**Exodus 19-21: Revelation, Law, and Prophecy**

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* + - 1. Transition from October 9. The God-Man Relationship.
         * “The God of Second Chances” (lecture 1). Man is independent. We are endowed with the capability to make choices, even bad choices
         * “Abram and the Anxiety of Faith” (lecture 2). The Patriarch Abraham. What is the quality of the relationship to God? Abraham is not reproved by God for laughing. He laughs – but he is honest about it.

The son – Isaac – is to be sacrificed: and that seems to put the whole idea of the covenant in doubt.

Yitzhak (Isaac): he laughs. He is to marry and have children. But what about the “testing” of Abraham and the “binding” of Isaac?

* + - * + What would it mean for the Bible if Genesis 22 were cut? After Genesis 22, the Hebrew Bible never refers back to Genesis 22.

“The silence is deafening,” said Breuer.

Why? Because it is a troubling text.

* + - 1. Transition. On October 9 we had focused on the Testing of Abraham.
         * The challenge itself (Genesis 22). Some time afterward, God [Elohim] put Abraham to the test and said to him: Abraham! “Here I am!” he replied.**[a](http://www.usccb.org/bible/genesis/22" \l "01022001-a)** 2 Then God said: Take your son Isaac, your only one, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah. There offer him up as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you.**[b](http://www.usccb.org/bible/genesis/22" \l "01022002-b)**

“Some time afterward.” After what? After negotiating about Sodom?

The “test.” In modern Hebrew, the root of “test” means “experience.” It also means to “carry” or “raise up.”

“Here I am.” Where? Near to Moriah. This is the first “Here I am.”

1. Preparation (Genesis 22:3-8). Early the next morning Abraham saddled his donkey, took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac, and after cutting the wood for the burnt offering, set out for the place of which God had told him. 4On the third day Abraham caught sight of the place from a distance. 5Abraham said to his servants: “Stay here with the donkey, while the boy and I go on over there. We will worship and then come back to you.” 6So Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, while he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two walked on together, 7Isaac spoke to his father Abraham. “Father!” he said. “Here I am,” he replied. Isaac continued, “Here are the fire and the wood, but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?” 8“My son,” Abraham answered, “God will provide the sheep for the burnt offering.” Then the two walked on together.
   * + 1. Why doesn’t Abraham object? The command to kill the son is not just a “test” but a breaking of the covenant and the erasure of the future.

He lies to the servant: “We will worship and then come back to you.”

Abraham says to Isaac: “Here I am” (the second time he uses this phrase). This is the only place in the Hebrew Bible where there is a conversation between father and son.

Isaac wants to know where the sheep is for the offering. He speaks to his father. Abraham says, “Here I am.” God will see to the sheep for the burnt offering (i.e., the offering of Isaac).

* + - 1. Destruction of the Covenant?

God is potentially destroying the relationship with his people.

“Then the two walked on together.” They are together, going for the same purpose.

1. Rescue. When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. Next he bound**[\*](http://www.usccb.org/bible/genesis/22" \l "01022009-1)** his son Isaac, and put him on top of the wood on the altar.[**c**](http://www.usccb.org/bible/genesis/22#01022009-c) 10Then Abraham reached out and took the knife to slaughter his son.**[d](http://www.usccb.org/bible/genesis/22" \l "01022010-d)** 11But the angel of the LORD [YHWH] called to him from heaven, “Abraham, Abraham!” “Here I am,” he answered. 12“Do not lay your hand on the boy,” said the angel. “Do not do the least thing to him. For now I know that you fear God [Elohim], since you did not withhold from me your son, your only one.”**[e](http://www.usccb.org/bible/genesis/22" \l "01022012-e)** 13Abraham looked up and saw a single ram caught by its horns in the thicket. So Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering in place of his son.**[\*](http://www.usccb.org/bible/genesis/22" \l "01022013-1)**
   * + 1. The willingness to offer the son is a sign that he “fears” God.
       2. The shofar on the Jewish New Year is a recollection of this story. It is a commemoration.
       3. The replacement of Isaac with a ram. God spared Isaac, replacing him with a ram; so God allows Israel to offer sacrifice, rather than to be destroyed.
2. Commentary. Abraham was willing to question God in the story of the negotiation over Sodom. That garrulousness is replaced by Abraham’s silence.
   * + 1. In medieval times some people said, “Abraham did sacrifice his son.” This interpretation arose after the crusades, when Jewish communities were slaughtered by crusaders. Some Jews sacrificed themselves, saying, “It is better to kill ourselves than to be killed by the crusaders.” Isaac may well have been slain, some medieval Jews said, then resurrected. But this commentary did not prove popular.
       2. But what about the raised hand? Why does God ask Abraham to kill his son?
3. Various Interpretations.
   * + 1. Genesis 22 shows Abraham, not boldly negotiating with God (as he did over Sodom), but meekly accommodating himself to God’s world.
       2. Was Abraham a “knowing participant” – an adult – or an “unknowing participant,” one who did not realize what he was doing?
       3. At the beginning of the story, God is Elohim. But then the “angel of the LORD” [YHWH] comes. One has to be willing to give up everything for God. This is the struggle between the “new” God and the “old” God. The old God would ask for child sacrifice, but not the new God, the LORD.
       4. Abraham’s Silence. Why is he silent? It is because he acquiesces.
       5. The Prophetic “We.” “We will worship and then come back to you.” But at the end of the story, the text does not say that they “walked together.”
4. Denouement. 15[**\***](http://www.usccb.org/bible/genesis/22#01022015-1) A second time the angel of the LORD called to Abraham from heaven 16**[f](http://www.usccb.org/bible/genesis/22" \l "01022016-f)** and said: “I swear by my very self—oracle of the LORD—that because you acted as you did in not withholding from me your son, your only one, 17I will bless you and make your descendants as countless as the stars of the sky and the sands of the seashore; your descendants will take possession of the gates of their enemies,**[g](http://www.usccb.org/bible/genesis/22" \l "01022017-g)** 18and in your descendants all the nations of the earth will find blessing, because you obeyed my command.”**[h](http://www.usccb.org/bible/genesis/22" \l "01022018-h)** 19Abraham then returned to his servants, and they set out together for Beer-sheba, where Abraham lived.
   * + 1. Abraham is stunned into silence. The Angel of the LORD speaks. Abraham has faith in the covenant. He is silent because the command to slay the son is absurd.
       2. The covenant. If there is a covenant, there is a future. Abraham does not understand how there will be a future, but he knows there will be.
       3. The silence of certainty. Abraham plays a “game of chicken.” He does not believe that God will destroy the covenant, but he takes God to the brink by raising his hand.
       4. Discussion. Some Christian thinkers have taken the Kierkegaardian point of view to the extent of formulating a “divine command theory.” If God asks this of Abraham, then God can suspend morality for the sake of an end that only God knows. What God commands is “right.” But historical criticism can also shed light on this. Child sacrifice was a way of showing loyalty to God in the ancient world. The point is loyalty. Abraham was loyal to God. But the means of proving loyalty to God is culturally specific. Can we believe that God today could ever demand child sacrifice? No.
5. Rebuttal. Breuer takes another viewpoint. The philosophical analysis of Kierkegaard and historical criticism, says Breuer, is not the language of the Bible.
   * + 1. John Michalowski. The “some time afterward” of 22:1 introduces the element of history. Abraham has matured during his time with the Philistines. He has learned who God is.
       2. Chris Craig. Abraham insists on paying at the well of Beer-sheba. Anything given to Abraham is originally from God. But God has promised the land to Abraham. Nevertheless, Abraham pays for it. He wants the deed.
       3. The Cave of the Patriarchs. Jews go to it to honor the Abrahamic traditions.
       4. Janelle Neubauer. “Go to the place I will show you.” We don’t know exactly where Moriah is. It is a region, not a specific place. What happens during the three days that they travel? Abraham has time to assimilate what God has commanded.
       5. Michael Talty: Who would have reported this story? Isaac or Abraham? Breuer: The story is preserved, but the Hebrew Bible never alludes to it again.
6. Did this really happen? “If you can explain to me why it matters that it happened, I will answer the question.”

If we say, “It didn’t happen, but it was a prophecy,” then we mean that it is spiritually and psychologically important.

The question of whether it really happened is not important. It is a foundation text. By reading it on Rosh HaShanah, we affirm its importance and blow the ram’s horn.

Coffee Break

1. Transition to Exodus: the story of Jacob.
2. Genesis 32: Jacob.
   * + 1. His relation to Esau. He is the second son, the afterthought, the subordinate.
       2. The selling of the birthright and the blessing. Rachel arranges the situation so that the second son, Jacob, receives the blessing.
3. The Experience at Haran.

The vision at Beth-El. John Michalowski: the “Blessing” and “birthright” are *given* to Jacob, but Esau *receives* the flocks and herds.

The prophecy of return from Haran to Palestine (Genesis 31). In the dream God’s angel said to me, ‘Jacob!’ and I replied, ‘Here I am!’ 12Then he said: ‘Look up and see. All the he-goats that are mating are streaked, speckled and mottled, for I have seen all the things that Laban has been doing to you. 13I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a sacred pillar and made a vow to me. Get up now! Leave this land and return to the land of your birth.’”**[c](http://www.usccb.org/bible/genesis/31" \l "01031013-c)**

God instigates the return to the land. Jacob goes back, but he is terrified (Genesis 32). When the messengers returned to Jacob, they said, “We found your brother Esau. He is now coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him.” 8Jacob was very much frightened. In his anxiety, he divided the people who were with him, as well as his flocks, herds and camels, into two camps.

1. Encounter at the Jabbok (Genesis 32). That night, however, Jacob arose, took his two wives, with the two maidservants and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok.24After he got them and brought them across the wadi and brought over what belonged to him,25Jacob was left there alone. Then a man**[\*](http://www.usccb.org/bible/genesis/32" \l "01032025-1)** wrestled with him until the break of dawn.26When the man saw that he could not prevail over him, he struck Jacob’s hip at its socket, so that Jacob’s socket was dislocated as he wrestled with him.**[d](http://www.usccb.org/bible/genesis/32" \l "01032026-d)**27The man then said, “Let me go, for it is daybreak.” But Jacob said, “I will not let you go until you bless me.”28“What is your name?” the man asked. He answered, “Jacob.”**[e](http://www.usccb.org/bible/genesis/32" \l "01032028-e)**29Then the man said, “You shall no longer be named Jacob, but Israel,**[\*](http://www.usccb.org/bible/genesis/32" \l "01032029-1)** because you have contended with divine and human beings and have prevailed.”30Jacob then asked him, “Please tell me your name.” He answered, “Why do you ask for my name?” With that, he blessed him.31Jacob named the place Peniel,**[\*](http://www.usccb.org/bible/genesis/32" \l "01032031-1)** “because I have seen God face to face,” he said, “yet my life has been spared.”[**f**](http://www.usccb.org/bible/genesis/32#01032031-f)
2. The Struggle (Genesis 32). 25Jacob was left there alone. Then a man[**\***](http://www.usccb.org/bible/genesis/32#01032025-1) wrestled with him until the break of dawn.26When the man saw that he could not prevail over him, he struck Jacob’s hip at its socket, so that Jacob’s socket was dislocated as he wrestled with him.[**d**](http://www.usccb.org/bible/genesis/32#01032026-d)27The man then said, “Let me go, for it is daybreak.” But Jacob said, “I will not let you go until you bless me.”28“What is your name?” the man asked. He answered, “Jacob.”[**e**](http://www.usccb.org/bible/genesis/32#01032028-e)29Then the man said, “You shall no longer be named Jacob, but Israel,[**\***](http://www.usccb.org/bible/genesis/32#01032029-1) because you have contended [SRR] with divine and human beings and have prevailed.”
3. Jacob’s Enemy. Wounded Jacob still demands a blessing from his enemy.
4. The name change: “You shall no longer be named Jacob, but Israel, because you have contended with Elohim and with humans and you have prevailed.”
5. SRR: Struggling, wrestling, contending. The verb is about the relationship between humanity and God.
6. Denouement. 30Jacob then asked him, “Please tell me your name.” He answered, “Why do you ask for my name?” With that, he blessed him.31Jacob named the place Peniel,[**\***](http://www.usccb.org/bible/genesis/32#01032031-1) “because I have seen God face to face,” he said, “yet my life has been spared.” 32At sunrise, as he left Penuel, Jacob limped along because of his hip.33That is why, to this day, the Israelites do not eat the sciatic muscle that is on the hip socket, because he had struck Jacob’s hip socket at the sciatic muscle.
   * + 1. Jacob asks for the “man’s” name; he replies that it is not for Jacob to know.
       2. Peni-el. The face of God. Specifically, “I have seen God, and yet my life has been spared.” Israelis do not eat the meat of the thigh socket, the sciatic nerve.
       3. From here on in, Jacob’s descendents are named after him, after “Israel.” The Hebrew Bible does not speak of “Jews” or of “religion.” The people are the “Sons of Israel.”
7. Summary: The Anxiety of Faith.
   * + 1. Israel means “I struggle with God.” The struggling is a part of Jewish identity.
       2. There is no sense that Jewish identity can be without struggle. “That’s Israel. That’s the kernel that is planted here.”
8. The Book of Exodus.
9. The Preliminary Story. The tribe goes “down,” and there Israel becomes a nation.
10. Moses on the Mountain (Exodus 19).
    1. Covenant. [**a**](http://www.usccb.org/bible/exodus/19#02019001-a) 1 In the third month after the Israelites’ departure from the land of Egypt, on the first day, they came to the wilderness of Sinai. 2After they made the journey from Rephidim and entered the wilderness of Sinai, they then pitched camp in the wilderness.**[\*](http://www.usccb.org/bible/exodus/19" \l "02019002-1)** 2bWhile Israel was encamped there in front of the mountain, 3Moses went up to the mountain of God. Then the LORD called to him from the mountain, saying: This is what you will say to the house of Jacob; tell the Israelites: 4You have seen how I treated the Egyptians and how I bore you up on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.**[b](http://www.usccb.org/bible/exodus/19" \l "02019004-b)** 5Now, if you obey me completely and keep my covenant,**[\*](http://www.usccb.org/bible/exodus/19" \l "02019005-1)** you will be my treasured possession among all peoples,[**c**](http://www.usccb.org/bible/exodus/19#02019005-c) though all the earth is mine. 6You will be to me a kingdom of priests,**[\*](http://www.usccb.org/bible/exodus/19" \l "02019006-1)** a holy nation.[**d**](http://www.usccb.org/bible/exodus/19#02019006-d) That is what you must tell the Israelites. 7So Moses went and summoned the elders of the people. When he set before them all that the LORD had ordered him to tell them, 8all the people answered together, “Everything the LORD has said, we will do.” Then Moses brought back to the LORD the response of the people.
       * + 1. Covenant. The people accept their role as a kingdom of priests.
           2. Practices. Already in the stories of the patriarchs, there are practices, such as circumcision or the refusal to eat the sciatic nerve. The covenant is meant to be upheld by the fulfillment of a variety of practices. There are hundreds of laws (613 mitzvoth).
    2. Law. Law is specific, because righteousness – what is right before the Lord – should not be left to caprice. When a fruit tree is planted, one cannot harvest the fruit immediately. One refrains for three years, then brings the fruit to the altar. Then afterwards one can eat of it.
       * + 1. Exodus 22. When someone causes a field or a vineyard to be grazed over, by sending his cattle to graze in another’s field, he must make restitution with the best produce of his own field or vineyard.5If a fire breaks out, catches on to thorn bushes, and consumes shocked grain, standing grain, or the field itself, the one who started the fire must make full restitution.
           2. When something borrowed is stolen, who is responsible? The Bible considers this. Law governs not only our relationship to God, but our relationship to one another, all of which expresses a relationship to God.
           3. Breuer: “The covenant is made up of the small things, because we start with the small things and move up to the great things.”
           4. James Cassidy: An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Breuer: “Our tradition has never interpreted this literally.” We are an oral tradition. The text indicates things “generally,” but we have to learn how to read the text, to learn how to pause, to give emphasis.
    3. Judaism as a Legal Tradition. The Pharisees are the predecessors of our sages, says Breuer. They created our rabbinic tradition. We Jews have to learn the basic principles. But what is written is not the sum of what we know. The written word is the basis for oral interpretation. The emphasis on rabbinic dialogue by Jared Goldfarb, on the importance of textual interpretation, on the responsibility of individuals to struggle with the text, on the search for a communal sense, reflects this modern understanding. Today’s Judaism is “Pharisaic” Judaism, the Judaism of the disputing rabbis who succeeded the temple cult.
       * + 1. Judaism is a mixture of “Napoleonic” law and “Common” law, of positive law and of the interpretation in the courts of fundamental fairness.
           2. The State of Israel’s law is based on British law and Jordanian law.
11. Implications of the Law.

Spirituality and the Law. When Breuer taught at Loyola Chicago, he would occasionally have students from the Theater Department. The theater students knew how to read texts. Breuer challenged them: What are your aspirations? They aspired to joining a theater troupe.

That meant that they had to assimilate the classical theater repertoire. They auditioned, they showed talent, they had to rehearse.

The act of rehearsal is not just about memorizing. It’s about seeing the possibilities that the text offers. It’s attention to detail. It’s not just the words, but the color, tone, and emphasis of the words. “It’s how do I say those words!”

So a Jewish “legal tradition” does not just mean, “The letter kills.” It also means, “The spirit gives life.” It gives life in interpreting the text.

So, in interpreting the Jewish textual tradition, said Breuer, there must be a “slavish” devotion to detail; but that is “slavery” to the truth. As Jesus said (Mark 10:43-44): “Whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant; (44) whoever wishes to be first among you will be the slave of all.” That is the “slavishness” of the Jewish legal tradition.

1. Next Session: the prophetic tradition.