



But Where Is the Lamb?: Imagining the Story of Abraham and Isaac

James Goodman

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“I didn’t think he’d do it. I really didn’t think he would. I thought he’d say, whoa, hold on, wait a minute. We made a deal, remember, the land, the blessing, the nation, the descendants as numerous as the sands on the shore and the stars in the sky.”

So begins James Goodman’s original and urgent encounter with one of the most compelling and resonant stories ever told—God’s command to Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac.

A mere nineteen lines in the book of Genesis, it rests at the heart of the history, literature, theology, and sacred rituals of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. For more than two millennia, people throughout the world have grappled with the troubling questions about sacrifice, authority, obedience, and faith to which the story gives rise. Writing from the vantage of “a reader, a son, a Jew, a father, a skeptic, a historian, a lover of stories, and a writer,” Goodman gives us an enthralling narrative history that moves from its biblical origins to its place in the cultures and faiths of our time. He introduces us to the commentary of Second Temple sages, rabbis and priests of the late antiquity, and early Islamic exegetes (some of whom imagined that Ishmael was the nearly sacrificed son). He examines Syriac hymns (in which Sarah stars), Hebrew chronicles of the First Crusade (in which Isaac often dies), and medieval English mystery plays. He looks at the art of Europe’s golden age, the philosophy of Kant and Kierkegaard, and the panoply of twentieth-century interpretation, sacred and profane, including the work of Bob Dylan, Elie Wiesel, and A. B. Yehoshua. In illuminating how so many others have understood this story, Goodman tells a gripping and provocative story of his own.

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