



Relativism, Abraham and Isaac, Finding Jesus at Andrews

Can God communicate his truth across cultures so that "his people" can come to the understanding he desires, or is the latter less important than Christian community and a generalized faith?

The Danger of Relativism

IN JOHN BRUNT'S ARTICLE, "How My Mind Has Changed and Remained the Same with Regard to Biblical Interpretation" (summer 2006), I experienced the author's struggle between the opposites of "post-modern" relativism and the extreme literalism alleged to be the purview of Adventist fundamentalists. Apparently, Brunt has resolved this struggle; but he does not answer questions that remain in my mind.

True interpretation, he says, involves letting Bible text "function for us in the same way it functioned for the original hearers." Yet he also writes about sociocultural variability of interpretation and asserts that this process should evoke faith and form community.

Doesn't this train of reasoning open the possibility of another kind of relativism in the absence of discussion about truth? Can't a group's interpretation of Bible text(s) lead to "the possibility of distortion and misunderstanding," as it can in a more individualistic process?

If all interpretive processes

do is evoke faith and form community, aren't all religious communions on the same footing in regard to truth? Is biblical truth relative or absolute? Can God communicate his truth across cultures so that "his people" can come to the understanding he desires, or is the latter less important than Christian community and a generalized faith?

DEAN RILEY
via the Internet

THANK YOU for the opportunity to reply to Dean Riley's thoughtful letter. I agree wholeheartedly that there is the danger of relativism here. In fact, community can be demonic if it is the wrong kind of community. The faith that is evoked must be faith in Jesus Christ, a genuine trusting response to the grace of God, which he reveals. And the community that is formed must be the body of Jesus Christ as set forth in Scripture, not just any community. We still have the responsibility to interpret and evaluate the message of the Bible to see if our faith and community are consistent with it. My point is that this hap-

pens best not just by individual effort, but through worship and community as presented within Scripture.

JOHN BRUNT
Grand Terrace, Calif.

Abraham and Isaac

THE FOLLOWING WORDS are offered in response to several essays in the summer 2006 issue of *Spectrum*. I know that others will resolve perceived conflicts between texts differently, but I find in the story of Abraham's attempted sacrifice of Isaac evidence that God is compassionate and that he provides us with lessons from which we can learn.

The story of Abraham and Isaac has always troubled me. One of my first memories was of repulsion at the thought of anyone intentionally killing someone else. Pictures of a kind-faced gentleman in a robe standing over a bound boy on an alter didn't ease my repulsion because the apparent peacefulness of the scene was incompatible with the stress that must have existed.

When I became older, my focus turned from thinking about Abraham's attempt to

kill Isaac to thoughts about God. I wondered why God would first command people not to kill others, then tell Abraham to kill his son, for whom he had waited almost one hundred years.

The text says, "God said, 'Take your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering'" (Gen. 22:2). I wondered if it could be read in some other way than the obvious, yet the meaning seemed clear. Hebrews 11 lists three actions that demonstrated Abraham's faith, the third being his offering of Isaac. In addition, the book of James offers Abraham's experience with Isaac as evidence that faith changes a person and that change will be reflected in the actions that follow (James 2:21–24).

Abraham was called the Friend of God (2 Chron. 20:7; Isa 41:8; James 2:23), servant of God (Gen. 26:24; Ps. 10:9), and Father of Israel (Exod. 3:15; Isa. 51:2; Matt. 3:9). Abraham had a covenant relationship with the Lord; he would be the father of many nations. I also find it remarkable that the true God is identified as "the God of Abraham" (Exod. 3:6, 15, 16).

The only other incident of child sacrifice that I know being portrayed favorably in the Bible is the story of Jephthah (Judg. 11:30–40), who promised the Lord, "whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the Lord's, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering" (Judg. 11:31). When Jephthah returned home to Mizpah, who should come out to meet him but his daughter?

As in the case of Abraham and Isaac, this episode seems to have had the Lord's blessing. Samuel mentions

this story in his farewell speech as an example of the Lord's deliverance of Israel from their enemies, and Hebrews 11 includes Jephthah among the people of faith.

Although God commanded the Israelites not to practice child sacrifice (Deut. 18:9), some did it anyway (2 Kings 16:3, 21:6; Jer. 7:30–33, 19:5; 32:35). The practices of the people who lived around the Israelites—not the example of Abraham—were given as the reason. Micah suggests that child sacrifices were considered acts of devotion, but he also says, "What does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:6–8).

I believe that Abraham was aware of others who had offered children as sacrifices, and that Isaac was by far his most prized possession. I have also concluded that Abraham offered his son as a sacrifice either because of influences from others around him or because he thought God had asked him to do it. Either way, God didn't condemn him, but instead blessed him and provided an appropriate sacrifice—a ram.

For me, the picture of God has changed from a being whose requests might be repulsive, to someone who can bless me even when I do things contrary to his principles.

RON RITTER
via the Internet

Finding Jesus at Andrews

ALTHOUGH I WAS a student at the Andrews University Seventh-day Adventist Theological about the same time as Richard Davidson (1968–70), my experience there was as positive as his was apparently neg-

ative (Davidson, "The Authority of Scripture: A Personal Scripture," *Spectrum* 34.3 (summer 2006):39–45).

I learned much from each of my teachers even though their approaches varied according to their differing backgrounds, personalities, and theological priorities. Several took a personal interest in me that went far beyond normal expectations. This is why I remember them with particular vividness and gratitude.

I do not recall any of my teachers at Andrews University endorsing the historical/critical method as Davidson summarizes it from the writings of others. Although I was required to know about it, I do not remember being asked to cast a vote in the debate between a "descriptive" approach to Scripture and a "confessional" one.

The legitimate point of Harvard's Krister Stendahl was that it is one thing to study what a portion of Scripture might have meant in the past and another to ponder what it might also mean in the present. Years later, I told Professor Stendahl, a tall and dignified Swede with a distressingly rigid back, that he was one of the reasons my second son's first name is "Krister." He was pleased!

Davidson depicts his theological journey as a line that moves from faith through doubt and back to faith. I think of my sojourn as a series of concentric circles that constantly increase in size and number without losing their center. This center is God's love as manifest most clearly in Jesus Christ. I am thankful that my teachers at Andrews University helped me to develop several new orbs!

DAVID R. LARSON
Loma Linda, Calif.