

Some angles on the binding of Isaac

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Violence. Danger. Fear. Trust. Betrayal. Salvation. Ethics. They're all invoked in the story of the binding of Isaac. Here are a couple different points of entry into this difficult passage:

- The story is often recited to emphasize Abraham's obedience. But what was going through his mind when he said to Isaac, "God will provide the ram," or when he told the others, "the boy and I...will come back to you"? If Abraham believed these things, then he never thought he would actually kill Isaac. And if he trusted God's promise of descendants through Isaac, then it would be reasonable to expect that he wouldn't have to kill Isaac--or that if he did, God would resurrect him (Heb. 11:19). Yet God/the angel affirms that Abraham was willing to sacrifice Isaac. What did Abraham think? *Was he willing?*
- Biblical texts related to child sacrifice seem to contradict each other. In Ezekiel 20:25-26, God gives statutes "that were not good" about offering up firstborn children, in order that God "might horrify" the people. In Jeremiah 19:4-6, God condemns burning children as sacrifice, something "which I did not command or decree, nor did it enter my mind." The contradiction resolves if we understand the different perspectives reflecting different periods in history.
- This quote from Catherine Madsen got me thinking about the inescapability of violence--and the need to deal with it in stories about God:

What if the alternation in God's character between tender care and ferocious brutality, between limitless creation and wholesale wreckage, occurs not

because the writers of the Hebrew Bible admired brutality or wreckage, but because they could not escape them? Metaphor is a talking cure: it starts at the point of injury. ("[Notes on God's Violence](#)," *CrossCurrents*, Summer 2001.)

- I return again and again to Jon D. Levenson's rich and compelling book [*The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity*](#). Levenson deals with the stories of Isaac, Ishmael, Jacob, Joseph and Jesus.