

# English Language resources: Bible texts analysis – Genesis 22: 1-18

### **Textual analysis of a passage from two versions of the Bible**

**Text A** is the *King James Bible* translation of Genesis 22:1-18. The *King James Bible (KJB)* was first translated in 1611 but was revised in 1769. This is the version in general use today.

**Text B** is the *Good News Bible* translation of the same text. The *Good News Bible* is a modern paraphrase of the Bible first published in 1976.

This is an analysis of the two texts showing the ways in which language has changed over time.

### **Audience**

The audience can be considered on three levels:

- ❖ Since Genesis 22:1-18 comes from the Old Testament of the Bible, its original audience was pre-Christian. One of the earliest sections of the Bible (probably written down over 1,400 years before Christ), it was part of Jewish scripture. It provides an account of God's creation of a 'chosen people' which places Jewish ancestors at the centre of the narrative and in a special relationship with him. These stories would have been passed down through the ages in the oral tradition, before being written down some centuries later.
- ❖ The *KJB* audience was a Christian society with limited access to the Bible until the *KJB* appeared in 1611. The translation maintains ceremony and tradition in the translation. It was used in church but, increasingly, families and individuals with growing literacy had access to the text. Owning a family Bible was a matter of prestige and made possible by the affordability of texts owing to the advent of the

printing press. The *KJB* was produced in order to give an authoritative translation acceptable to majority of churchgoers during a time of religious conflict. (See <http://www.crossref-it.info/articles/71/English-Bible-Translations> > An authoritative state Bible)

- ❖ There is a wide modern-day audience for the *Good News Bible*. The *GNB* version is deliberately more straightforward than more traditional translations, thereby widening its potential audience. The translation of the *GNB* was undertaken by American scholars and aimed at an American audience. (See <http://www.crossref-it.info/articles/71/English-Bible-Translations> > Biblical translation and language change > The Good News Bible 1976 > Context).

### **Purpose**

This is a multi-purpose text.

It is informational. We see this in the use of names including the place name Jehovahjireh in the *KJB* which is translated as 'The Lord Provides' in the *GNB*. The narrative of events gives us important information about the foundations of both Judaism and Christianity.

Both text A and B are advisory with the important didactic purpose of showing the readers how to behave and how to relate to God's commands. We see this in the *KJB* in the use of grammar with the imperative verbs 'take' v.2 and 'lay' v.12. It is in the lexis with 'offering' and 'obey'. The *GNB* similarly uses imperatives e.g. 'take' v.2 and the lexis 'honor and obey' v.12.

Both texts present a dramatic narrative which would engage its audience with the characters involved, their dialogue and the sequence of events, and in that sense can be said to be entertaining. Universal images such as 'the stars of the heaven' and 'the sand which is upon the sea shore' are clear metaphors designed to be understood in explaining the scale of God's

# English Language resources: Bible texts analysis – Genesis 22: 1-18

blessing. They engage the hearer / reader, as does the use of patterning (e.g. such as v. 17).

### Content/genre

This is a sacred text, specifically from the Old Testament of the Bible. It is an important and well known story from Genesis, the first book of the Bible and features Abraham, the founder of Judaism. God tests Abraham's faith by asking him to sacrifice his son, before himself providing an alternative. Meanwhile, Abraham is rewarded for his fidelity by the promise that he will found an important dynasty.

Christians encountering this passage would have done so in the context of many sermons in which this narrative is regarded as a type or forerunner of the sacrifice of God's own son, Jesus.

### Discourse

Both texts have a third person impersonal narrator with an authoritative voice. This is linked to the idea that the narrator is omniscient and knows all that Abraham did and felt e.g. God did tempt Abraham

In both texts there is a linear narrative, which is particularly marked in the *KJB* by the use of the conjunction 'and' to join the narrative events together. Only two of the eighteen verses do not start with 'and'. It is a very prominent discourse marker, which gives a sense of time sequence. There is also the distinctive discourse marker 'And it came to pass' which indicates the beginning of the narrative. This is used extensively in the *KJB* indicating the passing of time; a new event. It also reflects the oral tradition of opening a story, much as in modern times we say 'Once upon a time'. The *GNB* uses 'Some time later', which has the same meaning but perhaps is not so memorable.

There is the use of repetition as a rhetorical device in v.17. The repetition

of 'thy son, thine only son' in verses 12 and 16 of the *KJB* acts as a memory prompt and a cohesive device for the whole text which links with 'thy son' v.2. The addition of 'only' in the repetition emphasises the sacrifice that Abraham is being asked to make.

The *GNB* also has a continuous narrative, but there is more variety of discourse markers to indicate narrative progress, with a similar emphasis on the passage of time e.g. 'Early next morning', and, 'When they came'.

### Graphology

*KJB* Text A is divided into chapters and verses with a new line for each verse. In the *GNB* Text B the verse numbers are still there but the text conforms to modern paragraphing conventions including a new paragraph for different speakers, which is much more clearly differentiated than in the *KJB*. Speech in the *KJB* is signalled by capitalisation in mid-sentence, as in v.5.

There is a typical use of an initial capital for 'God' and 'LORD' is written entirely in capitals in the *KJB*, a biblical convention for indicating the divine name of God which, according to the first of the Ten Commandments, must be accorded respect. However, the *GNB* just uses initial capitalisation.

The *GNB* also has a heading, which gives information about the content of the passage. This is typical of the more user-friendly approach of modern translations.

### Grammar

The *KJB* text has many marks of formality. In the *GNB* there is the loss of these discourse features:

- It is grammatically less formal having shorter sentences. In the *KJB* v.3 is all one sentence, while it has become two sentences in the *GNB*
- *GNB* uses the phrasal verbs 'spoke up' v.7, 'started out' v.3 and 'keep back' v.16
- There is the use of contraction 'Don't hurt' in v.12.

# English Language resources: Bible texts analysis – Genesis 22: 1-18

These are all features of informality.

There are archaic grammatical formations in the *KJB*. The syntax is often unfamiliar e.g. the word order in 'Take now thy son' v.2 where today the time adverb 'now' would precede the verb. 'Lay not thy hand' in v.12 would in Modern English use an auxiliary verb to emphasise the command: 'Do not lay your hand'. The *GNB* has standard modern word order saying 'Don't hurt the boy', with the additional informal feature of the contraction 'Don't'.

In Text A there is frequent use of the preposition 'unto' in v.1, v.11 and v. 12. This has been replaced in Modern English simply by 'to'.

The clearest example of grammatical forms no longer in use is the second person singular pronoun. In the *KJB* we see the use of 'thou' (the subject), 'thee' (the object), 'ye' (plural), all of which are rendered by an undifferentiated 'you' in the *GNB*, while the possessive 'thy' and 'thine' are replaced by 'your' and 'yours' in Modern English.

## Lexis

Both texts A and B contain the lexical fields of sacrifice e.g. 'burnt offering', 'knife', 'lamb', 'slay' (in *KJB*) and 'kill' (in *GNB*). The violent connotations of some of these words make the story more shocking, perhaps especially so to modern readers who are not familiar with such a culture.

There are many examples of archaic lexis in Text A (*KJB*) e.g. 'clave' v.3, 'yonder' v.5. In Text B (*GNB*) these have been replaced by the modern equivalents of 'cut' and 'over there'.

Although the *GNB* changes many words to make them more familiar to modern audiences it does maintain some traditional biblical lexis such as 'Angel of

the Lord' v.15 and 'burnt offering' v.13. This may well be to do with maintaining religious tradition with such well known phrases. With 'burnt offering', there is no real modern equivalent as this tradition of sacrifice no longer exists in Christian practice.

## Semantics

There has been semantic change involving some of the lexis. The *KJB* uses the word 'ass' while the *GNB* uses 'donkey'. Ass is still in use for the animal, but its more colloquial meaning is that of a stupid person.

Text A uses 'tempt' in verse 1, while the *GNB* uses 'test'. The word 'tempted' has narrowed in meaning to be used particularly in the context of enticing someone to do wrong. Although this sense certainly exists in the Bible, it is not what is meant here.

The *KJB* used 'seed' for descendants, whereas now seed is usually seen as agricultural lexis. However, it perhaps conveys the idea of the biological growth of the Jewish people from small beginnings, descending through Abraham's 'only son', Isaac.

There is the reference to possessing the 'gate of his enemies' in Text A v.17. This alludes to besieging a fortress, a metaphor which would still be familiar in the seventeenth century and makes the conflict of good /evil concrete and understandable. This reference has been removed in Text B and replaced with the more generic 'conquer their enemies'.

## Spelling/orthography

The *GNB* uses the American spelling 'honor' v.12 and gives a translation of the Hebrew term represented in the *KJB* as 'Jehovajireh'.

## Phonology

The use of patterning to make the *KJB* passage memorable would be an important phonological feature at a time when most people would hear it rather than read it.

# English Language resources: Bible texts analysis – Genesis 22: 1-18

The repetition of 'and' makes it quite straightforward in contrast to quite a shocking narrative. This could indicate that, for Abraham, obedience to God is straightforward and factual.

In v.17 there is further patterning with the repetition of 'blessing' / 'bless', and 'multiplying' / 'multiply'. God's general acts of blessing and multiplying are personalised to Abraham in the second mention of the verb.

The collection of sibilant words in the same voice – seed / stars / sand / sea / shore / seed – becomes poetic but could also intentionally recreate the sound of the sea.

## Concepts

In the *KJB* many of the verses start with 'And'. In modern texts 'And' is generally never used at the start of a paragraph and only rarely at the start of a sentence. It is not considered acceptable in formal writing any more.

This is an example of the impact of prescriptive grammar that started during the eighteenth century.

## Context

There is the reference to blood sacrifice, both animal and human, throughout both texts. This is obsolete in Christian culture, but reflects the standing of the Bible as a historical text.

The ideological impact of both the texts (*KJB* and *GNB*) is the Judeo/Christian value of absolute obedience to God. Abraham is tested by God and is rewarded for his unquestioning obedience in vv. 17 and 18. There is little difference between the two versions as they give the same events in the narrative. However, the sense in the *KJB* that the descendants of Abraham (the Jews and, ultimately, [Christ]) would be a source of blessing to the world, is diluted by the *GNB* version. The paraphrased v.18 indicates less inevitability in the spread of God's blessing, since it depends on the nations requesting it.

## Text A

### Genesis 22:1-18 KJB

<sup>1</sup>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.

<sup>2</sup>And he said, Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.

<sup>3</sup>And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son, and clave the wood for the burnt offering, and rose up, and went unto the place of which God had told him.

<sup>4</sup>Then on the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place afar off.

<sup>5</sup> And Abraham said unto his young men, Abide ye here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you.

<sup>6</sup> And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it upon Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife; and they went both of them together.

# English Language resources: Bible texts analysis – Genesis 22: 1-18

## English Language resources: Bible texts analysis – Genesis 22: 1-18

<sup>7</sup> And Isaac spake unto Abraham his father, and said, My father: and he said, Here am I, my son. And he said, Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?

<sup>8</sup> And Abraham said, My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering: so they went both of them together.

<sup>9</sup> And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood.

<sup>10</sup> And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son.

<sup>11</sup> And the angel of the LORD called unto him out of heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham: and he said, Here am I.

<sup>12</sup> And he said, Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me.

<sup>13</sup> And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold behind him a ram caught in a thicket by his horns: and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering in the stead of his son.

<sup>14</sup> And Abraham called the name of that place Jehovahjireh: as it is said to this day, In the mount of the LORD it shall be seen.

<sup>15</sup> And the angel of the LORD called unto Abraham out of heaven the second time,

<sup>16</sup> And said, By myself have I sworn, saith the LORD, for because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son:

<sup>17</sup> 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;

<sup>18</sup> And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice.

# English Language resources: Bible texts analysis – Genesis 22: 1-18

## Text B

### **Genesis 22:1-18 GNB**

#### **God Commands Abraham to Offer Isaac**

<sup>1</sup> Some time later God tested Abraham; he called to him, 'Abraham!' And Abraham answered, 'Yes, here I am!'

<sup>2</sup> 'Take your son, God said, 'your only son, Isaac, whom you love so much, and go to the land of Moriah. There on a mountain that I will show you, offer him as a sacrifice to me.'

<sup>3</sup> Early the next morning Abraham cut some wood for the sacrifice, loaded his donkey, and took Isaac and two servants with him. They started out for the place that God had told him about. <sup>4</sup> On the third day Abraham saw the place in the distance. <sup>5</sup> Then he said to the servants, 'Stay here with the donkey. The boy and I will go over there and worship, and then we will come back to you.'

<sup>6</sup> Abraham made Isaac carry the wood for the sacrifice, and he himself carried a knife and live coals for starting the fire. As they walked along together, <sup>7</sup> Isaac spoke up, 'Father!'

He answered, 'Yes, my son?'

Isaac asked, 'I see that you have the coals and the wood, but where is the lamb for the sacrifice?'

<sup>8</sup> Abraham answered, 'God himself will provide one.' And the two of them walked on together.

<sup>9</sup> When they came to the place which God had told him about, Abraham built an altar and arranged the wood on it. He tied up his son and placed him on the altar, on top of the wood. <sup>10</sup> Then he picked up the knife to kill him. <sup>11</sup> But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, 'Abraham, Abraham!'

He answered, 'Yes, here I am.'

<sup>12</sup> 'Don't hurt the boy or do anything to him,' he said. 'Now I know that you honor and obey God, because you have not kept back your only son from him.'

<sup>13</sup> Abraham looked around and saw a ram caught in a bush by its horns. He went and got it and offered it as a burnt offering instead of his son. <sup>14</sup> Abraham named that place 'The Lord Provides.' And even today people say, 'On the Lord's mountain he provides.'

<sup>15</sup> The angel of the Lord called to Abraham from heaven a second time, <sup>16</sup> 'I make a vow by my own name - the Lord is speaking - that I will richly bless you. Because you did this and did not keep back your only son from me, <sup>17</sup> I promise that I will give you as many descendants as there are stars in the sky or grains of sand along the seashore. Your descendants will conquer their enemies. <sup>18</sup> All the nations will ask me to bless them as I have blessed your descendants all because you obeyed my command.'