

## Must Every Disciple Make an Abrahamic Sacrifice?

An Old Testament KnoWhy<sup>1</sup> for Gospel Doctrine Lesson 9: “God Will Provide Himself a Lamb” (Abraham 1; Genesis 15-17; 21-22) (JBOTL09A)



Figure 1. Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn (1606-1669): *The Sacrifice of Isaac*.

*Question:* In his willingness to offer up Isaac in sacrifice, Abraham made an unthinkable choice — a choice that opposed reason,<sup>2</sup> went contrary to the commandments,<sup>3</sup> seemed to nullify God’s prior promises,<sup>4</sup> and must have made his whole soul recoil in moral repugnance.<sup>5</sup> Does the Lord require every disciple to make a similar choice?

*Summary:* It is one thing to choose the right when the right seems reasonable and blessings for obedience seem obvious. It is another thing to bow in humble submission when “the thought makes reason stare”<sup>6</sup> and the rewards of faith are not forthcoming. This article will show how Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and Hagar each experienced such tests, as have many in modern times. The relevance of these tests to temple covenants and blessings is made apparent, as is the need for the rescuing power of the Atonement. Will something of a similar nature be required sooner or later of every disciple? Elder Neal A. Maxwell taught: “If we are serious about our discipleship, Jesus will eventually request each of us to do those very things which are the most difficult for us to do.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, “sometimes the best people have the worst experiences because they are the most ready to learn.”<sup>8</sup>

## The Know



*Figure 2. Jacques Joseph Tissot (1836-1902): God's Promises to Abram.*

**What is an Abrahamic test?** To undergo an Abrahamic test is to be “chastened and tried, even as Abraham, who was commanded to offer up his only son.”<sup>9</sup> It is, as Elder Bruce C. Hafen termed it, to experience a “divine tutorial”<sup>10</sup> whereby one’s faith becomes “sufficiently strong to lay hold upon the promise of eternal life,”<sup>11</sup> “knowing (not believing merely) that [one has claim on] a more enduring substance.”<sup>12</sup> “Many of us will say that we do not have that kind of faith,” observed Truman G. Madsen. But “I submit to you that you do not have that kind of faith until you pass that test.”<sup>13</sup>

President John Taylor “heard the Prophet Joseph say, in speaking to the Twelve on one occasion: ‘You will have all kinds of trials to pass through. And it is quite as necessary for you to be tried as it was for Abraham and other men of God, and (said he) God will feel after you, and He will take hold of you and wrench your very heart strings, and if you cannot stand it you will not be fit for an inheritance in the Celestial Kingdom of God.’”<sup>14</sup> The Prophet is remembered as having taught “that if God had known any other way whereby he could have touched Abraham’s feelings more acutely and more keenly he would have done so.”<sup>15</sup>

Whether the test results from situations that expose our own weakness,<sup>16</sup> from the need to respond humbly and charitably to what might seem to be the weakness of others,<sup>17</sup> or from a call to confront daunting, sometimes incomprehensible circumstances beyond anyone’s control — and even if the challenges seem to come directly as a result of our efforts to do what is right — a fitting response to an Abrahamic test will require utter faith, courage, and consecration. At these times, according to Terryl L. Givens, it is “our obligation to know that [the] voice [that directs us] is emanating from a divine source.” “Once we have that assurance,” he continued, “then the rationality [of the directive] is irrelevant.”<sup>18</sup>



*Figure 3. Jacques Joseph Tissot (1836-1902): God Renews His Promises to Abraham*

**The test of Abraham.** The opening of Genesis 22 discloses to the reader something that Abraham did not know, namely that God's entreaty<sup>19</sup> to sacrifice Isaac had been made in order to "tempt" (King James Version) or "try" (Joseph Smith Translation) or "test"<sup>20</sup> him. By stating this purpose at the outset, the narrator of the chapter precluded "any possible misunderstanding [by the reader] that God requires human sacrifice as such,"<sup>21</sup> a point that is especially relevant in light of Abraham's own near-death as a child by that means.<sup>22</sup> Instead, what God wanted was for "Abraham ... to learn something about Abraham."<sup>23</sup>

Important for each of us is that God's intervention in the family line of Abraham, "assigning a valiant spirit to break the chain of destructiveness," provided a clean start for his wives and children. Although Abraham suffered innocently as the child of an idolatrous father, "through the grace of God [he found] the strength to [neutralize] the poison within [himself], refusing to pass it on to future generations. Before [him] were generations of destructive pain; after [him] the line flows clear and pure."<sup>24</sup>

Abraham knew God's voice through long experience. His faith in God's covenants was sure, knowing that "Jehovah could raise his son from the dead if necessary in order to fulfill the promise"<sup>25</sup> of posterity through Isaac. Once God had spoken, there were no long, agonizing soliloquies, no impassioned protests, no doleful mournings in anticipation of his presumed loss. "He who was so daringly eloquent on behalf of the people of Sodom surrender[ed] in total silence to his own bitter personal destiny."<sup>26</sup> The only hint of a temporary loss of composure is in the confused sequence of preparations that commenced early the next morning.<sup>27</sup>



*Figure 4. Annika Sheaff performs the Grand Jeté with seeming effortless<sup>28</sup>*

What can we learn from Abraham's response? That the sign of absolute faith is not found in the gross sequence of motions that outwardly proclaim obedience, but in the subtleties of a perfect inner grace that accompanies their performance, an authentic, loving response to a divine call whose flawless pose is unappreciated by ordinary observers but not unseen by God.

The great Danish Christian philosopher Soren Kierkegaard (1814-1855) compared Abraham's "leap *by* faith" to the leap of a skilled ballet dancer.<sup>29</sup> He wrote: "[I]t is supposed to be the most difficult feat for a ballet dancer to leap into a specific posture in such a way that he never once strains for the posture but in the very leap assumes the posture. Perhaps there is no ballet dancer who can do it – but [Abraham] does it."<sup>30</sup>

We of lesser faith "are unable to assume the posture immediately, [we] waver for a moment," and this wavering proclaims the imperfection of our posture.<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, the perfectly executed leap is not one of "bravura or virtuoso display," but rather "a refined, technically demanding kind of dance; one that capture[s] a sense of lightness and the ethereal."<sup>32</sup> When a call for faith comes to someone like Abraham, the response is reflexive. There is no pause for preparation, no need to muster courage and strength, but only what seems to be an immediate, effortless bridging of the chasm of earth and heaven,<sup>33</sup> a flying embrace of divine futurity, with no looking back.<sup>34</sup>





Figure 5. Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn (1606-1669): *Abraham Caressing Isaac*

Abraham's sudden engagement with his divine mission required a successive exit from each tie that bound him to his former life: "Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house."<sup>35</sup> Sarna notes that the elements of God's directive are "arranged in ascending order according to the severity of the sacrifice involved: country, extended family, nuclear family."<sup>36</sup> When he reached the time of his greatest trial, in "striking verbal echoes" of his first call, God called him to make the supreme sacrifice of the one for whom he had been waiting and praying his whole life: "your son, your *favoured* son, *Isaac*, whom you *love*."<sup>37</sup>

Abraham's response to the divine request enabled him to develop and demonstrate to the utmost degree his readiness to "patiently endure," thus qualifying to "obtain the promise" by a personal oath from the Father that he would attain eternal life,<sup>38</sup> and that his beloved wives and sons would be "secured [to him] by the seal wherewith [he would be] sealed."<sup>39</sup> In the end, Abraham's binding of Isaac for the sacrifice was revealed as the necessary prelude for God's binding of Isaac to Abraham for eternity.<sup>40</sup>

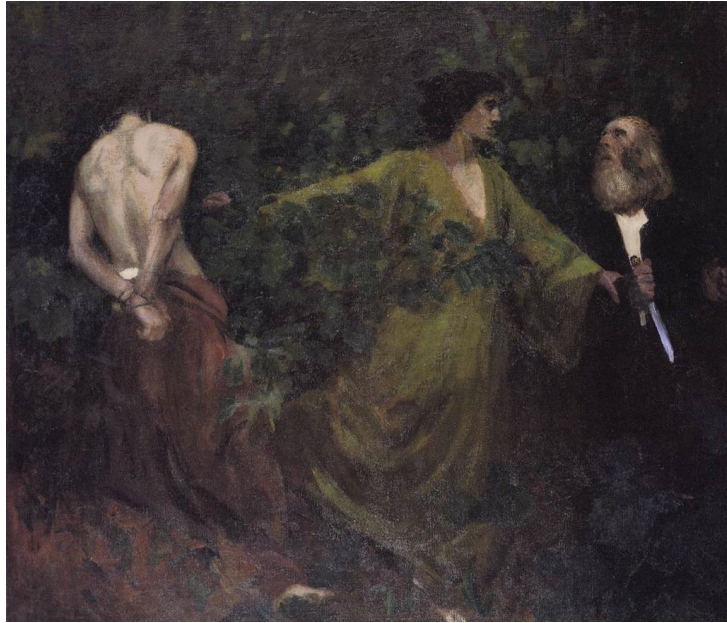


Figure 6. Károly Ferenczy (1862-1917): *Abraham's Sacrifice*

**The Test of Isaac.** In discussions of Genesis 22, Isaac is often treated as a passive foil to Abraham in his trial. But there is no doubt that in this experience Isaac, a man who possessed (we might suppose) the same apparent soberness faith that belied the age of the young Moroni,<sup>41</sup> also learned something about Isaac. Truman G. Madsen summarizes extrabiblical traditions to argue that Isaac's obedience was no less voluntary than Abraham's:<sup>42</sup>

If we can trust the Apocrypha, there are three details that the present narrative omits. First, Isaac was not a mere boy. He was a youth, a stripling youth on the verge of manhood. Second, Abraham did not keep from him, finally, the commandment or the source of the commandment. But having made the heavy journey (how heavy!), he counseled with his son. Third, Isaac said in effect: "My father, if you alone had asked me to give my life for you, I would have been honored and would have given it. That both you and Jehovah ask only doubles my willingness." It was at Isaac's request that his arms were bound, lest involuntarily but spontaneously he should resist the sinking of the knife. Though many have assumed it to be so, only the Book of Mormon records a prophet's words saying that this was in "similitude of God and his Only Begotten Son."<sup>43</sup>

In Hebrews 11:19, the evidence of absolute consecration of Abraham and Isaac is described using the language of death and resurrection.<sup>44</sup> In trying to make sense of this idea, we might remember that in some Jewish<sup>45</sup> and early Christian<sup>46</sup> creedal formulations bearing on accounts of Abraham's sacrifice, one finds the idea that Isaac actually died, ascended to heaven, and was resurrected — though perhaps this tradition makes more sense if we remember that the symbolism of death and resurrection fits equally well in the figurative context of temple ritual and its literal equivalent in actual heavenly ascent.<sup>47</sup>





Figure 7. Detail from the Torah Shrine of the Dura Europos Synagogue<sup>48</sup>

For example, consider this close-up of the decorations located immediately above the *Torah* niche in the late second century Dura Europos synagogue.<sup>49</sup> The entire panel is rich with symbols of resurrection and eternal life: the menorah as a stylized Tree of Life (left), a representation of the doors of the Temple in Jerusalem (center), and the sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham (right). In front of the altar on which Isaac is lying, a ram caught in a tree is shown. In the background is what appears, at first glance, to be someone in a tent. Although the figure in the background is sometimes identified as Sarah,<sup>50</sup> women in the other Dura murals are always shown wearing colored clothing. Besides, it is difficult to see why Sarah would have been pictured at the scene of sacrifice.

In light of the tradition that, in Isaac's experience on Mount Moriah, he died, ascended to heaven, and was resurrected, Margaret Barker<sup>51</sup> interprets the figure standing at an entrance as "going up behind a curtain held open by a disembodied hand — the symbol of the LORD [shown immediately to the left of the curtain]. Since the temple curtain [veil] represented access to the presence of God, this seems to depict Isaac going to heaven."<sup>52</sup> Going further, it must be observed that Barker's description actually raises not one but three interpretive possibilities: 1. an actual death and resurrection; 2. a temporary ascent to the heavenly temple (as when Abraham received God's sure promise); and 3. a figurative entry into God's presence through ritual.

What can we learn from Isaac's near-sacrifice? In the temple sacrifices of ancient Israel — which pointed back to Isaac's arrested sacrifice and pointed forward to Jesus' unarrested sacrifice — the people were to "see" their own arrested sacrifice and redemption, having been spared the shedding of their own blood through the Atonement. Harold Attridge concluded that "Isaac's rescue from virtual death<sup>53</sup> on the sacrificial pyre is symbolic of the deliverance that all the faithful can expect."<sup>54</sup>



Figure 8. Jacques Joseph Tissot (1836-1902): *Sarah Is Taken to Pharaoh's Palace*

**The test of Sarah.** Although Sarah's role is backgrounded in the story of Isaac's near-sacrifice, she is front and center in Genesis 12 and 20 where she is twice taken as a prospective wife by foreign rulers Pharaoh and Abimelech. Tissot's painting shows Sarah's understandable discomfort with being ogled at close range by the passing men of Pharaoh's court.

Every Bible scholar has commented on the duplication of both primary themes and specific language in Genesis 12 and 20. Following the lead of Umberto Cassuto's pioneering insight that "all the Abraham stories were ... duplicates of one another,"<sup>55</sup> Gary Rendsburg has detailed a complex, unifying structure of parallel stories that flow through the book of Genesis from start to finish.<sup>56</sup>

However, while not diminishing the value of Rendsburg's analysis, Hugh Nibley posited an additional hypothesis to explain the two close variants of Sarah's story: namely, that, as we have seen already with regard to certain traditions about Isaac's sacrifice, something akin to the two accounts of her trials might have been used in former times as a means to explain and illustrate ritual.<sup>57</sup> For example, following the logic of Nibley, just as the story of Enoch's city provided a perfect context for lecture on the law of consecration, one might see the themes of Sarah's story as a natural fit for a discussion of something like the laws of obedience, sacrifice, or chastity. Wrote Nibley:<sup>58</sup>

It was now [Sarah's] turn to face the test of the "lion couch" [just as her husband once had been tested in Abraham 1:7-15]! As we have seen, not only the royal altar but also the royal bed was a lion couch. And this was to be more than a test of Sarah's virtue, for should she refuse, the king would be mortally offended — with predictable results for the lady. ...



It is she and she alone who is being tested ... this time. It is incorrect to say with Graves that “Abraham gave Sarah to Pharaoh,” for he was in no position to do so: he was completely in Pharaoh’s power — he had already taken Sarah by force — and Pharaoh was listening only to Sarah! ... [T]hroughout the story every crucial decision rests with Sarah and Sarah alone. ...



Figure 9. Jaques Joseph Tissot (1836-1902): *Abram’s Counsel to Sarah*.

There was nothing in the world to keep her from exchanging her hard life with Abraham for a life of unlimited ease and influence as Pharaoh’s favorite except her loyalty to her husband. By a special order from heaven Abraham had stepped out of the picture and Pharaoh had been placed in a legally and ethically flawless position, and Sarah knew it: “I Abraham, told Sarai, my wife, all that the Lord had said to me.”

Why is the brilliant prospect of being Queen of Egypt never mentioned as an inducement or even a lightening of Sarah’s burden? Sarah apparently never thinks of that, for she was as upset as Abraham: “Sarai wept at my words that night.” Still, the proposition was never put to her as a command, but only as a personal request from Abraham: “Please say you are my sister for the sake of my well being, so that through your ministrations I shall be saved, and owe my life to you!”<sup>59</sup> and so with Abimelech: “This will be a special favor which I am asking of you in my behalf.”<sup>60</sup> Abraham is abiding by the law of God; the whole question now is, *Will Sarah abide by the law of her husband?* And she proved that she would, even if necessary at the risk of her life. It was as great a sacrifice as Abraham’s and Isaac’s, and of the same type. ...

[T]he stories of Isaac and Sarah teach us that salvation is a family affair, in which, however, each member acts as an individual and makes his own choice, for each must decide for himself when it is a matter of giving up all things, including life itself, if necessary. But “when the Lord has thoroughly proved him, and finds that the man is determined to serve Him at all hazards,” only then “the visions of the heavens will be opened unto him,” as they were to Abraham, “and the Lord will teach him face to face, and he may have a perfect knowledge of the mysteries of the Kingdom of God.” If Abraham knew that “God would provide a sacrifice,” Isaac did not; if he was perfectly sure of his wife, she was not and prayed desperately for help — husband, wife, and son each had to undergo the terrible test alone.



Figure 10. Frederick Goodall (1822-1904): *Hagar and Ishmael*, 1879

**The test of Hagar.** In insightful papers by LDS scholars Andrew C. Smith<sup>61</sup> and Jonathon M. Riley<sup>62</sup> we learn much about the neglected character and role of Hagar in biblical, Islamic, and LDS tradition. Smith notes that, unfortunately, Hagar often has been portrayed in a secondary role “as one of the characters defined largely by their positions vis-à-vis the ‘main characters’ of the narrative.”<sup>63</sup> However, within LDS and non-LDS discourse, “[s]he is steadily being granted a role more equal to that of Sarah as a covenant wife of Abraham, albeit with a different ‘calling’ or role.”<sup>64</sup>

Indeed, Smith notes that “in some later Jewish traditions, Hagar is said to have ... fully converted to the covenant religion of Abraham, and taken a new name, Keturah (which most consider to be Abraham’s third wife), and is reunited with Abraham after Sarah’s death.”<sup>65</sup>

With respect to the present article’s theme of Abrahamic tests in the lives of others within Abraham’s immediate family, there is good reason to believe that Hagar’s experience is no less a trial than Abraham’s. Bible scholar Nahum Sarna observes that the story of Isaac’s near sacrifice in Genesis 22 “is organically connected with the preceding chapter [about Hagar and Ishmael]. Abraham has lost [the company of] one son [Ishmael] and now seems about to lose the other [Isaac]. In both narratives, the child is saved by divine intervention at the critical moment, the only two biblical instances of an angel calling from heaven to human beings. In both cases there is a fortuitous discovery: a well of water in the earlier story, a ram in the thicket here.”<sup>66</sup>

Going further, Riley shows how Hagar's narrative also deeply resonates with parallel stories of additional prophets besides Abraham. He finds significant patterns of allusions to Hagar's story in the Exodus narrative<sup>67</sup> as well as the story of Elijah.<sup>68</sup> These all go to show that Paul's contrast in Galatians 4:22-31 between Hagar (the "bondmaid") and Sarah (the "freewoman") as an allegory describing the difference between Judaism and Christianity should be taken as useful rhetorical fodder, not as a literal characterization of Hagar herself as an individual.<sup>69</sup> Rather, Hagar, in company with the prophets Abraham, Moses, and Elijah, can be seen as an exemplars sharing a common model of faithfulness and eventual reward after trial.



Figure 11. Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn (1606-1669): *Angel Appears to Hagar*

This is not all, however. In the casting out and redemption of Hagar, Smith argues that “the author of the Hagar passages wanted to draw attention back to the earlier story of Adam and Eve in the Garden. ... It is plain that the author of the story wanted Hagar to be seen as a parallel to the great mother figure,”<sup>70</sup> Eve — thus becoming a model for following the road of return to the presence of God for each of Eve's daughters and sons.



## The Why

Hugh Nibley sums up the principle of sanctification through faithfulness in Abrahamic tests as follows:<sup>71</sup>

The gospel is more than a catalogue of moral platitudes; these are matters of either eternal life or nothing. Nothing less than the sacrifice of Abraham is demanded of us.<sup>72</sup> But how do we make it? In the way Abraham, Isaac, and Sarah all did. Each was willing and expected to be sacrificed, and each committed his or her all to prove it. In each case the sacrifice was interrupted at the last moment and a substitute provided: to their relief, someone else had been willing to pay the price, but not until after they had shown their good faith and willingness to go all the way — “lay not thy hand on the lad ... for now I know.”<sup>73</sup>

Abraham had gone far enough; he had proven to himself and the angels who stood witness (we are told) that he was actually willing to perform the act. Therefore the Lord was satisfied with the token then, for he knew the heart of Abraham. This is the same for Isaac and Sarah [and Hagar] and for us. And whoever is willing to make the sacrifice of Abraham to receive eternal life will show it by the same signs and tokens as Abraham, but he or she must do it in good faith and with real intent.

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## Further Study

An excellent 13-minute film portraying Genesis 22 entitled “Akedah (The Binding)” can be found in the LDS Media Library: <https://www.lds.org/media-library/video/2011-03-027-akedah-the-binding?lang=eng&clang=ase>

For a related discussion, see Book of Mormon Central, “How Abraham’s Sacrifice of Isaac Illuminates the Atonement” KnoWhy 412 (February 2018), to appear. See also Book of Mormon Central, “What Does It Really Mean to be Blessed for Keeping the Commandments?” KnoWhy 367 (September 26, 2017). <https://knowhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/content/what-does-it-really-mean-to-be-blessed-for-keeping-the-commandments>.

For a scripture roundtable video from The Interpreter Foundation on the subject of Gospel Doctrine lesson 9, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mSDXCiHEqqg>.

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## Endnotes

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- 1 Used with permission of Book of Mormon Central. See <https://knowhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/reference-knowhy>.
  - 2 No explanation was given for the divine injunction to sacrifice Abraham's beloved son.
  - 3 The idea of child sacrifice was condemned in ancient Israel (e.g., Leviticus 20:2-5; 1 Kings 11:4-11; 2 Kings 21:6; 2 Chronicles 28:1-4; Jeremiah 32:35-36).
  - 4 The greatest promise Abraham had received was posterity through Sarah and his son Isaac.
  - 5 "Abraham had left a culture where human sacrifices was performed" (T. G. Madsen, Power). See Abraham 1:7-15.
  - 6 Hymns (1985), Hymns (1985), O My Father, #292, third stanza. "Staring is produced by wonder, surprise, stupidity, horror, fright and sometimes by eagerness to hear or learn something, sometimes by impudence. We say, be stared with astonishment" (N. Webster, Dictionary (pdf), vol. 2, s.v., stare). Cf. W. Shakespeare, Shakespeare, The Taming of the Shrew, 3:2:228: "Nay, ;ook not big, nor stare, nor fret"; Othello, 5:2:188: "Nay, stare not, masters, it is true indeed."
  - 7 N. A. Maxwell, Choose, p. 46.
  - 8 Cited in B. C. Hafen, Disciple's Life, p. 20.
  - 9 D&C 101:4.
  - 10 B. C. Hafen, Anchored, pp. 28, 29. Figure with permission of Liz Lemon Swindle.
  - 11 Lectures on Faith 6:11.
  - 12 Lectures on Faith 6:3. See Hebrews 10:34.
  - 13 T. G. Madsen, Power.
  - 14 J. Taylor, 18 June 1883, p. 197. Continued President Taylor (ibid., p. 197): "Some people have wondered why so many of the Twelve fell away. God tries people according to the position they occupy. Joseph Smith never had many months of peace after he received the truth, and finally he was murdered in Carthage jail. I was with him on that occasion, and therefore know a little about it... But all these personal things amount to but very little. It is the crowns, principalities, the powers, the thrones, the dominions, and the associations with the Gods that we are after, and we are here to prepare ourselves for these things. We are after eternal exaltation in the Celestial Kingdom of God. And we want to feel that this is the main object of existence, that this is why we were born, and that God has revealed Himself from the heavens, restored the Holy Priesthood and gathered us together in order that we might form a nucleus through whom He could communicate His will."
  - 15 J. Taylor, 24 June 1883, p. 264.
  - 16 See Ether 12:27. President Boyd K. Packer recounted how the conversion of Dr. Karl G. Maeser required him to learn humility:

I recite the experience of the founder of [Brigham Young] University, Dr. Karl. G. Maeser. He had been the headmaster of a school in Dresden-a man of distinction, a man of high station. In 1856, Brother Maeser and his wife and small son, together with a Brother Schoenfeld and several other converts, left Germany bound for Zion.

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When they arrived in England Brother Maeser was surprised to be called on a mission in England. Much to their disappointment the families were separated and the Schoenfelds continued on to America. While the Maesers remained in England to fill the call from the Church Authorities, the proud professor was often required to perform menial tasks to which in his former station he had never stooped.

It was customary among the higher German people that a man of Brother Maeser's standing never should be seen on the street carrying packages, but when the elders were going to the train they told him to bring their carpet bags. Brother Maeser paced the floor of his room, his pride deeply hurt. The idea of carrying the suitcases was almost more than he could stand and his wife was also deeply hurt and upset to think *that* he had to do so.

Finally he said, 'Well, they hold the priesthood; they have told me to go, and I will go.' He surrendered his pride and carried the bags. [see A. P. Burton, Maeser, p. 11].

17 Elder Jony L. Koch reminds us that "we have no right to portray anybody, including from our Church circle, as a badly finished product! Rather, our words about our fellow beings should reflect our belief in Jesus Christ and His Atonement and that, in Him and through Him, we can always change for the better!" (J. L. Koch, *Apart*, pp. 110-111).

President Henry B. Eyring has taught (H. B. Eyring, *Lord Leads*, pp. 81-82):

The Lord's leadership of His Church requires great and steady faith from all who serve Him on earth.

For instance, it takes faith to believe that the resurrected Lord is watching over the daily details of His kingdom. It takes faith to believe that He calls imperfect people into positions of trust. It takes faith to believe that He knows the people He calls perfectly, both their capacities and their potential, and so makes no mistakes in His calls.

That may bring a smile or a shake of the head to some in this audience — both those who think their own call to serve might have been a mistake as well as those who picture some they know who seem poorly suited to their place in the Lord's kingdom. My counsel to both groups is to delay such judgments until you can better see what the Lord sees. The judgment you need to make, instead, is that *you* have the capacity to receive revelation and to act on it fearlessly.

18 T. L. Givens *et al.*, *Feeding the Flock* Podcast. Of course, one cannot allow room for acceptance of the seemingly irrational in God's commands to sincere disciples without also opening the door to the illusions of the psychotic and the false pretensions of the conscious deceiver.

19 That God couches his request as an entreaty rather than a command allows Abraham to witness that his willingness to comply springs from love rather than obligation. Nahum Sarna explains that the Hebrew phrase translated in Genesis 22:1 as "Take now thy son" "adds the participle *na*' to the imperative, which usually softens the command to an entreaty, as noted in Sanhedrin 89b, Genesis Rabba 55:7, and Rashi's commentary. Abraham has absolute freedom of choice. Should he refuse, he would not incur any guilt" (N. M. Sarna, *Genesis*, Genesis 22:1).

20 *Ibid.*, Genesis 22:1.

21 *Ibid.*, *The Akedah: The Binding of Isaac*.



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22 Abraham 1:7-15.

23 President Hugh B. Brown, cited in T. G. Madsen, *Power*, p. 232.

24 C. Broderick, *Dare*, p. 119. For more on this theme, see J. M. Bradshaw, *Temple Themes in the Oath*, pp. 50-52.

25 T. G. Madsen, *Power*. See Hebrews 11:19, and additional commentary on that verse later in this article.

26 N. M. Sarna, *Genesis*, Genesis 22:3.

27 My appreciation to Arthur Henry King (1910-2000) for this unpublished insight concerning Genesis 22:3.

28 Annika Sheaff *Grand Jeté*, Annika Sheaff *Grand Jeté*.

29 N. Kramer, *August Bournonville*, p. 80. Kimerer LaMothe describes dancing “as a way of inhabiting religion; it engages thinking, feeling, and enacting ... [I]n Kierkegaard’s work, “dancing” has a meaning as a kind of doing that eludes the grasp of philosophical writing.”

30 S. Kierkegaard, *Fear*. See N. Kramer, *August Bournonville*, p. 73, where Kimerer LaMothe is quoted as saying: “The leap is a movement in which a dancer springs off the ground with one foot, hovers for a moment off the ground, and then lands on the other foot. As such, it embodies in one explosive action a double movement — a movement of leaving the earth and returning to it, like the knight of faith. In a leap, as in faith, although the two movements contradict one another (going up, going down), they appear in that act as one seamless act, connecting earth to earth ... the unity exists in the form of a singular temporal finite act. It exists only in passing — in the flash of its occurrence.”

31 S. Kierkegaard, *Fear*. Edwin Denby describes the magic of the skilled dancer’s landing (cited in N. Kramer, *August Bournonville*, p. 73): “The most obvious test for the dancer comes in the descent from the air, in the recovery from the leap. She has to catch herself in a knee bend that begins with the speed she falls at, and progressively diminishes so evenly that you don’t notice the transition from air to the ground. ... [T]his is the “divine moment” that makes her look as if she alighted like a feather. It doesn’t happen when she lands, you see, it happens later. After that, straightening up from the bend must have the feeling of a new start; it is no part of the jump, it is a new breath, a preparation for the next thing she means to do.”

32 N. Kramer, *August Bournonville*, p. 74.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 78: “Bournonville’s Mephistopheles’ entrance onto the stage is indicative of the sudden because there is no preparation, no indication of a gathering of muscular force to prepare the body for a leap. Instead, the leap arrives out of a completely motionless position. No one expects it. It simply happens.”

See also *ibid.*, p. 73: The shape of the ballet leap, in the way that it connects earth to earth, calls to mind the bridging of heaven and earth characteristic of faith. The balletic leap as a leap of faith thus unifies in the moment of its performance the temporal and the divine.

34 See Luke 9:57-62. *Ibid.*, p. 74: The *grand jeté* is recognizably one of the most difficult feats performed by a ballet dancer. ... Erik Aschengreen, in his “Bournonville Style and Tradition,” writes that typical of the Bournonville style “is the *grand jeté en avant* with

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the open arms — ‘the Danish embrace’ as Walter Terry called it — and this step had a stunning, flying effect on a raked stage.”

35 Genesis 12:1.

36 N. M. Sarna, Genesis, Genesis 12:1.

37 Ibid., The Akedah: The Binding of Isaac, emphasis added. See Genesis 22:2.

38 See Hebrews 6:13, 15.

39 J. Smith, Jr., Words, 13 August 1843, p. 241. Sometimes, due to faulty interpretations of statements by the Prophet Joseph Smith, it has been mistakenly taught that the “temple sealing of worthy parents in marriage assures the salvation and exaltation of their children. However, this blessing is not conferred by the marriage sealing but rather through qualifying for an eventual “sealing [of] the blessing [of] the everlasting covenant, thereby making their calling and election sure” (J. Smith, Jr., Teachings, 13 August 1843, p. 321. Cf. J. Smith, Jr., Words, pp. 241, 300 n. 19 ). Prior to the marriage sealing of Benjamin F. Johnson to his wife, the Prophet Joseph Smith explained the difference between these two kinds of seals (*William Clayton’s Journal*, 20 October 1843, cited in J. B. Allen, No Toil, p. 408. Punctuation and grammar modernized):

... there were two seals in the Priesthood. The first was that which was placed upon a man and a woman when they made the [marriage] covenant and the other was the seal which allotted to them their particular mansion.

See D. A. Bednar, Faithful Parents for an apostolic correction of this misunderstanding.

After emphasizing Abraham’s status as a “friend” of God after demonstrating his willingness to sacrifice Isaac, E. Douglas Clark summarizes scriptures and teachings of Joseph Smith confirming Abraham’s “election sure” which occurred at that time (E. D. Clark, Blessings, pp. 217-218):

[W]hen God announced the blessings, it was not just by promise but by oath, as emphasized by the letter to the Hebrews: “When God made promise to Abraham, because he could swear by no greater, he sware by Himself.... And so, after [Abraham] had patiently endured, he obtained the promise” (Hebrews 6:13, 15). So what did it mean for the Almighty to swear by Himself? God was really saying, according to the Midrash, “Even as I live and endure for ever and to all eternity, so will My oath endure for ever and to all eternity” (citing Kasher, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation*, 3:160). It was the unconditional promise of eternal life, his calling and election made sure, which, says Joseph Smith, comes to a man after “the Lord has thoroughly proved him, and finds that the man is determined to serve him at all hazards” (J. Smith, Jr., Teachings, 27 June 1839, p. 150). Accordingly, explained Joseph Smith, it was “the power of an endless life... which; Abraham obtained by the offering of his son Isaac” (J. Smith, Jr., Words, 27 August 1843, p. 245), an event that “shows that if a man would attain to the keys of the kingdom of an endless life, he must sacrifice all things” (J. Smith, Jr., Teachings, 27 August 1843, p. 322).

The rabbis stated that at the beginning of the great trial, when God had first called Abraham’s name and he had answered “Here am I,” the real meaning was “Here am I—ready for priesthood, ready for kingship, and he attained priesthood and kingship” (H. Freedman *et al.*, Midrash, Vayera 55:6, 1:486). Similarly, Joseph Smith stated that by the “oath of God unto our Father Abraham,” his children were

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“secured [to him] by the seal wherewith [Abraham had] been sealed” (J. Smith, Jr., Words, 13 August 1843, p. 241). In the greatest irony of Abraham’s life, only by binding Isaac for the sacrifice had Abraham bound him to himself in the eternal bonds of priesthood sealing.

40 Paraphrasing E. D. Clark, Blessings, p. 218.

41 See Mormon 1:2.

42 T. G. Madsen, Power.

43 Jacob 4:5.

44 L. T. Johnson, Hebrews, p. 295, explaining the Greek behind the phrase in Hebrews 11:9 stating that Abraham receive Isaac “in a figure” (i.e., “figuratively speaking” (J. Dunnill, Covenant, p. 178): “The phrase *en parabole* points in two directions. Abraham received Isaac ‘back’ literally, when God stopped the sacrifice and Isaac was able to accompany his father home ... As in the use of the same phrase in 9:9, however, the author may also imply another symbolic dimension, namely the resurrection from the dead that occurred in Christ and is anticipated by believers.” On the connection between Hebrews 11 and Romans 4, see L. D. Hurst, Epistle to the Hebrews, p. 121.

45 See, e.g., H. W. Attridge *et al.*, Hebrews, p. 335 n. 25; W. L. Lane, Hebrews 9-13, p. 363.

46 See, e.g., W. L. Lane, Hebrews 9-13, p. 362.

47 H. W. Nibley, Sacrifice of Isaac.

48 C. H. Kraeling *et al.*, Synagogue, plate 51.

49 J. M. Bradshaw, Ezekiel Mural, pp. 11-12.

50 See, e.g., E. R. Goodenough, Dura Symbolism, 9:67-77.

51 M. Barker, Temple Themes, p. 28.

52 Others have interpreted the divine hand as “staying the sacrifice” of Isaac (e.g., L. Liebman, Gavestone).

53 P. M. Eisenbaum, Hebrews 11, p. 162 observes that the motif of a “near-death experience” of the hero appears more than once in Hebrews 11. In the case of Isaac: “What is stressed is that from one who was almost never born, and who after being born was almost killed, the descendants of Abraham, the descendants of God’s faithful ones, are born” (*ibid.*, p. 163).

54 H. W. Attridge *et al.*, Hebrews, p. 335. Cf. J. M. Bradshaw *et al.*, By the Blood Ye Are Sanctified, pp. 176-179.

55 G. A. Rendsburg, Redaction, p. 28.

56 For details of parallels between the two accounts of Sarah’s ordeals, see *ibid.*, pp. 35-38.

57 According to Nibley, various features in the two stories of Sarah indicate that we are “dealing here with ritually conditioned events rather than unique historical occurrences” (H. W. Nibley, Sacrifice of Sarah). See J. M. Bradshaw *et al.*, Investiture Panel, p. 41 for a discussion of how rituals and accompanying variants of myths used to explain them may evolve through time, subject to caveats such as those raised in R. A. Oden, Jr., Bible without Theology, pp. 65, 69.

58 H. W. Nibley, Sacrifice of Sarah.

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59 See Genesis 12:13.

60 See Genesis 20:13.

61 A. C. Smith, Hagar.

62 J. M. Riley, Two views of the foreign woman: Inner biblical allusion in the Elijah narrative.

63 A. C. Smith, Hagar, p. 90.

64 Ibid., p. 136.

65 Ibid., p. 88.

66 N. M. Sarna, Genesis, The Akedah: The Binding of Isaac. See also the list of parallels in J. M. Riley, Two views of the foreign woman: Inner biblical allusion in the Elijah narrative, p. 1.

67 J. M. Riley, Two views of the foreign woman: Inner biblical allusion in the Elijah narrative, pp. 1, 3-8.

68 Ibid., pp. 2, 12-17.

69 See the analysis of A. C. Smith, Hagar, pp. 100-103.

70 Ibid., p. 130.

71 H. W. Nibley, Return, p. 59.

72 D&C 101:4.

73 Genesis 22:12.