

Child Sacrifice

One of the gods worshiped by Abraham's neighbours, the Canaanites, was Moloch. There are a number of places in the Tenakh in which it appears that this god was believed to demand child sacrifice.

God explicitly forbids child sacrifice in the Old Testament. Some scholars have suggested that the story of Abraham and Isaac is intended to demonstrate to the Israelites that He does not require child sacrifice.

The Rabbinic texts

Ancient Jewish teachers or *Rabbis* wrestled with the meaning of this story. Their teachings have been recorded.

(i) In one ancient Jewish commentary on the *Akedah*, Abraham asks God why he had to be tested, and God replies: "It is my wish that the world should become acquainted with thee, and should know that it is not without good reason that I have chosen thee from all the nations."

(ii) In ancient Jewish thought, a child was sometimes treated as an extension or possession of a parent, rather than a separate being in his own right. Perhaps Isaac should be thought of as Abraham's most treasured possession.

Resurrection

In the letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament, it is suggested that Abraham's faith showed that he knew Isaac would be given back to him - in other words, that he believed in the resurrection after death that Jesus preaches in the New Testament.

The problem of God's commands

Which of the following is true?

- (i) What God commands is made good *because He* commands it
- or
- (ii) God does not make things good, but rather knows what is good and commands it because He is also good.

If (i) is true, then God could command *anything* and it would be true; there seems to be no reason to care about God's moral goodness.

If (ii) is true, then something exists independently of God – the standard of goodness, which he is bound to follow. This suggests that there is some rule or power that even God must obey.

Christological Interpretations

Christians reading this story might see connections with the story of the Jesus. Perhaps this is God's way of foreshadowing the New Testament story. For example, both Jesus and Isaac were their father's only son, both Jesus and Isaac carried wood for their sacrifice, both Jesus and Isaac were obedient to their father to the point of death.

Sartre's Question

The existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre offers the following reflection: This is the anguish that Kierkegaard called "the anguish of Abraham." You know the story: An angel commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son; and obedience was obligatory, if it really was an angel who had appeared and said, "Thou, Abraham, shalt sacrifice thy son." But anyone in such a case would wonder, first, whether it was indeed an angel and secondly, whether I am really Abraham. Where are the proofs? A certain mad woman who suffered from hallucinations said that people were telephoning to her, and giving her orders. The doctor asked, "But who is it that speaks to you?" She replied: "He says it is God." And what, indeed, could prove to her that it was God? If an angel appears to me, what is the proof that it is an angel; or, if I hear voices, who can prove that they proceed from heaven and not from hell, or from my own subconsciousness or some pathological condition? Who can prove that they are really addressed to me?