



Charting New Horizons: Retelling the Story of Abraham and Isaac

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Wilfred Owen (1893-1918)

The Parable of the Old Man and the Young (Jun 1918)

So Abram rose, and clave the wood, and went,
And took the fire with him, and a knife.
And as they sojourned both of them together,
Isaac the first-born spake and said, My Father,
Behold the preparations, fire and iron,
But where the lamb for this burnt-offering?
Then Abram bound the youth with belts and straps,
And builded parapets and trenches there,
And stretched forth the knife to slay his son.
When lo! an angel called him out of heaven,
Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad,
Neither do anything to him. Behold,
A ram, caught in a thicket by its horns;
Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him.
But the old man would not so, but slew his son,
And half the seed of Europe, one by one.



Comparing the biblical story and Owen's *Parable*


Genesis 22:3-13 (KJV)

³ And **Abraham rose up early in the morning**, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son, and **clave the wood** for the burnt offering, and rose up, and went unto the place of which God had told him. ⁴ Then on the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place afar off. ⁵ And Abraham said unto his young men, Abide ye here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you. ⁶ And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it upon Isaac his son; and **he took the fire in his hand, and a knife; and they went both of them together.** ⁷ And Isaac **spake unto Abraham his father, and said, My father:** and he said, Here am I, my son. And he said, **Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?** ⁸ And Abraham said, My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering: so they went both of them together. ⁹ And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and **bound Isaac his son**, and laid him on the altar upon the wood. ¹⁰ **And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son.** ¹¹ **And the angel of the LORD called unto him out of heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham:** and he said, Here am I. ¹² And he said, **Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him:** for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me. ¹³ And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and **behold behind him a ram caught in a thicket by his horns:** and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering in the stead of his son.

Owen's *Parable*

So **Abram** rose, and clave the wood, and went, And took the fire with him, and a knife. And as they sojourned both of them together, Isaac the first-born spake and said, My Father, Behold the **preparations**, fire and **iron**, But where the lamb for this burnt-offering? Then Abram bound the youth **with belts and straps**, **And builded parapets and trenches there**, And stretched forth the knife to slay his son. When lo! an angel called him out of heaven, Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad, Neither do anything to him. Behold, A ram, caught in a thicket by its horns; Offer the Ram **of Pride** instead of him.

But the old man would not so, but slew his son, And half the seed of Europe, one by one.



From Abram to Abraham: Genesis 17 (NRSV)

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. ² And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.” ³ Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, ⁴ “As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁵ **No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations.** ⁶ I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. ⁷ I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. ⁸ And I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and I will be their God.”

The biblical sections not included in Owen's *Parable: Genesis 22:1-2, 14-19 (KJV)*

And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, Behold, here I am. ² And he said, Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.

[...]

¹⁴ And Abraham called the name of that place Jehovahjireh: as it is said to this day, In the mount of the LORD it shall be seen. ¹⁵ And the angel of the LORD called unto Abraham out of heaven the second time, ¹⁶ And said, By myself have I sworn, saith the LORD, for because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son: ¹⁷ That in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies; ¹⁸ And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice. ¹⁹ So Abraham returned unto his young men, and they rose up and went together to Beersheba; and Abraham dwelt at Beersheba.



Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967)

Memorial Tablet (Great War), October 1918

Squire nagged and bullied till I went to fight,
(Under Lord Derby's Scheme). **I died in hell—
(They called it Passchendaele)**. My wound was slight,
And I was hobbling back; and then a shell
Burst slick upon the duck-boards: so I fell
Into the bottomless mud, and lost the light.

At sermon-time, while Squire is in his pew,
He gives my gilded name a thoughtful stare:
For, though low down upon the list, I'm there;
'In proud and glorious memory' ... that's my due.
Two bleeding years I fought in France, for Squire:
I suffered anguish that he's never guessed.
Once I came home on leave: and then went west...
What greater glory could a man desire?



Anthem for Doomed Youth (Sep-Oct 1917)

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?

Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
Can patter out their hasty orisons.
No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells;
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs, –
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;
And bugles calling for them from sad shires.

What candles may be held to speed them all?

Not in the hands of boys but in their eyes

Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes.

The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;
Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,
And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.



Dulce et decorum est (Oct '17-Mar '18)

[...]

My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To **children** ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie; Dulce et Decorum est
Pro patria mori.



Soldier's Dream (Oct 1917)

I dreamed kind Jesus fouled the big-gun gears;

And caused a permanent stoppage in all bolts;

And buckled with a smile Mausers and Colts;

And rusted every bayonet with His tears.

And there were no more bombs, of ours or Theirs,

Not even an old flint-lock, not even a pikel.

But God was vexed, and gave all power to Michael;

And when I woke he'd seen to our repairs.



A Hundred Years On

A Hundred Years From Now (Apr 2015)

Rupert McCall, OAM

[...]

When the playing of the bugle sends a shiver down your spine

When you realise that your qualities are just the same as mine

From dreamtime land to coastal sand, the city to the sprawl

When the essence of my legacy unites Australians all

When Anzac legend shines a light on all who make that vow

With pride, the world will know their name a hundred years from now



Rereading, retelling, reconfiguring: A fresh look at Abraham and Isaac

- **Rereading: The personal transformation from Abram to Abraham**
 - *Lekh-lekha*: “Go” (to yourself first)
- Retelling: Actively listening, and only then responding, to the question from Isaac/our youth
 - Going together in dialogue
- Reconfiguring: allowing our own hopes towards our youth/children to be reshaped in dialogue with them
 - Learning to let go



Rereading: *The personal transformation from Abram to Abraham*


- Genesis 22:2: God says to **Abraham**: *lekh-lekha* el eretz *ha-Moriyah* – “**go** to the land of Moriah”
- Genesis 12:1: God says to **Abram**: *lekh-lekha* me-*artzecha* – “**go** from your land”



Genesis 18 (NRSV)

²² So the men turned from there, and went toward Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before the LORD.

²³ Then Abraham came near and said, **“Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? ²⁴ Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it? ²⁵ Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?”** ²⁶ And the LORD said, “If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake.



From Abram to Abraham: Genesis 17 (NRSV)

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. ² And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.” ³ Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, ⁴ “As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁵ **No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations.** ⁶ I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. ⁷ I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. ⁸ And I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and I will be their God.”

Dutiful obedience?

12 ¹Now the LORD said to Abram, “**Go** from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. ²I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” ⁴**So Abram went**, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him.

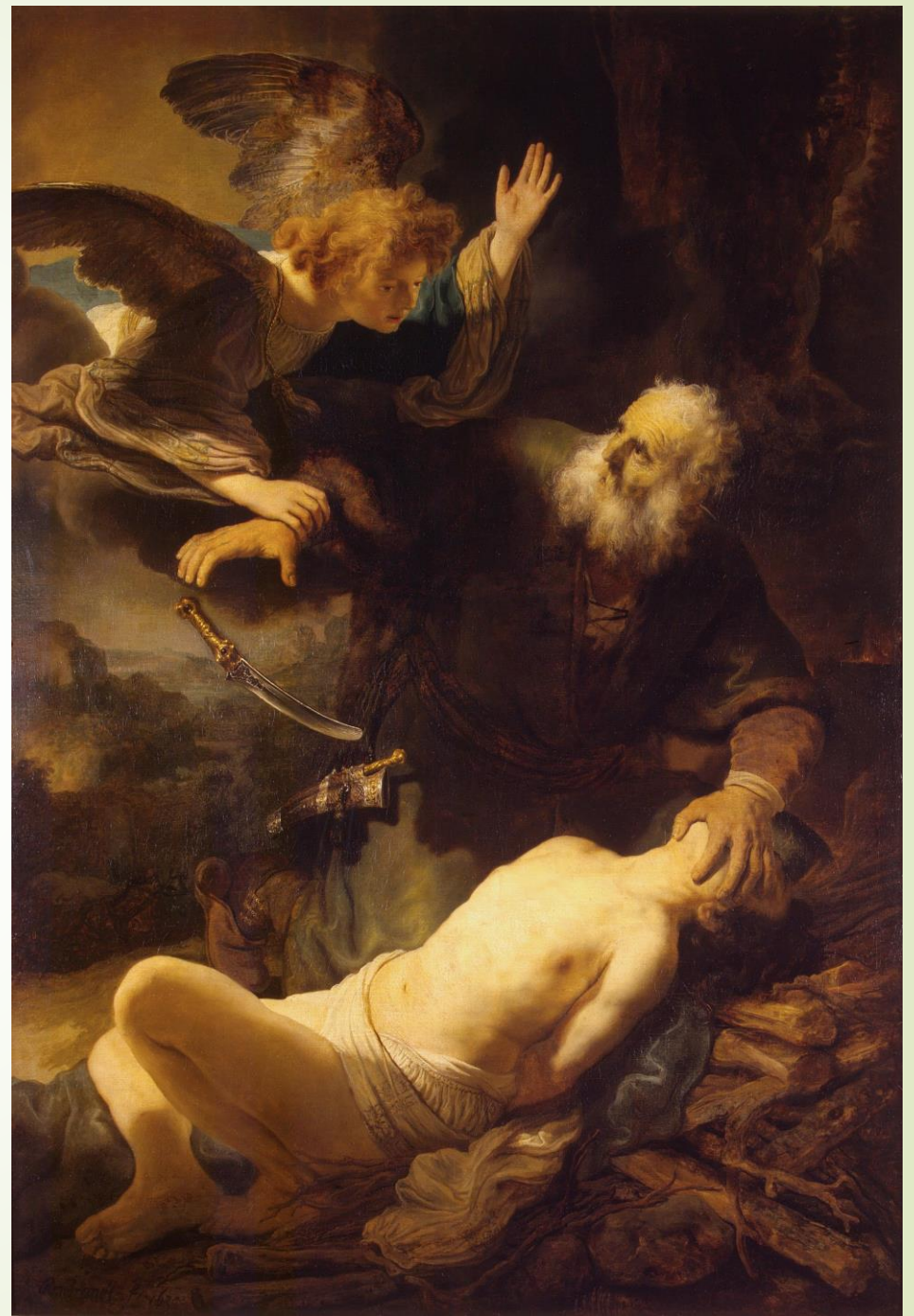
22 ¹After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” ²He said, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and **go** to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you.” ³So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and **went** to the place in the distance that God had shown him.



Or personal responsibility?

22 ¹⁰ Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. ¹¹ But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” ¹² He said, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” ¹³ **And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son.** ¹⁴ So Abraham called that place “The LORD will provide”; as it is said to this day, “On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided.”

Rembrandt,
Sacrifice of Isaac,
1635





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The dialogue between father and son

⁶ Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. ⁷ Isaac said to his father Abraham, “Father!” And he said, “Here I am, my son.” He said, **“The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?”** ⁸ Abraham said, **“God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.”** So the two of them walked on together.



The dialogue between father and son

Abraham said, “**GOD himself will provide** the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.”

Or:

Abraham said, “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering: **my son.**”



The dialogue between father and son

⁶ Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. ⁷ Isaac said to his father Abraham, “Father!” And he said, “Here I am, my son.” He said, “The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” ⁸ Abraham said, “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” **So the two of them walked on together.**



The dialogue between father and son

Isaac: "Father!" ***Abraham, remember that you are my father.***

Abraham: "Here I am, my son." ***Don't worry. I am here for you, son.***

Isaac: "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" ***If you are really here for me, then you know that a lamb is missing. Are you my father? Are you really going to go ahead and offer me up as a sacrifice just because God told you to? I am your son, Father. Listen to me, please.***



The dialogue between father and son

“The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?”

¹³ And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son.



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Reconfiguring: learning to let go



¹⁹ So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beer-sheba; and Abraham lived at Beer-sheba.



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Soldier's Dream (Oct 1917)

Wilfred Owen

I dreamed kind Jesus fouled the big-gun gears;
And caused a permanent stoppage in all bolts;
And buckled with a smile Mausers and Colts;
And rusted every bayonet with His tears.

And there were no more bombs, of ours or Theirs,
Not even an old flint-lock, not even a pikel.
But God was vexed, and gave all power to Michael;
And when I woke he'd seen to our repairs.

A Soldier's Dream (Gallipoli, 1915)

Harold G. Kershaw

I dreamt I was a soldier

Was marching down the street
To the strains of martial music.
The sound of tramping feet.
The crowds that lined the pavement,
They cheered us as we passed,
They clapped and waved us onward
The first ranks to the last.

I dreamt I was a soldier,

I woke and found it true,

But I heard no people cheering
I saw no skies of blue;
The night was dark and stormy
The heavens surely sent
The rain in extra measure
On to my dripping tent.
The cricket's eerie calling
Was mingled with the sound
Of the patter of the raindrops
Upon the sodden ground.
The storm wind in the tree tops,
A tent mate's heavy snore
Then lulled me off to dreamland
I fell asleep once more.

I dreamt I was a soldier,

And peace had come to earth;

I heard once more the music,
The cheering and the mirth,
The crowds were more excited,
For we were back again
With faces bright and smiling
Like sunshine after rain.

I dreamt I was a soldier

I woke and found it true

With the storm clouds swiftly passing,
The sunlight peeping through.

I saw into the future

Beyond war's stress and strain,

An inner voice was calling

All will be well again.

The prospect seemed more cheerful,

A new hope I had found,

I felt a strengthened purpose


To face the daily round;

The words just like an echo

Were ringing in my brain,

I heard them oft repeated:

All will be well again.



When hope becomes reality, and
leads to joy

“We only had a tiny bit of hope but we had to cling onto it. And in the end that tiny bit of hope became reality.”

BBC interview (11 July 2018) with Rear Adm Arpakorn Yuukongkaew, head of the Thai Navy Seals who rescued the 12 Thai boys and their coach.

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Richard McBee,
After the Akeida, 1991

