

TESTAMENT

Writer Douglas Rushkoff explores and explains the hidden meanings and Biblical mysteries that form the basis for his widely acclaimed series, TESTAMENT.

These notes cover TESTAMENT VOLUME ONE: AKEDAH. Notes to Volume Two, WEST OF EDEN, will appear in the published book, as well as on line at www.dccomics.com/redirect/?6537.

Arc One: Akedah.
The Story of Abraham of Ur



Chapter One: (#1)

We open on the scene of Abraham, patriarch of the Hebrews, waking his 14-year-old son, Isaac. Most of us know the basics: God has called upon Abraham to sacrifice his favorite son (Genesis 22:2), but it turns out to be a test. God sends an angel to stay Abraham's hand, and they sacrifice a ram instead. (Gen. 22:13)

But there's a whole lot more to the story. First off, Isaac was something of a miraculous birth, to say the least. Abraham's first wife, Sarah, had proven infertile right up until she was in her 90's. She even allowed Abraham to have a son (Ishmael) with her servant, Hagar.

All this changes after Abraham accepts three "men" as guests to his tent (Gen. 18:3). Now these aren't just ordinary men, as most Biblical scholars have concluded, but angels (or, according to more "new age" sources, possibly our alien co-inhabitants of the earth at that point, the Nephalim). In any case, Abraham - recognizing their importance - orders Sarah to bake up some "cakes" and tend to the guests. (Gen. 18:6) For the original hearers of Torah (the first five books of the Bible, of which Genesis is the first),

somewhere around the 6th Century BCE, the meaning would have been quite clear: Sarah was a priestess of Canaan, and the cakes she baked were part of her sacred fertility rites.

Shortly later, the angels ask Abraham where Sarah is. "There, in the tent," directs Abraham. "I will return to you next year, and your wife Sarah shall have a son!" informs one of the angels on departing. Sarah laughs out loud - then lies, saying she didn't laugh. (Gen. 18, 9-15.)

So, what happened in the tent between Sarah and angels? What did this priestess - a Canaanite temple priestess - do after making her pagan offerings? We can't know for sure, but we do know it resulted in the son that her visitors promised. Some rabbis and scholars have speculated that Isaac's father - and thus the genuine Jewish patriarchal line - was one of these angels, which could explain Abraham's somewhat conflicted relationship to his blessed son. Whatever the case, we can be sure that the story intends us to consider the divine intervention required for the Israelite line to begin.

Sarah gives birth to Isaac, and Abraham circumcises the boy at eight days, just as his God commanded him to do for Ishmael. Concerned for her son's endowment, Sarah then insists that Abraham banish Hagar and her son Ishmael from the camp. (Gen. 21:11) Assured by God that Ishmael will one day father a nation of his own, Abraham agrees to send Hagar and Ishmael off to Arabia, and his lineage - according to most biographies of the era - included the prophet Mohammad.

Although the Bible makes no mention of Sarah's reaction to Abraham's intention to sacrifice her Isaac, we can only assume that when Abraham trots Isaac off to Mount Moriah, she knows what he intends to do up there. For, unknown to most casual readers of the Bible, child sacrifice was more than just common: it was the norm. Men of Canaan, in particular, sacrificed their first-born sons to the god Moloch, as a way of appeasing the ever-chaotic forces of nature. It was believed if you pay Moloch his due, you could at least control the inevitable losses that life would bring.

In fact, (see Jon D. Levenson's scholarly work, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity*) the Israelites returned to the practice of child sacrifice at many of the more chaotic moments in their own history. Archaeological remains of the altars on which these heinous deeds were committed still exist today.

Now Abraham should have been above all this - especially since he had already been instructed by God to substitute the more ritualistic practice of circumcision for child sacrifice back in Genesis 17 (line 11). For this kinder, gentler God, a

piece of foreskin was all that was required. It was a new kind of deal - a contract, really - where Abraham's line through an as-yet unconceived Isaac would be exalted forever, as long as his sons thereafter were circumcised.

That's why I've rendered Abraham's servants so confused at his decision to bring Isaac up to Mount Moriah. He's already been through this, and has already accepted his God's new deal. And even though God's order to Abraham is framed as a "test," (Gen. 22, 1) I think the real test here is not whether Abraham is willing to listen to God's commands - but whether he is really able to leave his old ways behind.

Thus, we see not the Bible's God himself, but the Canaanite god Moloch ordering Abraham to carry out this deed. For it is he who would most benefit from the sacrifice of another child to his fiery altar. Moloch's power is dependent on the sacrificed flesh of children.

In a sense, the Bible can be understood as the chronicle of humankind's changing relationship to God. God starts out demanding child sacrifice, then proves satisfied with some foreskin and the occasional animal sacrifice. Thanks to later prophets and the destruction of the Temple, we learn that God is actually satisfied by prayers of devotion - that he be internally experienced. And finally, through the book of laws and ethics known as Talmud, God is to be acknowledged through acts of kindness and social justice. God quite literally leaves the stage.

It is a leap of sorts to portray Moloch as ordering the sacrifice, but one absolutely consistent with how such actions would have been understood by the Torah's original intended audience.

In this very first chapter, we're also introduced to two other gods, and by watching their behaviors along with Moloch's, we learn something of the rules of the comic book, itself. While linear action - whether modern or Biblical - occurs within the panels, the gods themselves exist entirely outside the panels. They may cross into a frame, but then only as an element - such as fire, wind, or perhaps an emotional wave such as anger or lust. Moloch's finger lights the flame atop Mount Moriah, just as Melchizedek's breath allows a ram to speak to Abraham.

Astarte, the Persian fertility goddess, is introduced early in the saga - for, as we'll soon see, it is the female archetype that was both intentionally and unintentionally repressed by the writers of the Bible, who sought to extinguish what they saw as the dangerous practices of the fertility cults. Unfortunately, they may have thrown out the baby with the bathwater.

Of all the goddesses, Astarte does show up the most - whether referred to directly or incorporated into Hebrew characters such as Esther, so it's only fitting that she represent the feminine energy in the god realm.

As for Melchizedek, whose name means "my king is righteous", he is believed to have been an instructor of Abraham's, and of some prophetic or even angelic origin. (See the Midrash commentary, Genesis Rabba 43:6) Called "priest of the most high God" in Genesis (14:18), he seemed an appropriate representative for the "one true God" in the Bible, who has no name, face, or other identifiable existence. For our purposes, the "God" Melchizedek speaks about doesn't necessarily need to exist - and is even called into question by Astarte and Moloch, his adversaries from the pre-Judaic cults.

The parallel action at the end of the first chapter, where Abraham initiates the sacrifice of his son to the fires of Moloch, while Alan Stern sacrifices Jake to the RFID-enforced draft, seems obvious to me - but I might as well spell it out, here. Both sacrifices are interrupted by Melchizedek, who provides animals (a ram and the dog Bucky) as substitutes.

Also in this chapter, for reasons that haven't yet been disclosed, Dinah and her cohorts have discovered a method for penetrating the confines of the panels, and venturing out into the "godspace" beyond their own temporal experience of reality. Although they don't have the tools to interpret this experience, Jake and Dinah see the new, timeless perspectives on the story in which they are participating, as well as its analog in Bible narrative. They can sense, but can't yet see, the goddess into whose realm they have slipped.



Chapter Two. (#2)

We come upon Abraham at a point later in our own story, but actually earlier in the book of Genesis (18:23). Such liberties with chronology don't bother me, since the Bible doesn't really treat time the same way as a modern book might. Events resonate with one another as part of a whole work, and aren't to be understood as a chronicle of history as much as a song or even a fractal. Each part reflects every other.

In fact, this is the moment just after the angels leave Abraham and Sarah, promising that she'll soon bear a son. They have also

informed Abraham that the sinful towns of Sodom and Gomorrah will be wiped away. This concerns Abraham, whose nephew Lot lives down in Sodom. So, in the character of a man who has already negotiated one contract with his God, Abraham attempts to negotiate on behalf of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. God finally agrees that if there are but ten "innocent" people to be found, he'll spare the cities.

Meanwhile, the angels have gone down to Sodom to test Abraham's nephew Lot the same way. (Here, Lot is played by Jake - while Jake played Isaac in Chapter One. This isn't intended to confuse the readers as much as to demonstrate that there isn't a one-to-one correspondence of Bible characters to our modern characters. Indeed, the whole point is that the Bible stories contain dynamics that underly all of our experiences. Any Bible character's story applies to each of us at one time or another.)

Lot makes the same initial offer of hospitality to the "stranger" that his uncle Abraham did. (Gen 19:3) (For space, I've condensed the three angels down to one stranger - played by Tyrone who we'll soon meet). But the angels understand that this is not customary in the rather sick town of Sodom. For, there's no nice way to say this, but strangers in Sodom - much like fresh meat in a bad prison - were to be subjected to ritualistic hazing by the townsfolk, and not taken in as guests. It was against the town's rules to provide a stranger refuge.

Lot demonstrates his heroism by agreeing to host the Stranger, but goes a step further when the townspeople realize what he's done. "All the people to the last man gathered about the house. And they shouted to Lot and said to him, 'Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may be intimate with them.'" (Gen. 19:4) I kid you not. So what does Lot do? He begs them to do no such thing, and then offers two of his daughters "who have not known a man. Let me bring them out to you and you may do to them as you please." (Gen 19:9)

The Stranger strikes the Sodomites down with "blinding light" before they have a chance to take Lot up on his offer, then rewards Lot with passage out of town before it is to be destroyed in fire. Oddly, perhaps, he instructs them "Flee for your life! Do not look behind you!" (Gen 19:16) In other words, just don't look back. I added the bit about not judging Lot too harshly, as a way of incorporating a few centuries of apologetic justifications by rabbis throughout history for Lot's willingness to throw his daughters to the mob.

Of course, while running from the burning city, Lot's wife looks back and is turned into a pillar of salt (Gen. 19:26), while in our story, Miriam's concern for her fellow protesters leaves her vulnerable to the shock of her RFID tag.

Melchizedek seems to imply that both Miriam and Lot's wife's sad fates had more to do with making themselves unnecessarily vulnerable than simply not following instructions. And Moloch is left to voice the concern of any thinking Bible reader at this point: why kill the virtuous over a petty transgression like this?



Chapter Three (#3)

Widower Lot (played by Jake) and his two remaining daughters (played by Kat and Jake's young former pupil Dinah) have fled to a cave, where they live isolated from all other people. The last few paragraphs of Genesis 19 tell the story of how the older of the two decides that in order to continue their father's line, they will have to bear his children. They get him drunk, and the older daughter sleeps with him. The next day, with a little cajoling from her sister, the younger agrees to do it, too.

The plot point of plying Lot with wine is meant, surely, to convey to the hearers that Lot was not completely responsible for his actions. We can't know for sure what the Bible thinks of all

this - the language in this section is suspiciously direct. But the daughters are never named, which is usually a sign of disapproval - as if they've been deleted from the credits.

We do have reason enough to believe that - at least before Sodom really went to hell - these two could well have been Temple Priestesses (sacred prostitutes). We learned earlier that these two were virgins - which could just as easily mean vestal virgins, who would be the only ones permitted to perform the sacred sex rites of the cults to which they must have belonged. Their isolation would thus be cutting them off from the "spiritual energy" they were used to working with - how to conduct a fertility ritual with no seed?

The girls justify the action, twice saying "that we may maintain life through our father." They are not condemned, of course, because they end up carrying the Moabite line - who will prove crucial in maintaining the fertility of the Israelites (King David himself was a descendent of the Moabites). In fact, Biblical heroine Ruth is among the Moabites who later convert to Judaism in order to provide fertile wombs when none could be found. It's as if the Bible understands that the taboo nature of the fertility cults - and incest is about as taboo as you can get -

must be preserved in some form for the story to continue.



Chapter Four (#4)

The Bible shifts between family sagas and near-global conflicts as deftly as any TV miniseries. Except in the Bible's case, the larger story always reflects aspects of the subplots it contains.

Again, I've taken liberties with the timeline. In the Bible, most of this action occurs earlier than Sodom and Gomorrah, when Abraham (then known as Abram) was still a respected mercenary soldier. To keep things less confusing - and a better parallel to Alan Stern's story of mid-life redemption - I've set this later in Abraham's career.

We come upon an older Abraham - essentially a prophet in his own right, at this point - tending to sheep in what appears to be his retirement. Along comes the Stranger, who only Abraham can see. We learn just a tidbit of the larger war story - basically that Lot now lives amongst the people of the Valley of Siddim (Genesis 14:4), a strategic location both militarily and economically. They are a vassal state under the rule of King Cherdorlaomer the Edomite, (played by Green) who in turn reports to King Khammu-Rabi, King of all Babylonia.

Eventually, the people of the valley rebelled (Gen. 14:4), which in this context means refusing to pay tax - or, in other words, to respect the King's coin as the true and only "coin of the realm." Of course, this comes in handy for the modern story I'm telling about a man (Fallow) who intends to rule the world by controlling its one currency. Khammu-Rabi (played by Fallow) sends Cherdorlaomer (Green) with an army of giants (modern military robots) to quell the resistance.

The Valley of Siddim was dotted with "bitumen pits" (Gen 14:10) which were used hiding places and for surprise attacks. Nonetheless, Lot and his family are taken captive. As far as we know in the Bible itself, Abraham went with his kinsmen, defeated the army of giants, and set his nephew free.

But giants? Who are these Anakim (and Rephaim) of which the Bible speaks? Servants of Ishtar - Babylonian for Astarte - mythology holds they worshipped her at the full moon. Khammu-Rabi has managed to enlist them in his cause, most likely through magical manipulation. And the giant's divided allegiance makes them vulnerable.

At least this far into our saga, the gods divide predictably along party lines. I've presented Melchizedek as the sole representative of the "good" side, to lead readers to believe (as Biblical characters and readers did) that such angels were not characters, themselves, but aspects of God. In Torah, when a character is labeled as an angel or a messenger of God, he was generally regarded by the hearers as God himself.

Of course, in Testament, this will turn out to be a ruse. Angels - and even the gods in this saga - are not the "One True God," but competing or sometimes allying god forms, whose own existence must also be called into question.



Chapter Five (#5)

Melchizedek finally has some allies - but not without a cost. Readers should by now understand that this alliance of "good" gods means Melchizedek isn't the Lord God at all, but an angel or demi-god attempting to defend and promote the Bible's God and truth.

I've added Bible prophet Elijah as a main companion to Melchizedek. Elijah is the one person the Bible claims survived his own death (2Kings 2:11), and thus qualifies for existence beyond the panels - at least in my book. The fact that his name means "my God is the Lord" also made him a perfect candidate to support the case for the One True God argued by Melchizedek.

Melchizedek's second ally is Krishna of India, a foreigner to these stories - as least as far as most readers are concerned - and the proponent of an entirely different tradition. This gives him the freedom to be a bit glib about the goings-on here. While his addition as the third member of the "good god" trio may seem random to the casual reader, as far as Biblical history is concerned, there is little doubt that prophets as early as Isaiah traveled to India, learned the Upanishads

(Vedic texts written by the sage of India between the 8th and 4th Centuries, BCE), and then carried these insights back home with them. Consider remarkably unprecedented proclamations of the prophets Amos and Isaiah, in particular, who argued that God despises outward demonstrations of devotion - such as festivals and sacrifices - and prefers to be understood from the inside out.

This idea of an internalized God was lifted directly from the Upanishads' concept of Atman, an internal manifestation of the most infinite divine energy. The difference in approach between the Upanishads and Bible is significant: while the Bible demands that all other gods and intermediaries be eliminated as false idols, the Upanishads understand that old habits die hard, and permits that people worship their own local gods...as long as they understand that the spirit of Atman animates them all. (See Karen Armstrong, *The History of God*, for more on the integration of the Vedic traditions into Judaism and the Bible.)

Meanwhile, Atum-Ra, the Egyptian creation god, joins Moloch and Astarte. The battle lines are drawn between the monotheists and their polytheistic counterparts. But the conversation between them essentially gives the whole of Testament away: without the story, the monotheists are lost. And without active worshippers, the polytheist deities cease to exist. Atum-Ra is most worried of the three, because he requires expressive ritual, while Astarte and Moloch have each aligned themselves strongly enough with a basic human energy - sex or violence - to maintain their existences as more widespread archetypes.

The Bible doesn't say a lot about how Abram defeats the giants, so I imagined how such a battle might have taken place - especially given Abram's comments afterwards, and Melchizedek's mysterious appearance in the Bible at that point, with bread, wine, and a blessing. (Gen. 14:18).

The Bible does imply, however, that Abram's victory was a direct result of his intention. While he fought as a mercenary in the past, this time he fights for the love of his family and his God. He refuses the customary "spoils" of victory: "I swear to the Lord, God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth: I will not take so much as a thread or a sandal strap of what is yours; you shall not say, 'It is I who made Abram rich.'" (Gen. 14: 22-23). Unlike the Anakim, who have been persuaded to turn from their own god Astarte (or at least divide their allegiance) to fight for Cherdolaomer and Khammu-Rabi, Abram and his soldiers refuse to sell out their true divine benefactor - or, more importantly in my opinion, on their deeper intention of saving their friends.

Likewise, the soldiers fighting on Green and Fallow's behalf from within their robot suits have no way of controlling these devices. We are, perhaps, surprised to learn that Alan has "made" these robots; was he that involved with the

military? (In the next arc, we will learn that Alan has been working with emergent languages and AI life forms from the beginning - and that he was slowly drawn into service of the military as his ambition blinded his better judgment.) It is Alan Stern who is in a unique position to re-activate the robots' original "swarm" programs - more deeply encoded than the "fail safe" measures later installed. They return to their true natures.

Both Alan and Abram revisit the best and worst aspects of their military careers - and have the opportunity to revise their relationship to war by updating their formerly mercenary intentions with good ones. In short, they each sold out their strength to the military; by risking everything on this rescue mission - with everything to lose and no expectation of financial reward - they become heroes, and redeem themselves.

Cherdolaomer returns to Khammu-Rabi, defeated. Though the Valley of Siddim is lost, the reign of Khammu-Rabi is hardly over. Over the next centuries, the Israelites may regain control of Canaan, but their entire nation is exiled to Babylonia under the very same dynasty. I chose to make Khammu-Rabi a true believer in the Babylonian gods and rituals, and recreated a sacred sex rite suitable for a high king. These rituals - like Dinah's psychedelics-induced excursions through the networked isolation tank - bring Khammu-Rabi beyond the confines of temporal reality (represented by the panels) and permit him to penetrate godspace.

Khammu-Rabi's modern equivalent, Fallow, uses more modern means to escape the confines of time - the injection of a drug (which we later learn is an isolate of the nano-technology version of the Artificial Intelligence stolen from Alan Stern back in France). But he - and the gods - are clearly unprepared for direct visitation by a modern human. He doesn't even know who he is confronting.

By the end of the Akedah arc, we and the gods witness the first major corruption of the Bible's narrative: while Lot's wife was turned into a pillar of salt forever, Miriam is deprogrammed. She recovers from the effects of the psychological programming, and commits to playing a part in the story.

Before Melchizedek has a chance to celebrate the story's new possibilities with Miriam a survivor, Astarte interjects in her own way - through the media - where we now learn Jake is a fugitive.