

# As It Is Written

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What's in a word? In Genesis 22:2, God is universally quoted as commanding Abram to sacrifice his son. Here's a typical translation of the first part of the verse taken from the NAU:

*He said, "Take **now** your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac,*

Just for completeness, here is the Hebrew corresponding to verse fragment above,

וַיֹּאמֶר קַח-נָא אֶת-בְּנֶךְךָ אֶת-יְחִידְךָ אֲשֶׁר-אַהַבְתָּ אֶת-יִצְחָק

The highlighted words are the English and Hebrew equivalents of 'now'. We continue: In addition to the NAU, the NAS, and the KJV also include the word "now" in their translations. However, the NET, NIV, NLT, NRS, and the NIRV simply do not translate the Hebrew word נָא (*na*). Why do some Bibles translate *na* and others do not?

One answer seems to be that most translators understood the underlying Hebrew word *na* as an expression of time as, for example, when a mother calls her son to "Come here, now" or "Come here this instant". Understood this way, God is telling Abraham to drop everything, fetch Isaac, and to sacrifice him on some mountain. Since that is exactly what Abraham attempted to do, most translators understood *na* as temporal in nature; a moment in time and therefore redundant. After all, it's God speaking and there is nothing in the context to suggest that Abraham can sacrifice his son in his own good time.

But there's a bigger problem, here; one that almost all English translations get wrong. They either omit the translation of *na* or the mistranslate *na*. Young's Literal Translation (YLT<sup>1</sup>), however, gets it exactly right – not only does the YLT translate *na*, but its translation is correct. Again, here is the first part of 22:2 from the YLT:

*And He saith, 'Take, I pray thee, thy son, thine only one, whom thou hast loved, even Isaac,*

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<sup>1</sup> The YLT was first published in 1862. More information can be had here: [https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Young%27s\\_Literal\\_Translation](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Young%27s_Literal_Translation)

The problem with those English translations that translate *na* into *now* is that biblical Hebrew has a perfectly fine word that expresses ‘now’ as a moment in time, and that word is אַתָּה (*attah*). This word is almost never translated as anything other than the temporal *now*. So, when the divine authors intended to convey the meaning “*this instant*” they used *attah*. Indeed, to get a better idea of what the Bible’s authors meant to convey with these two words, we can look at verses in which *na* and *attah* are both present (some forty-one verses). In every one of these forty-one verses *na* is always (and correctly) translated as *please* or *I pray you*. In these same forty-one verses *attah* is always translated as *now*.

Now, for some statistics: the Hebrew word *na* is found 355 times in the Hebrew Bible. In the majority of cases its context suggests that a request or entreaty is being made. In these cases, the translators render *na* as ‘please’ or “*I pray*”. This occurs 194 times in both the NAU and NAS Bibles. However, when God speaks directly to a human (some 249 occurrences), the Hebrew word *na* never occurs (except in this verse, 22:2). Put another way, God never says *please* except here. So, here is my translation of the first part of 22:2:

*And God said, “Please, take your son, your only son ...”*

As you reflect on this verse (and its immense theological importance), include in your reflection the fact that this is the only place in the Bible where God (or Jesus) says *please*. Could the unique use of *please* have something to do with the horrific nature of the request? Or, perhaps Abraham’s assent was the actual test all along. What do you think?

Now, go and study