

To facilitate group discussion, Public Affairs Television, Inc. has created the 175 page *Talking About Genesis: A Resource Guide*. You can purchase a copy of the Resource Guide for \$5.95 wherever books are sold or by calling Doubleday at 1-800-323-9872. In Illinois, call 847-768-7000.

Below is an excerpt from the chapter "The Test". In addition to the essay and activities found below, the full guide contains other themes including commentaries on Isaac's role during his own near sacrifice.

THE TEST

THE STORY OF ABRAHAM AND ISAAC ON MOUNT MORIAH: Genesis 22-23

And it happened after these things, that God tested Abraham and said unto him, "Abraham." And he replied, "Here I am." And He said, "Please take your son, your only one, whom you love--Isaac--and go to the land of Moriah; bring him up there as an offering upon one of the mountains which I shall tell you." (Genesis 22:1-2, The Chumash: The Stone Edition/Artscroll)

Now read the story of God's command to Abraham and Abraham and Isaac's journey to Mount Moriah in your Bible. As you do, consider the following questions:

- Why does God test humans? Especially one as faithful as Abraham has already shown himself to be?
- What exactly is the test here? Is it a test of Abraham's absolute and unquestioning faith and obedience or is it a test of man's willingness to challenge God?
- How would you describe Abraham's faith? How does it compare to Isaac's? To your own?
- Where was Sarah? What might be different about this story if God had commanded Sarah to sacrifice Isaac?
- Do you think it will ever be possible for Isaac to forgive his father? To forgive God?
- Why does this story make us so uncomfortable today?
- Do you believe that God always requires that we sacrifice (or be willing to sacrifice) what we love most?

ARGUING WITH GOD

by Rosann Catalano

Over the centuries, countless explanations have been offered for Abraham's failure to argue with God on Mount Moriah. Perhaps he knew that it was only a test. Perhaps he was a zealot whose love of God superceded all family ties. Perhaps he was still resentful over Ishmael and so the sacrifice of Isaac was not so difficult for him. Perhaps he had become disheartened by God's many tests. Perhaps he had come to believe that arguing with God was futile, that the best man could do was to learn what God's plan was--and in this case, he did not want to know what God's plan was. Perhaps he felt that arguing on behalf of others was part of our obligation to pursue justice, but that arguing on his own behalf was self-serving. Perhaps he understood that God, in every age, asks us to demonstrate our faith by giving up what is most important to us. Perhaps . . .

While the notion of arguing with God may strike some as outrageous or blasphemous, it is part of the larger lament tradition that is deeply embedded in both the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Testament.

The laments of Moses, Samson, Rebekah, Elijah, Jeremiah, Job, and Jesus all belong to this tradition, one which has profound implications for the ways in which Jews and Christians understand both the character of God and the nature of their relationship with God.

The lament tradition rises out of the anguish experienced when the hopes and claims of faith come into direct conflict with the reality of human suffering. Here is prayer which disregards all pretense and politeness by issuing a bold protest that appeals to God to alter the situation. Laced with the language of expectation, this is a tradition that storms the gates of heaven in search of the God who promised to be a God of compassion and mercy.

In Genesis 18, Abraham argues with God against the decision to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. That God accedes to the temerity and tenacity of Abraham witnesses both to the persuasive power of the lament and to the willingness of God to be moved by the prayer of those created in God's own image.

Against the backdrop of this tradition, what are we to make of Abraham's silence when God demands that he sacrifice his son, Isaac? Perhaps it is beyond us to discern God's will, but surely we are required to wrestle with Abraham's response. Four chapters earlier, he presses God again and again for the sake of the righteous of Sodom and Gomorrah whom he does not know; but now in the face of this scandalous demand, he remains silent. What are we to make of Abraham's docility and his blind obedience to God? Given the tragic history of the twentieth century, is this model of submissive faith one we want to encourage in our own time?

Rosann Catalano is Theologian-in-Residence at the Institute for Christian and Jewish Studies and an adjunct professor at St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore.

WHERE WAS SARAH?

by Phyllis Tribble

Attachment threatened the obedience, the worship, the fear of God . . . Nowhere prior to Genesis 22 does Abraham emerge as a man of attachment. That is not his problem . . .

Attachment is Sarah's problem. Nevertheless, Genesis 22 drops Sarah to insert Abraham. The switch defies the internal logic of the larger story. In view of the unique status of Sarah and her exclusive relationship to Isaac, she, not Abraham, ought to have been tested. The dynamic of the entire saga, from its genealogical preface on, requires that Sarah be featured in the climactic scene, that she learn the meaning of obedience to God, that she find liberation from possessiveness, that she free Isaac from maternal ties, and that she emerge a solitary individual, nonattached, the model of faithfulness. In making Abraham the object of the divine test, the story violates its own rhythm and movement. Moreover, it fails to offer Sarah redemption and thereby perpetuates the conflict between her and Hagar . . .

Patriarchy has denied Sarah her story, the opportunity for freedom and blessing. It has excluded her and glorified Abraham. And it has not stopped with these things. After securing the safety of Isaac, it has no more need for Sarah; so it moves to eliminate her.

Phyllis Tribble, a series participant, is a professor of sacred literature at Union Theological Seminary in New York City and author of *Texts of Terror: Literary Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*. This piece is excerpted from "Genesis 22: The Sacrifice of Sarah," in *Not in Heaven: Coherence and Complexity in Biblical Narrative*, edited by Jason Rosenblatt and Joseph Sitterson (1991).

ACTIVITIES FOR GROUPS AND FAMILIES

IMAGINING: ON MOUNT MORIAH

Assign various group members to play Abraham, Isaac, the two servants who accompany them to Moriah, and Sarah. Reenact the scene the way you imagine it happened, beginning with Abraham and Isaac leaving home and ending when Sarah hears the story of what happened. Afterward, have the people

who participated in the reenactment stay in role so that the group can question them. For example, the group might want to ask of Abraham: Why didn't you refuse, or at least protest and argue? Can you find the words to explain to us why you kept silent, why you seemingly obeyed God so willingly? Ask of Isaac: Did you submit willingly? When did [fbyou know what was going to happen--or did you not know until it was actually happening? Now, afterward, what do you feel? How do you feel about your father? About God? Will there be lasting repercussions of this event for you? Ask of Sarah: Did you believe Abraham about where he said he and Isaac were going when they left home that morning? Do you now know where Abraham took him? Who told you? If you suspected what was going to happen, why did you let them go? What do you think you would have done if God had asked of you what God asked of Abraham?

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