

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

## **Part 1**

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### *THE DILEMMA*

Most Jews, Christians, and Muslims are familiar with the story of Abraham and Isaac on Mt. Moriah in Genesis 22.<sup>1</sup> Traditionally Jews refer to this chapter as the *Aqedah* (“Binding”), locate it at the site of the Temple in Jerusalem,<sup>2</sup> view it as the culmination of the ten trials that Abraham undergoes in Genesis,<sup>3</sup> and chant the passage annually on the second day of *Rosh ha-Shanah* (the Jewish celebration of the New Year in the Fall), with some also reciting it in the daily morning service. Genesis 22 has served as a paradigm throughout the centuries that encourages many Jews to obey God and to follow a path that leads them to live differently from those in surrounding cultures, even sometimes to the point of sacrificial martyrdom.<sup>4</sup> Jewish interpreters view the Abraham and Isaac story as one of the foundational narratives which explain the unique

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relationship between Israel and God found in Torah and the subsequent history of the Jewish people.<sup>5</sup> Jews have a variety of prisms through which they have historically interpreted the text of the *Aqedah* story: e.g. the idea that the firstborn child, or beloved child, belongs to God; the repudiation of human sacrifice and the view that human life is fundamentally sacred; the association of the story with Passover; the drawing of Abraham as a paradigmatic figure for the importance of obedience to God even in the face of a terrifying request;<sup>6</sup> the notion that life is a series of tests, which persons (especially Israel) must take and pass; the view that God tests the righteous because the wicked are unable to handle the stress; the belief that God gave Abraham a test so that he could atone for previous errors; the interpretation of Isaac as a survivor of persecution, including the holocaust; the promotion of faith even when God's face is hidden;<sup>7</sup> etc.<sup>8</sup> Christian exegetes have viewed this biblical section fundamentally in terms of sacrifice, martyrdom, and atonement. They regard Abraham as an exemplar of Christians who live by faith and trust in God and interpret the account as a blueprint for the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.<sup>9</sup> Christians understand Genesis 22 in terms of Jesus' willingness to sacrifice his life (in this case replacing Abraham with God the father and Isaac with Christ, the son of God) and God's expectation that such a human sacrifice was in fact necessary.<sup>10</sup> Muslim traditions typically replace Isaac with Ishmael (the progenitor of the Arab peoples) and situate the *Aqedah* episode prior to the birth of Isaac.<sup>11</sup> In the Islamic calendar, the "Feast of the Sacrifice" (*Id al-Adha*), one of the most significant feasts of the year, falling at the conclusion of the Hajj, celebrates Abraham's sacrifice of a ram in place of Ishmael (or Isaac).

While this narrative has served as a source of inspiration for many persons and communities, it has also caused anguish, consternation and disappointment for many others. Frankly, the *Aqedah* has always left me with a queasy sensation in the pit of my stomach. As a Jew in the progressive tradition, I have found it personally frustrating and disturbing that many rabbis, academics, and other commentators often ignore or gloss the painful and destructive elements of the story and of its various cultural interpretations. Along with other passages from the Bible (e.g. the various descriptions of capital punishment, the stories of incest, the depictions of the Israelite destructions of cities that include the murder of males and enslavement of women and children, etc.), the *Aqedah* has led many to question the moral foundations of our tradition, if not of God Itself.<sup>12</sup> The rabbinic tradition frequently does not provide satisfactory explanations. In fact,

the lack of sufficient response to the ethical challenges of passages such as this one may in modern times have contributed to disillusionment in congregations, attraction to Eastern religions, and reduced participation by some in organized religious life.<sup>13</sup>

In previous generations (though much less frequently now), the common response of Christians who have posited a sharp, stereotypical distinction between a God of love in the New Testament and a God of wrath in the Old Testament offers an equally unsatisfying and insufficient solution. After all, the gospels and Paul tell the story of a son who dies as a sacrifice because God, his father, required it. Here we find a God able to inflict destruction and death. And, in the end, Isaac did not die as a slaughtered victim, but Jesus did.<sup>14</sup> Though different in format, Christians and Jews face a similar task of squaring a deity capable of violence and extraordinary harshness with the commitment found in both faiths to living a moral and humane (*menschlich*) life.

Numerous questions and disturbing thoughts confront those of us who treat the *Aqedah* as a sacred story. In challenging this text and, implicitly, God, I engage in a traditional argument that extends all the way back to the beginning of Judaism and that, in many ways, has ever since defined us as a people: Abraham argues with God over the fate of Sodom (Genesis 18:22-33); Moses questions God in the burning bush at Midian (Exodus 2-3); Joshua laments to God about his fears of military defeat (Joshua 7:7-9); both Jeremiah and Ezekiel engage in frequent querying of God; Habakkuk interrogates God about the presence of injustice in the world (Hab 1:2-2:20); Job engages in a sustained critical argument with God (Job 13:3), and God apparently acknowledges that Job's piety stems from Job's willingness to engage God with questions (Job 42:1-7); and, more recently, Tevye, the figure from the short stories of Sholom Aleichem (most famously depicted in the film, "Fiddler on the Roof"), constantly debates with God.<sup>15</sup>

Let me then begin by asking: How can God ask a person, a father, to sacrifice his beloved child, his son?<sup>16</sup> What kind of god would make such a request? God not only asks Abraham to sacrifice his son, but does so after making certain promises to him. Specifically God tells Abraham that God will make Isaac the ancestor of the people of the covenant (namely, the Jewish people in Genesis 17:19) and will continue Abraham's name solely through the offspring (seed) of Isaac (Genesis 21:12). From the point of view of Abraham, God has an apparent change of mind and plans in Chapter 22. As Gerhard von Rad says, "With the command to sacrifice Isaac, must not the entire past

and the entire future of the divine dealings and guidance have tumbled down right in front of Abraham?"<sup>17</sup> Elsewhere, he writes, "For in commanding Abraham to offer up Isaac, God apparently destroys his whole continually reiterated promise to Abraham . . . for the recipient of the promise only the way of utter forsakenness by God seems to stand open."<sup>18</sup> For von Rad, the story of the *Aqedah* centers on the trustworthiness of God--whether Abraham (and humanity) are traveling "a road out into godforsakenness."<sup>19</sup> While the image of a vacillating deity marks a pattern in the earlier chapters of *Genesis* (especially in the creation and flood stories), here for the first time God threatens to renege on a commitment. Why would a deity who upholds the ethical norms of society break a promise, not keep a commitment, and ask a father to slaughter his son?

If God did in fact plan to keep Its promise from the very outset, why would God deceive and torment Abraham in this way? What kind of deity would put a person through this kind of misery?<sup>20</sup> If God had never intended the sacrifice to take place, does this test not amount (given Abraham's ignorance of divine intention) to a form of torture akin to the Milgram experiment?<sup>21</sup> Recall the stories of the individuals whom Stanley Milgram asked in 1963 to administer a test ostensibly to determine whether punishment might help people to learn more effectively. If the "learner" failed to answer questions correctly, an experimenter instructed the "teacher" to apply increasingly strong electric shocks to the wrist of the "learner" who was strapped in a chair. In fact, the "teachers" were Milgram's experimental subjects, the "learner" was an amateur actor who feigned pain at the appropriate moments, and no electric shocks were ever applied. Many have argued (including Milgram) that this post-Nuremberg experiment proved that most people would follow orders (no matter how unjustified) in spite of their consciences, moral codes, and religious strictures.<sup>22</sup> I agree.<sup>23</sup> Yet, the potential trauma that this deceptive, terrifying, and guilt-inducing experience could cause in the lives of some of those applying the pseudo-electric shocks forced a change in the way social scientists conducted these kinds of experiments.<sup>24</sup>

What effect would God's frightening experiment have on Abraham, Isaac, Ishmael, Sarah, and their descendants? Would we not expect our ancestral family, who experienced this disturbing ordeal, to suffer from what we would now label post-traumatic stress syndrome? In the *Aqedah* story, the narrator does not mention Isaac descending the mountain with his father. From that point forward, Isaac and Abraham never converse directly again in the text.<sup>25</sup> Some have taken this to

indicate that Isaac actually died and was resurrected; but others have speculated on the subsequent mental state of Isaac. We can imagine a dazed and stunned Isaac leaving his father behind and clambering down the rocky slopes cut, scratched, and bruised in more ways than one. Immediately following this passage, Genesis 23 notes the death of Sarah, and rabbinic commentators have connected the two events, suggesting that she had died in grief over the apparent death of her son and a father's incomprehensible act.<sup>26</sup> After the *Aqedah*, the text makes no mention of any further interaction between Sarah and Abraham, leading some to wonder whether they had stopped speaking to one another and even separated. Further, consider how Rebekah and Jacob are able to conspire to fool a sightless and aged Isaac into giving Jacob Isaac's blessing (Genesis 27). How can we expect Isaac to discern the machinations of his wife and son, when his own father had betrayed him in a fundamental way by removing that most precious of childhood gifts: familial protection and security. Abraham's act had made Isaac into an elderly man who could not see, where seeing refers not only to Isaac's eyesight, but, more important, to his awareness and understanding.

Jacob continues the familial pattern, when Laban tricks Jacob into marrying his elder daughter, Leah (rather than his younger daughter, Rachel), by bringing Leah to him at night, when Jacob could not see her in the darkness (Genesis 29:15ff.). After Joseph's dreams of greatness, he goes to look for his brothers, whom he sees, but does not really see, because he can not imagine that his braggadocio has inspired their envy. They, in turn, see him but do not foresee where their actions will lead (Genesis 37). In Genesis 42:1, a comprehending Jacob sees the possibility of obtaining food in Egypt, but his sons spend their time looking at one another. Later Jacob's own sons see Joseph, but ignore him in his suffering (Genesis 42:21). When they encounter a now powerful Joseph in Egypt, the brothers do not realize that Joseph recognizes who they are (Genesis 42ff.). And, later, a blind and uncomprehending Jacob explains to Joseph how he had lost sight of him (Genesis 48:11), ever since the time when his brothers had left him for dead. Blindness becomes a metaphor for a familial pattern of incomprehension and obliviousness that has some of its roots in the *Aqedah* story.<sup>27</sup>

The blindness that defines many of the characters of Genesis recalls one of the most famous figures of Greek mythology, Oedipus, who poked out his eyes after learning that he unwittingly had sexual relations with his mother and had murdered his father. Indeed, some

commentators have compared the relationships of Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac in the *Aqedah* story to that of Oedipus and his parents, Laius and Jocasta.<sup>28</sup> In the Genesis account of Abraham, readers confront some of the typical Oedipal relationships: tension between father and son (which the myth symbolically expresses in terms of the father attempting to slay the son) and a close, tender relationship between mother and son.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps Abraham interprets God's instructions in such a way that Abraham preserves his preeminent position within the family unit (and more broadly in his clan) by slaying him in the form of a sacrifice. Perhaps he is reliving the trauma of his own childhood, when his father (Terah) uprooted him and his family from their home in Ur.<sup>30</sup> Some might critique the overuse (and misuse) of the Oedipus story in contemporary popular culture, but many would probably agree that there are some families where parents have used their children to reinforce their own superiority and dominance. Do we have to wait for God, or God's angels, to stop parents from doing this to children, sometimes to the point of abuse and even murder? Are there ways to describe the Oedipal drama without resort to the language of violence and (here) sacrifice?

Genesis 22 contains another disturbing component. When speaking to Abraham, God describes Isaac as Abraham's beloved and sole son. What happened to Ishmael? Why would God disown Ishmael as a son of Abraham? In Genesis 21:8-21, after the birth of Isaac, Sarah expels Hagar and her son, Ishmael, into the wilderness of Beer-sheva, apparently in order to preserve Isaac's rights of inheritance. At this moment, the narrator of the story has God intervene, explaining to Abraham that his line would continue through Isaac (thus giving Isaac the inheritance), but that Ishmael would also serve as the ancestor of a great nation. While Abraham would naturally have assumed that Ishmael would receive the inheritance due to his status as eldest son, God alters the typical pattern. And, once more, Abraham silently accedes to God, quickly accepting this reversal of fortunes for his sons. The reader faces a characteristic familial dynamic where one child receives preferential treatment over the other.

Readers should find this disconcerting enough, considering that we Jews, Christians, and Muslims look to Isaac or Ishmael as our progenitors. Yet, how does God reward the favored son? By demanding his sacrifice. Just like the first fruits and first-born animals, the first-born son belongs to God. Had he definitively known his father's plans at the destination of Moriah, Isaac would certainly have regarded his status as preferred son with more than a good deal of

ambivalence. Here preference serves as a double-edged prize, as it does for many children even now.

Further, in this passage and elsewhere in Genesis, the references to seeds (usually translated as “offspring”) assume the preeminence of males in the process of procreation. Through spreading of their seeds, men determine the future course of peoples and their histories.<sup>31</sup> The text relegates women to silence, passivity, and irrelevance.

Both Jews and Christians regard Leviticus 19:18 (the Golden Rule) as a central scriptural commandment: “Love your neighbor as yourself,” or literally, “Show love to your neighbor as you would to yourself.”<sup>32</sup> How does God’s command or request in the *Aqedah* in any way demonstrate to people that they ought to follow the Golden Rule? Isn’t God asking Abraham to act counter to this central commandment?

To this question, the Danish existentialist theologian, Søren Kierkegaard, replied affirmatively, but he defended God and Abraham on the basis of what Kierkegaard called “the teleological suspension of the ethical.”<sup>33</sup> For Kierkegaard, Abraham, “the knight of faith,” had reached the ultimate stage of human development, that of the “religious,” which subsumes the lower “ethical” stage. According to Kierkegaard, God acts in an arena that exists beyond morality. Further, given that God knew that Its angels would eventually prevent the sacrifice of Abraham, God never contradicts Its ethical responsibilities. Rather, God allows Abraham to demonstrate his faithful obedience to God. For this reason, God can suspend the ethical in order to achieve God’s purpose (or *telos*).<sup>34</sup>

Yet, this posits a deity willing to use human beings to achieve particular ends. I cannot accept that and do not believe, even if it were true, that it serves as a healthy paradigm for humanity to follow. What kind of world do we leave to our children when we ask them not to “do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” but rather to do unto others as they serve your purpose (even if that purpose is an honorable one)--that is, to justify the means by the end?

Kierkegaard’s explanation suggests the specter of a world in which God accepts, and engages in, immoral behavior to achieve a noble result.<sup>35</sup> Of course, history is littered with the shattering pain and destruction that this worldview produces.

Conversely, while we can decry God’s culpability in this event, what kind of man would accept a command or request, even a divine one, to slaughter his own son? According to Kierkegaard, Abraham, through his deep and abiding faith, realized that God would

ultimately never commit an immoral act. Abraham could agree to sacrifice Isaac, because Abraham's knowledge of, and friendship with, God allowed him to know God's innermost thoughts and plans. Kierkegaard presupposes that all people (including Abraham) can subjectively know the mind of God through their faith.

As Aryeh Botwinick has observed,<sup>36</sup> Kierkegaard proposed a theology whereby "the knight of faith renounces the universal to become the individual" and regarded "subjectivity" as "higher than reality." Only through the "absurd" and through "paradox" does the "individual stand in an absolute relation to the absolute." Yet, this perspective has at least two major negative effects. It denies the value of reason and logic in evaluating our world. Even more troubling, it envisions God as so completely removed that only "a subjective or absurdist leap is sufficient to negotiate him."<sup>37</sup>

In contrast, some religious traditions see God in terms of negative theology that validates our knowledge of God, but recognizes from the outset that humans can never apprehend God totally. Our very humanness always limits our knowledge of God to provisional metaphors and incomplete formulations. Negative theology protects us from both the despair of agnosticism and the idolatrous arrogance that purports to comprehend God's mind.<sup>38</sup>

For Kierkegaard (and others), Abraham puts his faith in God above, and in opposition to, the lives and well-being of his family (Isaac, Sarah, Ishmael, and Hagar). He twice passes off his wife as his sister (Genesis 12:10-20), he abandons Hagar and Ishmael (Genesis 21:8-21), and he is willing to kill Isaac without consulting with Sarah in spite of the fact that she had an equal interest in the well-being of the son whom she had borne in her old age.<sup>39</sup> Abraham focuses so intensely on God that he ignores the needs of his closest companions, the very humans whom God made in God's image.<sup>40</sup> What are the "family values" of one who loves God without loving one's intimate relations?<sup>41</sup>

How would we regard Abraham's behavior if he lived in our midst? How would we react to the news that a father took a three-day hike to the Appalachian hills to slaughter his son because God had instructed him to do so? Every few years or so, we hear the story of a parent who kills a child, because the voice of God commanded it, and of others who kill at the supposed behest of God.<sup>42</sup> On what basis are those persons insane, psychotic, and/or murderers, while Abraham is dubbed a "knight of faith"?

Then we must ask whether we promote submissive victimhood at the expense of self-protection and self-preservation, when we idealize the image of a son who willingly allows his father to slaughter him. In fact, Isaac asks only one mild question and otherwise remains silent. Readers might find it surprising that Isaac does not more actively question his father or God, given that he had apparently reached an age beyond infancy and early childhood and that he was facing his own demise.<sup>43</sup> Those who have children might find Isaac's reticence rather surprising and expect more typical questions: Are we there yet? Why is the trip taking so long? Humor aside, if Isaac had reached an old enough age, we would anticipate more probing queries: Why do we have to wait for God to provide the sheep? Could we not have brought one from our own flock? What is so important about the land of Moriah? Why are we offering this sacrifice in the first place? Father, why are you acting so strangely? Instead, the narrative portrays an absolutely compliant son who follows his father's instructions in spite of the doubts he apparently has.<sup>44</sup> Are we perpetuating familial and societal violence when we memorialize a story that endorses the behavior of a menacing father and his acquiescent son?<sup>45</sup>

Throughout history, and still today, humanity has faced the haunting apparition of nations and peoples sending out their children to battle, often to die, as sacrifices for a greater purported good. One need not be a pacifist to wonder whether the story of Abraham and Isaac promotes national and ethnic violence.<sup>46</sup> Does the language of sacrifice in this narrative, which is found in the sacred texts of all the Abrahamic faiths, help to create a self-perpetuating prophecy in which humanity cyclically and unconsciously surrenders a portion of its population to potential death?<sup>47</sup> Do passages such as the *Aqedah*, which some interpreters see as a symbolic attempt of Israel (through Abraham) to suppress its own violent instincts,<sup>48</sup> actually encourage us to engage in further brutality?

Israeli writers have frequently commented on the *Aqedah* as a metaphor for the sacrifices both nations and parents have asked their children to make. For many Israelis, the *Aqedah* came to symbolize the loss of their youth in defense of the nation: Abraham attempted to sacrifice Isaac, just as modern Israel sacrificed its youth to protect its territory and ensure its security.<sup>49</sup> In the words of the Israeli poet, Haim Guri, "he [Abraham] bequeathed that hour to his heirs--they are born with a knife in their hearts."<sup>50</sup>

The need for such sacrifice is longstanding in biblical tradition. In his book, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*,

Jon Levinson argues convincingly that the impulse to sacrifice the beloved child (either the first-born child or the child regarded as the equivalent of the first-born) existed frequently through sublimation in Israel's mythic imagination:<sup>51</sup> the rites of the paschal lamb in Exodus 12-13 where the sacrifice of lambs replaces the sacrifice of the first-born Israelites; the dedication of the Levites in Numbers 8:16-19 where the dedication of the Levites replaces the sacrifice of the first-born; and Hannah's dedication of Samuel as a Nazirite in 1 Samuel 1:11, where Hannah dedicates Samuel to the Temple instead of sacrificing him. In some cases, child sacrifice found positive affirmation among biblical writers. Exodus 22:28 says so explicitly: "You shall give me the first-born among your children"

( $\eta\lambda\alpha\text{-}\tau\bar{\eta}\iota\ \delta\eta\mu\beta\ \tau\bar{\eta}\kappa\beta$ ) = *b<sup>e</sup>khor banekha titten-li.*). While *Exodus* reinterprets this to refer to redemption of first-born children through a substitutionary sacrifice (34:19-20) and most other biblical writers condemn child sacrifice (e.g. Jeremiah 19:5-6), some took it more literally. Take the example of *Ezekiel* who in 20:25-26 makes the following horrifying statement: "I [*i.e. God*], in turn [*following Levinson*], gave them [*i.e. Israel*] laws that were not good and decisions by which they could not live. When they set aside every "first delivery of the womb" [ $\mu\eta\ \tau\ \tau\bar{\eta}\rho\alpha\iota\ \kappa\bar{\alpha}$  = *kol-peter rakham*], I defiled them in order to make them desolate so that they might know that I am the Lord" (20:25-26).<sup>52</sup> Although the well-known story of Jephthah's daughter in Judges 11:29-40, including Jephthah's vow to sacrifice whomever he first encountered at his home, is open to different interpretations, it could suggest that child sacrifice worked--in this case, allowing Jephthah to triumph over the Ammonites. Had Jephthah constructed a more cautious vow, God might have aided him in his military campaigns. Still, God does not object to the apparent slaughter of Jephthah's daughter, and the results speak for themselves. Finally, according to 2 Kings 3:26-27, the king of Moab, Mesha, sacrificed his first-born son when the battle was going poorly for Moab against Israel. In doing so, Mesha turned the tide against Israel. Again a child sacrifice proved effective. In this context, the New Testament gospel interpretation of the Christian God's sacrifice of God's son, Jesus, certainly fits an ancient pattern.

In other words, the tradition subsequent to Abraham understands ritual atonement (both animal sacrifice and dedication of persons) as a transformed child sacrifice,<sup>53</sup> and it can sometimes acknowledge child sacrifice as a possible, legitimate option.<sup>54</sup> Here we have several interpretive choices, none of them mutually exclusive.

Among them is that God initiated child sacrifice for God's own inscrutable purposes (perhaps as a cruel necessity in the evolution of human consciousness). Another is that, genetically predisposed to violence because violence enhanced survival for hunter-gatherers, human beings domesticated their genetic inheritance through ritualized violence that included child sacrifice. Still another, human beings engaged in child sacrifice as a learned behavior, because our early forbears believed that the deaths of some persons led to rewards for the living and consequently ensured the welfare of the groups in which they lived. Of course, there are more possibilities.

In any case, according to biblical tradition as conveyed through the internal chronology of the Mosaic account, the story of Abraham and Isaac on Mt. Moriah set a precedent for possible child sacrifice. Given the violence of human history, especially the genocidal massacres of the twentieth century, can we now hold as our paradigm a story that portrays a man who himself embarks on a mission not only of violence, but the slaughter of his son? Should we not expect more from the parent of the three major Western religions, a figure who serves as the moral exemplar for so many? Is child sacrifice, sublimated or not, an acceptable image to evoke in our liturgies and theologies? Whatever the historical origins or mitigating circumstances that might exonerate Abraham, our uncritical heroizing of Abraham's behavior in the *Aqedah* episode may be a form of idolatry that condemns his descendants--Jews, Christians, and Muslims--to follow in his gruesome footprints to Moriah, which later interpreters identified as the site of the Temple mount in Jerusalem. To what extent does the story of the *Aqedah* and its uncritical interpretation contribute to ongoing religious tension and violence?

As numerous interpreters have observed, Abraham does not engage God in any kind of conversation, but immediately sets out to obey the request of the deity. In this regard, Abraham follows the pattern of Genesis 12, when, at God's command, he unflinchingly leaves Haran for Canaan. No hesitation. No queries. No protestations. No dilatory maneuvers of any kind. He speaks no words at all. Listen. Obey. Act. The story makes no overt emotional appeals. From beginning to end, Abraham acts without emotion, as if numb and unconscious. Aptly, retired LTS professor, George Coats describes Abraham as an "automaton":<sup>55</sup> "My God, right or wrong. Yahweh, love him, or leave him."<sup>56</sup> The scene recalls a typical dream in which the dreamer watches her- or himself engaged in an

incomprehensible activity, apparently unable (or perhaps unwilling) to change the course of events.<sup>57</sup>

Many consider this a laudable characteristic of Abraham's personality, an example of his willingness to obey God, no matter the consequences.<sup>58</sup> Yet, the Nazi trials at Nuremberg demonstrated once and for all that following orders could not legally serve as an excuse for crimes against humanity. There are internationally recognized legal limits to military and civilian discipline, as well as a legal requirement to abstain from fundamentally immoral behavior. After Auschwitz, why do we laud Abraham for his obedience and condemn the Nazi murderers for theirs?<sup>59</sup> Given that unquestioning obedience helped to enable the unspeakable horrors of the concentration camps, we can no longer afford to promote Abraham's compliant behavior.<sup>60</sup>

In Genesis 18:22-32, Abraham engages in an aggressive negotiation with God for the fate of Sodom.<sup>61</sup> By demonstrating more courage in attempting to save the lives of strangers than the life of his own child,<sup>62</sup> Abraham seems to place a greater value on the lives of outsiders than on the lives of members of his own immediate family.

Why the silence, the laconic acceptance of a horrific fate? When confronted in Midian by the presence of God in the burning bush (Exodus 3-4), Moses repeatedly challenges God in a classic scene of kvetching (whining) questions, a performance worthy of the classic, neurotic, Jewish characters in Philip Roth novels and Woody Allen films (and considerably different from the portrayal of Moses by Charlton Heston in "The Ten Commandments"). And Moses continues his reverently obstreperous behavior in Exodus, as well as in Numbers. Could not Abraham have used some of Moses' uncertainty, circumspection, reluctance, and skepticism (qualities reflected by the stammering to which Moses was apparently subject)?<sup>63</sup> For Jews, those qualities are much admired, because in this world certainty is elusive, and all interpretations are subject to future revision. So the question arises: Do we follow Moses at Midian or Abraham at Moriah?

As already discussed, the Bible provides numerous other examples of faithful Jews who engage in healthy debate with God, including Joshua, Jeremiah, Habakkuk, and Job. Other figures go the extent of testing God, such as Gideon who demands proof that God will deliver Israel (Judges 6:36-40); and Ahaz who receives an opportunity to test God (Isaiah 7:10-17).<sup>64</sup> God does not expect unquestioning loyalty, nor does God expect Israel to respond unflinchingly without fully understanding the outcome of the task at hand.

When we feature this story as one of the Jewish foundation stones and read it on *Rosh ha-Shanah* without analyzing it critically and unraveling its unsavory elements, what kind of message do we send to our own children and their parents? In fact, I have known persons who found this passage and others like it in the Bible deeply disturbing. The lack of sufficient explanation and interpretation by educators and rabbis has contributed in at least a small measure to some thoughtful persons abandoning organized Jewish religious life. Those of us who interpret biblical texts for a living can no longer afford to hawk our wares to small groups of academics, but must learn to speak to congregants hungry for ways to reincorporate Torah into their lives in intelligent and meaningful ways.

That is what I propose to do here, to save this passage from oblivion for those in progressive traditions who find it frightening and distasteful and for those on the margins of our communities. I ask the questions that I do, not to disturb those already comfortable in Jewish life (or Christian or Muslim life), but to reach those who want to engage their sacred texts with the same candor that they give to other matters.

Remember: we are dealing here with Hebrew words, which can often have connotations and meanings that translations do not preserve. All interpretation starts with the Hebrew text, and, in this regard, I hope to follow in the footsteps of the great classic Torah commentators and midrash writers. In a world (both academic and popular), where historical research and the search for historical facts have such a powerful hold on the imagination, I strive to combine the best of historical-critical scholarship and close reading of language (philological and midrashic).

In the end, however, as Gerhard von Rad observed, a text such as Genesis 22 has wide parameters of interpretation.<sup>65</sup> Stories with such powerful impact and with such profound meaning for those who cherish them have what Paul Ricoeur has called a “surplus of meaning.”<sup>66</sup> We probably cannot determine with certainty the intentions of the authors or editors of this kind of poetic narrative. Further, authorial intent and textual meaning may not always coincide, because a rich text takes on a life of its own. By radically limiting the meaning of the multivalent symbolism to simple descriptions and to a single historical context, we not only denude the text of its literary and spiritual power, but we fail to convey accurately the depth of its content and significance.

If we regard a given text as transmitted words of God or as divinely inspired, we would find ourselves in the position of idolaters claiming to know God's precise purpose. Sometimes we must simply acknowledge that a wide spectrum of readings is possible and that God's intentions are ultimately unknowable.<sup>67</sup> This does not imply the existence of a completely open text, but rather the presence of a range of possible interpretations into which a story might fit. Some interpretations may simply not work.

Therefore, I will attempt to construe the original context of this passage. Yet, I also acknowledge that words have meanings that may have eluded early interpreters and may only find interpretive fruition in later periods and in different cultures, where people can see and hear what others heretofore could not. In light of this, I will carefully examine the denotations, allusions, grammar, and syntax of Hebrew words and phrases in order to draw out their complex, and sometimes surprising, significance.

END OF PART 1

Part 2 will appear in the next issue of the *Lexington Theological Quarterly*

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#### End Notes

<sup>1</sup>For the interpretation of Abraham and his life, including the *Aqedah*, in the three largest Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), see Karl-Josef Kuschel, *Abraham: Sign of Hope for Jews, Christians, and Muslims* (New York: Continuum, 1995). For a sense of the vast *Aqedah* literary tradition, consult Mishael M. Caspi, *Take Now Thy Son: The Motif of the Aqedah (Binding) in Literature*, BIBAL Monograph Series, 5 (North Richland Hills, TX: BIBAL Press, 2001). On the *Aqedah* tradition in Judaism and Christianity, see Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993). For all three traditions (including Islam) of the *Aqedah*, see Carol Delaney, *Abraham on Trial: The Social Legacy of Biblical Myth* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998). Those seeking a recent collection of essays on the *Aqedah* may find the following assortment of articles of interest: Ed Noort and Eibert Tigchelaar, eds., *The Sacrifice of Isaac: The Aqedah (Genesis 22) and Its Interpretations* (Leiden: Brill, 2002). For a useful bibliography on biblical scholarship on *Gen. 22*, see Gordon J.

Wenham, *Genesis*, Word Biblical Commentary, 1–2 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987–94), 2:96–97; for older bibliography, see Claus Westermann, *Genesis: A Commentary*, (Originally published as *Genesis. Biblische Kommentar*, 1, Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1974–1982), trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984–86), 2:351–52, 353–54.

<sup>2</sup>See 2 Chron 3.1. On the identification of the *Aqedah* with the Jewish temple on Mount Moriah, including references to the relevant sources (and for the Samaritan counter-tradition that located the *Aqedah* at the site of the temple on Mount Gerizim), see Isaac Kalimi, “The *Aqedah* and the Temple: A Disputed Heritage. 1. The Land / Mount Moriah, and the Site of the Jerusalem Temple in Biblical Historical Writing. 2. The Affiliation of Abraham and the *Aqedah* with Zion / Gerizim in Jewish and Samaritan Sources,” in *Early Jewish Exegesis and Theological Controversy: Studies in Scriptures in the Shadow of Internal and External Controversies*, Jewish and Christian Heritage Series, 2 (Assen, The Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 2002), 1–57. See also R. W. L. Moberly, “The Earliest Commentary on the Akedah,” *Vetus Testamentum* 38 (1988): 307; R. W. L. Moberly, “Christ as the Key to Scripture: Genesis 22 Reconsidered,” in *He Swore an Oath: Biblical Themes from Genesis 12–50*, 2nd ed. (1st ed., 1993), ed. Richard S. Hess, Gordon J. Wenham, and Philip E. Satterthwaite (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 1994), 158–60. John van Seters sees the identification of Moriah with Jerusalem as a late development: *Abraham in History and Tradition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1975), 238.

<sup>3</sup>For discussion of the trials and their identification, see Jo Milgrom, *The Binding of Isaac: The Akedah, a Primary Symbol in Jewish Thought and Art* (Berkeley, CA: BIBAL Press, 1988), 1–62; also Shubert Spero, “Abraham’s Trials: Tests of Strength or Learning Experiences,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (April–June 2000): 73–79.

<sup>4</sup>On the *Aqedah* and martyrdom in Judaism, see Shalom Spiegel, *The Last Trial: On the Legends and Lore of the Command to Abraham to Offer Isaac as a Sacrifice, the Akedah*, translated from the Hebrew, with an introduction, by Judah Goldin (New York: Pantheon Books, 1967). Spiegel discusses how Christian persecutions of Jews in the middle ages led many Jews to the understanding that Abraham actually did successfully sacrifice Isaac and that Isaac was later resurrected after dying. Building on the observation that the narrative

does not describe Isaac accompanying Abraham down the mountain, these interpreters saw the deaths of their own children in terms of the death and resurrection of Isaac. Sometimes Jewish parents went to the extent of killing their own children before their persecutors could. On the topic of the *Aqedah* and martyrdom, see also Levenson, *Death and Resurrection*, 173–99.

For a general review of the traditional interpretation of the *Aqedah* story in Judaism, see Louis Arthur Berman, *The Akedah: The Binding of Isaac* (Northvale, NJ: J. Aronson, 1997). Less traditional, but profoundly scholarly and steeped in all the Jewish sources, is Levenson, *Death and Resurrection*. Louis Ginzberg provides a convenient collection of the sources in *The Legends of the Jews*, vols 1–2 translated by Henrietta Szold, vol 3 translated by Paul Radin (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1909–38), 1:271–86, 5:248–55; so also Mishael M. Caspi and Sasha Benjamin Cohen, *The Binding (Aqedah) and Its Transformation in Judaism and Islam: The Lambs of God*, Mellen Biblical Press Series, 32 (Lewiston, NY: Mellen Biblical Press, 1995), 2–51. For a discussion of the *Aqedah* in both Jewish literary sources and visual depictions, see Milgrom, *Binding*; see also Robin M. Jensen, “The Binding or Sacrifice of Isaac: How Jews and Christians See Differently,” *Bible Review* 9, no. 5 (October 1993): 42–51 for both early Jewish and Christian art. For a review of the interpretation of the *Aqedah* in some of the rabbinic materials, see Yaakov Elbaum, “From Sermon to Story: The Transformation of the *Akedah*,” *Prooftexts* 6 (1986): 97–116; Lewis M. Barth, “Introducing the *Akedah*: A Comparison of Two Midrashic Presentations,” in *A Tribute to Geza Vermes: Essays on Jewish and Christian Literature and History*, ed. Philip R. Davies and Richard T. White, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series, 100 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), 125–38; Lewis M. Barth, “Textual Transformations: Rabbinic Exegesis of Genesis 22:14,” in *Bits of Honey: Essays for Samson H. Levey*, South Florida Studies in the History of Judaism, 74 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), 3–23; and Maren Niehoff, “The Return of Myth in *Genesis Rabbah* on the *Akedah*,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 46 (1995): 69–87. For a discussion of Classical (medieval and pre-modern) Jewish sources, see Rolf-Peter Schmitz, *Aqedat Jiùbaq: Die mittelalterliche jüdische Auslegung von Genesis 22 in ihren Hauptlinien*, Judaistische Texte und Studien, 4 (Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1979); and Esther Starobinsky-Safran, “Sur le sens de l’épreuve

(Interprétations juives de Genèse 22),” *Revue de Théologie et de Philosophie* 114 (1982): 23–35.

<sup>5</sup>On this idea, see especially vv. 17–18, which emphasize the special relationship between God and Israel and the blessings that accrue from Abraham’s action.

<sup>6</sup>For a critique of obedience from an Orthodox perspective, see Eugene Korn, “*Tselem Elokim* and the Dialectic of Jewish Morality,” *Tradition* 31 (1997): 5–30, especially 24ff. He notes that Jews have understood the worth of the *Aqedah* as solely homiletic and have never regarded the *Aqedah* as halakhically (legally) or morally normative. For that reason, Jonathan Magonet calls Abraham the “anti-model”: no one should repeat what he did at Moriah (“Abraham and God,” *Judaism* 33 [1984]: 160–70).

<sup>7</sup>For the interpretation of the *Aqedah* through the lens of the holocaust, see Zev Garber and Bruce Zuckerman, “Why Do We Call the Holocaust ‘the Holocaust?’ An Inquiry Into the Psychology of Labels,” in *Remembering for the Future: Working Papers and Addenda*, ed. Yehuda Bauer (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1989), 1879–92 (relating the word, “holocaust,” to “sacrifice, and hence “*Aqedah*”); Isabel Wollaston, “‘Traditions of Remembrance’: Post-Holocaust Interpretations of Genesis 22,” in *Words Remembered, Texts Renewed: Essays in Honour of John F. A. Sawyer*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series, 195 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 41–51 (reviewing a variety of perspectives); Gershon Greenberg, “The Death of History and the Life of *Akedah*: Voices from War,” in *The Death of God Movement and the Holocaust: Radical Theology Encounters the Shoah*, ed. Stephen R. Haynes and John K. Roth, Contributions to the Study of Religion, 55 (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), 99–109 (reviewing Orthodox Jewish responses). To take in a portrayal of Isaac as a “survivor,” see especially Elie Wiesel, *Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends* (New York: Summit Books, 1976), 69–97. For the image of the hidden face of God in the context of the *Aqedah* and the holocaust, see Eliezer Berkovits, *With God in Hell: Judaism in the Deathcamps* (New York: Sanhedrin Press, 1979), 113–31; also briefly in his *Faith After the Holocaust* (New York: Ktav, 1973), 136–37.

<sup>8</sup>For a review of various Jewish perspectives, see Levenson, *Death and Resurrection*; Berman, *Akedah*. There are other interesting Jewish interpretations as well: e.g. Michael Lerner, “The Binding of Isaac,” *Tikkun* 7 (September-October 1992): 7–8. Lerner suggests that

the *Aqedah* teaches Abraham not to treat his son as an object or tool for the perpetuation of his glorious progeny, but as a being (subject) worthy of respect in his own right. This recalls the interpretations of some biblical critics (both Jewish and Christian): Devora Steinmetz, *From Father to Son: Kinship, Conflict, and Continuity in Genesis*, Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 50–85 (who argues that Abraham learned to see more clearly -- that is, to interpret his world correctly); and Phyllis Trible, "Genesis 22: The Sacrifice of Sarah," in *'Not in Heaven': Coherence and Complexity in Biblical Narrative*, ed. Jason P. Rosenblatt and Joseph C. Sitterson, Jr., Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991), 170–91 (who argues that Abraham learns non-attachment): Not surprisingly, these perspectives diverge from the traditional Jewish view that Abraham always loved his son unconditionally: e.g. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "Majesty and Humility," *Tradition* 17 (1978): 36.

According to Robert Eisen, Abraham did not argue with God over the fate of the residents of Sodom (Gen 18:17-33), but rather God engaged Abraham in a Socratic dialogue in order to teach Abraham moral maturity. The *Aqedah* confirmed for God that Abraham had finally learned the lessons of that encounter: "The Education of Abraham: The Encounter Between Abraham and God Over the Fate of Sodom and Gomorrah," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (April-June 2000): 80–86. Shubert Spero understands the ten trials of Abraham culminating in the *Aqedah* as learning experiences that taught Abraham to develop his full humanity: "Abraham's Trials"; see *Gen.* 17:1, "Be exemplary (מִיִּתְּיָם = *w<sup>e</sup>h<sup>e</sup>yeh tamim*). Unlike Noah, who was always fully developed, Abraham had to learn. For modern Israeli views that take a more critical perspective on the *Aqedah*, see n. 49 below.

<sup>9</sup>On the *Aqedah* in the New Testament, still fundamental is Nils A. Dahl, "The Atonement: An Adequate Reward for the Akedah (Ro 8:32)," in *Neotestamentica et Semitica: Studies in Honour of Matthew Black* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1969), 15–29. For the interpretation of Abraham in early Christian tradition (including the New Testament), see Jeffrey S. Siker, *Disinheriting the Jews: Abraham in Early Christian Controversy* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991); also, for Paul, Roy A. Harrisville, *The Figure of Abraham in the Epistles of St. Paul: In the Footsteps of Abraham* (San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press, 1992). There is considerable literature on the figure of Abraham

in individual works from the New Testament and early Christianity. On the interpretation of Isaac in the New Testament, see J. Edwin Wood, "Isaac Typology in the New Testament," *New Testament Studies* 14 (1968): 583–89; L. Sabourin, "Isaac and Jesus in the Targums and the NT," *Religious Studies Bulletin* 1 (1981): 37–45; James Swetnam, *Jesus and Isaac: A Study of the Epistle to the Hebrews in the Light of the Aqedah*, *Analecta Biblica*, 94 (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1981). For a broad overview of the interpretation of the *Aqedah* in Christianity, see David Lerch, *Isaaks Opferung, christlich gedeutet: Eine auslegungsgeschichtliche Untersuchung*, *Beiträge zur Historischen Theologie*, 12 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1950). See also the bibliography in the following footnote.

<sup>10</sup>Jewish tradition is somewhat more ambivalent about this, regarding the story as in part a repudiation of human sacrifice and an affirmation of the worth of human life. Although Jewish sources accept the notion of substitutionary atonement and apply it to the *Aqedah* (e.g. see the commentary on Gen 22 by Babya ben Asher *ylava*), they do not generally view martyrdom as exclusively positive (certainly not to the degree found in Christian hagiographic and martyrological literature). For they also place one of their highest values on the sacrality of human life. On the whole topic of child sacrifice in early Judaism and Christianity, see Levenson, *Death and Resurrection*; for a different point of view, see Delaney, *Abraham on Trial*, especially chapters 3–4.

Some have questioned the existence of pre-Christian Jewish interpretation of the *Aqedah* as a form of substitutionary atonement: Philip R. Davies and Bruce Chilton, "The *Aqedah*: A Revised Tradition History," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 40 (1978): 514–46; Bruce D. Chilton, "Isaac and the Second Night: A Consideration," *Biblical* 61 (1980): 78–88; Philip R. Davies, "Passover and the Dating of the *Aqedah*," *Journal of Jewish Studies* (1979): 59–67; and Bruce D. Chilton, "Recent Discussion of the *Aqedah*," in *Targumic Approaches to the Gospels: Essays in the Mutual Definition of Judaism and Christianity*, Bruce Chilton, *Studies in Judaism* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1986), 39–49.

Israel Levi, Hans-Joachim Schoeps, Geza Vermes, Roger Le Déaut and Robert J. Daly have supported the opposite position, that (even prior to the New Testament) Jews associated the *Aqedah* with substitutionary atonement: see Robert J. Daly, "The Soteriological

Significance of the Sacrifice of Isaac,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 39 (1977): 45–75 (with references to earlier bibliography on pp. 47–9). See also Robert Hayward, “The Present State of Research Into the Targumic Account of the Sacrifice of Isaac,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 32 (1981): 127–50. Fundamental is Geza Vermes, “Redemption and Genesis XXII: The Binding of Isaac and the Sacrifice of Jesus,” in *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism: Haggadic Studies*, ed. P. A. H. de Boer, *Studia Post-Biblica* (Leiden: Brill, 1961), 193–227, who established the argument on behalf of a pre-Christian atonement tradition. Vermes has utilized a recently discovered fragment of *Gen.* 22 from Qumran to support his position: “New Light on the Sacrifice of Isaac from 4Q225,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 47 (1996): 140–46. For critiques of Vermes (though not siding with Chilton and Davies), see Alan F. Segal, “The *Aqedah*: Some Reconsiderations,” in *Geschichte - Tradition - Reflexion: Festschrift für Martin Hengel zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. Hubert Cancik, Hermann Lichtenberger, and Peter Schäfer (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1996), 99–116; and Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “The Sacrifice of Isaac in Qumran Literature,” *Biblica* 83 (2002): 211–29. In his fundamental work, Jon Levenson has argued for a very ancient tradition: see *Death and Resurrection*, 176ff. The evidence of the book of Jubilees 17–18 (together with suggestive elements from the newly discovered Qumran fragment) remains very strong, supporting some version of the position of Vermes, *et al.*

In any case, by the time of the rabbis, the association of the *Aqedah* with substitutionary atonement had found clear and definitive acceptance, albeit rarely with the full confidence and gusto of Christian interpreters. Robert Hayward argues against the Chilton/Davis thesis that this later Jewish tradition developed in response to Christian atonement theology: “The Sacrifice of Isaac and Jewish Polemic Against Christianity,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 52 (1990): 292–306. Robin M. Jensen suggests that Jews in late antiquity (rabbinic period) understood the *Aqedah* as an expiatory atonement for the future sins of the people of Israel that could serve in the stead of the Temple cultic system; on the other hand, early Christians understood the *Aqedah* as a metaphor for Christ’s sacrifice. That is, for Jews, the *Aqedah* replaced the Temple rituals and sacrifices; for Christians, the sacrifice of Christ replaced the *Aqedah*: Jensen, “Binding or Sacrifice.” For the continuing importance of the *Aqedah* as a theological predecessor for the crucifixion of Jesus, see Ted Peters, “Isaac, Jesus, and Divine Sacrifice,” *Dialog* 34 (1995): 52–56. On the other hand, R.W.L.

Moberly sees not the crucifixion, but rather the call to discipleship, as the major locus of influence of the *Aqedah* in the New Testament: Moberly, “Christ as the Key,” 170–73.

<sup>11</sup>The Qur’an does not identify the son, but later Muslim interpreters divide into two camps (one favoring Isaac, the other, Ishmael), with the proponents of Ishmael eventually triumphing. For a review of the Islamic literature, see the following: Reuven Firestone, “Abraham’s Son as the Intended Sacrifice (*al-Dhabāb*, Qur’an 37:99–113): Issues in Qur’anic Exegesis,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 34 (1989): 95–131; Suliman Bashear, “Abraham’s Sacrifice of His Son and Related Issues,” *Islam* 67 (1990): 243–77; Jacques Doukhan, “The *Aqedah* at the ‘Crossroad’: Its Significance in the Jewish-Christian-Muslim Dialogue,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 32 (1994): 29–40; and Caspi and Cohen, *Binding*, 54–122. See also Delaney, *Abraham on Trial*. For an attempt at comparing the rabbinic understanding of the *Aqedah* (and of God) as inherently elusive and mysterious with a similar interpretation found in the Qur’an, see Aryeh Botwinick, “Political Abuse of a Biblical Paradigm: The Case of the *Akeidah*,” *Telos* 33 (2002): 7–54.

<sup>12</sup>In this article, I use the pronouns, “It,” “Its,” and “Itself” to refer to God. I realize that many people differ on the use of such pronouns in English and the proper translation of the Hebrew pronoun, *hu’* (= אלה), into English. In English, “it” does not solely indicate non-human entities (inanimate objects, plants, and certain animals), but also persons whose gender “is unspecified, unknown, or irrelevant” (*American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed, 2000): e.g. “Tell me who **it** is.” In Hebrew, *hu’* (“he”) and *hi’* (אִי) = “she”) indicate both persons and inanimate objects, depending on the gender of the referent noun. While Hebrew nouns and pronouns divide into male and female categories, that did not mean that those words possessed male and female characteristics. Further, *hu’* (pointed by the Masoretes as *hi(w’)* = אִי) can often mean “she” in the Bible (e.g. Gen 3:16), especially in the Pentateuch. So the pronoun *hu’* did not definitively indicate God’s gender, or whether God even had a gender.

<sup>13</sup>Immanuel Kant was one of the earliest to critique Gen 22 and Abraham’s behavior. See the discussions in Emil L. Fackenheim, *Encounters Between Judaism and Modern Philosophy: A Preface to Future Jewish Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 33–35; Jon D. Levenson, “Abusing Abraham: Traditions, Religious Histories, and Modern Misinterpretations,” *Judaism* 47 (1998): 259–62 and *passim*;

Berel Dov Lerner, "Saving the *Akedah* from the Philosophers," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 27, no. 3 (July-September 1999): 167–73.

<sup>14</sup>With the exception of some traditions in the Middle Ages: See n. 4 above. Likewise there are Christian traditions in which Jesus survives, particularly among the Gnostics.

<sup>15</sup>Jews have also frequently complained and lamented to God. For example, Psalm 13 describes a person prayerfully crying out to God, because God has forgotten them. In a Yiddish song by Shimon Shmuel Frug, "*Zamd un Shtern*" ("Sand and Stars"), the singer complains to God that God had fulfilled the promise to Abraham in the matter of sand, but "where are the stars?" For more on Frug and this reference, see the article in the *Encyclopedia Judaica* (*Cecil Roth, Encyclopaedia Judaica* [Jerusalem; New York: Encyclopaedia Judaica; Macmillan, 1971–72]): "Frug, Shimon Shmuel." This song is well-known, and there are many recordings of it. For the tradition of arguing with God in Judaism, see Anson Laytner, *Arguing with God: A Jewish Tradition* (Northvale, NJ: J. Aronson, 1990).

<sup>16</sup>Some commentators object strongly to what they regard as an anachronistic critique of sacrifice in the ancient world, including the anticipated sacrifice of Gen 22: e.g. Moberly, "Christ as the Key," 156–57; Levenson, "Abusing Abraham." In some regards, they are quite right, especially when dealing with historical questions. Yet, while we must understand the historical and cultural contexts which make possible certain practices, in the end, we have no choice but to make some kind of ethical judgments, especially since many of us (especially those active in congregations) use these stories to guide our own lives. Obviously, circumstances mitigate culpability, but they do not serve as total pardons. Nor do they exempt us from the process of thoughtful discernment in which we as moral beings must engage.

<sup>17</sup>*Das Opfer des Abraham: Mit Texten von Luther, Kierkegaard, Kolakowski und Bildern von Rembrandt*, Kaiser Traktate, 6 (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1971), 28. For a summary of Von Rad's views on the *Aqedah* (including the passages cited here), see David C. Hopkins, "Between Promise and Fulfillment: Von Rad and the 'Sacrifice of Abraham,'" *Biblische Zeitschrift* 24 (1980) 180–193.

<sup>18</sup>*Old Testament Theology*, (Based on *Theologie des Alten Testaments: Einführung in die evangelische Theologie*, 1, 2 vols., 2nd ed., Munich: Kaiser, 1957–1960), 1. *The Theology of Israel's Historical Traditions*. 2. *The Theology of Israel's Prophetic Traditions*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1962–65), 1:174. James

Crenshaw also puts it eloquently: “Having already turned his back on the past, Abraham hears a command to give up the future. Nothing is left for him now but the living present . . .” *A Whirlpool of Torment: Israelite Tradition of God as an Oppressive Presence*, Overtures to Biblical Theology, 12 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 19.

<sup>19</sup>Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, (Originally published as *Das erste Buch Mose, Genesis*: Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1956), trans. John H. Marks, The Old Testament Library (London: SCM, 1961), 239.

<sup>20</sup>Some have suggested that God did not know Abraham’s potential response in Gen 22 and used the test as a learning experience about humanity (Abraham specifically): Terence E. Fretheim, “God, Abraham, and the Abuse of Isaac,” *Word & World* 15 (1995): 53–56.

<sup>21</sup>This may explain why some interpreters, including the great biblical exegete, Gerhard von Rad have viewed Abraham, not Isaac, as the true sacrifice in the passage: See the discussion in von Rad, *Genesis*, 230–40; with commentary on von Rad by Moberly, “Christ as the Key,” 163–70.

<sup>22</sup>Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1974). Others have sought to confirm the results of Milgram’s experiments. See the nurse study, in which a vast majority of nurses were willing to endanger patients when doctors ordered them to give excessively large doses of a drug: Charles K. Hofling et al., “An Experimental Study in Nurse-Physician Relationships,” *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 143 (1966): 171–80. Cf. the study where over half the sample of nurses admitted in a questionnaire that they had complied with a doctor’s orders even though they regarded those orders as unsafe: Annamarie Krackow and Thomas Blass, “When Nurses Obey or Defy Inappropriate Physician Orders: Attributional Differences,” *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality* 10 (1995): 585–94. (Thanks to Thomas Zentall of the University of Kentucky for the nurse study references.)

<sup>23</sup>In fact, Milgram conducted this experiment because many of his contemporaries denied that people would continue to obey immoral commands. Consequently, his experiment serves as a sober reminder of humanity’s potential for unquestioning obedience and the consequent suffering that ensues. In fact, how much does Abraham’s behavior in Genesis 22 differ from that of the subjects of the Milgram experiment? Personally, I am glad that Milgram did what he did, but

recognize that this experiment may serve far better as a one-time event than a recurring procedure. And, in fact, that is how some commentators view Gen 22 as well--an event not for repetition or imitation (see n. 6 above): God did this once, but no more.

<sup>24</sup>For both an ethical and methodological critique of Milgram, see Diana Baumrind, "Some Thoughts on the Ethics of Research After Reading Milgram's *Behavioral Study of Obedience*," *American Psychologist* (1964): 421-23; see Milgram's response, "Issues in the Study of Obedience: A Reply to Baumrind," *American Psychologist* (1964): 848-52. (Thanks to Karyn McKenzie of Georgetown College for these references.) In 1971, Philip Zimbardo conducted an experiment in which volunteers played the roles of prisoners and guards in a simulated prison, known as the Stanford Prison Experiment. The participants involved themselves in their parts to such an extent that humiliation, abuse, and violence ensued. Zimbardo had to suspend the experiment. (Thanks to Mike Nichols for alerting me to the importance of this experiment) Both the experiments of Milgram and Zimbardo led to a response by the American Psychological Association in 1982 that established institutional review boards in which the well-being of the participants took precedence over the potential benefits of the research and which strongly discouraged the use of deception as an experimental tool.

<sup>25</sup>For this and similar reasons, some might regard Abraham and the other family members who succeed him as tragic figures: Philip L. Quinn, "Agamemnon and Abraham: The Tragic Dilemma of Kierkegaard's Knight of Faith," *Literature and Theology* 4 (1990): 181-93. For tragedy and biblical narrative in general, see Cheryl Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative: Arrows of the Almighty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

<sup>26</sup>For the aggadic tradition on the death of Sarah, see Ginzberg, *Legends*, 1:286-91. For a list of references to Sarah's grief-stricken reaction, see Ginzberg, *Legends*, 5:255, n. 256.

<sup>27</sup>For more on **seeing**, see pp. 81-2. For a view of sight that differs considerably from this, see the very provocative and thoughtful essay of Steinmetz, *Father to Son*, 50-85.

<sup>28</sup>Since Freud's use of the Oedipus story to describe family structures that he observed among his patients, which he came to see as a universal phenomenon, considerable discussion has ensued not only among psychoanalysts and psychologists, but also among anthropologists and others. For a review of the Oedipus complex in

world folk literature, see Lowell Edmunds, *Oedipus: The Ancient Legend and Its Later Analogues* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985); Allen W. Johnson and Douglass Price-Williams, *Oedipus Ubiquitous: The Family Complex in World Folk Literature* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996).

<sup>29</sup>For an interesting, though rather one-dimensional, example of psychoanalytic interpretation of the *Aqedah*, see Erich Wellisch, *Isaac and Oedipus: A Study in Biblical Psychology of the Sacrifice of Isaac, the Akedah* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1954). David Bakan suggests that the desire to kill children, including that of Abraham in Gen 22, stems from a universal, human, infanticidal impulse that resists the integration of the individual (“agency”) and the group (“communion”). The child represents that very integration which the parents and community find threatening: *The Duality of Human Existence: Isolation and Communion in Western Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), 205–10. Martin S. Bergmann considers the *Aqedah* an attempt to eradicate human sacrifice, ultimately leading to other kinds of psychological sacrifice that the superego demands. The Oedipus Complex and Laius Complex stem from the repressed hostilities of parents to children, and children to parents, which the abolition of human sacrifice only channeled in a different direction: *In the Shadow of Moloch: The Sacrifice of Children and Its Impact on Western Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992). Dorothy Zeligs suggests that for many fathers, sons (including Isaac) function as the reembodiment of the grandfather in the life of the father. She understands this as the motivation for the infanticidal impulse (a reliving of the Oedipal contest): *Psychoanalysis and the Bible: A Study in Depth of Seven Leaders* (New York: Bloch, 1974), 32. Some authors observe that the traditional Jewish sources often portray Abraham as aggressively seeking to kill Isaac: Spiegel, *Last Trial*; and Niehoff, “Return of Myth.” (who relates the phenomenon to psychoanalytical interpretation). For a discussion of psychoanalytic approaches to biblical narrative, including Gen 22, see Yael Feldman, “Recurrence and Sublimation,” in *Approaches to Teaching the Hebrew Bible as Literature in Translation*, ed. Barry N. Olshen and Yael S. Feldman, *Approaches to Teaching World Literature*, 25 (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1989), 78–82.

<sup>30</sup>So Michael Lerner, *Jewish Renewal: Path to Healing and Transformation* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 41–46.

<sup>31</sup>See Part 2.



Korn, “Tselem Elokim,” 23ff; Levenson, “Abusing Abraham,” 268–69; Lerner, “Saving the *Akedah* (who rejects the entire philosophical enterprise of using philosophy to interpret the Bible); and Botwinick, “Political Abuse.” See also Martin Buber, *Eclipse of God: Studies in the Relation Between Religion and Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1952), 115–20; for useful discussion of Buber and Kierkegaard, see the student essay of Aimee Zeltzer, “An Existential Investigation: Buber’s Critique of Kierkegaard’s Teleological ‘Suspension of the Ethical,’” in *Church Divinity*, ed. John H. Morgan (Bristol, IN: Wyndham Hall, 1987), 138–54. Ronald Green has argued that Kierkegaard interprets the *Aqedah* as a Christian text and that it therefore does not accord in any way with Jewish interpretations of the story: “Abraham, Isaac, and the Jewish Tradition: An Ethical Reappraisal,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 10 (1982): 1–21; *Religion and Moral Reason: A New Method for Comparative Study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 84–102.

<sup>36</sup>For the substance of this paragraph, see Botwinick, “Political Abuse,” 34ff. (with specific references to *Fear and Trembling*).

<sup>37</sup>Leo Strauss as quoted in Botwinick, “Political Abuse,” 35, n. 65; Leo Strauss, “The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy,” *Independent Journal of Philosophy/ Unabhängige Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 3 (1979), 111–118.

<sup>38</sup>For fuller discussion of negative theology and the *Aqedah* in Jewish sources, see Botwinick, “Political Abuse.” For negative theology in Christianity, see Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); also “Apophatic Theology,” in F. L. Cross, ed., E. A. Livingstone, third edition edited by, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 88.

<sup>39</sup>For possible interpretations of the role of Sarah, see Tribble, “Genesis 22”; and W. Lee Humphreys, “Where’s Sarah? Echoes of a Silent Voice in the *Akedah*,” *Soundings* 81 (1998): 491–512. On later interpretive traditions about Sarah (especially Christian homilies in Syriac), see Sebastian P. Brock, “Genesis 22: Where Was Sarah?” *Expository Times* 96 (October 1984): 14–17; and Sebastian P. Brock, “Reading Between the Lines: Sarah and the Sacrifice of Isaac (Genesis, Chapter 22),” in *Women in Ancient Societies: An Illusion of the Night*, ed. Léonie J. Archer, Susan Fischler, and Maria Wyke (London: Macmillan, 1994), 169–80.

<sup>40</sup>In rabbinic tradition, Ben Azzai regarded the statement that God created humanity in God's image as the most important verse in Torah (Gen 5:1): See *Sifra* 89b; *Genesis Rabbah* 24:7; also Gen 1:26-27, 9:6. In this context, to love God without loving others (especially one's family) makes no sense

<sup>41</sup>For this reason, some feminists have criticized Abraham and Kierkegaard, because they give priority to principles over persons: Owen J. Flanagan, Jr., "Virtue, Sex, and Gender: Some Philosophical Reflections on the Moral Psychology Debate," *Ethics* 92 (1982): 501-02; Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 104-05; Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Caring to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 43-44. See also Delaney, *Abraham on Trial*. For discussion of this material, see Lee, "Abraham in a Different Voice," 391ff.

<sup>42</sup>The television show, "Law and Order," recently aired an episode, in which a priest killed a drug dealer, because the voice of God came to him during prayer and told him to shoot him.

<sup>43</sup>For discussion of Isaac's age, see Part 2.

<sup>44</sup>Many rabbinic sources portray Isaac as a willing participant in the apparent sacrifice, and even a martyr. See the sources mentioned in n. 4.

<sup>45</sup>For an affirmative answer, see the response of Alice Miller: *The Untouched Key: Tracing Childhood Trauma in Creativity and Destructiveness*, trans. Hildegard Hannum and Hunter Hannum (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 137-45. She examines numerous visual renderings of *Genesis* 22 and observes no evidence of doubt on the part of Abraham or resistance on the part of Isaac, suggesting that the artists fully identified with the father killing his son. See also Fretheim, "Abuse of Isaac"; and Burton L. Visotzky, *The Genesis of Ethics* [New York: Crown Publishers, 1996], 101-11.

In addition to glossing the culpability of the parent, this portrayal idealizes the submissive behavior of the victim. To quote Miller, when do we stop obeying the commandment: "Thou shalt not be aware": *Untouched Key*, 145; see also her book, *Thou Shalt not be Aware: Society's Betrayal of the Child*, 2nd ed. [1st ed., 1990], trans. Hildegard Hannum and Hunter Hannum [London: Pluto, 1998]). The Israeli writer, Shlomo Giora Shoham, a father who lost his son in the Yom Kippur War of 1973, referred to Isaac as a "willful victim" and

termed the phenomenon of youth who willingly accept sacrifice the "Isaac Syndrome": "The Isaac Syndrome," *American Imago* 33 (1976): 329–49; *The Myth of Tantalus: A Scaffolding for an Ontological Personality Theory* (St. Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1979), 299–316. For analysis of his thinking, see Yael Feldman, "Isaac or Oedipus? Jewish Tradition and the Israeli *Aqedah*," in *Biblical Studies/Cultural Studies: The Third Sheffield Colloquium*, ed. J. Cheryl Exum and Stephen D. Moore, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series, 266/ Gender, Culture, Theory, 7 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 178–81.

<sup>46</sup>The World War I English poet, Wilfrid Owen, wrote these poignant words in his poem, "The Parable of the Old Men and the Young": "So Abraham rose, and clave the wood, and went/ And took the fire with him, and a knife. / And as they sojourned both of them together, Isaac the first-born spake and said, My Father,/ Behold the preparations, fire and iron,/ But where the lamb for this burnt-offering? Then Abram bound the youth with belts and straps,/ And builded parapets and trenches there, And stretched forth the knife to slay his son./ When lo! an angel called out of heaven,/ Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad,/ Neither do anything to him. Behold,/ A ram, caught in a thicket by its horns;/ Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him./ But the old man would not so, but slew his son,/ And half the seed of Europe, one by one."

<sup>47</sup>On the centrality of sacrificial language, see Gordon J. Wenham, "The *Akedah*: A Paradigm of Sacrifice," in *Pomegranates and Golden Bells: Studies in Biblical, Jewish, and Near Eastern Ritual, Law, and Literature in Honor of Jacob Milgrom*, ed. David P. Wright, David Noel Freedman, and Avi Hurvitz (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1995). See also Stanley D. Walters, "Wood, Sand, and Stars: Structure and Theology in Gn 22:1–19," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 3 (1987): 301–30. For the anthropological study of sacrifice, still important is René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, (Originally published as *La violence et le sacré*: Paris: B. Grassert, 1972), trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), in which sacrifice serves as an alternative to human violence.

<sup>48</sup>See the discussion of the Oedipal complex above on p. 82.

<sup>49</sup>The *Aqedah* forms one of the major themes of modern Israeli literature. For fuller discussion and references to stories and poems, see Michael Brown, "Biblical Myth and Contemporary Experience: The *Akedah* in Modern Jewish Literature," *Judaism* 31 (1982): 99–111;

Edna Amir Coffin, "The Binding of Isaac in Modern Israeli Literature," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 22, no. 3 (1983): 428–45; Glenda Abramson, "The Reinterpretation of the *Akedah* in Modern Hebrew Poetry," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 41 (1990): 101–14; and Feldman, "Isaac or Oedipus."

<sup>50</sup>As quoted from the articles cited in n. 49 above. See also the statement of a young Israeli soldier in 1967: "We are a generation marked by doubt and skepticism. All we have left are contradictions and a faith in ruins. What can we still believe in? I want to know. I want to know where I am going what I am fighting for. I refuse to be an eternal Isaac mounting the altar of sacrifice without asking or understanding why . . .": referenced in Saul Friedländer, *When Memory Comes*, trans. Helen R. Lane (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1978), 57.

<sup>51</sup>Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993) discusses all the references below in illuminating detail: Chapter 1. See also Crenshaw, *Whirlpool*, 10–12. For a discussion of child sacrifice from a psychoanalytical point of view, see Bergmann, *Shadow of Moloch*. For the practice of child sacrifice in the ancient Near East, see Alberto Ravinell Whitney Green, *The Role of Human Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East*, American Schools of Oriental Research Dissertation Series, 1 (Missoula, MO: Scholars Press, 1975); Westermann, *Genesis*, 357–58; George C. Heider, *The Cult of Molek: A Reassessment*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series, 43 (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1985); John Day, *Molech: A God of Human Sacrifice in the Old Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Joseph J. Prentiss, "The Sacrifice of Isaac: A Comparative View," in *The Bible in Light of Cuneiform Literature: Scripture in Context III*, ed. William W. Hallo, Bruce Williams Jones, and Gerald L. Mattingly, Ancient Near Eastern Texts and Studies, 8 (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1990), 203–30.

<sup>52</sup>Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son* also cites two other texts, Isaiah 30:30-33 and Micah 6:6-8: pp. 9ff.

<sup>53</sup>Greek myth preserves other stories similar to the *Aqedah* (transforming human sacrifice), including one where the father (Athamas) goes to the top of a high mountain to sacrifice his son (Phrixus) in response to a sham oracle fabricated by a stepmother (Ino). At the last minute, Heracles saves the day, and a golden ram carries off

the son to Colchis where Phrixus sacrifices it in gratitude: Apollodorus, *Library*, 1.9.1-2, 3.4.3; and Hans Christoph Ackermann and Jean-Robert Gisler, eds., *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* (Zurich; Munich: Artemis Verlag, 1981-), 2:950-53. For discussion of this material, see Hugh C. White, "The Initiation Legend of Isaac," *Zeitschrift für Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 91 (1979): 1-30.

<sup>54</sup>The latter may represent a minority view, but it exists within the biblical texts themselves.

<sup>55</sup>"Abraham's Sacrifice of Faith: A Form-Critical Study of Genesis 22," *Interpretation* 27 (1973): 397-98.

<sup>56</sup>"Abraham's Sacrifice," 398, n. 11.

<sup>57</sup>For this reason, the description of Abraham's actions as "somnabulistic" rings true: See James L. Crenshaw, "Journey Into Oblivion: A Structural Analysis of Gen. 22. 22:1-19," *Soundings* 58 (1975): 248.

<sup>58</sup>Lippman Bodoff has suggested that Abraham stalled his departure, his journey, and his preparations in the hope that God would rescind God's order: "The Real Test of the *Akedah*: Blind Obedience Versus Moral Choice," *Judaism* 42 (1993): 71-92; "God Tests Abraham - Abraham Tests God," *Bible Review* 9, no. 5 (October 1993): 53-56, 62. Bodoff also argues that God hoped that Abraham would object to the horrifying request; so also Lee, "Abraham in a Different Voice"; Omri Boehm, "The Binding of Isaac: An Inner-Biblical Polemic on the Question of 'Disobeying' a Manifestly Illegal Order," *Vetus Testamentum* 52 (2002): 9-12.

<sup>59</sup>See the materials above in n. 24 above for literature on obedience and authority.

<sup>60</sup>See the wonderful, humorous version of Gen 22 that Woody Allen provides: William Novak and Moshe Waldoks, edited and annotated by, *The Big Book of Jewish Humor* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 220. Allen puts two appropos statements into the mouth of God: 'Never mind what I said,' "the Lord spake," 'Doth thou [Abraham] listen to every crazy idea that comes thy way?'; and "And the Lord said, 'It proves that some men will follow any orders no matter how asinine as long as it comes from a resonant, well-modulated voice.'"

<sup>61</sup>For another view of this passage, see Eisen, "Education," who sees Gen 18 as a Socratic dialogue initiated by God to teach Abraham.

<sup>62</sup>He does not even bother to mention his nephew, Lot, and Lot's family, who lived in Sodom.

<sup>63</sup>See Ex 4:10.

<sup>64</sup>For discussion of these texts, see Crenshaw, *Whirlpool*, 18–19.

<sup>65</sup>von Rad, *Genesis*, 238–39.

<sup>66</sup>Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian Press, 1976). See also my own work on religious symbolism: Laurence H. Kant, *The Interpretation of Religious Symbols in the Graeco-Roman World: A Case Study of Early Christian Fish Symbolism*, Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University (1993).

<sup>67</sup>As the words of Isaiah suggest, “You are indeed a God who concealed yourself” (45:15): *rTšhī l aē hTā' k̄æ*; = 'akhen 'atah 'el *mistater*.