

The *Aqedah* (Genesis 22), God's Promise, and Its Relation to the Post-Pandemic Churches

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Abstract: Gerhard von Rad's exegesis on Genesis 22 shows that the test of Abraham or the *Aqedah* contains a problem of the endangered promise. Isaac was seen as the promised child, the proto-Israel. Hence, there is a dilemma of the endangered people of God if Isaac is sacrificed. So too the church, along with the entire history of salvation, would not exist. Abraham's experience can serve as a blueprint of how God deals with his church, the Israel of God. It is normal then to ask the following: How does God deal with his church? Can the church continue to thrive in this post-pandemic era? This paper aims to provide some answers by showing, first of all, that Genesis 22 is a culmination test from the initial calling to Abraham in Genesis 12. This command and the related verbs are then examined in the context of Abraham's calling from Genesis 12 until the test in Genesis 22. Finally, some spiritual implications and insights are drawn to encourage post-pandemic churches as they journey on with the Lord. As the world grapples with the profound impact of the global health crisis, it is argued that Genesis 22 is not just a problem of an endangered promise, but rather a complex relationship Abraham has between a divine promise that is also entangled with and should be understood in relation to, a divine command, a doubtful and responding faith, and an act of obedience and disobedience. In short, faith indeed is a pilgrimage.

Research Highlights:

- This article attempts to provide a clear and detailed exegesis of Genesis 22 in the broader context of the Abrahamic story starting from the call in Genesis 12.
- The author shows that Abraham, despite his reputation and successes as a man of faith, indeed struggled throughout his life to trust and obey the Lord.
- Contemporary churches thus need not be ashamed if they end up following Abraham's footsteps in this post-pandemic era.

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INTRODUCTION

For about two years or so since early 2020, COVID-19 and its ever-evolving variants have been affecting many areas of life. It consumes our lives and causes panic. The church is not an exception. The pandemic has affected many church practices, including the cancellation of live Sunday services and all face-to-face activities. Some believe that the pandemic is apocalyptic in nature. The seven seals of Revelation 6:1-8:1 are regarded as proof that the plague is happening now and that Jesus' return is imminent.¹ Agreeing to some extent that the coronavirus is awakening the church for the second coming, John Piper offered several alternative points of view about what God has been doing throughout this pandemic. Those include the belief of divine judgments, to realign us with the infinite worth of Christ, and for the church to reach the nations.² He concludes, "God has used the suffering and upheaval history to move his church to places it needs to go."³

In the present context, this study concerns the relationship between the divine and his people in a certain situation. For that purpose, Genesis 22 will be examined. It is fitting to reread and to draw insights from the narrative of the patriarch Abraham as one of the greatest exemplar among the faithful saints. From this narrative, what can the readers learn and apply in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic? It will be an exposition to the texts and, wherever possible, relating it to this pandemic situation that affects the church. As it is pointed out clearly by Gerhard von Rad, the story here is not primarily about Isaac but about Abraham. It is "the disappearance from Abraham's life of the whole

promise."⁴ In other words, the test of Abraham contains a problem of the endangered promise.

Thus, instead of offering a clearcut solution and a to-do-list for church in this pandemic era, this writing begins to show that the whole interrelated story should be seen as a complex relationship between a promise that is also entangled with, and should be understood in relation to, an initial command, responding faith, and an act of obedience and disobedience on Abraham's part. It is not just a problem of the endangered promise but also a pilgrimage of faith.

METHOD

This paper will treat the entire Abrahamic saga (Gen. 12-22) as a unified final text. There will be no practices of literary criticism, albeit some scholars contend that there are some discrepancies at some point in the saga, usually between the J and E traditions. It is so because these practices do not contribute significantly to the purpose of this article. The task of determining the source of the chapters or when the editorial task(s) was undertaken will only distract the task of uncovering the meaning of the text itself and its relevance to the reader today.

This paper employs a method of re-narrating the story of Abraham with a running commentary and word studies. Focusing on the plot of the final text, this study discusses actions taken by Abraham as a signal of his responses to God's initial command in Genesis 12:1: לך-לך (lek leka, literally: go [you]!). The writer sees no significance, however, in including the chapter which contains the war and the meeting between Abraham and Abimelekh. Instead, only the actions that are done by Abraham in a clear connection with the

¹Simon Dein et al., "COVID-19, Mental Health and Religion: An Agenda for Future Research," *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 23, no. 1, (2020): 1-9, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2020.1768725>.

²John Piper, *Coronavirus and Christ* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020), 55-98.

³Piper, *Coronavirus and Christ*, 95.

⁴Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, rev. ed., terj. John H. Marks (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1973), 239-240.

initial divine command in Genesis 12 will be given full attention, e.g., הֵלֵךְ (to go), יֵצֵא (to depart), לֵקַח (to take), יֵרֵד (to go down), עֲלֶה (to go up), בֹּא (to come) and גֹּר (to dwell). The method used here is exposition to the final text as a unified narrative. The focus is the plot and Abraham's actions. It concludes with reflections.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the Command to the Test of Abraham

The text of Genesis 22 begins with the phrase “after these things.” What things are being referred to here? Some older commentators contend that those are the events right before the *Aqedah* or the test of Abraham. As a result, the test that God gave to Abraham was seen as the consequence that Abraham must bear for what he had done with Hagar and Ishmael. If that is correct, then, the test in Genesis 22 must serve as Abraham's atonement for the expulsion of his son.

Such a view, however, seems unlikely. Structurally, over the Abrahamic narrative, there is a recognizable phrase that occurs in chapter 22 that only appeared in chapter 12. This Abrahamic saga began and ended with a divine command לֵךְ-לֵךְ (*lek leka*, go you). In structure and concept, both “tests” are similar. Both are a command, and both stress a journey, an altar, and promised blessings. Both are an appropriate commencement of and conclusion to the Abrahamic saga.⁵

Moreover, there is a logical parallel that supports the relationship between chapter 12 and 22. At the beginning of the saga, God commanded Abraham to go from his homeland and his family to an unspecified land (Gen. 12:1-3), and, in chapter 22, God once again ordered Abraham to go to an un-

specified distance high up toward the land of Moriah.⁶ It seems, therefore, that the author of Genesis already put a bracket for this saga. For this reason, this article will inspect the content within its bracket. The connection, then, will be of God's promise on one hand and of God's will upon Abraham on the other. The former is “to go” because of God's grace and promise (Gen. 12:1), and the latter is “to go” for fulfilling God's inquiry (Gen. 22:2).

לֵךְ-לֵךְ מֵאֶרֶץ וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ אֶל-הָאָרֶץ
אֲשֶׁר אֲרָאֶךָ:⁷

Go you לֵךְ-לֵךְ *from* your land and *from* your born (place) and *from* the house of your father to the land that I will show you (Gen. 12:1).

לֵךְ-לֵךְ אֶל-הָאָרֶץ הַמְרִיבָה וְהַעֲלֵהוּ (יִצְחָק) שָׁם לְעֹלָה עַל
אֶחָד הַהָרִים אֲשֶׁר אִמַרְתִּי לְךָ:

Go you לֵךְ-לֵךְ *to* the land of Moriah and sacrifice (Isaac) there *to* the high (place) of the one mountain that I will said to you (Gen. 22:2).

Abraham Kuruvilla was right to connect the phrase הדברים האלה “these things” to all events that began from chapter 12 up to 22. Hence, chapter 12 serves as the beginning of Abraham's narrative and reaches its peak in chapter 22;⁸ from the divine command and promises to the divine test. However, this study will differ from Kuruvilla in that, in what follows, there will be a close reading primarily for the meaningful verbs that are

⁶Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 138.

⁷Quotations on the Hebrew Bible Texts are taken from Abraham Tal, *Genesis*, Fascicle 1, *Biblia Hebraica Quinta* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2015), and all the English translations are the author's unless otherwise noted.

⁸Abraham Kuruvilla, “The *Aqedah* (Genesis 22): What Is the Author Doing with What He Is Saying?” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 55, no 3 (2012): 496, https://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/55/5-3/JETS_55-3_489-508_Kuruvilla.pdf.

⁵Abraham Kuruvilla, “Theological Exegesis,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 173 (2016): 266–267.

connected with the divine command in Genesis 12 and to analyse the connection that is established here. That connection has already been noted by John Gibson who maintains in relation to Genesis 12:1-3 that everything Abraham does in his life is an act of following his calling, and everything that happens to him is, or should be to some degree, directly related to the promises.⁹ T. Desmond Alexander likewise remarked, "The fulfillment of the divine promises is conditional on Abraham's obedience."¹⁰ Moreover, Victor Hamilton argued that the verse must be understood in light of the whole narrative: "If one focuses exclusively on v. 2 (of Gen. 22), then God appears to be deceptive, irrational, and self-contradictory, if not cruel."¹¹

This reading will be reinforced by those connections, but in a different fashion.¹² Since the entire Abrahamic saga begins with the phrase לך-לך (go you), this imperative verb-phrase, not the entire promise in itself, will be the starting point in which the actions of Abraham will be considered afterward. Besides, only the actions that are taken by Abraham, which signal a strong relationship against the command לך-לך (go you), will be commented on below. Thus, unlike Laurence Turner's reading for example, the study below will be focused on the responses made by

Abraham to the initial divine command in chapter 12 until his final test in chapter 22.¹³

Genesis 12

The first response in which Abram acted against the command לך-לך (go [you]!) is in the verse 4. As a response to divine speech, which include calling, departure, and promises, Abram was pictured as a man ready to trust and obey. The verb that is used here corresponds directly to the initial command: "so Abraham goes." The author of Genesis used the same verb root הלך (to go). Not only that, but the verb is also supported by the latter empathetic explanation: "as the utterance of the LORD to him."

וילך אברם כאשר דבר אליו יהוה

So Abraham **goes** וילך as the utterance of the LORD to him (Gen. 12:4).

However, it is not the only verb that corresponds with the initial divine command. As soon as Abraham's action "to go," Abraham does a similar action bringing along someone else.

וילך אתו (אברם) לוט

And goes with him (Abraham) Lot (Gen. 12:4a).

A question should be asked, for Abraham ironically seems to not follow the divine imperative to leave his family since Lot is going along with him. The initial divine command was to depart from his family, but here Lot is still accompanying Abraham. It is highly probable that Abraham thinks of Lot as his likely heir.¹⁴ This strange inclusion of Lot is obvious if one considers the flow of the sentences. The former act is the declaration that Abram was indeed doing what the Lord said to him (כאשר דבר אליו יהוה). What follows

⁹John C. L. Gibson, *Genesis*, vol. 2 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1982), 12.

¹⁰T. Desmond Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land: An Introduction to the Pentateuch*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 175–176.

¹¹Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapter 18-50*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 105–106.

¹²It is by no means to eliminate the connection between Genesis 12 and the primeval history, for example, with Genesis 6. However, the current connection is made in order to unearth the significance of the initial divine command and how Abraham responds to it. For other possible connections, see Laurence A. Turner, *Announcements of Plot in Genesis*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 96 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), 52–53.

¹³Turner was more interested in the plot of the narratives that extend in a broader scope from Genesis 12-25. See further Turner, *Announcements of Plot*, 51–53.

¹⁴See also Kuruvilla, "The *Aqedah*," 497.

directly contrasts the former. Thus, the next sentence regarding Lot could be seen as an additional or extraneous act that Abram took apart from the divine command in verse 1. Kuruvilla thus comments: “That certainly was not an attitude of faith in God’s promise.”¹⁵

After describing his nephew, in 12:4b, Abraham finally departed (יצא) from his homeland (בצאתו מחרן). The departure, however, still requires some attention. After a short description of the departure, there is a detailed description of the people and things that Abraham took along with him which is conveyed by the verb ויקח “so take” (Gen. 12:5). The description here seems exhaustive, suggesting that it is important to mention.

ויקח אברם את־שרי אשתו ואת־לוט בן־אחיו
ואת־כל־רכושם אשר רכשו ואת־הנפש אשר־עשו
בחרן

So Abraham **took** Sarah, his wife, Lot, his nephew, all *the possessions* that he gathered, and *the people* he acquired in Haran (Gen. 12:5a).

Here, Abraham took not only Sarah, his wife, (ויקח אברם את־שרי), but also his brother’s son, Lot. Thus, this repetition is likely an indication that Lot was not supposed to come along like the previous statement. Why would there be another description of what Abraham took with him if it was already stated in verse 4? Why mention Lot again? Was it not clear in verse 4a? In verse 5, the biblical author likely intends to suggest and stress this as he is describing in the second position after mentioning Sarai with the conjunction ואת־לוט. In other words, Abraham is bringing Sarah, his wife (which is fine), but also (strangely) Lot (again)! In addition to bringing Lot, he also brought possessions (וואת־כל־רכושם) and the people (ואת־הנפש) from Haran. Regarding the question posed earlier, it

is equally possible to doubt whether the divine imperative in verse 1 allows these “belongings” to be carried along. After all, there was a short description: Abraham still departed according to God’s command and arrived at Canaan.

ויצאו ללכת ארצה כנען ויבאו ארצה כנען:

So they **departed to go** to the land of Canaan and they **arrived** to the land of Canaan (Gen. 12:5b).

Indeed, Abraham left Haran to go to Canaan. Notwithstanding, what he took outweighed what he left behind. He took Lot, possessions, and people; but according to the text provided, he left only Haran. Between the two uses of the verb יצא (*depart*, in 12:4b and 12:5b), there were considerably many things in the middle that Abraham took when he left his hometown to fulfil God’s command.

To summarize the points made so far, the reader should be aware of this opening of the Abrahamic saga. This backdrop serves as a preview of the entire narrative. As early as the opening, the author hinted to the reader not to picture Abraham as a perfect man in relation to God and his command. Besides, there will be several verbal hints afterwards that will support the depiction in this opening.

Finally, after the long description of taking along those mentioned above (wife, nephew, possessions, people), in Genesis 12:5b Abraham “departed to go” (ויצאו ללכת). It seems that the half-obedient Abraham was rather reluctant to leave what the LORD had asked him to do. If Abraham was completely obedient and faithful, why would these long listed things be mentioned right before he actually left (v. 5b)? After this, the root verb (הלך) is not mentioned until verse 9 with another form of הלוך. But the main actions that Abram has done so far are not ללכת, but something else that will be discussed below. Is it another sign of Abraham’s disobedience

¹⁵Kuruvilla, “The *Aqedah*,” 497.

and doubtfulness? The author of the Abrahamic saga appears to tease the readers' sense of suspicion.

In the land of Canaan, Abraham passed through the land: ויעבר אברם בארץ (12:6). There, the LORD appeared to him to repeat his initial promise (12:7). This repetition led to the act of worship. So Abraham built an altar there for the LORD, ויבן שם מזבח ליהוה הנראה, אליו, as his response to the LORD who appeared to him and who, by his grace, repeated his promise, despite the half-obedient Abraham. Maybe Abram was not so sure about the former divine calling. That is why, the LORD appeared to him and stressed the initial promise once again.

The peaceful Abraham must have been shocked by the famine in the land. Here, the verb to go down (ירד, 12:10) marked the explicit beginning of the downside of Abram's mission to obey the divine command. The place where Abram goes here, i.e., Egypt (מצרימה), also marked the opposition of where the Lord intended Abram to go in the first place. Abram went to Egypt not only to escape from a severe famine in the land that the LORD already showed to Abram, but also to dwell (לגור) there.

While going down to Egypt (ויהי כאשר חקריב ויהי כאשר חקריב), Abram had to say something to Sarai (לבוז מצרימה), (ויאמר אל-שרי אשתו), to signal his doubt. Further, we find what is inside Abram's mind here regarding his wife and a speech directly given to his own wife with the expression (הנה-נא ידעתי כי). Knowing that his wife is good-looking, Abram pleaded with her not to reveal her identity in connection with Abram. The pleas were marked twice by the word נא. It seemed to be a serious plea signifying what was at the very bottom of Abram's heart, that is, to save his life (למען ייטב-לי) (בעבורך וחיתה נפשי בגללך).

From this downgrading of Abram, the initial divine command rings once more, but this time from the mouth of Pharaoh.

למה אמרת אחתי הוא ואקח אתה לי לאשה ועתה הנה
אשתך קח ולך:

Why you said my sister she is? So then I take her to me to be my wife. Now then, here is your wife; take her, and **go!**" (Gen. 12:19).

Genesis 13

Responding to this latter command, Abram "goes up" (עלה, 13:1), as contrasted to the "go down" (12:10, ירד) as if he tried to regain his initial path.

ויעל אברם ממצרים הוא ואשתו וכל-אשר-לו ולוט
עמו הנגבה:

So Abram **went up from Egypt**, he and his wife and all that he had, and Lot with him, into Negeb (Gen. 13:1).

The act of returning is emphasized with the verb that corresponds to the initial divine command. Additionally, the biblical Author specified the nostalgic place and marked it as "where his tent had been at the beginning (בתחלה)."

וילך למסעיו מנגב ועד-בית-אל עד-המקום אשר-היה
שם אהלה בתחלה בין בית-אל ובין העי

And he went on from the Negeb as far as Bethel to the place where his tent had been **at the beginning**, between Bethel and Ai (Gen. 13:3).

Note here that the act of going back to the place where Abram was originally is emphasized (בתחלה). Here, Abram calls God once more (ויקרא שם אברם בשם יהוה).

After mentioning Lot several times, at 13:5ff, the confirmation that Lot is supposed to be left is confirmed at last. Thus, mentioning Lot from the beginning served as a sign that

Lot will be causing something that affects the history of salvation carried by Abram.

Abraham then politely asks Lot to separate himself from Abraham. The particle **נא** is used twice regarding the speech between Abram and Lot, signifying another solemn plea coming from the heart of Abram. Perhaps, finally here he acted in accordance with the initial divine command, i.e., to separate himself from his family.

ויאמר אברם אל־לוט אל־נא תהי מריבה ביני וביניך
Then Abram said to Lot, “**(Please)** let there be no strife between you and me” (Gen. 13:8).

הפרד נא מעלי
Separate **please** from me (Gen. 13:9).

Finally, Abram dwelt (ישב בארץ־כנען) in the land that the LORD had promised him. Not only that, but the biblical narrator also stressed that the LORD repeated his promise to Abram again. Here, the LORD explicitly showed the land that he is going to give to Abraham after the separation from Lot.

יהוה אמר אל־אברם אחרי הפרד־לוט מעמו
The LORD said to Abram, **after Lot had separated from him** (Gen. 13:14).

In addition to that, the LORD made it clear that the promised descendant would not come from Lot. This is because, after the departure, God once again repeated his initial promise to Abraham (Gen. 13:16). After the repeated promise comes once more the divine command “to go” (התהלך) in hithpael form.

קום התהלך בארץ לארכה ולרחבה כי לך אתננה
Arise, **walk through** the length and the breadth of the land, for to you I will give it (Gen. 13:17).

Genesis 15

It is interesting that Abraham in Genesis 15:2 used the same verb root (הלך) as the initial divine command, while he probably could have used another. For instance, he could have said something as simple as **ואנכי ערירי** without using any verbs at all, a sentence structure possible in the Hebrew language. Regarding the use of an extra verb or word, the writer of the Bible would not use any wasted words so the verb that is inserted here must indeed be significant. The remembrance with the initial command is, then, obvious. Abraham doubts God’s promise after all.

Abraham stated his doubt explicitly in 15:3f. Here, Abraham was uttering complaints “and Abram said” ויאמר אברם instead of trusting the utterance of the initial divine promise “and the LORD said” ויאמר יהוה (12:1). For this doubtfulness, God once more convinced Abraham in a graceful yet direct manner that Abraham would have his heir from Sarah (15:4).

In response to God’s utterances, Abraham comes to believe him ביהוה (אברם) (15:6). This is the first time Abraham is pictured explicitly as a man of faith. Von Rad contended that the verb was used to convey an act of declaration; hence, God declared Abraham to be righteous.¹⁶ Conversely, Yohan Hwang suggests another possibility that it is connected to the test in Genesis 22. The righteousness here is expecting the test in *Aqedah*.¹⁷

Not only that, he has God’s approval on his deed ויחשבה (יהוה) לו צדקה. This scene continues with the swear made by the divine to

¹⁶Gerhard von Rad, “Faith Reckoned as Righteousness,” dalam *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays*, terj. E. W. T. Dicken (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 125–130.

¹⁷Yohan Hwang, “Eschatology in Genesis 15:6” *Hebrew Studies* 55 (2014): 19–41. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43151464>.

satisfy a man's doubt במה אדע כי אירשנה. Here, the divine swear to Abraham is a pure act of the divine's unconditional love. When asking for God's proof that God would grant his own promise, Abraham was not prepared. Instead, he fell into a deep sleep ותרדמה נפלה על-אברם when God was going to perform the divine swear (15:12).

Genesis 16

Soon after these things, one might expect a good deed to be done by Abraham. However, chapter 16 begins with a contrasting description. Here, Sarah is described as a wife that cannot bear a child ושרי אשת אברם לו ילדה. Sarah was seventy-six years old when she made her request for Abraham to take Hagar. Sarah wanted to have a child through a surrogate. Indeed, for the Ancient Near East, infertility was seen as originating from the deity, often as a form of curse or punishment.¹⁸ Hence, Abraham was in the middle of questioning whether his God intended to bless or to curse him. Then, almost immediately, in agreement with Sarah, Abraham took Hagar "and he went to Hagar" (ויבא) (אל-הג'ר) as his wife to gain an heir.

Genesis 17

Abraham was really old and seemed to have given up on God's promise. However frustrated Abraham might have been, the LORD still made him the same promise (17:1ff.). This time, the promise was accompanied by a command to make a sign of circumcision (v. 13ff.). Abraham fell and laughed as if it was a divine joke imposed on him (ויפל אברהם) (על-פניו ויצחק). As realistic as he was, Abraham questioned in his heart the divine logic by referring to his age pertaining to the promise of heirs (17:17).

¹⁸Candida R. Moss dan Joel S. Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility: Biblical Perspectives on Procreation and Childlessness* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 12.

ויאמר בלבו הלבן מאה-שנה יולד ואם-שרה
הבת-תשעים שנה תלד

And he said in his heart, "Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" (Gen. 17:17).

Instead of trusting the initial divine utterances, once more Abraham preferred to trust his own (17:18). He suggested that Ishmael would be his heir and would live in the countenance of God.

ויאמר אברהם אל-האלהים לו ישמעאל יהיה לפניך
And Abraham said to God, "Oh that Ishmael might live before you (Gen. 17:18).

This act of distrust and disobedience was immediately countered by God: but Sarah your wife, אבל שרה אשתך (17:19). It was negated by a strong negation of אבל, *but*. Besides, the reason for the negation clearly had to do with the mother of the true promised heir of God, *Sarah your wife*. Lastly, by name, God promised this child and Abraham shall call his name Isaac וקראת את-שמו יצחק and not Ishmael ישמעאל.

However, in 17:23 Abraham acted once more. "He took" (ויקה אברהם) all of his men including his son Ishmael to be circumcised according to the previous covenant. It seems that Abraham was trying to believe God and acted based on the prescription of his God. Although the tension of his disbelief was still there, by the repetition of the calling "Ishmael his son" ישמעאל בנו, he obeyed the command to get circumcised.

Genesis 20-21

After the event of Sodom and Gomorra, Abraham journeyed (ויסע משם אברהם ארצה הנגב) again to Negev (Gen. 20:1). After the event in Egypt, Abraham dwelt (ישב) between Kadesh and Shur. Here, Abraham met Abimelekh. There is a scene here where Abraham

tricked Abimelekh regarding his wife. Sarah has once again been “sexually compromised” to preserve Abraham’s life. In terms of the narrative, Abraham’s action creates tension because it endangers the promise God made to Abraham in Genesis 12.¹⁹ Abraham seems to deliberately give Sarah away. What about his promised descendant from Sarah?

Although there was no direct statement from God, the mistake that Abraham made here is undeniable. The promise from God was endangered due to the shallow action of Abraham, and, consequently, Sarah proved Abraham’s wrongdoing.²⁰ Seeing the usages of the verb יכה (to vindicate or to rebuke), Elizabeth Robar argued that later in Genesis 21:25, Abraham is retired to a position of being in the right in contrast to 20:16. In Genesis 20:16, only Sarah is vindicated כל ונכחה. Later in 21:25, Abraham rebuked Abimelekh והוכח אברהם את־אבימלך. The same verbal root is used in both situations (יכה), and it seems that its usage in 21:25 emphasizes the remembrance of Sarah’s vindication. The two appearances of the verb יכה are possibly intended to demonstrate that just as Sarah was shown to be in the right by Abimelekh’s gifts, Abraham was seen as in the right in his justified rebuke of Abimelekh.²¹ However, even if this is true, it still shows that Abraham’s action earlier in chapter 20:2 cannot be seen as right after all.

Finally, after receiving a rebuke, Abraham prayed (ויתפלל אברהם אליהאלהים) to God for the sake of Abimelekh (Gen. 20:17). Strangely, in the case of Abimelekh, God closed all of the women’s wombs because of Sarah’s infertility. It was even more strange that, by the prayer of Abraham, all the wombs were opened. This act of closing and opening

wombs was directly followed by the opening of Sarah’s womb in 21:3. Of course, the one who opens and closes the wombs is God, not Abraham. Abraham’s mistake promoted the closing; his prayer inquired God to do the opening one. Almost immediately after the opening of the wombs, Sarah’s womb also opened. It is the exhibition of God’s sovereignty that can close or open wombs. The same God immediately opens Sarah’s.

After the birth of the promised son, again, Abraham did the covenant sign to his true heir. Now it is not truly Ishmael, but rather Isaac, his son וימל אברהם את־יצחק בנו (21:4). In addition to Lot, who ended up separated from Abraham, Ishmael also banished and God approved the act (21:12). It is clearly stated that the reason for the divine approval is that Isaac should be called the seed of Abraham and not Ishmael.

כי ביצחק יקרא לך זרע

For **through Isaac** shall your offspring be named (Gen. 21:22).

Genesis 22: Abraham’s Final Test

Now, “after the things” observed above, ויהי אהר הדברים האלה, comes the final test of Abraham. Regarding this final test, the seemingly unusual phrase קה־נא was used. The particle נא depicted a solemnity of the divine request. It occurred only five times (Gen. 13:14; 15:5; 22:2; Ex. 11:2; Isa. 7:3) in instances where God was demanding something that defied reasonable explanation.²² Thus, this phrase referred to Abraham’s last and the most difficult trial, probably beyond man’s logic, given by God to sacrifice his son, the only beloved son, Isaac.

קה־נא את־בנך את־יחידך אשר־אהבת את־יצחק
ולך־לך את־ארץ המריה והעלהו שם לעלה

Take (please) your son, your only one that you loved, Isaac, and go (you) to the

¹⁹Elizabeth Robar, *The Verb and the Paragraph in Biblical Hebrew: A Cognitive-Linguistic Approach*, vol. 78, *Studies in Semitic Languages and Linguistics* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 153.

²⁰Robar, *The Verb and the Paragraph*, 153.

²¹Robar, *The Verb and the Paragraph*, 155.

²²Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 101.

land of Moriah and sacrifice him there as offering (Gen. 22:2).

Regarding the response to the command here in the test, conventional reading contended that in the text of Genesis 22, there is no questioning of the divine command on Abraham's part. Jonathan Jacobs also signaled that, from the Talmudic sages, medieval Jewish biblical commentators, and modern biblical scholars alike have accepted the assumption that Abraham was performing the binding with no doubts.²³ If the conventional reading is true, then it marks a great pivotal point in Abraham's life. This is because in the context of the opening of the saga (Gen. 12), Abraham was depicted as an imperfect patriarch (or was he?).

It is more natural for Abraham to act according to the previous trait. Not only because it flows well, but also because it is more humane. Despite this conventional view, Jacobs argued that Abraham has doubts. According to his reading, there were many times when Abraham seemed to hesitate as if he was waiting for God to annul the command. For example, Jacobs noted the very minor role Isaac played in chapter 22. Meanwhile, Abraham's actions were depicted the most; he is the main character here. Furthermore, there were many unnecessary acts accompanying this act of sacrificing.²⁴

From the structural point of view, Jacobs was probably right. Considering the initial command and the way Abraham acted at the beginning, the beginning and the end of Abrahamic saga allow a number of comparisons to be made. There is still similarity between the younger and older Abraham. The Abraham who half-obeyed God at the initial calling is still visible in the last test. Indeed, at

the outset, Abraham was doing what was required by God. In the former scene, Abraham still moved his feet to go to the land of promise. In the latter scene, Abraham made his move to Moriah. Despite these acts that appeared to be obedient, one can still notice Abraham's doubt. While in the first command, Abraham still brought Lot, in the last command, Abraham delayed his acts towards the mountain.

The verb לקח (to take) is ironic in relation to this Abrahamic saga. Although Abraham took Lot as a signal of doubt, if not disobedience, here in chapter 22, God really asked Abraham to take his true son. First of all, Abraham probably doubted God's plan so he brought Lot and may have thought that if God's plan did not work, his plan to have Lot as his heir would. This kind of thinking process was not strange to Abraham considering his actions in chapter 12 and on. However, this time in chapter 22, God asked Abraham to take his real son as if God would violate his own promise. Previously, Abraham took Lot in case he could not fulfill the progeny for himself, i.e., to sustain life. This was definitely not working because Lot finally departed. Now God asked Abraham to take his living son, his own blood, to make him die.

Further, the same young Abraham was still there when he tried to fulfil God's inquiry. In chapter 22, God asked Abraham to bring only his son. Instead, Abraham brought everything else (two attendants (v. 3), fire and knife (6), knife (10), ram (13)).²⁵ The Abraham from chapter 12 is the same man as the Abraham in chapter 22. This is shown by his disobedience when he took Lot instead of leaving everything as God had instructed in chapter 12. At the test in chapter 22, Abraham hesitated.

The conventional reading and possibly others suggest that God's voice through the

²³Jonathan Jacobs, "Willing Obedience with Doubts: Abraham at the Binding of Isaac," *Vetus Testamentum* 60, no. 4 (2010): 546–548, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41062716>.

²⁴Jacobs, "Willing Obedience with Doubts," 549–555.

²⁵Jacobs, "Willing Obedience with Doubts," 557–558.

angel confirmed Abraham's faith. Genesis 22:12 contains the verb אָי which is the NT equivalent to the word faith (Deut. 10:12; Eccl. 12:13; Ps. 103:11, 13, 17; 112:1; 128:1; Prov. 31:30; Luk. 1:50).²⁶ According to this reading, the fear of God caused obedience grounded in a deep trust in God,²⁷ even though it is out of our understanding. Is this the kind of unquestioning faith that one should see in Abraham's life?

Perhaps, the faith that received God's praise is the faith that is willing to obey even if there is doubt. None of Abraham's doubtful actions received God's rebuke. If Jacob's reading is true, then it is also the same God who praises Abraham's little faith, despite his weakness. In Abraham's case, Anthony Thiselton would be correct to contend that "doubt and faith are compatible."²⁸ Abraham is the model in which faith and doubt are intertwined. Faith is something that is renewed moment by moment. In order to believe and act accordingly, doubt must regularly arise and be conquered by renewed acts of will.

From Abraham to the Church: Concluding Reflections

When commenting on the patriarch's narratives, it might be true that history would repeat itself to some extent. In the case of the Abraham's narratives, the parallels between what happened seem to be more than a coincidence. This emphasis suggests that there are links connecting the lives of God's people in a certain theological principle. Thus, the depictions of human nature's unchanging weaknesses and disobedience, the constancy of God's faithful character, and his keeping of promises, are

signs that are revealed to the church to rebuke and to teach.²⁹ The church must open its ears to listen.

In Abraham's narrative from Genesis 12 to 22, several things should be noted. First, on one hand, Abraham, as an example of God's people, is often depicted as doubtful of God's command and promises. Kuruvilla says, "Genesis 12-20, then, is not the account of a pristine faith on part of the patriarch."³⁰ Despite how often God reminded Abraham, Abraham kept doing what seemed right from his perspective. On other hand, the LORD is the faithful God who keeps his promise amidst Abraham's doubts. In addition, a self reflection should take place on the Church's part. The church has been in one way or another like the patriarch Abraham, going through a life entangled with the divine command and promises and all its responses. How should the people of God then respond in light of what has happened to the world after COVID-19?

Some may tend to have a certain prejudice about COVID-19. Some Christians suggest that the pandemic is a punishment for sin. According to this view, one would assert that COVID-19 has been sent to purge the world of sin.³¹ Linked to Genesis 22, the pandemic may have succeeded at mimicking the test God gave to Abraham. It is a necessary test. It is necessary for the benefit of all succeeding generations of the readers of the text, to demonstrate what it means to trust God fully.³² Hopefully, this test will make the church repent.

²⁶Kuruvilla, "The *Aqedah*," 500.

²⁷R. W. L. Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith: A Study of Abraham and Jesus*, Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 79, 96.

²⁸Anthony C. Thiselton, *Doubt, Faith, and Certainty* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 47.

²⁹Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 1 (Waco: Word, 1987), 257–258.

³⁰Kuruvilla, "The *Aqedah*," 597.

³¹Dein et al., "Mental Health and Religion," 5–6.

³²Kuruvilla, "The *Aqedah*," 498.

Regardless of any prejudices, there is compelling evidence for a link between the COVID-19 pandemic and religion. Relying on Google's data, Jeanet Sinding Bentzen found a rise in searches for the word "prayer" on Google in March 2020. The most searched prayers were about asking God for protection against the coronavirus, staying strong, thanking nurses for their efforts, and even ending the pandemic.³³

However, a typical Hebrew Bible's theology about the cause of everything that has happened on earth is clear. The God of Israel is the first cause. In response to COVID-19, John Piper stresses the sovereignty of God over all things that happen in our world. Of course, the coronavirus is understood as God's bitter providence; to describe some of God's work as bitter is not blasphemy.³⁴ God rules over everything, not just the good things; but also the bad ones (cf. Isa. 45:7; Lam. 3:37). As Job similarly asked, "Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?" The narrator confirms that Job's statement is true: "In all this Job did not sin with his lips" (Job 2:10).

In the realm of divine providence, the underlying reasons behind the actions orchestrated by God remain enigmatic. The human intellect is naturally inclined towards seeking logical explanations for events. Consequently, inquiries arise as to why God subjects individuals, both historically as exemplified through Abraham, and presently in the context of the church, to challenging trials. Confronted with the profound impact of a devastating pandemic, many are compelled to question the pur-

pose behind God's permission of such widespread affliction. In light of these circumstances, one may wonder whether the faithful should voice their dissent. Drawing parallels with the narrative of Job, it is conceivable for the church to think that these calamitous events do possess a discernible rationale (Job 2:3).³⁵

Circling back to Abraham's narrative, why would God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son in the first place? Some have explanations. It was probably not God, but an evil figure, like in the book of Job, who was behind the *Aqedah*.³⁶ A fragmentary text found among the Dead Sea Scrolls (4Q225) seeks to resolve the problem of *Aqedah* by mentioning the "Prince of A[ni]mosity who came [to G]od and accused Abraham with regard to Isaac."³⁷ On the other hand, it was perhaps a test to prove or disprove Abraham's faith.

Nevertheless, the situation is unmistakably true. Considering Abraham's experience with the church, God may want us to sacrifice ourselves. The Jewish tradition in the collection of midrashim in *Genesis Rabbah* 56 saw Abraham as the object of the test. In *Gen. Rab.* 55:4, the ministering angels questioned Abraham's attitude that "Abraham has rejoiced and has made everyone rejoice but he did not set aside for the Holy One Blessed Be He a single bull or a single ram." However, the Holy One contended that Abraham "would not refuse" to sacri-

³³Jeanet Sinding Bentzen, "In Crisis, We Pray: Religiosity and the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization* 192 (2021): 542, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jebo.2021.10.014>.

³⁴Piper, *Coronavirus and Christ*, 37–38.

³⁵Ying Zhang, "Reading the Book of Job in the Pandemic," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 139, no. 3 (2020): 607–612, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jbl.2020.0033>.

³⁶Reed Carlson, "Provocateurs, Examiner, and Fools: Divine Opponents to the *Aqedah* in Early Judaism," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 83, no. 3 (2021): 373–389, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cbq.2021.0080>.

³⁷Florentino Garcia Martinez and Eibert J. C. Tigchelaar, eds., *The Dead Sea Scrolls Study Edition* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 478–481.

face his son if asked.³⁸ Moreover, in remembrance of Genesis 12, Gen. Rab. 55:7 shows that Abraham offered himself, everything he has, and did not hold back. Abraham offered everything he had.

John Calvin once said that Abraham's faith is the best model of believing for the children of God, the church.³⁹ What kind of model, then? Calvin would have different views on Abraham. Notwithstanding, the exposition above shows that he is also a type of doubtful church who can do nothing apart from God's providence. Although, in modern Christianity, many regard doubt simply as a lack of faith or trust in God.⁴⁰ However, Abraham's doubtful act received praise from God culminating in Genesis 22.

Should the church, in this pandemic era, be bold as opposed to be doubtful? Should God's people keep their faith strong and leave not a single drop of doubt? Or, can we? Abraham still showed doubt, even after all of his experiences. Is it not humane for the church to also show doubt and uncertainty in the midst of this pandemic? Perhaps, God's people are too naïve with themselves. Acknowledgment of doubt is seen as weakness and disbelief. Perhaps, it is time to reconsider that. The church needs to begin to see that faith and doubt can operate simultaneously.⁴¹

While emphasizing the *Aqedah* as crucial in religious history, Levenson argues that the *Aqedah* made the earlier promise in Genesis

12 that was rooted only in God's grace. However, he also stated that those promises are grounded "on the basis of Abraham's willingness to offer Isaac up for sacrifice."⁴² Hence, it is a dialectic between God's initial command and promises with the acts of Abraham. This is shown by the act of sacrificing Isaac. One can also relate with all of the actions that Abraham has made from chapter 12 to 22. This willingness to sacrifice his son, as is proved above, is never a purely bold action without doubt. If Abraham followed God's command to sacrifice Isaac in the end, it was faith that acted in the midst of uncertainty and doubt. To put it differently, faith is about a pilgrimage that the church must take.⁴³

Hence, akin to Abraham's experience, the church finds itself compelled to sever ties with its entire past, while also being called upon to relinquish its entire future.⁴⁴ This divine command echoes the initial call to Abraham (Gen. 12) and finds resonance in the subsequent test (Gen. 22). As the people of God navigate through myriad uncertainties, it is inevitable that they will encounter missteps and make imperfect choices. Nevertheless, within the ultimate summons, Abraham faced the pivotal question: "How significant am I to you? Sacrifice your son, your only son, the one you love."⁴⁵ For the church, the divine mandate to "go forth" (Matt. 28:20) heralds a fresh commencement for God's people, which potentially parallels the call that the church is expected to obey.

N. T. Wright was right to say that, "It is no part of the Christian vocation, then, to be able to explain what's happening and why.

³⁸The Midrashim texts are taken from H. Freedman and Maurice Simon, eds., *Midrash Rabbah*, terj. H. Freedman, vol. 1 (London: Soncino Press, 1939).

³⁹John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, terj. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 jilid, The Library of Christian Classics (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 2.10.11.

⁴⁰Thiselton, *Doubt, Faith, and Certainty*, 1.

⁴¹Thiselton, *Doubt, Faith, and Certainty*, 37–41.

⁴²Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection*, 138–139.

⁴³Jana M. Benneth, "On Pilgrimage with Abraham: How a Patriarch Leads Us in Formation in Faith," *Journal of Moral Theology* 10, SI1 (2021): 20–39, <https://jmt.scholasticahq.com/article/24525-on-pilgrimage-with-abraham-how-a-patriarch-leads-us-in-formation-in-faith>.

⁴⁴von Rad, *Genesis*, 239.

⁴⁵Kuruvilla, "Theological Exegesis," 266–267.

In fact, it *is* part of the Christian vocation *not to be able* to explain—and to lament instead.⁴⁶ It is the responsibility of God's people to act faithfully in the midst of doubt and uncertainty. It is the message that can be seen in the text of Abraham.

It is a call for the church to go forth (Matt. 28:20). A call not to find relief merely in religion, but to seek the face of God and let God to lead the way. Even if God's people find themselves in some imminent danger of COVID-19,⁴⁷ like the kind of test that Abraham took, God's people should exercise the kind of faith in which nothing comes between God and the believer.⁴⁸ Not even the gifts of God, not even the church as an institution.

CONCLUSION

In this postpandemic era, what kind of faith is worthy of praise? We act, feel, and think in the same way as a believer on some occasions and like unbelievers or doubters on other occasions.⁴⁹ The problem is that when people shout for the church to have a strong belief in this pandemic era, is it genuinely done? Who can tell? If a total doubtless faith is required in God's people, should we say Abraham was more of an unbeliever than a man of faith?

⁴⁶N. T. Wright, "Christianity Offers No Answers About the Coronavirus. It's Not Supposed To," *Time*, March 29, 2020, <http://time.com/5808495/coronavirus-christianity>, emphasis original.

⁴⁷Observing the interconnection between the *Aqedah* and Sinai narrative, Gideon Miller says that the pattern of danger and deliverance is a natural part of the religious encounter with God: "God reassures His adherents that He does not seek human sacrifice, victims, or anyone's harm. Rather, he wishes to benefit mankind through the acceptance of His will and the fulfillment of His designs." See Gideon Miller, "Peril and Deliverance and the Aqedah-Sinai Narrative Structure," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (2012): 247–252.

⁴⁸Miller, "Peril and Deliverance," 271–272.

⁴⁹Thiselton, *Doubt, Faith, and Certainty*, 44.

William Hamilton once wrote that, "We doubt in order that we may believe; we begin, that we may not end with, doubt."⁵⁰ Perhaps, it is not the ultimate purpose of the church to be a pretender of bold faith. Instead, faith is a pilgrimage the people of God must take. This is not to say that the church must be more mediocre. Rather, it is to say that the church should remain aware, honest, and humble, and to boast only in God. Like Abraham, the church is God's people, humane in nature. We doubt. Can doubt and faith be compatible? Or, should the church be more authentic about its feelings, no matter how doubtful it may be. Should the church shout, "Lord, I believe, help my unbelief" (Mark. 9:24)? With this attitude, shall the church take a pilgrimage of faith to learn to offer its entire life to our God. In relation to, a divine command, a doubtful and responding faith, and acts of obedience or even disobedience, shall the church "go forth"!

AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

Author's Contributions and Responsibilities

I am responsible for the analysis, interpretation, and discussion of the research results. I have read and approved the final manuscript.

Competing Interests

I have no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately affected them in writing this article.

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