



## Second Sunday of Lent B February 25, 2018

### Help with difficult Old Testament Scriptures may be just a click away!

If you have read the Old Testament *without* a helpful commentary, you are probably left asking many questions like: “Why would God do that?”

Some of you who read the Bible may not be aware that I have written commentaries on all 46 books of the Old Testament which can be found on our parish website (click on Fr. Tobin’s Writings and go to Commentaries on the Books of the Old Testament). Note the three levels of help with the books of the Old Testament. Level Three is the most extensive. Levels One and Two are briefer introductions to the Books of the Old Testament.

This column contains four examples of help on difficult passages. The first example is on today’s first reading (Gen 22: 1-2, 9-13, 15-18).

Why did God ask Abraham to sacrifice his only son?

*“This story is one of the great masterpieces of narrative writing in the Bible. We are drawn from the very beginning of the story and held in suspense until an angel intervenes. We are left to imagine Abraham’s inner thoughts as he makes the fifty-mile trip to Mount Moriah. We feel the silence as father and son walk together, coming closer with each step to that moment of ultimate decision.”* (Collegeville Study Bible, p.60)

The story is centered around Abraham’s great faith and obedience to God, and not on the horror of God’s command. Would Abraham be able to place on the altar the child of promise, his whole future? The answer is ‘yes’—he was ready and willing. He who pleaded with God to spare the innocent in Sodom (18:17-32) did not plead here to spare his own son. Here, obedience to the divine command was uppermost.

Walter Brueggeman, in his book on *Genesis* (pp 185-194), says that this text is nestled between a God who *tests* (22:1) and a God who *provides* (22:8-13). In the beginning of the narrative, God put Abraham to the ultimate test: to hand over to him the one on whom his whole future hinged. It meant going back to barrenness and, at the same time, trusting somehow that God knew what he was doing and would provide—even if it meant raising Isaac from the dead.

A key question this text raises is: Does God really test us in this way? In the biblical books ahead, we will see that testing was rather common in Israel’s history. God tested Israel to see

if she would remain faithful to him or would she look to other gods as well (Ex 20:20, Deut 8:16; 13:3; 33:8). All too often, we only want a God who *provides* and not a God who *tests*. Three concluding remarks:

- God is opposed to human sacrifice, a common practice in those times.
- The early Church Fathers saw the sacrifice of Isaac as a type or foreshadowing of the sacrifice of Christ, i.e., the father offered his only son and the son carried the wood for the sacrifice, just as Christ carried his cross to Calvary.
- On a spiritual level, we might say that going up the hill, Isaac belonged to Abraham; coming down, he belonged to God.

Throwing light on the ‘ban of destruction’—God ordering the Israelites to kill men, women and children

One of the most disturbing passages in the Old Testament is found in Joshua 6:21: *“They observed the ban by putting to the sword all living creatures in the city: men and women, young and old, as well as oxen, sheep and asses.”*

In Chapter 6 of Joshua, we read about one of the most reprehensible practices in ancient Israel, namely, God commanding the destruction of every man, woman and child after a Canaanite city had been conquered.

In carrying out the ‘ban of destruction,’ the Israelites were obeying what Moses told them to do when the Lord gave them victory over the cities in the land of Canaan. *“In the cities of those nations which the Lord, your God, is giving you as a heritage, you shall not leave a single soul alive...lest they teach you to make any such abominable offerings as they make to their gods, and you thus sin against the Lord, your God”* (Dt 20:16-18).

The people of Israel believed that God was a warrior, the commander-in-chief of their army. It was their God who won their battles; therefore, God must receive the spoils. As they understood it, they dedicated the spoils by destroying everything—men, women, children and even animals. In this way, the people would be protected from the contamination of foreign gods (Ex 34:12-15).

What can be said about this practice that is so reprehensible to our modern sensibilities? How could the God who forbade killing in his Ten Commandments order such destruction of human life? Several points to note:

While the mass slaughter of whole populations do greatly offend us, we too in our own era have experienced the mass

execution of Jews, the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the conquest of North America by white European settlers who believed it was their *divine right* to drive the Indians out of their land and mistreat them in gross ways. While the mention of these modern • atrocities is not intended to justify the ancient practice of the ban, they may help to sober our outrage.

- Wholesale destruction of cities after a victory in war was common practice in those times just as burning heretics at the stake was a common practice in the Middle Ages. It was part and parcel of the practice of holy warfare in ancient times. Rather than take captured soldiers as prisoners and material objects as booty, *everything* was destroyed and burned and given as sacrificial offering of thanksgiving to the god or gods who led them to victory. It was easy for Israel with *their very primitive image of God* to believe that this was what their God expected of them. The refusal of all claims on the items and individuals captured was a way of proclaiming that the victory belonged totally to God. Our ancestors were influenced by the customs of their day, and are not to be judged by the customs or principles of our time. We may be embarrassed by the ban, but it was part of the initial stage in Israel's formation and growth as the people of God.

We must keep in mind that the Israelites did not have the benefit of the revelation that came with Jesus, the One who revealed to us the totally non-violent nature of God, the One who said that those who live by the sword shall die by the sword (Mt 26:52).

- The practice of the ban was seen as a way to make sure that the pagan practices of the Canaanites did not contaminate Israel's loyalty to God. *"It is necessary to realize that the ancients saw evil as an infectious reality; it had to be rooted out and destroyed in its totality"* (Roland Faley, TOR). The Israelites living in the thirteenth century B.C. did not have the benefit of the fullness of revelation that came with Jesus. As noted above, Moses had told the people not to leave a single soul alive lest they teach pagan ways. In 1Kings 11:1-13, the Deuteronomistic historian will tell us that the downfall of Solomon's kingdom was due to his allowing the pagan practices of his foreign wives to enter into Israel. In the Gospel, Jesus says: *"If your right eye should cause you to sin, tear it out and throw it away"* (Mt 5:29). Jesus is not telling us to self-mutilate but rather to do whatever it takes to avoid sin and the occasion of sin. When the authors of Joshua were compiling this book, they saw clearly how the exiles could easily lose their faith in God by mixing with and intermarrying with their neighbors.

Most scholars believe that it was unlikely that the ban of destruction was ever carried out as ruthlessly and completely as described in Joshua.

The following are two more sample commentaries you will find in my writings on events in the Old Testament.

## Cain and Abel (Genesis 4:1-16)

One of the most intriguing stories in Genesis is the Cain and Abel story. The brothers could be called the 'patron saints' of sibling rivalry. The following is my commentary on the story.

*"Sin is a demon lurking at the door: his urge is toward you, yet you can be his master."* (Gen 4.7)

While this story opens with Adam and Eve giving birth to two sons (which may cause us to wonder where they eventually found wives), the narrative presupposes a developed civilization, noting the mention of cultic sacrifices, shepherds, farmers and people who might attempt to kill Cain. Remember, the concern of the Genesis author/editor was not how the world was created or how Cain and Abel found wives.

In Genesis 3, we read how the man and woman revolted against God. In this chapter, we see brother literally killing brother, and the drum roll of sin continues. The story also highlights the age-old conflict between nomadic shepherds (Abel) and settled farmers (Cain), as well as sibling rivalry.

In verses 3-4, the brothers brought offerings to the Lord. But the Lord looked with favor on Abel, with no reason given. Some commentators suggest that Cain offered his sacrifice without faith, meaning without any sense of personal relationship with God (Heb 11:4, Jude vv 10-11). Others suggest God was playing favorites—and we must accept it. In Exodus 33:19, God said to Moses: *"I will show favors to those whom I will."*

God's blessing is not something that can be earned or even understood, but we do have a responsibility for how we respond when we may feel others are more favored than us. When God favored Abel's sacrifice, Cain resented it deeply and was crestfallen (v.5). Then God visited Cain and told him he had a choice. Even though "sin was knocking at his door" trying to bring him down, he could choose to act as God would want him to act (*"Cain, you can master it"* [v.7]), or he could follow his selfish designs. God was calling on Cain to be strong and responsible. Like his parents, Cain was faced with a choice to obey God, to fight the temptation, or to give in to a deep-seated resentment.

Sadly, Cain chose not to listen to the Lord. Instead he invited Abel out for a walk in the field and while there, he killed his brother. It was an act of premeditated murder and an example of the kind of behavior deep resentment can lead to.

The remainder of the narrative (vv 9-16) is akin to a "lawsuit" in which God tried Cain for his life. The narrative has close parallels to the "indictment" of Adam and Eve in Gen 3:8-19. There was an *investigation* (vv 9-10), a *sentence* (vv 11-12) and, finally, *banishment* (v.16). In the exchange, Cain refused to take any responsibility for his behavior. Sarcastically, he asked: *"Am I my brother's keeper"* (v.10)? Cain was banished, sent off to be a *"restless wanderer of the earth"* (v.12). In verses 13-14, Cain begged for mercy. The killer feared that he would be killed. In verse 15, God responded: *"Not so, if anyone kills Cain, Cain shall*

be avenged seven-fold. So the Lord put a mark on Cain lest anyone should kill him on sight" (v.14). The mark served a twofold function: on one hand, it announced Cain's guilt; on the other, it assured his protection by God.

Esau gains his father's deathbed blessing by deception (Genesis 27)

*"Isaac explained to Esau, 'Your brother came here by ruse and carried off your blessings.' Esau exclaimed, 'He has been well named Jacob! He has now supplanted me twice'" (vv 35-36).*

This chapter is divided into five scenes:

- *Isaac and Esau (27:1-4)*. In this scene, Isaac who was old and blind, wished to bless his firstborn and favorite son, Esau, before he died. In the ancient world, deathbed blessings were considered to be very important. Before imparting his blessing, Isaac sent Esau out to prepare one of his favorite meals.
- *Rebekah and Jacob (27:5-17)*. When Rebekah overheard Isaac's plan to give his special blessing to Esau, she hatched a plan whereby Jacob would receive the blessing intended for Esau. Jacob went along with the plan. His only fear was being caught in the act of deception.
- *Isaac and Jacob (27:18-29)*. In this central scene of the chapter, the suspense is heightened by each of Isaac's statements and questions: *"Which of my sons are you?"* — *"Come closer that I may feel you."* — *"Although the voice is Jacob's, the hands are Esau's."* — *"Are you really my son Esau?"* Jacob played his role of deception very well. He even had the audacity to suggest that God was behind his trickery: *"The Lord, your God, let things turn out well for me"* (27:20). Finally, after smelling his son's clothes, he bestowed the blessing. The first part of the blessing pertained to agriculture, which spoke of the "fragrance of a field," "abundance of grain and wine." The second part concerned the domain of Israel over Edom, Esau's people. The blessing was sealed by a counter curse.
- *Isaac and Esau (27:30-40)*. This is a very emotional scene. When father and son became aware of Jacob's deception, Isaac was *"seized with a fit of uncontrollable trembling"* (27:33) and Esau *"bursts out into bitter sobbing"* (27:34). Esau exclaimed: *"He has been well named Jacob! He has now supplanted me twice"* (27:36). What Isaac bestowed on Esau was essentially the reverse of the blessing Jacob had received: agricultural infertility, strife, and subservience. Esau and his people, Edom, would serve Jacob's people until they finally broke loose from Judah (2Kgs 8:20-22). We might wonder why Isaac did not take back his blessing from Jacob. In ancient times, it was the strong belief that a blessing (or curse), once bestowed, would prevail (Num 22-24, particularly 23:19-20).

- *Rebekah and Esau*. Because of the dirty trick Jacob pulled on Esau in stealing both his *birthright and blessing*, Esau allowed a big grudge to grow in him and he plotted to murder Jacob. When Rebekah found out Esau's plans, she strongly suggested to Jacob that he leave home and visit his uncle Laban until Esau cooled down. Jacob might have been God's choice to carry forward his plan of salvation, but his act of deception had very serious consequences for him. He would spend twenty years in exile for his sin.

What are we to make of this story? The overall purpose of Genesis 12-50 was to show God's promise being carried out despite all obstacles. We should not be surprised then that Jacob, like Abraham, was himself one of those obstacles.

The oracle in 25:23 states that the elder son was to serve the younger one. Was Rebekah to be condemned for assisting in the fulfillment of the Divine Word? Was Isaac not opposing God's will by wanting to give his blessing to Esau? The narrator leaves these questions unanswered—he simply tells the story. In his mysterious plan, God chooses whom he wills—in this case, one who manipulated his brother into selling him his *birthright* and tricked his blind father into giving him his special *blessing* (another example of God writing straight with crooked lines).

The above are two examples of the help you can find on Old Testament events in my Level 3 Commentaries.

Other writings available on our website

If you are visiting or are relatively new in the area, you may not be aware of my many other writings on our website. In addition to my commentaries on the Sunday Readings and the Old Testament, you will find:

- 28 articles on the four pillars of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* which can be used for personal study or in a small group setting
- 20 articles on the 2,000 years of our Church's history. Articles 16, 17 and 18 are focused on Catholicism in the United States
- The Mass Explained, a step-by-step explanation of the Mass
- Treasury of Prayers containing a variety of beautiful prayers
- Miscellaneous articles on such topics as dealing with grief, anger, fear, and more

If you know of people who may be interested in these free resources, please consider letting them know. Our website address is [www.ascensioncatholic.net](http://www.ascensioncatholic.net).

Have a blessed week,

*Fr. Sean*