As It Is Written

In Genesis 22:2, God is universally quoted as <u>commanding</u> Abraham 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, …"*

In this translation, God instructs Abraham to drop everything and begin preparations for the sacrifice – hence the use of the word 'now'[1]. At the same time, other well-known Bibles do not translate the immediacy of God's instruction[2]. Here, for example, is the RSV's translation,

He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, …"

What's going on? Why do some Bibles include the word 'now' and others not? And is this even important? To answer these questions, we need first to examine the actual Hebrew text paying special attention to the Hebrew word colored red. Here it is:

וַיֹּאמֶר קַח־**נָא** אֶת־בִּנְךָ אֶת־יְחִידְךָ …

It turns out that those translators who omit 'now' from their translation chose to ignore the **נָא** (= 'na'). At the same time, those Bibles that express the verse's urgency translate '*na*' into 'now'. So, which version is correct – the verses that translate '*na*' or those that do not?

One possibility is that neither is correct. There is some justification for this view for two reasons: First 'na' is not normally (in fact, very rarely) translated as 'now'. Second, the justification for ignoring its presence – even if translated incorrectly – is problematic, if only because the author wrote the word in the first place. Translators should assume, in the absence of some evidence to the contrary, that each word written by the biblical author was for a purpose and ought not be ignored. So, let's dig a bit deeper and see what we can find.

It turns out that biblical Hebrew has a perfectly good word that expresses 'now' as a moment in time, and that word is עַתָּה (*attah*). The word *attah* is almost never translated as anything other than the temporal 'now'. Thus, if the author's intent was to show that God wanted Abraham to drop everything, he most likely would have written something like,

וַיֹּאמֶר קַח־**עַתָּה** אֶת־בִּנְךָ אֶת־יְחִידְךָ …

(Where *attah* (colored red) is used instead of 'na').

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[1] As do a number of other popular Bibles, for example, the NAS, KJV, NAU.
[2] The NRS, RSV, and RSV among others do not recognize the temporal aspect of this verse.

To get a better idea of what the author may have meant when he used 'na', we can examine verses in which both 'na' and 'attah' occur (some 41 verses). In all of these verses, *na* is translated as 'please' or "I pray you", while *attah* is always translated as 'now'.

Now, for some statistics: The Hebrew word *na* is found 355 times in the OT. 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 is quoted as speaking directly to a human (some 249 occurrences), the Hebrew word *na* never, ever occurs - except in this verse, 22:2! In other words, God never says please except in this verse in which He asks Abraham to sacrifice Isaac.

How do we explain this? Is God without tact? He surely doesn't need to say please, but doesn't common courtesy – simple kindness – mean anything to God? Let's look at a retranslation of the first part of 22:2 using 'please':

And God said, "Please, take your son, your only son …"

As you reflect on this verse (and its profound theological importance), include in your reflection the fact that this is the only place in the Bible where God (or Jesus for that matter) 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?

Now, go and study