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FEAR AND TREMBLING: KIERKEGAARD'S CHRISTIAN WORK

Jerome I. Gellman

The purpose of this paper is to show that the various layers of meaning in Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* are embedded in a hidden, new Christian communication. I trace the traditional Christian understanding of the "sacrifice of Isaac," in which Isaac is the prefiguration of Jesus, and then argue that Kierkegaard departed from this traditional teaching to make Abraham the Christ-figure of the story. To Kierkegaard, Abraham is the true sacrifice of the story.

Soren Kierkegaard went to some trouble to alert the reader of *Fear and Trembling* to a hidden message within its covers. There is the Pseudonym, "Johannes de Silentio," suggesting that the author is remaining silent about something, although he writes much. Then there is the addition on the title page that reads: "What Tarquinius Superbus spoke in his garden with the poppies was understood by his son, but not by the messenger." This refers to when the son of Tarquinius Superbus sent a messenger to ask his father what he, the son, should do with the people of Gabii. The father walked with the messenger in the garden, and as they spoke removed the heads of the tallest poppies with his cane. The son understood from this how to proceed. He was to put to death the leaders of Gabii. The author of *Fear and Trembling*, too, is suggesting that we must pay attention to what he is doing as he speaks to us, if we hope to get the message.

What is Kierkegaard's hidden message? The usual wisdom says that *Fear and Trembling* contains a hidden message to or about Regina, Kierkegaard's former fiancée. Kierkegaard broke with Regina on October 11, 1841, and published *Fear and Trembling* just two years later. During the period of 1841-1843 his diaries are full of references to Regina, and Kierkegaard's renunciation of her. Thus, *Fear and Trembling* is really about Kierkegaard's Abrahamic giving up of his Isaac, Regina.

Ronald Green has moved out of the conventional wisdom about the hidden message, advancing an original understanding of Kierkegaard's work. Green argues for a hidden message in Kierkegaard's work, one which Kierkegaard himself may not have been aware of and only unconsciously intended. That secret message had to do with the relationship between Soren Kierkegaard, the son, and the father, Michael Pederson Kierkegaard. For Green, the father-son setting of the *Fear and Trembling* pertains to the very essence of the message for Kierkegaard. This message



has to do with the fact that Kierkegaard's father felt himself damned for sins he had committed, and that Kierkegaard the son grew up under the cloud of that feeling of misfortune. The Abraham story, says Green, became a metaphor for Kierkegaard's working out his relationship to his father's sinfulness, and his own. This is worked out in terms of Kierkegaard's thoughts on sin, forgiveness and grace.¹

Others see in Kierkegaard's book a perhaps not so-hidden working out of a Christian ethic, or of an out-and-out theology of forgiveness.² Green has argued quite convincingly that Kierkegaard's work is best understood as comprised of layers of meaning, where each lower layer illuminates those above it.³ In keeping with that spirit, I do not wish to deny an implicit connection between *Fear and Trembling* and Kierkegaard's broken engagement to Regina. Neither do I wish to question Green's insights into Kierkegaard's relationship to his father and Kierkegaard's occupation with sin and forgiveness, nor the themes of Christian ethics and forgiveness-theology. I do want to argue, though, that the hidden, as well as the not so-hidden themes in this work are deeply embedded inside a matrix of a disguised Christian theological message. I contend that Kierkegaard conveys a veiled Christian message that appears to be entirely new in the history of Christian thought. That, however, is not likely the reason why Kierkegaard obscures it. As we shall see, the obscuring of the message more likely has to do with Kierkegaard's conception of himself as an author in writing this work.

I

To appreciate Kierkegaard's hidden Christian communication in *Fear and Trembling*, we must attend to the traditional Christian treatment of the sacrifice of Isaac. Traditionally, Isaac, in his near-sacrifice and salvation, prefigures the death and resurrection of Jesus. Isaac is the "Christ-figure" of the *aqeda*. Green has shown that Kierkegaard was familiar with this treatment of the story before he wrote *Fear and Trembling*.⁴ Unlike Jesus, Isaac does not die. Unlike Abraham, God completes the sacrifice of his son, Jesus. Some scholars have argued that Paul based his theology of the expiatory sacrifice of Jesus upon the Jewish understanding of Isaac's near-sacrifice as expiatory for the Jewish people.⁵ G. Vermes has argued that there was a well-developed Jewish theology of expiation concerning Isaac's sacrifice available to Paul.⁶ Not all scholars endorse these claims, however. Scholars do agree, though, that there are several references in the Christian Testament to the theme of Isaac's prefiguration of Jesus.

Scholars have noted several references, explicit or oblique, in the Christian Testament to the sacrifice of Isaac, suggesting Jesus as the new Isaac. Jon Levenson sees an early reference of this sort in John the Baptist's description of Jesus as God's "beloved son" (Mark 1:11, Matt 3:17, Luke 3:22, 2 Peter 1:17). The Greek term for "beloved" here is the same as used by the Septuagint in Genesis 22 to render the thrice-appearing Hebrew "yahid" (literally, "single"), as applied to Isaac.⁷

In John 3:16 we find, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have

everlasting life." This echoes God's command to Abraham to sacrifice his "only" son.⁸ Also the words that God loved "the world" fit a fulfillment of Abraham's near sacrifice, since God told Abraham, after the sacrifice episode, that "all the nations of the world" shall be blessed in his seed (Gen 22: 18). Abraham had not carried through with the sacrifice, and the world was blessed through his seed. Now, by allowing the sacrifice of His son to go through, God was bringing a new and larger blessing to the world through His seed.

In Patristic thought, as we shall see below, the theme continued to develop of Isaac prefiguring Jesus' sacrifice, by reference to Isaac carrying the wood for his sacrifice. This became a prototype for Jesus carrying his wooden cross to the crucifixion. In particular this is based on the Gospel of John that has Jesus, and not Simon, carrying the cross (John, 19:17). Also, John uniquely portrays Jesus as "bound" during the Passion (John 18: 12, 24), just as Isaac was bound at his sacrifice.⁹ Some scholars have seen a reference to the sacrifice of Isaac also in John 1, where John proclaims Jesus to be "the lamb of God" as well as "the son of God."¹⁰ This connects up with the sometime identification of Isaac as a sacrificial lamb, and to Jesus' being God's son, who is to be sacrificed.¹¹

Vermes and Levenson, respectively, have argued that the connection between Isaac and Jesus surfaces as well in Galatians 3: 6-29. Vermes cites verses 13 and 14: "Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us...That the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ; that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith." Vermes says Paul had in mind Genesis 22:18, where God tells Abraham that the nations of the world shall be blessed in the seed, Isaac, whom Abraham was willing to sacrifice. So are the Gentiles to be blessed through the Son that God has sacrificed. Levenson focuses on verse 16: "Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as one, And to thy seed, which is Christ."¹² Once again, there is a parallel set up between Abraham's seed, meaning Isaac, and God's seed.

Vermes sees a similar connection between Isaac and the sacrifice of Jesus, in Acts 3:25-6, where Peter says, "Ye are the children of the prophets, and of the covenant which God made with our fathers, saying unto Abraham, And in thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed. Unto you first God, having raised up his Son Jesus, sent him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from his iniquities."¹³

Finally, in Romans 8:32, Paul writes of God: "He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all." This closely parallels the language of Genesis 22:16, where the angel praises Abraham for not having "withheld thy son, thine only son."¹⁴ So the Christian Testament attests well to the theme of Jesus as the Isaac-sacrifice.

A second theme in the Christian Testament is of Isaac as a prefiguration of the resurrection of Jesus. The clearest instance of this is Hebrews 11:17-19, where Paul writes, "By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac: and he that had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, Of whom it was said, That in Isaac shall thy seed be called: Accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead; from

whence also he received him in a figure." Here, Abraham's faith is his belief that God will bring Isaac back to life after Abraham has committed the sacrifice. The resurrection of "Isaac" is postponed, to be realized in Jesus. Some see as well in the words "in a figure" a reference to Isaac as portending the resurrection of Jesus.

Given this Pauline imaging of the resurrection by the sacrifice of Isaac, scholars are accustomed to seeing other references to this theme in the Pauline writings. For example, Wood suggests that the Isaac typology might have influenced I Corinthians 15:4, where Jesus is said to have risen on the third day, "according to the scriptures." If this phrase refers to the resurrection being on the third day, it corresponds with the sacrifice of Isaac "on the third day."

The Patristic writings richly developed the motif of Isaac as the prefiguration of Jesus. The following are its recurring themes:

1. Isaac and Jesus as the sacrifice:

Barnabas wrote that Jesus offered himself in sacrifice so that "the type established in Isaac, who was offered upon the altar, might be fulfilled."¹⁵

For Irenaeus, Isaac is a "member" of Jesus, part of the mystery actualized fully in the latter.¹⁶ Irenaeus writes also that Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son "so that God might be pleased to make the sacrifice of His only Son, His beloved..."¹⁷

Origen writes that Abraham's statement to Isaac in Genesis 22:8 "God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering," prophesies that God will provide the lamb for the burnt offering in Christ.¹⁸

2. Isaac carries the wood:

Tertullian praises Isaac for carrying the "wood himself, he was already proclaiming the death of Christ, offered as victim by the Father and carrying the cross of his own passion himself."¹⁹

Clement of Alexandria writes that although Abraham did not actually sacrifice Isaac, "Isaac did, however, at least carry the wood for a sacrifice, as the Lord carried the cross."²⁰

Origen writes, "By the fact that he carried the wood of the holocaust Isaac constitutes a figure. Also Christ bearing his own cross."²¹

3. Isaac is patient or silent:

Cyprian of Carthage wrote that Isaac, who prefigures the Lord as victim, "was found to be patient."²²

Melito of Sardis writes that although Jesus suffered, "Isaac did not

suffer, for he was a type of Christ who was going to suffer." And, Isaac "was silent, bound like a ram, not opening his mouth nor uttering a sound.... He carried with fortitude the figure of the Lord."²³

Christian lore continues these developments. The mountain on which the sacrifice of Isaac took place is identified with Calvary, site of the crucifixion. A Christian pilgrim who saw the rock where it is believed Jesus was crucified, wrote: "Beside this is the altar of Abraham, which is where he intended to offer Isaac..."²⁴ Father Abraham only *intended* to sacrifice his son, whereas Jesus really was sacrificed.

To finish this excursion into the traditional Christian understanding of the sacrifice of Isaac, I should mention that Luther (I remind the reader of Kierkegaard's having been a Lutheran) in his lectures on the sacrifice of Isaac stresses two themes: justification by faith and not by works, and the theme of dying as entry into life. Luther does not make the identification between Isaac and Jesus.²⁵ Rather, Luther opts for an explicit identification of the slaughtered lamb with Jesus: "Nevertheless, it does not seem to have been a rash statement on the part of the fathers when they said that the ram was provided from the beginning of the world; for they knew about Christ, the woman's Seed, and understood this ram to be a figure of Him."²⁶ This identification of Jesus with the lamb intertwines with a traditional Christian theme identifying Jesus with the Paschal lamb sacrifice, offered in the Temple the day (or so, depending on the version of the story) of Jesus' crucifixion.²⁷ The identification of Isaac and Jesus is missing here in Luther. I am about to argue that in Kierkegaard's reading of the Genesis story this identification is not only missing but denied. Might Luther's commentary have set the stage for Kierkegaard's denial of the identification, in having weakened for him the equation of Isaac with Jesus?

II

Turning to Kierkegaard, I want to establish first that there is an intended Christian message in *Fear and Trembling*. Here is the evidence. In *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, Kierkegaard writes that: "The contents of this little book affirm, then, what I truly am as an author, that I am and was a religious author, that the whole of my work as an author is related to Christianity, to the problem 'of becoming a Christian'...."^{28,29} And with specific reference to *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard writes: "...the thought behind the whole work is: what it means to become a Christian."³⁰ Elsewhere in the same work, Kierkegaard refers to the "fear and trembling" required to understand the "character of Christian self-denial."³¹ So here we have a pointer to the book *Fear and Trembling* also having to do with "Christian denial."

In *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, Kierkegaard divides his authorship into three stages: "The first group of writings represents aesthetic productivity, the last group is exclusively religious: between them lies the *Concluding Postscript*. ...The problem of the whole authorship: how to become a Christian."³² In the aesthetic writings, which include *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard says he was perpetrating a "deception."³³ The

deception consisted in this: "It means that one does not begin directly with the matter one wants to communicate.... So...one does not begin thus: I am a Christian; you are not a Christian. Nor does one begin thus: It is Christianity I am proclaiming; and you are living in purely aesthetic categories. No, one begins thus: Let us talk about aesthetics."³⁴ "The deception," writes Kierkegaard, "consists in the fact that one talks thus merely to get to the religious theme."³⁵ And with regard to his work on the sacrifice of Isaac, "As early as the publication of *Fear and Trembling*, the serious observer...to whom one can talk in silence (cf. The pseudonym Johannes - De Silentio), was in a position to discern that this, after all, was a very singular sort of aesthetic production."³⁶ Here is a hint that what is said in silence is indeed the Christian message of the work.

There is a Christian message in *Fear and Trembling*. The author hides it, for fear of losing the reader when faced with an openly Christian theme. Better the reader come to realize on his or her own what the author means to say, by following the author about his garden/writing, attending to what the author does along the way.

III

Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* radically transforms the traditional Christian treatment of the sacrifice of Isaac by making Abraham, not Isaac, the Christ-figure of the story. This, I submit, is the unstated intention of *Fear and Trembling*: to portray Abraham as the "intimation" of Jesus. Isaac drops out of the Christian picture entirely.

In *Training in Christianity*, Kierkegaard proclaims that "To be a follower means that thy life has as great a likeness to His as it is possible for a man's life to have."³⁷ So we are all to strive to become as Christ-like as we can. Hence, Kierkegaard wishes us to become as Abraham-like as we can. Seen in this light, Kierkegaard's (or the pseudonymous author's) repeated avowals in *Fear and Trembling* that he cannot understand Abraham, may be an ironic protest, since in Kierkegaard's eyes Abraham is a paradigmatic imitation of Jesus, and an archetype for all true Christians. Thus, Kierkegaard succeeds in portraying the Christian ideal, at the same time deflecting his true intentions by protestations of Abraham's being incomprehensible to us.

The key to this interpretation of Kierkegaard lies in a comparison between *Fear and Trembling* and Kierkegaard's later work, *Gospel of Sufferings*. The latter belongs to the openly Christian period of Kierkegaard's authorship, and, on my view, makes explicit the hidden message of *Fear and Trembling*. *Gospel of Sufferings* contains a portrayal of Jesus, together with the development of the idea that a person is a "follower" of Jesus insofar as he or she recapitulates the "Christ character" in his or her life.

An appreciation of the Christian meaning of *Fear and Trembling*, emerges by noting the parallels between Kierkegaard's portrayal of Abraham, and Kierkegaard's emphases in his portrayal of Jesus and his "followers" in *Gospel of Sufferings*. To Kierkegaard: (1) Abraham is the One Who Suffers, as was Jesus. They both suffer by being "rejected of men;" (2) Abraham is

the sacrifice in *Fear and Trembling* as was Jesus in his crucifixion. (3) Just as Jesus walks, to the crucifixion, with a heavy step, so does Abraham walk, to his sacrifice, with a heavy step; (4) Just as Jesus was silent, so was Abraham; (5) Abraham has a Dual Nature, as does Jesus.

(1) *Jesus and Abraham Suffer, both Suffering Rejection by Others*
In *Gospel of Sufferings*, Kierkegaard proclaims of Jesus:

He went out into the world, but he did not go as a young man goes from his father's house, he went out from the Father in heaven, and gave up the glory he had from the foundation of the world, yea, from eternity his choice was free, and he came to the world - in order to suffer!³⁸

Kierkegaard thus re-affirms the centrality of Jesus' suffering in the Christian Testament.³⁹ Kierkegaard's *Gospel of Sufferings* is dedicated to a portrayal of Jesus as the Suffering One, and of the apostles and all the Christian faithful after them as followers of Jesus because they suffer, as did Jesus.

Kierkegaard declares that the most significant suffering of Jesus was in his being rejected by "the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes."⁴⁰ Jesus is rejected by the Jews, and on his way to being crucified is beaten and made to wear a crown of thorns. He is spat on and mocked by the crowd. Jesus' suffering on the cross is in the deepest sense the suffering of rejection.

Just so, the apostles and all the Christian faithful after them imitate Jesus in their being rejected and persecuted for their faith.⁴¹ Kierkegaard proclaims that "To be a follower means that thy life has as great a likeness to His as it is possible for a man's life to have."⁴² In what does this "likeness" consist? Kierkegaard's answer is: "Then he [Jesus] says: But you must imitate me, die to the world, suffer for the teaching, be hated by all men."⁴³ The suffering that the Christian Testament refers to specifically, writes Kierkegaard, "is suffering at the hands of men. God wills to be loved - but conversely, loving God must come to mean that you thereby collide with men."⁴⁴

Kierkegaard writes: "And this is Christian piety: to renounce everything in order to serve God alone, to deny oneself everything in order to serve God alone - and then to have to suffer for it, to do good and have to suffer for it."⁴⁵ Indeed, the Christian denies "his own son and daughter" for the love of God, and in so doing "bears his own cross."⁴⁶

Fear and Trembling is a work of rich and subtle themes, all of which transpire within a tale of Abraham's Christian suffering. Kierkegaard says that if he is to talk about Abraham, he must first "depict the pain of his trial."⁴⁷ Abraham suffers Fear and Trembling, anguish and isolation, in passing from belonging to the ethical, the universal, the "public," to an "absolute relation to the absolute." Abraham "dies to the world." In going to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham incurs the censure of the ethical, the universal, the public. In the Hegelian conception of ethics that Kierkegaard accepts, society embodies the ethical.⁴⁸ "Society," therefore, rejects Abraham. Abraham steps out of the ethical to God, and is thereby "hated" by the multitudes. In

their eyes he is a murderer: If Abraham does not act in a suspension of the ethical, which ordinary people cannot but affirm, then, writes Kierkegaard, "the sentence of condemnation is pronounced upon Abraham."⁴⁹ For this Abraham suffers as he passes out of the ethical. This is the key to Abraham's imitation of Jesus.

Jesus walks alone. "The deepest sorrow and suffering," writes Kierkegaard, is, "to walk alone and to walk on one's own."⁵⁰ Walking alone, Kierkegaard writes in *Gospel of Sufferings*, is a Christian virtue because it is an imitation of Christ:

To follow Christ means therefore to deny oneself, and so it means to go *by the same way* as Christ went, in the humble form of a servant, in want and scorn and mockery, not loving the world, and not beloved by it. And so it means *to walk alone*....⁵¹

And:

So the man who chose to follow Christ goes forward on the way.... when the going is heavy, and there are many foes and no friends, then the agony of it may well wring from him the moan: I walk alone.⁵²

Abraham too walks alone. Abraham, the Knight of Faith, "...knows that there winds a solitary path, narrow and steep, he knows that it is terrible to be born outside the universal, to walk without meeting a single traveler."⁵³ The true Knight of Faith, says Kierkegaard, "is always absolute isolation."⁵⁴ Abraham, as Jesus, suffers in being alone.

(2) *Jesus and Abraham are Sacrificed*

To suffer for God, to be rejected by others, to walk alone, is *equivalent*, for Kierkegaard, to being sacrificed and crucified. The apostles, writes Kierkegaard, "*conceiving themselves to be sacrificed*,"⁵⁵ because of their suffering, share the standing of the martyr who thanks God for being "counted worthy to be crucified."⁵⁶ To Kierkegaard, to suffer means to be worthy of sacrifice, and to be worthy of sacrifice is as though to be sacrificed. Jesus, then, is sacrificed not only in the sense of being crucified in the end, but because he suffers for God, is rejected by others, and walks alone.

Abraham suffers as Jesus was to suffer, and thus, in Kierkegaard's equation, Abraham becomes the sacrifice. In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard quotes Luke 14:26 to describe Abraham as one willing to forsake all of those he loves. *Gospel of Sufferings* begins with the very next verse in Luke: "And whosoever does not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple." Abraham goes to his own sacrifice, bearing his cross. For Kierkegaard, then, it is Abraham who "carries the wood," not Isaac. It is noteworthy that in all of *Fear and Trembling* there is no reference to Isaac carrying the wood on the way to the sacrifice. Kierkegaard thus ignores a traditional Christian motif. In the "Prelude" to that work, Kierkegaard omits this element of the story in four different retellings of the "sacrifice of Isaac." He does say, however, that Abraham "laid the wood in order,"

without referring to Abraham's taking the wood from Isaac.⁵⁷ (Might Kierkegaard's Abraham have carried the wood himself??) Isaac does not "carry the wood" for Kierkegaard because Isaac is not the prefiguration of Christ. Abraham is.

(3) *Jesus and Abraham Walk with a Heavy Step*

The faithful, writes Kierkegaard, "call themselves *Bretheren of the Cross*, by which to denote that their way through the world is not as *light as a dance*, but heavy and toilsome, even though their faith be to them also the joy that overcomes the world."⁵⁸ Bretheren of the Cross are such in imitation of Jesus' carrying of his cross. Those who bear a cross walk with a heavy gait.

Just so, concerning Abraham, the Knight of Faith, Kierkegaard writes, "...even the most tried of tragic heroes walks with a *dancing step* compared with the knight of faith, who comes slowly creeping forward."⁵⁹ Abraham goes with a slow and painful gait, as opposed to the Tragic Hero who is understood and loved, and dances about with a splendid step.

(4) *Jesus is Silent, So is Abraham*

Kierkegaard's Jesus is silent. In his journals, Kierkegaard wrote, "Christ was silent."⁶⁰ In *Gospels of Suffering*, Kierkegaard attributes Jesus' silence to his meekness, and says: "He asserted not his cause; he pled not his innocence; he spake not of how they sinned against him; not by one word did he point to that most shameful guilt."⁶¹ In his "meekness" Jesus takes upon himself the burden of his suffering.

For Kierkegaard, the focus is not on Isaac's silence, as it was for Melito of Sardis. Instead, Abraham, Kierkegaard's Abraham, suffers in silence. Abraham will not say a word in his own defense, and will not betray his infinite singleness. Of Abraham and Isaac, Kierkegaard writes, "They rode in silence for three days. On the morning of the fourth day Abraham said never a word..."⁶² This reflects Abraham's silence about his mission. And Abraham is silent about his purpose before Sarah, before Eliezer, and before Isaac.⁶³

Within the theme of silence, there are differences between Kierkegaard's treatment of Jesus and Abraham, respectively. Nonetheless, the theme of silence plays an important role in each of the characterizations. And for Kierkegaard, the silent one is Abraham, not Isaac. We can say of both Jesus and Abraham, Kierkegaard's Abraham, "Silence is ... the mutual understanding between the Deity and the individual."⁶⁴

(5) *Abraham has a Dual Nature, as does Jesus*

Jesus has two natures. One is his concrete earthly, finite nature, which he shares with others: and the other is his infinite nature, not of this world.⁶⁵ This is the central paradox of Christian faith for Kierkegaard and the source of its "infinite passion." Jesus' suffering occurs in paradoxical co-existence with his infinite nature. Jesus' suffering reaches its greatest intensity precisely when on the way to the transfiguring of his earthly nature.

Just so, Abraham, Kierkegaard's Abraham, has a dual nature. One, an earthly, finite nature that Abraham shares with others. This nature express-

es itself through his being concretely situated in the world, defined by Abraham's enmeshment in the defining institutions of Hegel's public morality, or *Sittlichkeit*. There Abraham has his earthly incarnation.⁶⁶

Abraham has an infinite nature as well. Abraham is "the Single One," as is Jesus the "Single One."⁶⁷ Abraham receives his "infinity" or what Kierkegaard calls his "infinite accent" when standing "in an absolute relation to the absolute." Abraham is the infinite one when he succeeds in transfiguring his concrete situation in the world. Abraham's suffering signals his passage from being finite to being infinite. In *Fear and Trembling*, Abraham passes from his earthly incarnation to his infinite existence.

IV

In light of the above parallels between Abraham and Jesus, I propose that in *Fear and Trembling* Kierkegaard sees Abraham as the "Christ-figure," rather than Isaac. We should consider *Gospel of Sufferings*, then, to be completing Kierkegaard's earlier work. The Christian message of *Fear and Trembling* becomes there revealed. Herein lies an explanation for why Kierkegaard chose to write about the Abraham story. That was because the Abraham story served Kierkegaard as a proxy for the Christian message of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. At this stage of his career, Kierkegaard wished to commit a "deception," speaking as a Christian without being detected.

With this, however, my story does not end. For there is a further important sense in which *Gospel of Sufferings* supplements Kierkegaard's story of Abraham. In *Fear and Trembling* Kierkegaard's emphasis is on the pain and heaviness with which Abraham proceeds to the sacrifice. While we have seen that in *Gospel of Sufferings* Kierkegaard continues this theme, at the same time he emphasizes the joy and lightness of being a Christ-figure, a joy and lightness simultaneous with the suffering and rejection. In a chapter headed by a quotation of Matthew 11:30, "My yoke is good [easy], and my burden is light," Kierkegaard advances the thesis that the Christian, like Jesus, considers her or his burden to be easy and light. However, this is not because the burden has ceased to be hard and heavy. Rather, the heavy burden is itself light and easy. Kierkegaard writes:

When we talk about bearing burdens in the language of every day, we distinguish between a light burden and a heavy one; we say it is easy to bear the light burden, hard to bear the heavy one. But we are not speaking of this now; we speak of the far more solemn theme that one and the same burden should be heavy and yet light; we speak of a miracle and a wonder....⁶⁸

Of Jesus, Kierkegaard writes: "He did indeed bear a burden, heavy far beyond human power - yea, beyond the power of the race to bear - and he bore it lightly...."⁶⁹

Why is the burden light? Kierkegaard answers that the "heaviest burden" of all is the consciousness of sin, and "one who takes away the consciousness of sin and gives instead a consciousness of pardon - he takes

away indeed the heavy burden and gives the light one." Jesus carries a heavy burden lightly; he carries sin to pardon. Indeed, he carries those who have mocked him to pardon. The key to the lightness of the burden, says Kierkegaard, is in having thought for other people: "When anyone must gather all his energies, and has not a single thought, nor a single moment, to spare for other people, and when thus he is bearing his burden to the limit of his power, he is indeed bearing it, but he is not bearing it lightly."⁷⁰

Just so Abraham, who in going to his sacrifice commits a teleological suspension of the ethical. Within the suspension of the ethical Abraham is pardoned. For *within* the ethical Abraham is a murderer. In the ethical suspended he is a Knight of Faith, favored in the eyes of God. He is pardoned. And here, I suggest, is the deep meaning of Kierkegaard's statement in *Fear and Trembling* that Abraham must love Isaac through it all: "The absolute duty may cause one to do what ethics would forbid, but by no means can it cause the knight of faith to cease to love...[Abraham] must love Isaac with his whole soul"⁷¹ If Abraham does not now love Isaac, if he has no "no thought" for him, Abraham may be bearing his burden to the limit of his power, but will not be bearing his burden lightly. He will fail his trial.

Gospel of Suffering, then, completes the Christian picture of Abraham for us. *Fear and Trembling* accentuates the heaviness of Abraham. Now we see Abraham fully pardoned.

To conclude, I propose we locate the hidden Christian message of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* in its depiction of Abraham, not Isaac, as the Christ-figure of the *aqedah*. I propose further that the levels of hidden meaning, whether of Kierkegaard as Abraham in relation to Regina, or as Kierkegaard pardoned from the familial sins surrounding him, or the themes of sin and pardon be seen as supervenient upon Kierkegaard's reversal of the Christian treatment of the story of Abraham. Kierkegaard may have perceived himself as sacrificed, as Ronald Green has argued, but not as the lamb or as Isaac.⁷² He is sacrificed as Abraham was sacrificed. The themes of sin and pardon are indeed incorporated into *Fear and Trembling*, in the person of Abraham himself. As a proto-type of the Savior, Abraham experiences and witnesses to pardon within the pain of guilt, whereas Kierkegaard's Savior was later to become Kierkegaard's very font of pardon.⁷³

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NOTES

1. Ronald Green, "Deciphering *Fear and Trembling's* Secret Message," *Religious Studies* 22 (1986), p. 110, and Ronald Green, " 'Developing' *Fear and Trembling*," in Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino, Eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1998), pp. 257-281, especially pp. 269-276.

2. Green has given a good survey of these views in " 'Developing' *Fear and Trembling*."

3. Ronald Green, " 'Developing' *Fear and Trembling*."

4. Ronald Green, " 'Developing' *Fear and Trembling*," p. 270.

5. See J. Edwin Wood, "Isaac Typology in the New Testament," *New Testament Studies* 14, pp. 583-9.

6. G. Vermes, "Redemption and Genesis XXII," *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism, Haggadic Studies* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1973) pp. 193-227: See also, p. 218. Vermes quotes Israel Levi as saying that Paul used an extant Rabbinic theology of the *aqedah* and applied it to Jesus, in "Le sacrifice d'Isaac et la morte de Jesus," *Revue des Etudes Juives* 64, (1912), pp. 161-184, and p. 219. Shalom Spiegel writes that Paul borrowed the extant *aqedah* theology for his interpretation of Jesus. See "Legends of the *Akedah*," in *Alexander Marx Jubilee Volume Hebrew Section*, New York, 1950, pp. 471-547.

7. Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son, the Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (Yale University: New Haven and London, 1993), page 200. Levenson denies, though, that Paul thought of Isaac as a "prefiguration" of Jesus. Instead, argues Levenson, Paul thought of Jesus as *replacing* Isaac. See Levenson, pp. 210-213. For my purposes, this distinction is not crucial. Whatever I say concerning Isaac as a prefiguration of Jesus can be recast in terms of Isaac "corresponding" to Jesus. This will not affect my thesis about Kierkegaard.

8. See, *The Gospel According to John* The Anchor Bible, Introduction, Translation and notes by Raymond E. Brown (Garden City; Doubleday, 1966): page 147.

9. See Frederic Manns, "Note on the Sacrifice of Isaac in the Fourth Gospel," in Frederic Manns, ed., *The Sacrifice of Isaac in the Three Monotheistic Religions* (Jerusalem: Studium Biblicum Franciscum, 1995), pp. 99-100. (Hereafter: *The Sacrifice of Isaac*)

10. Wood, p. 587.

11. A sub-theme of the Christian tradition, intertwined with Isaac as the prefiguration of Jesus, is the identification of Jesus with the ram, which is actually offered as the sacrifice and not only placed on the altar.

12. Levenson, p. 210. See footnote 4 above, however, for Levenson's own interpretation of this.

13. Vermes, p. 220-21.

14. Wood, p. 587.

15. See M. C. Paczkowski, "The Sacrifice of Isaac Early Patristic Exegesis," in *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, p. 105.

16. Paczkowski, p. 107.

17. Paczkowski, p. 106.

18. Paczkowski, p. 115.

19. Paczkowski, p. 109.

20. Paczkowski, p. 110.

21. Paczkowski, p. 116.

22. Paczkowski, p. 110.

23. Paczkowski, p.108.

24. Jensen, "The Binding," p. 46.

25. Martin Luther, *Luther's Works* (Concordia Publishing House; St. Louis, 1987), "Commentary to Genesis."

26. "Commentary to Genesis," p. 137.

27. See Levenson, chapter 15.

28. Soren Kierkegaard, *The Point of View for My work as an Author*, p. 5:

29. In the text I will be assuming that Kierkegaard can be trusted to tell us what he had in mind when he wrote *Fear and Trembling*. For those who think *The Point of View* is little more than revisionist history, I could revise (and somewhat weaken) my argument to be independent of that assumption, as follows: There is a striking coherence between some of the themes of *Gospel of*

Sufferings and *Fear and Trembling*. This striking coherence suggests that the themes of the former are incipient in *Fear and Trembling*, whatever Kierkegaard's explicit intentions were at the time of writing that work. Thus we uncover Kierkegaard's "hidden" message. I would argue further, though, that the correlation between *Gospel* and *Fear and Trembling* counts in favor of taking Kierkegaard at his word in *The Point of View*.

30. P. 22: footnote
31. P. 8:
32. *The Point of View for My work as an Author*, p. 13:
33. Pp. 39-41.
34. P. 41.
35. P. 41.
36. p. 21
37. Soren Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity*, Translated by Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), p. 108.
38. Soren Kierkegaard, *Gospel of Sufferings*, Translated by A. S. Aldworth and W. S. Ferrie (London: James Clarke and Co., 1955), p. 49. (Hereafter: "Gospel.")
39. See, for example: Mark 8:31-33 that Jesus "must suffer many things," and Luke 24:46 that it "behooved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day."
40. After Mark 8:31-33.
41. In John, Jesus tells the faithful, "If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you (John 15: 18).
42. Soren Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity*, Translated by Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), p. 108.
43. *Gospel*, p.106.
44. *Gospel*, p. 108.
45. *Gospel*, pp. 106-7.
46. See: Matthew 10: 37, and Luke 14:26.
47. Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, translated with an introduction by Walter Lowrie (Princeton University: Princeton, 1954), p. 63.
48. For more on Kierkegaard's Hegelian conception of ethics, see Jerome Gellman, *The Fear, the Trembling, and the Fire* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1994).
49. *Fear and Trembling*, p. 72.
50. *Gospel*, p. 16.
51. *Gospel*, p. 19. All emphases are in the original.
52. *Gospel*, p. 23.
53. *Fear and Trembling*, p. 86.
54. *Fear and Trembling*, p. 89.
55. *Gospel*, p. 143, my emphasis.
56. *Gospel*, p. 144
57. *Fear and Trembling*, p. 28.
58. *Gospel*, pp. 13-14. The second emphasis is mine.
59. *Fear and Trembling*, 87-88. My emphasis.
60. *The Journals of Kierkegaard*, ed. Alexander Dru (New York: Harper & Bros., 1959) p. 306.
61. *Gospel*, p. 42.
62. *Fear and Trembling*, p. 27.
63. *Fear and Trembling*, p. 91.

64. *Fear and Trembling*, p. 97.

65. I mean this way of putting the matter to be taken loosely. I do not mean to take sides in ancient Christian disputes about the “nature” or “natures” of Jesus.

66. For more on the relationship between Kierkegaard’s conception of Abraham and Hegel’s *Sittlichkeit*, see Jerome Gellman, *The Fear, the Trembling, and the Fire* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1994).

67. *Gospel*, p. 91.

68. *Gospel*, p. 31.

69. *Gospel*, p. 38.

70. *Gospel*, p. 38.

71. *Fear and Trembling*, p. 84.

72. Green, p. 275.

73. I am indebted to Norman Lillegard, Eleonore Stump, and William Wainwright, as well as to an anonymous referee for *Faith and Philosophy*, for their helpful comments.