

Jewish Studies 100
Themes in Jewish Tradition
Spring 1999

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hours: Tuesday, Thursday 3-4 p.m.

The Binding of Isaac

The Akeidah, or the Binding of Isaac, as told in Genesis 22, is one of the great Biblical stories and the foundation for one of the great themes of Western religion, the near-sacrifice and restoration of the beloved son. The story is also one of the most problematic texts in all Biblical literature, and a source for countless later tales and re-imaginings in later Jewish, Christian, and Islamic literature. In this course, we will study the history of this tale and its theme from the Bible through the modern period in order to show how a Biblical tradition develops and changes in response to historical change. The focus will be on Jewish tradition but we will also consider Christian and Islamic parallels because, as we shall see, no religious tradition in Western culture has ever developed in a vacuum. In this way, we will also attempt to understand the very nature of Tradition-- the process by which the past is received and handed on to future generations-- as it figures in Judaism and Western culture in general.

Requirements: 1) Class participation; 2) two short papers and either a take-home final or final paper (to be decided); 3) participation in the class listserv.

Textbooks

At the Penn Book Center (on 34th St., next to Starbucks).

Oxford Study Bible. This is the recommended Bible for the course, but if you own another Bible, feel free to use it.

S. Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, A. Hannay transl.

Recommended: R. P. Scheindlin, A Short History of the Jewish People. A copy of this book will be on reserve in Rosengarten.

At Campus Copy, 3907 Walnut St.: Bulkpack under the title of "The Binding of Isaac," which contains all other readings on the syllabus.

N.B. All readings from the TANAKH are listed on the syllabus by book, chapter and verse (e.g. Genesis 4:12; Deuteronomy 12:4-6; Habbakuk 1:2-3:5; Psalms 30:4,5-6).

Schedule:

N.B. There will be no classes on Thursday April 1 and 8 because of Passover. We will try to schedule a make-up class sometime during the spring.

1) Jan. 12: Introduction

I. The Biblical Story and Pre-Tradition

- 2) Jan. 14: The Story of the Patriarchs: The Akeidah's Context
Genesis Chaps. 1-36.
Scheidlin, 1-23.
- 3) Jan. 19: The Story of the Akeidah and Its Meaning in the Bible
Genesis 22 (JPS TaNaKH transl.)
E.E. Speiser, Genesis (The Anchor Bible), pp. 161-166
N. Sarna, Genesis (JPS Bible Commentary), pp. 150-56; 391-94.
Understanding Genesis, pp. 154-65
Robert Alter, Genesis, pp. 103-7
Erich Auerbach, "Representation of Reality in Homer and the Old Testament." pp. 45-58.
- 4) Jan. 21: Child Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East
Leviticus 18:21; 20:1-5; Judges 11; II Kings 3:4- 27; 16:1-4; Micah 6:1-8; Ezekiel 23
(esp. 23:36-39).
Jon D. Levenson, "Child Sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible: Deviation or Norm," "YHWH Versus Molech," and selections from "The Aqedah as Etiology." From The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity, pp. 3-24, 111-114.
- 5) Jan. 26: A Greek Akeidah?
Euripides, Iphigenia in Aulis, trans. Charles Walker
- 6) Jan. 28: Reading the Akeidah in Greek: Philo of Alexandria
Scheidlin, pp. 25-49.
Septuagint, Gen. 22
"Selections: Scriptural Exegesis," from D. Winston, Philo of Alexandria, pp. 79-82.
Selections from "On Abraham." pp. 35-59; 85-103.

II. Late Antiquity: The Elaboration of Tradition

- 7) Feb. 2: Early Jewish Biblical Interpretation
Scheidlin, pp. 51-69
J. Kugel, Introduction, The Bible As It Was, pp. 1-42.
R. Goldenberg, "Hebrew Scriptures in Early Postbiblical Judaism," Oxford Study Bible, pp.122-28.
A. Review of sources: please skim selections from Jubilees; Josephus, Jewish Antiquities; Pseudo-Philo 32; Targum Neofiti XXII; Midrash Genesis Rabbah on Genesis 22 Chs. 55- 56 (henceforth MR); Tanhuma; Babylonian Talmud; Sefer Hayashar (Book of Jashar); and Pirke deRabbi Eliezer.

B. "After These Things:" What Instigated the Akeidah?
Job, Chap. 1

Jubilees 17:15-18
Pseudo-Philo 32
MR Chp. 55: 4, 6
Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 89b, "After the words of Satan...", "After Ishmael's words"
"Midrash Zo Hi," pars. 1 and 2.
Sefer HaYashar Chap. 22: 40-55, pp. 57-59
Tanhuma 4:42 (p.125)
Bereshit Rabbati to Gen. 22:1 (pp. 85-86)

8) Feb. 4

C. "Tested:" Why Did God Test Abraham, the Righteous Man?

Jubilees 18:15-16
Josephus, Jewish Antiquities
Neofiti 22:1-2
MR 55:1-2, 3, 7; 56:7
Tanhuma 4:43 (pp. 125-27)
Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 89b, "Rabbi Simeon ben Abba... That his mind should not reel..."

D. The Land of Moriah: Where is it?

Josephus, Jewish Antiquities, 222, 226
MR Chap. 55, 7b; Chap. 56, 10b
Pirke deRabbi Eliezer

9) Feb. 9: E. God's command: What was Abraham Thinking?

Gen. 12:1
MR Chap. 55: 7, Chap. 56: 1, 2, 3, 4 7-8

F. The Role of Satan

Jubilees
MR, Chap. 56:4
Tanhuma 4:46 (pp. 129-30)
Midrash "Zo Hi'She-Ne'emra Ba-Ruah Ha-Qodesh"
Sefer Hayashar Chap. 22 (pp. 60-61)

10) Feb. 11: G. Isaac's Place in All This

Josephus, Jewish Antiquities
Pseudo-Philo
Neofiti 22:10
MR Chap. 56:5, 8, 11; 56:3
Tanhuma 4:46 (p. 129)

H. The Sacrifice That Wasn't

MR 5a, 5b, 6, 7, 8a, 8b, 9a,b,c,d; 11a, b, c.
"Midrash Zo Hi," par. 4

11) Feb. 16: I. When Did the Akeidah Take Place?

1. Passover

Exodus 12

Jubilees, 17:15-18:19.

Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael Bo on Exodus 12:13.

2. Rosh Hashana

Theodor Gaster, "New Year," pp. 108-223.

Babylonian Talmud Rosh Hashanah 16a

MR, Chap. 56, 10

"Midrash Zo Hi," par. 521.

Selections from Rosh Hashana Musaf Service, pp. 338-42.

Illustrations of Ancient Synagogue Mosaics and Murals

12) Feb. 18: Early Christian Interpretation

E. Clark, "Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church," Oxford Study Bible, pp. 129-40.

The Letter to the Romans, Chaps. 3-8;

The Letter to the Galatians, Chaps. 1-4.

The Gospel According to Luke. Skim the entire gospel, concentrating on Chaps. 1-5,
18:31- 24:53.

The Gospel According to John, Chaps. 13, 18-19;

N.B. Please read the introductory notes to each gospel or letter for some historical background.

13) Feb. 23: Early Church Fathers

"Origen's Homily VIII: On the Fact that Abraham Offered His Son Isaac" (pp. 136-47).

St. Augustine, The City of God XVI:31-33, pp. 693-696.

Melito of Sardis, Frag. 9

Kontakion of Romanos: On Abraham and Isaac

14) Feb. 25: Early Islamic Tradition

"Sura 37." From The Glorious Quran. pp. 478-481.

Hadith: TBA

Recommended: "Chapters 1 and 2," From Reuven Firestone, Journeys in Holy Lands: The Evolution of the Abraham-Ishmael Legends in Islamic Exegesis, pp.3-21.

15) March 2: Tales of the Prophets: al-Kisa'i, pp.129-31

Tha'labi, pp. 133-38

Mystical Interpretation: Ibn al-Arabi, "The Wisdom of Reality in the Word of Isaac,"
from The Bezels of Wisdom, pp. 96-103

V: The Middle Ages (10-16th C.) and the Exploitation of Tradition

16) March 4: Two Medieval Interpretations

R. Scheindlin, pp. 71-121

Maimonides, The Guide of the Perplexed III: 24, pp. 497- 502.
Rashbam on Gen. 22, from Rabbi Samuel Ben Meir's Commentary on Genesis, pp. 94-100.
RaMBaN (Nahmanides), Commentary on the Torah for Gen. 22, pp. 275-80.

17) March 16: The Akeidah and the Crusades

"The Crusade Chronicle of Solomon Bar Simson", pp. 74-82.
Poems by Judah Samuel Abbas and David Bar Meshullam, pp. 357-59; 374-75.

18) March 18: The Akeidah Unbound

Ephraim of Bonn, "The Akedah," from Shalom Spiegel, The Last Trial, 139-52
Mekilta, Tractate Pisha #7, "And when I see the blood..."
Pirke DeRabbi Eiezer, Chap. XXXI (p. 228)
Midrash on the Shemoneh Esreh Prayer, quoted in Spiegel, p. 37 note.

VI: Modernity (19th- 20th C.) and the Re-Making of Tradition

19) March 23: The Revolt Against Sacrifice

Scheindlin, pp. 149-87.
Tchernichovski, "Baruch of Mayence"

20) March 25: Kierkegaard and Existential Interpretation

S. Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, A. Hannay trans.

21) March 30: Kierkegaard and Buber

M. Buber, "On the Suspension of the Ethical," from Eclipse of God

22) April 1: NO CLASS (PASSOVER)

23) April 6: The Akeidah Before and After the Holocaust

Scheindlin, pp. 199-215
"The Binding of Isaac." From The Book of Legends, ed. H.N. Bialik and Y.H. Ravnitzky, pp. 39-42.
F. Kafka, "Abraham"
J. Lind, "The Near Murder"
Poems by I. Manger and Amir Gilboa Hayyim Gouri

24) April 8: NO CLASS (PASSOVER)

25) April 13: In Modern Israeli Poetry

Scheindlin, pp. 217-63
Poems by Hayyim Gouri, T. Carmi, T. Rubner, B. Galai, Y. Amichai, D. Avidan, H. Levine, Shenhar, Meged

26) April 15: Prose Transformations

A.B. Yehoshua, "Early In the Summer of 1970"

27) April 20: In the Wake of the Lebanon War (1980's)

I. Gruenwald, "The Unbinding of Horror: 'The Binding of Isaac' in Contemporary Perspective"

Poems by Y. Amichai, Y. Laor, M. Wieseltier, and Y. Kafri

28) April 22: Feminist Readings and Biblical Tradition Today

Poems by Alicia Ostriker, Elinor Wilner, Shirley Kaufman, and Helen Papell.

RESPONSE PAPERS

The Response Papers are to be approximately 2 (TWO) typed pages in length. Please don't make them much longer. They must be handed in on time; late papers will not be accepted. The papers will not be graded formally, but they will be read carefully and will be part of the final course grade.

Please hand in TWO copies of each paper (one for me, one for the WATU advisor).

These writing assignments have several purposes: 1) They are intended to help YOU organize and focus your thoughts on the reading assignments and their relationship to the themes of the seminar, and thus to prepare you for class. 2) They are meant to show ME that you are reading carefully and insightfully and that you are THINKING about what you read.

These responses are NOT meant to be finished, polished papers. You should use them as an occasion to try out new ideas, explore your thoughts in writing, and simply respond to the readings.

Thus, I am interested in hearing what you find interesting or exciting or provocative about a particular reading. Or if you are troubled or bewildered by a reading, write about that, but please EXPLAIN what troubles or puzzles you (or what interests you) and WHY.

These papers can be relatively informal in style (if you wish); don't be afraid of using the first-person or expressions like "I think," etc. (in moderation, of course). But please make sure they are written in English and that the writing is not sloppy or careless. ALL SENTENCES MUST BE GRAMMATICAL SENTENCES. MISSPELLINGS AND FREQUENT TYPOS ARE NOT ACCEPTABLE. If you quote a primary source or a text on the syllabus, please write the page number in parentheses. If you cite a secondary source not on the syllabus, be sure you cite documentation and give full bibliography. PLAGIARISM WILL NOT BE TOLERATED.

While you are free to write what you wish in these papers, we have proposed topics or subjects for the first several assignments. Feel free to tailor and adapt these suggested topics. After that, you're on your own!

Sept. 12: Choose one or two passages from our readings in Genesis that you are "surprised" to find in the Bible-- passages, in other words, that did not fit your expectations or preconceptions of what you would find in the Bible. Explain what your expectations were, why the passage(s) is surprising and-- if you can-- why you think they are nonetheless in the Bible.

Sept. 19: Summarize Spiegel's and Levenson's respective positions on the connection between the story of the Binding of Isaac and the practice of child sacrifice in the Ancient Near East and ancient Israel. What do you think?

Sept. 28: Discuss Philo's interpretation of the Akeidah (actually, two interpretations) and discuss how the the cultural environment of Alexandria and Hellenistic Judaism is reflected in it.

Oct. 5: Choose one passage from the midrashim in Genesis Rabbah for this class and write about it answering the following questions: 1) What is the "problem" in the Biblical text that gives rise to the midrashic interpretation? 2) How does the interpretation solve the problem? 3) In addition to

solving the problem, does the interpretation teach or tell us something additional-- a general moral lesson, a way of behaving, an insight into personality or character, etc.?

Oct. 26: Explain what you find interesting about the Islamic interpretations, and how they compare to the Rabbinic midrashim. How does culture and context shape interpretation here?

Nov. 7: ???

Nov. 14: ???

Nov. 21: ???

Nov. 30: ???