

Confused yet?

This text with all its mystery and compelling power has proven to be fertile ground for artists. There is hardly any other scene from the Hebrew Scriptures that have been more illuminated by visual artists than our scene today.



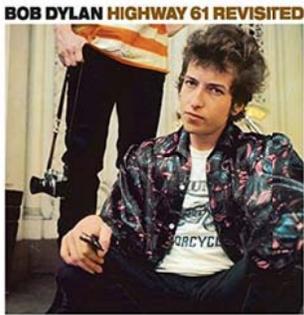
Song writers too have abundant reference to this crazy story of Abraham and Isaac on Mt. Moriah. Bob Dylan's memorable first verse of *"Highway 61 Revisited"* puts the scene of Abraham sacrificing Isaac at the legendary crossroads where Bluesman Robert Johnson is reputed to have sold his soul to the devil for the ability to play the guitar.

As Dylan sees it:

Oh God said to Abraham, "Kill me a son"
Abe says, "Man, you must be puttin' me on"
God say, "No." Abe say, "What?"
God say, "You can do what you want Abe, but
The next time you see me comin' you better run"
Well Abe says, "Where do you want this killin' done?"
God says, "Out on Highway 61"¹

Leonard Cohen also rises to catch the wild, untamed nature of God's demand in his *"Song of Isaac:"*

The door it opened slowly,
my father he came in,
I was nine years old.
And he stood so tall above me,
his blue eyes they were shining
and his voice was very cold.
He said, "I've had a vision
and you know I'm strong and holy,
I must do what I've been told."
So he started up the mountain,
I was running, he was walking,
and his axe was made of gold.²



This text is clearly not for the faint-hearted. It challenges us beyond mere reason. We rebel viscerally. We know this is sacred, dangerous ground. Like the burning bush, we had better tread carefully.



How are we to make sense of this: Isaac, the child of the promise sacrificed? Does God break promises? Does God break God's own rules against human sacrifice? How can this possibly affect our walk today?

Fred Craddock, famed teacher of preachers advises: "Just let this story tell itself." The hearers "might feed for a month off that story. They might even start talking to each other about that story."³

Retired United Methodist Bishop Will Willimon did just that. Early on, he served a moderately affluent, white, suburban church in NC. Called at the last minute to lead an intergenerational SS class, he grabs a video entitled "*Sacrifice of Isaac*" from a series aimed at just telling the Genesis story straight from Scripture. "What can happen? This is just a simple Bible story."⁴ "Right?"



After the video ended, there was stunned silence. Discussion was a non-starter. Willimon tried to fill up the empty air with words on top of words about the cultural background of ritual child sacrifice in the Ancient Near East. Still no response. Finally in near desperation, He asked:

"But what does this old story mean to us? I daresay we moderns are a bit put off by the primitive notion that anybody would think that God wanted [them] to sacrifice a child like this."⁵

"God still does," an older, gray-haired woman volunteered, looking anxious. "How?"

Quietly with tears beginning to well up, she said:

"We sent our son to college. He got an engineering degree. But he got involved in his church, not a Methodist Church, a fundamentalist church. Then they had a baby, our only grandchild. Now he says God wants him to be a missionary and go to Lebanon. [Wants to] take our baby, too."⁶

She can go no farther, beginning to heave and sob.

The silence was broken again by a middle-aged man. “I’ll tell you the meaning this story has for me. I’ve decided that I and my family are looking for another church.” “What?” Willimon asks and adds “Why?”

“Because when I look at that God, the God of Abraham, I feel I’m near a real God, not the sort of dignified, businesslike, Rotary club god we chatter about here on Sunday mornings. Abraham’s God could blow a man to bits, give and then take a child, ask for everything from a person and then want more. I want to know that God.”⁷

This God is indeed a strange and mysterious God who breaks into even the nice, comfortable, staid, orderly, middle class lives we have struggled hard to create in order to insulate ourselves from the ravages of sacrifice and costly faith. The God of Sarah and Abraham breaks into even middle-of-the-road, reasonable religion.



The God of Moses and Mariam breaks into our real world demanding more than offerings, more than tithes, more than obedience ~ but more than trust? The point of Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac seems to be for us to trust God in everything, even in irrational, very direct demands.

We could have sung this morning *“Trust and Obey”* or *“I Surrender All.”* The artists do seem to get the point of this story, perhaps better than the learned theologians. The angel who stays Abraham’s hand explains to us that the point is about trusting God ~ our God who does provide for all our real needs and more ~ our God who is faithful to promises made and covenants struck. That is why Abraham named this place “the LORD will provide” that is, ‘YHWH jireh’ or as traditionally pronounced, ‘Jehovah jireh.’



This seemingly simple text has a mind-altering, life-altering power. If we let it seep into our hearts and souls and let it work its way around our minds. Don’t try and tie down its meaning ~ its meaning is much more than rational, more than heart-tugging ~ it has to be absorbed intuitively ~ lived intentionally. And don’t let it out until it has done its life transforming work.

¹ Bob Dylan, “*Highway 61 Revisited*” first verse

² Leonard Cohen, “*Song of Isaac*” first verse

³ quoting Fred Craddock, source unknown

⁴ *Pulpit Resource* for June 26, 2011, p. 58

⁵ *Ibid*

⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 58-59

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 59