

un·think·able!

Imagine the Creator of the universe (if He exists) were to demand from you the sacrifice of your own child. How would you react?

Although such an imagination understandably causes a vehement inner rebellion with most people, this story is to others not only important, but also a striking—indeed, a truly beautiful—illustration of a person's submission to the will of their Creator. *The great sacrifice (or the greatest test)* is not only found in Jewish but also in Christian and Islamic scriptures, which gives us an indication how many people are touched by this story:



In Judaism, the Akedah, which is found in chapter 22 of Genesis (Gen. for short, the first book of the Torah), is regarded as Abraham's greatest trial.



In Islam, this story, which is recounted in Surah 37:99–111 of the Quran, forms the basis for the most important holiday: Eid al-Adha (celebration of the sacrifice).

Within Christianity—which recognizes with the Torah also Genesis 22 as part of its own sacred scriptures—this story is of enormous significance as well.

However, its significance goes far beyond what it means in the other two major monotheistic religions: it is a prophetic image, a foreshadowing of the birth, suffering, death, and resurrection of the Messiah. Instead of providing name and place of birth as identifying characteristics of the Messiah (especially since these could apply to more than one person), Genesis 22 establishes the role of the Messiah 2,000 years before His birth through several striking parallels between Isaac (the son of Abraham) and Jesus of Nazareth. Let's take a look at a selection of 7 of those parallels:

#1 Miraculous Conception

Both Isaac and Jesus were conceived in a supernatural manner: Isaac by parents who were—explicitly stated—too old to conceive a child^{1a}, and Jesus by a virgin^{1b} (as confirmed in the Quran^{1c}).

#2 Tremendous Promises

Both Isaac and Jesus received promises of immense significance for their lives; promises that went far beyond what was given to other people, even to those of great importance. For example, on the one hand a blessing^{2a} is mentioned which would be poured out through the “seed” upon “*all the nations of the earth.*” On the other hand, an eternal kingdom^{2b} is mentioned to which there “*will be no end.*”

#3 Willing to Sacrifice ^{Father}

In Isaac's case, his father Abraham was willing to sacrifice^{3a} his “*only son*” in obedience to God. In Jesus' case, God the Father was willing to sacrifice His only begotten Son:

“*For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.*”^{3b}

We are *all* lost, for we have *all* sinned and are guilty in the sight of God^{3c}. An honest look at the Ten Commandments^{3d} and the Sermon on the Mount^{3e} makes this universal human condition obvious. God, who is described in the Bible as a holy and just judge, cannot simply overlook sin; rather, the penalty for sin *must* be paid. Just as God's nature is non-negotiable, so the just punishment for our sins is non-negotiable as well: death^{3f}. Not only the physical death here on earth, but also the second death^{3g}: eternal separation from God in hell.

[1a] Gen. 17;18 [1b] Luke 1 [1c] Surah 21 [2a] Gen. 17;22 [2b] Luke 1 [3a] Gen. 22; Midrash Bereishit Rabbah 56; Surah 37 [3b] John 3 [3c] Romans 3 [3d] Exodus 20 [3e] Matthew 5-7 [3f] Romans 6 [3g] Revelation 20

Since God, who is also described as gracious and merciful^{3h}, does not want anyone to perish³ⁱ, He has already announced the Gospel³ⁱ (Injil, the Good News) in the Tanakh, the Jewish Bible:

#4 Age & Obedience ^{Son}

God would send His Son to earth in human form to pay the price for our sins on the cross. Jesus did this out of obedience to the Father, but also entirely out of His own *free will*. At the time of the crucifixion, He was in the prime of His life^{4a} and capable^{4b} of saying » No «. Likewise, Isaac was in the prime of his life during Genesis 22 and would have been capable of defending himself. But he submitted to his father's will, as both the Quran^{4c} and the Jewish Midrash^{4d} confirm.

#5 Carrying the Wood

Isaac, who in his youth was stronger than his elderly father, carried the wood on which he was supposed to be sacrificed as a burnt offering^{5a}. After Jesus had been sentenced to death by the Jewish Sanhedrin for blasphemy (His claim to be equal to God^{5b}), He had to carry the wooden cross to the place where He was indeed crucified^{5c}.

#6 Location of Sacrifice

Another interesting aspect of this comparison (Genesis 22 || the Gospel) is the location of the sacrifice: in Isaac's case the sacrifice was supposed to take place on a mountain close to Jerusalem^{6a}, while in Jesus' case it actually took place on a mountain close to Jerusalem^{6b}. This is especially significant since neither Isaac nor Jesus lived in the immediate vicinity of Jerusalem and undertook long, burdensome journeys—specifically and deliberately—for this sacrifice^{6c}.

[3h] Exodus 34 [3i] 1. Timothy 2 [3j] 1. Corinthians 15 [4a] Luke 3 [4b] Matthew 26 [4c] Surah 37 [4d] Midrash Bereishit Rabbah 56 [5a] Gen. 22 [5b] Mark 14 [5c] John 19 [6a] Gen. 21; Gen. 22; 2. Chronicles 3; Midrash Bereishit Rabbah 56 [6b] John 19 [6c] Mark 10

#7 Substitute in Thorns

The attentive reader will notice in this aspect #7 that the remarkable continuity within the previous six aspects is broken. When God saw Abraham's faith and obedience, He provided in Isaac's place a ram which had become entangled by its horns in a thicket^{7a}. In Jesus' case, however, no substitute was provided: when He was crucified—with a crown of thorns around His head—He *became* our substitute.



The key verse for understanding why this discrepancy is not only explainable but, from the perspective of the Gospel, even inevitable, is found in Matthew 5:17. Here Jesus says:

“*Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill.*”

Jesus did not merely fulfill the Law, the Torah, by being *blameless*^{7c} in light of God's commandments.

Nor did He fulfill the Law, the Torah, merely by fulfilling *direct prophecies* about the Messiah (e.g., that He would come from the tribe of Judah^{7d}).

Above all, He fulfilled the *foreshadowing* found in so many passages of the Tanakh. Genesis 22 is just one of many examples in which God, many centuries before Jesus' birth, symbolically demonstrated that one day the *Lamb of God* would come to take away the sins of the world^{7e}. Abraham and Isaac could not fulfill this part of the Gospel themselves since it required a perfect, *sinless* sacrifice.

Because of love for us humans, God the Father did not spare his own Son^{7f}. Because of love for His Father in heaven, Jesus voluntarily humbled^{7g} Himself and was obedient even unto death on the cross.

[7a] Gen. 22 [7b] Matthew 27 [7c] New Testament; Surah 19; Bukhari 3286/3431; Muslim 2366c [7d] Gen. 49 [7e] John 1; Isaiah 53; Revelation 5 [7f] Romans 8 [7g] Philippians 2