

Restorative Thoughts on an Agonizing Text: Abraham's Binding of Isaac and the Horror on Mt. Moriah (Genesis 22): Part 2*

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THE STORY

Let us review the outline and substance of our story.⁶⁸ The Genesis narrator introduces the passage by indicating that a period of indeterminate time had elapsed after the covenant of Abraham and Abimelech in Beer-sheva in Genesis 21. The phrase, “some time afterward,”⁶⁹ serves to link Genesis 21 and 22,⁷⁰ but neither specifies a specific duration of the interval nor aids the reader in determining the age of either Isaac or Abraham.⁷¹ Clearly, Isaac has reached an age where he can walk and climb a mountain, where he can not only speak, but converse, and where he can carry firewood. This suggests that the story depicts him certainly not as an infant and probably not as a young boy,⁷² but more likely as at least a youth or adolescent (teenager),⁷³ if not a fully-grown adult,⁷⁴ counter to many popular _____

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artistic renderings. Isaac has the capacity to exercise some limited judgment if a youth and retains his full critical faculties if an adult.⁷⁵

The text then refers to God testing (hst = *nasah*) Abraham (v. 1).⁷⁶ In doing this, the author for the first time in the Torah explicitly places a person in the position of having to prove oneself. God expects Abraham to pass through an ordeal in which he will walk the right path.⁷⁷ Naturally, the reader knows the result, though Abraham operates without this foreknowledge, as the events of a terrifying mystery unfold.⁷⁸ God addresses Abraham once by name,⁷⁹ and Abraham (like Jacob, Moses, and Samuel) responds as the open vessel through whom God works, “Here I am” (hnh = *hinneni*).⁸⁰

Apparently at night,⁸¹ Abraham receives a dream, vision, and/or auditory revelation in which God commands him to take his beloved and favorite, son, Isaac, on a journey to Moriah where Abraham is (as he understands it) to sacrifice Isaac as a burnt offering on one of the mountain heights (v. 2). As some have noted,⁸² the Hebrew does not simply say “take” (j q = *qakh*), but adds the participle an (= *na’*) to the imperative form (anaj q = *qakh-na’*), which we can translate in more than one way: “Take”; “Please take”; “Take, I pray”; “Would you take”; “I ask you to take”; “I urge you to take”; etc. Following rabbinic authority in his commentary on the passage,⁸³ Rashi explains that *na’* does not indicate a command, but a “request” (hvQB = *baqqashah*).⁸⁴ As a result, the trial that Abraham undergoes involves real choices; his ordeal is genuine, based in “reality” (vMm = *mammash*), and is not a divine setup.⁸⁵ Theoretically, he could have declined the offer, though he ultimately chose to undertake the challenge.

The literary structure of God’s request consists of a dramatic buildup that culminates in the climactic mention of the name, “Isaac”: 1) “Take”; 2) “your son”; 3) “your only one” (or “your favored one”); 4) “Isaac whom you love.” By postponing reference to the name of Isaac, the text makes the reader wait in suspense before referring to him, thus allowing for the startling revelation that discloses Isaac as one of the main protagonists of the episode. And God’s words specify that the beloved and favored son is not Abraham’s eldest, Ishmael, but his youngest, Isaac. If we translate $\text{d} \text{d} \text{j} \text{j} \text{a} \text{t} \text{a}$ (*’et-y^ekhid^ekha*) as “your only one,” we not only further lower the value of Ishmael, but virtually nullify him out of existence. Right from the outset, the reader knows that there exists a hierarchy of value within Abraham’s family.⁸⁶

It is also noteworthy that the word, “love” (bhā = *’ahav*), occurs here for the first time in the Torah, describing Abraham’s love

for his son right before God ostensibly asks Abraham to sacrifice and kill him. The connection between love and possible violence therefore has its roots in the earliest sections of the biblical narrative. One further irony is salient: the object of violence is not the son with lower status (Ishmael), but the one having greatest familial prestige (Isaac).

Significantly, God does not give specific and detailed instructions. He does not explain how Abraham might identify the mountain, what sorts of preparation Abraham should make, the time of day for the sacrifice and other particulars concerning the sacrificial procedure, or the reasons for it. The narrator leaves the reader wondering how Abraham could embark on such a task given his lack of information. Perhaps we are to assume that the text omits some items or, more likely, that God expected Abraham to interpret the vision and fill in the details. As Sigmund Freud long ago observed, reconstruction of the specific elements of a dream involves a complex process of recall and interpretation.⁸⁷ From the very outset, God expects Abraham to use his intellect and wits to understand God's instructions, to interpret them correctly, and to carry them out accordingly.

The next morning Abraham arises, harnesses his ass, splits the wood for the burnt offering of Isaac, and takes two young male servants and Isaac with him on his journey to Moriah (v. 3).⁸⁸ In no way, does Abraham question God's request, nor does he doubt his own interpretation of God's language, nor does he relate the experience to any other associates or family, especially his wife, Sarah, or Isaac. Given that God's words came more in the form of a request than a command, and given the horrifying nature of the request, this is a rather surprising response (though similar to his behavior in Genesis 12) and might naturally lead a reader to question Abraham's motivations here.

While Abraham appears to have displayed no hesitation in his response to God, the language of the text suggests that God's frightening request had left Abraham overwhelmed, staggering, and confused. In a strange reversal of the expected order of preparations, Abraham split the wood only after harnessing the ass and summoning Isaac and his servants. Naturally, we would expect Abraham to have split the wood first. Here Genesis 22 suggests that Abraham felt the numbing pain of a parent facing the news of the impending death of a child.

On the third day of his journey, a time that must have engulfed Abraham with agony and grief,⁸⁹ he finally saw Moriah at a distance (v. 4),⁹⁰ though the text does not explain how he identified the mountain.⁹¹ In a section filled with the language of vision,⁹² the word for "seeing"

(*har*: = *ra'ah*) makes its first appearance in v. 4,⁹³ paralleling the frequent references to sight throughout the vision-filled book of Genesis.⁹⁴ Then Abraham explains to his two servants that they should wait for them with the ass and that he would ascend the mountain with the “youth (or “boy” or “young man,” namely Isaac),⁹⁵ “worship” or “bow low” together (presumably in association with the sacrifice of an animal, later identified as a ram),⁹⁶ and return afterwards (v. 5).

From the point of view of those readers who view God as omniscient, Abraham’s commitment to return shows that God knew all along that the sacrifice would not take place and that, at an unconscious level, Abraham knew this as well.⁹⁷ In this way, the story exists in parallel dimensions: that of the dramatic protagonists--Abraham and Isaac; of the all-seeing director--God; and of the observers--the knowing audience of readers and listeners.

In addition, the story here (and also in v. 14) refers to Moriah as *מִקְדָּם* (= *hammaqom*), “the place.” In the Bible, “place” can sometimes specifically refer to holy structures, for example the Temple,⁹⁸ and in rabbinic literature, it serves as another title (such as “Lord” and “Name”) to substitute for the actual name of God.⁹⁹ In Jewish tradition, the very word, “place,” therefore suggests sacrality and the presence of God.

Next, in mundane, matter-of-fact language, the passage describes an unnerving scene. After taking one of the sacrificial elements (the wood) and placing it on the person of his son, Isaac--a terrifyingly ironic act in which Isaac bears the fuel for his own apparent death to come--Abraham takes up the other slaughtering instruments, a firestone and knife.¹⁰⁰ Together, father and son ascend the mountain in hushed stillness (v. 6).¹⁰¹ Then Isaac breaks the silence, calling out to Abraham, “Father,” with Abraham replying, “Yes, my son” (v. 7). Here Abraham addresses his son as “my son,” just after he had referred to him as “the boy,” while speaking to his servants. For dramatic reasons, the narrator heightens the tension by personalizing the dialogue, which reminds readers of the intimate and affectionate relationship between father and son and stresses the poignant anguish of the moment.

Here the Hebrew word for “knife” or “cleaver,” *תְּלֶאֱפֵלֶת* (= *ma'akhelet*, which appears here in v. 6 and later in v. 10 right before Abraham is to slaughter Isaac) alludes both to the apparent imminent destruction of Isaac and to his last-second rescue. *Ma'akhelet* derives from the verb; *לָכַח* (= *'akhal*), “to eat,” but *'akhal* also means “to consume” and “to destroy,” is frequently used in concert with “fire” (as

here), and often refers to God's destruction of human beings, and occasionally of animal offerings.¹⁰² Thus, *ma'akhelet* suggests Abraham's intended sacrificial slaughter of Isaac. At the same time, *ma'akhelet*, sounds like מלאך (= *ma'lakh*), the "angel" (or "messenger") who stops Abraham from killing Isaac at the end of the story.¹⁰³ Thus, the Hebrew word for "knife" suggests both the readers' greatest fear and their fondest hope. These sound patterns also recall the strikingly powerful phrase at very the beginning of the episode, לך (= *Lekh-l'kha*), "Go forth," which God speaks to Abraham in v. 2.

More drama follows. Apparently in his own private (though restrained) suffering,¹⁰⁴ Isaac asks Abraham why the instruments of sacrifice are present (the firestone and wood), but not the actual sheep to be sacrificed. Abraham replies that God will "see to [provide] the sheep for the burnt offering, my son."¹⁰⁵ *Bereshit Rabbah* 56:4 observes that the reader can interpret the Hebrew of Abraham's reply in two ways: 1) "God will see to the sheep for the burnt offering [offering-up], my son"; or 2) "or, if not, the burnt offering will be **my son**." In his commentary on the Torah, Richard Elliott Friedman puts it this way: 1) "God will see to the sheep for the burnt offering, my son"; 2) "God will see to the sheep for the burnt offering: my son."¹⁰⁶ Given that the Hebrew has no punctuation, either reading is legitimate. In the latter instance, "my son" stands in apposition to "sheep": That is, Isaac ("my son") is the sheep! Therefore, the author shows Abraham speaking ambiguously here, which effectively highlights the anguish of the circumstances.

Further eliciting the emotions of the reader, the narrator concludes this section of the story with a simple and brief description of father and son, poignantly stating, "And the two of them walked on together" (v. 8):¹⁰⁷ two forlorn figures slowly treading to a destiny of anguish, while the readers await Isaac's rescue.

Instead of depicting a lively dialogue between father and son, the text leaves its readers in terrifying and ominous quiet with a spare description that forces us to contemplate the horror that the two protagonists expect to encounter. Except for the one brief conversation between Abraham and Isaac and Abraham's instructions to his servants, the narrator sets the journey to the mountaintop of Moriah in gloomy silence, with a lack of sentiment and passion, and with an economy of language that uses only the two names of Abraham and Isaac (not a mention of Sarah, Ishmael, or the names of the servants) and indulges in very few descriptive phrases.¹⁰⁸ Yet, the connotations of the words form a rich web of significance. As readers, we find

ourselves in the atmosphere of a dream, where the symbols refer to one another in mysterious and elusive ways, but without the noisy commentary of conscious, waking life.¹⁰⁹

So concludes the first half of the *Aqedah* episode directly prior to its climax. Characterized by Abraham's preparations for the sacrifice and by movement from one place to another (first from Beer-sheva to Mt. Moriah, and then from the foot of the mountain to its summit), this portion of the narrative in some sense serves as a commentary or midrash on God's command to Abraham, "Go forth" (לך לך = *Lekh-l'kha*) 22:2. This phrase appears only one other time in the Bible, in *Genesis* 12:1, when God commands Abraham to "**go forth** from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you."¹¹⁰ For Abraham and for his descendants, the people of Israel, **going forth** means moving from a position of comfort and stability (a settled life in their ancestral home) to one of transition and change, where, as Søren Kierkegaard puts it, "fear and trembling" lurk on all sides of our path.¹¹¹ Far from a vacation or a pleasant outing, the journey consists of an encounter with a God who is both profoundly terrifying and awe-inspiring.¹¹² In *Genesis* 22, we find ourselves in a world where some persons can avail themselves of God in the form of visions and dreams, but the narrator depicts this God as a force at once beneficent and solicitous, but also forbidding and perilous.

"To go forth" in Hebrew (from הלך = *halakh*) occurs frequently in Torah (especially in *Genesis*), with many meanings.¹¹³ They include (among a broad range of possibilities) "to go," "to come," "to walk," "to move," "to traverse," "to travel," and "to grow". Throughout the *Genesis* narrative, characters are walking from place to place. In the *Aqedah*, in v. 3 Abraham walks to Moriah, while in vv. 5, 6 and 8, Abraham and Isaac walk up the mountain. In v. 19, Abraham and his two servants walk back to Beer-sheva. In 15:2 Abraham describes life as a "walk" which concludes with death. In 17:1 God asks Abraham to "walk in my ways."¹¹⁴ In later Jewish thought, an important word arises from *halakh*, namely הלכה (*halakhah*), literally meaning "something to go by":¹¹⁵ in other words, rules, practices and customs. In a sense, the references to *halakh* in this narrative suggests from a historical perspective that the walk of Abraham and Isaac refers not simply to a single event, but to the voyages and journeys that the Jewish community has taken throughout its existence: the walks of our matriarchs and patriarchs, the walk in freedom out of Egypt, the walk in the wilderness, the walk to the promised land, the walk of rabbinic tradition and observance, the

walk into the diaspora, the walk out of Spain, the walks that many in Europe took to the *lagers*, the voyages that many of our families took to this country, and the walk on the road on which we currently travel. The journey in Genesis 22 can function as a metaphor for the experiences and travels of the Jewish people (and for others as well). The question remains: What kind of walk does Abraham take, and does he embark on it for the right reason? If not, how can we understand this story so that we can redirect our steps in the right direction?

Finally, the two hikers reach their destination (9a), and the story enters a new stage, as the verb *bo'* (אָב, "to come, to arrive") introduces the second section. Whereas the first half of the narrative focuses on movement from one place to another, the two protagonists now arrive at the site ("the place of which God had told them") where they plan to fulfill the divine request. The narrator refers to the location simply as "the place," without further detail. Frugal language, a marker of the entire story, especially characterizes vv. 9-10. A series of verbs and their direct objects (most with object markers) follows. There are no adverbs or adjectives, rather a series of unadorned, declarative statements that describe horrifying events in a dispassionate tone: reaching the summit; building an altar; laying out wood; binding Isaac; placing him on the altar above the wood; and picking up the knife to slaughter him. In rapid-fire succession, the narration builds the plot to a crescendo through a swift, stark sequence of actions initiated by Abraham.

Several words suggest the violence of the event presumed to come. The double reference to an "altar" (j Bḥi = *mizbeakh*) indicates an intended sacrifice (from the verb, j bʔ = *zavakh*, "to slaughter [as a sacrifice]"). For the only time in the Bible, the narrator uses the word that gives our passage its name: dqʔ (= *'aqad*), literally meaning in later Hebrew "to tie bent limbs together." That is, *'aqad* refers to the "binding" of the forelegs and hindlegs of a sacrificial animal,¹¹⁶ here Isaac. The "wood" (ʔ[ʔ = *'ets*) indicates the material used for burning the animal, while the "knife" specifies the instrument of slaughter. For the conclusion of this build-up, the narrator describes Abraham raising his hand with the knife. The author then uses the verb, fjv; (= *shakhat*), meaning "to slaughter" according to proper ritual rules--a term used in later Judaism for *kosher* butchering to indicate the slitting of the throat of an animal in a particular, swift way so that the blood drains immediately.¹¹⁷ The last word before the slaying speaks to the poignancy of the moment: ḥBj (= *b'no*, "his son"). Abraham does not

plan to sacrifice a typical animal, but a human being, his very own son.¹¹⁸

Finally, on the verge of this hideous act, an angel of the Lord halts Abraham by calling out Abraham's name twice and then ordering him not to raise his hand against his son. The angel explains that Abraham has shown his fear of God by not withholding his favored son.¹¹⁹

Describing the angel as speaking to Abraham from the "heavens" (שָׁמַיִם = *shamayim*), the text depicts angels as beings that dwell in the celestial sphere (the starry sky) and that can move between earth and heaven.¹²⁰ The angel repeats Abraham's name twice to which Abraham responds, "Here I am" (הִנְנִי = *hinneni*). This sets a pattern found in several later biblical passages where God speaks to individuals whom God favors and chooses to perform certain special tasks: Jacob, Moses, and Samuel.¹²¹ Each time God uses their double name, and they respond, "Here I am."

By stating "since you have not withheld your son . . . from Me," verse 12 also suggests a blurring between the identity of God and the angel. The reader cannot clearly distinguish between the two, a typical phenomenon in some biblical texts,¹²² suggesting the nature of God as both unitary and multitudinous, singular and plural. In turn, this ambiguous demarcation conveys a sense of the text itself as never fixed or certain. Like God whose identity always remains unclear and labile, interpreters can transform the text over time into new shapes in response to changing contexts. This observation may help readers to understand the angel who says in v. 12, now "**I** know that you fear God," implying that God learns as events unfold, responding to them as they occur. Like a text, God does not remain stationary or unresponsive to the efforts of human beings, but alters course in the ebb and flow of circumstances.

Significantly, not only does the angel ask Abraham to refrain from slaughtering Isaac, but the angel refers to Abraham's "hand" (יָד = *yad*), not his knife, and requests that Abraham not do "anything" (מְאִמָּה = *m'ummah*) further to Isaac. Why does the text mention Abraham's hand, when the knife apparently constitutes the real danger? What does the angel mean when it refers to other possible actions that Abraham might perform on Isaac? The story seems to suggest that Abraham has more in mind than cutting the throat of his sacrificial victim. According to *Genesis Rabbah* 56:7, God's tears had melted away the knife, and Abraham, fearing that he could not slaughter Isaac, planned to strangle Isaac or draw blood from him with his own hands in order to

fulfill the divine commission. That explains why the angel told Abraham not to “do anything” more. In any case, these rabbis viewed Abraham as so committed to slaughtering his son that he would attempt to do so even without his sacrificial implement, with his own bare hands. Does this reflect the intensity of this man’s commitment to his sacred mission, or does it suggest the spillover of adrenaline when engaged in an act of violence?

After the angel’s brief speech, Abraham lifts his eyes and sees a ram,¹²³ caught behind in a thicket by its horns,¹²⁴ which he then takes and offers as a burnt offering in place of his son.¹²⁵ Just as Abraham looked up and saw Moriah from a distance in v. 4, here he looks up again. Where was he looking earlier? Could the ram have been wandering in the area all along? Do we know how carefully Abraham uses his vision? Does this suggest that God had provided a ram for Abraham before Abraham ever had arrived at the summit?¹²⁶

With Isaac spared, Abraham acknowledges God by naming the mountain “*Adonai-yireh*” in v. 14. Intentionally, this phrase can have multiple meanings depending on the vowel pointing. It can refer to Abraham and all his descendants who “fear” (אַרַּף = *yare’*) God. It can refer to the sheep that Abraham “saw” (הָרַח = *ra’ah*) and realized could substitute for Isaac. It can refer to Abraham who “saw” God on the summit of the mountain in a sort of prophetic vision. It can refer to God who “appeared” (הִרְאָה = *nir’ah*, “was seen”) on the mountain. It can refer to God who “showed” (הִרְאָה = *her’ah*)¹²⁷ Abraham both Godself and the sheep. Through an aural pun (not graphic), it can also possibly refer to God who “instructed” (הִרְאָה = *yarah*) Abraham and his descendants.

This kind of wordplay characterizes the entire story and suggests that the text itself welcomes multiple interpretations. Here is another example: “Moriah” (הִרְאָה). As *Genesis Rabbah* 55 suggests, it too has numerous meanings. It can indicate “instruction” (as in *Torah*, from *yarah*, “to teach”),¹²⁸ because it serves as “the place from which instruction goes forth to the world.” It can indicate “religious awe” (הִרְאָה = *yir’ah*; or הִרְאָה = *morah*) because it serves as “the place from which religious awe goes forth to the world.” It can indicate “showing” (from הִרְאָה = *her’ah*), because God showed it to Abraham. An interpreter could also link it with “light” (הִרְאָה = *’orah*) or dominion (אֲתִרְאָה = *maruta*). There are many more possible derivations, including the modern scholarly attempt to connect the proper name to the ancient Amorites, based on a reading in the Syriac Bible, the *Peshitta*. Words such as *Moriah* and *Adonai-yireh* resonate with

numerous connotations and can never find a fixed definition, since (at least in Jewish tradition), the text always, deliberately, and continually allows the readers to find new import in it.

In vv. 15-18, the angel calls out to Abraham a second time. As the mouthpiece of God, the angel rewards Abraham for going to Moriah and not withholding his favored son from sacrifice. Swearing an oath, God through the angel promises to make Abraham's "descendants" (literally "your seeds") "as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sands on the seashore" and to bring them victory against their adversaries ("the gates of their foes"). Because Abraham obeyed God's voice, Abraham's descendants will serve as a blessing for all the nations of the earth.

The reference to "your seeds" (ִרְיָא = *zar'akha*) ties the *Aqedah* to Abraham's future. Because Abraham agreed to sacrifice Isaac, Isaac and his future sons will procreate and produce many children, a huge economic advantage in the ancient world. Carol Delaney has commented on the male orientation of this language, which points to males as the creative force in human reproduction.¹²⁹ For Delaney, this language not only perpetuates a false, gender stereotype, but it suggests the violence that joins sacrifice and sexuality in this story. The reference to conquering enemies would certainly confirm this.

The repetition of the angelic voice has caused considerable comment throughout the centuries. Traditional Jewish midrash has explained the repetition in a variety of ways. One strand saw the angel (not God) as speaking in vv. 11-12 and again in v. 13, but God suddenly interrupts the angel this time to confirm to Abraham that Abraham will not need to go through with the sacrifice. That is why the text says, "By myself I swear" in v. 16: to let Abraham know that now he hears not simply an angel, but God Itself. Other commentators understand Abraham as interrupting the angel, when he saw the ram in v. 13 and sacrificed it. Consequently, in order to continue the unfinished divine revelation, the angel speaks again in vv. 15-18.¹³⁰

The apparent break in the narrative, as well as the different content and language, has suggested to some modern scholars a different source for this section: vv. 1-14 and 19 come from the Elohist (E), while another, later source (possibly the Yahwist, J, or a later redactor of Genesis) inserted vv. 15-18.¹³¹ Although a few view this chapter as the work of a single author, most regard it as comprising two sources, first connected, then integrated, by an editor.

Traditional interpretations of the *Aqedah* still have a place in communicating the power of this passage. If nothing else, the customary, positive explanations have resonance within certain communities and elucidate aspects of the story that a more critical approach may never uncover.

All of us who work on biblical texts are engaged in a process that never truly reaches conclusion. Once you exhaust the text, it no longer speaks or has meaning for new generations. The Torah--scripture--resembles plants that need constant tending and maintenance. Remember how God describes Adam's task in the Garden of Eden in Genesis 2:15: "Till it and tend it." If we stop watering and stop trimming it, the plant will fall into decay and die. Parts of a plant die every day, just as cells in our own bodies, but the plant lives and thrives if we nurture it. The plant remains the same plant in most ways, but also undergoes alterations and transformations that allow it to flourish. Torah follows a similar path. Interpretations that work in one generation may no longer suffice in the next. We may need to add to them, alter them, and possibly transform them. That's what Jewish midrash does. While striving to stay within the text, midrash builds on the multiple meanings of words that allow a text to grow and take on shapes in new contexts. In fact, for Jews, midrashic interpretation forms not merely an appendage to Torah, but a part of the Torah itself.

I readily admit the legitimacy of some other readings that may even seem to contradict my own. In the words of midrash editors, I simply present "another interpretation" (*davar akher*),¹³⁶ which might stand alongside the numerous, insightful interpretations that scholars have previously discovered over the centuries. Following this rabbinic tradition, which usually does not attempt to resolve the competing interpretations into a unified argument, I simply accept the presence of multiple meanings in a text and await their resolution (if there is one).

In studying Jewish commentaries on the *Aqedah*, readers can sometimes find a brief reference to an interpretation that gains little notice otherwise.¹³⁷ Writers from diverse backgrounds from antiquity to the middle ages to modern times have noted this reading. *Genesis Rabbah* (56:8),¹³⁸ Rashi,¹³⁹ Ibn Ezra,¹⁴⁰ Gersonides,¹⁴¹ Babya,¹⁴² Aaron ben Elijah,¹⁴³ Abravanel,¹⁴⁴ Joseph Herman Hertz,¹⁴⁵ W. Gunther Plaut,¹⁴⁶ and others cite variations of it. Yet, usually noting this reading in passing, neither they nor others follow it fully to its logical and surprising conclusion. In general, all these commentators suggest a reading in which God did not ask Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, but

simply asks Abraham to bring Isaac up to the summit of the mountain to make a burnt offering.

Particularly important is the word $hl\ddot{a}$ (= *'alah*) in 22:2, used twice therein. As a noun, $hl\ddot{a}$ (*'olah*, from *'alah*) usually refers to a “whole, burnt sacrifice,” literally a holocaust, because the smoke rises up (to God). In this context, the verb can also sometimes mean “to offer” (as in “offer a sacrifice”). Consequently, the JPS and NRSV editors translate the clause in 22:2 “offer him there as a burnt offering.”¹⁴⁷ Since these renderings do not capture the sense of upward movement inherent in the word, Everett Fox translates “offer him up there as an offering-up.”¹⁴⁸

Yet, *'âlâh* has a double meaning. Normally *'alah* as a verb means “to go up,” “to rise,” or “to ascend.” Here the form is causative (called *hiphil* in Hebrew), normally meaning to “bring up,” “cause to ascend,” or “cause to rise.” The traditional translation of 22:2 omits this common meaning. Therefore, following the above-mentioned Torah commentators, I would suggest another translation: **'bring him for an offering-up.** Here *'alah* does not refer to a sacrificial event, but to an ascent of a mountain.

The text does not specify who or what constitutes the offering. God does not identify Isaac as the offering, only that Abraham should bring him up to the summit and make an offering of some kind. God never uses the word, “slaughter,” because God never intends to slaughter Isaac. Abraham could have figured that out, if he had listened carefully or asked good questions. *Genesis Rabbah* 56:8 puts it this way. “Did I tell you, ‘slaughter him’? No, but **'bring him up.** Now that you have brought him up, bring him back down.”

Abraham misinterpreted God’s instructions. God simply told Abraham to **bring Isaac up** the mountain. God may have mentioned a sacrifice, but God does not name the victim. God never told Abraham to kill Isaac, but simply asked him to make an offering, presumably an animal. **Abraham** (not God) decided to identify Isaac as that animal.

After the angel stops Abraham from killing Isaac, Abraham looks up and sees the ram. Possibly God intended that ram as the sacrifice all along, but Abraham, while looking down, in an unconscious stupor caused by the anguish of his misinterpretation, never bothered to observe it. Or Abraham could have brought another animal with him. An angel then stops Abraham from sacrificing Isaac, not God. Why? Conceivably because God had learned to Its horror how Abraham could misinterpret God’s words. In any case, the text does not say “kill Isaac,” but rather “bring him up **for** an offering-up.”

Basing his interpretation on Exodus 11:3, Bapya suggests that “**for** an offering-up” (hl;[l]= *l’olah*) in v. 22:2 actually means “**instead** of an offering-up.” That is, by bringing Isaac up the mountain, Abraham would have made an offering that would take the place of a sacrifice. God never intended a sacrifice, but rather considered the act of ascent the equivalent of an offering. Because Abraham did not catch this subtle addition of the preposition, *l’*, to *olah*, Abraham misinterpreted God’s instructions (which Bapya sees as the result of Abraham’s overwhelming love for God).¹⁴⁹

Another possibility remains. Abraham misheard hl;[l] (*olah*) as “sacrifice” or “offering,” when he should have heard “ascent.” In *Ezekiel* 40:26, the prophet uses the word, *olah*, to describe an “ascent” or “stairway, while hl;[m] (*ma’aleh*) regularly means an “ascent” or “climb.” Thus, we could translate: “Bring him up for an ascent.” Perhaps by *alah* God planned for Abraham to make a pilgrimage to a sacred high place, or to go up to Jerusalem as pilgrims did on holidays,¹⁵⁰ or to make a heavenly ascent as Jacob did in his dream in Genesis 28, but we will never know for sure, because Abraham assumes that a sacrificial ritual will take place.¹⁵¹

Abравanel makes a further interesting observation. He suggests that “that I will say to you” refers to the object of the verb, *alah* as its antecedent: “Take your son, your only one, Isaac, whom you love, and, on one of the summits there, offer it [the animal], which I will say to you, as a whole offering.” In light of this, one could also translate 22:2 in the following manner: “And [God] said, ‘Take your son, your only one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and, on one of the mountaintops, bring him up there for an offering-up [whole offering] that I will say to you.’” Here “that I will say to you” refers to “offering-up [whole offering]” as its antecedent. In other words, God will explain to Abraham what kind of animal Abraham will sacrifice when he reaches the summit of the mountain. Given the word order (with “mountain” immediately preceding “that” in the Hebrew, I would not view the above translation as the natural construal of the text’s language. But it is also possible that we are meant to read this sentence in more than one way. That is, the standard reading and a counter-reading exist simultaneously within the same text. The text is intentionally ambiguous.

In any case, the wordplay on *alah* and its repetition fit a pattern that characterizes Genesis 22. The entire story is filled with puns and wordplays of various kinds, some of which I have discussed: Adonai-Yireh in 14; Moriah in v. 2; seeing; swearing (*shav’a* in v. 16)

and Beer-sheva (*B'er Shava'* in v. 19); walking; the words for "together" (*yakhdav* in vv. 9 and 19), "only" (or "favored," *y'khid'kha* in vv. 2, 12), and "a certain" (*'akhad* in v. 2); "take" (*qakh* in vv. 2, 3, and 6), Isaac (*Yitskhaq*), and "from afar" (*merakhog*); Abraham (*Avraham*), "father" (*av* in v. 7), and "love" (*'ahavta* in v. 2); "knife" (*ma'akelet* in v. 6) and "angel" (*ma'lakh* in vv. 11 and 15); "bring him up/(burnt) offering" (*'alah* and "on" [*'al*] in v. 2); "youth" (*na'ar* in vv. 3, 5, and twice in v. 12) and "gate" (*sha'ar* in v. 17);¹⁵² and probably many more. Also the narration provides numerous examples of word repetition. "Abraham" occurs thirteen times; "son" occurs nine times; and a surprisingly large number of words occur more than once.¹⁵³

And that may serve as the very point of the *Aqedah*. *'alah* has more than one meaning, as do a number of the words, phrases, and sentences in the story. The *natural* reading may not be the *correct* reading. Or several different interpretive options may exist simultaneously. The scriptural text expects its readers to ponder its significance and question its intentions, just as God expected Abraham to consider carefully the content of God's own words. Ambiguity within certain parameters characterizes the language of the *Aqedah* to such an extent that it compels readers to make their own interpretive and moral decisions. In other words, Torah does not always provide direct answers, but leaves enough room for questioning to allow us to draw our own conclusions.

Indeed God tested Abraham, but it is a different test from what we usually think. Here are the unstated instructions that God did not provide: I am using ambiguous words to make a request of you; study them; ponder them carefully; ask me questions; talk to your family and friends; do not assume my intentions; follow my instructions precisely; and better check it out before you draw your final conclusion. Students here can probably relate; God does not give transparent and simple assignments. God expects us to study, to think, to pay attention, to engage in debate, and to work hard at understanding what God says and means.¹⁵⁴

Yes, this is a very difficult test,¹⁵⁵ with ambiguity, multiple interpretations, and doubtful answers. But God sets the bar extremely high for humans.¹⁵⁶ After all, what else would God expect from creatures made in God's own image?¹⁵⁷

Abraham made a number of errors on his test: he did not study or ponder God's words sufficiently; he did not ask God questions; he did not speak with his wife, son, or friends; he looked down, when he should have looked up; he was relatively unconscious,

when he should have remained aware; he presupposed meaning, when he should have doubted and inquired; and, sadly, without suspecting the limits of his own understanding, he assumed that God meant for him to sacrifice Isaac. Now, on the other hand, God did not fail Abraham on his test (maybe he would now receive a “C,” or a “B-” in light of grade inflation). Why? Prior to this event, he had shown tremendous courage and fortitude by leaving his home in Haran (Genesis 12), by rescuing Lot after Cherdolaomer’s forces had captured him Lot in battle (Genesis 14: 13-16), and by agreeing to have a son in his old age (Genesis 18, 21). Ultimately, he did not kill Isaac; he obeyed the angel’s voice and restrained his hand. His own love for Isaac, though apparently ambivalent, may have held him back too. He loved God and tried to obey God. He had reasons for misunderstanding God’s instructions: given that God had already destroyed the human race once before in Noah’s time, and that child sacrifice existed in Abraham’s time, Abraham would have naturally assumed that God might expect him to kill his son. Since God regularly surprised Abraham, Abraham could have reasonably expected another surprise. And Abraham did not have the benefit of much prior human experience in dealing with God.

Like many of the other protagonists of Genesis (e.g. Adam, Noah, Sarah, Jacob, and Joseph), Abraham is flawed.¹⁵⁸ Yet God rewards him and his descendants with the covenant and its promise, as indicated in 22:15-19. Why? In spite of their shortcomings--our shortcomings-- God looks at our better nature and rewards us when we make even limited use of it.

We who live now do not share, however, the same situation as Abraham. We have fewer excuses. We have plenty of experience with persons claiming direct experience of God. The study of history should make us less prone to surprises and help us to understand that God’s words exist in community contexts that shift and change over time. God may not require perfection from us, but God does expect a lot, even more than from the biblical protagonists.

The message is simple, though not the implementation. When you hear the voice, or read the words, of God, do not assume their surface meaning. Convey your experiences to others, ask questions, study and read, think long and hard. God not only works, but speaks, in mysterious ways. It is up to us to unravel that mystery.

TRANSLATION OF GENESIS 22:1-19 (Aqedah)¹⁵⁹

¹Now, after some time, God tested Abraham and said to him, “Abraham.” He said, “Here I am.” ²[God] said to him, “Please take your son, your only one, Isaac, whom you love and go to the land of Moriah, and bring him up there for an offering-up on one of the mountaintops that I will say to you.” ³Early the next morning, Abraham arose, harnessed his ass, and took with him two of his youths and Isaac, his son. He split wood for the burnt offering, got up, and went to the place that God had said to him.

⁴On the third day, Abraham raised his eyes and saw the place from afar. ⁵Abraham said to his youths, “You stay here with the ass, while the youth and I will go over there so that we can worship and return to you.” ⁶Abraham took the wood for the offering-up, placed it on Isaac, his son, and took the firestone and the knife in his hand. And the two of them walked off together. ⁷Then Isaac spoke to Abraham, his father, saying, “My father.” He said, “Here I am, my son.” And he said, “Here are the firestone and the wood, but where is the sheep for the offering-up?” ⁸Abraham said, “God will see to the sheep for the offering-up, my son.” And the two of them went off together.

⁹They came to the place which God had said to him. There Abraham built the altar, arranged the wood, bound Isaac his son, and put him on the altar on top of the wood. ¹⁰Then Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. ¹¹But an angel of the LORD (*YHWH*) called to him from heaven: “Abraham! Abraham!” ¹²He said, “Here I am.” It said, “Do not stretch out your hand against the youth, and do not do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only one, from me.” ¹³Thereupon Abraham raised his eyes, and he saw a ram caught behind in a thicket by its horns. Abraham walked over, took the ram, and offered it as an offering-up in place of his son. ¹⁴Thus Abraham called that site, *Adonai Yireh (YHWH Yireh)*, from which comes the saying today, “On the mountain of the LORD (*YHWH*), it will be seen.”

¹⁵Then an angel of the LORD (*YHWH*) called to Abraham a second time from heaven. ¹⁶It said, “By myself I swear as a declaration of the LORD (*YHWH*), ‘Because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only one, ¹⁷I will truly bestow a blessing upon you and I will truly make your seed as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore, so that your seed will seize

the gate of their enemies. ¹⁸ All the nations of the earth will enjoy blessing through your seed, because you have hearkened to my voice.”

¹⁹Abraham then returned to his youths. They arose and went off together to Beer-sheva. And Abraham stayed in Beer-sheva.

End Notes

⁶⁸For various attempts at structuring the story (including the use of chiasm) and at analyzing the literary dynamics, see the following: Crenshaw, “Journey Into Oblivion”; Rémi Lack, “Le sacrifice d’Isaac: analyse structurale de la couche élohiste dans Gn 22,” *Biblica* 56 (1975): 1–12; Grégoire Rouiller in François Bovon and Grégoire Rouiller, studies published under the direction of, *Exegesis: Problems of Method and Exercises in Reading: Genesis 22 and Luke 15*, (Originally published as *Exegesis: Problèmes de méthode et exercices de lecture (Genèse 22 et Luc 15)*. Bibliothèque Théologique, Neuchatel: Delachaux et Niestlé, 1975), trans. Donald G. Miller, Pittsburgh Theological Monograph Series, 21 (Pittsburgh: The Pickwick Press, 1978), 413–40; Sean E. McEvenue, “The Elohist at Work,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 96 (1984): 315–32; Jacob Licht, *Storytelling in the Bible*, 2nd ed. (1st ed., 1978) (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1986), 115–20; Jean-Louis Ska, “Gn 22:1–19: Essai sur les niveaux de la lecture,” *Biblica* 69 (1988): 324–39; Francis Landy, “Narrative Techniques and Symbolic Transaction in the *Akedah*,” in *Signs and Wonders: Biblical Texts in Literary Focus*, ed. J. Cheryl Exum, Semeia Studies (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 1–40; Jan P. Fokkelman, “‘On the Mount of the Lord There is Vision’: A Response to Francis Landy Concerning the *Akedah*,” in *Signs and Wonders: Biblical Texts in Literary Focus*, ed. M. Cheryl Exum, Semeia Studies (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 41–57; Walters, “Wood, Sand, Stars”; Jacques Doukhan, “The Center of the *Aqedah*: A Study of the Literary Structure of Genesis 22:1–19,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 31 (1993): 17–28; Wenham, *Genesis*, 100–01. For a study of rhetorical strategies in *Gen. 22*, see Yair Mazor, “Genesis 22: The Ideological Rhetoric and the Psychological Composition,” *Biblica* 67 (1986): 81–88.

⁶⁹חֲלֹהֶם בְּרִבְבוֹתֵי רְיָאֵ = ‘*akhar had’varim ha’elleh*. Some rabbinic traditions understand this phrase to mean “in connection with these things”: that is, the *Aqedah* is connected to a specific, prior event that precipitated it (*BR* 44:5). A midrash arose to explain what that

event was. Satan (Sammael) had caused Abraham to sin by dressing in the guise of a beggar and asking for alms outside the house of Abraham at the time he was holding a banquet on the occasion of Isaac's birth. Busy with other obligations, Abraham (and Sarah) neglected him. This gave Satan the pretext to challenge Abraham's loyalty to God and set in motion the *Aqedah* test. See the references collected in Ginzberg, *Legends*, 5:248–49 (nn. 226–8). See also the story found in *Jubilees* 17:15–18, where Prince Mastema (Satan) challenges Abraham before God on the grounds that Abraham loved Isaac more than anything else, including God.

⁷⁰Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, trans. Dorothea Shefer-Vanson, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series, 70 (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press/Almond Press, 1989), 133. See also Walters, "Wood, Sand, Stars," 306.

⁷¹On the indeterminate nature of the time passage, see Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation*, in *The JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 112.

⁷²*Contra* W. Gunther Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981), 146, who describes Isaac as a "mere boy."

⁷³For Isaac as a teenager (fifteen years old), see the interpretation of *Jubilees* in Eberhard Nestle, "Wie alt war Isaac bei der Opferung? [Miscellen]," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 26 (1906): 281–82.

⁷⁴If we understand the *Genesis* account in chronological terms (though that is certainly debatable, and W. G. Plaut not illegitimately objects to it--*Torah*, 146), then the claim of the rabbis that Isaac was thirty-seven years old seems reasonable: *BR* 56:8. Since Sarah was ninety when she gave birth to Isaac (Gen 17:17), and since Sarah died at the age of one hundred twenty-seven immediately after the episode, the rabbis arrived at the figure of thirty-seven ($127 - 90 = 37$) for Isaac at this time. Of course, in the end, we have no way of knowing, and the text is probably intentionally vague.

Two additional issues complicate the matter. Ancient ideas about stages of life (childhood, adulthood, old age, etc), and the precise ages they cover, are somewhat different from our own. Also, given that the life spans of the patriarchs (as depicted in the *Torah*) are

considerably longer than those of the actual Jews who composed these texts at a later time, it is possible that the narrator altered her/his understanding of life stages. For example, does childhood last the same amount of time for someone living to fifty as it does for someone living to one hundred and twenty? That may explain why the rabbis can conceive of Isaac, whom Abraham calls a $\text{ר}[\text{ע}]$ (= *na'ar* --“boy,” “youth,” or “young man”) in v. 5, as having attained the age of thirty-seven.

⁷⁵The text ambiguously suggests different age categories, ranging from older boyhood to youth to adulthood. Readers face a representation of Isaac both protean and malleable.

⁷⁶Rabbinic texts see this as the tenth and ultimate test for Abraham. The specific nature of the test actually differs from source to source. See *Pirque Avot* 5:3 and the numerous commentaries. The idea of God testing Abraham does create a problem for the exegetes, because it implies that God does not know the final result. Yet God's uncertainty about the results of this test reflects a pattern throughout the Genesis narrative, when the creation appears to take unexpected turns (the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden, the murder of Abel by Cain, the corruption of the Noahide generation, the building of the tower of Babel, etc.).

⁷⁷Other passages refer to similar tests that God places before Israel: Ex 15:25, 16:4, 20:17; Deut 8:2, 8:16, 13:4; Ju 2:22, 3:1, 3:4. Job faces a similar test: e.g. Job 1:12, 2:6. For further discussion of the use of the word in the Hebrew Bible, see John J. Lawlor, “The Test of Abraham: Genesis 22:1–19,” *Grace Theological Journal* (1980): 27–28; Westermann, *Genesis*, 356; and Moberly, “Christ as the Key,” 155.

⁷⁸Knowledge of the events of the story and the eventual outcome presumably leave readers much less anxious and fearful than the protagonists themselves. Recently I spoke with a young girl (Josephine Elwood) who was reading and studying this story and asked her whether she was scared. She said, “no,” and that she really liked the story. When I asked why, she replied that God's request to sacrifice Isaac was a “test” for Abraham, and she knew what would happen. For a similar viewpoint, see Coats, “Abraham's Sacrifice,” 392–93. Another person (John Harrison) suggested to me that we ought to regard the *Aqedah* as a kind of Japanese *Kabuki* drama, where everyone knows the precise course and outcome of the unfolding events.

⁷⁹As opposed to the command in v. 11, where God states the name of Abraham twice; but see the Septuagint (LXX) version, where God says “Abraham” twice in v. 1 (as well as in v. 11).

⁸⁰Gen 22:11, 31:11, 46:2; Ex 3:4; 1 Sam 3:4

⁸¹The reference to the early morning in v. 3 shows that the events of v. 2 took place the night before. This parallels Abraham’s vision of God in Gen 21:14 in regard to Sarah and Hagar, whereupon Abraham arose early the next morning. For other parallels with the Hagar story, see Lawlor, “Test,” 33–35; Crenshaw, *Whirlpool*, 18, n. 31; McEvenue, “Elohist”; Wenham, *Genesis*, 99–100; Wenham, “Akedah,” 97–100; Curt Leviant, “Parallel Lives: The Trials and Traumas of Isaac and Ishmael,” *Bible Review* 15, no. 2 (April 1999): 20–25, 47; and A. Marx, “Sens et fonction de Gen. XXII 14,” *Vetus Testamentum* 51 (2001): 199–202.

Cf. Abimelech’s dream of God concerning Sarah in 20:6ff., after which Abimelech awoke early the next morning. Also Abraham departed early the next morning after God had destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah (19:27). All this recalls the sequence found in Gen 1:5, 8, 13, 19, 23, 31: “And there was evening and there was morning, a first [etc.] day” (דְּיָוַם וַיְהִי עֶרֶב וַיְהִי בֹקֶר יוֹם אֶחָד). = way^ehi-‘erev way^ehi-voqer yom ‘ekhad).

⁸²Including Rashi and Sarna, *Genesis*, 151.

⁸³So Rabbi Shim’on bar Abba in *BT Sanhedrin*, 89b; also *BR* 55:7.

⁸⁴For the use of אַתְּ (na’) in making an imperative into an entreaty or request, see the following biblical sources as examples: Gen 13:9, 15:5, 24:2; Nu 20:10; Ju 13:4, 16:6, 16:10, 16:28, 18:5; Is 1:18, 5:3; and Am 7:2, 5. For these and other references, see the relevant entries in Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament with an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic*, Corrected impression, 1953, based on the lexicon of William Gesenius, trans. Edward Robinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), 609; Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann Jakob Stamm, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament (HALOT)*, (Originally published as *Hebräisches und aramäische Lexikon zum Alten Testament*: 3rd. ed. 4 vols. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967–1990), trans. M. E. J. Richardson (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994–2001).

⁸⁵See the story in *BT Sanhedrin* 89b: “This is comparable to a story (parable) of a king of flesh and blood, against whom arose many wars, and he achieved victory because of one great warrior. Later a severe battle arose against him. The king said to the warrior: ‘I have a **request** of you: stand with me in this battle, so that people may not say, ‘there was no reality in the earlier ones.’ So also did the Holy One, blessed be He, say to Abraham, ‘I have tested you with many trials, and you have withstood them all. Now stand tall in this trial, so that people may not say, “There was no reality in the earlier ones.”’”

.:j xmw dja rwbq wl hyj w hbrh twmj lm wyl [wdm[v rcb ul ml lvm
 dmm[umm hvqbb *wl rma hqzj hmj lm wyl [hdm[pmyl
 .vmm pnb :ya twmvar *rmay al v wz hmj lmb yl
 wl kb tdm[w twmysn hmkb utysyn :phrbal rma awb urrb vwdqh ,a
 .pymvarb vmm :ya :rmay al v hz nmysnb yl dmm[wvck[

⁸⁶*BR* 55:7 and Rashi also comment on the drama and progressive disclosure of the passage. Preference for younger siblings is one of the prime motifs of Genesis (Abel-Cain, Isaac-Ishmael, Jacob-Esau, Joseph-other brothers). On this topic, in and outside of Genesis, see Frederick E. Greenspahn, *When Brothers Dwell Together: The Preeminence of Younger Siblings in the Hebrew Bible* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Levenson, *Death and Resurrection*, 55–169.

⁸⁷First published in 1900: *The Interpretation of Dreams*, (Originally entitled *Die Traumdeutung*: Leipzig and Vienna: Franz Deutike, 1900, 8th ed. in 1930), trans. James Strachey (New York: Avon, Discus, 1965).

⁸⁸The biblical text does not identify the two servants. Later rabbinic interpreters name them as Ishmael and Eliezer.

⁸⁹For an imaginative rendering of the emotions of Abraham during this period, see Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, ed, trans & introd by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Kierkegaard’s Writings, vol. 6 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983).

⁹⁰The geographical identification of Moriah is a problem. For full discussion and bibliography, see James R. Davila, “The Name of God at Moriah: An Unpublished Fragment from 4QGenExod^a,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 110 (1991): 577–82; also Walters, “Wood, Sand, Stars,” 303.

⁹¹Rabbinic sources suggest that God placed a cloud and a pillar of fire over the mountain to indicate its location: Ginzberg, *Legends*, 1:278–79. The text itself remains silent.

⁹²Moberly, “Earliest Commentary,” 306–07.

⁹³While “Moriah” appears in v. 2, “seeing” occurs in vv. 4, 8, 13, and 15. The text and the rabbis understand Moriah as in part referring etymologically to seeing, with the recurring consonants, “resh” and “heh” and the assumption of an “aleph”, as in *r - ' - h*: 1) so R. Judah in *BR* 55:9 on v. 4, where Moriah is understood as the place “I will show you” (that is, the place, “I will have you see” [*harm = mar'eh*])--see the discussion in Sarna, *Genesis*, 391 ; 2) “. . . see to the sheep” in v. 8; 3) “. . . Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw” in v. 13; and 4) “and Abraham named that place *Adonai-Yireh*, from which comes the present saying, ‘On the mountain of the Lord there is vision,’” in v. 15.

⁹⁴For example, the phrase “The Lord appeared” or “The Lord was seen” (from the *niphal* verb root form of *hār = ra'ah*) occurs three times with Abraham (12:7, 17:1, 18:1), twice with Isaac (26:2, 24), and once with Jacob (35:9). See the discussion of this phenomenon in Sarna, *Genesis*, 91–92. In 18:2, Abraham follows his vision of God with his vision of three men appearing at his tent. In Gen 16:13, Hagar calls God *'el ro'i* (*yaṛj l'āθ*), for which Sarna offers a variety of translations: “God of seeing,” “God of my seeing,” and/or “God who sees me”: *Genesis*, 121, with references (p. 350, n. 12). To these I would add the following paraphrases: “God who gives me sight,” “God who allows me to see God,” and/or “God who allows me to continue to see even after God saw me” (following the text of the midrash that Gen 16:13 itself offers). This may recall Leah’s prayerful comment that, because the Lord saw her in her affliction, her husband would love her (29:32). Later in the Ishmael portion of the narrative, Hagar explains that she does not want to look upon her son, Ishmael, while he is dying (21:16). At the beginning of the Abraham story in 12:1, God tells Abraham to leave Haran and go to the land that God will show him (literally, the land that God will make him see). In Gen 12:12-13, Abraham fears that the Egyptians will see Sarah and kill him; in turn the Egyptians see Sarah in 12:15. Note how both Lot and Abraham look out on the territory that they will occupy in Gen 13. Both Isaac and Jacob have trouble seeing at various points (see comments in Part 1). God frequently looks out on God’s creation in

Gen. 1. In Gen 6:2, the divine beings (“sons of God”) see the “daughters of humanity.” Noah uses a dove to see whether the waters had receded in 8:8, Noah sees the happy sight in 8:13, and God promises to remember the Noahide covenant, whenever God sees the bow in the clouds (9:16). In 9:22, Shem and Japheth see their father’s (Noah’s) nakedness and cover him up so that they do not see it any longer--presumably an allusion to Adam and Eve seeing that they were naked in the Garden of Eden in Gen.3. God acts as one who sees, a witness, in 31:50. When water covers the earth, Genesis describes its emergence as an appearance or sight (1:9, 8:5). The references to evening and morning in Gen 1 suggest an alternation of darkness and light, sightlessness and sight, though sometimes God’s very light can produce impaired vision: 19:11.

⁹⁵רַחֵם = *hanna‘ar* Here Abraham interestingly uses the same word that the text earlier uses for Abraham’s two servants. According to *BR* 56:2, Abraham asks the two servants whether they see what he sees: that is, the cloud (discussed in n. 91). Because the servants (like the asses) do not see the cloud, Abraham does not allow them to accompany him and Isaac on their climb up the mountain.

⁹⁶“Bow down low”: הִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה (= *nishtakhaveh*), from the root, v - j - j (*sh - kh - kh*), similar to the act of prostration (that is, where the body lies flat and stretched out on the ground with the face down--a posture of submission and reverence), though possibly also indicative of a crouching position. In many cultures, the act of bowing down low (or prostration) is associated with submission before a higher authority (monarch, tribal chieftain, landholder, or a deity), and thus naturally with worship.

⁹⁷Ginzberg, *Legends*, 1:279, 5:250, n. 239.

⁹⁸See the numerous references in *BDB*, 880.

⁹⁹*Maqom* derives from the verb מָקַם (= *qum*), “to stand,” which in later Hebrew, can mean “to exist”--close to the concept found in Ex 3:14, where God describes Godself as “I am who I am” or “I shall be who I shall be” (רַבּוֹאֵי הַיְהִיָּה, הַיְהִיָּה = *‘ehyeh ‘asher ‘ehyeh*). For discussion of *maqom* as referring to a sacred place, see Sarna, *Genesis*, 358, n. 10 (chap. 12).

¹⁰⁰For the identification of “fire” (וַאֲשֶׁר = *‘ets*) with “firestone,” see Ephraim A. Speiser, *Genesis*, Anchor Bible 1 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), 163; Sarna, *Genesis*, 152.

with others (from Haran to Canaan with Lot, Sarah, and servants in 12:5-6; and from Beer-sheva to Moriah with Isaac and two young male servants in 22:3-4); and Abraham builds an altar (12:7-8 and 22:9). For further, more detailed, discussion of the parallels, see Gary Rendsburg, *The Redaction of Genesis* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1986), 30–35.

¹¹¹See *Fear and Trembling*.

¹¹²Something many of us in developed societies forget. See also the “great dark dread” (חִלְדָּוָה חִקְוָה} חִמְיָא = ‘emah khashekhah g^edolah) that descends upon Abraham in Gen 15:12, right before God tells him of the coming enslavement and oppression of the Israelites in Egypt.

¹¹³For a discussion of the theological import of this word in Genesis, see Heinrich Gross, “Zur theologischen Bedeutung von *Halak* (Gehen) in den Abraham-Geschichten (Gen 12–28),” in *Die Väter Israels: Beiträge zur Theologie der Patriarchenüberlieferungen im Alten Testament. Festschrift für Josef Scharbert zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. Augustin R. Müller and Manfred Görg (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1989), 73–82.

¹¹⁴This is a common expression (with many variations) throughout the Bible: See *BDB*, 234.

¹¹⁵Ernest Klein, *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the Hebrew Language for Readers of English*, foreword by Haim Rabin (New York; London: Macmillan Publishing Company; Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1987), 152.

¹¹⁶Marcus Jastrow, compiled by, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (New York: Judaica Press, 1971), 1104–05.

¹¹⁷חִפְיָא} = sh^ekhitah.

¹¹⁸For some medieval Jewish interpreters of this text, Abraham did in fact successfully sacrifice Isaac: Spiegel, *Last Trial*. V. 12 does not necessarily pose a problem for this, because the text does not indicate one way or the other whether Abraham slit Isaac’s throat with his knife, only that Abraham should not use his hands to prepare the body further. The angel does not mention the knife (but only Abraham’s hand), because the knife had already done its job.

¹¹⁹The word “to fear” (אַרַּף = yare’) sounds orally similar to the word for “to see” (אַרָּא = yare’), and this kind of pun exists throughout the chapter, especially in v. 14, when Abraham names the mountain.

The angel could mean either “since you fear” or “since you see.” See discussion on p.170 below.

¹²⁰See especially Gen 28:12.

¹²¹Gen 46:2; Ex 3:4; 1 Sam 3:10.

¹²²See the references cited in Sarna, *Genesis*, 383.

¹²³Just as earlier he lifted his eyes and saw Moriah from a distance (v. 4). The interpretation of רַיָּא' (*'akhar*) remains challenging. *'akhar* normally means “after” (or “afterwards,”), but, only with some difficulty, does this reading make grammatical sense in either Hebrew or English. The New Jewish Publication Society translation emends it to דְּיָא, (*'ekhad*), meaning “a” (or “a certain” or “one”), following “Heb. mss. and ancient versions.” Some have suggested that *'akhar* means “behind him” (אָרְיָא' = *'akharav*). Marvin Pope (following Rashi and Ugaritic texts) suggests an alternative reading. Pope humorously notes that “behind him” could “suggest that Abraham had eyes in the back of his head.” Instead, Pope understands *'akhar* as referring to a chronological sequence, indicating “immediate” and “direct” “action.” Following Pope, one could translate *'akhar*, “just then.” See Marvin H. Pope, “Enigmatic Bible Passages: The Timing of the Snagging of the Ram, Genesis 22:13,” *Biblical Archaeologist* 49, no. 2 (1986): 114–17; Walters, “Wood, Sand, Stars,” 305–06; and Wenham, “Akedah,” 99.

¹²⁴For discussion of the significance of the ram as a symbol of the Temple cult that alluded to the priesthood and sacrificial atonement, see Walters, “Wood, Sand, Stars,” 308–10.

¹²⁵The word for “in place of” is תַּיָּט (= *takhat*), which medieval rabbis interpreted as also meaning “after.” Therefore, for them, Abraham sacrificed the ram after sacrificing Isaac. See Spiegel, *Last Trial*, 60–61.

¹²⁶According to Yehuda Amichai, “the true hero of the *Akedah*, was the ram,” because it volunteered to die in Isaac’s place. Neither Isaac, nor Abraham, nor the angel bothered to look and see it. In this way, Amichai understood the ram as a proxy for those dying in Lebanon in the 1980’s and the indifference to their deaths. See his poem as quoted in Abramson, “Reinterpretation,” 109–10.

¹²⁷Literally “caused to see.”

¹²⁸הַרְוִי = *Torah*, from הַרַי (= *yarah*); also הַרְוִי (= *moreh*), “teacher.” The midrash actually cites הַרְוִי (= *hora'ah*, “instruction”).

¹²⁹Delaney, *Abraham on Trial*, *passim*.

¹³⁰ Spiegel, *Last Trial*, 126ff.

¹³¹ For bibliography on earlier source criticism of this passage, see T. Desmond Alexander, "Genesis 22 and the Covenant of Circumcision," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 25 (1983): 22, n. 8; Crenshaw, *Whirlpool*, 13, n. 11. See also Jean-L. Duhaime, "Le sacrifice d'Isaac (Gn 22, 1-19): L'héritage de Gunkel," *Science et esprit* 33 (1981): 139-56. As most others, Sean McEvenue regards the passage (1-14, 19) as the product of the Elohist, while a redactor added vv. 15-18. For an analysis of the theology of the Elohist, see Hans Christoph Schmitt, "Die Erzählung von der Versuchung Abrahams Gen 22,1-19 und das Problem einer Theologie der elohistischen Pentateuchtexte," *Biblische Notizen* 34 (1986): 82-109. R. W. L. Moberly interprets vv. 15-18 as the earliest commentary on the *Aqedah* story: Moberly, "Earliest Commentary." The introduction of *YHWH* (the four letters of God's name or *Tetragrammaton*, "LORD") in 22:14 in an apparently Elohist text has intrigued many source critics. For interpretation of a Qumran fragment which uses *Elohim* instead of *YHWH* in 22:14, see Davila, "Name of God." Omri Boehm sees the influence of the redactor of vv. 15-18 in vv. 11-12, 14, "Binding," 3-5.

Other scholars see Gen 22:1-19 as a unitary text: Coats, "Abraham's Sacrifice"; Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition*, 226-48 (but composed by the Yahwist); Rendsburg, *Redaction*, 102-03; and Wenham, *Genesis*, 2:96-118.

For a tradition history (the original historical context, or *sitz-im-leben*) of the passage, see the following: Henning Graf Reventlow, *Opfere deinen Sohn: Eine Auslegung von Genesis 22*, *Biblische Studien*, 53 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag des Erziehungsvereins, 1968); Rudolf Kilian, *Isaaks Opferung: Zur Überlieferungsgeschichte von Gen 22*, *Stuttgarter Bibelstudien*, 44 (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1970); (more briefly) Duhaime, "Le sacrifice d'Isaac"; and Westermann, *Genesis*, 2:354-55 and *passim* in pp. 351-65. Still fundamental is Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis*, (Based on the 9th printing of the 3rd ed. of the German commentary [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977] that was first published in 1901.), trans. Mark E. Biddle, foreword by Ernest W. Nicholson, *Mercer Library of Biblical Studies* (Atlanta: Mercer University Press, 1997), 233-40. For a review of Gunkel's work on Gen 22, see Bovon and Rouiller, *Exegesis*, 143-48. John van Seters

rejects any attempts at determining sources and early traditions behind the current text: *Abraham in History and Tradition*, 228–37.

¹³²Sarna, *Genesis*, 154.

¹³³In my opinion, the references to “walking” throughout Chap. 22 support this.

¹³⁴See T. Desmond Alexander, “Genesis 22.”

¹³⁵See Gen 21:33.

¹³⁶רְיָאֵל רַב־דָּ:

¹³⁷For a brief survey of some of this material, see Schmitz, *Aqedat Yüḥpaq*, 42–43.

¹³⁸הַבְּרֵאשִׁית הַגְּדוֹלָה = *b'reshit rabbah* = *Great Genesis* (so named because of the first word of Genesis, *b'reshit*), a collection of midrashic traditions on Genesis compiled in Israel, dating from the 5th to 6th centuries C.E. (whose traditions undoubtedly go back to much earlier periods).

¹³⁹An acronym for R. Solomon Isaac, Ra-SH-I, born in Troyes in northern France, studied in the academies at Mainz and Worms (German), wrote perhaps the definitive commentary on almost the entire Torah, Talmudic scholar, halakhic authority, and teacher of numerous students: 1040-1105 C.E. See the section in his commentary on *Genesis 22* (יְבִרַת וַיִּרְיֵן מִן הַרְוֵת יַמְמִיחַ הַמְמִיחַ = *Khamishah Khomshet Torah 'im Perush Rashi* = *The Five Books of Torah with Rashi's Commentary*).

¹⁴⁰Abraham Ibn Ezra, from Spain, peripatetic scholar who travelled widely in North Africa, Egypt, Italy, Provence (southern France), Normandy (northwestern France), and London, Torah commentator, transmitter of Arabic texts into Hebrew, conveyor of the Spanish Jewish tradition to northern Europe, poet and liturgist, grammarian, philosopher, theologian, mathematician, astronomer, and physician: 1069-1164 C.E. See his commentary on *Genesis 22* (הַרְוֵת לְ וַיִּרְיֵן = *Perush 'al ha-Torah* = *Commentary on the Torah*).

¹⁴¹Levi ben Gershom, also known by his acronym, Ralbag (Ra-L-Ba-G), from Provence (southern France), Jewish Aristotelian philosopher and theologian, Talmud scholar, astronomer, and mathematician, 1288-1344 C.E. See his commentary on *Genesis 22* (הַרְוֵת לְ וַיִּרְיֵן = *Perush 'al Sefer ha-Torah* = *Commentary on the Torah*).

¹⁴²Babya ben Asher ben ḳlava, Torah commentator, born in Saragossa (Spain), early interpreter of the Zohar, died c. 1320. See his

commentary on Genesis 22 (הר״ת יצחק חזקוני [יצ״ב ןבבאר װרדמ = *Midrash Rabbenu B'khayye 'al Khamishah Khumshe Torah = The Interpretation of our Teacher Babye on the Five Books of Torah.*

¹⁴³Also known as Aaron the Younger, Karaite scholar from Nicomedia in western Turkey who lived in Constantinople, Torah commentator, poet, liturgist, and expositor of Karaite thought: 1328-1369 C.E. See his commentary on Genesis 22 (הר״ת ר״ק = *Keter Torah = Crown of Torah.*

¹⁴⁴Isaac ben Abravanel, Jewish Torah commentator, court minister to kings in Portugal, Spain, and Italy (Venice), wealthy businessman, and philosophical and theological scholar: 1437-1508 C.E. See his commentary on Genesis 22 (הר״ת יצ״ב ןבבאר = *Perush 'al ha-Torah = Commentary on the Torah.*

¹⁴⁵Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth, lived 1872-1946. See his *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs: Hebrew Text, English Translation, and Commentary*, 2nd ed. (1st ed., 1929–1936, 5 vols) (London: Soncino Press, 1960), 74 for one of the standard Orthodox Jewish commentaries.

¹⁴⁶See *Torah*, 150 for the standard Reform Jewish commentary.

¹⁴⁷“JPS” refers to the Jewish Publication Society, while “NRSV” refers to the New Revised Standard Version.”

¹⁴⁸Everett Fox, a new translation with introductions, commentary, and notes by, *The Five Books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy*, The Schocken Bible, 1 (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 93.

¹⁴⁹Not surprisingly, this essay understands Abraham’s reasoning a little differently.

¹⁵⁰Biblical texts very frequently employ ‘*alah* when referring to a journey to Jerusalem. It is perhaps significant that the very last word of the Hebrew Bible (according to the traditional Jewish order of biblical books as found in the TaNaKh) in 2 Chron 36:23 is ‘*alah*. In this case, ‘*alah* refers to the return (ascent) of the Jewish exiles to Jerusalem where the Temple will be rebuilt at the instigation of Cyrus, King of Persia.

¹⁵¹In order to rescue Abraham, some of the commentators interpret God as saying, “Act **AS IF** you are going to sacrifice Isaac”; that is, “bring him up, **AS IF** you are making Isaac into a sacrifice”: See especially Ibn Ezra who cites Jer 35:2, where he interprets the imperative as an

“as if” statement: “Go to the house of the Rechabites, and speak to them, and bring them to the house of the Lord, to one of the rooms, and act as if you were giving them wine to drink.” תַּוְּלַח' תַּיְאֵל א, הַחַיִּיֹּתֵי בֵּי מִטְבָּחִים מִיָּדָא תִּרְבְּדוּ מִיְבִכְרֵי תַּיְבָּל א, יַוִּל ה) (עַיִל; מִיָּדָא תַּיְצִוְהִיֹּ= *halokh 'el-bet harekhavim w^edibbarta 'otam vahavi'otam bet YHWH 'el-'akhat hall^eshakhot w^ehishqit 'otam yayin*). That is, since the Rechabites were forbidden from drinking wine, God did not actually intend for Jeremiah to make them drink wine.

¹⁵²For this pun, and some other possible ones, see Crenshaw, “Journey Into Oblivion,” 251.

¹⁵³E.g. “God” in vv. 1, 3, 8, 9, and 12; “Abraham” in vv. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 (twice in a row), 13 (twice), 14, 15, and 19 (twice); *hinneh*, “here I am” in vv. 1 and 7, and “here is” in v. 7; and 11; “said” in vv. 1, 2, 5, 7 (four times), and 8; “take” in vv. 2, 3, and 6; “Isaac” in vv. 2, 3, 6, 7, and 9 (twice); “only” (or “favored,” in vv. 2 and 12; “son” in vv. 2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, and 13; *alah* in vv. 2 (twice, once as verb and once as noun), 6 (verb), 7 (verb), 8 (verb), and 13 (twice, once as verb and once as noun); “seeing” (see discussion in Part 1); “walking” (see discussion above on p. 167); “two” in vv. 3, 8, and 15; “youth” in vv. 3, 5, and 12 (twice); “ass” in vv. 3 and 5; “wood” in vv. 3, 6, and 7; “place” in vv. 3 and 4; “raised his eyes” in vv. 4 and 13; “firestone” in vv. 6 and 7; “father” (twice in v. 7); “sheep” in vv. 7 and 8; “raise . . . hand” in vv. 10 and 12; “angel of the Lord” in vv. 11 and 15; “from heaven” in vv. 11 and 15, and “heaven” in v. 17; “LORD”/Tetragrammaton in vv. 11, 14 (twice), 15, and 16; “called” in vv. 11 and 15; “do” in vv. 12 and 15; “bless” in vv. 17 and 18; “descendants” (“seed”) in vv. 17 (twice) and 18; and Beer-sheva in v. 19 (twice).

¹⁵⁴Lippman Bodoff and Jung H. Lee have also suggested that God wanted Abraham to object: see the references in n. 58 in Part 1.

¹⁵⁵Just as the Milgram experiment was. See Part 1.

¹⁵⁶As God had done for Adam and Eve, Abel and Cain, and Noah, with obviously mixed results.

¹⁵⁷See Gen 2:26-27, 5:1.

¹⁵⁸See Norman J. Cohen, “Heeding the Angel’s Cry: A Modern Midrashic Reading of Abraham’s Life,” *Journal of Reform Judaism* 30 (1983): 1–15; and Steinmetz, *Father to Son*, 50–85.

¹⁵⁹The following translations provided crucial assistance and some of the actual language used here: New Revised Standard Version

(NRSV), 1989 (Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.); Wenham, *Genesis*, 2:97–99; Fox, *Five Books*, 93–97; The New Hebrew Jewish Publication Society Translation (JPS, 2nd ed.), 1999; Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah*, 73–78. I also want to thank Thomas O. Lambdin, Judah Goldin, and Steven D. Fraade whose teaching and publications have given me many invaluable insights on Hebrew translation (and interpretation). Needless to say, any shortcomings are my own.

*Addendum to Endnotes. 1) Note the following, helpful essay on rabbinic interpretations of the *Aqedah* (not included above): Anthony J. Saldarini, “Interpretation of the *Aqedah* in Rabbinic Literature,” in *The Biblical Mosaic: Changing Perspectives*, ed. Robert Polzin and Eugene Rothman (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982), pp. 150-65; 2) For a logical-philosophical interpretation of the *Aqedah*, see Richard S. Ellis, “Human Logic, God’s Logic, and the *Aqedah*,” *Conservative Judaism* 52.1 (1999), pp. 28-32; 3). Reference to the essay by Philip R. Davies, “Passover and the Dating of the *Aqedah*” (in Part 1) should indicate vol. “30.”