

Sunday, June 26, 2011: Genesis 22:1-14

Obedience to God must be rooted in ethics.

by [Nanette Sawyer](#) in the [June 14, 2011](#) issue

A father told about the tornado that hit his home in April. Racing to his son's room as it approached, he had just touched his son when suddenly the tornado ripped off the side of their house and pulled his eight-year-old son out into the night. The father and mother held on to their other children and cried out prayers to God. Not long afterward, when the chaos of the tornado had subsided, the father saw his eight-year-old walking toward him. The boy said that he'd been taken up into the sky, then had floated back down. He saw the flashlights that his father and mother were holding and began to walk toward them.

It sounds like a miracle. It surely was a moment for gratitude. But where was God in this story? Was God in the tornado? Was God in the lights that guided the boy back home? Whatever God's role might have been, it seems clear that the parents were not responsible for the child's near death.

The story of Abraham and Isaac is different. Abraham seems to agree to take the life of his own son as an act of worship of God. In many interpretations of the passage, it is Abraham's obedience to God that is emphasized, along with its significance as a sign of Abraham's faithfulness. But to contemporary readers this obedience may seem immoral; Abraham's faithfulness seems to lead to cruelty. What terrible cognitive dissonance this creates. What a moral dilemma!

This story does not, however, compel us to affirm obedience over and above ethics. On the contrary, obedience to God must be rooted in ethics. It is good that we are concerned about the morality of the Abraham/Isaac story. We should be disturbed by the implicit violence of the story and by the moral paradox of Abraham being affirmed for complying with the violence. Like most stories, this one is reflecting an accepted morality, or narrating a moral struggle that's being negotiated at the time of the story's telling. In the case of child sacrifice, biblical texts show us that social attitudes toward the practice evolved over time. In Genesis, God commands

Abraham to burn his child and affirms Abraham for his willingness to do so; but through the prophet Jeremiah, God condemns this practice. Today the very thought of such violence is morally repugnant.

It's not necessarily God who is changing, but our understandings of God that change. We strive to evoke, emulate and engage an ethical God. We seek to know a God of justice, and as our understandings of justice change, our estimations of God change too. This alters the stories we tell about God and our beliefs about God's expectations of us. It alters how we interpret and apply our learnings from the Bible.

In the time of Jeremiah, God condemns the burnt offering of children to other gods "which I did not command or decree, nor did it enter my mind" (Jer. 19:5). No condemnation would be necessary if there were no infraction, so we are sensing the people's moral struggle. They were disagreeing about the acceptability or the necessity or the morality of child sacrifice. At the time the book of Jeremiah was written, some communities were resisting this practice and feeling the moral repugnance we now feel. God renounces child sacrifice—as if to say, pay attention to this. God does not want children to be sacrificed. The biblical accounts testify to the moral struggle within communities.

Abraham did what he thought was right at the time, and we should follow Abraham in trying to do what is right to the best of our ability. But our understanding of what is right has changed.

We can read this story on various levels, of course. We can spiritualize the message and say that this story is about being willing to "let go" of our children. We can interpret it as overturning the sacrificial system. After all, God interrupts and prevents the sacrifice of Isaac. But if this story is about condemning the sacrificial system, it bears acknowledging that Abraham is commended for his willingness to do what the story would purportedly critique.

Some of us have experienced the tragic loss of a loved one and have had to grapple with how God could allow such a thing. We won't all be blessed like the boy floating back down out of the sky and following the flashlights home. Sometimes we may even need to lash out at God for not averting the disasters we experience. God does not take our children away to punish us, nor does God spare our children because we are willing to sacrifice them. God does not expect us to express devotion through acts of cruelty. Even if we are mystified by God's role in tragedy, we can be sure of

this much.

Child sacrifice is not right, and in this day and age we cannot imagine a God who would affirm someone for agreeing to do such a thing. Obedience to the point of immorality or cruelty is not what we are called to do, and it's not what God wants from us. On the other hand, trying to love and worship God—which Abraham did—and trying to acknowledge our dependence on God and our giftedness by God—that is a wholesome spiritual practice which can lead to our moral development and to the betterment of the world. That was true then and it's true now. God will provide, yes. It is good to trust in God, yes. Some things change, but some things stay the same.