

Know the Culture

By Eric Mitchell

Pre-Session Assignments

One week before the session, participants will take the following assignments.

Assignment One

Read Genesis 17:10-22. Prepare to share your answers to the following questions: How important is having a son and heir in Abraham's culture? To whom is God's blessing given?

Assignment Two

Read Genesis 13:2-5; 31:19, 34; 49:28; Exodus 8:25-27; 22:20; and Deuteronomy 32:21. Prepare to share your answers to the following questions: What type of culture is reflected in the lives and ways of the people of the Old Testament? Where and how did they live? How did they worship? What was their societal structure?

Assignment Three

Read 1 Samuel 15:22 and the comments related to Genesis 22:1-19 in the section **It's in the Book**. Prepare to share your answers to the following questions: How did ancient people view sacrifices? What do Abraham's statements in Genesis 22:5 and 8 indicate? What is more important to God than sacrifices? How do Old Testament sacrifices relate to the New Testament sacrifice of Christ?

Scripture to Memorize

"In your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice." Genesis 22:18

Session Goal

Consistent with God's Word and in the power of the Holy Spirit—by the end of this session, disciples will understand that we must interpret the speech and actions of Old Testament saints within the context of *their* culture—not ours.

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Eric has traveled to Israel seventeen times as well as to Jordan, Turkey, and Egypt. He currently teaches a young adult Sunday school class at Travis Avenue Baptist Church. He and his wife Nancy have been happily married for 27 years and have four children. He enjoys riding his bike, lifting weights, woodworking, and shooting guns. www.ericalanmitchell.com.

It's in the Book

30 minutes

Real-Life Scenario

Missionary Don Richardson faced challenges when presenting the gospel to the Sawi tribe of West Papua, Indonesia. He discovered that they were idealizing Judas as the treacherous hero of the story. Their culture praised the traits of deceitfulness and murder. Later, Don saw a man from one tribe present his baby son to be raised by another tribe to make peace between their two tribes. He then was able to connect the gospel to their culture. Don explained that Jesus was the “peace child” between God and man and that Judas had killed the peace child—a most treacherous act among the Sawi tribes. The gospel was accepted and spread among the Sawi. But what if Don had not considered the culture?

Introduction

Before we can understand and spread God’s message in the Bible, we must understand what it meant to the ancient believers so we can bridge its full message across time to our modern culture. When God communicated to the authors and audience of Scripture, He did so with actions, language, and symbols which *they* understood. It is important to learn the Old Testament culture in order to understand correctly what passages meant *to them* and best interpret Scripture.

Read Genesis 22:1-9 out loud.

Studying the Passage

Verse 1. God tested Abraham. Abraham was a monotheist (someone who believes in one god). He worshipped the one and only God through sacrificial offerings. Abraham came from a family-oriented, patriarchal (father-centered), tribal culture.

Verse 2. Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love. Isaac was not Abraham’s only son, but he was the only son through his wife Sarah. Ishmael was also Abraham’s son but through the servant Hagar. Therefore, Ishmael was not the son of promise.

Having a son was extremely important in ancient times. That son would be an heir, continue the lineage and take care of parents in their old age. God had miraculously provided Isaac as a son to Abraham and Sarah. **offer him . . . as a burnt offering.** But God asked Abraham to kill and burn his beloved son and heir, Isaac. What was going on?

Sacrifices were necessary because of sin. God was the first to kill an animal to atone for sin. Because of their sin, He used animal skins to make clothes to cover Adam and Eve’s nakedness. In the ancient Near East, a whole burnt offering was offered to atone for sin or invoke God’s presence. Israel was later required in the laws of Moses to kill or sacrifice any firstborn male of their flocks and to redeem (buy back) their own firstborn children from God.

Assignment One Feedback

The person who completed **Assignment One** during the week can now share answers to the following questions: How important is having a son and heir in Abraham’s culture? To whom is God’s blessing given?

Studying the Passage, Genesis 22:3

Verse 3. saddled his donkey. Abraham lived in tents and made a living as an owner and herder of sheep and cattle. He was more a sheikh than a simple shepherd, speaking many ancient languages and trading with different people groups. As he traveled, he often conversed with kings. **took two of his young men.** He had 318 men who were in born and raised in his camp (not to mention their wives and children; see Genesis 14). **burnt offering.** Normally an animal was sacrificed in this offering. Animals were capital goods and thus highly valued. They did not actually atone for sin, but were a shadow of the future sacrifice of Christ on the cross (see Hebrews 10).

Assignment Two Feedback

The person who completed **Assignment Two** during the week can now report on the type of culture reflected in the lives and ways of the people of the Old Testament.

Studying the Passage

Verse 3. So Abraham rose early. Abraham took the first steps of obedience. He took everything the sacrifice required.

Verses 5. I and the boy will... worship and come again to you. From Abraham's actions in verse 10, we know he fully intended to obey God and kill Isaac. However, from his statement about their "return," he fully believed Isaac would return with him *alive*. He was not lying to his servants; he had no need to. In ancient times the father, or patriarch, of a family was both lord and master of his entire family and his possessions. He could do with them as he wished.

Verses 8. God will provide. It was improper in ancient times to offer a sacrifice which cost the person nothing. A sacrifice was to be from the best, and firstborn, of one's possessions. This is what Abraham was bringing to God; both the best of his possessions (his beloved son Isaac) and the best of his worship (his obedience). When Abraham stated to Isaac that God would provide the lamb for the offering, he was likely thinking of Isaac. We learn that he was actually prophesying both of God's provision of the ram caught in the thicket (v.13) and ultimately God's provision of the future sacrifice of His own Son, Jesus Christ.

Assignment Three Feedback

The person who completed **Assignment Three** during the week can now report on what was discovered about sacrifices.

Studying the Passage

Verse 9. laid him on the altar. Abraham was most assuredly in anguish, but determined. God was more important to Abraham than his own son. In verse 10, he prepared to strike Isaac, but the Lord called to him.

Verse 12. do not... do anything to him. Remember, this was a test (v.1): either Abraham would fail at obedience (and not sacrifice Isaac), or he would succeed at obedience (and God would stop him). It was *never* God's plan for Abraham to go through with the sacrifice. **for now I know.** God knew beforehand what Abraham would do. Abraham "*believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness*" (Genesis 15:6). However, faith also requires action (see James 2). Abraham proved his faith in God through his steadfast obedience. This word for knowledge includes an experience of that knowledge.

Verse 17. Surely multiply your offspring. Because of Abraham's faith, God swore to bless Abraham and to multiply his descendants. **your offspring shall possess the**

gate of their enemies. Abraham's descendants were to be powerful and control their enemies' cities.

Verse 18. in your offspring. This singular descendant (or more correctly "seed") is Jesus Christ (see Galatians 3:16). God also did not withhold His own Son, the Lamb of God (John 1:29), but provided Him as a sacrifice to atone for the sin of the world. **shall all the nations of the earth be blessed.** This blessing will be through Jesus, the Messiah.

On Your Own

In the space below, write down which verses present the following biblical, cultural issues:

God testing:

The importance of a son/heir:

Sacrificial worship:

Covenant:

God blessing people:

God's promise of Messiah:

Discussion Questions

How different was the biblical culture from how we live today? How important was the Old Testament culture of sacrificial worship for New Testament believers? How does this inform us about the work of Christ on the cross?

Heart and Hands

8 minutes

Read again the **Real-Life Scenario** near the beginning of the lesson. Consider whether your answers have changed during the session.

Be silent for two or three minutes. Thank Jesus for His sacrifice and for the gospel. Adore Him for His glorious reign on the throne of heaven. Then ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to you:

1. A way the Scriptures you studied will change your heart for the glory of Christ.
2. Or a way those Scriptures will lead you to stop doing something for the glory of Christ.
3. Or a way those Scriptures will lead you to do something for the glory of Christ.

Write what the Spirit reveals to you below, and then be ready to share what you have written with the group.

Since Last Week

5 minutes

Grace-Filled Accountability

5 minutes

Planning for Evangelism, Missions, and Service

5 minutes

Prayer

7 minutes

At Home: Nail It Down

Most Scripture clearly communicates its main message when translated into our language. However, there are times when a better understanding of the culture (people, history, geography, ancient religions, languages, and archaeology/artifacts) within which the ancient Israelites interacted is helpful to explain the Scriptures today. These are things Old Testament believers understood which we may not understand. This is similar to teenagers' understanding of musical lyrics and slang which parents often do not understand. The culture and background can explain to us many of the truths in Scripture. Here are some examples:

1. How do the ten plagues judge all of the two thousand plus idols of Egypt (Exodus 12:12)? The plagues attacked idols by sphere of influence (Nile River, creatures in the Nile, flying things above, man, animals, crops, sky, and royal idols).
2. Why do Elimelech, Naomi and sons move 36 miles east from Bethlehem to Moab in a time of drought (Ruth 1)? There is normally more rain in Moab when drought falls on Judah.
3. Why can a woman pick up and throw a millstone in the Old Testament (Judges 9:53), but a millstone in the New Testament is described as a tool of heavy justice (judgment by drowning) if tied around one's neck and dropped into the sea (Matthew 18:6)? The Old Testament upper millstone weighs five pounds, while the New Testament millstone is hundreds of pounds.
4. How might it have been important to the Ninevites that Jonah was spit out of a fish's mouth? The Assyrians worshipped a fish-god idol.
5. Why does Jesus use the imagery of a camel passing through the eye of a needle (Luke 18:25)? Note: The small "eye of the needle" doorway in a city gate came centuries after Christ, so that particular explanation is incorrect. Here Jesus clearly shares a situation that is physically *impossible* but spiritually *possible* with God. He illustrates that *only God* can save the rich.

The cultural background of the Scriptures can be learned through two sources: (1) the Scriptures and (2) biblical background books like *Holman Bible Atlas*, *Peoples of the Old Testament World*, and *Life in Biblical Israel*.

Follow-up Question:

Is there a good Bible background resource that might be of help to you?

The Making Disciples curriculum is a gift from Southwestern Seminary to those who, for the glory of the Father and in the power of the Spirit, will spend a lifetime embracing the full supremacy of the Son, responding to His reign in all of life, inviting Christ to live His life through them, and joining Him in making disciples among all peoples.