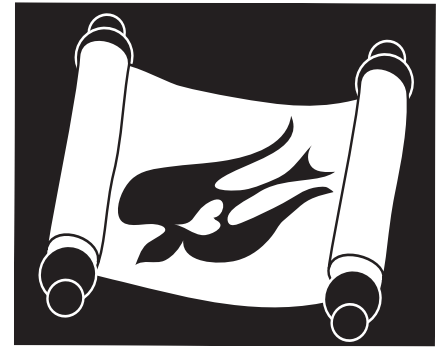


# Archaeology of the Word



Traditional Jewish methods of Bible study for Christians  
*The Jewish biblical tradition is a rich source of insight and learning for Christians. This conviction was stated at Vatican II and has been reaffirmed in church statements down to our own day. Jewish approaches to the bible, such as those below, put us in touch with a tradition that was dear to the heart of Jesus, himself a Jew. Such methods, which have been honed over thousands of years via oral and written traditions, offer interpretative tools which are new to most Christians.*

## Archaeology of the Word

Excavation of a biblical text is like the work of an archaeologist digging into the ground. Clues on the 'surface' of the text direct the reader to a spot to 'dig'. As we dig we undertake a work of discovery, finding layers of meaning beneath the plain or literal meaning of the text. What are some of these clues? The examples below are taken from the *Akedah*, the Torah portion that tells the story of the sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22:1-19.

**Repetition.** The phrase 'they went on together' in v.6 is repeated in v.8. To what is the author trying to draw our attention by this repetition?

**Use of numbers in the text.** 'On the third day...' is mentioned in v.4. What might be the significance of this day being mentioned by number?

**Questions** in the text are almost always meant to be answered by the reader. '...but where is the lamb for the offering-up?' In what way do I find myself asking a question like Isaac's in my own life? I identify with the questioner in the text.

**Names** can hold meanings which affect the interpretation of the text. The name 'Akedah' is the word for 'binding' in Hebrew. When we know that the binding of the sacrificial lamb was essential for the sacrifice to be carried out cleanly and successfully,

how does this knowledge affect our understanding of the text as a whole?

**Structure.** The *Akedah* finishes in v.19, just before the death of Sarah which is mentioned 7 verses later. What significance might we find in the proximity of the two stories?

**Puzzling words, phrases, passages.** 'Avraham...saddled his donkey,... he split wood for the offering-up...' (v.3) These phrases puzzled the sages. Abraham was a man of wealth, with servants. Why would he be doing the manual work himself?

**Times.** 'Avraham started-early in the morning' (v.3). Why the early start? Why might the time of day be noteworthy?

**Rhythm.** With the help of Hebrew-sensitive translations, we can find that the poetic rhythm of the text contributes to interpretation. In the *Akedah*, note the steady, almost robotic rhythm of Avraham's actions as he goes about a terrifying activity. What can we make of this?

**Absence.** Absence can also act as a clue. E.g., Abraham is a fearless negotiator in so many other Genesis texts, yet here he is silent and unquestioning. Why?

**Echoes of other passages, cross-references.** Compare the triplet in 22:1 with a similar triplet in Gen 12:1.

'Jewish biblical scholarship in all its richness, from its origins in antiquity down to the present day, is an asset of the highest value for the exegesis of both Testaments, provided that it be used with discretion.'

- Pontifical Biblical Commission,  
*Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, 1995, IC.



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# Akedah 1

Here we begin to excavate the Word, starting with one of the textual 'clues' from Jewish biblical interpretative methods. Our passage of focus is the Akedah, the binding of Isaac, Genesis 22:1-9. This is a key text for both Jews and Christians, especially for the rich insights it affords into the nature of faith and what it means to be faithful to the will of God.

Begin by reading the text aloud, in pairs (in havrutah), noting your existing thoughts/reactions. Now: let's find a spot to dig...

## Clue: Absence

**Do we notice anything interesting about what is NOT said in the text? Any unusual omissions? Any key characters who appear to be absent?**

E.g., Where is Sarah in this terrifying family saga?

Where is Isaac in the final scene? The text tells us that Abraham returned to his servants, but says nothing of Isaac.

In v.1 God's call to Abraham is described as a test, yet no reason is given for this test. This omission energizes the discussions of the rabbis.

Why is Abraham so silent in the face of this test? This is a man who, previously in Genesis, has boldly negotiated with God over the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Yet here he appears uncharacteristically mute. No questions asked, no apparent struggle. Why?

## Why?

The Jewish sages pondered and discussed such questions. Surely the absence is for a reason. What hidden meaning can we uncover? In *havrutah*, join the sages in questioning the text.

E.g., Abraham's silence is accentuated by his robotic movements; silent, moving on auto-pilot. When do we see people act like this? In times of extreme grief, shock. Lack of emotion can signal a coping/survival mechanism.

## What the rabbis discussed

Could Abraham's puzzling silence be a sign of his grief? Judging by one *midrash*, some rabbis apparently thought so, desiring to 'fill the blanks' with a storyline flowing with emotive scenes of tears and trembling. And it is not only Abraham and Isaac who are

crying and trembling, but row upon row of ministering angels (see *midrash* at right). At the moment of would-be sacrifice, the heavens open, angels cry out in protest.

## What new light is shed on the text by interpretations like these?

E.g., the horror of God's apparent command is underscored. We are led to ponder the complexities of discipleship. How can we be sure of God's will? How many people, claiming to act in God's name, have destroyed life? Can Abraham's story reveal not only the virtue of faith, but the danger of misguided religiosity? Then again, love costs...

## What new questions are raised about the characters?

Below the surface of the text are we privy to another side to Abraham: compassionate, vulnerable in his paternity?

## Christian links

Were the Church Fathers aware of this side of Abraham? How did they deal with the anguish of the *Akedah*?

## Interactive

Write your own *midrash* that expresses your insights into the struggles of Abraham: a) as he walked to Mount Moriah, b) as he raised the knife.

## Survey the scene

Having emerged from your excavation, take stock of your findings. In what way has my appreciation of the text deepened? How has my understanding of discipleship been enlarged?

## Continue looking for clues

What other clues of absence can you find in this text? Using a similar process, go back and explore them.



## A Midrash sample

*(Abraham's) mouth fell wide open with weeping as a great cry of anguish erupted from him. Then, his eyes blinking frantically, he looked up to the Presence and pleaded in a rising voice, "I lift mine eyes to the mountains; whence will my help come?" (Ps. 121:1). At that, the Holy One appeared above the angels and flung open the firmament. Isaac lifted up his eyes... The ministering angels stood in rows and rows, crying and weeping... The Holy One said to the angel Michael, "Why are you standing still? Do not let Abraham go on!"*

(See Bialik and Ravnitzky, *The Book of Legends*, #45, p.41)

## New Testament links

*By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac.*

(Letter to the Hebrews 11:17)

## A sample from the Church Fathers

*Many of you who hear these words are fathers... Do you think any one of you from the mere relating of the story acquires so much steadfastness, so much strength of soul, that when a son perhaps is lost by a death that is common and due to all, even if he be an only son, even if he be a beloved son, might bring in Abraham as an example for himself...? And indeed this greatness of soul is not required of you, that you yourself should bind your son, you yourself tie him, you yourself prepare the sword, you yourself slay your only son. All these services are not asked of you. Be constant in purpose, at least, and mind. Offer your son to God with a joyful, immovable faith. Be the priest for your son's life. It is not fitting that the priest weeps who offers to God.*

Origin: *Homilies on Genesis* 8.7.6

# Akedah 2

Here we model some steps in the excavation of the Word, starting with one of the textual 'clues' from Jewish biblical interpretative methods. Our passage of focus is the Akedah, the binding of Isaac, Genesis 22:1-9. This is a key text for both Jews and Christians, especially for the rich insights it affords into the nature of faith and what it means to be faithful to the will of God.

Begin by reading the text aloud, in pairs (in havrutah), noting your existing thoughts/reactions. Now: let's find a spot to dig...

## Clue: Repetition

### Where in the text do we find repetition?

In verse 6 and 8 we see repeated the phrase: 'the two of them went together.'

### Why this repeated phrase?

The Jewish sages pondered and discussed this question. Surely the text repeats itself for a reason! What hidden meaning can we uncover? In *havrutah*, join the sages in asking questions of the text.

### Some possible explanations from rabbinic discussions:

The repeated phrases seem to bracket a brief conversation between Abraham and Isaac:

*Father, ... where is the lamb for the burnt offering?* asks Isaac.

*God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son,* answers Abraham.

Biblical Hebrew was originally written without punctuation marks or even capital letters marking the beginning of a sentence. Thus Abraham's reply could be read:

*God himself will provide. The the lamb for the burnt offering (is) my son.*

*Thus the two of them went forward together.* (v.8)

Rashi (revered rabbinic commentator) supports this reading, saying that now that Isaac understands his role. Father and son walk with one purpose.

### What new light does this interpretation shed on the text?

E.g. If Isaac is fully conscious of his role, then we can say that Abraham's radical act of faith becomes Isaac's too.

### What new questions does it raise about the characters?

Are both father and son a bit obsessed? Is their understanding of God's command in fact skewed? Are Abraham and Isaac gullible? What of parents who allow sons/daughters to commit suicide in terrorism acts? Between vv.6-8, the father-son relationship is mentioned five times: we can't miss the intensity of the relationship at this moment. If it is true that Isaac agreed to his father's plan, does this change your reading of the text?

### Interactive

Enter into a dramatic role play. With your *havrutah* partner, explore the dialogue between father and son.

If you were presenting the *Akedah* as a musical composition for a choir, what would be the recurring sung phrase?

Spend some time pondering a visual image of the *Akedah*.

### Christian links

How did patristic commentators deal with this text?

### Survey the scene

Having emerged from your excavation, take stock of your findings. In what way has my appreciation of the text deepened? How is my perspective different? What new questions are raised for me about the life of faith and the path of discipleship? When Hebrews 11 is read in church on Sundays, how will I hear it afresh as a result of this *Akedah* excavation?

### Continue looking for clues

What other clues of repetition can you find in this text? Go back and explore them, following a similar method to what you practiced here.



### A Midrash sample

*In that instant, fear and dread terror fell upon Isaac, when he saw in Abraham's hand nothing at all fit for an offering. So, suspecting what was intended, he asked, 'Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?' Abraham replied, 'The Holy One has chosen you.' Isaac said, 'If He has so chosen, my life is given to Him, but I grieve for my mother.' Nevertheless, 'they went both of them together' (Gen. 22:8) - one to bind, the other to be bound; one to slaughter, the other to be slaughtered.*

(See Bialik and Ravnitzky, *The Book of Legends*, #45, p.41)

### New Testament links

*By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac.*

(Letter to the Hebrews 11:17)

### A sample of the Church Fathers' commentary on the Akedah

*That Isaac carries on himself 'the wood for the burnt offering' is a figure, because Christ also 'himself carried his own cross (Jn 19:17),' and yet to carry 'the wood for the burnt offering' is the duty of a priest. He therefore becomes victim and priest. But what is added also is related to this: 'And they both went off together.' For when Abraham carries the fire and knife as if to sacrifice, Isaac does not go behind him but with him, that he might be shown to contribute equally with the priesthood itself.*

(Origen: *Homilies on Genesis* 8.6.29)

# Akedah 3

Here we begin to excavate the Word, starting with one of the textual 'clues' from Jewish biblical interpretative methods. Our passage of focus is the Akedah, the binding of Isaac, Genesis 22:1-9. This is a key text for both Jews and Christians, especially for the rich insights it affords into the nature of faith and what it means to be faithful to the will of God.

Begin by reading the text aloud, in pairs (in havrutah), noting your existing thoughts/reactions. Now: let's find a spot to dig...

## Clue: Structure/Proximity

### Do we notice anything interesting about how this text is situated amidst the Genesis narrative?

E.g., The death of Sarah follows almost immediately after the *Akedah*, just seven verses later.

### Why?

The Jewish sages pondered the significance of this placement. What hidden meaning can we uncover? In *havrutah*, join the sages in questioning the text...

### What the rabbis debated

Building upon other textual clues, namely the absence of Sarah from the *Akedah* narrative, and the stated time of day at which Abraham embarked upon his journey, the rabbis interpreted the proximity of this verse in such a way as to turn the absent Sarah into a pivotal figure in the *Akedah* story. E.g.:

Abraham left early in the morning (v.3) because he is stealthily trying to avoid telling Sarah, knowing that she would never agree to her only son being sacrificed. One rabbinic perspective went as far to say that the horror of hearing of the events on Mount Moriah caused the death of Sarah. The proximity of the verse which mentions her death to the *Akedah* narrative helped to precipitate this interpretation.

### What new light is shed on the text by interpretations like these?

E.g., the drama surrounding Sarah highlights the radical character of this test, its impact on the whole family unit and ultimately on the destiny of Abraham and Sarah's descendents.

### What new questions are raised about the characters?

Was Abraham's response heroic obedience or poor discernment? To what extent did Sarah cooperate in the act of heroic faith (or blind obedience) on Mount Moriah? Consider the impact of religious decisions upon familial relationships in this story.

### Christian links

Did Christian commentators on the *Akedah* have anything to say about the role of Sarah? E.g., read Romanos' *Kontakion on Abraham and Isaac* which offers insightful reflection on the role of Sarah.

### Interactive

With your *havrutah* partner, explore a dialogue between Abraham and Sarah before/after events on Mount Moriah.

Ponder a visual image of the *Akedah*, placing yourself into the mind/heart of Abraham's wife and Isaac's mother.

### Survey the scene

Having emerged from your excavation, take stock of your findings. In what way has my appreciation of the text deepened? How is my perspective different? What new questions are raised for me about the life of faith and the path of discipleship? E.g., our discernment in faith affects the lives of others for good or for ill, inviting collaboration or causing alienation. In what ways does the *Akedah* speak to this statement?

### Continue looking for clues

What other clues relating to the structure or to the proximity of verses can you find in this text? Go back and explore them, following a similar method to that practiced here.



### A Midrash sample

*When Abraham returned from Mount Moriah, Satan became infuriated. He had not gotten what he desired, which was to thwart the sacrifice of Abraham. What did he do? He went to Sarah and asked: "Did you hear what happened in the world?" She answered, "No." He said, "Abraham took Isaac his son and slaughtered him, offering him up on the altar as a sacrifice." Sarah began to cry, and moan the sound of three wails which correspond to the three blasts of the shofar, and her soul burst forth from her and she died. Abraham came only to find that she had died. From where had he come? From Mount Moriah.*

(Midrash Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer, 31)

### New Testament links

*By faith our ancestors received approval, for without faith it is impossible to please God.*

(Letter to the Hebrews 11:22)

### A sample from early Christian hymnography on the Akedah

(Sarah addresses Isaac, saying:)  
*If He desires you for life, he will give orders that you live;  
 He who is the immortal Lord will not kill you.  
 Now I shall boast: having offered you as a gift from my womb to Him who gave you to me, I shall be blessed.  
 Go then, my child, and be a sacrifice to God, go with your father, or rather your slayer.*

*But I have faith that your father will not become your slayer, for the saviour of our souls alone is good.*

(St Romanos, 6th century C.E., *Kontakion on Abraham and Isaac*, stanza 14)