Transformative Learning
And
Interreligious Biblical
(Re) Interpretation
Of
Genesis 22:1-19
“The Binding of Isaac”

Charles S. Chesnavage
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Fordham University Doctoral Student: Religious Education
The binding of Isaac, as found in Genesis 22:1-19, and in the Koran, Sura 37:100, is one of the most well known episodes in the life of Abraham. All three monotheistic religions, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim, claim the story as providing a model of faith as exemplified by Abraham and Isaac’s relationship and faithfulness to God’s command. This project will approach this story using the Transformative Learning theory of Jack Mezirow.¹

For Mezirow, “meaning perspectives,” are those uncritical presuppositions, and assumptions acquired throughout one’s lifetime that one brings to a given learning situation, or in this case a biblical/Koranic passage. Each of the three religious traditions will be bringing their own presuppositions and assumptions to the biblical/Koranic passage.

“Critical reflection,” is a critique of the presuppositions on which personal or religious beliefs have been built. One way to critique such an important passage is to approach it from the perspective of each of the three religious traditions that claims it as their own. An overview of all three religious interpretations will challenge the “meaning perspectives” that one will bring to the passage.

“Perspective transformation,” is the outcome of becoming critically aware of how our presuppositions can limit or constrain the way we view the world or, in this case, a biblical/Koranic passage. Learning takes place when this transformation leads to a more inclusive, discriminatory, permeable, and integrated perspective; and of making decisions or otherwise acting upon these new relationships.

A key process leading to this perspective transformation are “critical discourses” which allows a suspension of prior judgments and biases, and critically reviews the evidence or arguments to make a justification for the new meaning that is being proposed. The ultimate goal is to reach a consensus, or “superior perspective,” that will better motivate adults to accept a more inclusive and integrated perspective, or meaning of the biblical/Koranic passage.

It is my hope that by looking at the three religious traditions interpretation of the passage, it will shed new light on a very familiar story, and challenge some presuppositions, and assumptions that are brought to the passage leading to a perspective transformation that is more inclusive and integrated. Hopefully, a richer and deeper understanding of the story will emerge with a respect for how each religious tradition approaches and (re)interprets the passage.

I will conclude the project with some suggestions for adult religious education, in relationship to the passage, and in relationship to interfaith dialogue.

Genesis 22:1-19

“Some time after these events, God put Abraham to the test. He called to him, “Abraham!” “Ready!” he replied. Then God said: “Take your son Isaac, your only one, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah. There you shall offer him up as a holocaust on a height that I will point out to you.” Early the next morning Abraham saddled his donkey, took with him his son Isaac, and two of his servants as well, and with the wood that he had cut for the holocaust, set out for the place of which God had told him.

On the third day Abraham got sight of the place from afar. Then he said to his servants: “Both of you stay here with the donkey, while the boy and I go on over yonder. We will worship and then come back to you.” Thereupon Abraham took the wood for the holocaust and laid it on his son Isaac’s shoulders, while he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two walked on together, Isaac spoke to his father Abraham: “Father!” he said. “Yes, son,” he replied. Isaac continued, “Here are the fire and the wood, but where is the sheep for the holocaust?” “Son,” Abraham answered, “God himself will provide the sheep for the holocaust.” Then the two continued going forward.
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 tied up his son Isaac, and put him on top of the wood on the altar. Then he reached out and took the knife to slaughter his son. But the Lord’s messenger called to him from heaven, “Abraham, Abraham!” “Yes, Lord,” he answered. “Do not lay your hand on the boy,” said the messenger. “Do not do the least thing to him. I know now how devoted you are to God, since you did not withhold from me your own beloved son.” As Abraham looked about, he spied a ram caught by its horns in the thicket. So he went and took the ram and offered it up as a holocaust in place of his son. Abraham named the site Yahweh-yireh; hence people now say, “On the mountain the Lord will see.”

Again the Lord’s messenger called to Abraham from heaven and said, “I swear by myself, declares the Lord, that because you acted as you did in not withholding from me your beloved son, I will bless you abundantly and make your descendants as countless as the stars of the sky and the sands of the seashore; your descendants shall take possession of the gates of their enemies, and in your descendants all the nations of the earth shall find blessing—all this because you obeyed my command.

Abraham then returned to his servants, and they set out together for Beer-sheba, where Abraham made a home.²

The Jewish (Re) Interpretation

One aspect of the story that can be shared by all three religious traditions is the test of Abraham. “Sometime after these events, God put Abraham to the test.” (Gen. 22:1) God does not tell Abraham it is a test. Also, God does not tell Abraham to “kill” his son Isaac.³

One presupposition brought to this text is God telling Abraham to “kill” Isaac. In fact, the text says for Abraham to offer Isaac as a holocaust, or burnt offering. Oftentimes, the reader interprets Abraham’s attempt to “sacrifice” Isaac with a knife as a command from God. It is not. Early Jews referred to the story as an “offering” not a binding or a sacrifice.⁴

⁴ Ibid, p. 87.
Despite the significance of the story in the Jewish tradition, it is NOT mentioned anywhere else in the Hebrew scriptures.\(^5\) Other events in the life of Abraham are mentioned like his departure from Ur, and the covenant and promise of land. One theory for the distance from the story is the allusion to child or human sacrifice.

One reason the text may have been put on the side is something Mezirow calls “sociocultural distortion.” This distortion maintains “belief systems that pertain to power and social relationships, especially those currently prevailing and legitimized and enforced by institutions.”\(^6\) The institution that I could see creating distance with the Abraham and Isaac story would be the Monarchy in Israel’s history. A monarchy, as an institution, would be more concerned with a theology that would focus on the Davidic Covenant, the inviolability of Jerusalem, as the religious capital of Israel, and a Temple theology. This story would appear to be quite “primitive” in the mind of a sophisticated monarchy. Much of the editing of the Hebrew scriptures, and redacting took place during the time of the Monarchy and during the post-exilic period.

According to Mezirow, a perspective transformation can occur in response to a disorienting event like the death of a loved one. The story of Abraham and Isaac begins to be reclaimed, within the Jewish religious tradition, after the exile, during the Jewish diaspora when Jews were living in a hostile environment in Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Arabia. The Abraham and Isaac story is (re) interpreted at this time to emphasize the suffering a faithful Jew must go through in the name of faith.\(^7\)

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\(^5\) Ibid, p. 90.
\(^6\) Mezirow, p. 15.
\(^7\) Ibid, p. 90.
In Josephus’s *The Antiquities of the Jews*, Abraham explains to Isaac what he is going to do, and Isaac is not only pleased to be the sacrifice but rushes to the altar to die.8

Greek philosophy at this time contributes to the critical reflection of the text. The binding of Isaac symbolized “the power of reason to triumph over raw emotion, even parental love.”9

This point is brought home in a story from 4 Maccabees that involves a mother and her seven sons tortured and killed due to their refusal to eat pork. (cf 2 Mac. 7:1-41) Comments in the text make the text stronger. “Sympathy for her children did not sway the mother of the young man, she was of the same mind as Abraham.” Eliezer, in the story, on his deathbed, cries out that Jews should be like Isaac with a willingness to sacrifice themselves for God. “O children of Abraham, die nobly for your religion!” Now the story of the offering of Isaac is seen not just as a test but as a standard of faithfulness as a Jew in the midst of suffering and persecution.

The reclaiming of the Abraham and Isaac story, at this time of Greek persecution and hostility in the diaspora leads to a perspective transformation. The story moves from one that emphasizes being tested by God, to one that helps Jews and all those who suffer persecution to accept it as Isaac accepted his role as a sacrificial offering. The circumstances of persecution lead to a (re)interpretation of the story. The original story has Isaac questioning where the sheep is for the holocaust. The (re)interpretation of the story has Isaac so willing to be the sacrifice that he rushes to the altar to die.

**The Christian Interpretation**

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8 Ibid, p. 91.
9 Ibid, p. 91.
The image of Abraham loving God so much that he is willing to sacrifice his only son, by Sarah, becomes closely linked to a parallel interpretation, in the Christian tradition, to John 3:16, “for God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that whoever believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life.”

Another strong parallel interpretation found in the story is that Mt. Moriah and Calvary become the place of sacrifice and sacredness. This parallel of interpretation can be seen in the mosaics found in the church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, the place identified with the death and resurrection of Jesus. The middle mosaic shows Mary Magdalene, known as the “first Apostle,” who is present at the crucifixion of Jesus (Mt. 22:56), and one of the first to witness the resurrection of Jesus. (Mt. 28:1)

The second mosaic on the left is Jesus removed from the cross. The third mosaic on the right of Mary Magdalene shows Abraham about to sacrifice Isaac. The image of Jesus lying on the stone floor is similar to the image of Isaac lying on the stone altar. Both Jesus and Isaac are naked except for a cloth around their waists; their expressions show painful acceptance. Behind Jesus is a bush with no leaves, and behind Isaac is a bush with a ram caught in it.

As mentioned previously, the persecution of the Jews during the Greek era and in the diaspora continues into the first century CE when the Romans persecute both Jews and Christians. The (re) interpretation of the story of Abraham sacrificing or offering up Isaac takes place in the context of suffering and persecution. The (re) interpretation of both stories provides not only a model of Jewish and Christian faithfulness to God, but a faithfulness in the midst of suffering and persecution. Inspiration was found in Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son, and in Isaac’s willingness to die. Inspiration
was found in God’s willingness to sacrifice his only Son for our salvation, and Jesus being a willing victim to the sacrifice.

Paul is the first one to make the connection between the binding of Isaac and the crucifixion of Jesus. Paul places Calvary and the crucifixion at the center of the Christian message and religion, and his own theology. Abraham acts on behalf of Israel, in obedience to God’s command, and God acts on behalf of all of humanity. In both stories God spares the life of the victim.

In Hebrews, Paul (re) interprets the binding of Isaac, and the faith of Abraham including a belief in the resurrection from the dead.

“By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was ready to offer his only son, of whom it was said, “Through Isaac descendants shall bear your name.” (Hebrew 11:17-19)

According to Paul in Hebrews, Abraham reasons that God was able to raise even from the dead, and he received Isaac back as a symbol.

Paul places the Christian understanding of the resurrection in the mind of Abraham, who in fact does receive his son back. In similar ways, the story of Abraham and Isaac is linked to the gospel of John who refers to Jesus as the Lamb of God, a Passover image and sacrificial image. Irenaeus (re) interprets the story encouraging Christians to carry the cross of their faith as Isaac carried his own wood to his holocaust offering. Tertullian (re) interprets the story by saying that the reason Isaac carried his own wood to the sacrifice was a mystery kept secret until Christ was asked to carry his wooden cross to his sacrifice.11

10 Ibid, p. 92-93.
11 Ibid, p. 94.
The connection between Isaac and Jesus is further emphasized in the Christian tradition by their supernatural births. Isaac is born to a childless mother too old to bear children, and Jesus is conceived without a natural human father but the power of the Holy Spirit. Also, the crucifixion of Jesus is set at the time of Passover, which is one of the times the Jews reflect upon the offering of Isaac.

The Christian interpretation of the offering of Isaac story, contains the idea of “prefigurement,” or the idea that what is hidden in the Old Testament is revealed in the New. Christians approach the Old Testament or Hebrew Scriptures with these assumptions in mind. What happened in the Old Testament revealed something that happened in the New Testament even before it occurred in real life.

This set of assumptions will later cause tension between the Jewish and Christian traditions. Upon critical reflection, the idea of prefigurement creates a hierarchy that suggests the Old Testament is “Old,” and the New Testament is the “Newer” “more improved” interpretation that “replaces” the Old. It is an (re) interpretation of the Old Testament that would no longer look upon it as having value within the original Jewish context. As the Christian tradition claims the entire Bible, both Old and New Testament, as its own it becomes a more “exclusive” book. The exclusive view of the Bible becomes part of the meaning perspective, or set of assumptions that Christians bring to the interpretation of the Old Testament, or Hebrew Scriptures.

A subtle distinction that reveals this view of the Christian understanding of the Old and New Testaments can be found in the mosaics mentioned earlier in the church of the Holy Sepulcher. In the mosaics, Jesus has a golden halo Isaac does not. In the passage, Isaac does not die, but Jesus does.
In light of Vatican II, a critical reflection began to challenge this assumption. A perspective transformation began to take place that respected the Hebrew scriptures as belonging to the Jews in its own unique and sacred way. This perspective transformation allows the Bible to be more inclusive and permeable as it is read, and (re)interpreted by both religious traditions.

“Nostra Aetate”, is an example of a Vatican II document that begins to express a new meaning to the Church’s relation to non-Christian religions. It states, “The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men.” “Since the spiritual patrimony common to Christians and Jews is thus so great, this sacred synod wants to foster and recommend that mutual understanding and respect which is the fruit, above all, of biblical and theological studies as well as of fraternal dialogues.”13 This is an example of a document that has led to critical discourse and has provoked similar responses from the Jewish and Muslim traditions to bring about mutual respect towards each other.

The rise of Christianity, and its separation from Jerusalem, the fall of the Second Temple in 70 CE, caused another (re)interpretation of the story that focused more on Isaac, like the Christian interpretation that linked Isaac to Jesus. Isaac like Jesus at the time of Roman persecution was a victim and like the Jews suffered in silence. At this time, the word for the “offering,” that appears in the story, shifts to the word “binding.”

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The Christian tradition was already looking at the story as a sacrifice, or near sacrifice. The word “binding” enters the Jewish liturgy at this time, around the third century CE, and from this time on the Jews would read this story during the New Year celebration of Rosh Hashana. The blowing of the “shofar” or rams horn at this service, represents the ram caught in the thicket that becomes the sacrifice in place of Isaac.

As time would pass, and hostility and anti-semitism would increase between Christians and Jews the story would play a role during the time of bloody Christian persecution of the Jews. In the eleventh century, in Germany, Jews were asked to renounce their Jewish faith and convert to Christianity or face torture. Rather than do this many Jews chose to kill themselves and their children. Jewish prayer books at the time contained prayers to be recited before the killing of the children and suicide took place. Allusions to the Isaac story were found in these prayers.

“As ask ye now and see, was there ever such a holocaust as this since the days of Adam? When were there even a thousand and a hundred sacrifices in one day, each and every one of them like the akedah/binding of Isaac, son of Abraham?”

The medieval suffering of the Jews, at the hands of the Christians, led to a (re)interpretation of suffering and the story of Abraham and Isaac. Whereas the suffering of the Israelites in the Hebrew scriptures was due to their disobedience to God’s laws, the sufferings during the medieval period was looked upon as a sign of God’s favor and not God’s fury. Suffering was seen as a sign of worthiness, not sin, and it was meant to strengthen those who were faithful Jews.

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14 Feiler, pgs. 95-96.
16 Feiler, pgs. 96-97.
To more closely connect Jewish suffering with Isaac, a (re)interpretation of the story leads to Isaac actually being killed by Abraham. The (re)interpretation was based on clues found in the text. Some of these clues were that Isaac did not return with Abraham from the mountain, and the word for the ram, ‘hr’, was actually a cognate of ‘hryt,’ or “end of days.” This suggested the suffering of the Jews would last until the end of days.

The biggest clue leading to this interpretation was the angel calling out twice to Abraham to stop him. The first time the angel says, “Do not lay your hand on the boy. Do not do the least thing to him. I know now how devoted you are to God, since you did not withhold from me your own beloved son.” The second time the angel says, “I swear by myself, declares the Lord, that because you acted as you did in not withholding from me your beloved son, I will bless you abundantly and make your descendants as countless as the stars of the sky and the sands of the seashore; … all this because you obeyed my command.” (Gen. 22:11-18)

Interpreters would raise the following questions. Why call out twice if Abraham actually stopped the first time? And, why did Abraham not withhold his favored son? The conclusion reached was that Abraham killed his son the first time. After Abraham sees the ram he kills it a second time.

Rabbi Ephraim of Bonn includes this (re)interpretation in a twelfth century poem. Abraham made haste, pinned Isaac down with his knees, and slaughtered him.

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17 Ibid, pgs. 97-98.
“Down upon him fell the resurrecting dew, and he revived. The father seized him then to slaughter him once more. Scripture bear witness! Well-grounded is the fact. And the Lord called Abraham, even a second time from heaven.”

The (re)interpretation of the text leading to Isaac’s death causes problems. How does one explain his presence later in the story as the father of Jacob and Esau, and who dies later in old age? The answer would share clear ideas with Christianity. Rabbinic interpretation had Isaac go away for three days, and return. Some rabbis said he went to heaven, some to the Garden of Eden, and some to study Torah. The concept of “three days” predates Judaism and Christianity and was well known among the Mesopotamian religions as the time the gods traveled to the netherworld and then returned.

The (re)interpretation of the story not only focused on Isaac as victim, but placed even more emphasis on his resurrection. His resurrection was his reward for his righteousness so he could provide salvation for his descendants. Isaac becomes a risen Savior figure like the Jesus of Christianity.

The (re)interpretation of Isaac’s death and resurrection was so widespread in the Middle Ages that Jews would mark their heads with ashes to remember Isaac who was slain and risen. This was based on a story that said Isaac’s body was burned and his ashes collected and given to Sarah. Every Jew who faced trial according to Rabi Ephraim became another Isaac. “Recall to our credit the many akedahs/bindings. The saints, men, and women, slain for thy sake.”

The Holocaust provides the greatest example of suffering in Jewish history with the images of Abraham and Isaac providing metaphors for the suffering of the Jewish

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18 Ibid, p. 98.
19 Ibid, p. 98.
people. Elie Wiesel expresses this image of Abraham and Isaac. “All the pogroms, the crusades, the persecutions, the slaughters, the catastrophes, the massacres by sword and the liquidations by fire—each time it was Abraham leading his son to the altar, to the holocaust all over again.”

Wiesel points out that martyrdom is not the theme of the Jews nor of the binding story, but survival is. For Isaac, whatever happens on Moriah, he lives as do his descendants. The survival of Isaac in the face of death, and in spite of death seems to laugh in the face of death, which is the meaning of his name, “He laughs.” For Wiesel, Isaac is the first survivor who teaches survivors of future Jewish history that it is possible to suffer and doubt but not lose the ability to laugh.21

The Muslim Interpretation

“We gave him news of a gentle son. And when he reached the age when he could work with him, his father said to him: “My son, I dreamt that I was sacrificing you. Tell me what you think.” He replied: “Father, do as you are bidden. God willing, you shall find me steadfast.”

And when they had both submitted to God, and Abraham had laid down his son prostrate upon his face, We called out to him saying, “Abraham, you have fulfilled your vision.” Thus do We reward the righteous. That was indeed a bitter test. We ransomed his son with a noble sacrifice and bestowed on him the praise of later generations. “Peace be on Abraham.”

Thus do We reward the righteous. He was one of Our believing servants.”
Sura 37:100

For Muslims today the victim of the sacrifice is Ishmael. But, this was not always the case. In fact, the Koran gives no name for the son in the story, assuming the reader knows the name of the son. Early on in the Muslim tradition, Isaac was believed to be the victim of the sacrifice, but the debate began immediately. In the seventh century each

of the religious traditions, Jews, Christians, and Muslims were wrestling over ownership of the story of Abraham.

Some of the reasons why Isaac was thought to be the son of the sacrifice in the Muslim tradition was because the sacrifice occurs relatively early in the life of Abraham, before he traveled to Mecca with Ishmael. Also, Isaac is the son mentioned in the Koran, each time God promises Abraham a son. So when Abraham prays for a son at the start of the story it is thought to be Isaac.

A scholar named Reuven Firestone collected more than two hundred medieval Islamic commentaries and concluded that one hundred thirty named Isaac as the son, and one hundred thirty three named Ishmael.\(^\text{22}\)

Supporters of Ishmael gave their own reasons. God would not have asked Abraham to sacrifice Isaac since God already promises Abraham and Sarah in the Koran that Isaac would have a son.

Sheikh Abdul Rauf states, “There is no dispute among Jews, Christians, and Muslims that the commandment was to his only son. And there’s no dispute that Ishmael was the oldest.”\(^\text{23}\)

Another way to claim it was Ishmael for the Muslim tradition was to create separation from the Jewish and Christian traditions by creating a conflict and accusations of error or misinterpretation. Ibn Kather accuses the Jews of “dishonestly and slanderously” introducing Isaac into the story, even though the Bible says Abraham went

\(^{22}\) Ibid, p. 106.
\(^{23}\) Ibid, p. 105.
to sacrifice his only son. The Jews force this understanding because Isaac is their father while Ishmael is the father of the Arabs. 24

By the eleventh century, relying on its own authoritative sources, Islam makes Ishmael the favored son Abraham takes to sacrifice and this is made into a doctrine of faith. Islam wanted to clearly separate itself from the Jewish and Christian traditions by turning a debatable teaching into a doctrine. This doctrine based on Ishmael would clearly separate Islam from Judaism and Christianity as the new “owners” of the Abraham story in an “exclusive” way. Similar to the Christian appropriation of the whole Bible as a part of its biblical doctrine.

For Mezirow, “experience strengthens, extends, and refines our structures of meaning by reinforcing our expectations about how things are supposed to be.” For Mezirow, this becomes a “epistemic distortion known as reification” whereas an idea or teaching becomes “immutable.” 25 Critical discourse becomes difficult with an immutable concept.

The similarities in the Koran, with the biblical story are strong. Abraham obeys, God intervenes and saves the boy. Similarities can also be found in the biblical interpretation of the story. The boy is old enough to work and talk, Abraham actually consults his son, and the boy shows himself to be a willing victim. 26

The important differences are: the event takes place in a dream, making it unclear if it actually occurred. There is no mention of location, wood, fire, or a knife. And

24 Ibid, p. 106.
25 Mezirow, p. 15.
26 Feiler, p. 103.
finally, in the dream the name of the son is not given. Isaac’s name appears after the narrative ends. 27

The key to the story within the Muslim tradition is Abraham is a true believer, who submits to God’s will and is willing to sacrifice his son, and is rewarded for his efforts. Both Abraham and his son submit themselves to the ultimate sacrifice. The name Islam itself means “submission.”

Suggestions for Religious Education and Interreligious Dialogue

This paper and topic provides an excellent starting point to engage in interfaith and intrafaith dialogue. (Dialogue between people of good will. Gabriel Moran)

After reading the Genesis 22:1-19 account of the Abraham and Isaac story I would suggest the following ideas and questions.

1. In light of this passage viewed as a test of Abraham in all three religious traditions, what experiences have tested your faith? The Jewish tradition highlights 10 tests in the life of Abraham, including the sacrifice of Isaac. The Muslim tradition has Abraham tempted three times to distract him from his task to sacrifice Isaac.

2. In the passage, and in all three religious traditions Abraham is upheld as a role-model of faith. Who have been some of your role-models who have shown courage through trials, or who have inspired your own faith?

3. While Abraham is seen as a central figure in all three religious traditions, what can we learn from the three different interpretations and (re) interpretations of the story? Can we respect the differences? Do they challenge our assumptions towards the text and the other religious traditions?

27 Ibid, p. 104.
4. In light of the (re)interpretation of the text, due to historical circumstances, suffering and persecution, can this knowledge make us more inclusive of the other traditions and relate to the suffering that led to the (re)interpretation?

5. Final suggestions would be to provide information about the three religious traditions to appreciate similarities and differences. And read and explore a document like Nostra Aetate, and other documents like, “Dabru Emet: A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity,”28 and Five Points of Consensus between Catholics and Muslims,29 that invite critical discourse on the issues of Interreligious and Intrareligious dialogue.

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Bibliography


