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Elements of Sacrifice in Abraham's Time and Our Own

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Abraham's test to offer Isaac as a sacrifice is one of the most poignant stories in the Old Testament, yet it is told with astonishing economy, occupying a mere nineteen verses. Nevertheless, it stands as one of the most detailed narratives of sacrifice in the Old Testament. Herein God commands aged Abraham to travel a three-day, uphill journey from Beersheba to Mount Moriah, where he must bind Isaac, slay him with a knife, and burn his remains as a sacrifice to God. Ultimately, Isaac is spared when the angel of the Lord intervenes and God provides a ram to be sacrificed in his place.

I believe this story serves as a template for making acceptable sacrifices to God. In this light, I have identified five elements of righteous sacrifice from Genesis 22. These five elements are not comprehensive—the story of Abraham binding Isaac for sacrifice is a rich digest of imagery and content relative to sacrifice. Nevertheless, the following elements of sacrifice seem essential: (1) sacrifice as a medium of testing our true intentions, (2) the significance of place (holy ground designated by God for the receipt of offerings), (3) the significance of altars, (4) the significance of rapport between sacrificer and sacrifice, and (5) the significance of sacrifices as a type or shadow of the Atonement of Jesus Christ. The purpose of this article is to use Genesis 22 as a pattern from which to examine these five elements in latter-day sacrifice. This exploration will lead to a clearer conception of sacrifice and will provide a practical construct through which to teach the doctrine of sacrifice

using Genesis 22 as a template. Ultimately, we conclude that there is a connection between sacrificial offerings today and sacrificial practices in the days of Abraham.

Sacrifice as a Medium of Testing Intent

In the opening lines of Genesis 22, God reveals His design in commanding Abraham to offer up Isaac: “And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham. . . . And he said, Take now thy son . . . and offer him there for a burnt offering” (vv. 1–2). The footnote of verse 1 in the Latter-day Saint edition indicates the word *tempt* is a translation from Hebrew meaning to test or prove. What was God looking to assess through the testing of Abraham? Lexicographers Jenni and Westermann note that the Hebrew word from which *tempt* is translated suggests a test to determine Abraham’s true intentions.¹ This is clearly evident in the acceptance of Abraham’s offering: “Now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me” (v. 12). It is reasonable to conclude that in Abraham’s day a major purpose of sacrifice was to test the intentions and true desires of the sacrificer. As explained in Abraham’s own writings, God wanted to “prove [his children] herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them” (Abraham 3:25). Without question, the *herewith* of this passage includes sacrifice.²

This element of sacrifice is evident in latter-day scripture. For example, the Lord revealed to the Prophet Joseph Smith in July 1843: “For I am the Lord thy God, and will be with thee even unto the end of the world, and through all eternity; for verily I seal upon you your exaltation, and prepare a throne for you in the kingdom of my Father, with Abraham your father. Behold, I have seen your sacrifices, and will forgive all your sins; I have seen your sacrifices in obedience to that which I have told you. Go, therefore, and I make a way for your escape, as I accepted the offering of Abraham of his son Isaac” (D&C 132:49–50). It is evident from these verses that Joseph Smith was sealed up to exaltation not because he was perfect in his execution or performance of all that God commanded him to sacrifice, but that, like Abraham, his intentions were wholly focused on the will of God. Therefore, like Abraham, Joseph Smith received exaltation through Jesus Christ, who filled in any gaps between his intentions and his performances.

Elder Dallin H. Oaks clarified how this aspect of the Atonement is employed in our lives:

Our Father in Heaven will receive a truly righteous desire as a substitute for actions that are genuinely impossible. . . . This is the principle that blessed Abraham for his willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac. The Lord stopped him at the last instant (see Genesis 22:11–12), but his willingness to follow the Lord's command "was accounted unto him for righteousness" (D&C 132:36). This principle means that when we have done all that we can, our desires will carry us the rest of the way. It also means that if our desires are right, we can be forgiven for the unintended errors or mistakes we will inevitably make as we try to carry those desires into effect. What a comfort for our feelings of inadequacy!³

Joseph Smith explained that our desires must be earnest, sincere, and wholehearted, like Abraham's, for such grace to be extended. He explained, "The sacrifice required of Abraham in the offering up of Isaac, shows that if a man would attain to the keys of the kingdom of an endless life; he must sacrifice all things."⁴ He further taught that "you will have all kinds of trials to pass through. And it is quite as necessary for you to be tried as it was for Abraham and other men of God, and . . . God will feel after you, and He will take hold of you and wrench your very heart strings, and if you cannot stand it you will not be fit for an inheritance in the Celestial Kingdom of God."⁵

This wrenching was evident in preparing certain men to be called into the first Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and Quorum of the Seventy in the last days. The majority of the Twelve and many of the Seventy were called from the ranks of those who participated in Zion's Camp—the harrowing journey from Ohio to Missouri to defend and bring aid to persecuted Saints in 1834. Because of poverty, illness, and mortal danger, participation in Zion's Camp was a sacrifice of monumental proportions. According to Joseph Smith, the sacrifice was designed to test the intentions and desires of future leaders of God's Church. Shortly after the journey was completed, Joseph explained:

Brethren, some of you are angry with me, because you did not fight in Missouri; but let me tell you, God did not want you to fight. He could not organize His kingdom with twelve men to open the Gospel door to the nations of the earth, and with seventy men under their direction to follow in their tracks, unless He took them from a body of men who had offered their lives, and who had made as great a sacrifice as did Abraham. Now the Lord has got His Twelve and His Seventy, and there will be other quorums of Seventies called, who will make the sacrifice, and those who have not made their sacrifices and their offerings now, will make them hereafter.⁶

Genesis 22 teaches that sacrifice is a medium of testing true intent. If the intentions of the sacrificer harmonize with God's will, the offering will be acceptable to Him. If intentions are not in line with God's will, the sacrifice lacks efficacy. This fundamental element of sacrifice was clearly in place as Abraham bound Isaac and laid him upon the altar, and remains in place today as time, talents, money, and other oblations are offered as latter-day sacrifices.

Significance of Place

Given the brevity of the Genesis 22 account, it is significant that we have five references to the prescribed place where the sacrifice must be carried out (see vv. 2, 3, 4, 9, 14). The repeated identification of a specific site for the offering suggests significance. Indeed, the significance of place is a fundamental element of sacrifice.

The Lord commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac "upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of" (v. 2). Thereafter, this mountain is referred to as "the place" or "that place" (see vv. 3–4, 9, 14). Location was so significant to the efficacy of the sacrifice that Abraham apparently had no alternative; he had to travel to the prescribed location. This begs the question, why a mountaintop? Throughout history, temples and mountaintops have shared a common heritage (see Exodus 4:27; 1 Kings 19:11; Isaiah 27:13; Matthew 17:1–9; 2 Peter 1:18; 1 Nephi 18:3; Ether 3:1). In fact, temples are frequently referred to as the mountain of the Lord (see Isaiah 2:2; Micah 4:1; Psalm 48:1). Tradition holds that during the Creation, the first peak or primordial mound that rose above the chaos of the waters came to represent the site of God's initial contact with the earth. Figuratively, this mountain was the site from which He ordered the rest of the Creation.⁷

This traditional view is borne out in the biblical narrative as mountains frequently serve as sacred space that link heaven and earth. This is particularly true of the first temple complex—the Garden of Eden—wherein a spring of water gushed forth. This spring watered Eden and then divided into four river heads that went out (flowed down) from Eden and watered the four corners of the world (see Genesis 2:10–14; Moses 3:10–14; Abraham 5:10). The flow of water away from Eden in four different directions suggests a higher elevation than surrounding lands. The increased altitude also suggests that the water source must be a spring and not another river flowing through Eden.⁸ Not surprisingly then, Ezekiel refers to the Garden of Eden as "the holy mountain of God" (Ezekiel 28:14). Whether literally or figuratively, the mountain of the Lord suggests a rise above the fallen and imperfect world

and beckons those who wish to draw closer to God to climb above corruption and come to the “place which the Lord your God shall choose to cause his name to dwell there; thither shall ye bring all that I command you; your burnt offerings, and your sacrifices, your tithes, and the heave offering of your hand, and all your choice vows which ye vow unto the Lord” (Deuteronomy 12:11).

Climbing up and out of the world to a chosen place of worship is illustrated through the “Songs of Degrees” or “Psalms of Ascent” (Psalms 120–34). These fifteen songs depict a journey from the proverbial lowlands of worldliness to the mountain of the Lord—the place where worldliness is eclipsed by peace. Before construction of the temple at Jerusalem, these fifteen psalms were possibly sung as worshippers climbed the hills leading to Gibeon, where the Ark of the Covenant was kept before it was moved to the City of David. Centuries later, it is possible that these psalms were sung while ascending the steps of the second temple at Jerusalem that led to the inner court. Apparently, there were fifteen steps leading to this court (see Ezekiel 40:26, 31), which some believe were designed to match the “Songs of Degrees.”⁹ Singing or reciting the words of the Songs ensured that the worshipper acknowledged his or her ascent to the most holy place on earth—the mountain of the Lord.

Visually, the facades of some Latter-day Saint temples (for example, Salt Lake, Nauvoo, and Mount Timpanogos) illustrate this climb out of the world with a series of carefully crafted stones. On the Salt Lake Temple, earth stones surround the foundation of the temple, moon stones encompass the temple structure at approximately one-quarter of its height, sun stones may be seen at a level approximately three-quarters, and star stones surround the structure near the pinnacle of the building. Hence, the temple facade depicts the journey undertaken within the temple that begins on earth and ascends up beyond the moon, sun, and stars to reach God's celestial realm.¹⁰

As these examples suggest, temples re-create this primordial mound and the journey up and out of the fallen world.¹¹ Donald W. Parry noted that “every Near Eastern temple symbolically recalls a mountain.”¹² The connection between certain mountaintops and holy ground helps to explain God's design in commanding Abraham (who was over one hundred years old as the story unfolds) to hike three days and climb the mountain God had prescribed.¹³ If any mountain would do, certainly God would not require His aged servant Abraham to travel for three days to Moriah. Simply, the ideal place to offer sacrifice is at the place designated by God, such as a mountaintop (see Deuteronomy 12).

The site-specific nature of sacrifice consistently appears in latter-day scripture. In July 1831, Joseph Smith arrived in Jackson County, Missouri, from Kirtland, Ohio. Here he received a revelation identifying Jackson County as the location of Zion and the center place to which the Saints should gather. The Lord also identified the place where the temple should be built. He revealed: “And thus saith the Lord your God, if you will receive wisdom here is wisdom. Behold, *the place* which is now called Independence is *the center place*; and *a spot* for the temple is lying westward, upon a lot which is not far from the courthouse. Wherefore, it is wisdom that the land should be purchased by the saints, and also every tract lying westward, even unto the line running directly between Jew and Gentile” (D&C 57:3–4; emphasis added). Later, the Lord revealed: “Verily this is the word of the Lord, that the city New Jerusalem shall be built by the gathering of the saints, beginning at *this place*, even *the place* of the temple, which temple shall be reared in this generation. . . . Therefore, as I said concerning the sons of Moses—for the sons of Moses and also the sons of Aaron shall offer an acceptable offering and sacrifice in the house of the Lord, which house shall be built unto the Lord in this generation, upon *the consecrated spot* as *I have appointed*” (D&C 84:4, 31; emphasis added). The phrases “the center place,” “a spot,” “this place,” “the place,” “the consecrated spot,” and “I have appointed” in these verses indicate that as it was with Abraham, so it was with the Latter-day Saints: the Lord consecrated the place for the temple in Zion where He would commune with them and receive their sacrifices.

The site-specific nature of temples in the latter days survived the martyrdom of the Prophet Joseph Smith. His successors have made the selection of a temple site a matter of the utmost urgency always anxious to receive the confirmation of the Lord that the selected site was *the place* wherein the Lord desired a temple to be built. The selection of building sites for the Salt Lake Temple and Denver Colorado Temple will serve to illustrate.

From the teachings of Brigham Young, we know that the site of the Salt Lake Temple was appointed by God. Once the Saints arrived in the Salt Lake Valley in 1847, Brigham Young immediately turned his attention to building a temple. On April 6, 1853, President Young spoke from the Tabernacle, saying, “This I do know—there should be a temple built here. . . . I scarcely ever say much about revelations, or visions, but suffice it to say, five years ago last July I was here, and saw in the spirit the temple not ten feet from where we have laid the chief cornerstone. I have not inquired what kind of a temple we should

build. Why? Because it was represented before me. I have never looked upon *that ground*, but the vision of it was there. I see it as plainly as if it was in reality before me."¹⁴

President Gordon B. Hinckley voiced similar feelings in conjunction with selecting a building site for the Denver Colorado Temple:

When it was announced that we would build a temple in that city and had selected a site on which it should stand, opposition rose against us. We gave up that site and tried another. Again we were thwarted. But we were determined to go forward, putting our trust in the Lord that He would guide us in accomplishing His purposes. Two other possible sites were selected. At the time, President Kimball and President Romney were both ill, and mine was a serious responsibility. I asked President Benson, then President of the Council of the Twelve, if we might go to Denver together, and there with Elder Russell Taylor we looked over these sites. I give you my testimony that we were guided by the Spirit in choosing the ground on which that beautiful new structure now stands.¹⁵

Anciently, Abraham was commanded to ascend to a specific site, a holy mountain prescribed by God, to commune through sacrifice. No less is required of Latter-day Saints. Through His prophets the Lord designates sacred ground upon which temples are constructed. When we ascend to the temple and worship through the sacrifice of a willing heart, we may anticipate blessings similar to those bestowed upon Abraham.

Significance of Altars

If the temple is the mountain of the Lord, the altar may serve as its figurative peaks. In fact, the Lord commanded horns to be built on the four corners of certain altars (see Exodus 27:2; Leviticus 4:7). These horns represented power, strength, fullness, and abundance. They were also associated with an increase of height, suggesting the loftiest point where man and God meet.¹⁶ Furthermore, the altar is traditionally designated to be a conduit connecting heaven and earth, God and man.¹⁷ Altars of the true and living God serve at least three purposes. They are (1) a place for sacrifice; (2) a place for covenant making and covenant renewal; and (3) a place where the divine presence of God may be manifest.¹⁸ Abraham's experience with Isaac at Moriah reflect these purposes.

Sacrifice. In Genesis 22 we learn that it was not enough for Abraham and Isaac to merely arrive at the place of sacrifice. Once there, Abraham was commanded to build an altar as prescribed by a millennia-old pattern that was established by God in the days of Adam

and Eve, who, following their expulsion from Eden, were commanded to construct an altar and sacrifice “the firstlings of their flocks, for an offering unto the Lord” (Moses 5:5). Initially, the purpose of this ritual was not entirely clear to them. However, “after many days an angel of the Lord appeared unto Adam, saying: Why dost thou offer sacrifices unto the Lord? And Adam said unto him: I know not, save the Lord commanded me. And then the angel spake, saying: This thing is a similitude of the sacrifice of the Only Begotten of the Father, which is full of grace and truth. Wherefore, thou shalt do all that thou doest in the name of the Son, and thou shalt repent and call upon God in the name of the Son forevermore” (Moses 5:6–8).

From this we learn that sacrifice at altars was instituted at the onset of mortality. The principal purpose and practice of sacrifice had not changed as Abraham built an altar on Moriah and lifted his knife to sacrifice Isaac. Therefore, the purposes of Adam’s sacrifices as well as Abraham’s sacrifices were the same—to teach that the Father would eventually sacrifice His Only Begotten Son to redeem mankind from temporal and spiritual death. Furthermore, Skinner notes that the Hebrew word for altar, *mizbeah*, is rooted in the word *zebah*, which means “sacrifice.” Therefore, the word *altar* really means “the place of sacrificing.”¹⁹ It is interesting that another name for Jerusalem is Ariel (see Isaiah 29:1–2; Ezekiel 43:15), which means “hearth of God” or “altar of God.” The hearth of the altar is where the priest stood as he slew the sacrifice, and the altar is where the sacrifice is presented to God and is consumed. Since all sacrifices point to the great and last sacrifice, Jesus Christ, it is not happenstance that another name for the city where He would “suffer, bleed and die for us” is the “altar of God.”²⁰

Covenant making and covenant renewal. Sacrifice and entering into covenants (or renewing covenants) are mutually inclusive. You cannot have one without the other. The word *covenant* is a translation from the Hebrew word *berith*.²¹ The etymology of *berith* is not completely clear; however, it has been suggested that *berith* is related to two Akkadian terms: *baru*, which means “to look for and make a fixed choice,” and *biritu*, which means “to clasp, fetter, bond, or fasten.”²² In short, *berith* is associated with rendering clear favor toward or choosing one from many to take for your own by having it bound to you. The result of this binding selection is the creation of something more beautiful and desirable than was had in an earlier form.²³

Before the test on Moriah, God entered into a covenant with Abraham, giving him a new name, the promise of a land inheritance, and assurance of a great posterity (see Genesis 13:14–16; Genesis

17:1–22). This covenant was renewed in conjunction with the sacrifice of the ram at the altar on Moriah. At that moment the Lord 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: 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; and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice” (Genesis 22:16–18). We see in this episode the covenant pattern. Abraham was shown favor, was selected by God, and was bound to Him in a way that would eternally improve the prophet's standing. These events indicate that a fundamental purpose of altars is for making and renewing covenants.

Divine presence. God's presence is associated with sacrifice and covenant making at altars. As alluded to earlier, altars serve as a conduit of sorts, connecting the earth and God's realm. God promises to manifest Himself at the altar. Moses was instructed, “An altar of earth thou shalt make unto me, and shalt sacrifice thereon thy burnt offerings, and thy peace offerings, thy sheep, and thine oxen: in all places where I record my name *I will come unto thee*, and I will bless thee” (Exodus 20:24; emphasis added). Furthermore, the prophets Ezekiel and Malachi refer to the altar as the table of the Lord (see Ezekiel 41:22; Malachi 1:7, 12), suggesting that God comes personally to the altar to accept and consume the sacrifice the way we approach a table to partake of a meal. Allusions to sacrifice as “God's food” abound in ancient scripture (see Leviticus 3:11; 21:21–22; Numbers 28:2; 2 Chronicles 7:1; 1 Kings 18:38).²⁴ Again, the connotation is that God's presence at altars of sacrifice is not only anticipated but also expected.

Abraham experienced the intimacy of the altar at Moriah. While he did not have to sacrifice Isaac, he did sacrifice the ram caught in the thicket. As we should expect, Abraham encountered God at the altar and named the place Jehovah-jireh, meaning “the Lord shall be manifest (seen)” (Genesis 22:14, footnote b). The connotation of this title suggests that God was nearby or present at the altar of sacrifice as the entire drama unfolded.

In the days of Abraham, sacrificing an animal denoted totality—holding nothing back from God. And in that totality was something of the heart of the sacrificer. As will be seen in the next section, this connection between the sacrifice and sacrificer is essential. Keil and Delitzsch note that “in the sacrificial flame the essence of the animal was resolved into vapour; so that when man presented a sacrifice in his own stead, his

inmost being, his spirit, and his heart ascended to God in the vapour, and the sacrifice brought the feeling of his heart before God.”²⁵

Following His Atonement, Jesus commanded that the sacrifice of animals cease. Instead, He commanded that a broken heart and a contrite spirit should be offered to God as a sacrifice instead (see 3 Nephi 9:19–20). The covenant to sacrifice everything for the kingdom of God is made at an altar. Obedience to the covenant will be enacted away from the altar in daily life by offering sacrifices of time, talents, tithes, and being faithful to any command that God may give. These oblations and deep reverence for God’s will are an extension of the covenant made at the altar itself and serve as barometers to determine if one actually possesses a broken heart and a contrite spirit. The Lord revealed in July 1833: “Verily I say unto you, all among them *who know their hearts are honest, and are broken, and their spirits contrite*, and are willing to observe their covenants by sacrifice—yea, every sacrifice which I, the Lord, shall command—they are accepted of me” (D&C 97:8; emphasis added). Figuratively, the heart is often the seat of our deepest emotions and intentions. A broken heart suggests susceptibility and openness to God’s designs. Similarly, the word *contrite* means broken. A contrite spirit is not self-willed but willing to conform to the commands of God. Taken together, the language of this verse suggests that the acceptability of any sacrifice is determined by the intent and will of the individual offering it.

The centrality of these ideas to Latter-day Saint theology is expressed by Joseph Smith:

Let us here observe, that a religion that does not require the sacrifice of all things never has power sufficient to produce the faith necessary unto life and salvation; for, from the first existence of man, the faith necessary unto the enjoyment of life and salvation never could be obtained without the sacrifice of all earthly things. It was through this sacrifice, and this only, that God has ordained that men should enjoy eternal life; and it is through the medium of the sacrifice of all earthly things that men do actually know that they are doing the things that are well pleasing in the sight of God. When a man has offered in sacrifice all that he has for truth’s sake, not even withholding his life, and believing before God that he has been called to make this sacrifice because he seeks to do his will, he does know, most assuredly, that God does and will accept his sacrifice and offering, and that he has not, nor will not seek his face in vain. Under these circumstances, then, he can obtain the faith necessary for him to lay hold on eternal life.²⁶

Both before the Atonement (with animal sacrifice) and after the Atonement (with offerings such as time, talents, tithes, and so forth),

we see the aforementioned intimacy of sacrifice at altars. Similarly, President Joseph Fielding Smith taught:

It is quite evident, then, that these glorious blessings of eternal inheritance, by which we become sons of God and joint-heirs with Jesus Christ, possessing “all that the father hath,” do not come except through willingness to keep the commandments and even to suffer with Christ if need be. In other words, candidates for eternal life—the greatest gift of God—are expected to place all that they have *on the altar*, should it be required, for even then, and should they be required to lay down their lives for his cause, they could never pay him for the abundant blessings which are received and promised based on obedience to his laws and commandments.²⁷

Likewise, Elder Neal A. Maxwell taught: “So it is that real, personal sacrifice never was placing an animal on the altar. Instead, it is a willingness to put the animal in us upon the altar and letting it be consumed! Such is the ‘sacrifice unto the Lord . . . of a broken heart and a contrite spirit,’ (D&C 59:8) . . . for the denial of self precedes the full acceptance of Him.”²⁸

Sacrifice at altars is intended to point worshippers to the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus Christ, give them opportunities to make and renew covenants, and bring them into the divine presence of God. In the days of Abraham, sacrifice at altars involved the offering of an animal. Today, we offer our hearts, might, mind, and strength. From the story of Abraham's test at Moriah, we learn that the principal elements of sacrifice at altars are still in place today.

Rapport between Sacrificer and Sacrifice

There must be a distinct tie between life and livelihood of the sacrifice and the sacrificer in a greater context of faith in Jesus Christ. Kurtz refers to this relationship as “biotic rapport.” He explains that “it was not sufficient that the sacrifice should be merely the property of the person offering it; on the contrary, it was requisite that it should stand in a close, inward, essential relation, a psychical *rapport*, to the person of the worshiper.”²⁹ In this light, Abraham was commanded: “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” (Genesis 22:2).

The intimate relationship between Abraham and Isaac is the defining component of the story that makes this command exceptionally difficult and without parallel among mortals. Isaac was a child of promise who was long sought for, cherished, guarded, and raised up

by Abraham and Sarah, who conveyed to Isaac all the physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual energy at their disposal. Isaac was their most prized possession. Furthermore, Abraham's vested interest was long term. According to Josephus, Isaac was twenty-five years old at the time of the binding and had "endeared himself to his parents still more, by the exercise of every virtue, and adhering to his duty to his parents, and being zealous in the worship of God."³⁰ Similarly, Philo described Isaac at the time of the binding as "a beloved and only son, very beautiful in his person, and very excellent in his disposition. For he was already beginning to display the more perfect exercises of his age, so that his father felt a most strong and vehement affection for him, not only from the impulse of natural regard, but also from the influence of deliberate opinion, from being, as it were, a judge of his character."³¹

The element of giving of oneself is clearly seen in latter-day scripture as well as the teachings of latter-day prophets. Speaking of Sabbath observance, the Lord commanded, "And that thou mayest more fully keep thyself unspotted from the world, thou shalt go to the house of prayer and offer up thy sacraments upon my holy day; for verily this is a day appointed unto you to rest from your labors, and to pay thy devotions unto the Most High; nevertheless thy vows shall be offered up in righteousness on all days and at all times; but remember that on this, the Lord's day, *thou shalt offer thine oblations and thy sacraments* unto the Most High, confessing thy sins unto thy brethren, and before the Lord" (D&C 59:9–12; emphasis added). An oblation is a sacrifice offered to God in sacred service, particularly a sacrifice of time, talents, or means.³² A sacrament is "a solemn religious ceremony enjoined by Christ, the head of the christian church, to be observed by his followers, by which their special relation to him is created, or their oblations to him renewed and ratified."³³

Though sacrifice today does not involve the slaughter of an animal or the offering of harvested crops, sacrifice is inherent in giving time and talents through serving selflessly in callings and by the payment of tithes and offerings. Furthermore, the sacrifice must be offered from a foundation of faith in the true and living God. In the modern era, time, talents, and means constitute the fruits of our labors and represent the essence of our existence. When offered with real intent, all the blessings associated with ancient sacrifice stand available to the sacrificer today.

Elder Russell M. Nelson describes the fruits of such latter-day sacrifices. He wrote: "Our highest sense of sacrifice is achieved as we make ourselves more sacred or holy. This we do by obedience to the commandments of God. Thus the laws of obedience and sacrifice are

indelibly intertwined. Consider the commandment to obey the Word of Wisdom, to keep the Sabbath day holy, to pay an honest tithe. As we comply with these and other commandments, something wonderful happens to us. We become disciplined! We become disciples! We become sacred and holy—more like our Lord!”

Elder Nelson then provides the following example:

For a short time during the first year of our marriage, Sister Nelson maintained two jobs while I was in medical school. Before her paychecks had arrived, we found ourselves owing more than our funds could defray, so we took advantage of an option then available to sell blood at twenty-five dollars a pint. In an interval between her daytime job as a schoolteacher and her evening work as a clerk in a music store, we went to the hospital and each sold a pint of blood. As the needle was withdrawn from her arm, she said to me, “Don’t forget to pay tithing on my blood money.” . . . Such obedience was a tremendous lesson to me. Sister Nelson’s commitment to tithe became my commitment too.³⁴

In this example, Sister Nelson’s “blood money” was truly part of her, and the biotic link between her life and her tithing is obvious. Her faith in Jesus Christ and His command to pay tithes is also evident. Income is usually earned through labors that extract “the sweat of thy face” (Moses 4:25), and the tithing paid on money earned is part of us too. Similarly, President Gordon B. Hinckley taught:

Over the past years it has been my responsibility to extend calls to scores of men, their wives, and their families to leave all behind and go into the mission field. Those with whom we shall speak in coming months will respond in the same way that those in the past have responded. They will, in effect, say, “Of course, I am ready to go whenever and wherever the Lord calls.” . . . I confess that at times I feel reluctant to ask people to do things in the Church because I know they will respond without hesitation. And I know also that those responses will entail great sacrifice. . . . Someone occasionally says that there was so much of sacrifice in the early days of the Church, but there is no sacrifice today. The observer goes on to say that in pioneer days people were willing to lay their fortunes and even their lives on the altar. “What has happened to the spirit of consecration?” some of these ask. I should like to say with great emphasis that this spirit is still very much among us. I have discovered that no sacrifice is too great for faithful Latter-day Saints.³⁵

This example illustrates the tendency of many to minimize the significance of a latter-day sacrifice that does not include the privations endured by our pioneer ancestors. In reality, the response to a call and faithful service as a mission president, deacons quorum adviser, counselor in the Relief Society presidency, or nursery leader makes the

attending sacrifice of time, talent, and resources acceptable to the Lord so long as it is offered with real intent.

Sacrifice as a Type of the Atonement

Abraham's binding of Isaac on the altar at Moriah is one of the clearest examples in all scripture that sacrifice is a type that points to the Atonement of Jesus Christ (see Jacob 4:5). A type is a figurative representation of an actual thing or event. For example, a shadow cast by a tree is a type, or is typical, of the actual tree. By examining the shadow or type, the observer may learn many things about the tree itself, such as height, width of trunk, type and density of foliage, and so forth. All sacrifice should be a type or a shadow of the atoning sacrifice of the Savior (see Moses 5:5–9). The Prophet Joseph Smith taught:

By faith in this atonement or plan of redemption, Abel offered to God a sacrifice that was accepted, which was the firstlings of the flock. Cain offered of the fruit of the ground, and was not accepted, because he could not do it in faith, he could have no faith, or could not exercise faith contrary to the plan of heaven. It must be shedding the blood of the Only Begotten to atone for man; for this was the plan of redemption; and without the shedding of blood was no remission; and as the sacrifice was instituted for a type, by which man was to discern the great Sacrifice which God had prepared; to offer a sacrifice contrary to that, no faith could be exercised, because redemption was not purchased in that way, nor the power of atonement instituted after that order. . . . Certainly, the shedding of the blood of a beast could be beneficial to no man, except it was done in imitation, or as a type, or explanation of what was to be offered through the gift of God Himself; and this performance done with an eye looking forward in faith on the power of that great Sacrifice for a remission of sins.³⁶

Similarly, the Apostle Paul explained that “by faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac: and he that had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, of whom it was said, That in Isaac shall thy seed be called: accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead; from whence also he received him in a figure [or type]” (Hebrews 11:17–19).³⁷ Of the many types that point to the Atonement of Jesus Christ in Genesis 22 (the altar, blood, fire, wood, and so forth), Abraham, Isaac, and the ram are most significant.

In the binding narrative, Abraham serves as a type of the Father. Through Abraham we see the active role that the Father played in the sacrifice of His Only Begotten Son. The text of Genesis 22 makes it clear that Abraham, and by association, the Father, was willing to offer this ultimate sacrifice: “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*" (Genesis 22:1; emphasis added). The key to seeing Abraham's and the Father's willingness is found in the phrase "here I am," which is echoed as "here am I" in verses 7 and 11. The phrase stands as a declaration and communicates a readiness to both listen and obey.³⁸ Hence, while Jesus Christ was willing to be sacrificed, it is equally important that the Father was willing to make the sacrifice.

Abraham bound Isaac "and laid him on the altar upon the wood. And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son. And the angel of the Lord called unto him out of heaven, and said, Abraham. . . . Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him" (Genesis 22:9–12). Up to this point in the narrative, Isaac had served as a type of Jesus Christ. He fully yielded to the will of his father, he journeyed to the prescribed place of sacrifice, and he allowed himself to be bound and prepared for death by slaughter. At this juncture, Isaac is untied and raised off the altar by his father. This is a type of how Christ will be raised up in the Resurrection by His Father (see Acts 13:30, 37; 1 Corinthians 6:14; Galatians 1:1). In his release, Isaac is also a type of all the children of God who are "bound" by certain temporal and spiritual deaths due to the Fall of Adam and sinfulness unless a mediator intervened as a substitute (see 2 Nephi 9:6–9). Isaac's escape from the binding at the altar is typical of our escape, made possible by Christ, from the "awful monster; yea, that monster, death and hell, which I call the death of the body, and also the death of the spirit" (2 Nephi 9:10).

Nevertheless, the "ram caught in a thicket" (Genesis 22:13) becomes the premier type in this sacrificial saga. Like the Savior, the ram was provided miraculously by God (see Isaiah 7:14; 1 Nephi 11:15–18; Alma 7:10). Like the Savior, there was only one ram in the thicket available as a sacrifice. The Atonement of Jesus Christ was infinite and eternal, with no possibility of a backup should Christ fail (see 2 Nephi 9:7; D&C 76:1).

Of course, a critically important element of sacrifice is that the sacrifice, the sacrificer, and the ritual all point to Jesus Christ. As with the other four elements, this too is found in latter-day scripture and the teachings of modern prophets and apostles. For example, President Joseph F. Smith beheld in a vision all the Saints of God from Adam to Jesus Christ who had died and were waiting in the world of spirits to be taught by the Savior following His death. These spirits formed an innumerable host (see D&C 138:12) and "were filled with joy and gladness, and were rejoicing together because the day of their

deliverance was at hand” (D&C 138:15). Furthermore, “all these had departed the mortal life, firm in the hope of a glorious resurrection, through the grace of God the Father and his Only Begotten Son, Jesus Christ” (D&C 138:14). Finally, throughout their lives they had all “offered sacrifice *in the similitude of the great sacrifice of the Son of God*, and had suffered tribulation in their Redeemer’s name” (D&C 138:13; emphasis added). President Smith then provides a partial list of prophets who had offered sacrifice in similitude of the Son of God. The list includes Adam, Abel, Seth, Noah, Shem, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Elias, Malachi, Elijah, “and many more” (D&C 138:38–49). From this we learn that starting with Adam, sacrifice has always been, and continues to be, intended as a similitude of the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

Elder Bruce R. McConkie wrote:

It follows that if we had sufficient insight, we would see in every gospel ordinance, in every rite that is part of revealed religion, in every performance commanded of God, in all things Deity gives his people, something that typifies the eternal ministry of the Eternal Christ. . . . Sacrifice is a similitude. It is performed to typify the . . . sacrifice of the Son of God. . . . After the final great sacrifice on the cross, the use for the similitude that looked forward to our Lord’s death ceased. Blood sacrifices became a thing of the past. New symbolisms, found in the sacrament of the Lord’s supper, were adopted so that the saints might look back with reverence and worship upon his atoning ordeal. . . . Symbolisms change but the principles are always the same.³⁹

Elder Bruce C. Hafen explained how one’s sacrifice of a broken heart and a contrite spirit is a type of Christ’s atoning sacrifice:

To lay claim to the Savior’s sacrifice, we, like Adam and Eve, must also obey and sacrifice. We must bring an offering that in some way approximates his own suffering—the sacrifice of a broken heart and a contrite spirit. . . . Elder James E. Talmage believed that the physiological cause of Christ’s death was, literally, a broken heart. This element in our Lord’s sacrifice suggests two differences between animal sacrifices and the sacrifice of a broken heart. First is the difference between offering one of our possessions, such as an animal, and offering our own hearts. Second, one who offers an unblemished animal, the firstling of a flock, acts in similitude of the *Father’s* sacrifice of his unblemished, firstborn Son. By contrast, one who offers his own broken heart acts in similitude of the *Son’s* terribly personal sacrifice of himself. Thus, the figurative breaking of our own hearts, represented by our repentance and our faithful endurance of the mortal crucible—our own taste of a bitter cup—is a self-sacrifice that mirrors the Savior’s own self-sacrifice.⁴⁰

The test of Abraham and Isaac found in Genesis 22, including the sacrifice of the ram caught in the thicket, serves as a type of the great and last sacrifice of Jesus Christ. All sacrifice should follow this model of pointing toward God, and drawing worshippers nearer to Him. God designed sacrifice to be a type, shadow, and similitude of the Father's great and last sacrifice of His Son and the infinite self-sacrifice offered by the Savior. In this light, true sacrifice will always yield deeper devotion to the Father and the Son because they are the true focal points of worship through sacrifice. **RE**

Notes

1. Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, trans. Mark E. Biddle (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 2:741–42.

2. Other biblical figures whose intentions were tested include Adam, Eve, Korah, Dathan, Abiram, Balaam, Job, and Hosea, to name a few.

3. Dallin H. Oaks, *Pure in Heart* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 59.

4. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1904), 5:555; see also Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 322.

5. This statement is John Taylor's recollection of instruction given by Joseph Smith (John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses* [Liverpool: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1966], 24:197).

6. Smith, *History of the Church*, 2:182.

7. David Noel Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), s.v. "Temple, Jerusalem."

8. Donald W. Parry, "Garden of Eden: Prototype Sanctuary," in *Temples of the Ancient World*, ed. Donald W. Parry (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994), 133.

9. David B. Galbraith, D. Kelly Ogden, and Andrew C. Skinner, *Jerusalem: The Eternal City* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1996), 69. The Psalms of Ascent were not limited to the tabernacle or temple. Certainly earnest believers in many time periods rehearsed or sang the lyrics of these psalms as they traveled to Jerusalem (a physical climb from any direction) for feasts and holy days. To be sure, the ascent may not have included a physical journey of any kind. One could ascend to the high places of the mind and spirit by rehearsing these passages to one's self in a spirit of contemplation.

10. Richard G. Oman, "Exterior Symbolism of the Salt Lake Temple: Reflecting the Faith That Called the Place into Being," *BYU Studies* 36, no. 4 (1996–97): 22.

11. David Noel Freedman, ed., *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), s.v. "Temple." See also John M. Lundquist, "What Is a Temple? A Preliminary Typology," in *Temples of the Ancient World*, ed. Donald W. Parry (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994), 83–117.

12. Parry, "Garden of Eden: Prototype Sanctuary," 133.

13. Not enough information is contained in the text of Genesis 22 to identify the exact location of Mount Moriah. However, long-standing traditions locate Moriah in Jerusalem and identify it with the mount upon which Solomon eventually constructed a temple. For a more detailed treatment of the location and significance of Moriah, including details regarding Abraham's three-day journey from Beersheba, see Galbraith, Ogden, and Skinner, *Jerusalem: The Eternal City*, 27–33. Not all biblical scholars agree that the location of Abraham's Moriah is the same as the mountaintop on which Solomon's temple was eventually built. For a treatment of alternative viewpoints, see Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, s.v. "Moriah."

14. Brigham Young, *The Discourses of Brigham Young*, comp. John A. Widtsoe (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1954), 410; emphasis added.

15. Gordon B. Hinckley, in Conference Report, October 1986, 53.

16. J. H. Kurtz, *Offerings, Sacrifices, and Worship in the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), 46; see also Alonzo Gaskill, *The Lost Language of Symbolism* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 49–50.

17. Hugh W. Nibley, "Abraham's Temple Drama," in *The Temple in Time and Eternity*, ed. Donald W. Parry and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999), 7.

18. Manahem Haran, *Temples and Temple-Service in Ancient Israel* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1985), 17; see also Joseph Fielding McConkie, *Gospel Symbolism* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 251.

19. Andrew C. Skinner, "Genesis 22: The Paradigm for True Sacrifice in Latter-day Israel," in *The Old Testament and the Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Randall Book, 1986), 77.

20. Bruce R. McConkie, *A New Witness for the articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 430–31.

21. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000), 136; see also G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 2:255–58.

22. Botterweck and Ringgren, *Theological Dictionary*, 2:255–58.

23. Botterweck and Ringgren, *Theological Dictionary*, 2:255–58; see also Victor L. Ludlow, "Covenant Teachings of the Scriptures," BYU devotional address, Provo, Utah, October 13, 1998.

24. Haran, *Temples and Temple-Service*, 17; see also McConkie, *Gospel Symbolism*, 251.

25. C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001), 1:95.

26. Joseph Smith, comp., *Lectures on Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1985), 69.

27. Joseph Fielding Smith, *The Way to Perfection* (Salt Lake City: The Genealogical Society of Utah, 1931), 23; emphasis added.

28. Neal A. Maxwell, in Conference Report, April 1995, 91.

29. Kurtz, *Offerings, Sacrifices, and Worship*, 60; emphasis in original.

30. Josephus, *Antiquities*, 1.13.1, in *Josephus: Complete Works*, trans. William Whiston (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1960).

31. Philo, *On Abraham*, 32:168, in *The Works of Philo*, trans. C. D. Yonge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000).

32. *Noah Webster's First Edition of an American Dictionary of the English Language*, 1828 ed., s.v. "oblation." See also Doctrine & Covenants 59:12, footnote b.
33. *Webster's First Edition*, s.v. "sacrament."
34. Russell M. Nelson, *The Power within Us* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 112–13.
35. Gordon B. Hinckley, in Conference Report, October 1985, 109.
36. Joseph Smith, *Teachings*, 58. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland commented, "As the Prophet Joseph taught us, we can rest assured that God was not interested in the death of innocent little animals—*unless* the meaning of those altars truly alters the nature of our lives" ("I Stand All Amazed," *Ensign*, August 1986, 70).
37. In defining "figure" in this verse from the Greek, Bauer uses the words *type* and *figure* interchangeably (see Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich [Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979], s.v. παραβολή).
38. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000), 244.
39. Bruce R. McConkie, *The Promised Messiah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 378–80, 386.
40. Bruce C. Hafen, *The Broken Heart* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 32.