

**READING THE AKEDAH NARRATIVE  
(GENESIS 22:1-19) IN THE CONTEXT OF  
MODERN HERMENEUTICS**

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- February 1993 -

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## ABSTRACT

(This thesis is an attempt to apply literary criticism, specifically a narratological approach, to the reading of the biblical text.) There is an incongruity in the story of Isaac's (near) sacrifice by Abraham insofar as it is too economical with language in what is otherwise a complex set of important issues about obedience and sacrifice. Interpreters throughout the centuries have tried to resolve the textual difficulties created by the incongruity. Yet the variety of their conclusions are evidence of the impossibility of overcoming the ambiguities of the story. But these ambiguities are scarcely given any thorough investigation by the interpreters, whose assumed duties are commonly to clarify the story either for the sake of religious or moral obligation or, in the pursuit of intellectual satisfaction as is apparent in many historical readings of the text. A closer look at the story reveals that there are many ambiguities that can be grasped from many angles. By using the focalization theory of narratology one can illuminate differing points of view involved in the process of narration. The narrator's voice should not be regarded as the only representation of the events as there are also the characters' ways of looking at the related events. One should be careful so as not to follow slavishly the narrator's voice while neglecting others' standpoints in the narrative which may contradict the narrator's voice. There should be communicative links seen amongst the voices or focalizations in the narrative which may or may not be verbally said. Here, it is proposed that reading is experiencing the multilayered world of the narrative. Reading is not necessarily and ultimately bound with the task of producing meaning, although, it may mean a threat towards rational objectivity. But the pursuit of objective meaning has, consciously or unconsciously, always been under the threat of disarray once the narrative is allowed to manifest its conflictual nature. Interpretations which claim to establish the meaning of the story can only do so by hiding, repressing, putting aside, masquerading, or even by misrepresenting the undermining existence of other elements or meanings in the story. There is a growing awareness of the manipulateness of interpretation together with a realization of the sense of indeterminacy in biblical stories. It may well be that, as anticipated by this thesis, biblical hermeneutics should make itself more available to a task of uncovering the indeterminacy of the text, the whole point in the narrative, said or unsaid; rather than to provide a means by which the text can be elucidated, which itself is illusory.

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## PREFACE

My interest in the Akedah began in the final year of my bachelorship in Indonesia, as a topic that I had chosen as my final thesis. The study, that is made mainly on the basis of historical criticism as well as an analysis of Kierkegaard's thought in *Fear and Trembling*, is ended with an awareness that the story of the sacrifice of Isaac needs greater appreciation in terms of its aesthetic value rather than as a piece of historical documentation. The recent development of biblical studies in its relation with literary criticism, although, to my knowledge, it is still much confined to a Western context, provides a great deal of opportunity for my attempt to recognize the aesthetic dimension of the story. At the same time, I am also interested in the influence of the issues in modern hermeneutics on biblical interpretation which seems indisputable and opens the way for important discussions about the objectivity and subjectivity of the readers. These aspects give a background for this dissertation.

There is no doubt that my former supervisor, Dr Gerrit Singgih, has made a major contribution towards my encounter with the above stated problems. I am grateful to him for that and for his constant support during the three and half years of my study in the place which is also his almamater. Without his guidance and recommendation in the first place, my study in Glasgow would not have been possible.

My debts to my supervisor, Professor Robert P. Carroll, are immeasurable. Words would not be enough in describing his patient and carefulness in supervising my work and in correcting my failings- after all, writing in a foreign language and under pressure of time (read: money) is not easy. I have greatly benefitted from the inspiration and enthusiasm that I could derive throughout my discussions with him. I am most grateful that his guidance has brought not only valuable scholarly knowledge to me but also deep spirituality, in these all I am only a beginner.

I would also record my gratitude to Hugh Pyper who, during his busy times of teaching and writing his own thesis, has helped me so much with correcting my English and improving my knowledge of literary criticism. As far as literary criticism is concerned, I am also helped a great deal by lectures from and discussions with Dr David Jasper. A few opportunities for discussion were also kindly given to me by Mr Alastair Hunter. I am in debt of them all, though, the responsibility for the views expressed in this dissertation is mine.

As an overseas student, the problems such as cultural and gastronomic bewilderment seem unavoidable. For this, I am indebted to Leslie Milton who introduced me to the real life of Scottish pubs and for his friendship; to the families of the lecturers who have invited me, and later on, my wife, to dine; and also to John Bradley for his caring treatment.

This study is made possible financially by Postgraduate Research Scholarship of University of Glasgow; Faculty of Divinity, Glasgow University; Trinity College, Glasgow University; Overseas Student Fund of the Faculty; my church, GKI Diponegoro, Surabaya, Indonesia which also has allowed me to study abroad for a few years.

Last but not least, I would like to most of all thank to my wife, Susan, who has given a wonderful company during her stay in Glasgow over the past one and half years. Her understanding and relentless encouragement provided me with a conducive atmosphere that I really need to complete my writing. May her sacrifice never be in vain.

RS  
January 1993

In the Apse of the Cathedral at Canterbury there is a window which can tell us a good deal about the controls operating on the image in the art of Christian Europe....The window displays a marked intolerance of any claim on behalf of the image to independent life. Each of its details corresponds to a rigorous programme of religious instruction. To prevent the occurrence of those alternating crises of adoration and iconoclasm which had troubled the Church in Byzantium, the image in Western Christendom has been issued with a precise but limited mandate: 'illiterati quod per scripturam non possunt intueri, hoc per quaedam licturae lineamenta contemplatur'. Images are permitted, but only on condition that they fulfil the office of communicating the Word to the unlettered. Their role is that of an accessible and palatable substitute. And not only must the image submit before the Word, it must also take on, as a sign, the same kind of construction as the verbal sign. Speech derives its meanings from an articulated and systematic structure which is superimposed on a physical substratum. Its signs resolve into two components: the acoustic or graphic material- the 'signifier'; and intelligible form- the 'signified'. With the linguistic sign, interest in the sensuous materiality of the signifier is normally minimal except in certain highly conventionalised art situations; we tend to ignore the sensual 'thickness' of language unless our attention is specifically directed towards it. And the Canterbury window similarly plays down the independent life of its signifying material, which progressively yields, as we approach it, to a cultivated transparency before the transcendent Scripture inscribed within it. The status of the window is that of a relay or a place of transit through which the eye must pass to reach its goal, which is the Word. Qualities that might detain the eye during that transit are to be carefully restrained....Next, the legends in the margins of the lesser panels, which function by question and answer, like catechism....With pedagogic imagery such terminal signposting is essential- left to his own devices the spectator might prolong his contemplation beyond the requirements of instruction.

Norman Bryson, *Word and Image*

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Just as literary critics have called for an interpretive evaluation of classic works of art in terms of justice, so students of the Bible must learn how to examine both the rhetorical aims of biblical texts and the rhetorical interests emerging in the history of interpretation or in contemporary scholarship. This requires that we revive a responsible ethical and political criticism which recognizes the ideological distortions of great works of religion. Such discourse does not just evaluate the ideas or propositions of a work but also seeks to determine whether its very language and composition promote stereotypical images and linguistic violence.

Elisabeth S. Fiorenza, "The Ethics"

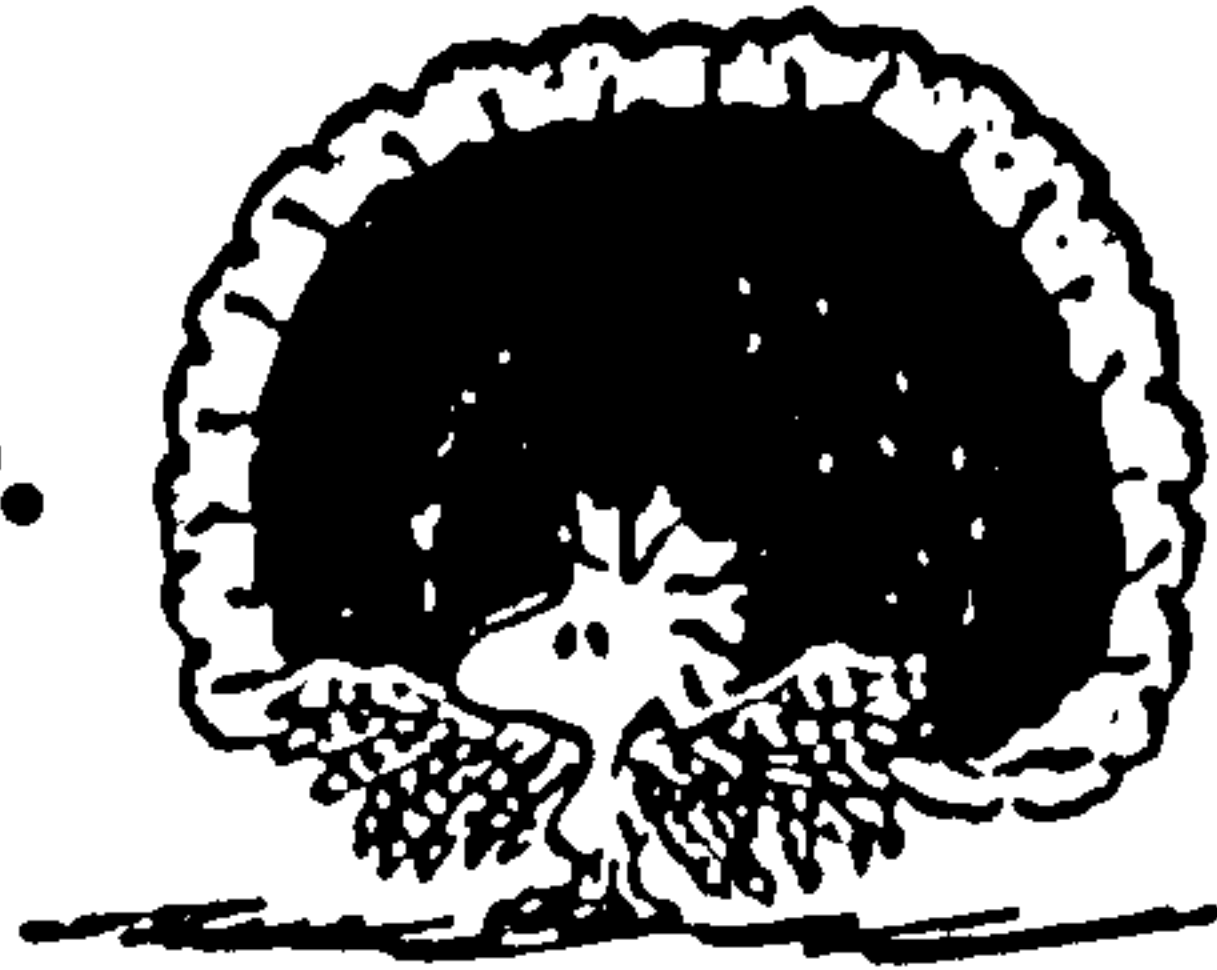


In Christian as in Platonic tradition, the material script is devalued in favour of a spiritual writing imprinted directly on the soul without the aid of material instruments. This 'simulated immediacy' then becomes the source of all authentic wisdom and truth. What cannot be acknowledged within this Platonic scheme is the fact that it depends on a root metaphor of writing, one that it strives to repress even while perpetually playing variations on its terms. Deconstruction insists- paradoxically- on the literal status of this otherwise self-supporting metaphor. It is not, as Derrida says, 'a matter of inverting the literal meaning and the figurative meaning but of determining the "literal" meaning of writing as metaphoricity itself' (Derrida 1977a, p.15). It is here that deconstruction finds its rock-bottom sense of the irreducibility of metaphor, the *differance* at play within the very constitution of 'literal' meaning. It finds, in short, that there is no literal meaning.

Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction*

# PEANUTS.

by  
SCHULZ



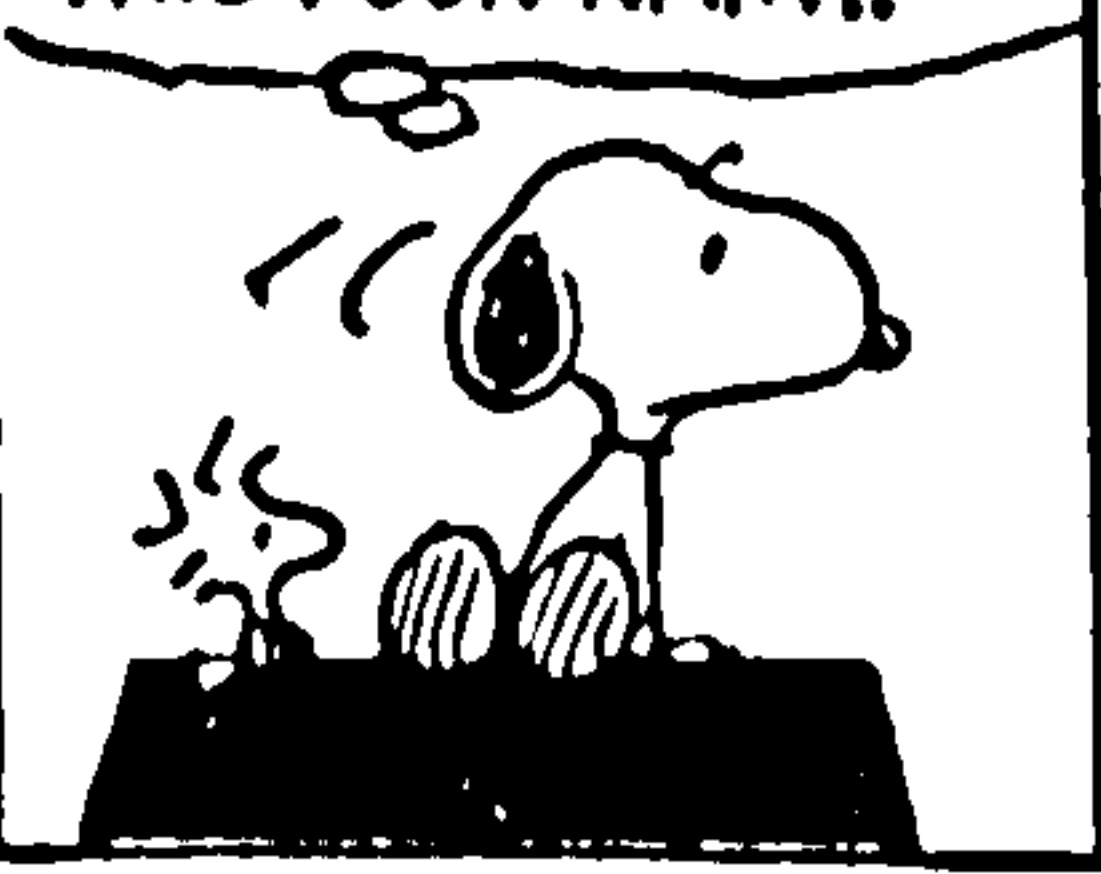
SO ISAAC  
WAS SAVED



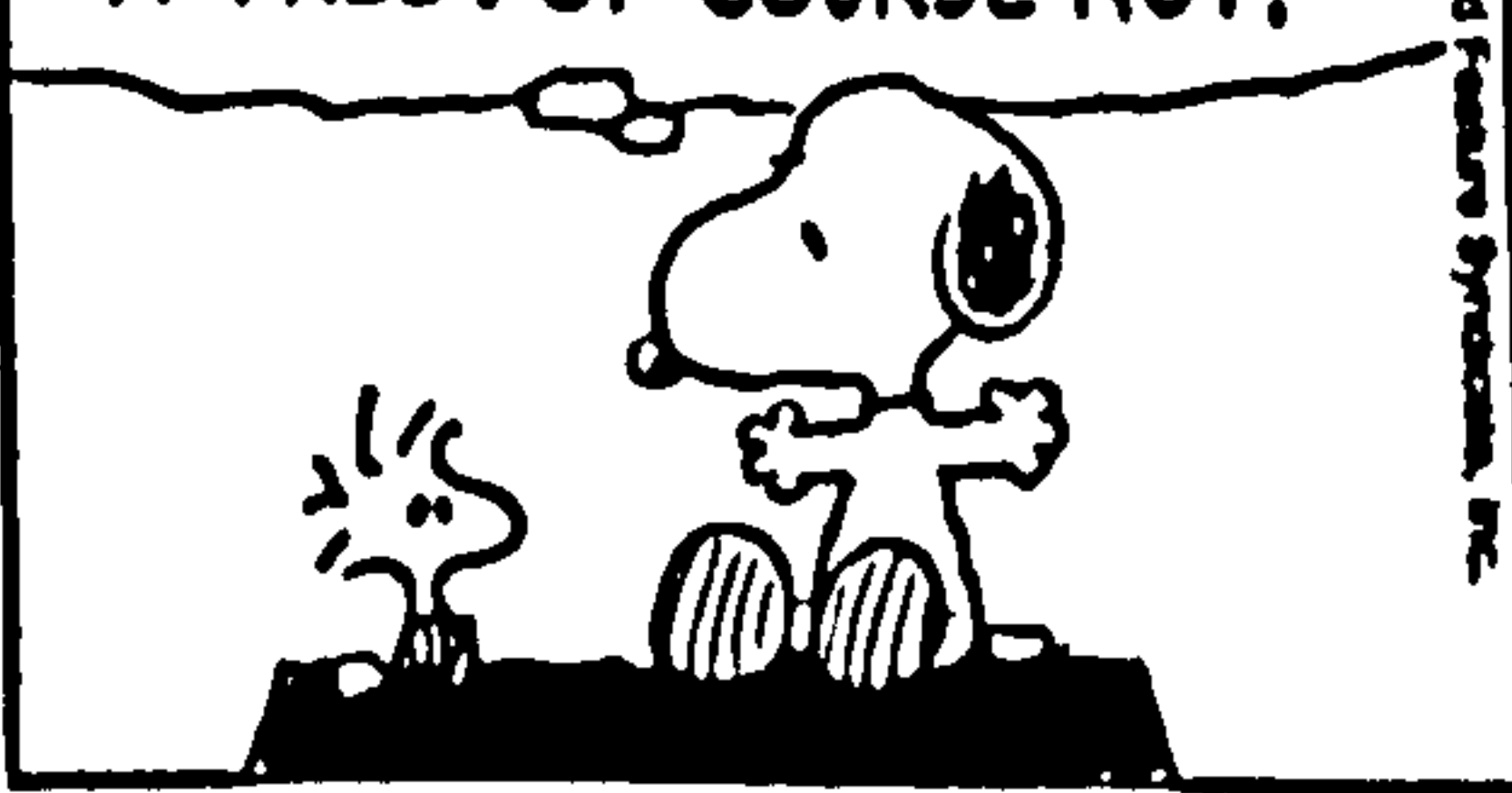
THEN, GUESS  
WHAT HAPPENED..



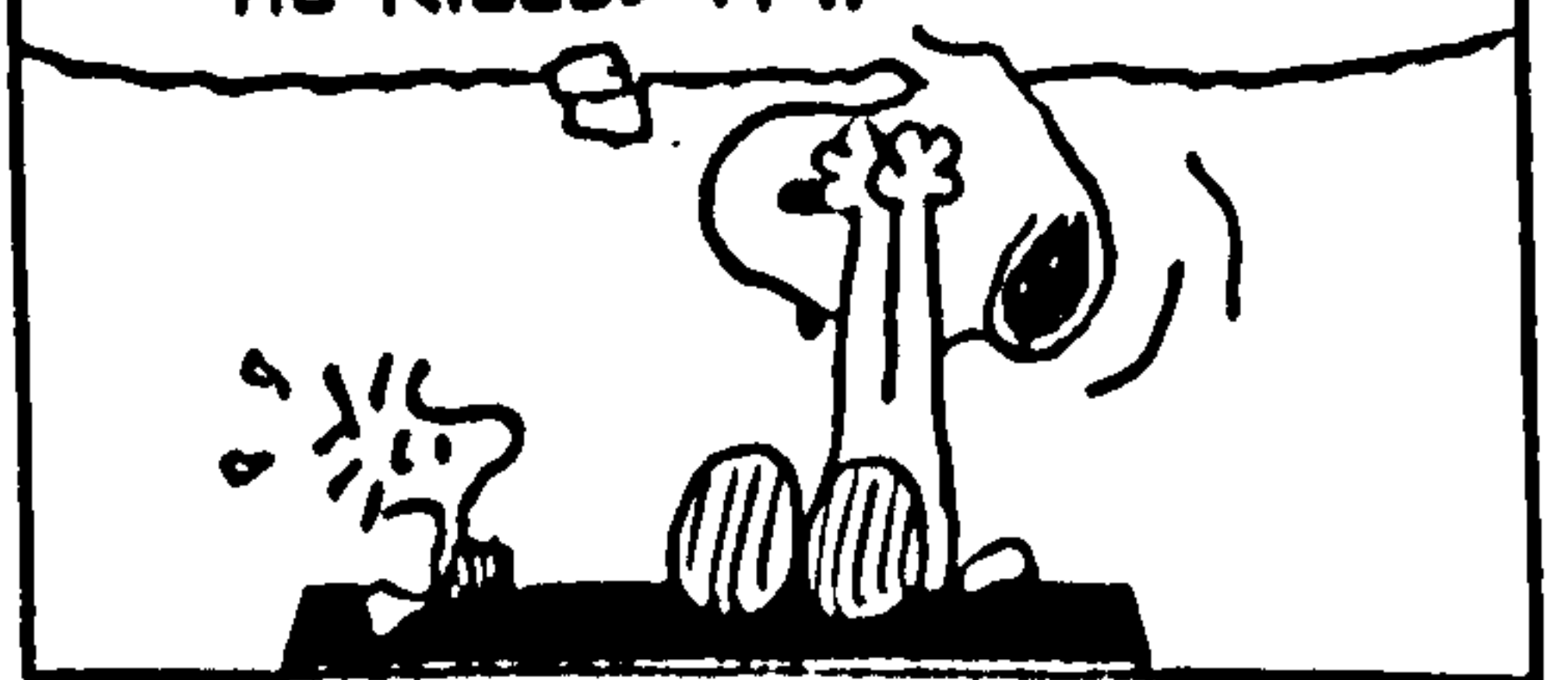
ABRAHAM TURNED  
AROUND, AND SAW  
THIS POOR RAM..



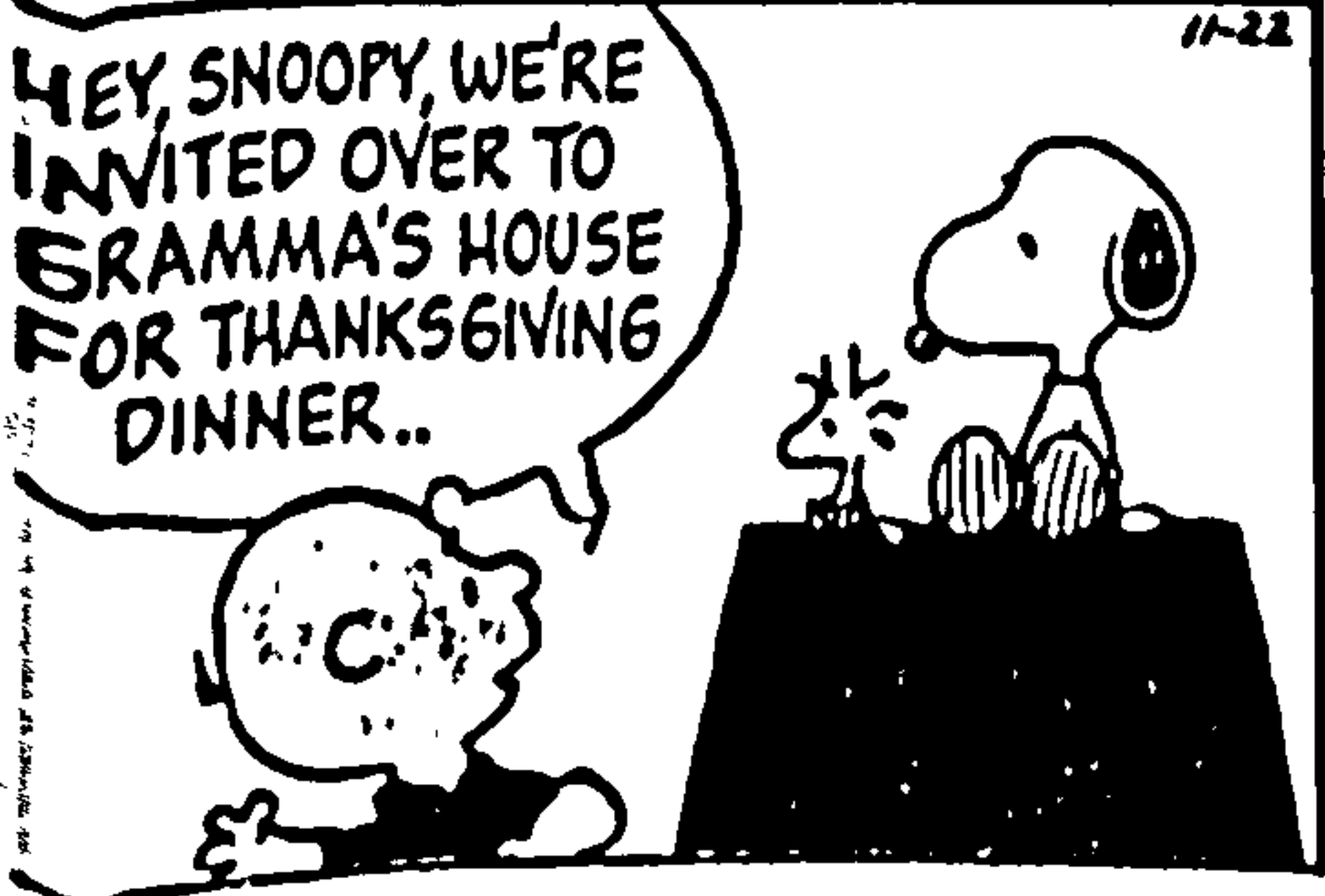
IT HAD ITS HORNS CAUGHT  
IN A THICKET.. DID HE SET  
IT FREE? OF COURSE NOT!



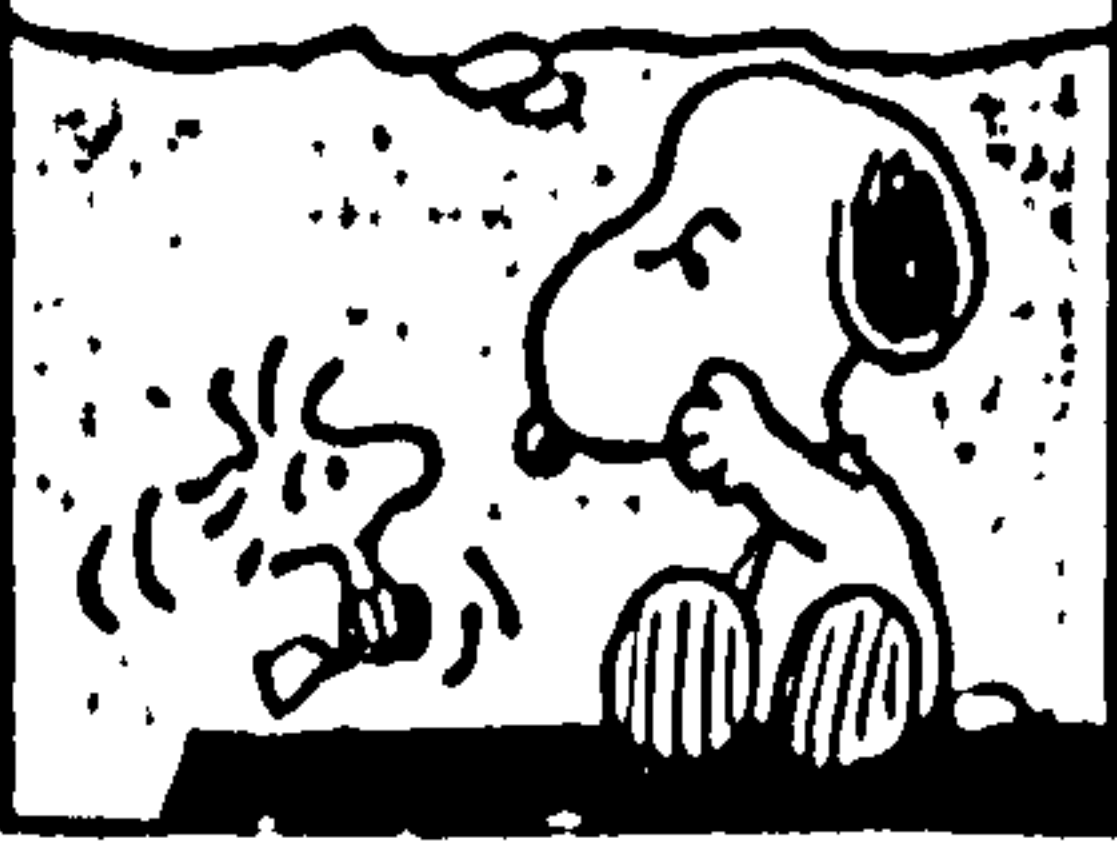
HE OFFERED IT UP AS A BURNT  
OFFERING! CAN YOU IMAGINE THAT?!  
HE KILLED IT !!



HEY, SNOOPY, WE'RE  
INVITED OVER TO  
GRAMMA'S HOUSE  
FOR THANKSGIVING  
DINNER..



AND YOU KNOW WHAT  
THEY'RE GOING TO  
EAT? A BIRD!!



BLEAH!



HE'S NOT  
COMING  
ALONG?

DON'T ASK ME  
WHY.. I NEVER  
KNOW WHAT  
HE'S THINKING..



## CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

Harold Bloom in his contemplation of the works of the J writer (to use the term assigned by modern scholarship to one of the authors of the Hebrew Bible) sees that the narrative of Genesis 22 reflects so much of J's characteristics which are thought of as being censored by the Elohist author, the supposed author of the narrative.<sup>1</sup> He says, "the story of the *Akedah*, of Abraham being ordered by God to sacrifice Isaac, does not show any stylistic traces of J but is from a literary perspective clearly bowdlerized from J by the Elohist author or school".<sup>2</sup> What is borne in mind here is the high literary quality of the story of the *Akedah*, which is recognized by Bloom as the hallmark of J's work. Bloom comes to the admiration of J through the realisation of the radical irony in the writer's works. The irony arises not in terms of the contrast or gap between expectation and fulfillment, nor in the inconsistency between saying and meaning (saying of one thing while meaning quite another). "It is the irony of J's Hebraic sublime, in which absolutely incommensurate realities collide and cannot be resolved."<sup>3</sup> One may only look at J's Yahweh to notice the irony. According to Bloom, the representations of Yahweh by the Priestly writer, or by

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<sup>1</sup>Bloom uses the terms J or E pragmatically, that is, only in order to compare and analyze the literariness of the stories of these authors with the attention particularly on J.

<sup>2</sup>Harold Bloom, *Ruin the Sacred Truths: Poetry and Belief from the Bible to the Present*, 1989, p.9.

<sup>3</sup>Bloom, *ibid.*, p.4.

the Deuteronomist, or by the Elohist, or even by the prophets differ substantially from the appearance of Yahweh in J's writings. One of the dominant elements of J's Yahweh is surprise, unprecedented emergence in manner and logic. It is impossible therefore for J's Yahweh to be appropriately understood in a certain fashion or to be assimilated, because there will always be another element that is not included.

Bloom's claim for the Akedah that it mirrors J's characteristic of unassimilated originality, can unmistakably be justified.<sup>4</sup> This thesis which is intended to study the literariness of the Akedah will show that the narrative does have the irony of a collision among incommensurate realities which is most obvious in the commands of God. If Elohim- the name itself may indicate, as argued by Buber, the hiddenness or mystery of God who will reveal Himself only then<sup>5</sup>- declares the command that Isaac must be sacrificed, the messenger of Yahweh announces the opposite, the cancellation of the sacrifice. Elohim's command itself comes as a surprise or, more suitably, a shock which will remain so since its motive is unheard until the end of the story. We are introduced to the word *nissah* (to test) which, despite the vagueness of its meaning (is the sacrifice to be seen as real?), might

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<sup>4</sup>Here we are not dealing with the problem of authorship, that is, whether Genesis 22 is J's or E's and so on, since our present focus as well as our study as a whole is about the literariness of the narrative.

<sup>5</sup>Martin Buber, *Biblical Humanism: Eighteen Studies by Martin Buber*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer, c.1968, p.41.

reduce the tension caused by the accomplishment of the sacrifice of Isaac. The word is perhaps evidence of the attempt by E to bowdlerize J as claimed by Bloom. Should God not be seen as sadistic in commanding the sacrifice? If this is the case, however, the impact of the message would not be quite satisfying because the motive of the command is still concealed, the horror of God remains hanging around unrepudiated. But such a bowdlerizing attempt continues as far as the history of interpretation is concerned.

In chapter II we will see a variety of interpretations of the Akedah throughout the centuries which in one way or another, consciously or unconsciously, tend to suppress the irony. As the irony of the Akedah lies mostly in the concealment of the motives of the characters' acts and wishes, it undoubtedly attracts the interpreters to show their skills in providing the narrative with clear backgrounds as to what the characters have in mind so that there is no more unexplained ambiguity. The book of Jubilees, for instance, gives the story a prologue, similar to that of the story of Job, in which God and the prince Mastema, a satanic figure, are involved in a bet on the faith of Abraham. The writer of Jubilees might not see that *nissah* in itself would solve the problem of God's enigmatic motive which prompted him to extend the story to include the background of the celestial court. The addition results in a very different picture from that of the Hebrew since not only the sacrifice demands to be viewed as a temporary

means for getting the evidence of Abraham's loyalty but God is in any way fenced off from being seen as the initiator of the horror of the sacrifice. The sacrifice does not originate from God's but Satan's will. But, who could not see that the addition in Jubilees is a major reconstruction of the Hebrew version, logically and ideologically? The work of Jubilees and certainly other interpretations may indicate the impossibility of reading the narrative in its mystery and irony without introducing the elements that could lead to the clarification of the narrative and therefore to the finding of the meaning. It must be said however that the ways interpreters deal with the narrative are so different from one another that it is impossible to talk about meaning in singular form rather than plural. As this chapter is intended to delineate the differences in the way the Akedah has been read, it will not go into detail about the background and context of each interpreter. There is no doubt that the context of tradition, culture, ideology of the reader influences as well as forms his reading. Here we may think of the three different versions of Abraham's sacrifice as it is portrayed in Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions. The first and the last traditions have an obvious difference in terms of the character of the son, namely, Isaac in Judaism and Ishmael in Islam. The Christian, however, while adopting the Akedah tends to understand the narrative in the light of the Crucifixion of Christ. The openness of the Akedah to different interpretations is evident in these three traditions let alone if we take into account the

variations of reading within the traditions. Nonetheless the interpretations in the end work to achieve their conclusions in the exclusion of some other elements. The interpretations are certain and authoritative while the text is equivocal and polyphonic. As a result we may always find something that is repressed or marginalized by the interpretations.

In chapter III we will try to look at the many possibilities that we can find in reading the text. It is implicitly or explicitly a response to the already-given interpretations since it is virtually impossible for us to get away from the previous interpretations either by way of acceptance or by way of negation. Having said that, our mode of reading should remain to be seen as different from the other interpretative modes including the one based on historical-criticism presuppositions. To use the structuralist distinction, it is a synchronic reading with the concern on the literary phenomenon of the text rather than a diachronic reading. Our attention is not directed at finding the living context of the author(s) or the author's intention, although there is nothing to prevent us from thinking that such a real author or, at any rate, redactor existed and wrote his fiction about the Akedah. As our study impinges on the text, it is the narrator instead of the author that we will deal with. We know the narrator through its voices in the narrative. We would not, however, regard the narrator as a human being. The narrator is a narrative device whose voice leads us to accept some

images. The narrator does not always work straightforwardly so that we can understand the story without any difficulty. In fact it works with many voices which are often incoherent, even conflictual. In analyzing the way Abraham is portrayed in the book of Genesis, we will find the many voices or points of view in which Abraham can equally be seen as a pious believer and as a selfish husband and father, or, he may indeed be seen as a God's foolish puppet. In the Akedah the many and competing voices will in turn become an unresolvable paradox between the desire to end Isaac's life and the desire to save Isaac.

Chapter IV focuses on the paradoxical desires. The desire to annihilate Abraham's descendant is not at all unique to the Akedah as both Lot and Ishmael have also experienced a lethal danger in their lives. The Akedah is different only because God overtly states his will in the form of the sacrificial command. Does God demand human sacrifice? In this chapter we will discuss this question and its impact, that is, the violent desire of God which is deeply rooted in the Akedah. Different from the previous chapter, the Akedah here is studied almost exclusively as an independent story. It is made possible since the Akedah is an unbroken narrative that could also be read as a separate story.

Our reading in Chapter IV inevitably raises a moral problem since we live in the modern era in which human sacrifice and its violent effects are simply intolerable. Chapter V, while considering the answers of some modern commentators



to the problem, also looks at the possibility of deriving a message from the narrative. To say that a biblical narrative like the Akedah has a significance for life today, we would surely have to face the moral dilemma of the sacrifice. Kierkegaard, in this case, has attempted to highlight the dilemma although in the end he comes to a conclusion that repudiates the absoluteness of modern morality as well as rationality. But, Kierkegaard's answer, if it can be said so, is by no means plain though, as he would maintain, it is paradoxical. Abraham is a paradoxical being who believes in the absurdity. As we cannot understand Abraham, we cannot follow his deed either. In other words, there is nothing that we can learn from Abraham except that we shadow him in his journey into absurdity. Surely, apart from the paradox of Abraham's faith, as Kierkegaard contends, the Akedah consists of a few more paradoxes. There are paradoxes which, taken together, would take us nowhere. As a matter of fact, this is the feeling of nothingness that we find in the end of the Akedah as Isaac vanishes from the story. The end of the Akedah where Abraham is seen as walking back home with his servants is in fact a suspended end. We are reminded again of J's irony since the clash of voices makes the story indeterminate and the disappearance of Isaac raises the indeterminacy to the level where the readers are simply left in despair.

There remains a problem of the interpretation of the indeterminate narrative, especially if the reading is

expanded to an end in which the meaning of the story must be shown. This is also a problem of the commentaries produced on the basis of historical criticism where, despite the claim of objectivity, their conclusions remain to be regarded as interpretative and bearing the commentators' ideologies. One may say that despite the awareness of the indeterminacy, this thesis has one or two times also become entangled with the business of meaning production which, if true, would more appropriately describe a basic need to understand, even of a mystery that is equivalent to the basic will for survival rather than a deliberate effort to impose upon the narrative a meaning. However, we are ready to admit that there is no interpretation that can represent the whole conflicting phenomena of the text. There is always insufficiency of interpretation in writing down the unstable images in the narrative. As Meir Sternberg says, "in principle there is always a difference between what we reconstruct from the given text and what we find constructed on the text's surface, between what happened in the world of hi(story) and what unfolds in the art of hi(story) telling".<sup>6</sup> Interpretation should therefore at best be related with the task of recognizing and spelling out all the possibilities a text may contain without attempting to canalize them into a specific meaning. Perhaps in the chaotic moment in hearing the many voices of the narrative as well as being placed in uncertainty, we may find a strength or even a

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<sup>6</sup>Meir Sternberg, "Time and Space in Biblical (Hi)story Telling: The Grand Chronology," in *The Book and the Text: The Bible and Literary Theory*, ed. Regina M. Schwartz, 1990, p.98.

meaning, not primarily the meaning of the story rather it is a meaning of life. In the end, since the main concern of this thesis is on interpretation and hermeneutics, I would like to quote Regina M.Schwartz who says, "these questions- about the design of the narratives, about gender construction, about repression in the Bible, about prophetic sublimity, about multiplicity of interpretations, about the politics of interpreting, about decentered subjects, about the Bible in ancient popular culture, and about biblical understanding of space and time- these questions are difficult to cordon off from the preserve of biblical theology and hermeneutics, even when they are broached from a secular perspective...Biblical authority is not safe from all of these questions- in part because theological questions are more difficult to separate from literary theory than they were from the discoveries of archeologists and philologists; in part because questions of faith are matters of theory".<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Regina M.Schwartz, "Introduction: On Biblical Criticism," in *The Book and the Text: The Bible and Literary Theory*, 1990, p.14.

## CHAPTER II

## RECEPTION HISTORY OF THE AKEDAH

To doubt one's own capacity to be free from preunderstanding which necessarily colors the perceptions and interpretations of reality is the beginning of epistemological wisdom. None may claim "Archimedean vantage point" from which to peer at truth.

Duncan S.Ferguson, *Biblical Hermeneutics*

Judah Goldin in his introduction to Spiegel's *The Last Trial* remarks on the reception of the story of the binding of Isaac in this way, "each generation has its own experiences and its own concerns. These inevitably affect the conception of the story; they also affect the ways the story is used."<sup>1</sup> This remark reminds us of what is commonly argued by recent literary critics about the relativity of interpretation with regard to the entanglement of the readers' subjective points of view. The power of reading actually lies in the reader's own experience and concerns that one way or another form his strategy of reading and, therefore, the product. Thus, each generation or even each community produces its own readings that may entirely differ from another community (although not necessarily unrelated) that is separated by time as well as ideology. In this chapter we will look at the differences that take place either in translational texts or in various

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<sup>1</sup>S.Spiegel, *The Last Trial: On the Legends and Lore of the Command to Abraham to offer Isaac as a Sacrifice: The Akedah*, 1967, p.xvi.

interpretations of the Akedah. At the same time we may also perceive what Goldin indicates as the use of the story. Since, as much as the story is interpreted it is also used in many ways to provide the ideological basis of action. From time to time, the interpretation of a biblical passage has to face such a practical demand. A tension may arise as the biblical narratives do not always furnish the readers with satisfactory answers to their problems, or, that the historical context of the readers demands another solution from the one suggested in the Bible. The opacity of the narrative is certainly another problem that the readers have to deal with whether or not the problem can be solved.

### II.1. The Akedah in translation: the Septuagint and Targum Onkelos

#### The Septuagint<sup>2</sup>

As a (Greek) translation the Septuagint (LXX) follows closely the Hebrew version. Reconstructions mainly emerge as a necessary attempt to clarify the obscurity in the Hebrew version. To keep the sequence flowing orderly and logically, the LXX diminishes the paratactical performance which is typical of the Hebrew Bible. There is no doubt that the syntactical style of the Hebrew which mainly avoids any intrusive notion of causation is "a style that

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<sup>2</sup>The version which is used here is *Septuaginta: Vetus Testamentum Graecum Auctoritate Academiae Scientiarum Gottingensis editum, vol. I, Genesis, 1974*, ed. J.W. Wevers.

cries out for interpretation".<sup>3</sup> The LXX must first of all have responded to it, as it needed to produce a plausible translation. The Hebrew conjunction *waw* that marks the beginning of the sentences in vv.3,6,7,8a,8b,9 for instance, does not have its Greek equivalent (*kai*) in the LXX. As a consequence the sentences of the LXX look more interconnected and therefore the narrative easier to follow. A case in point is vv.8 and 9, when Abraham finishes replying to Isaac's question it is said, "*poreuthentes de amphotoi hama (8b) elthon epi ton topon (9)*(both having gone together (they)came to the place)..." While the MT notes, "*wayyeleku šeneyhem yaḥdaw (8b) wayyabho'u 'el-hammaqom (9)* (and they went both of them together and they came to the place). LXX links the sentence in 8b with the following sentence that reveals the event of the arrival at the sacrificial place. "Both having gone together", therefore, forms an introduction for "(they) came to the place". It portrays poignantly the intimate relationship between the father and the son in the last seconds of the life of the son as if they are united in the sacrifice. In the MT, the two sentences have a different depiction. They disclose two consecutive events, the moment when the characters still walk together towards the terminal point and when they get to the place. Besides in v.8b the sentence *wayyeleku šeneyhem yaḥdaw* also appears in v.6. Between the two verses is the brief dialogue of Isaac and Abraham in which Isaac's question is answered

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<sup>3</sup>David Lawton, *Faith, Text and History: The Bible in English*, 1990, p.93.

ambiguously. The togetherness in v.8b might have been superficial as Isaac keeps wondering over his question and Abraham has just deceived his son. It is the tension between the father and the son that probably occupies the moment of arrival at the sacrificial site rather than the intimate unity that we find in the LXX. But, surely it is another logical chain, apart from and in contradiction to the LXX, that may be concluded from the seemingly loosely connected phrases of vv.8b and 9.

For the sake of clarity, the LXX may also choose expressions which are not a word-for-word translation of the Hebrew Bible. The name of the sacrificial site (v.2) indicated as *'eres hammoriyyah* (the land of Moriah) by the MT is rendered as *ten gen ten hupselen* (the high land) by the LXX. The difference may show the inclination of the LXX to avoid using unfamiliar names, the names which were unrecognisable for its audiences such as *hammoriyyah*. On the other hand, the high land may perhaps point to the Temple in Jerusalem where religious sacrifices were commonly held. If this is true, we may say that the LXX reflects a tradition which constituted an ideological link between the biblical story of Akedah and the sacrifices performed in the temple of Jerusalem. As Spiegel says, "one may regard the biblical Akedah story as a kind of confirmation from Heaven and approval by the Most High, of the rightness, the propriety of the Temple-service in Jerusalem."<sup>4</sup> Of course, we cannot be absolutely sure that

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<sup>4</sup>Spiegel, *Last Trial*, p.73.

what the LXX means by "the high land" is the Temple. For us who are not the real readers to whom the passage was originally addressed, "the high land" can mean anywhere. But, the definite article *ten* may indicate that the LXX refers to a particular high land that only its contemporaries could understand without any further information as to its exact location.<sup>5</sup> At any rate, "the high land" may be understood as an indication of a sacrificial site since many sacrifices took place on high ground. By assigning "the high land" for its translation the LXX may probably try to demonstrate the sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham as being one of sacrificial rites. If we read the passage within the hypotactical nature of the LXX, we may have an unmistakable depiction of a ritual exercise executed step by step by the character. The LXX seems to put stress on the worship of Abraham as well as his piety.

Seeing the emphasis on the process of the sacrifice, one may wonder if the LXX overlooks the distinctiveness of the sacrificial victim. The sacrifice is peculiar because of the human object, but it is the more so as Isaac is promised to be the bearer of Abraham's name (21:12). In the MT Isaac is even seen as the only son of Abraham (22:2). The LXX notes Isaac as *ton uion sou ton agapeton* (your son, your beloved one).<sup>6</sup> The unique status of Isaac seems to be

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<sup>5</sup>The cultural and historical context of the LXX is usually understood as Jewish Diaspora around third to first centuries B.C.E. However, evidence for the communities where the LXX was written is not known.

<sup>6</sup>Some other texts besides the LXX render *ton monogene* (the only one) for the Hebrew *yehidka*. See Wevers, *Septuaginta: Göttingensis*, p.213.



less significant to be put in the fore than the emotional bond between the father and the son. A question such as the continuation of Abraham's clan that has been put in jeopardy by the sacrifice of the only son is apparently no more the issue here than in the MT.

Furthermore, the Hebrew word used by the MT to describe Abraham's activity aimed at Isaac: *'aqad* (to bind) has apparently lost its appeal as a unique word in its translation in the LXX. The Greek word *sumpodisas* (to bind hand and foot, sometimes only the feet) is also used in the case of binding a criminal, e.g., Dan.3:20ff. It may complete the LXX's portrayal that hardly bears the sense of the distinctiveness of the sacrifice.

In v.19, the LXX renders the etymological explanation of Beersheba: the well of the oath. It may reflect an exegetical method that by deciphering Hebrew names one may grasp the meaning of the story. But the meaning would never come straightforwardly (the deliverance of meaning through a name itself clearly indicates the indirectness) and only by way of allusion. Although the translation of the Hebrew name itself still does not provide a clear message and direction as to which part of the story it must be linked to obtain the intended meaning, it has moved one step forward from the obliqueness of allusion towards plainness of meaning. While one still doubts if the Hebrew narrative contains a plain and coherent meaning, the translational text seems to lead the readers to encounter such a meaning.

Here are two texts of a different nature.

The LXX is, after all, not merely a translation, if there is any such thing at all, but also an interpretation that seeks to set up a clear meaning of the story so that the story could be easily digested by the audiences. Moreover, as J.Dines indicates in her note on the subjectiveness of Septuagint translation, "a translation may thus also be a 're-reading' of the parent text in the light of the convictions, needs and prejudices of the community from which it emerges."<sup>7</sup>

#### Targum Onqelos

Targum Onqelos is a translation of the Hebrew Bible, as the LXX, in Aramaic. It is generally known that the Targum was written for the needs of Jewish communities, in the time when Aramaic was the *lingua franca*, for those who wanted to study Torah but no longer had access to the Hebrew.<sup>8</sup> Its function as representing Scripture itself is apparent in that it stays reasonably loyal to the Hebrew text. Considering its interpretative elements, the Targum can be

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<sup>7</sup> J.Dines, "Septuagint," in *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. R.J.Coggins and J.L.Houlden, 1990, p.622.

<sup>8</sup> Targums existed probably in Babylonia before the end of the third century C.E. but it involved a long and complex development before reaching its present form. Bowker says, "it was a deliberate attempt to make an Aramaic translation, and that it may well have been a part of the general attempt in Judaism from the second century A.D. onward to provide authoritative translations as a safeguard against Christian interpretations of scripture based on LXX." J.Bowker, *The Targums and Rabbinic Literature: An Introduction to Jewish Interpretations of Scripture*, 1969, pp.24-5.

said to lie half-way between the LXX (which incorporated interpretation but remained relatively close to the Hebrew text) and those works which set out to retell the biblical narrative in their own words, often for their own particular purposes, for examples, another Targum: Pseudo Jonathan, the book of Jubilees. These books follow the Hebrew narrative only very roughly, and they were prepared to introduce incidents or comments to make the narrative more meaningful.<sup>9</sup> Differing from them Targum Onqelos makes an attempt to translate the text verse by verse, yet at the same time it introduces its own interpretations for the sake of clarity in expression, adjustment with contemporary knowledge as well as ideological reassessment.

Our first encounter with Targum Onqelos' own reading deviating from the Hebrew text is in the indication of Abraham's destination as commanded by the divinity (consistently represented with the Tetragrammaton, perhaps to avoid giving the impression of the plurality of God as in the term *'elohim* while confining itself to the monotheistic depiction) as "the land of worship" instead of "the land of Moriah" (MT). In the MT the exact location of a place named Moriah itself is unclear and has no other mention except that in 2Chron.3:1 which gives the location of the Temple of Jerusalem on mount Moriah. There is little wonder that 2Chron.3:1 is part of the tradition in Judaism that linked Mount Moriah with the Jerusalem Temple. In itself, Moriah would have been an unknown place. This

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<sup>9</sup>Bowker, *ibid.*, pp.8,9.

tradition could have influenced the knowledge of the authors of Targum Onqelos which, rather than rendering the unknown place Moriah, writes the land of worship to mean the Temple. But, how can we possibly assume that the land of worship refers to the Jerusalem Temple? It is known that the origin of the targumic traditions was closely connected with the synagogue which in this early period of development still referred to a place, or better an assembly (the meaning of synagogue), in which Torah was read and studied. Our knowledge of the development of the synagogue itself is unclear due to the lack of direct evidence from this period. However, as Bowker says, "the origin of the synagogue in Judea was closely connected with the *ma'amadoth*", i.e., "divisions of the people throughout Judea, which were intended to correspond to the twenty-four courses of the priest in the Temple...Each *ma'amad* assembled, when its turn came, to read passages of scripture corresponding to the sacrifices taking place in Jerusalem."<sup>10</sup> After the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 C.E., the synagogue became the traditional place where not only Torah was read and studied but where worship, which had been normally enacted in Jerusalem, was conducted. A similar process happened in the diaspora where the link with Jerusalem was cut off. Physically, no more attachment could be made to the Temple in this kind of situation, but there is little doubt that the Temple possessed significant meaning in the ideology of Judaism. Since the Temple was important both before and after its

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<sup>10</sup> Bowker, *ibid.*, p.9.

destruction, it was apparently necessary for the Jews to associate the Temple with the past events in order to obtain the historical significance of the place and the activities in it as well as to underscore its authority.

Evidence from the life of the Patriarchs was possibly employed as a confirmation of the authority and legitimacy of the worship particularly the sacrifice-related ones that were connected with the Jerusalem Temple. It might be achieved by drawing a line of continuity between the events in the past (the sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham) and the present sacrifices so that the latter is to be seen as a consequence of the former. "The land of worship" itself was more a reflection of the latter generation who looked back to the history of the Patriarchs in the light of their own experience which resulted in such a rendering.

At the same time when worship is emphasised, there emerges the problem of whether the sacrifice of Isaac itself can be thought of as worship. The Targum might have been alert to the possibility that the sacrifice is understood negatively (as a crime, for instance), that it shows the need to confine the accomplishment of the sacrifice in a special way. "Offer him up there as a burnt offering *before me*" (v.2). It cannot be done anywhere except before God at a specific place. One may observe that in this particular case the Targum sought to personify the divinity, a style that is practically taboo in the writings but has to be used in order to make a clear statement that the sacrifice

has got to be done under divine control.<sup>11</sup> The reverse might also be possible. Abraham is perhaps understood not as an ordinary man. As a terrestrial being he, unlike other men, has a privilege to conduct a face-to-face meeting with the divinity. The sacrifice is a private matter between God and Abraham which nobody else could see, which inevitably underlines a conspiratorial act by both of them.

The avoidance of anthropomorphism in the Targum is conspicuous in v.8, "Before adonai (it) is revealed (which is) the sheep for the burnt offering, O my son." The MT on the other hand records "God will provide himself the lamb for a burnt offering my son." It is commonly recognised that, as Grossfeld says, "the general tendency in the Targum is towards the transcendentalization of God. In line with this view, a characteristic of Targum Onqelos is reverence for God in all ways of speaking about or to Him. Consequently, the Hebrew, which is characterized by a certain freedom of expression and by colorful idioms, is invariably paraphrased."<sup>12</sup> Emerging from the Targum's paraphrase, however, is not only the sense that the animal is not directly provided by the divinity but it is not necessarily provided by the divinity. The above sentence may well be accepted as an alternative expression for the same content of the Hebrew version. But, in its own right the sentence lacks clarity. God passively receives the burnt offering while we are not informed as to who provides

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<sup>11</sup> Compare with vv.8,14,16 which obviously paraphrase the Hebrew anthropomorphic expression so that God can be seen as transcendental.

<sup>12</sup> B.Grossfeld, *The Targum Onqelos to Genesis*, 1988, p.19.

the sheep. As an answer to Isaac's question, this statement is perplexing. The tendency of transcendentalizing God in targumic translation has lessened the clarity of the story. Nonetheless, the ambiguity over who will provide the animal seems to match up to the description of the mysterious emergence of the animal (v.13).

Targum Onqelos renders 'ḥd (a/one) as the attribute for the ram in v.13 rather than 'ḥr (behind) as does the MT. This attribution endorses the mysteriousness of the origin of the ram. In MT's reading we are still made aware of the location of the ram. Whether the ram has been there, behind Abraham, since Abraham arrived at the site we do not know but, at least, the ram comes from behind Abraham at the time he sees it. On the other hand, the Targum's portrayal has made the ram as if it had arisen out of soil. It suddenly presents itself in front of Abraham. Possibly the Targum wants to show that the ram is provided by the divinity himself. The ram will eventually be sacrificed in Isaac's stead. The spontaneous initiative by Abraham to sacrifice the ram comes as a sudden act too.

The Targum opens up the event as "and Abraham raised his eyes after these (things/words)". The MT does not have the phrase "after these". The phrase, however, is reminiscent of the beginning of v.1. If in v.1 the phrase functions to introduce a new event that follows, so it does in v.13. The sacrifice of the ram is a new development in the story. It happens after the former preparation and consummation of

Isaac's sacrifice is cancelled by the angel of adonai (this celestial being is another targumic transcendentalized translation of the Hebrew messenger of Yahweh). Although the sacrifice of the only son has been stopped, the sacrificial worship itself is to be continued by the sacrifice of the ram. It is a further emphasis on worship which has actually been apparent since v.2 and that will become more obvious in the next verse.

The Targum reads v.14 differently from the MT, "and Abraham worshipped and prayed there, in that place, and he said, 'Here, before the Lord, shall {future} generations worship'" Therefore, it is said on this day: On this mountain did Abraham worship before the Lord." The Targum translates the Hebrew *qr'*:to call as "to pray". It is observed by Grossfeld that "this Targum, consistently renders the Hebrew *qr'* in this context as signaling 'prayer'.... In addition to prayer (Hebrew *sl'*), *plk* (worship) occurs in some instances either by itself (Gen.33:20) or together with pray."<sup>13</sup> So that instead of naming the place, Abraham is seen as praying and worshipping. This is thought to provide a basis for the worship of the generations after Abraham. Thus, the story functions as an aetiology of the place where traditional worship is to be held. It is important to notice the attempt to establish a continuation of the past event with the present tradition. The translation of v.14 might reflect the view of the Akedah in the tradition because of its strong reference to the future

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<sup>13</sup>Grossfeld, *ibid.*, p.65.



generations.<sup>14</sup> However, the sentence has been reconstituted in relation to the Hebrew text.

The MT's version is densely occupied by puns that surround the naming of the place. "*wayyiqra' abraham šem-hammaqom hahu' Yahweh yir'eh 'ašer ye'amer hayyom behar Yahweh yera'eh* (and Abraham called the name of that place 'Yahweh will provide/see' as it is said to this day on {the} mount Yahweh will be seen or it {refers to the animal} will be seen or it will be provided)."<sup>15</sup> The words *yir'eh* and *yera'eh* enshroud at least four puns: *yir'eh* (he will see) the resonance of which can be found in v.8, *yera'eh* (he was seen), *yere'* (one who fears) that resounds in v.12, *wayyar'* (and he saw) that appears twice in v.4 and v.13. What in the past was still in the form of hope and belief of the father and son (v.8) has now become real by the sacrifice of the ram. And the place that was seen by Abraham from a distance (v.4) probably with an anxious mind calculating the time of the sacrifice of his son that was nearer than ever, turned out to be the place where the substitute animal was revealed in front of Abraham. The belief that Yahweh would provide the animal sacrifice can, therefore, be proved (although perhaps Abraham did not really mean it when he replied to Isaac's question). The puns therefore link several events and images by assonance. The common

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<sup>14</sup> Concerning the Akedah in the tradition, see Chapter II.2, for example, pp.45-47.

<sup>15</sup> The obscurity of *Yahweh yera'eh* may possibly be explained in the light of the attempt to transcendentalize the divinity as shown by Targum Onqelos so that it is an oblique expression of "Yahweh will provide the sacrificial animal" whereas the literal translation will say "(to) Yahweh it will be provided".

motive of puns is clearly expressed by Walter Redfern, "puns appeal to those who want to say several things at once, and for whom unambiguous utterance is too linear and restricting."<sup>16</sup>

The link between what Abraham has done in the Akedah and its effect for the future generations is highlighted again in the context of transmission of the blessings. The declaration of the blessings is opened with an oath by the angel of adonai "By my Memra I swear, says adonai,..." As in the MT it is not clear whether this is the angel's utterance or God's. The Targum seems to complicate the identification of the subject by inserting *Memra* as "a circumvention for the idea of God."<sup>17</sup> So there are the angel, *Memra* and God who are possibly involved in giving the utterance. Meanwhile, the language of the blessings is virtually linear, replacing some metaphorical terms of the Hebrew with semantically straightforward words. The Targum renders "your descendants" for the Hebrew "your seeds", "the cities of their enemies" for "the gates of their enemies" (v.17). And for the ambiguous Hebrew phrase *hithbarakhu bhezār 'akha kol goyey ha'areṣ* (by your descendants shall all nations of the earth bless themselves), the Targum offers the paraphrase: "on account of your descendants shall all people of the earth be

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<sup>16</sup>Walter Redfern, *Puns*, 1984, p.177.

<sup>17</sup>M.Ginsburger as quoted in Grossfeld, *Onqelos*, p.25. The *Memra* can also be understood as "a world-permeating force, a reality in the world of matter or mind, the immanent aspect of God holding all things under its omnipresent sway." J.Abelson as quoted in Grossfeld, *Onqelos*, p.27.

blessed because you have accepted my *Memra*". It is indicated that the deeds of Abraham and his descendants determine the divine blessings for other peoples. So that, in this understanding, whether the people are blessed depends entirely on the merit of Abraham and his descendants. It shows the exclusive right possessed by Abraham's descendants as the only mediator of divine blessings, simply because they are Abraham's descendants. The Targum does not seem doubtful in expressing, what one might call, the chauvinistic idea of the people who claim themselves as Abraham's descendants. This might arise as an attempt to defend the national identity and dignity of the Jews who at that time lived under foreign rule (Roman). Another possibility is that the Targum was written when the rise of Christianity was felt as a challenge to the existence of the Jews as Abraham's descendants who had been chosen to be the source of the blessings for the nations.

It is known that Targum Onqelos was used within the context of worship. In this context, the unity between events in the past and the present plays an important role in the mind of the worshippers. In their understanding, the divine blessings derive from the merit of the Patriarchs as well as their own obedience. The blessings as a reward for the merit of the Akedah were understood not only for the Patriarchs but also for the succeeding generations. This understanding became more obvious in the so-called doctrine of the merit of the Akedah in Rabbinic tradition. Thus, the emphasis of the Targum is most of all on the link between

the history of the Patriarchs and the following generations in the context of worship and blessings. In this case, it virtually differs from Targum Ps. Jonathan and much Rabbinic literature in that Onqelos alone takes for granted the command to sacrifice Isaac which for others seems to be problematic.

## II.2. Midrashic readings

Targum Ps. Jonathan<sup>18</sup> and Genesis Rabbah<sup>19</sup> reflect the need for explaining the reason for the command to sacrifice Isaac which in the MT as well as in the translation texts is simply taken for granted. Both texts mention a quarrel between Ishmael and Isaac, who want to prove who is the most beloved son of their father. The quarrel appears as a prelude to the sacrificial command.<sup>20</sup> In the end Isaac declares an unrivalled challenge to Ishmael by allowing himself to be sacrificed. This story does not only provide a reason for the divine command that initiates the Akedah but at the same time it deliberately shows the great courage of Isaac. Isaac is known as a 37 years old man who, therefore, would have been able to resist his aged father had he wanted to. "The testing of Abraham thus becomes a testing also of Isaac. Abraham's offering of his son

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<sup>18</sup> See Bowker, *Targums*, pp. 224-6.

<sup>19</sup> *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, tr. Rabbi Dr. H. Freedman and Maurice Simon, 1939.

<sup>20</sup> Another Targum (Neofiti) explains that the Akedah was brought about by God's desire to test Abraham. It renders the test as the tenth of such temptations, the same rendering as that of the book of Jubilees.

becomes Isaac's self-oblation."<sup>21</sup>

Genesis Rabbah fortifies the depiction of Isaac as the beloved son of Abraham, "said He (God) to him (Abraham): 'take, I pray thee- I beg thee- thy son.' 'Which son?' he asked. *Thine only son*, replied He. 'But each is the only one of his mother?'- whom thou lovest- 'is there a limit to the affections?' even Isaac, said He. And why did He not reveal it to him without delay? In order to make him (Isaac) even more beloved in his eyes and reward him for every word spoken." Is it necessary for Abraham to be urged to love Isaac more? Did the Rabbis realise that Abraham's love for Isaac is unconvincing? The comment astonishingly implies so. But the biblical narrative may support this implication.<sup>22</sup>

The comparison of the worthy son, Isaac and the less worthy son, Ishmael forms another part of the story in the Targum in which Ishmael is disclosed as one of the two servants (the other one is Eliezer). The servants are regarded as inferior as they cannot see what Abraham and Isaac can, that is, the cloud over the hill that marks God's presence. On this basis, they are left behind with the asses (the Bible does not have any explanation for this event). The servants do not deserve to worship (this is the overt motive of Abraham going up the hill as he declares to the servants) with Abraham and Isaac in the holy place. The

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<sup>21</sup> Philip S. Alexander, "Aqedah", in *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. R.J. Coggins and J.L. Houlden, 1990, p.45.

<sup>22</sup> See Chapter III

belittling depiction of Ishmael may possibly be perceived as having its basis primarily in the Bible. God, regardless of Ishmael, describes Isaac as the only (*yhd*) and beloved son of Abraham. In the hands of the Rabbis, the marginal place of Ishmael in Abraham's family is rationalized therefore becomes more apparent. It may doubtlessly happen because the Rabbis themselves would have a claim of inheritance in Isaac. With the emergence of Islam, which established itself as originating from Ishmael, the Rabbis, one may imagine, would have more strongly than ever projected Isaac's exceptional figure.

Only the righteousness of Abraham makes possible the divine test, "when a man possesses two cows, one strong and the other feeble, upon which does he put the yoke? Surely upon the strong one. Similarly, God tests none but the righteous..." explains a midrash. The burdensomeness of the test makes it appropriate only for certain men. The analogy of the working cow may indicate that the test is part of a series of tests, like a daily job. The test is more like a contest of somebody's strength rather than a way to find out whether somebody is strong enough to endure the test. In other words, the Rabbis indirectly rejected any supposition that the test was given because God was doubtful about Abraham's obedience or righteousness.<sup>23</sup> The demonstration of Abraham's righteousness may also have an implication that the sacrifice is not in any way a popular

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<sup>23</sup>The supposition that is indicated by the midrash of *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*, for instance.

test.

The test is, first of all, considered as problematic since it seems to contradict the other divine wishes.<sup>24</sup> The Rabbis used an illustration of a teacher who says "do not lend money on interest, yet himself lent on interest." It obviously bewilders his student, "master, you tell me, 'do not lend money on interest', yet you yourself lend on interest!" He then replies, "I tell you not to lend on interest to an Israelite, but you may lend on interest to other nations". Another example of contradictory wishes is picked up from God's own statements. Israel appeals to God, "thou didst write in thy Torah, *thou shalt not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge* (Lev.xix,18), yet thou doest so thyself, as it says, *the Lord avengeth and is full of wrath, the Lord taketh vengeance on his adversaries, and he reserveth wrath for his enemies* (Nah.i,2)."<sup>25</sup> God's answer: "I wrote in my Torah, '*thou shalt not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge*' against Israel; but in respect of the nations- *avenge the children of Israel*, etc. (Nah.xxxi,2)."<sup>26</sup> So, to avoid being trapped in a contradiction, one should place each command in its particular context. The commands are circumstantial, depending on to whom and when they should be applied (in

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<sup>24</sup>Which one of the divine wills that is in contradiction with the will to test Abraham is never specified but the Rabbis' explanation is no other than a response to God's contradictory wills.

<sup>25</sup>The quotations from biblical verses are taken by the Rabbis from midrashic version, differs from the MT.

<sup>26</sup>Undoubtedly, Rabbinic interpretations are much coloured by nationalistic sentiment that the treatment of Israelites should be more respectful than of other nations.

any way Israel should gain the benefit). By the same token, the test in the Akedah is specifically designed for Abraham at that particular moment so that God's will is not necessarily to be seen as in opposition to his other wishes.

Concerning the land of Moriah, some Rabbis have regarded the name as a pun and derived various meanings in conjunction with its pronunciation. The name has been understood as the place from where instruction (hora'ah) emerges, emanating religious awe (yir'ah), etc. All understandings are seemingly geared towards the idea that this is a kind of religious education centre in which one learns religious ethics. It apparently is interwoven with the understanding that in the Akedah, Abraham is undertaking religious training from God so that the place is to be interpreted not far from it. There is also an interpretation which relates the Moriah to myrrh (mor). This myrrh is usually used as an incense in the preparation of worship. In this context, the emphasis is to be given to the worship to which Abraham's journey to the land of Moriah leads. In the translation of Targum Onqelos worship in fact emerges as the dominant theme of the Akedah, this text even replaces the Moriah with 'the land of worship'.

In the MT itself the word worship (ništaḥaweḥ) appears only once, that is, in Abraham's message before he leaves his servants for the sacrificial site (v.5). In response to this verse, Rabbinic interpretations accentuate the affects



of worship. "Everything happened as a reward for worshipping. Abraham returned in peace from Mount Moriah only as a reward for worshipping...Israel were redeemed only as a reward for worshipping...The Torah was given only as a reward for worshipping..." The theme of worship, as we have seen, is also employed by Targum Onqelos and apparently is very common in Jewish literature.

Interestingly, the Rabbis did not mention the return of Isaac from the worship but only Abraham. The deletion is probably an anticipation of the absence of Isaac from the journey back to Beersheba at the end of the Akedah which the Rabbis were very much aware of. To fill the gap of knowledge concerning the absence of Isaac, it is said that Isaac was sent off to study Torah with Shem. A Jewish legend also mentions that Isaac was taken to Paradise in order to be healed from the incision made in him by his father when he began to offer him up as a sacrifice.<sup>27</sup> Another speaks about Isaac being left on Mount Moriah for three years until he reached the age of forty, and then he married Rebecca.<sup>28</sup> The Rabbis could hardly ignore the absence of Isaac. However, the indication in Abraham's message that he and Isaac will come back to his servants after the worship did not entail a question for the Rabbis. They did not regard Abraham's conflicting utterance that he will return with his son as ambiguous. Perhaps it was the naive belief in the candid piety of Abraham that prevented

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<sup>27</sup> Spiegel, *Last Trial*, pp.6,7.

<sup>28</sup> Spiegel, *Last Trial*, p.5.

the Rabbis from having a thought even of the slightest chance of the deceitfulness of Abraham. Or it might be the mission of the Rabbis, based on their ideological belief, to protect Abraham from being seen as a cunning individual.

Targum Ps. Jonathan records another reason, besides the worship, of what Abraham was going to do when he left his servants behind with the asses, i.e., to witness how the divine promise of many descendants is to be reestablished. Although the nature of the promise itself is in fact a contradiction of the nature of Isaac's sacrifice, the Targum does not have any doubt about it. Abraham's reason is accepted as logical.

The attempt to bowdlerize Abraham's image as well as Isaac's image may have found a problem when Isaac breaks the silence and asks a critical question of Abraham. Since Isaac is always described as a compliant son who loyally follows his father's plan, his question appears contemptuous. The Rabbis responded by presenting the satanic figure, Samael who first of all tries to make Abraham aware that he should not kill his son, given to him at the age of a hundred. Samael's role is reminiscent of the friends of Job. Having failed to deflect Abraham from his purpose, Samael comes to Isaac. If only for a self-sacrifice Isaac is zealously ready (we may remember that Isaac's sacrifice is primarily based on his challenge to Ishmael to prove who deserves to be the dearest son) but when Samael reminds Isaac of so much that Sarah has done

for him that would be in vain had he been sacrificed, Isaac is prompted to beseech his father the truth of the matter. The existence of Samael was probably intended to avoid the impression that Isaac is the sole initiator of the question. Isaac is not to be responsible entirely for questioning his father because he does so under influence of Samael. This event ends with Abraham's answer which reveals the possibility of Isaac being "the animal sacrifice": "at all events, God will provide himself the lamb, O my son; and if not, thou art for a burnt-offering, my son."<sup>29</sup> From this moment onwards, Isaac would remember that he would be the sacrificial victim.

The biblical version is much more oblique than Genesis Rabbah and Targum Ps. Jonathan in that it never clearly discloses Isaac's willingness with regard to his sacrifice. On the contrary, the other two texts have indicated that Isaac is ready to sacrifice himself from the very beginning (the challenge of Isaac to Ishmael) and if Isaac eventually launches a question, according to the Rabbis, it is because Samael reminds him of his mother and all her care for him. Isaac is much more concerned about his mother than himself. Once again Isaac's courageous manner is depicted.

On the arrival of Abraham and Isaac at the sacrificial site, the alert eyes of the Rabbis noticed "where was Isaac?". Abraham builds the altar on his own, Isaac who apparently has helped him since the servants were left

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<sup>29</sup> Similar expression can be found in Targum Neofiti.

simply disappears. One of the Rabbis gives his answer by saying "he (Abraham) had taken and hidden him (Isaac) lest he who sought to seduce him throw a stone at him and disqualify him from serving as a sacrifice". Despite the seemingly contrived answer and therefore fanciful, we hardly disagree with the Rabbis over the gap of knowledge caused by the disappearance of Isaac at the sacrificial site.

In the Bible, the disappearance of Isaac might be an allusion to Isaac's opposition to the sacrifice. As we know, in the Bible it is not clear whether Isaac complies with his father's intention. He might in the end agree to be sacrificed but possibly after his father forced him to do so which the Bible for some reason cannot disclose. Abraham in any way acts like a dictator in implementing the divine command. He hardly acts upon Isaac's consent (if it is necessary at all). And, as this event shows, he does not care whether Isaac will help him with building the altar. Abraham may build the altar alone because Isaac deserts him or is tied up to a tree as he rises in rebellion against his father.

The voluntary sacrifice of Isaac plays an important role in the Targum as well as in Rabbinic interpretations. According to Geza Vermes, "the most pregnant illustration of Isaac's role in the sacrifice comes from R.Meir, who cites R.Akiba's interpretation of the commandment of the love of God in Deuteronomy vi.5 (You shall love the Lord

your God...with all your soul): 'like Isaac, who bound himself upon the altar'.<sup>30</sup> The voluntariness will also lead to the acceptance of the sacrifice as an unblemished sacrifice. The Targum writes Isaac's utterance as follows, "bind me well that I may not struggle at the anguish of my soul, and that a blemish may not be found in your offering, and that I may not be cast into the depth of destruction". Another tradition even goes further as saying that one quarter of Isaac's blood was spilled on the altar, if only the sacrifice is to be legitimate.<sup>31</sup>

The consent of Isaac to the sacrifice of his own life is central in the tradition. The Akedah is celebrated as commemoration of the nobility of Isaac's sacrifice that produces a reward for his descendants too. In fact the virtue of the Akedah exists in almost every, if not all, sacrificial event in Judaism as clearly seen by Geza Vermes through Rabbinic literature,

Rabbinic writings show clearly that sacrifices, and perhaps the offering of all sacrifice, were intended as a memorial of Isaac's self oblation. Their only purpose was to remind God of the merit of him who bound himself upon the altar.<sup>32</sup>

The sacrifices of the following generations are intended to invoke the sacrifice of Isaac in front of God who, then, is hoped to assist them during difficult times as well as to grant his mercy upon the people's sins. For this reason, it

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<sup>30</sup> Vermes, "Redemption and Genesis xxii" in *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism*, 1973, p.197.

<sup>31</sup> Spiegel, *Last Trial*, p.46.

<sup>32</sup> Vermes, *op.cit.*, p.209.

is important that Genesis 22 is regarded as a real event that happened in the past.

If eventually the substitution of the sacrificial victim, of the ram for Isaac, did take place, in the eyes of the Rabbis it would not change the significance of the sacrifice. The ram was accepted as though it were Isaac himself. Isaac and the ram are considered inseparably as the sacrificial victim. The combination of sacrifices of Isaac and the ram is believed to be able to atone for the sins of Isaac's descendants. "According to ancient Jewish theology, the atoning efficacy of the Tamid offering, of all the sacrifices in which a lamb was immolated, and perhaps, basically, of all expiatory sacrifice irrespective of the nature of the victim, depended upon the virtue of the Akedah, the self-offering of that Lamb whom God had recognized as the perfect victim of the perfect burnt offering."<sup>33</sup> On Rosh ha-Shanah the atoning merit of the Akedah is most highlighted. The emergence of the ram also gives rise to an eschatological hope of the Messianic day, in the present time which is memorialised in conjunction with Rosh ha-Shanah, that will be made public by blowing a *shofar* (a horn of a ram) which is thought to be one of the Akedah ram's. "The shofar is ubiquitous in Jewish art in late antiquity, being found frequently in synagogues, on tombstones, and on small objects."<sup>34</sup> Thus, the Akedah is used to provide a mythical basis for the ideological

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<sup>33</sup> Vermes, op.cit., p.211. Here, Vermes quotes Gen.Rab. lxiv.3.

<sup>34</sup> P.S.Alexander, "Aqedah," p.46.

understanding of redemption from sin and of liberation from oppression in the present time as well as a type of the Messianic action that is linked with the resurrection of the dead in the future.

Nevertheless, the biblical story of the Akedah never obviously demonstrates the voluntariness of Isaac in his sacrifice as the interpretative texts and the tradition do. There is certainly a lack of strong will in the biblical Isaac but beyond this, Isaac remains an enigmatic character. We cannot know how willing he is to let his father sacrifice him. Neither does the Bible show the speciality of the substitute ram. It is just a ram which happens to be on the site which inspires Abraham to make a substitution for Isaac's sacrifice. Moreover, the voluntariness of Isaac's sacrifice and the fact that Isaac is to be bound to be the sacrifice on the altar may look incongruous. He would not have needed to be bound had he voluntarily offered his life to be sacrificed. This incongruity may or may not have been observed by Josephus who simply omitted the event of the binding of Isaac from the story so as to take Isaac's willingness to an extreme.<sup>35</sup>

Another eschatological motive in interpretation can be found in Rabbinic comments on the naming of the place. *Yahweh yir'eh* is related to Jerusalem or the Temple that

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<sup>35</sup> Thomas W. Franxman, *Genesis and the "Jewish Antiquities" of Flavius Josephus*, 1979, p.161.

probably had already been destroyed for the second time by the time Genesis Rabbah was written. A midrash, for example, shows that *Yahweh Yir'eh* "alludes to the Temple built"; the phrase " 'as it is said to this day: in the mount' refers to it destroyed"; and " 'where the Lord is seen' refers to it rebuilt and firmly established in the Messianic era". Jubilees even more clearly identifies the place as 'mount Sion' (XVIII:13), a term which in apocalyptic texts is generally used to refer to spiritual Jerusalem built by the Messiah. Symbolically the reestablishment of the Temple in the Messianic era can be understood as the reestablishment of the nation itself since at that time the Jews were either living under Roman colonialization in Palestine or scattered in the countries of the Diaspora. Therefore, the hope for national reestablishment was presumably alive. While hoping for the Messianic era, there was also a need for divine protection in times of distress.

Targum Ps. Jonathan writes of Abraham's prayer (targumic interpretation of the event in Gen.22:14) as containing a prayer for future generations, "when I prayed for mercy from before you, O Lord, it was revealed before you that there was no deviousness in my heart, and I sought to perform your decree with joy, that when the descendants of Isaac, my son, shall come to the hour of distress, you may remember them, and answer them, and deliver them; and that all generations to come may say, In this mountain Abraham bound Isaac, his son, and there the Shekina of the Lord was



revealed to him." This prayer may reflect the need of the writers and their contemporaries who were in a time of distress for the above stated reason.

The Targum and Rabbinic comments in Genesis Rabbah work on the basis of filling the gaps of the story. Many difficulties in the biblical version of the Akedah are explained and, therefore, made plain. Another example is about the death of Sarah. In the Bible, after the Akedah and the news about the children who were born by Milcah for Nahor, Abraham's brother, there is a statement of the death of Sarah (Gen.23:1,2). The Targum explains the death of Sarah as caused by bitterness after hearing of the slaughter of Isaac from Satan. The death of Sarah is related to the Akedah in which Sarah is entirely absent. Her innocence of the event eventually proves to be fatal as Satan's information shocks her deadly. The sudden death of Sarah is therefore accentuated. No matter whether one is satisfied with such a story of the death of Sarah or with the presentation of a strange figure like Satan, the gap-filling process that has been introduced by the Targum and Genesis Rabbah may well represent largely the desire to explain away the ambiguities of the biblical narrative, or, the necessity of making sense of the huge gaps in the story, that is commonly shared amongst commentaries.

We have acknowledged that in interpreting Abraham and Isaac, both the Targum and Rabbinic commentaries emphatically maintain the spiritual heroism of the

Patriarchs. This in fact might represent a popular belief in the Patriarchs in and around the time of those interpretations. The book of Jubilees might provide another example of the eulogy to the Patriarchs as it surfaces, in a courtroom setting similar perhaps to that of Job, in the grandeur of Abraham's faith in God.<sup>36</sup> D.S.Russell analyzes this general tendency as follows,

In the years that followed Ben Sira (writing about 180 BC) and on into Christian era the patriarchs gained a new prominence and popularity within Judaism. The stories told of them in scripture came to be embellished or amplified or altered in such a way as to enhance their reputation out of all recognition. Legends grew up around them, miracles were attributed to them and rewards were given by a grateful God by reason of the merit they displayed.<sup>37</sup>

In the case of Jubilees, important events in the lives of the Patriarchs are also framed within the chronology of Jewish festivals.<sup>38</sup> Jubilees 17:15 gives the date of the Akedah as 15 Nisan, three days (18:3, Gen.22:4) after "the voice in heaven" that reveals the plan to test Abraham was heard. At the end of the story, Abraham is recorded as celebrating the seven-day feast which is also celebrated every year thereafter (18:18). This dating suggests that for the writers of Jubilees the Akedah is to be understood

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<sup>36</sup> "Jubilees", tr. R.H.Charles revised by C.Rabin in *The Apocryphal Old Testament*, ed. H.F.D.Sparks, 1984.

<sup>37</sup> D.S.Russell, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: Patriarchs and Prophets in Early Judaism*, 1987, pp.1-2.

<sup>38</sup> O.S.Wintermute perceives, "the writer (of Jubilees) has a theological concern for time which is reflected in the structure of the book. The author believed that there was a theological value inherent in certain special times." Wintermute, "Jubilees: A New Translation and Introduction" in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol.2, ed. J.H.Charlesworth, 1985, p.38.

in conjunction with the Passover.<sup>39</sup> The principle of the festival is to remember the liberation and salvation granted by the divinity. However, the context of Jubilees' time was far from such a liberation as people still lived under foreign rule and for the conservatives, to which the writers presumably belonged, popular hellenization as well as skepticism towards Jewish laws surely increased that concern.<sup>40</sup> Here, the Akedah undoubtedly possessed an important function in strengthening the hope of the people for divine liberation. The sacrifice of Isaac, like the sacrifices of the Passover, is a reminder of the divine covenant to make Israel his people, to bring them out from slavery and to protect them from the enemy.<sup>41</sup> After all, Jubilees seemingly rejects the assumption that the sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham was once and for all. The incorporation of the seven-day festival, contemporaneous with the writers, seems to suggest that what had been done by the Patriarchs was still preserved or vice versa, the

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<sup>39</sup>R.Daly, "The Soteriological Significance of the Sacrifice of Isaac", *CBQ* 39(1977), p.55.; R.Hayward, "The Targumic account of the Sacrifice of Isaac", *JJS* (32)1981, pp.145.

<sup>40</sup>According to G.W.E.Nickelsburg, "the dating of the *Book of Jubilees* can be determined in two stages. Several factors indicate ca. 175 and 100 B.C.E. as the outer limits. The *terminus post quem* is provided by passages reflecting matters that were at issue in the Hellenistic reform....Explicit citation of the *Book of Jubilees* in the Qumran Damascus Document (CD 16:3-4) indicates a lower limit ca. 100-75 B.C.E. Paleographical evidence from Qumran manuscripts of *Jubilees* suggests a date closer to 100 B.C.E. Within this time span, two dates are possible." Nickelsburg, *Jewish Literature Between the Bible and the Mishnah: A Historical and Literary Introduction*, 1981, p.78.

<sup>41</sup>The blessings at the end of the Akedah in fact refer not only to the liberation of Abraham's descendants but also to their superiority over other nations. As Jubilees writes, "and your descendants shall take possession of their enemies' cities (Hebrew: gate). And in your descendants shall all the nations of the earth be blessed (Hebrew: by/through your seeds all the nations shall bless themselves)." Similar interpretation can be found in Targumic texts as well as LXX.

existing festival had actually an antiquarian root in the experience of the Patriarchs and therefore was respectable. The mode of Jubilees, and certainly many Rabbinic interpretations, in recasting the biblical Akedah by bringing in some aspects of contemporary tradition might well be intended to persuade the readers to be insiders of the (hi)story. The (hi)story is no longer an unrelated event that happened in the past but is a part of the readers' lives. Reading is actually a dialogical relationship between the readers and their contemporary world on the one hand and the story world on the other hand. What happens here is that while the story projects its images into the readers' mind, the readers will understand the story only by responsively projecting their own values, knowledge, ideologies, and cultures into the story. The projection of the readers' world into the story is in fact essential, otherwise the story will remain strange to the readers. The writers of Jubilees might have realised very well that it deliberately provides interpretative keys in a form of contemporary events and let the readers understand the story only in this light.

This makes Jubilees' reading arbitrary in a sense that for a reader who does not belong to its community it is possible either not to understand or to understand the story differently. A reader who has never practised or indeed seen the seven-day festival would be unlikely to grasp Jubilees' reading. But, it certainly was not the case in the community where Jubilees existed, for them this kind

of presentation could result in a better understanding of the story.

One may notice that although like some Rabbinic interpretations Jubilees expresses the need for explanation of the enigmatic elements in the Akedah such as the unprecedented divine command for Isaac's sacrifice, it may take a different way of explanation. Jubilees does not suggest that the reason for such a command lies in human affairs like the quarrel between Ishmael and Isaac, nor does it understand it as God's capricious desire. Instead, it casts a theatrical setting which takes place in heaven where first of all it is revealed that Abraham "had been faithful in doing everything he (the Lord) had told him to do, and that he loved the Lord, and that in every affliction he had been faithful"(xvii:15). Afterwards comes the prince Mastema, a satanic accuser who in his curiosity asks God to once again and more severely test Abraham. It appears that the prince Mastema is the only member of these heavenly beings who is skeptical about Abraham's faith. Accordingly, it is also he who at the end is put to shame as Abraham shows no lack of faith in God (xviii:11). Hardly in the book of Genesis can we find a depiction of divine conference as detailed as this, especially with regard to the presence of the opposite representative such as the prince Mastema. The presentation itself may simply reflect the popular belief at the time Jubilees was written.<sup>42</sup> But

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<sup>42</sup> In the Bible a similar model of the divine council can only be read in the book of Job, with hints and allusions elsewhere (cf. Isa. 40:1, 6:6ff).

what can also be thought about it is that it might be an attempt to elucidate the opposing wills of the divinity that is ultimately pervasive in Genesis narratives. The presence of the prince Mastema as the initiator of the test may give the background of the destructive will of God's command which in Genesis remains mysterious. At the same time Jubilees makes itself apologetic for God since after all it was the prince Mastema who provoked the command and not God himself since God had already known that Abraham would be loyal to him.<sup>43</sup> The notion of the divine omniscience was later rejected by a midrash of *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* from probably eight century C.E. which does not assume that God, in fact, knows Abraham's mind without testing him. Acknowledging the tradition about the ten trials of Abraham, which appears also in Jubilees, this midrash seems to believe that all the tests, not only the Akedah, were designed so that God would discover both Abraham's mind and his capacity to follow-through.<sup>44</sup> The most attempted refinement of the story by Jubilees is, in fact, no longer about the exclusion of the destructive will from God than in the deletion of any possibility that Isaac's sacrifice might end up in a real sacrifice. Even the prince Mastema, the satanic accuser, is never recorded as really suggesting a real sacrifice of Isaac. His demand

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<sup>43</sup>The strongest apologia can be read in Josephus' declarations that God had not issued the command from a craving for human blood; nor had He made Abraham a father only in order to rob him in so impious a fashion of his offspring. See Franxman, *Genesis*, p.161.

<sup>44</sup>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.P.R.Davies and R.T.White, JSOT SS 100, 1990, p.132.

would never exceed a mere test. Thus, when Abraham succeeds in accomplishing the sacrifice, the prince is put to shame. This is the farthest possible condition that the skeptic has to suffer. The prince could never be punished in connection with murder since the death of Isaac is never his intention. Unlike Jubilees, the book of Genesis does not seem to eliminate the possibility that Isaac's sacrifice could be real.<sup>45</sup>

The apologetic nature of Jubilees, however, seems to prevent it from penetrating deeply into the disappearance of Isaac at the end of the story which might be the cause of the speculation as to the death of Isaac. In the prologue of his book which reveals the many tragedies in Jewish history inspired by the Akedah Spiegel says,

Even the ancients, long ago, were surprised that immediately after the Akedah- after Isaac was bound on the altar to be sacrificed by his father at God's command, and then just as categorically ordered to be released and not to be even so much as bruised- that immediately after that, all traces of Isaac son of Father Abraham disappear.<sup>46</sup>

But if the ignorance of the absence of Isaac was perhaps caused by Jubilees' insensitivity and not necessarily due to distortion, Rabbinic interpretations consciously dismissed it as a gesture of the death of Isaac.<sup>47</sup> Josephus took a stronger stand against the death of Isaac by twisting the end of the story, transforming it to a happy

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<sup>45</sup> More discussion about the real sacrifice of Isaac as a strong possibility is in Chapter III.

<sup>46</sup> Spiegel, *Last Trial*, p.3.

<sup>47</sup> See pp.41,42.

end altogether. The father and son, restored to each other and elated with the promises, embrace. They then offer the sacrifice, return home to Sarah and live happily.<sup>48</sup> This viewpoint was seemingly anxiously intended as a complete rejection of the tragic interpretation of the Akedah.

### II.3. Jewish history and literature: between tragedy and comedy

As a matter of fact the comic denouement as obviously represented by Josephus and for some also by the Bible itself, although the reverse is also true, has never passed without a challenge from the opposite view. It is noticed by Harold Fisch who says,

It would seem that the Akedah in its naked, original form, where Isaac is saved and the father and child walk together into the future, has to fight not only against the pagan mythical heritage of our (Jewish) culture but also against terrible historical realities that press themselves upon us in life itself.<sup>49</sup>

Fisch refers to two kind of tragedies that surround the history of reception of the Akedah. One of them is the pagan rite of human sacrifice that is supposed to be a part of ancient life. And the other is the tragic killings of many Jews throughout the history of Western/Christian civilization. "History recounts many instances of parents killing their children in the face of persecution and calling upon the story of the Akedah as justification."

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<sup>48</sup> Franxman, *Genesis*, p.162.

<sup>49</sup> H.Fisch, *A Remembered Future: A study in Literary Mythology*, 1984, p.93.



Glenda Abramson reminds us bitterly.<sup>50</sup>

Surely Rabbinic interpretations time after time in history have never missed the opportunity to mention the deadly fate of Isaac. Perhaps the most extreme depiction of the killing of Isaac which might stretch the imagination to breaking point is Rabbi Ephraim's poem:

*Down upon him fell the resurrection dew, and he revived.  
(The father) seized him (then) to slaughter him once more.  
Scripture, bear witness! Well-grounded is the fact:  
And the Lord called Abraham, even a second time from  
heaven.*

*The ministering angels cried out, terrified:  
Even animal victims, were they ever slaughtered twice?  
Instantly they made their outcry heard on high,  
Lo, Ariels cried out above the earth.<sup>51</sup>*

"Scripture, bear witness!" claims the poem while referring to the divine voice that truly sounds twice in the biblical narrative. But, can the poem also base its thought of Isaac being slaughtered twice by Abraham on the biblical story? It is hardly the case. The story may well spark off a grim image of Isaac's sacrifice but it never pushes itself to such an extremity. On what basis then was the poem written? The answer must be the real experience faced by the poet and his contemporaries. The poem produced as a contemplation in the time of the Crusades in 11<sup>th</sup> century C.E. where thousands of Jews were killed or killed themselves to preserve their honour. "For the victims of the Crusades it was impossible not to feel that their sufferings and sacrifices exceeded by far everything

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<sup>50</sup> .G.Abramson, "The Reinterpretation of the Akedah in Modern Hebrew Poetry", *JJS*, 41(1990), p.101.

<sup>51</sup> Cited in Spiegel, *Last Trial*, pp.148-9.

endured by the original Akedah father and son."<sup>52</sup> There are many stories recorded from this time that may only increase the shocking affect of the zealousness of the Jews in defending their belief against Christian conquerors. People cut each other's throats before they cut their own throats when the "mobsters had broken through into the castle courtyard and there was no way out except through apostasy". The people found the model of their gruesome acts in the story of Isaac's sacrifice. "The memory of Mount Moriah had not faded; it continued to instruct every one who followed the course of Sanctification of the Name."<sup>53</sup> Hardly one could separate experience from reading or reading from experience. A deep question is raised by Spiegel in this regard, "are we to suppose that in the consciousness of that generation the haggadah about Father Abraham took deep roots, that in the end he did do what would have been almost impossible to defend?"<sup>54</sup> The answer is likely to be yes, not because the biblical story itself can readily provide justification for their conviction that Abraham killed Isaac, since there is no such straightforward evidence. But, only the tragic world of the Jewish believers enabled them to grasp the tragic fate of Isaac that remains as a possibility inherent in the story.

In modern times, the tragic image still persisted as the Jews continued to suffer under persecution. "Its meaning to the persecuted European Jew is not difficult to comprehend:

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<sup>52</sup> Spiegel, *Last Trial*, p.21.

<sup>53</sup> Spiegel, *Last Trial*, p.21.

<sup>54</sup> Spiegel, *Last Trial*, p.27.

Isaac represented the Jewish people, constantly being called upon to make the supreme sacrifice as martyrs."<sup>55</sup> It furthermore developed with the establishment of the *yishuv* and the State of Israel in which Isaac became a flamboyant figure whereas Abraham became less honourable as a father.

Jewish legends about Isaac clearly indicate his hostile impulses towards Abraham, in fact his anger at his father's intention to sacrifice him....Rather than exclusively presenting the historically validated Abraham as God's blameless and trusting servant confronted by a test of faith- in which Isaac is a compliant partner- in Israeli literature Abraham's holy innocence is perceived as potentially murderous, and Isaac reacts with a murderousness of his own.<sup>56</sup>

Isaac gains much more sympathy in the new outlook of Israeli thought, while, on the other hand, there is skepticism about Abraham's role. Abraham is often portrayed as a weak father who could not give the needed protection to his son. Instead, he had endangered his own son in order to obey the divine mandate. The resentment towards Abraham relates to a bigger issue of the growing resentment towards predecessors, old traditions as well as God himself- in contemporary Hebrew poetry the image of God is so interwoven with that of the human father that we can hardly distinguish which is a symbol of which- that is generally seen as the cause of the present crises and weaknesses in allowing submissiveness.

In many of the poems about the *Akedah* the father is too weak to withstand God's command, and he betrays the son's trust by his readiness to agree to the sacrifice. Because of this dogged preparedness to

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<sup>55</sup> Abramson, "Reinterpretation," p.103.

perpetrate the sacrifice for the sake of some incomprehensible vision, the son destroys the father's tradition, the cause both of the vision and of the weakness.<sup>57</sup>

From a sympathy for and identification with Isaac follows an unequivocal rebellion against Isaac's role in the Akedah amongst the post-*Shoah* Israeli artists. In Yizhar's *The Days of Ziklag* (1958) one of the characters protests:

Who created such a rotten world! We can't live without giving life or taking life...I hate Abraham our forefather who goes off to sacrifice Isaac. What is his right over Isaac? Let him bind himself. I hate God who sent him to be bound, closed every avenue other than sacrifice. I hate the fact that Isaac is no more than the material for experimentation between Abraham and God. This proof of love, this demand for proof of love. The sanctification of God in the binding of Isaac. I hate...the bastards, why must the sons die?<sup>58</sup>

The rebellion against Isaac's role practically amounts to repudiation of the tragedy itself as it is not Isaac's dignity against which they rebel but Isaac's inability to defend himself against God/his father. Isaac with whom they want to identify themselves is not the pitiful biblical Isaac but the one who can stand up to demand and defend the basic right of life. Here Isaac is no longer appreciated as a martyr, as he used to be in the tradition (cf. Philo and Josephus), whose sacrifice must be held up but as an unfortunate defenceless son. In the wake of the new Israeli nation, along with the deeper influence of rationalism, tragedy may not have a place in the consciousness of the

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<sup>56</sup> Abramson, "Reinterpretation," pp.103-4.

<sup>57</sup> Abramson, "Reinterpretation," p.105.

<sup>58</sup> Cited in Abramson, "Reinterpretation," p.107.

people. Its existence is a part of the past history, the history of the fathers for whom devotion often resulted in irrational as well as submissive acts. The new generation has to stand up against that weakness in order to build a solid nation. Here we may hear the echo of Kant who accepts the sacrifice as not commanded by God himself, which, therefore has to be rejected as a religious or moral demand. Amongst the recurrences of the Akedah characters in modern Israeli art there is a momentous absence of God. With the disappearance of God the command loses its divine justification and nothing remains but a human drama of victim and victimiser.<sup>59</sup>

As a matter of fact the repudiation of tragedy is not typical of the secularized development of modern Israeli generation. Even in the ancient legends where Isaac is killed by Abraham, it is usually told that he is resurrected in the end.<sup>60</sup> The rejection of Isaac's fate as a mere victim does not only belong to modern mind but also, in its own way, to the ancient myth. Perhaps we should take into account what critics commonly say that Judaic thinking does not permit the moral structures of tragedy. It is claimed by George Steiner that,

tragedy is alien to the Judaic sense of the world... Jehovah is just, even in His fury. Often the balance of retribution or reward seems fearfully awry, or the proceedings of God appear unendurably slow. But over the sum of time, there can be no doubt that the ways of God to man are just. Not only they are just, they are rational. The Judaic spirit is vehement in its conviction that

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<sup>59</sup> Abramson, "Reinterpretation," pp.110-11.

the order of the universe and of man's estate is accessible to reason. The ways of the Lord are neither wanton nor absurd. We may fully apprehend them if we give to our inquiries the clearsightedness of obedience. Marxism is characteristically Jewish in its insistence on justice and reason, and Marx repudiated the entire concept of tragedy. "Necessity", he declared, "is blind only in so far as it is not understood."<sup>61</sup>

Nonetheless, as we have seen, tragedy cannot just be detached from the lives of so many Jewish believers who because of zealousness to their God had to sacrifice themselves during the periods of persecution. It also remains as an inherent potency in the story, despite what appears to be a rejection of human sacrifice, that permits Israeli poets to associate the weakness of the believers with Isaac's fate on the sacrificial altar. Tragedy therefore still holds, at least partially, true in Jewish thoughts of the Akedah.

#### II.4. In the Christian tradition

The portion of the awareness of tragedy becomes in one respect less obvious as the story of Genesis 22 enters the realm of the Christian interpretation. It may prove that experience moulds the model of reading. While the Jews have many times gone through a tragic life during the persecutions which enabled them to discern the undercurrent tragedy of the Akedah story, the Christians hardly have the same experience. At least one rarely sees it reflected in

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<sup>60</sup> See Spiegel, *Last Trial*, pp.28ff.

<sup>61</sup> G. Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy*, c.1961, p.4.

the writings of the theologians, that consequently alienated them from the tragic view of the Akedah. "Christianity reached the world as a sacrificial religion without sacrifice and as a means to avert disaster. The liturgical order recalled the strife in order to ensure liberation and eternal victory," claims Ulrich Simon.<sup>62</sup> Martin Luther clearly indicates this lack of tragic experience when he says: "we merely talk about these things, but Abraham and Isaac actually did them".<sup>63</sup> Christian interpreters, notably within the typological model of Isaac-Jesus, tend to bowdlerize the Akedah so that tragic images- which are, however, inevitable- are ultimately only a step to a happy ending. Because of the mythological performance of the salvific story about Jesus that he, having died and been buried, rises again to be the saviour of life then its anachronistic application, which is characteristic of typological interpretation, to the Akedah is made to endorse such an idea.

Augustine in his "City of God" (book xvi, ch.xxxii) typologically relates the sacrifice of Isaac/the ram to the Crucifixion of Jesus.<sup>64</sup> He maintains that Abraham not only never believed that God delighted in human sacrifices, but he all along believed that his son, on being offered up, would rise again. The latter may be the first indication that Augustine sees what happened in the Resurrection of

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<sup>62</sup>Ulrich Simon, *Pity and Terror: Christianity and Tragedy*, 1989, p.xiv.

<sup>63</sup>J.Pelikan, *Luther's Works*, vol.4, 1964, p.123.

<sup>64</sup>See W.J.Oates, ed., *Basic Writings of Saint Augustine*, vol.2, 1948, pp.352-3.

Christ would also have happened in the event of the Akedah provided Isaac had to die. The second description of the Isaac-Christ symbolic relationship is in the declaration of Isaac's status as the promise bearer. "In order, then, that the children of the promise may be the seed of Abraham, they are called in Isaac, that is, are gathered together in Christ by the call of grace." Augustine compares Ishmael and Isaac since they both according to him received divine assertion of being Abraham's seed.<sup>65</sup> The distinction is then made in relation to what is written in Rom.9:7,8, i.e., Ishmael represented "the children of flesh" and Isaac illustrated "the children of promise". It follows that Isaac himself carried the wood on which he was to be offered up, "just as the Lord Himself carried His own cross."

The action of Abraham in willingly sacrificing Isaac is understood as a reminiscence of that of God the father who, quoting Rom.8:32, "spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all". The beginning of this verse is strongly reminiscence of the LXX version of Genesis 22:16: "*ouk epheiso tu `uiu su tu agapetu di eme* (because you have not withheld your son, your beloved son)". But this verse assumes a real sacrifice of the Son of God by the Father while this never happens with Isaac in Genesis 22 where the ram is sacrificed as a substitution. This suggests that

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<sup>65</sup> In Genesis 20, the indication as Abraham's offspring is only attached to Ishmael (v.13) meanwhile Isaac is declared by the divinity as the bearer of Abraham's name but never as Abraham's seed. Augustine has clearly misread this passage.



Paul was influenced by Jewish traditions of the Akedah of Isaac where "Isaac's self-oblation was regarded as a true sacrifice in its own right" and "the effects of the Akedah were believed to be redemptive" (Isaac's sacrifice is real).<sup>66</sup> How true this claim is, will remain debatable because of the lack of evidence.<sup>67</sup>

Finally, the sacrifice or more precisely the blood of the ram is for Augustine the prototype of Jesus' blood and the event when the ram is caught in a thicket by its horns is seen as representing Jesus who "was crowned with thorns by the Jews."<sup>68</sup>

Augustine takes as a model of his symbolic/allegorical reading of Genesis 22 the paradigm of Crucifixion-Resurrection of Christ. As a result, even though Isaac has had to be sacrificed, as Christ, he would also have been resurrected. It appears only as a matter of belief in Abraham's mind when he considered the outcome of what will happen on the altar. In fact, Isaac was never sacrificed. This fact should have inevitably put an end to the Isaac-Jesus typology, because differently from Isaac, Jesus ended up on the cross and died. Augustine seems to blur the difference by presenting the substitute ram as the continuation of the typology, namely, the ram is now representing Jesus in the last seconds of crucifixion. How

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<sup>66</sup> See R.Daly, "Soteriological," pp.63-4.

<sup>67</sup> P.R.Davies and B.D.Chilton, "The Akedah: A Revised Tradition History", *CBO*, 40(1978), pp.514-46

<sup>68</sup> Oates, *Basic Writings*, p.353.

could the substitution in Genesis narrative maintain the connection with the event of Jesus which clearly lacked such a substitution, is not made clear. The word *tahath* (in substitution of) in Genesis 22 conspicuously indicates the distinction between Isaac as the real victim who escapes the sacrifice and the ram as the surrogate victim which is slaughtered on the altar. The same word may also divide the event before and after the substitution is revealed- the ram is not the one who brings the sacrificial wood and, conversely, Isaac is not the one whose horns (however weird an image it is) are caught in a thicket. However the differences do not apparently exist in Augustine's reading. Regardless of the alteration of the characters, the sacrifice of the ram is considered to be the completion (not the substitution) of Isaac's sacrifice. Undoubtedly, Augustine has reconstructed the Akedah narrative in accordance with the event of Jesus Christ, in which the actual death of the character really takes place. This confusion between human and animal sacrifice is lessened by the application of "as-if" notions in Rabbinic interpretations in which the ram sacrifice is regarded as if it is Isaac's own sacrifice.<sup>69</sup> The recurrences of the ram in Rabbinic literatures are no more often in relation to the sacrifice than in the symbolical use of its horn as the signal of the Messianic day.<sup>70</sup>

Genesis 22 does not conspicuously reveal the death of

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<sup>69</sup> Spiegel, *Last Trial*, pp.41ff.

<sup>70</sup> See pp.46,47.

Isaac, let alone his resurrection. But again Augustine's typological approach- which, as we have just seen, is not really typological since the two stories scarcely have the same type- embeds the notion of the Resurrection in the story. Bearing in mind that what is revealed later on is a discussion about the divine promise about Isaac's future, its function is, then, to prevent God from being seen as capricious. The resurrection of Isaac would have reassured the promise had it been broken by the sacrifice. It is also interesting to notice that Augustine in quoting Rom.9 does not indicate Isaac as the bearer of Abraham's name (Genesis 21:13) but simply "the seed".<sup>71</sup> The deletion of the Genesis attribution, which in itself may reflect the ideology of Jewish nationalism, might well be intended to spiritualize, or for that matter to christianize Isaac.<sup>72</sup> It becomes obvious in the statement that those who are gathered in Christ by the call of grace is equivalent to those who are called in Isaac, in this way they are reckoned as Abraham's descendants.

In the end, after quoting the blessing to the nations through Abraham's seed, Augustine comments, "in this manner is that promise concerning the calling of the nations in the seed of Abraham confirmed even by the oath of God,

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<sup>71</sup>The echo of Genesis is in fact still apparent in Rom.9 but not in Augustine's own translation.

<sup>72</sup>The need to retain Abraham's name would be more appropriate for the Jews rather than the Christians since the latter tend to relate themselves to Abraham spiritually or in terms of faith while the former prioritises its physical relation with Abraham. Note also Augustine's translation "in Isaac shall thy seed *be called*" whereas Rom.9:7 writes "through Isaac shall your descendants *be named*"(RSV).

after that burnt-offering which typified Christ." Augustine clearly changes the blessing of the nations to the calling of the nations. Since the seed of Abraham has been known as no one other than Christ or his followers then the calling of the nations logically refers to the Christians or non-believers who are called to be Christian. In other words, the promise is used by Augustine to endorse the conversion of people to Christianity and the expansion of the church. To add to its power, Augustine underlines the unusual appearance (in Genesis) of the divine oath. "He (God) had often promised, but never sworn." he says. We should have no doubt that Augustine is talking about proselytisation and confirmation of Christian faith here, after hearing his last sentence: "what is the oath of God, the true and faithful, but a confirmation of the promise, and a certain reproof to the unbelieving?".

Thus, Augustine's symbolical comment includes everything from the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus Christ to the expected result, that is, the confirmation of God's promise- presumably the same promise declared in the Akedah- to Christians. By putting the emphasis on the sacrifice and its reward, Augustine differs from others who focus the interpretation on the faith of Abraham.<sup>73</sup>

Luther and Calvin's comments on Genesis 22 contain some

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<sup>73</sup>More evidence that Augustine wants to put stress on the sacrifice is in his understanding of Heb.11:17-19. While the phrase demonstrates Abraham's faith, Augustine uses it as an indication of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac as it is compared with God's sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

recurrent points made earlier by Augustine.<sup>74</sup> Typical of these commentaries is an apotheosis of Abraham's faith. Calvin even tries to disclose Abraham's mind in accepting and realising the controversial divine command. Written in modern times Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* may represent a work in which Calvin's understanding of Abraham's "spiritual conflict of conscience" (Calvin's terminology) reaches its zenith of expression. What Calvin wants to show is the solidity of Abraham's faith amidst the suffering he undergoes throughout the sacrifice. It is clear that Abraham has to go through some tormenting contradictions.

It was sad for him to be deprived of his son, sadder still that his son should be torn away by a violent death, but by far the most grievous that he himself should be appointed as the executioner to slay him with his own hand...His contest, too, was not with his carnal passions, but, seeing that he wished to devote himself wholly to God, his very piety and religion filled him with distracting thoughts. For God, as if engaging in personal contest with him, requires the death of the boy, to whose person He himself had annexed the hope of eternal salvation. So that this latter command was, in a certain sense, the destruction of faith.<sup>75</sup>

If Abraham could endure it is because his faith teaches him to "leave the unknown issue to Divine Providence." and "as with closed eyes, he goes whither he is directed".<sup>76</sup> If Isaac has to die he must accept it as God's will on which he has no power but trust. Although Calvin seems to suggest

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<sup>74</sup>For Calvin's commentary see his *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses called Genesis*, tr. John King, The Calvin Translation Society, Edinburgh, 1847. For Luther see J. Pelikan, *Luther's Works*, vol. 4, Lectures on Genesis, Concordia Publ. House, St. Louis, 1964.

<sup>75</sup>Calvin, *ibid.*, pp. 559-60.

<sup>76</sup>Calvin, *ibid.*, p. 563.

this as some kind of solution, perhaps the only solution, of Abraham's loyalty to God "had it failed, faith must have perished", he still holds to the fact that the sacrificial command contains a moral dilemma. Abraham has "to endure, before the world, the disgrace of shameful cruelty".<sup>77</sup>

Faith, according to Calvin, "ought not to lie idle, without trial". At this point Calvin unveils the function of the divine test, that is, to dematerialize human hopes so as to leave only spiritual adherence to God. "God tempts his servants, not only when he subdues the affections of the flesh, but when he reduces all their senses to nothing, that he may lead them to a complete renunciation of themselves."<sup>78</sup>

Luther also perceives a contradiction in the test of Abraham which he tends to label as primarily on the nature of the divine command to sacrifice Isaac.

This trial cannot be overcome and is far too great to be understood by us. For there is a contradiction with which God contradicts Himself. It is impossible for the flesh to understand this; for it inevitably concludes either that God is lying- and this is blasphemy- or that God hates me- and this leads to despair.<sup>79</sup>

Several times Luther states that human reason cannot decipher the contradictory trial. However, like Augustine, Luther believes that "Abraham understood the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead, and through it alone he

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<sup>77</sup> Calvin, *ibid.*, p.564.

<sup>78</sup> Calvin, *ibid.*, p.564.

<sup>79</sup> Pelikan, *Luther's Works*, p.93.

resolved this contradiction, which otherwise cannot be resolved".<sup>80</sup> Luther eventually reveals that Isaac also shares this belief so that he may willingly present his throat and wait to be reduced to ashes on the altar.<sup>81</sup> In his faith that God shall always keep his promise no matter the outcome of the sacrifice, Abraham's faith deserves praise and is exemplary for the Christians. "These trials of the saintly patriarch have been set before us in order that we may be encouraged in our own trials..."<sup>82</sup>

Besides the emphasis on Abraham's faith, Luther and Calvin do not apparently relate the sacrifice of Isaac typologically to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ as it is done by Augustine. Calvin even subtly rejects such an interpretation when he comments on the sacrifice of the substitute ram.<sup>83</sup>

The emphasis on faith and work which we may read in the writings of Luther and Calvin are probably taken from themes in the New Testament writings. Hebrews 11:17-20 and James 2:21-23 mention the event in Genesis 22. "By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac" says Heb.11:17. It is, in fact, not so much the uncalculating faith of Abraham as he actually "considered that God was able to raise men even from the dead" (v.19). We have heard about this belief mentioned in Augustine's as well as

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<sup>80</sup> Pelikan, *Luther's Works*, p.96.

<sup>81</sup> See Pelikan, *Luther's Works*, pp.119,114.

<sup>82</sup> Pelikan, *Luther's Works*, p.97.

<sup>83</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries*, p.571.

Luther and Calvin's commentaries. But what those commentators do not say is the fact that Heb.11 does indicate that Isaac was really offered up, based on which Abraham's faith is vindicated. This is also the case with James 2 as it says or questions, "was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he offered his son Isaac upon the altar?" Since the context of James 2 is the vindication of works as an urgent completion of faith, then it practically implies the completion of the sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham. Both texts do suggest that the sacrifice of Isaac is not only imagined by Abraham but actually accomplished by him. While not reflecting what happens in Genesis 22, they very much underline the belief of what happens on Golgotha with Jesus Christ. Thus, the impression of the New Testament writings about the Akedah is influenced, if not mixed up, by their understanding of Jesus. On this basis, they may conceive the sacrifice as real and also on the same basis they can express the belief about the resurrection of Isaac. The closeness of the time of those writings with the life of Jesus or, at any rate, with the new emergence of the belief of Jesus Christ who was crucified and rose again, reasonably prompted them to read the Akedah in this light. On the other hand, it is also understandable for Luther and Calvin to frame their readings within the notion of *sola fide* that was a common theme during the Reformation period.

In Luther's and Calvin's commentaries we may understand that the aim of interpretation is to substantiate the



significance of the story for the readers' faith, namely, what the readers can learn about their relationship with God through the story. This tendency is also common in the periods following the Reformation up to the rise of historical criticism in the study of the Bible. Also typical of these times is the influence of Rationalism in which faith is always believed to be reasonable. A faith that contradicts reason is untenable. The same case is to be applied to God. Concerning the events as told by the Bible, it is generally accepted that the events actually took place in history. God indeed commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son, it was not merely Abraham's illusion.

David Pailin who studied commentaries (mainly by English authors) of Genesis 22 from the seventeenth century to the nineteenth century says, "consciously or not the canon of reason was applied to God in this period, so that most commentators were not prepared to entertain the notion that God's motives might be unfathomable to them or his actions gratuitous."<sup>84</sup> It was also understood that everything that comes from God is morally good. Most of the commentators, as represented by Thomas Chubb, believe that "God will not prostitute his authority by using it to answer no good purpose".<sup>85</sup> To answer the question of why God commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, most of the commentators explain that it is a test to prove the quality of Abraham's

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<sup>84</sup> David A. Pailin, "A Hermeneutical Problem Before Kierkegaard" in *Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling: Critical Appraisals*, ed. R. Perkin, 1981, p.13.

<sup>85</sup> Thomas Chubb, *Some Observations...Occasioned by the Opposition made to Dr. Rundle's Election*, 1735, p.31. Cited in Pailin, *ibid.*, p.13.

faith. Others say, rather like Augustine, that the event was intended by God as a prophetic foreshadowing of Christ.<sup>86</sup> Pearson tries to explain away the difference of Isaac's and Christ's experiences by denying it, "the saving of Isaac alive doth not deny the death of the Antitype, but rather suppose and assert it, as presignifying his resurrection from the dead".<sup>87</sup> But, structurally Christ's story is similar to the Akedah tradition in which Isaac is dead and resurrected rather than Genesis 22.

Another thought like that of Waterland indicates that the event is intended "to discourage and discountenance human sacrifices".<sup>88</sup> The thought has an echo in the works of historical critics such as Wellhausen and Gunkel which consider the story as a polemic against human sacrifice.<sup>89</sup> Voltaire suggests that the story "seems to show that, at the time when this history was written, the sacrifice of human victims was customary amongst the Jews".<sup>90</sup> This comment seems to be part of general sentiment in the Western world that the human race develops evolutionarily from the primitive to the modern one of which Western societies are the representative. This sentiment may also be perceived in the language of S.R.Driver's claim, "the

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<sup>86</sup> Pailin, *ibid.*, p.14.

<sup>87</sup> John Pearson, *An Exposition of the Creed*, 1880, pp.290ff, 306, 366. Cited in Pailin, *ibid.*, p.14.

<sup>88</sup> Daniel Waterland, *Scripture Vindicated in Answer to a Book entitled Christianity as Old as the Creation in Works*, vol.IV, 1843, p.204. Cited in Pailin, *ibid.*, p.14.

<sup>89</sup> See Westermann, *Genesis 12-36: A Commentary*, tr. John J.Scullion, c.1985, p.354.

<sup>90</sup> Voltaire, *A Philosophical Dictionary*, vol.I, 1843, p.18. Cited in Pailin, *ibid.*, p.15.

custom of human sacrifice was widely spread in the ancient world, as it is still among *savage* or *half-civilized* tribes". Although he tends to assign the custom to Israel's neighbours.<sup>91</sup>

The moral justifiability of God's action in commanding Abraham to sacrifice his son is a much more disturbing dilemma for many commentators. None of the interpreters, according to Pailin, "seemed to feel that there was any way of arguing that the killing of Isaac could be regarded as a positive good".<sup>92</sup> "Bayle" who seeks to follow the practices of his contemporaries in order "to give to the true God" a "testimony of love and faith" suggests that the idea of sacrificing Isaac was originally Abraham's. While God was pleased with its motive, he, nonetheless, abhorred the sacrifice itself and therefore stopped Abraham from carrying it out.<sup>93</sup> This suggestion obviously runs counter to Gen.22:1,2. But at any rate it describes a possibility that Abraham does not lack personal ambition in sacrificing Isaac despite following God's command. Some in defending God's moral perfection attribute to him unlimited rights even to destroy human life. The reason is that God is the creator of human life and he may take his creatures back by any means. This idea is rejected by Chubb who considers that God in his parental sovereignty has a duty to foster

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<sup>91</sup> S.R.Driver, *The Book of Genesis*, 1<sup>st</sup> publ.1904, p.221.

<sup>92</sup> Pailin, "Hermeneutical," p.19.

<sup>93</sup> "Bayle" refers to the additional note on Abraham in Bayle's *General Dictionary, Historical and Critical*, ed. John P.Bernard, T.Birch, J.Lockman, and others, 1734, p.95. Cited in Pailin, *ibid.*, p.17.

his creature's good, not bestowing a right to do whatever he likes with his son.<sup>94</sup> Chubb regards the sacrificial command as a deceptive "try-on" that God never intended to be carried out. It can be proved by the evidence that God finally withdrew the command. God's command therefore did not impugn his moral goodness. In this case, however, God remains to be seen as cheating Abraham since the Patriarch does not know that the command should not be taken as such. It seems that in any way God's moral goodness is indefensible. This is apparently what urges Kant to renounce the sacrificial command as coming from God. There is no divine will that contradicts moral goodness in Kant's opinion. Since the command of Isaac's sacrifice cannot be morally justified, it must not be accepted as originating from God.<sup>95</sup> But the last claim is probably no more true in the Genesis narrative than in Kant's thought, in which Abraham's obedience to the sacrificial command is an example of false belief. Perhaps as an implicit response to the Kantian claim, Driver demonstrates the dissimilarity between Abraham's barbaric cultural context and the conscience of modern readers, "...we live in an age, and under a moral light, in which we could not regard as Divine a command to violate not only our sense of what was morally right, but even our natural instincts of love and affection. It was possible for Abraham so to regard it, because he lived under the mental and moral conditions of an age very different from ours...The command would not

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<sup>94</sup>Pailin, *ibid.*, p.20.

<sup>95</sup>More discussion about Kant and Kierkegaard can be found in Chapter V.

therefore shock the moral standard to which Abraham was accustomed, as it would shock ours".<sup>96</sup> It may describe the difficulty of modern readers in accepting the violence of the command and, therefore, the command itself.

Similar to that of the modern Jewish writers, the modern writers in the context of Western Christianity, began to question the moral exactitude of Abraham's religious motive in sacrificing his own son. Isaac's submissiveness at the same time seems problematic. Emily Dickinson wrote in 1874 a poem that contrasts the portrayal of Isaac as an urchin and Abraham as an old man. In the end Isaac does not only survive but proves the domination of moral (against the immoral command?).

Abraham to kill him  
Was distinctly told-  
Isaac was an Urchin-  
Abraham was old-

Not a hesitation-  
Abraham complied-  
Flattered by Obeisance  
Tyranny demurred-

Isaac-to his children  
Lived to tell the tale-  
Moral-with a Mastiff  
Manners may prevail.<sup>97</sup>

The readings of writers who lived in this era became a symbol of rebellion against the figure of an older generation who had come to represent the weight of a particular tradition, specifically, the law and custom of

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<sup>96</sup> Driver, *Genesis*, pp.221-2.

<sup>97</sup> Thomas H. Johnson, ed., *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, 1955, poem number 1317, p.911.

Western Europe engrafted on a Christian evangelical past.<sup>98</sup> The spirit excited Europe during the French Revolution as well as the nineteenth-century movements of revolt that came to substitute freedom and light for restriction and darkness. "The young Gosse rises up against his Puritan father in *Father and Son* (1907) in the name of freedom and the pursuit of happiness in a perceived future. Oswald Alving in Ibsen's *Ghosts* and Ernest Pontifex in *The Way of All Flesh* share his revolt."<sup>99</sup> Fisch selects Melville's *Billy Budd* (circa 1888) as a peak example of the myth about the crisis of generation gap. Here a "father", Captain Vere, sacrifices his "son", Billy Budd, on the altar of inherited law and custom. Vere is the archetypal father, just as Billy is the archetypal son, and their drama is the reenactment of the ageless war of the generations. The bond of love between them makes the agony of their confrontation the more acute.<sup>100</sup>

The Akedah may allude to the conflict between generations. Be that as it may, and there is no doubt that the story is fraught with backgrounds like that, the sacrifice of the ram would, however, signal the end of the conflict. This is the complexity that would negate any kind of univocal interpretation. The older interpretation that tends to emphasize Abraham's obedience and the newer interpretation that questions the submissive role of Isaac cannot do

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<sup>98</sup>H.Fisch, *Remembered*, p.84.

<sup>99</sup>H.Fisch, *Remembered*, p.84. Several other examples can be found in Fisch's chapter.

<sup>100</sup>For further exposition on *Billy Budd*, see Fisch, *Remembered*, pp.84-86.

justice to the complex and equivocal story of Genesis 22. The reason for those readings lies elsewhere than in the biblical Akedah, namely, in the historical reality of each reader. The historical reality of the readers who lived in the more humanistically minded nineteenth century onward is supportive of the anti-tradition sentiment.

#### II.5. Conclusion: a multi-dimension reading

No one would deny that the story of the Akedah of Isaac has been so richly interpreted notably within Jewish communities over considerable period of time. Neither can one ignore the diversity of the interpretations. While the Hebrew Bible basically reveals Abraham as the dominant actor, the early (Jewish) traditions tend to make Isaac the focus of their readings in which his sacrifice is regarded either as redemptive or as a symbol of martyrdom. With interruption in the Medieval centuries when the character of Abraham moves to the centre of attention of interpretations, Jewish artists in the modern era furthermore see Isaac as the important figure to highlight as he may symbolize the sufferings of Jewish people. This generation of Israelis, particularly after the *Shoah*, for whom death and suffering are not unquestionable fates, rejects the submissive role of Isaac in the Akedah. The rejection, which is shared by modern Christian writers, is also based on the ethical absurdity of a father who has to sacrifice his own son as a religious duty. In the meantime

it suggests how the understanding of the Akedah is to be reconstructed to fit the new cultural spirit of the readers. The biblical portrayal of Isaac as a submissive victim may be far from problematic for the authors and even inspiring or strengthening the faith of the generations to come after them. But, it is certainly problematic for the modern writers who can no longer accept its value as such. Further criticism is of Abraham who is no longer seen as a pious believer but a murderer.<sup>101</sup> The influence of Kantian criticism against the acceptance of the sacrificial command as a divine duty undoubtedly endorses the defiant interpretations.

The multifarious reception of the Akedah which is not only represented in form: painting (it is described in mosaic on the floor of the sixth-century synagogue of Bet Alfa {at the foot of Mount Gilboa} and also painted on a wall in the Dura-Europos synagogue on the Euphrates of the third century C.E.), poems, novels, liturgies, even academic criticism, but also in content: secular and religious, Jewish and Christian, prevents us from speaking about the meaning of the story. Instead we have to admit the many possibilities of how the story can be understood. It is apparently made possible because each reader is placed within the confinement of his own ideological background that frames his reading which, as a result, may differ from

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<sup>101</sup> It is obvious in Wilfred Owen's poem, *The Parable of the Old Man and the Young*. The same spirit can be found in Yehuda Amichai's *The True Hero of the Akedah* that cynically puts the ram as the hero of the Akedah, innocent of the whole affair it has to stand alone while the others go home. See Abramson, "Reinterpretation," pp.109-110.



another's.

Stanley Fish observes that an interpretation is an activity that "is determined by the literary institution which at any one time will authorize only a finite number of interpretative strategies."<sup>102</sup> As a result, a text may be interpreted in a variety of ways, according to the literary institutions in which they are produced. It is the case where not only the text is interpreted differently but, more precisely, the interpreters read the text variably, or for that matter, the interpreters read "different texts". Disagreements among the interpretations are likely to happen affectively. But, in Fish's understanding the disagreements are ultimately not to be judged by what the original texts say or do not say. An interpretation cannot be seen in terms of its rightness or wrongness with regard to the facts of the original text. "Disagreements must occur between those who hold (or are held) different points of view, and what is at stake in a disagreement is the right to specify what the facts can hereafter be said to be. Disagreements are not settled by the facts, but are the means by which the facts are settled."<sup>103</sup> It is by no means certain that a text may be read in whatever way the readers want. The pluralism should not be perceived as this kind of freedom. There are certain possibilities which might not be acceptable in reading too. Fish takes Wayne Booth's point that there are justified limits to what we can legitimately

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<sup>102</sup> Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities*, 1980, p.342.

<sup>103</sup> Fish, *ibid.*, p.338.

do with a text, for "surely we could not go on disputing at all if a core of agreement did not exist".<sup>104</sup>

Although he agrees with Booth over this point, Fish needs to emphasize that "the text cannot be the location of the core of agreement by means of which we reject interpretations." It is, in Fish's perspective, no more a matter of the text than the readers, that is, the commitment made by the readers concerning the limits for interpreting the text. As to the text Fish assertively says that it serves only as the function of interpretation, namely, it only exists as a pretext within the interpretive strategies which attempt to articulate its meanings. In T.K.Seung's expression, "in its own right, a text is like a fish out of water. It has no power; it is neither autonomous nor heteronomous."<sup>105</sup>

"We are right to rule out at least some readings" says Fish in citing Wayne Booth.<sup>106</sup> The process of reading in fact consists of a series of rejections or suppressions of other readings that leads to the production of one's own reading. Nonetheless, as times change and the accepted ideology is transformed, what reading is accepted or rejected also changes. According to Fish, "the change is not random but orderly and, to some extent, predictable. A new interpretive strategy always makes its way in some

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<sup>104</sup> Fish, *ibid.*, p.342.

<sup>105</sup> T.K.Seung, *Semiotics and Thematics in Hermeneutics*, 1982, p.37.

<sup>106</sup> Fish, *Is There a Text*, pp.342ff.

relationship of opposition to the old, which has often marked out a negative space (of things that aren't done) from which it can emerge into respectability."<sup>107</sup> The relationship, though by way of differentiation, between the previous interpretation and the present one is virtually undeniable. The things that aren't done by the previous interpretation stimulate the emergence of the present one.

Fish's notion of relative (depending on the community of interpreter), and, consequently polyphonic, interpretation seems tenable in the light of the history of reception of the Akedah. After all, the Akedah itself is a complex and opaque text. For this sort of text it seems that interpretation will never be enough despite many which have been produced. "Its extraordinary, frightening dimension," says Westermann, "one can only experience with empathy; a commentary can do no more than hint at it."<sup>108</sup> Westermann is right, there is no commentary- by this we mean also any kind of retelling- that can represent the whole dynamics which underlie the Akedah. It is also true that, as Harold Fisch deduces, the story "requires that we ourselves find ways of fulfilling its meaning and promise (by experiencing it). It is not only Abraham who is tested: the reader is tested also: he must discover in himself the meaning of that survival, its portent and challenge".<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Fish, *Is There a Text*, p.349.

<sup>108</sup> C.Westermann, *Genesis*, p.355.

<sup>109</sup> Fisch, *Remembered*, p.90.

## CHAPTER III

## POLYSEMIOTIC READING OF THE AKEDAH

For Nietzsche, for Homer, and for the bulk of the Bible, . . . , the world is multifarious, always in transformation, and can only be grasped through juxtaposition and discontinuities and in the dimension of time: our partial vision is itself the guarantor of the world, and our attitude to it should be one not of focus but of participation.

Gabriel Josipovici, "The Bible in Focus"

Since Auerbach's *Mimesis* there has been an awareness that characterization in biblical narrative is multilayered, especially in the light of the knowledge that what emerges in the foreground is fraught with background of previous events.<sup>1</sup> Faced with this complexity some critics attempt to find the reason that may explain it. Robert Alter, for example, conceives that the biblical device of multilayered characterization reflects certain understanding of human nature. He says:

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<sup>1</sup>E. Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, 1974.

since art does not develop in a vacuum, these literary techniques (of depicting the character unequivocally) must be associated with the conception of human nature implicit in biblical monotheism: every person is created by an all-seeing God but abandoned to his own unfathomable freedom, made in God's likeness as a matter of cosmogonic principle but almost never as a matter of accomplished ethical fact; and each individual instance of this bundle of paradoxes, encompassing the zenith and the nadir of the created world, requires a special cunning attentiveness in literary representation. The purposeful selectivity of means, the repeatedly contrastive or comparative technical strategies used in the rendering of biblical characters, are in a sense dictated by biblical view of man.<sup>2</sup>

Biblical personage are paradoxical beings who bears the omnipotent quality of God as well as the imperfectness of human being. The life of biblical personages is seen as oscillating between those two poles. This view is argued by Alter as underlying biblical depiction of man. Consequently, what primarily may appear to be a bundle of disordering descriptions of human beings in the Bible can now be seen as an expression that is constrained by the ideological view of human nature.

If we follow Alter's argument, the portrayal of human nature in the Bible is to be understood as purposely made to impose upon the readers the ideology. "All these means to control what we (the readers) learn and what we are left to ponder about the characters and the meaning of the story".(my emphasis)<sup>3</sup> Despite a realisation that biblical characters often perform enigmatically sometimes even

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 1981, p.115.

<sup>3</sup> Alter, *ibid.*, p.157.

impenetrably, the narrator is still in control of the meaning. "We are never in serious doubt that the biblical narrator knows all there is to know about the motives and feelings, the moral nature and spiritual condition of his characters."<sup>4</sup> If, however, there remain ambiguities Alter argues, "he (the narrator) is highly selective about sharing this omniscience with his readers".<sup>5</sup> The narrator is omniscient but at the same time is selective. It is not only the source of knowledge in the narrative but also the guard of the knowledge. It knows everything that the readers may not. The readers may have gaps of knowledge but certainly not the narrator.

Nevertheless the omniscient narrator can be problematic when the readers' desire for knowledge is dissatisfied by gaps that are never fillable in the narrative. The narrator's omniscience only becomes obvious when it unfolds, in the later stage of the story, the answers to obscurities produced by the previous events. But, the problem arises at the point when the readers are left with questions that remain unanswerable until the end of the story; in which the readers are either actually intended to experience an inconclusive state or induced to create their own gap-fillings to articulate the story. In both cases, however, the narrator is no longer omniscient. The needed information does not emerge from its report. In the second case the readers could even be said to be more omniscient

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<sup>4</sup>Alter, *ibid.*, p.158.

<sup>5</sup>Alter, *ibid.*, p.158.

than the narrator since they know what the narrator does not. In the process of reading, the narrator's voice hardly represents the whole meaning that a story may produce. The narrator may provide the starting-points but on the other side of the meaning production process the readers' imagination always plays an indisputably important role. When a biblical narrator tells a story, the meaning(s) of the story is by no means plain. There is much obliqueness, many mysteries, even inconsistencies that may or may not be recovered. The history of interpretation gives us plenty of evidence of this fact. So, it is hard to prove the omniscience of biblical narrator as it appears in the narrative. The omniscience would allow, one way or another, a homology of biblical narratives which is hardly the case. The ambiguities of a story may not be caused by the selectivity of the narrator as Alter argues but the narrator's lack or simplicity of knowledge or just by some unobvious reason.

Since the depiction of the character is intentional in Alter's point of view, he furthermore analogises biblical narratives with the fictional narratives such as *Tom Jones* rather than *Summa Theologiae* or the cabbalistic *Book of Creation* the books that presumably incorporate an overwhelming claim of reality.<sup>6</sup> Alter, however, argues that the phenomena disclosed in such fictional narrative do not utterly depart from our ordinary reality. "The writer has cunningly projected out of an intuitively grasped fund of

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<sup>6</sup>Alter, *ibid.*, p.156.

experience not dissimilar to our own, only shaped, defined, ordered, probed in ways we never manage in the muddled and diffuse transactions of our own lives." <sup>7</sup> This kind of fiction is, according to Alter, "a mode of knowledge", the writer's manipulation in steering the readers towards a knowledge he wants them to share and suppressing disqualified forms of knowledge. It aims not to reject but rather to explain systematically according to its framework the so-called historical reality.

But, as Stephen Prickett argues, biblical narrativity tends not to be approachable through a perspective that maintains the dualistic distinction of fiction and reality.<sup>8</sup> If biblical narratives are regarded as fiction, they, however, contain many similarities of historical books based on reality. On the other hand, the admittance of the real history of the narratives must not overlook its fictional elements- Isaac is born when Abraham is a hundred years old and Sarah is ninety. The fiction and reality are so interwoven in biblical narratives that that makes them difficult to be differentiated as such. Biblical narrative is not a purely and consciously narratorial invention that the narrator has a "perfect knowledge" about the disclosed phenomena and control over the meanings.<sup>9</sup> Prickett sees that

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<sup>7</sup> Alter, *ibid.*, p.156.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Prickett, *Words and The Word: Language, poetics and biblical interpretation*, 1986, pp.204-209.

<sup>9</sup> Alter argues, "there is a horizon of perfect knowledge in biblical narrative, but it is a horizon we are permitted to glimpse only in the most momentary and fragmentary ways." Alter, *The Art*, p.158. But, the perfect knowledge is more likely to be Alter's than the narrative's.



Alter's understanding of fiction is based upon a conceptual framework that is fundamentally opposed to some others such as represented by A.D.Nuttall's.<sup>10</sup>

In his book *A New Mimesis: Shakespeare and the Representation of Reality*, Nuttall demonstrates the underlying tension in Shakespeare's plays between what he calls the "formalist" qualities (displayed in their ideological and theoretical structure) and the "real" or mimetic (the degree to which they are "true-to-life"). In the drama, there would be an active interplay between differing impressions projected by the formal structure and the mimetic quality. The mimetic reflection may criticize or even subvert what appears to be the reflection of the dominant ideology.<sup>11</sup> It represents one side for which the main ideology is the other side of a movement so that the life of the drama is formed by the fluctuation, a pendulum-like motion, between them. This kind of mimesis is actually very similar to Alter's depiction of human nature in the Bible. They are identified as being unsettled, unpredictable, polysemiotic. They exist to produce a rivalry against any expression out of the rigidity of ideology. But, while for Alter "this way of representing

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<sup>10</sup> "The positions of Alter, Frei, and Frye, which assume the creation of deliberate 'fiction' in biblical narrative, are subtly but fundamentally opposed to that of Nuttall, who sees *mimesis* in terms of the creative gravitational pull, conscious or unconscious, of reality on an otherwise formal and philologically schematized literary structure." Prickett, op.cit., p.208.

<sup>11</sup> "The qualities of Tudor monarchist ideology, which any historical understanding of the play must recognize as central to its formal structure, are actively criticized and even subverted by what Nuttall sees as mimetic and poetic qualities in the dramatic presentation". Prickett, op.cit., p.204.

the world is a matter of conscious literary convention", for Nuttall on the contrary, the mimetic "reality" is urgently needed, in Shakespeare's plays, in the face of the schematized historical narrative, the material of Holinshed's history for example, that otherwise would be the only rigid fact. Nuttall does not argue against, or even see as problematic, the assumption, such as demonstrated by Alter's dualism, that Shakespearean narrative as a mimesis of reality is systematically formed, is fictionalized, detached from the disorderly phenomenon of the reality itself. What does interest him most is the tension that may always appear between the fictional construct and the "universally recognizable element of common experience that is constantly and actively present in all fiction, modifying, and even undermining its 'official' programme in order to achieve *mimesis*".<sup>12</sup> The tension is very much in the process of the creation of an artist such as Shakespeare, or we might also say the biblical author and reflected through their poetical works. Biblical narrative is created out of a realisation of the ambiguity of reality, even sometimes demonstrating nescience (a lack of knowledge). Rather than putting aside the ambiguity, the Bible expresses an active dialogue with it. The ambiguity in biblical characters' performances would not in any time and way succumb to the narrator's ideological voice for the sake of consistency. The characters' points of view would in a sense remain independent from the narrator's so that they can be a rival

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<sup>12</sup> Prickett, op.cit., p.206.

or, at any rate, a partner in a dialogical relationship with the narrator.

Here, we are reminded by Bakhtin's theory of the novel that would bring us to the recognition of multiplicity of voices and viewpoints. The language of the novel is, according to Bakhtin, not a unilinear language: "literary language is not represented in the novel (as it is in other genres) as a unitary, completely finished off, indubitably adequate language - it is represented precisely as a living mix of varied and opposing voices."<sup>13</sup> It correlates to an ordinary communication between people where it is ostensible that every time a word is used, it is one way or another recontextualized, pulled in a different direction according to the new context of the speaker(s), and given a different inflexion and resonance.

The word, directed towards its object, enters a dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment of alien words, value-judgments and accents, weaves in and out of complex interrelationships, merges with some, recoils from others, intersects with yet a third group.<sup>14</sup>

This complexity of human language is still detectable in discourse, it "may leave a trace in all its semantic layers, may complicate its expression and influence its entire stylistic profile."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>M.M.Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, tr.Caryl Emerson and Michael Holoquist, 1981, p.xxvii.

<sup>14</sup>Bakhtin, *ibid.*, p.276.

<sup>15</sup>Bakhtin, *ibid.*, p.276.

As we could imagine, in the process of reading a human discourse the multilayeredness would be amplified by the entanglement of the readers in their own contexts. Bakhtin encourages the readers' creativity in the meaning(s) of every literature that is not at all straightforward (as in the authoritarian text): "the language of the novel is a *system* of languages that mutually and ideologically interanimate each other. It is impossible to describe and analyse it as a single unitary language."<sup>16</sup>

Not to analyse a text as a single unitary language means that there would not be the omniscient narrator or writer, such as Alter has argued about the Bible, from where any meaning should only be originated and united. The readers are also admittedly involved in producing the meaning(s). In this way of looking, the text is never regarded as a complete work that the readers should merely accept. According to the narratologist Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan in her *Narrative Fiction* published in 1983, this kind of reading represents a new orientation in literary criticism: "whereas the Anglo-American New Critics and the French structuralists treated the text as a more or less autonomous object, the new orientation stresses the reciprocal relations between text and the reader".<sup>17</sup> She, furthermore, quotes Wolfgang Iser's theory where the stress on the reciprocal relationship sounds loudly.

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<sup>16</sup> Bakhtin, *ibid.*, p.47.

<sup>17</sup> Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*, 1983, p.117.

A text can only come to life when it is read, and if it is to be examined, it must therefore be studied through the eyes of the reader.(my emphasis)<sup>18</sup>

In contrast to traditional interpretation, which has sought to elucidate a hidden meaning in the text, Iser reflects meaning as a result of an interaction between text and reader, as "an effect to be experienced," not an "object to be defined".<sup>19</sup> It is important for Iser, however, to fix a balanced interrelationship of the text and its reader in the mode of reading he contends. The involvement of the subjectivity of the reader is conceived to be inescapable. Nonetheless, the text one way or another does not at all withdraw its original images. Thus the freedom possessed by the reader, throughout his journey in experiencing the text events is not unlimited.<sup>20</sup> Since this is no less than a dialogical interaction that, however vague, persists the distinction between both parties, Iser's theory of reader-

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<sup>18</sup> Rimmon-Kenan, *ibid.*, p.117.

<sup>19</sup> The sentence is Robert C.Holub's. see R.C.Holub, *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction*, 1989, p.83.

<sup>20</sup> This insistence on the distinction between the text and the readers has provoked criticism on the part of the critics who see the inevitability of text disappearing in the reading process. Stanley Fish, for instance, considers: "it is just that the distinction itself is an assumption which, when it informs an act of literary description, will produce the phenomena it purports to describe. That is to say, every component in such an account (of Iser) - the determinacies or textual segments, the indeterminacies or gaps, and the adventures of the reader's 'wandering viewpoint' - will be the products of an interpretive strategy that demands them, and therefore no one of those components can constitute the independent given which serves to ground the interpretive process." cited in Holub, *ibid.*, p.103. If judging from the entire performance of the reading one would hardly disagree with Fish since, after all, the conclusion about textual elements is the reader's, made to justify her/his, first of all intendedly, objective reading. But, Iser's theory, that leads to the general theory of communication, seems to be more sensitive to the existence of text as another domain different from its readers which would be imperative in reading biblical text as a product of different time and culture from that of the readers'.

response would ultimately correlate with an understanding of human(e) communication.

A communication assumes an existence of two persons, exchanging, the already recognised, words and worlds, within a specific context, while the process continues many (re)new(ed) understandings, realisations, meanings, unforeseeable prior to the process, crop up. Arguing from within the sphere of fiction, Iser, furthermore, defines what he calls, "the asymmetry between text and reader". It consists of two deviations from the norm. First, the reader is unable to test whether her/his understanding of the text is correct. And second, there is no regulative context between text and reader to establish intent; this context must be constructed by the reader from textual clues or signals.<sup>21</sup> This creates a gap or gaps, which Iser describes as the "no-man's-land of indeterminacy", between schematised views. Through the gap the communication between the text and its readers is established. The readers enter the world of the text, experiencing it by filling the gap. But, this should be seen as different from Alter's or Sternberg's mode of gap-filling process. In Iser's view, the gap is grasped by the reader, as a "no man's land", rather than intended by the narrator/writer. It is also filled by the reader through a communicatory process with the text; neither the reader nor the text would, in the first place, come with a clear idea of what is going to be the form of the gap-filling.

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<sup>21</sup>Holub, *ibid.*, p.92.

R.C.Holub wonders as to what exactly constitutes the gap, which for him has not yet been made clear despite a great length of exposition of it by Iser in his "Indeterminacy and the reader's response".<sup>22</sup> "One can", he says, "imagine, however, that this lack of definition was intentional on Iser's part; for in response to a criticism of his undifferentiated category of indeterminacy (*Unbestimmtheit*), Iser remarked as follows: 'I share the opinion that indeterminacy is an extremely undifferentiated category and is therefore at best a universal of communication theory. To define it, however, would eliminate it as a universal that determines communication.'" Iser's remark is, in fact, reminiscent of Bakhtin's view of human discourse which, according to him, is not only polyphony but also marginal: it "lives, as it were, on the boundary of its own context and another, alien context."<sup>23</sup> It is impossible to differentiate a language that places itself in an alien context, in a "no-man's-land" context. A communicatory language is not a conceptualized language, graspable beyond the communication itself.<sup>24</sup> We could hardly apply a conceptual meaning of a

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<sup>22</sup> J.Hillis Miller, ed., *Aspects of Narrative: Selected papers from the English Institute*, 1971, pp.1-45.

<sup>23</sup> Bakhtin, *Dialogic*, p.284.

<sup>24</sup> Iser's objection to any kind of conceptualized language is also apparent in his criticism against structuralist theories: "the system of language is a natural one, which changes the semantic fields of words when new elements come on the scene, for the whole system must adapt itself to new elements if it is to incorporate them. This alone shows that the structure concept is an artificial system, whose mode of operation differs considerably from that of natural systems simply through the fact that its taxonomic classifications can be indefinitely extended without affecting the system, let alone changing it altogether." W.Iser, *The Current Situation of Literary Theory*, 1979,

word into a communication, what exists is its derivative, the second meaning of the word which is indeterminate and always (re)new(ed). "An utterance is never just a reflection or an expression of something already existing outside it that is given and final. It always creates something that never existed before, something absolutely new and unrepeatable,...something created is always created out of something given (language, an observed phenomenon of reality, an experienced feeling, the speaking subject himself, something finalized in his world view, and so forth)".<sup>25</sup> Interpretation (of biblical narratives), after all, is a matter of experiencing the indeterminate world of the text. The world with many voices and points of view that is reflected in the text, through the narrator's and the characters's voices (each represent individual voices), as well as through the involvement of the readers.

### III.1. In interpreting the characters

We are, now, going to study the Abraham narratives in the light of the theory of polysemiotic meanings. The focus of our study is the characterization of Abraham as well as other characters of the Akedah.

There are two reasons why literary study of the Akedah

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p.9.

<sup>25</sup>Bakhtin, "The Problem of the Text in Linguistics, Philology and the Human Sciences: An Experiment in Philosophical Analysis" in M.M.Bakhtin, *Speech and Genres and Other Late Essays*, tr.Vern McGee, 1986, p.119,120.



particularly and Genesis narrative generally should at least include, if not prioritise, the study of characterization. Firstly because they are a narrative about people, the so-called Patriarchs of Israel. The main focus of the story is on the life of the individual, that is his/her relationship with the divine and the other human beings.<sup>26</sup> The meaning(s) of the narrative is, therefore, interrelated with how the character is to be understood. But having said this, it does not mean that there would only be a single common understanding of the character based on the textual investigation. The dynamic performances of the character in the book of Genesis are inevitable and to know about the character is to gather all the information that relates to him without intending to reduce them into a simpler conclusion for the sake of certainty. Characterization study allows the character to be seen from different angles depending who perceives and when, where, how he/she is perceived. This will provide us a rich and lively understanding of the character. And for this second reason we argue that chracterization study is important.

In modern literary criticism (more precisely the narratological approach), a text is understood to produce some indicators by which the readers construct the character in the process of reading. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan explains the character construction as this:

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<sup>26</sup>As Erich Auerbach explains, "it is this history of personality which the Old Testament presents to us as the formation undergone by those whom God has chosen to be examples." Auerbach, *Mimesis*, p.18.

Character, as one construct within the abstracted story, can be described in terms of a network of character-traits. These traits, however, may or may not appear as such in the text. How, then, is the construct arrived at? By assembling various character-indicators distributed along the text-continuum and, when necessary, inferring the traits from them.<sup>27</sup>

It is obvious that the form of the character also depends on the readers' judgments and perception. The text does not essentially provide a ready-made character nor does it tell the readers about how the character should or should not be understood in such a way that the readers can accept it unequivocally. Rimmon-Kenan's suggestion for a reader inference when necessary implies the inevitability that the readers are to be involved in articulating the characters. It does not mean, however, that there is room for the readers' being completely arbitrary. The text always provides the readers with some information about the character which in turn functions as "a fence" so that the result of the (re)construction is not and should not be alien to the text. This theory basically offers a system of dialogical control between the text and its readers which is not only true for characterization study but also true for the reading process in general. Rimmon-Kenan has shown the inevitable role of the readers in embroidering textual

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<sup>27</sup>Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative*, p.59. See also Gerald Prince's *Dictionary of Narratology*, 1987, p.13., which also mentions the four Aristotelian principles of characterization: "the agent should have a certain moral elevation (*chreston*); s/he should be endowed with traits appropriately related to the action (*harmation*); s/he should have idiosyncrasies and be like an individual (*homaios*); and s/he should be consistent (*hamalon*)". We can only perceive these principles in the biblical narrative by way of contrast. Biblical characters scarcely meet the Aristotelian characterization as this study will show.

information to make a character become plausible. At the same time, it cannot be denied that each reader may respond to the textual information in different ways so that the multivariety of the character depiction may originate from the way it is read (by the readers) as well as the way it is composed (as it is in the text).

The work of the readers is not as easy as it looks. Once a character begins to appear as a result of the (re)construction, the readers must realise that it all happens while some other materials have got to be put aside. And although those discarded materials are perhaps not as directly linked as the applied ones, they are still part of the image of the apparent character. The problem is, while on the one hand the character depiction has to be plausible though not necessarily static, on the other hand the character-indicators from which the character is (re)constructed are quite often densely interwoven in the text-continuum. A report on the character's actions, utterances, thoughts is often disseminated over several occasions and ways and in the case of the biblical narrative it can be entangled with the narrator's own judgment directly or indirectly.

Meir Sternberg for example says that to get to know the characters in fact amounts to maintaining a contact with the narrator which in Sternberg's point of view is an omniscient narrator, the supposedly shaper of the narrative

world.<sup>28</sup> While we may take Sternberg's point, it must be understood that the narrator may characterize its character by way of paradox or sometimes it invites the readers to imagine an event that itself for some reason, apparent or not, prefers to leave blank. To have a contact with the omniscient narrator does not necessarily result in admitting the ultimate authority of the narrator's utterances and assuming that this is the only voice in the discourse. As a matter of fact, the narrator always needs us, the readers, to make its story alive and intelligible by means of interpretation, including interpretation on its own voice.

A study of characterization is intended to highlight all the appearance of characters collectively and/or individually. It must be distinguished from defining the characters in terms of who they are. The aim of this study is to characterize the characters in terms of what they are and how do we, the readers, find out.<sup>29</sup> We can even say that it is virtually impossible to fix who the character really is as if s/he would have everything that we real human beings have, simply because s/he is not real. As the biblical literary critic Robert Alter perceives, "Although a character's own statements might seem a straightforward enough revelation of who he is and what he makes of things,

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<sup>28</sup> Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*, 1985, p.161.

<sup>29</sup> Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, trans. by Christine van Boheemen, 1985, p.80. For a similar argument with a specification in biblical narratology see Sternberg, *op.cit*, p.327.

in fact the biblical writers are quite as aware as any James or Proust that speech may reflect the occasion more than the speaker".<sup>30</sup> Mieke Bal describes the fact about the character as this, "The character is not a human being, but it resembles one. It has no real psyche, personality, ideology, or competence to act, but it does possess characteristics which make psychological and ideological description possible."<sup>31</sup> Of course it is clear that the character is not a human being. But, Bal's argument is intended to show the utilizability of the characters in the discourse as well as in the interpretation of the discourse. Unlike a real human being, the characters are not free to express themselves. They are part of the discourse that is used to implement a goal and which reflects some ideology which does not originate from the character.

It is also true that in the process of interpretation the psychological and ideological description are often made up by the readers themselves. Perhaps more than any ancient narrative, biblical narrative works with many reticences, silences of the character and mostly through this device the influence of the readers along with their ideologies in fleshing out the character is inevitable. Sternberg says, "they (the characters) are subsumed by the general strategy of disclosure whereby the given does not suffice and the sufficient is not given in time or at all".<sup>32</sup> He,

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<sup>30</sup>Alter, *The Art*, p.117.

<sup>31</sup>Bal, *Narratology*, p.327.

<sup>32</sup>Sternberg, *Poetics*, p.323.

furthermore, comes to a conclusion, "so reading a character becomes a process of discovery, attended by all the biblical hallmarks: progressive reconstruction, tentative closure of discontinuities, frequent and sometimes painful reshaping in face of the unexpected, and intractable pockets of darkness to the very end".<sup>33</sup>

The immediate problem that the readers have to face in penetrating biblical characters is that they are not always open in evoking their inner feelings, their thoughts, their judgment. Although in some cases, the reticence of the characters is temporary and as the story goes on the readers will gradually perceive their original motives of action, but it cannot always be the fact. A character may remain mysterious from the first time s/he appears to the end of the story.

Not only being dumb, the character might also behave in a morally confusing way. It is a real question from time to time as to whether the character keeps a moral standard at all. Our reading, however, will only reveal the character as it is that may or may not be appropriate to the morality we acknowledge in our time. The character is not a human being in whom moral standards would have been essential for life. The decisions taken by a character are by no means consistent- somehow depending on the context when the decisions are made. Abraham brings Sarah along to the promised land only to use her later on in the time of

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<sup>33</sup> Sternberg, *Poetics*, p.323.

crisis (ch.12). If it is true for human beings, it is also true for God. The Akedah is undoubtedly a good example where the divine reveals his oppositional demands- the sacrifice of the promised son which is as dramatic as the cancellation of the sacrifice solemnly commanded. God's demands can emerge mysteriously and inconsistently.

### III.2.Abraham in action: his characterization and focalization

The silence of character is certainly one way through which the polysemiotic signals can be captured in biblical narratives; one will undoubtedly see this predominantly in Abraham's performance in Gen.22, but there are also some other narratological devices. The shifts of one point of view or voice to another necessarily yields multilayered effects. The narrator may focalize a character; so does the character himself. Each expresses their own experience of an event, that also describes their presuppositions. The narrator's report on character's action may be proleptic, anticipating the future events of which the present looks as a preparation. The birth of Isaac as a fulfillment of God's promise has been explicitly or implicitly anticipated by the narrator while reporting Abraham's journey. Abraham, on the other hand, may not be aware of the narrator's reports and acts pragmatically, according to his "limited" understanding. There probably is a discrepancy between what is seen by Abraham and what is conceived by the narrator.

Our argument, however, does not lead to a judgment as to which one of those voices should be accepted and which one should not. Each voice will be heard and seen dialogically with another.

## Genesis 12

The name of Abram (becomes Abraham after being ordained as the father of many nations, ch.17:5) is mentioned for the first time along with the other sons of Terah (11:26). Abram is the tenth descendant of Noah. The announcement of Abram as Noah's descendant has related Abram's story to the previous history. But, here, we cannot see the reason why Abram becomes the main focus in the following narrative or why he is chosen by God. However, he is the only one who then receives a divine command to move from his original place into the promised land (12:1-3). The command is "go (*lek-l•ka*) from your country (*me'ar•š•kha*) and from your kinship (*umimmolad•t•kha*) and from your father's house (*umibet 'abhikha*) to the land that I will show you (*'el-ha'ares 'ašer 'ar'ekha*)" (v.1). This command is heard when Abram is in Haran, the place where he and his father stay in their journey to the land of Canaan from Ur (11:31) and after the death of his father (11:32). Without regarding this command, the journey of Abram from Haran itself, starting in 12:5, would have been a continuation of the previous journey (11:31) and obviously without Terah being in it since he has already died. The command has



transformed the worldly pilgrimage of Abram's clan into a religious pilgrimage initiated by God's calling. Nonetheless, we still can see the reflection of the two "motivatedly separate" pilgrimages as the narration goes on. The religious motive of Abram's journey does not completely eclipse the mundane one. In spite of God's command and some of its reconfirmation throughout Abraham narrative, Abram's journey is more like an unending journey, full of danger, rather than a divinely-guarded journey to a promise land.

The two differentiated angles which perceive Abram's journey will soon be apparent in response to God's command. The narrator reports Abram's response to God's command in two ways:

1. So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. (v.4).

2. And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their possessions which they had gathered, and the persons that they had gotten in Haran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan. (v.5).

No.1 is a briefer report where Abram is portrayed in his instant obedience to God. This report assumes that Abram follows every detail of the content of the command. Judging from this report alone, we undoubtedly would agree with some commentators that "Abraham obeys blindly and without objection" God's command.<sup>34</sup> But, in the second report, the narrator with "the camera" directed straight at Abram's

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<sup>34</sup>The sentence is von Rad's. Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 1961, p.156.

actions discloses a quite different view. Abram prepares his journey in an orderly manner as if he does not want to leave anything he has when he moves. As a response to God's command, Abram's actions look asymmetric. The command wants Abram to go alone but Abram brings the whole family with him.<sup>35</sup> Does Abram hear God's command? or is this for Abram his own journey (as well as a fulfilment of God's command)? Surely, after his father's death, Abram, now the head of the family, has the obligation to keep the family. To follow literally God's command, namely, to abandon his family, would be unwise?!

The second report is not just a further detail of the first one as some commentators have argued.<sup>36</sup> It unveils a different phenomenon, Abram's depiction is, here, closer to the reality of a pilgrimage that is ready to move to another place. The first report is more likely to be the narrator's own judgment of Abram's obedience, who cares more about Abram's piety. Abram instantly departs from home alone, in accordance with God's command. Lot is even depicted as the one who follows Abram (*wayelek 'ito lot: and Lot walks with Abram*) and not that he is brought by Abraham as in the second report.

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<sup>35</sup>After Terah died, the rest of Abram's family are those who go with him.

<sup>36</sup>See for example Claus Westermann who first of all thinks that vv.4b-5 are an insertion by P, the redactor (works later than J, the original writer). He says, "vv.4b-5 give the impression of filling out rather than repeating, and the sentence immediately preceding it is identical with the same, or almost the same, sentence in J, which can therefore be left out". Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36: A Commentary*, c.1985, p.153.

Since the text bears two different perspectives, we should not automatically take them as meaningless contradictory statements that remain to be so unless one is regarded as more reliable and can be taken into account than the other. Instead, the many voices may well express a dialogical comprehension which can originate from an authorial contemplation. As argued by Bakhtin,

When there is a deliberate (conscious) multiplicity of styles, there are always dialogic relations among the styles. One cannot understand these interrelations purely linguistically (or even mechanically)...It is important to understand the total sense of this dialogue of styles from the author's standpoint (not as an image, but as a function).<sup>37</sup>

Obviously, Bakhtin's argument would invalidate, on the one hand, source criticism or documentary hypothesis which normally points at the different writers, distributors, redactors as the cause of the multiplicity of coverage and, on the other hand, any understanding that basically seeks for a closure, an obvious explanation of such differing phenomena. For Bakhtin the multiplicity is not a problem - so that unless it is overcome the interpretation cannot succeed- but a deliberate attempt of the author to objectify his reflection upon reality that inevitably is many-sided since the reality itself is basically unstructured, multi-dimensional, keeps changing, not always comprehensible as such. The Bible itself, in spite of being claimed as authoritative or expressing merely a single

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<sup>37</sup> Bakhtin, "The Problem," p.112.

ideology, still demonstrates the inevitability of plurality in its attempt to comprehend the reality. Thus, we should not be tempted to reduce the plurality into a single explanation for the sake of clarity or the singleness of the ideology. We, the readers, especially the modern ones, live with an awareness of a complex and incomplete reality in which the affects, like it or not, influence our reading. By raising this matter to the level of realisation we may hope that our reading of the Bible can be more exhaustive, taking into account as many full-blown aspects as possible that are even neglected or deliberately suppressed by the author(s).<sup>38</sup>

We will identify the phenomenon of the first report as a "direct definition/description" of the character from the narrator.<sup>39</sup> Rimmon-Kenan says, "Definition is akin to generalization and conceptualization. It is also both explicit and supra-temporal. Consequently, its dominance in a given text is liable to produce a rational, authoritative and static impression."<sup>40</sup> If this theory is true for other fictional narratives, it is only partially true for biblical narratives in which the narrator's direct definition of the character does not always demand to be accepted as static impression. When the narrator describes

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<sup>38</sup>What I have in mind here is the sort of readings that post-modernism could offer. They are feminist readings, deconstructionism, readings produced by the liberation theology movement, etc.

<sup>39</sup>In this case, the narrator merely offers his contemplative report (conclusion) rather than unfolding the situation of the character as s/he is or the character in her/his own action or utterances.

<sup>40</sup>Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative*, p.60.

the character as in the first report, it should not be taken as the only conceptualization of what happens. It is true that the narrator's direct definition is an attempt to make a generalization about the character but as happened in our reading, the narrator will also let the character be characterized differently in the discourse (the second report above). It does not mean that the narrator has, therefore, betrayed its own judgment but the truth is that the discourse may reflect many voices and the voice of the narrator forms one of them.

As Sternberg emphasises, "As a record of fact, to be sure, the Bible maintains a spatiotemporal (as well as thematic) continuity between the textual and the extratextual world denied to fictional writing."<sup>41</sup> The biblical characters are at a certain degree depicted as if they are live human beings that live in the real or, with regard to the text, extratextual world. Of course the realistic characters can exist only hypothetically or as an impression projected by the Bible. The characters as told in the story could possibly have never existed. The characters live merely in the narrative world (after all, they are fictional). In such a world, they are granted an opportunity, limited though, to manifest their own experiences through their actions, reactions, thoughts, emotions, speeches, external appearances that are reported in the narrative.

The narrator's perception and the character's own

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<sup>41</sup> Sternberg, *Poetics*, p.159.

manifestation of his experience may probably be different. The discrepancy should not be denied because it functions to enrich our readings. The Bible does not only reveal one way of looking an event, that proves the complexity of its world. Abram may be as blindly obedient as described by v.4 but he is also a sociable man who wants to be with his family wherever he goes as v.5 illustrates. His view of property is also practical, in that he brings all of his possessions that he might need in his journey. Surely Abram does not seem to hold a belief that he is a superhuman- as some would imagine because in their opinion he will always be protected by the deity- that he should not be worried by anything. Surprisingly, though, his alert act that should have been much more obvious disappears from the Akedah. He is not anxious nor horrified in sacrificing his own son. This is strange. He protects Ishmael against Sarah's hatred (ch.21) but he does nothing to protect Isaac who is not only in danger of being expelled but killed. After all, it is God himself who commands the sacrifice whereas Abraham's obedience to God is notorious- any action of Abraham is practically based on God's order. It is exactly at the point of obeying God's command that the alert Abraham becomes susceptible. His obedience to God seems to estrange him from his own son to the point that he is able to kill him with no hesitation.

We cannot precisely infer what does Abram actually think when he brings Sarai, his barren wife along.<sup>42</sup> At any rate,

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<sup>42</sup>Gen.11:30 reveals specifically the barrenness of Sarai

we know that Abram may sense the fact that Sarai's infertility makes the promise of being a great nation (v.2) absurd. Surprisingly, though, Abram does not seem to be bewildered. On the other side, Lot is with him. While Abram has no son of his own, Lot, his nephew could undoubtedly represent the position of Abram's descendant. If Abram keeps in his mind the promise of a great nation, then he may perceive its reason in the presence of Lot who remains with him. He might have regarded Lot (or somebody else in his group) as his descendant through whom the promise of a great nation will be realised.<sup>43</sup> At any rate, Abram may not necessarily hope that Sarai will be the mother of his own child.

Does Abram really love Sarai so that he could not relinquish her for the sake of God's command? If we think so, we might be disillusioned by the next event where Abram is deliberately disguising Sarai as his sister in order to escape from a lethal danger he senses in advance (12:10-20). The scene of a husband using his wife as a shield to protect himself would, to many of us, be morally shocking. It could be more perplexing that it happens, under urgent circumstance, just after Abram receives God's promise that his journey is going to be a blessed journey. Instead of getting the divine blessing Abram must sacrifice his own

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<sup>43</sup>The promise of descendants should have been given more appropriately to Sarai rather than Abram who seems to have no difficulty in getting children by himself (Ishmael) or by adoption (Lot, Eliezer of Damascus: Gen.15:2). Isaiah 51:2 reveals the apotheosis of Sarah as the mother of Israel. Abraham is father of many (nations) but Sarah is the one "who bore you (Israel)".

wife. The story begins with a famine that urges Abram and his family to take refuge in Egypt. There Abram must face another trouble, the Egyptians would kill him if they found him as Sarai's husband. So, Abram asks Sarai to cover up their relationship as a brother and sister.

Say you are my sister, that (*l'ma'an*) it may go well with me (*yiytabh-li*) because of you (*bha'abhurekh*), and that my life may be spared on your account.(v.13)

There are two reasons used by Abram in persuading Sarai: "that it may go well with me because of you" and "that my life may be spared on your account". The first reason has a close relationship with the main cause of their coming to Egypt, that is, to search for food. The emergence of the proceeding danger (that the Egyptians might kill Abram) that haunts Abram a great deal does not, however, eclipse the primary motive of being in Egypt. So that whatever they do to avoid the present danger must also be a way-out of the hunger. If Sarai masquerades as Abram's sister they could hope for the Egyptians, having seen Sarai's beauty, to be interested in exchanging some food and properties for her. It does work. v.16:"And for her (Sarai) sake (*ba'abhurahh*) he (Pharaoh) dealt well with Abram (*le'abhram hetibh*)". This report obviously corresponds to the first reason of Abram's request as well as to the second one. As commented on by Westermann: "The first sentence, 'But with Abram, all went well because of her (his own translation of v.16a)', is to be understood in the context of the beginning of the narrative: the escape from the famine and



the new threat of death." Westermann furthermore infers that "the ruse appears to have succeeded; both live and all is well with them; but the marriage and the family are destroyed".<sup>44</sup> Abram and Sarai may suffer throughout the deception, a suffering that has to be seen as the consequence of the command to go out from the original country. However, we hardly have any evidence that Abram's marriage is destroyed- that the couple no longer live in harmony. After the event Sarai resumes as Abram's wife and they apparently live as they used to be before the event. Westermann's judgment seems to be plausible only to our modern sense in which such a use of one's own wife should be strongly condemned. In the meantime, Abram and Sarai themselves do not seem to be bothered by it.

The narrative would not, however, have continued with Sarai being permanently Pharaoh's wife. The narrative discloses the affliction of Pharaoh (v.17) who then grudgingly gives Sarai back to Abram (vv.18,19). The strong reaction of Pharaoh toward Abram indicates that Pharaoh himself does not think that he deserves the affliction. Surprisingly, Abram does not want to respond against Pharaoh's anger, his silence inevitably makes it appear as if he accepts all the blame Pharaoh accuses him of. Pharaoh, finally, expels Abram from his country as a culprit.(v.20). After all, does Abram really feel guilty over the trick he played on Pharaoh? We have no clear answer to this question. If we see his complete silence in front of Pharaoh, we might

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<sup>44</sup>Westermann, *Genesis*, p.165.

think that he accepts the blame. But, judging from the very beginning of the event, we can say that Abram being in double danger could have thought that the trick is the only way to survive. He arranges the trick just to escape from the predicament. And if in the end he keeps silent in front of the angry Pharaoh it is because he does not see any point in having a quarrel when he has gained everything he wants from Pharaoh. In contrast to Abram's practical thinking, the narrator makes a judgment which is subtly implied by the report of Pharaoh's affliction. The narrator who operates outside the represented world (instead of, inside the represented world, that is, the world of the characters) could not justify the fact that Pharaoh takes Sarai as his wife. As a result, if, on the one hand, Pharaoh is revealed as being afflicted by Yahweh, on the other hand, Abram is cursed and expelled by Pharaoh. Both, Pharaoh and Abram are, in the narrator's point of view, to be badly rewarded because of the misplacement of Sarai. However, the "punishment" of Abram, if the unsympathetic reaction of Pharaoh can be thought as such, cannot be as crude as Pharaoh's affliction. Abram is different from Pharaoh.<sup>45</sup> Abram bears a religious duty from God and, as far as 12:4 is concerned, he is also a pious man. In comparing the punishment that the two men have to accept, we can see the assumption of the narrator that because of the speciality of Abram, he cannot be equated to others.

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<sup>45</sup> Elsewhere in biblical narratives, Pharaoh is identified as a foreign oppressor of Israel (Exodus). His harsh treatment of Abram may be an allusion to this later history of Abram's descendants. However, the present context shows that Pharaoh is angry because of he is caused suffering by Abram's trick.

Even if he is found guilty he must not be condemned like other people.

### Genesis 13

In ch.13 we find another discrepancy between the narrator's point of view and Abram's. The story is about Lot's departure from Abram's group. In the eyes of Abram, the separation is to avoid a clash within the family. "Then Abram said to Lot, 'Let there be no strife (*meribhah*) between you and me, between your herdsmen and my herdsmen; for we are kinsmen'"(v.8). This is actually a practical way of solving a family problem. About the place, Abram does not seem to really care. He will be glad to let Lot choose the place first and he will take the opposite direction accordingly. However, in the narrator's report the matter looks more complicated than Abram might have thought. The report about Lot is obviously an undermining of Lot himself. The narrator makes a contrast of Lot's place as seen by Lot at that time and as seen after the destruction of the place.

And Lot lifted up his eyes, and saw that the Jordan valley was well watered everywhere like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt, in the direction of Zo'ar; this was before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomor'rah.(v.10).

The sentence after (;) besides giving time indication also anticipates Gen.19 that reveals the dreadfulness of the

place that contradicts Lot's perception at that time. The narrator's comment on the place renders Lot as an unreliable informant with respect to what he sees of Sodom and Gomorrah. The same case happens when Lot has decided to live in Sodom. The narrator's words "the men of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the Lord" (v.13) would be enough to completely debunk Lot's consideration. Although this information from the narrator may refer to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (ch.19) later on, we certainly do not see any reason why Lot should avoid living in that splendid place (10a) for the sake of the not-yet-visible danger. However, by combining the two contrasting phenomena, the narrator apparently wants to convey its ideological message that a judgment based on the outward appearance may be tricky. This message becomes more apparent with the divine promise of land and descendants to Abram just after Lot's departure.(vv.14-17). Lot has chosen his land because of the beauty of the place. Abram, on the other hand, has Yahweh as the giver of his land (though still in a form of a promise), he does not choose the land by and for himself. Abram, therefore, should depend on Yahweh for the land, the status of the land as promise increases the sense of the dependence.

### Genesis 15

The report of Abram as a pious believer seems to reach its peak in ch.15:6 where the narrator states conclusively "and

he (Abram) believed (*he'emin*) in Yahweh (*baYahweh*) and he (probably Abram) reckoned it to him (probably Yahweh) as righteousness (*wayyah<sup>o</sup>šbheha lo sedaqah*)."<sup>46</sup> Ironically, the context of this statement is a debate between Abram and Yahweh which is coloured by Abram's protestation. The problem is that Abram is doubtful of having a son from his own blood as implied by previous divine promises. Therefore, he wants to realistically adopt one of his aides to be his heir. Yahweh, however, wants it otherwise, Abram's descendant must be Abram's flesh and blood. After hearing Yahweh's declaration, we hear the statement of the narrator. The conclusion, however, cannot just hide the fact that Abram has been aggressively arguing against Yahweh. He even still reserves a doubt over Yahweh's promise of land (vv.7,8). So, what has made Abram's opinion vary from God's? Having viewed the whole argument we may say that their disagreements more likely come from different ways of thinking. While God always looks to the future, that is, the fulfilment of the promises themselves, Abram is a realistic man, he always bases his arguments on what he can see at the time as it is. If God asserts that Abram will have his own descendant that is still invisible. On the other hand, Abram, seeing that he remains childless, wants to adopt another child as his heir. Abram's thought

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<sup>46</sup>Westermann calls this phrase "a theological reflection" which cannot have originated from Abram. He says "there is no trace in the verse of anything which goes back to the patriarchal period". Westermann, *Genesis*, p.222. Westermann, therefore, realises that there is somehow a gap between the original knowledge of Abram and the writer who uses his own conclusion in order to impose on the readers a religious effect of Abram's performance. For us, the gap can also be seen as a discrepancy between the narrator's own generalisation and Abram's performance similar to the previous dialogue with Yahweh.

may threaten to break up his promissory dependence on God. The adoption of Eliezer would end the promise of descendant which otherwise has yet to be fulfilled. Once Eliezer is admitted as Abram's heir, Abram will no more have to wait for the fulfilment of the promise of descendant. However, Abram's intention does not gain favour in God's eyes. Thus, Abram has to remain loyal to the promise, cancelling the visible presence (Eliezer) for the sake of the invisible future (Isaac).

### Genesis 16

Abram's pragmatic way of life is attested again when he accepts Sarai's suggestion that he should marry Hagar in order to have a son.<sup>47</sup> Where Gen.15:2,3 writes Abram's reaction to the problem of childlessness- his senior servant is absolutely eligible to be his heir- this chapter deals with Sarai's attempt to overcome the problem which seems to be much more distressing in her eyes. Sarai's frustration expressed in a strong language "the Lord has

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<sup>47</sup> Von Rad, like some other commentators, considers the plan to give a personal maid given to a woman when she gets married to a husband in order to have a child is a widespread legal custom at Abram's time. And yet, von Rad sees a probability that the narrator subtly condemns its application to this particular event, "the story of Hagar (so he calls ch.16) shows us to some extent,....., a fainthearted faith that cannot leave things with God and believes it necessary to help things along. All persons of the drama appear in a bad light....the reader understands that a child so conceived in defiance or in little faith cannot be the heir of promise." Von Rad, *Genesis*, pp.186,191. Von Rad's conclusion seems to be directed to strongly reject the existence of Ishmael as Abram's son. Although this prejudice would be proved too strong in the narrative, we would agree if the narrative somewhat ends up with showing "a failure" of Sarai's plan as unveiled in the beginning of the story.

prevented me from bearing children (*'ašarani Yahweh milledeth*)" (v.2) may not be found in Abram. Sarai seems to be very disappointed by her barrenness which in her own judgment is the only cause of the childlessness. Unlike Sarai, Abram does not seem to reckon the childlessness as an urgent problem, however, he is depicted as in utter agreement with Sarai's suggestion to take Hagar as wife. It is said, "And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai (*wayyišma` abhram l'qol šaray*)" (v.2). The sentence clearly indicates Abram's consent to Sarai's will that is done without any reservation. The narrative seems to emphasize that the plan to take Hagar as Abram's wife is engineered by Sarai alone, Abram just follows what has been decided by Sarai. It is made obvious in the succeeding summary:

Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her maid, and gave her to Abram her husband as a wife. And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived...(vv.3,4).

If Sarai is the initiator of Hagar's marriage, she is also the one who causes Hagar to flee (vv.5-7). After being pregnant Hagar looks down on her mistress. Sarai, on the other hand, may think that Hagar's contempt is a defiant gesture that in the future Hagar may not hand the child over to her in a way she expected before. Sarai pleads for Abram's judgment on Hagar's contempt. Besides the fact that he is Hagar's husband now, Abram willfully confirms Sarai's power over Hagar that results in the expulsion. The narrative is about Sarai's desperate attempt to have a child, but in the end it is Abram who owns the child: "And

Hagar bore Abram a son" (v.15). After the expulsion, Hagar's son is no longer Sarai's son as planned though he is still Abram's.

### Genesis 17

The transformation of Abram's name into Abraham which means "a father of multitude (nations)" (ch.17:5) is undoubtedly important as far as the promise of descendants is concerned. The promise of descendants itself is not for the first time heard in this occasion (see also 12:2, 13:16, 15:5) and indeed it is not given for the last time either (see 22:17a). Ironically, besides the promise of multi-descendants Abraham only has one son, that is, Ishmael. But, one son is apparently enough for Abraham to think of the possibility of having many more descendants (apparently through Ishmael) so that he remains attentively silent while listening to the divine utterances (vv.4-14). Only when Elohim declares Sarah (Sarai's new name) as the mother to-be of his son (v.16), Abraham cannot help laughing (v.17). In his old age, as is Sarah, Abraham does not believe that a child can be born to them. With a similar motive as in ch.15:2,3 Abraham contemptuously enough asks whether Ishmael is the son through whom Elohim wants to establish his covenant with the generations after Abraham. Up to this moment, we still see Abraham disagreeing with God concerning his actual heir. Abraham tends to consider what are the facts. For him, Ishmael is the hope for the



continuation of his clan. He seems to always interpret the divine promise of descendants in the light of the existence of some "children" that he has already had (cf.ch.15:2,3).

### Genesis 18,19

In the next story (ch.18) we discern a unique characterization of Abraham in his relation to God. Here Abraham is depicted as a character that can express his own will in front of the divinity.

After knowing that Yahweh is going to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham wants to make sure that Lot and his family can be saved from the destruction (vv.22-31). The text actually does not mention Lot's name but from a previous event we have gathered that Lot and his family live in Sodom (ch.13:12). In ch.13 despite the beauty that makes Lot prefer to live there, we have also heard about the potential danger of the place. So, there is no doubt that Abraham, here, tries to have Lot and his family protected from the catastrophe. In his argument, Abraham tries to convince Yahweh that there are some righteous people (Lot and his family) however small a minority they are in the place. Based on this fact, Abraham appeals to Yahweh,

Far be it from thee to do such thing, to slay the righteous (*ṣadiq*) with the wicked (*raša`*), so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be it from thee! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right? (*hašophet kal-ha'areṣ lo' ya`ašeh mišpaṭ*) (v.25).

The phrase "far be it from thee" which is addressed to Yahweh twice indicates the seriousness of Abraham in preventing the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. As *hašophet kal-ha'areṣ*, Yahweh should not punish the just with the wicked, he should be able to distinguish between the pious and the impious since they are not the same. Abraham's argument eventually appears as effective. In the end Yahweh concedes, "For the sake of ten I will not destroy it" (v.32).<sup>48</sup>

But, does Yahweh really bring about his deal with Abraham? As a matter of fact, Sodom and Gomorrah are destroyed (ch.19). Although Lot and his two daughters are saved, in contrast to the agreement made by Yahweh with Abraham, the place is destroyed. When he wakes up early in the morning to see whether Yahweh keeps his deal, Abraham should have been disappointed because "he looked down toward Sodom and Gomorrah and toward all the land of the valley, and beheld, and lo, the smoke of the land went up like the smoke of a furnace." (v.28). We are not told what Abraham's comment on it was but we can imagine it from seeing how the place looked in Abraham's eyes. The analogy of "a furnace" to refer Sodom and Gomorrah demonstrates how dreadful the

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<sup>48</sup>The number might have described the number of Lot and his family.

place was for Abraham. Abraham might have been in despair imagining the fate of Lot and his family. For him, Yahweh has failed to keep his deal.<sup>49</sup>

Ironically, the narrator makes a conclusion of the event by saying "So it was that, when God destroyed the cities of the valley, God remembered Abraham (wayyizkor 'elohim 'et-abraham)..." (v.29). It is virtually impossible for Abraham to think that God has remembered him by virtue of his agreement not to destroy the cities (18:32). So, the context of the narrator's conclusion should be searched for not in Abraham and Yahweh's dialogue (18:22-32), instead in Yahweh's inner voice (18:19). We read in v.19 Yahweh's intention to keep his promises to Abraham which also include the promise for multiplying Abraham's descendants. When the narrator declares that "God remembered Abraham", it introduces the story of Lot and his two daughters who survived the catastrophe and begot children incestuously (19:30-38). In other words, the narrator wants to make a

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<sup>49</sup>The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah emerges, as a symbol of the doom of sinners, many times in the Bible. In the second temple period, the people of Jerusalem (sinners) were accused as Sodom: Isa.1:9-10,3:9; Ez.16:46; Jer.23:14. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis might have originated in the contemplation of the people, particularly those who engaged themselves in didacticism, in the second temple period who grieved for the spiritual deterioration of Jerusalem. Thus, Sodom and Gomorrah represents sin in general, the wickedness of the people. So it does in the New Testament, Rev.11:8 like the prophetic texts, depicts Jerusalem, where Christ was crucified by its people, as Sodom. However, if the prophetic texts may bear the context of the sin of Jerusalem and the book of Revelation indicates Jerusalem as the place of Crucifixion, Gen.18 & 19 give no clear context of what the sin of the people was (cf.18:20,21 that only mentions "their sin is very grave"). A similar story can be found in Judges 19 in that the hospitality of an expatriate to his guests provokes an anger of the local people who then act maliciously. The lack of the reason of the malicious act itself makes it look disproportionate- why suddenly people brutally attack a foreigner?

link between the survival of Lot and his family and God's promise to Abraham. Lot survives because God remembered (his promises to) Abraham. But, Abraham, having seen Sodom and Gomorrah burning like hell, scarcely thinks in the same way as the narrator. Abraham does not even see the survival of Lot and his daughters. While in the eyes of the narrator God remembers Abraham, in the eyes of Abraham God has failed to implement his deal.

### Genesis 20

Genesis ch.20 discloses a scene similar to ch.12, that is, Sarah's disguise as Abraham's sister in a foreign land.<sup>50</sup> Unlike in ch.12, the reason for disguising Sarah cannot be found instantly in the beginning, before Abraham and Sarah entering the foreign land. The motive of moving to Gerar has also nothing to do with a famine as in Pharaoh's land before, instead, it is a part of Abraham's pilgrimage. The sojourn suddenly evokes the departure from Haran (ch.12:5ff.). But, certainly the whole of Abraham's journey is a wandering. He has never been established permanently in one particular place. In one of his sojourns, however, he goes to Gerar where he reveals himself as Sarah's brother. Why must Abraham say that he is Sarah's brother? There is no apparent circumstance which forces Abraham to play such a trick. Rather than unveiling Abraham's motive

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<sup>50</sup> But the two stories actually have quite different contexts and outcomes so that to treat them as the same with respect to their structure would only reduce their values.

at this early stage, the story continues with disclosing Abimelech's nightmare (vv.3-7). It is a peculiar nightmare because Abimelech can defend himself against Elohim's unexpected accusation. In the debate between Elohim and Abimelech, it is, finally, agreed that Abimelech is an innocent man (vv.4,5,6). However, he has to restore Sarah as Abraham's wife under a deadly threat by Elohim (v.7).

Having been agitated by God, Abimelech shows his discontentment against Abraham (vv.9,10). At this point, Abraham is urged to explain the motive of his pretence.

I did it because I thought, There is no fear of God ('en-yir'ath 'elohim) at all in this place, and they will kill me (waharaguni) because of my wife (al-d°bhar 'ištī). Besides she is indeed my sister, the daughter of my father but not the daughter of my mother; and she became my wife. And when God caused me to wander (way°hi ka'aser hith'u 'othi 'elohim) from my father's house (mibeth 'abhi), I said to her, 'This is the kindness you must do me: at every place to which we come, say of me, He is my brother.'(vv.11-13).

It is not clear what Abraham means by "there is no fear of God". It seems that in this kind of place people have no respect for the husbands whose wives they want to possess, they could even kill the husbands. Abraham seems to bear this kind of thought in mind and assumes that the people of Gerar are like that. To avoid being trapped in such the situation he must disguise his relationship with Sarah as brother and sister. It seems that the habit is quite widespread among the nations into whose land Abraham makes

a sojourn so that he has decided "at every place to which we come, say of me, He is my brother". We can imagine how often Abraham and Sarah should live under the disguise if they must do it at every place, it would be even too much for them bearing in mind they are a permanent wanderers. This condition has made the pilgrimage an almost impossible task. No wonder we hear Abraham's disappointment at the pilgrimage, he and his family have got to accomplish, and he somehow blames God who prompted him to wander: "God caused me to wander from my father's house". The use of the form *Hithphael* for the word *ta'ah*: to wander, clearly indicates that God is the primary cause of the distressing wander in Abraham's eyes. In other words Abraham puts the responsibility of the disguise also indirectly on God's shoulders as the source of all the conditions he must go through.

Nonetheless, the relationship between Abraham and Sarah as brother and sister should not entirely be called a disguise. Sarah is actually Abraham's sister as well as his wife (the truth of this incestuous relationship might also go deeper as to hint at the barrenness of Sarah as Abraham's wife). Abraham explains to Pharaoh, "She is indeed my sister, the daughter of my father but not the daughter of my mother". In fact this explanation would create a tone which is in contrast to Elohim's rebuke in Abimelech's dream (v.13). Elohim does not give Abimelech any other opportunity but to accept Sarah as Abraham's wife. Seeing how serious is Elohim's rebuke we cannot think that Elohim

would accept Abraham's explanation that he is in fact Sarah's brother which in turn would only decrease the seriousness of his rebuke. As a result, we can hear two kind of voices regarding Abraham and Sarah's relationship through Abimelech's ears. Elohim's utterance represents the voice of the accuser (vv.3,7) with a strong tone and Abraham's explanation is more like the voice of the accused (vv.11,12,13) with a "begging tone". Abraham is not accusing Abimelech of doing anything wrong to him, he seems to be ignorant or indifferent to the content of Elohim's rebuke. For him, Abimelech does not have to feel guilty about taking over Sarah. Abraham realises that the same occurrence may happen elsewhere since he must always describe himself as Sarah's brother for his own safety. As a response to Abraham's explanation, Abimelech is urged to substitute his anger with friendly treatment. He, finally, grants Abraham some possessions and lets Abraham stay in his country (vv.14,15). Abimelech's friendly treatment of Abraham must be seen only in the context of Abraham's confession and as a result of it and not because of his fear of the divinity. It can furthermore be proved by the fact that Abimelech, after hearing Abraham, prefers to call Abraham Sarah's brother regardless of Elohim's rebuke. "To Sarah he (Abimelech) said, 'Behold, I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver...."(v.16) (this can also be taken as Abimelech's justification of his marriage with Sarah).

The last two verses of ch.20 report the healing of

Abimelech, his wife and female slaves so that "they bore children". Interestingly, Abimelech's wife is indicated in singular form: 'ištō. The close interrelationship between the content of these two verses and the beginning of ch.21, that is, the pregnancy of Sarah and the birth of Isaac, may lead us to think that the Abimelech's wife is actually Sarah herself. Thus, the last event in Abimelech's house results in the healing of Sarah's barrenness which is a prerequisite for her subsequent pregnancy. But, if in this event, it is implied that Sarah is Abimelech's wife and in the later event, Yahweh originates Sarah's pregnancy, the role of Abraham in any way still remains obscure. Who therefore is Isaac's father? Is he Abraham (21:2,3)? Or Abimelech? Or Yahweh (if it is possible at all)? This obscurity creates a tension that seems to underlie Abraham's opposition against Ishmael's expulsion, his real son (cf.16:4) as well as Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac!

The subsequent friendship relationship of Abraham and Abimelech is told in Gen.21:21-24 in which they are agreed to make a covenant for living in peace together until their next generations. In the pretext of Abimelech's coming it is heard that the presence of Elohim in Abraham's life can always create a danger to other people.



At that time Abimelech and Pichol the commander of his army said to Abraham, "God is with you in all that you do ('elohim `immkha b`khol `ašer-`atah `ošeh); now therefore swear (hišabh`ah) to me here by God that you will not deal falsely ('im-tišgor) with me or with my offspring or with my posterity, but as I have dealt loyally (kaḥesedh) with you, you will deal with me and with the land where you have sojourned" (ch.21:22,23).

Abimelech needs to be sure that Abraham is not going to harm him and his family just because he knows that Elohim is always with Abraham. The context of Abimelech's request would be appropriately found in the previous story of ch.20 in which Abimelech has experienced a dreadful meeting with Elohim who accuses him of abducting Sarah. In the end of his ghostly appearance in Abimelech's nightmare, Elohim says, "if you do not restore her, know that you shall surely die (da` ki-moth tamuth `atah), you, and all that are yours" (ch.20:7). As a matter of fact, Abimelech has already restored Sarah (20:14). The thing which seems to please God who, upon Abraham's prayer, heals Abimelech (20:15). After all, he may remain unsure of the danger that may arise when Elohim is with Abraham.

### Genesis 21

Abraham's characterization in the event of the birth of Isaac in ch.21 is interesting because unlike Sarah, he surprisingly does not express any sign that he is happy. In the narrator's report, Abraham is seen in a normal activity of maintaining the tradition of welcoming a new born child.

-Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore him, Isaac (v.3).

-Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old (v.4).

-Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned (v.8).

We undoubtedly perceive a link between Abraham's present actions and his past experiences especially in his relation with God. In this light, the birth of Isaac is considered to be a fulfilment of the divine promise.<sup>51</sup> But, apart from the fulfilment of the promise which is reported in a rather formal way by virtue of Abraham's actions, we hardly know that Abraham receives Isaac in a peculiar way as one might hope for the promised son. In contrast to him, Sarah celebrates the birth of Isaac as a delightful miracle, "And Sarah said, 'God has made laughter (*ṣeḥoq*) for me; every one who hears will laugh over me' (*yiṣḥaq-li*)" (v.6). When Abraham is reported silent, Sarah exposes her feeling, pronouncing the wonder she is experiencing. The euphoria, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the over-protection given to the child have completed the characterization of Sarah as a mother of a miraculous child. Sarah wants Isaac to be the only son of Abraham unrivalled by Ishmael (vv.9,10).<sup>52</sup> But "the thing was very

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<sup>51</sup>The name of the son corresponds to the command in ch.17:16: "...whom you are to call Isaac". If Isaac is in fact born to Sarah, it correlates with ch.17:21:"whom Sarah will bear you". Isaac is furthermore circumcised in his eighth day, it accords to the command in 17:12:"He that is eight days old among you shall be circumcised".

<sup>52</sup>Gal.4:22-31 makes a differentiation between Ishmael as "the son of the slave (who) was born according to the flesh" and Isaac as "the son of the free woman through promise"(v.23). It is used in an apologetic rhetoric to emphasize the freedom from law (Torah) of Paul's followers as Isaac's descendants. When it comes to the matter of

displeasing to Abraham on account of his son" (v.11). This turns out to be the only report of Abraham's inner feeling in the whole chapter. While we do not know his feeling concerning Isaac, we certainly know that he cannot just let Ishmael depart from his house, at least, not until Elohim comes to convince him with a promise to make Ishmael a nation (v.12,13).

The narrative would barely give way to the character for performing his own feelings, thoughts, judgments if they in the end simply disconcert the main theme. Abraham will never permanently oppose the expulsion of Ishmael. His deed has got to comply with the intention to specify the promise of descendant in the existence of Isaac and to elevate Isaac's status accordingly. By the birth of Isaac, the promise of descendants which has been declared several times to Abraham, since he departed from Haran (ch.12), is, now, realised. This outcome is apparently approved by the narrator. The approval can be found in the comment on Sarah's pregnancy, "The Lord visited Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did to Sarah as he had promised. And Sarah conceived" (v.1,2). Sarah's pregnancy, in the narrator's

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Jerusalem- a popular notion in Judaism employed by Paul, Hagar is identified with the earthly city "for she is in slavery with her children", on the other hand, "Jerusalem above (Sarah) is free, she is our mother."(v.25,26). The portrayals may delineate a tradition, used in Judaism as well as in Christianity, that venerates Sarah as an infertile woman (v.27: "Rejoice, O barren one that dost not bear..." a quotation from Isa.54:1) yet has many children, she is seen as the mother of Israel in Old Testament texts (e.g.Isa.51:1,2) or the mother of Paul's followers in Galatians. These ideological uses of the story about Hagar and Sarah seem not to be bothered by the fact that in Genesis, Sarah merely wants first of all to protect the future of her beloved son, her only son, rather than deliberately creating an animosity against Hagar. (cf.Westermann, Genesis, p.339).

eyes, is a phenomenon created by God in accordance with his promises (ch.17,18). Apparently for this reason God backs up the expulsion of Ishmael, however displeasing it is for Abraham. Abraham's reaction to Ishmael's expulsion would sound unconventional with respect to the story's aim. Abraham's eccentric reaction may well be used only as a means to introduce the emergence of God and his confirmation of Isaac's special status ("through Isaac shall your descendants be named"). Nonetheless, Abraham can be rebellious over the plan of rejecting Ishmael for the sake of Isaac. God may successfully convince Abraham about Isaac's special status and Ishmael's future fate as a nation but how far Abraham understands it remains enigmatic, as enigmatic as his understanding of the whole promises of God and maybe of God himself.

Abraham's compliance in expelling Ishmael is done in silence which makes us wonder as to whether he does it wholeheartedly. In general, Abraham's actions are almost always an (silent) implementation of God's will (probably with an exception of ch.14 in which he acts independently) but most of his verbal expressions seem to be defiant of God's will: 15:2,3; 17:17; 18:23-33; 20:13; 21:12. The supposed discrepancy between Abraham's verbal expressions and actions creates a puzzlement that may lead us to think that some of Abraham's obedience to God is possibly unenthusiastic as in this event or, conversely, is over enthusiastic (more than God intends him to do) as in Genesis 22.

The status of Ishmael and Isaac in Abraham's eyes becomes an interesting background to our reading of the Akedah. Both of Abraham's sons must experience a mortal danger which in Ishmael's case is indirectly caused by God through his support of Sarah's demand; in Isaac's case it is directly demanded by God. Were Ishmael not to be expelled from Abraham's house, he would never have been in mortal danger in the wilderness of Beersheba. Abraham might have anticipated the possibility of such a danger that he was unhappy to let Ishmael go. In other words, Abraham does not want to have Ishmael living in danger away from him. We would very much expect Abraham to show the same anxiety when God asks him to sacrifice Isaac. Perhaps even more, recalling that Isaac is the promised son. But, as a matter of fact, we do not find any indication that Abraham is dismayed by God's command, not even that he makes God convince him of the task such as happened in Ishmael's expulsion. Abraham appears very confident in preparing as well as in executing the sacrifice of Isaac. One may therefore suppose that there is a gap in the relationship that Abraham sees between himself and Isaac. A gap that has apparently existed since Isaac's birth, namely, Abraham's reluctance to accept Isaac as his own son rather than the one that is given by Yahweh through Sarah.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup>For the possibility of reading Gen.21,22 in the light of conspiratorial opposition between Yahweh/Sarah and Abraham/Hagar concerning Ishmael's expulsion and Isaac's sacrifice, see Chapter IV.2.

The multilayeredness of Abraham's silence in the Akedah.<sup>54</sup>

The Akedah can be reckoned as a distinctive story among Abraham's narratives with regard to the seriousness of the content, that is, a human sacrifice demanded by God himself. However, the way the narration is carried out does not seem to reflect the acuteness of the problem. Instead of giving a clear explication of the unusual sacrifice, the narrator tends to minimize its report. What does appear to the readers is God's command which is eventually followed by the counter-command that has no motives. Other than that Abraham's dumb actions (with some minor exceptions) form his response to God's demands. The main focus of the Akedah is apparently on Abraham's action. From the preparation of the sacrificial journey until the execution, every bit of Abraham's action is monitored. The only and main problem is Abraham's silence which dominates almost all aspects of his appearance with one or two exceptions when he speaks briefly to other characters. There is virtually nothing we can know about him in his silence.

The question is: should we fill the gap in knowledge of Abraham's concealed mind? and if the answer is yes, then, how do we do it? or should we simply look at the story in its economical style and derive our reading from it?

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<sup>54</sup>Although the multilayeredness of the character is much more the concept of literary critics, some historic critics like von Rad in their comments on the Akedah also admit that "there are many levels of meaning, and whoever thinks he has discovered virgin soil must discover at once that there are many more layers below that." Von Rad, *Genesis*, p.238.

Biblical scholars even, those who work on a literary basis, have been disagreeing over this point. Meir Sternberg for example argues that the point of the story does not depend on the activity of bringing into the surface Abraham's state of mind, "the focus of interest lies in Abraham's supreme obedience regardless of any possible thought. His state of mind thus becomes of secondary importance. An insight into it would doubtless enrich the drama, and the reader concerned with realizing the text's potentialities in full will cast about for clues; but this will at best round things out. The point will be made and taken even with this gap left open."<sup>55</sup> For Sternberg, unlike in another biblical narrative (for example, the story of David and Bathsheba) the gap shown by the Akedah should only be left as it is, the readers' concern should merely be Abraham's obedience. This is not because the gap itself is considered too small and therefore ignorable but quite the opposite. The gap in the Akedah is so obvious that Sternberg arrives at the thought that the gap is a systematic gap, i.e., the omission of the supposedly peripheral information in order to gain a complete focus on the reported phenomenon. As a result the unexposed information would selectively be regarded as less essential than the exposed one. Sternberg says, "the Binding of Isaac resorts to systematic omission in order to establish (and impress on the reader) a hierarchy of importance."<sup>56</sup> But, is the obedience of Abraham the only point in the Akedah ?

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<sup>55</sup> Sternberg, *Poetics*, p.192.

<sup>56</sup> Sternberg, *Poetics*, p.192.

It is true that in the end the deity pronounces his blessing for a reason related to Abraham's obedience (v.18: 'ašer šama`ta b`qoli: since you have heard/obeyed my voice) but Abraham's deeds are too equivocal to be identified as a mere obedience to the deity. The characterization of Abraham in the Akedah (and also in the other occasions in the saga) makes us think of what kind of obedience Abraham has showed? Does it fit with God's conclusive judgment that Abraham is a fearing-God man (v.12)? So, there are still some problems which make the point that Abraham's obedience is not at once acceptable as it is. The silence of Abraham would still attract some differing interpretations. Sternberg's argument that seems to specifically point at the general, overarching, coherent meaning of the story has to be balanced with a close reading that looks into every detail of the story, the spoken as well as the unspoken one.

Eric Auerbach, who compares the characters of Homeric poems and the Bible, claims that "the personages speak in the Bible story too; but their speech does not serve, as does in Homer, to manifest, to externalize thoughts - on the contrary, it serves to indicate thoughts which remain unexpressed".<sup>57</sup> The biblical story which Auerbach has in mind is the Akedah. He thinks that some statements and dialogues of God, Abraham and Isaac are impenetrable with regard to their actual motives. The voices are heard but do not bring us anywhere in understanding the inner thought,

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<sup>57</sup> Auerbach, *Mimesis*, p.11.



feeling or judgment of the characters. One could hardly argue against Auerbach's opinion particularly in the awareness that the Akedah is told in an economical way. The narrator works selectively with words. He has no interest in disclosing the whole reality but only some events which for him are important. As a result we are left with many gaps, ambiguities concerning the motives of each actions. Only by filling these gaps can we hope to arrive at the depths of the characters' lives.

For Auerbach, the process of filling the gap in the Akedah amounts to inquiring into the whole life of the characters from surrounding stories. The reason for doing this is that "although they (the characters) are nearly always caught up in an event engaging all the faculties, they are not so entirely immersed in its presence that they do not remain continually conscious of what has happened to them earlier and elsewhere".<sup>58</sup> There is a close link between several stories about the characters that what is veiled here can be unveiled in another event. The link between those stories lies, according to Auerbach, in the consciousness of the character in question. So, we can see in Auerbach's argument that the character is psychologically depicted just like an ordinary human being that his/her acts are influenced by the abstract state of consciousness. And that the consciousness also includes the previous history or experiences. Exactly in recalling his previous history can Abraham possibly be described as being in a state of

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<sup>58</sup> Auerbach, *Mimesis*, p.12.

conflict. "Abraham's actions are explained not only by what is happening to him at the moment, nor yet only by his character..., but by his previous history; he remembers, he is constantly conscious of, what God has promised him and what God has already accomplished for him- his soul is torn between desperate rebellion and hopeful expectation; his silent obedience is multilayered, has background", says Auerbach.<sup>59</sup> Abraham's silence is not caused by his firm determination to obey God's command but conversely it is caused by his conflicting mind.

Auerbach's exposition of the complexity (or the depth as he might call it) of biblical humanity may sound familiar to our modern ears. But we hardly see Abraham in such a conflicting state described by Auerbach, not even at the peak of the sacrifice. Instead of being doubtful when he is about to kill Isaac, Abraham looks very determined. The narrator's report of this critical moment clearly indicates the seriousness of Abraham. Genesis 22:10: "Then Abraham put forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son". All is done by Abraham without delay. Seeing this, Gros Louis considers Auerbach's exposition of Abraham's inner thought as paratextual. He argues, "there is nothing in the text (Genesis 22) to support his (Auerbach) assertion that the morning for Abraham was 'bitter'".<sup>60</sup> Furthermore he says, "I find no textual evidence that Abraham, at any

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<sup>59</sup> Auerbach, *Mimesis*, p.12.

<sup>60</sup> Kenneth R.R.Gros Louis, "Abraham: II," in *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives*, vol.II, ed. K.R.R.Gros Louis and James S.Ackerman, 1982,p.73.

moment, considers 'desperate rebellion' - the dialectic Auerbach imposes on Abraham's soul seems to me solely a twentieth-century interpretation."<sup>61</sup> In his opinion, Abraham, right from the beginning merely displays an unwavering obedience, he brings about the sacrifice without doubt. Gros Louis even perceives that "There is no suspense in the episode, but rather an enormous sense of relief, a slowing of the pulses."<sup>62</sup> This is obviously contradictory to Auerbach's argument. If Auerbach describes Abraham as a hesitating man who must think several times before taking the risk to sacrifice his own son, Gros Louis argues that Abraham agrees instantly to God's command.

The difference between Auerbach's and Gros Louis' reading does not primarily originate from the degree of their loyalty to the text itself as Gros Louis has implicitly claimed. Like Auerbach, Gros Louis also needs to inspect other narratives to collect some elements that are useful for his reading of the Akedah. He calls those narratives "the narrative context" of the Akedah. By the narrative context he means all stories concerning Abraham and Isaac.<sup>63</sup> The Akedah is, for Gros Louis, the summary of the whole Abraham's story. In the Akedah the whole point of Abraham's life is recapitulated. He explains:

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<sup>61</sup> Gros Louis, *ibid.*, p.73.

<sup>62</sup> Gros Louis, *ibid.*, p.81.

<sup>63</sup> Gros Louis, *ibid.*, p.74.

Genesis 22 is not the climatic moment of the Abraham legend, but rather its summary. The narrative does not need to echo further the events of Abraham's life; it needs now to recall the values that have made that life meaningful and affecting, to remind us of Abraham's understanding of the significant connotations in the context of this narrative world; of possession, fruitfulness, and beauty.<sup>64</sup>

Abraham, having been prepared by his previous experiences is ready to obey God's command, he does not reckon the recent command as unusual. If there is something unusual in this event, it does not come from God's command and its implementation by Abraham as Auerbach says but because Abraham would regard this moment as a chance to test God's righteousness. Gros Louis says, "There can be nothing bitter about the early morning when Abraham saddles his ass (against Auerbach). On the contrary, he must be tense and anxious, provided as he is with an unusual opportunity to confirm the justness and righteousness of his Lord, to find out, on a starkly realistic level, if the Lord's covenant with him concerning Isaac's descendants is true or not."<sup>65</sup> Nevertheless, we do not have any textual evidence which says that Abraham is testing God, on the contrary what we have in the text is "God tested Abraham"(v.1). So, Gros Louis himself cannot avoid imposing upon the text his own interpretation although in a different way from Auerbach's kind of psychological exposition. Gros Louis has apparently given a religious meaning to Abraham's action in the Akedah in a way that Abraham wants to confirm the righteousness of

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<sup>64</sup>Gros Louis, *ibid.*, pp.81,82.

<sup>65</sup>Gros Louis, *ibid.*, p.80.

God by trying to sacrifice the promised son. But, to say that Abraham is testing God seems to have belittled the horror projected by Abraham's actions. Abraham does not seem to expect the emergence of God to cancel his sacrifice provided that it is a test. The text only tells us that Abraham is at one time asked to sacrifice his son and he does....In other words, the sacrifice is not a means for Abraham but an end in itself.

If, on the one hand, Gros Louis' argument that Abraham's appearance shows his whole-heartedness in sacrificing Isaac seems plausible; on the other hand, we accept his further argument that Abraham is actually testing God, as his own ideological projection.<sup>66</sup> We will find that Abraham has another reason for not being doubtful. The reason or more precisely reasons are, to follow Auerbach, multilayered. The multilayeredness is not necessarily in connection with Abraham's conflicting mind, Abraham's silence may conceal some multilayered motives that the readers should reconstruct although by no means fixing their certainty.

### Genesis 22

In the text itself, soon after God gives his command, we are told of how Abraham is to sacrifice Isaac. The first part of v.3 demonstrates Abraham's preparation of his journey. Normally like somebody who wants to take a long

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<sup>66</sup>It should be admitted, however, that the influence of readers' own ideology in the process of reading is unavoidable.

journey, Abraham departs early in the morning. The time indication may also allude to some other understanding. The morning time gives us a clue that God's command is delivered in the night time, that is, the night before Abraham's preparation. It will fit the usual time of divine appearances. The darkness of the night itself can, in the biblical narrative, symbolize a kind of mystery. And apparently for this reason that God's appearance, which is often surrounded by mystery both in form and content, tends to take place in the night. The command to sacrifice Isaac obviously demonstrates the mystery of God's will. We never know why God wants such a (vicious) sacrifice. However, once the focus is directed on the implementation of the sacrifice by Abraham, the impression of darkness and mystery of God changes. It changes into an ordinary scene of human daylight-business, full of consciousness. Abraham becomes a fully aware individual in his task to sacrifice his own son.

Abraham seems to have exactly calculated all his deeds to make the sacrifice effective. When he and the others have arrived at the nearest area of the sacrificial site, he splits his group into two, he leaves the two young men and his ass behind while he himself and Isaac continue on to consummate the sacrifice (v.4,5,6). Here, we are reminded of Abraham's preparation before the departure. He prepares two things, the journey: "(Abraham) saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him" (v.3) and the sacrifice: "he (Abraham) cut the wood for the burnt

offering" (v.3). Isaac is unspecifically mentioned between those groups so that he can be part of the journey (together with the two young men) or the sacrifice (a complement to the wood). In v.5 Abraham apparently thinks he has finished his journey so that he does not need his companions and the ass anymore. The sacrificial place can be reached easily from where they stand at the moment. His message to his companions that he and Isaac will go up and worship sounds relevant to the situation. The wood that is brought from home can be seen as an indicator that Abraham is going to worship. If, however, Isaac still goes with him, while the others have been left behind, it is because Abraham apparently needs his help to bring the wood for the burnt offering which otherwise he may not be able to do it himself (v.6). We can also see that Abraham calls Isaac *hanna'ar* (that young man), the same term used for his two companions which implies their status as Abraham's physical aides. So that the presence of Isaac in Abraham's subsequent journey is needed, at least in the eyes of the young men, to carry the wood for Abraham. But, does Abraham forget that his intention is actually to sacrifice Isaac which is not common worship as his companions might have understood? We simply do not know what exactly Abraham thinks at that time when he tells the young men that he is going to worship (v.5). He seemingly wants to convince everybody that there is nothing unusual in the worship.

Abraham's answer to Isaac's question about the lamb for a burnt offering is essentially in the same line of argument

as his message to the two young men. Isaac's question, "where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" (v.7) effectively threatens to break up Abraham's concealment. Isaac, like the two young men, would have primarily accepted that this is a worshipful journey, but for this reason they, of course, would need a lamb which has not appeared yet even when the sacrificial site is right next to them. Isaac needs to show his bewilderment which in turn urges Abraham either to make up another concealment or to tell the truth. In such a situation Abraham's answer is once again evasive. Instead of saying "You are the lamb for the burnt offering", Abraham says, "God will provide himself the lamb for a burnt offering" (v.8). There is no indication that Abraham tells Isaac directly that he is the sacrificial lamb. The phrase gives us an impression that Abraham is a pious believer who completely lives under God's providence. In fact, if that is true, it is the first time we find Abraham expressing such piety. His other appearances as a believer can only be encountered in the narrator's conceptualization rather than in his own utterance. Having faced some discrepancy between the narrator's and Abraham's own expression, we cannot be certain that the phrase would mean that Abraham simply believes that God will really provide himself the lamb. Abraham might have employed it as a tactic so that Isaac would stay with him until the last minute of the sacrifice. It could be reached provided that Isaac believes that the lamb in question would be there somewhere on the sacrificial site. Abraham, as we have also been informed on several other occasions, is, however,



clever enough to persuade people to do what he wants them to do.

If in the next moment Isaac has apparently agreed to comply with his father's intention to make him a sacrifice (v.9,10), we may imagine that the blank between the time after the brief dialogue (v.8) and building the altar (v.9) is the time when Abraham must use all of his ability to convince Isaac about the (unusual) sacrifice. There might have been some disagreements since the matter would be shocking for Isaac bearing in mind he has so innocently trusted his father's words that it is going to be a normal, i.e., animal sacrifice. But, the matter is possibly too disturbing to be included in the (sacred) text. Should Abraham, the Patriarch, blatantly overpower his own son's contradictory choice? The narrator's ideology might have made impossible such a depiction of the Patriarch. It could also be that the main purpose of the narrator, as Meir Sternberg has argued, is merely to show Abraham's supreme obedience and not at all to introduce Abraham's abusive action in subjugating Isaac's freedom.<sup>67</sup> Do either ideological constraint or literary confinement simply result in a silence over what has actually happened or should have logically happened? It is the readers, however, who should accept the lack of knowledge of how Abraham induced Isaac, as an invitation to become involved in experiencing such a tormenting moment. The gap created by ideological concern should be responded to by the readers

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<sup>67</sup> For Sternberg's comment on the Akedah, see his *Poetics*, p.192.

who, in their interpretative task, cannot simply harvest the meanings from the text but also have to engage in a dialogical encounter with it.

In such a relationship with the text, a different argument from what the narrator has consistently tried to establish may be proposed. Abraham, as we have seen so far, is not just an obedient person who never considers the cost and benefit of his action like a normal human being. If he wants to obey God's extraordinary command such as the command to go out from his father's house it is because he can see a chance for a better life which is attested very soon through the event in Pharaoh's land (ch.12).<sup>68</sup> Conversely, when he thinks that God's utterance is illogical he will make a rigorous defence against it (chs.15,17,etc.). In other words, under any circumstances, Abraham knows what he has and he has not to do for his own sake particularly and sometimes for the sake of his family as well. This is how Abraham appears in the stories. The narrator could not prevent the readers from reviving the whole memory of Abraham (cunning, selfish but tactful and worldly). It attracts our imagination to capture the time when Abraham has to entangle himself in a debate with Isaac, while it is ready to continue the story in which Isaac has seemingly already agreed with the realisation of

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<sup>68</sup>Westermann says,"It is the normal and natural thing that Abraham should go as God commanded him (against the commentators who laud Abraham's obedience); he would be putting himself at risk were he not to go". This explanation indicates how pragmatic Abraham's faith is. Westermann, *Genesis*, p.152.

the sacrifice.<sup>69</sup>

Artistically the narrator also creates a contrasting effect between Abraham's and Isaac's performances during the execution. While Isaac is only waiting hopelessly for the sacrifice, Abraham calmly prepares the sacrificial altar, puts the wood on it and finally binds Isaac and places him on the altar (v.9). Isaac remains speechless in his total surrendering act, watching Abraham take the deadly knife to slay him. On the other hand, Abraham is portrayed just like a cold-blooded killer. There is no hesitation in him. Not even the narrator speaks about God, in this particular moment, in order to remind us that the sacrifice is demanded by God.<sup>70</sup> The sacrifice seems to be a killing conducted by Abraham. Is Abraham's sacrifice motivated purely by a religious duty ? or, does Abraham possess another motive, at least as a second motive apart from the religious one (if there is any) ? The revealed phenomenon of vv.9,10 would again and again project an image of pure infanticide that represents the opposite side of a religious performance.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup>Viewing from Iser's understanding, this gap is to be considered as a fundamental means by which the communication between text and its reader takes place.

<sup>70</sup>From the departure until Abraham and Isaac arrive at the sacrificial site, God's name is again and again resounded (v.3:"went to the place of which God had told him",v.8:"God will provide himself the lamb",v.9:"they came to the place of which God had told him") but it suddenly fades away when Abraham is about to kill Isaac, when a divine confirmation of the sacrifice is mostly needed.

<sup>71</sup>One may only look at Rembrandt's painting: "Abraham's Sacrifice" to realise the dreadful moment of the sacrifice. In it, the hands play a dominant role in the compositional logic of the scene. Abraham is depicted as he is holding Isaac's head back (cf.Lev.1:4, 4:24) with his clawlike hand that covers the whole of Isaac's face to expose the throat. In contrast, Isaac, lying down hopelessly on the

It would seem a big leap to suggest that Abraham is seduced by some kind of jealousy that urges him to kill Isaac. But, surely the idea of a murder enacted by a close relative is not at all alien to biblical narratives. Cain murders Abel his only brother (Genesis 4). Esau hates Jacob and plans to kill him when his father has died (Genesis 27). Joseph's brothers arrange his death when they are away from their father's house (Genesis 37). Human jealousy is certainly the most prominent motive of these occurrences although it cannot be separated from a religious factor as well.<sup>72</sup> Such a human factor might as well underlie the sacrifice of Isaac. Abraham might have used this chance to take revenge for Ishmael's expulsion for which he was dismayed. Or that the presence of Isaac is, in Abraham's eyes, the harbinger of his death which he tries to reject by the killing. However, it is not our aim to hold one motive while rejecting the others. We only accept that Abraham's silence may conceal many possibilities.

After all, the ultimate effect of reading the Akedah does not depend on the rationalization of Abraham's conduct as much as experiencing an unspeakable moment when a father is convincingly exposing his own son to death. A moment

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ground even without his hands being shown (Isaac's hands are presumably bound at the back). The angel grips Abraham's hand to let the knife drop. C. Brown, Jan Kelch & Pieter van Thiel, *Rembrandt: the Master & His Workshop, Paintings*, 1991, p.183.

<sup>72</sup>Religious motive cannot entirely disappear from biblical narrative but one may notice that human beings in the Bible are not at all simple-hearted in their relation with each other. They gradually develop their ambition to dominate another, from the more impulsive one such as Cain's to a more sophisticated one shown by David.

that would undermine any reason. It may only be compared with the time when Sarai/h was asked to sell herself in order to save her husband (Genesis 12,20) that would disturb our conscience. It is a moment that is ethically absurd.

One thing must also be said. Although silence occupies virtually the whole appearance of Abraham in the Akedah which has attracted a great deal of comment, it should not be a single focus in reading the Akedah. As a matter of fact, Abraham does speak in the Akedah, he replies to Elohim's calling, he gives a message to the two young men, and he speaks to Isaac too. His utterances, however, are no more than an obliqueness that serve to blanket the truth. This completes the image of Abraham as a cunning, calculated, indifferent man in his relationship with the others. If anything is different, it must be his utterances directed to God that reflect a mere docility. Abraham, to God, is a submissive person but he can be deceitful and patronising to his fellow human beings. The recognition of Abraham must contain those oppositional characters.

Nevertheless, it seems inappropriate to judge Abraham's deeds on the basis of moral standards and put blame on him because of the deception. Abraham is hardly a figure who acknowledges moral responsibilities or, prioritises moral consideration in his deeds. He would not interpret the sacrifice of Isaac as inhumane; that in order to do so he had to go across the boundary of common sense. His

considerations are, in short, all too predictable.

After all, Abraham is not the initiator of the sacrifice. The involvement of God as the initiator of the sacrifice is undoubtedly the case.<sup>73</sup> We are at once reminded of Abimelech's anxiety that the presence of Elohim in Abraham's life can invoke a danger for other people (ch.21:22,23), a danger of which Abimelech himself has earlier almost been the victim of (ch.20). It is not clear how the danger should be understood except by the anticipation of its impact. To prevent the danger, however, Abimelech asks Abraham to swear (*šabha'*) that he will never harm his family (ch.21:23). In the Akedah, the divine blessing which basically is a promise to protect the welfare of Abraham's descendants in the aftermath of the sacrifice of Isaac is opened by an oath (*šabha'*) of Yahweh (ch.22:15). There could be a link between the two events by way of allusion. The same kind of danger anticipated by Abimelech is also threatening Isaac and the oath of Abraham to let Abimelech's family live in peace correlates to the oath of Yahweh to let Abraham's descendants live peacefully (yet, by dominating others). Thus, the presence of Abraham turns out to be a mortal danger for both Abimelech and Isaac just because Elohim is with him. Abraham's history is, however, surrounded by a similar danger that has threatened his sons, his wives, even himself (cf. his complaint in ch.21) and all happened not because of the

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<sup>73</sup>The role played by God in the Akedah and in Abraham's life will be studied later on in conjunction with the characterization of God.

absence but, on the contrary, the presence of God.

### The silence of Abraham: its meaning for Abraham and for the narrator

The Akedah consists of two kind of silences, that is, the silence of Abraham and the silence of the narrator. What we mean by the silence of the narrator is the refusal of the narrator to penetrate Abraham's mind. There is always a possibility for the biblical narrator to make a report based on somebody's invisible thoughts, feelings or judgment as well as on the invisible acts of the character.<sup>74</sup> But in the Akedah the narrator prefers to report Abraham only outwardly.<sup>75</sup> In response to it, we may think that the narrator does not want to reveal Abraham's inner thought because it cannot be tolerated with regard to the ideology it is based on. Suppose we accept Sternberg's argument that the narrator is only interested in showing Abraham's supreme obedience. Then its silence towards Abraham's inner thought can be interpreted as an attempt to delete any disturbing images which would debunk Abraham's supreme obedience. The narrator deliberately conceals Abraham's inner thought in order to avoid unintended self-contradictory phenomena in the discourse. While the motive of the concealment of the narrator can be quite as simple as that, we certainly have to face a multilayered meaning of Abraham's silence in his own view. The silence of

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<sup>74</sup> See for example Genesis 3:22, 15:6, 18:17-19.

<sup>75</sup> With the exception of vv. 4 & 13 where he uses Abraham's vision to see the sacrificial place and the ram. Nonetheless, he does not take any opportunity to unveil Abraham's inner thought.

Abraham brings with it the variety of desire that is humanly possible in worldly life.

Thus the work of the narrator represents one world, the world where God's promise is fulfilled and where the Patriarchs show their supreme obedience; while Abraham represents another world, a literally dangerous world, compelling man to be cunning, hardheaded, indifferent in order to survive either temporarily or permanently. In such an inconsistent world, Abraham is challenged, not to surrender his life merely into God's hand but to expand his own power in order to gain a confidence that he is able to prolong his life as well as his name.

The silence of Abraham does not necessarily mean that he is rendered dumb by a paradoxical understanding of God as Auerbach has argued, but it also does not have to be understood as a sign of his steadfast obedience as Gros Louis said. Abraham is silent because he is certain that Isaac's life must now be ended by way of a sacrifice. The idea may not come originally from him but he certainly does not have any objection to it. His utterances both to the two young men and to Isaac have a single aim, that is, to disguise his real intention so that he may prevent any disobedience from the others. We cannot simply say that Abraham is lying. It is analogous to the events in Egypt and Gerar.<sup>76</sup> There is an element of worship in the

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<sup>76</sup>In those places Abraham disguises Sarah as his sister but eventually he admits that Sarah is actually his sister as well as his wife. Based on this fact, Abimelech the king of Gerar dismisses his



sacrifice that may be used as Abraham's reason for the young men. And Isaac would be suitably thought of as the lamb to be provided so that Abraham may use that reason, the actual meaning of which he himself understands, to keep Isaac following him.

Obviously, the narrator refrains himself from overtly stating Abraham's attempt to persuade Isaac to come to the sacrificial altar. Abraham's action, at this particular moment, even if it were only outwardly, is to be censored. Nonetheless, the readers may use their imagination to seize the most dreadful moment in the relationship between Abraham and Isaac. The author(s) who dares to unveil as much as the Akedah has already told, would certainly grant the readers a chance, even somewhat deliberately encourage the readers, to involve themselves in penetrating the moment that he for some reason tends to leave out of his record.<sup>77</sup>

There is no doubt that the involvement of the readers, one way or another, would contribute to the story some understanding that the story may never bear.<sup>78</sup> Such a role enjoyed by the readers is necessary in maintaining a

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previous assumption that Abraham is a liar.

<sup>77</sup>We surely accept Auerbach's argument that a text like the Akedah calls for interpretation. Auerbach, *Mimesis*, p.11. And von Rad is also right in saying "a story like this (the Akedah) is basically open to interpretation and to whatever thoughts the reader is inspired. The narrator does not intend to hinder him, he is reporting an event, not giving doctrine." Von Rad, *Genesis*, p.238.

<sup>78</sup>This situation can be explained as such: while the text provides a gap, the readers fill the gap. The filling is fundamentally beyond the control of the text although not necessarily atextual.

dialogical relationship between the readers and the text. And from this the story-meanings can hope to be generated. In the text itself, the gaps create a possibility for the readers to enter the story world. The world in which Abraham is perceived as a dreadful parent whose determined ambition is to kill his child. It would, of course, undermine, or at least, create a paradoxical perspective to another image of Abraham usually projected by the narrator, that is, Abraham as a pious and religious man.

Even if Sternberg is right that the narrator only wants to project Abraham's supreme obedience while leaving other elements out, we still have to remember that Abraham's understanding of obedience may well be different from the narrator's.<sup>79</sup> Abraham, as we have recognised from the whole discourse, would not do anything when he was not certain that he would benefit. We only need to look back to the expulsion of Ishmael in which Abraham only wants to implement Sarah's demand after he gets an assurance from God that Ishmael will be made a nation (of course it is Abraham's nation as well, for they are his descendants). If Abraham wants "to obey" God's command to sacrifice Isaac, it may well be that he sees advantages in doing it apart from just blindly following God's demand. But then, the

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<sup>79</sup>The difference indicates the general inclination of biblical narratives to allude to a tension, even a contradiction, between the fact that someone is elected (by God) and his/her day-to-day behaviour. Alter sees this aspect in his analysis of David's story, he says, "one of the most probing general perceptions of the biblical writers is that there is often a tension, sometimes perhaps even an absolute contradiction, between election and moral character." Alter, *The Art*, p.117.

sacrifice could be a conspicuous killing of which the image of v.10 is the reminiscence. Were this to be the case, the command of God would no longer be the issue. It would lose its authority and be substituted with Abraham's own motive. The issue would be so sensitive that the narrator needs to smuggle in that possibility primarily under the title "God tests Abraham" and subsequently by omitting Abraham and Isaac's further discussion (supposedly between v.8 and 9).<sup>80</sup> By so doing the narrator can retain the sense that the sacrifice is always under God's command. Nevertheless, the narrator's assumption does not entirely eclipse the possibility of reading Abraham as a self-determining character who may act according to his own will.

The text can, in the end, be seen as a mixture of differing perspectives. Unlike the narrator, Abraham perceives the sacrifice as a golden opportunity to consummate his infanticidal desire. The narrator, on the other hand, places the sacrifice of Isaac within the context of a test. In the narrator's perspective, Abraham has to show his strict obedience to God's will while pushing aside his own desire.

The presence of God with his command may provide a reason for Abraham to execute Isaac in his own will and for the narrator to show the obedience of Abraham. The command is a means by which the two purposes can be achieved. After all,

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<sup>80</sup> The narrator would ideologically reckon an independent will of Abraham which is not coexistent with God's will as intolerable.

God himself does not lack his own will. His command may be used in different directions by others but, he also wants the sacrifice to be delivered in his own way and will. In the next discussion (Chapter III.4) we will see that while there is no obvious motive behind God's command, it will remain certain that the sacrifice per se is seriously intended to be consummated.

### III.3.The place for Sarah and Isaac

It is not far-fetched if the life of Abraham is perceived as a series of uses and abuses of the people surrounding Abraham and perhaps of Abraham himself too. In other words, it reflects a mechanism of victimization. Each of the occurrences in the stories about Abraham tells us of a danger that, as well as mortally threatening Abraham and his family, also puts the divine promises of land and descendants in jeopardy. In that situation what we may identify as an attempt to seek a problem solving by victimizing another appears as a model among the leading characters. Here comes what seems to be the use and abuse of the people. Moral consideration becomes absurd. The weak characters gain no defence against the use by the stronger ones. The feminists' eyes notice abuses towards women, they say the stories ostentatiously champion the superiority of man and debunk the ability of woman.

First, the divinity victimizes Abraham. He promises Abraham

a vast land and many descendants. But, never in his life does Abraham enjoy living in a wide land, the only land he owned is his graveyard that he bought with his own money (ch.21,25). Of his descendants, before his death Abraham had Ishmael from Hagar, Isaac from Sarah and another six children from Keturah (25:2), they are all eight people, far away from being analogous to the dust of the earth (13:16) or the stars in heaven (15:5). When one day Abraham's great-great-great-grand children were many (the Israelite nation), one wonders that the divine promise is not actually given to Abraham but *through* Abraham.

The victimization does not solely involve Abraham. The evidence even becomes clearer when it comes to the people surrounding Abraham. What happened with Sarah and Isaac is a good example. Genesis 22:1-19 obviously tells about the sacrifice of Isaac. But, the text reflects nothing significant about Isaac's response to the sacrifice. Anxiety, fear, feeling of horror that one, being bound on the sacrificial altar, would have suffered from, are simply erased from the text. Sarah's case is worse since her existence is utterly forgotten in the story. Not a word is mentioned about her. Being the mother of the sacrificed son, Sarah's heart would have been more torn apart than Abraham's. Let alone, she is the one who loves Isaac most (see Genesis 21). Nonetheless, her feelings have been forgotten. She never even had an opportunity to express her comment on the Akedah. Soon after the sacrifice, the text

declares her (mysterious) death.<sup>81</sup> Logic would, however, guide us to think that Sarah knew of the sacrifice of his son by her husband and, therefore, suffered from it before she died.

### Sarah

The feminist biblical critic Phyllis Trible has written, with regard to Genesis 22, the so-called "a movement into unknown territory" that is "the sacrifice of Sarah".<sup>82</sup> An interpretation which, in terms of traditional biblical criticism, should be regarded as unconventional, therefore, "yields surprise, elicits puzzlement, and builds suspense" as the title itself may tell us. Trible designates her interpretation as an "innovation", unrecognizable in the history of interpretation as well as in the text itself.<sup>83</sup> It is an attempt to create balancing points of view between the (modern, female) readers and the author's. The readers who have been aware of the acuteness of woman's problems and the author(s) whose works reflect virtually a devaluation of woman. "An author's intentionality and a reader's response have thus yielded competing views" remarks Trible in her epilogue.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>81</sup>Unlike Abraham's, the pronouncement of Sarah's death does not indicate that she died peacefully (23:2, cf.25:8). Did not Sarah die, as some rabbinic commentator says, because she was greatly troubled by the sacrifice of Isaac?

<sup>82</sup>Phyllis Trible, "Genesis 22: The Sacrifice of Sarah" in *Not in Heaven: Coherence and Complexity in Biblical Narrative*, eds. Rosenblatt, J.P. and Sitterson, Jr., J.C., 1991, pp.170-91.

<sup>83</sup>The omission of Sarah from Genesis 22 is seen as an attempt by the (male)author(s) to suppress the value of woman's existence.

<sup>84</sup>Trible, op.cit., p.191.

Sarah should have been the focus in Gen.22, argues Tribble. She deserves to represent the parental position in the Akedah instead of Abraham. Because, as Genesis 21 demonstrates, she is the one who actually loves Isaac while Abraham himself never expresses his love for Isaac. Moreover, as seen by R.P.Carroll, "the disappearing of Ishmael in the text of 22.2 -'take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love...'- is curious in the context of the stories of Abraham in Genesis and seems to steal a line more appropriate to Sarah than to Abraham."<sup>85</sup> Isaac is not the only son of Abraham since through Hagar he also has Ishmael. On the other hand, Isaac is the only son of Sarah. The divine words, therefore, would have been more appropriately addressed to Sarah. The story introduces Isaac as the only son of Abraham while speaking nothing of Sarah. Tribble claims, "by structure, use of particles, and repetition, the narrator has relentlessly secured meaning. Abraham fears God, worships God, obeys God."<sup>86</sup> By so doing, the author(s) has sacrificed Sarah. Sarah is victimized for the sake of enhancing the figure of Abraham as a devoted believer. As a matter of fact, the whole story about Abraham tends to show him as a steadfast believer while Sarah is portrayed as less admirable than that.

Sarah in the previous events of Abraham's stories has

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<sup>85</sup>R.P.Carroll, "The Discombobulations of Time and the Diversities of Text: Notes on the Rezeptionsgeschichte of the Bible" in *Text and Pretext: Essays in Honour of Robert Davidson*, ed.R.P.Carroll, JSOT SS 138, 1992, p.75.

<sup>86</sup>Tribble, "Sarah," p.181.

always been characterized as a marginalized woman. A barren wife is her first identification in the book of Genesis: "Now Sarai was barren; she had no child." (11:30). While, Milcah, Nahor's wife has no such mention that make us think that Sarai is an abnormal wife. Something is wrong with Sarai, Abram's wife. Nonetheless, we hear no complaint or an effort to heal the infertility (cf. Rebekah, Gen. 25:21). The case seems to be closed or concealed. It can only be felt as a background of any occurrences that involve Sarah. But, as a result, it may seem that Sarah is hardly regarded as an honourable wife by Abraham. In the land of Pharaoh and later on, in Gerar, Sarah is to degrade her dignity as a good woman. She sells herself to protect Abraham. One may wonder, had Sarah not been barren, would Abraham have used her in a way he does now? Infertility amounts to Sarah being used and abused all the time. But, the text is silent about her suffering.

Once, Sarah is exposed as a woman with power in her hand (Genesis 16,21), her image is remote from a person who can use her power wisely. Instead, she is depicted as a selfish and cruel woman. Hagar and her son are the victims of Sarah's cruelty. This derogatory feature of Sarah, once revealed, never ends up with a refinement. Hagar may come back to join Abraham and Sarah as commanded by the deity (ch. 16) but Sarah would never give her a peaceful life any more.<sup>87</sup> Her abhorrence of Hagar and Ishmael was persistent

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<sup>87</sup>Hagar will never appear again until the birth of Isaac (Genesis 21) when she has to suffer another intimidation from Sarah through Abraham. It proves that since the first expulsion, Hagar has



until she died. The last thing the text can tell us about the Sarah and Hagar relationship is that Sarah urged Abraham to expel Hagar and Ishmael (ch.21). When Sarah died, she did not die in "a good old age" (cf. Abraham, Gen.25:8). One may think that it is because she still cannot get away from her enmity towards Hagar and Ishmael. The Akedah, moreover, would have obsessed her as Hagar and Ishmael's revenge when she herself could not be present and be supportive to Isaac. The Akedah was a nightmare for Sarah who died just after it and perhaps because of it too.<sup>88</sup>

In Genesis 21, after the birth of Isaac, Sarah's demand for the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael is not without a logical reason. She accepted Isaac as a special son who is given in her old age when she even could not have expected to give breast feeding to a baby any more (21:7). Undoubtedly, she really loved Isaac and wanted him to enjoy an exclusive right as Abraham's heir. One could easily notice that this is not the case with Abraham. As Tribble comments, "unlike the bond between Sarah and Isaac, no unique tie exists here between Abraham and Isaac."<sup>89</sup> There is a contrasting appearance between Sarah and Abraham in their relation with Isaac. When Sarah, during the birth of Isaac, was in a state of euphoria, Abraham merely did what usually a father

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received no kind treatment from Sarah any more than before their relationship was broken (Genesis 16).

<sup>88</sup> A Jewish legend describes the death of Sarah as caused by a grieving after she is told that Isaac is sacrificed by Abraham. See L.Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, vol.I, c.1909, p.278.

<sup>89</sup> Tribble, "Sarah," p.187.

does in a tradition of welcoming a new-born baby. Abraham does not seem to regard Isaac as a special son. Sarah was the only one who not only uttered Isaac's name and predicated it with "my son" (21:10) but also echoed the name (in Hebrew *yishaq* means "he laughs") in her sayings: "God has made laughter for me; every one who hears will laugh over me." (21:6). But, the happiness soon becomes a worry, a worry that Ishmael, another son of Abraham, would one day be Isaac's rival in inheriting Abraham's name and welfare. It eventually results in the expulsion of Ishmael and his mother. However, Sarah is not alone in trying to protect Isaac's right by way of casting out Ishmael, although the idea is at once rejected by Abraham. God clearly convinced Abraham that Sarah's idea was justified (21:12,13), we may see that the narrator is also in support of Sarah.

The narrator's intention is important to be highlighted here, since it does not simply tell of the occurrence but also reflects the maintenance and implementing of Sarah's demand, of course, in his own way. The demand of Sarah was for Ishmael to be expelled. The narrator's intention is probably to write out Ishmael.<sup>90</sup> The evidence is that, not once Ishmael's name is mentioned in the text. Ishmael's identification ranges from the more specific one, "his (Abraham's) son" (21:4,5), "the son of Hagar the Egyptian" (21:9), to the more general one, "the child" (21:14,15,16)

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<sup>90</sup>The same ideological inclination to identify Ishmael not by his own name can be found in the New Testament texts (Paul's letters).

and "the lad" (21:17,19,20) but never is he identified by his own name. And if we take the notion that name is essential for Israelite understanding of being, that name indicates the existence of the person, then the removal of Ishmael's name from the discourse would manifest nothing but his annihilation. If we read the text without some prejudice such as "Ishmael is not the promised son, so why should we care about him or his name? our main concern is Isaac, the promised son" (both Christians and Jews would be in favour of this prejudice but certainly not Muslims), we would be bewildered by the narrator's decision not to use Ishmael's name directly. Obviously, the story will end up with Ishmael being separated from Isaac and Abraham and the removal of Ishmael's name in this case would simply complete the ideological deletion of Ishmael from the history of Abraham's descendants. If this is true as the intention of the narrator then Sarah's demand is clearly incorporated for endorsement. Thus, on the narrative level we have Sarah's demand for Ishmael's expulsion; in the discourse we acknowledge the narrator's bias of writing out Ishmael's name. After all, we may distinguish Sarah's demand which originated from her genuine love of Isaac from that of the narrator's sophisticated attempt to disregard Ishmael which may be because Ishmael is not the promised son or that his mother is a foreigner. However, it is easier for us to prove from the expulsion of Ishmael the cruelty of Sarah. In the foreground, she alone apparently holds responsibility for the expulsion and its ensuing effects. Nonetheless, after realising the effect of the

narrator's work we may come to the conclusion that Sarah is not the only one who would be satisfied by the expulsion of Ishmael from Abraham's house. Even the narrator upholds the expulsion. Both Sarah and the narrator "erase" Ishmael.

To say that Sarah is left with the unfortunate image of cruel mistress and selfish step-mother, simply because she is a woman, would hardly be acceptable. This view which is commonly held by feminist critics and seemingly shown by Tribble has no obvious evidence in the story. The appearance of man only in the Akedah brings about violence. Abraham, without Sarah's presence in defending Isaac, is unalterable in his determination to kill his own son. Abraham, as a man, would never show any sign of despair in facing the death of Isaac (cf. Hagar: 21:16) or of remorse at having killed his son. The divine intervention interrupts the sacrifice not because of the crying of the mother (21:17) but because of the father's rigidity: "you have not withheld your son" (22:12). Without the intervention, the child would have been killed. This is obviously a serious threat to the benign image of Abraham as an obedient man that is supposedly inculcated by the narrator, and, seen by the feminist as the only figuration of the text that needs to be combatted.<sup>91</sup> In the Akedah, Abraham does not seem to be a loving father but, rather, a killer of his own son.

Tribble seems to overlook the dialectical appearance of Abraham, for her the author only wants to produce a fine

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<sup>91</sup>Tribble, "Sarah," p.181.

figure of Abraham while suppressing disreputable images. On the other hand, more importantly, Tribble also misses Sarah's "double faces". Her view of Sarah in the story sounds too pessimistic that she needs to counter by her own interpretation. In fact, in the text, despite the exposure of Sarah's cruelty, her attitude is endorsed by God and in the plane of discourse, entertained by the narrator.<sup>92</sup> Ishmael has, however, to be separated from Abraham's family. Thus, Sarah is not only depicted as a disgraceful woman but also as a woman whose decision is vindicated.

The affection of Sarah for Isaac is, however, notorious. Abraham himself does not seem to be able to emulate Sarah's love for Isaac. What is notorious of Abraham, on the other hand, is his unyielding obedience to God. Unlike Abraham, Sarah once clashed with the divinity over her skepticism (Gen.18:9-15). On the contrary, almost every move made by Abraham is an implementation of God's command. These might be the reason why Abraham alone is to accept the sacrificial command while Sarah does not appear at all in the event. In the background, we may perceive that the greatness of Sarah's love for Isaac might have hindered the sacrifice. This, at the same time, may create an ambiguity in the understanding of *nissah*. A test like this should have been directed to the one whose love of the son might probably defeat his love of God. What is the use of the test if the tested person has already shown his steadfast

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<sup>92</sup>In a tradition that is reflected in Isa.51:1,2, Sarah is adored as Israel's mother and in Paul's letters, she is admitted as Christians' mother (e.g.Gal.4).

loyalty to God? The dynamics of oscillation between oppositional wills that can be hoped from a *nissah* does not appear in the Akedah (cf. the murmur of the people of Israel in Exod.15:22-25). This makes *nissah* a rather inappropriate title of the events. Yet, without the rendering of *nissah*, the sacrifice of Isaac could be seen as anything but a proof of Abraham's faith in God that overcomes even his bond with his own son. *Nissah* has put the Akedah in a different perspective, what should have been a blind obedience is manipulated into a more dynamic obedience in which Abraham's subservience to God is not merely accepted without a struggle that emerges from his love for Isaac.<sup>93</sup> However, *nissah* would seem to be more vivid had Sarah appeared as the subject instead of Abraham.

### Isaac

Our present study is primarily a response to the omission of Isaac since the cancellation of the sacrifice (22:11) right to the end of the Akedah. This leads to an evocation of the characterization of Isaac in the whole story of Isaac and Abraham.

There hardly is any doubt of the pitiful figure of Isaac in the Genesis narratives besides his being the promised son.

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<sup>93</sup>The rendering of *nissah* in Gen.22 may be seen as equivalent to the rendering of a Job-like discussion between God and the prince Mastema in the book of Jubilees (ch.XVII:15ff) that ends up with the prince Mastema urging God to test Abraham. Both are an ideological exposition on the Akedah.

In his childhood (ch.21), he apparently needs protection from his mother against supposedly his rival brother.<sup>94</sup> After the expulsion of Ishmael, however, a more serious threat comes into Isaac's life. It does not come from anyone but his own father. Is there any rivalry motive behind the sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham?

A study by Carol Delaney titled *The Legacy of Abraham* has been directed to show the exercise of the distinctive power of Abraham as a father over Isaac's life and death that allows the sacrifice to happen.<sup>95</sup> Delaney says, "Abraham, in taking Isaac without consulting Sarah, executed the prerogative of father-right."<sup>96</sup> The father-right is primarily understood as a claim of the father to the child's mother that because of him the child may exist. "The child is fashioned solely by the impregnating principle provided by the father while the woman supplies nothing of her essential being to the child. She serves merely as the soil in which the seed is planted, her value becomes derivative."<sup>97</sup> The father, therefore, sees himself as the one who is able to engender life. In the next state, "if the life engendering ability is male then it is

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<sup>94</sup> Interestingly, Gal.4:29 alludes to the persecution of Isaac by Ishmael that may indicate a tradition on which it is based. The allusion corresponds to a Jewish legend about quarrels between Isaac and Ishmael over the rights of the first-born. "Ishmael, who had been accustomed from his youth to use the bow and arrow, was in the habit of aiming his missiles in the direction of Isaac, saying at the same time that he was but jesting". In the end, it is Sarah who defends Isaac and his right to inherit all that Abraham has. Ginzberg, *Legends*, pp.263-4.

<sup>95</sup> Carol Delaney, "The Legacy of Abraham" in *Anti-Covenant: Counter-Reading Women's Lives in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Mieke Bal, 1989, pp.27-41.

<sup>96</sup> Delaney, *ibid.*, p.37.

<sup>97</sup> Delaney, *ibid.*, p.35.

transferred from father to son. The son also possesses this ability and therefore as he matures he becomes a potential threat to the father's authority."<sup>98</sup> This kind of threat felt by the father, that underlies infanticides in the Greek stories, is, according to Delaney, possibly the rationale behind the Akedah, the sacrifice of son. Abraham may have anticipated the rivalry of Isaac to him, for which the sacrifice is a precautionary act, over the father-right.

However, the sacrifice of Isaac comes for the first time as a divine command. Since the narrative presentation of God reflects his maleness, God is inevitably involved in the web of male actions in terms of defending the father-right (after all, Sarah has Isaac because God {Yahweh} visits her, Gen.21:1,2), the right to be seen as the author of life and death. In the Akedah, it is, after all, God who, by the sacrifice, tries to defend his "prerogative of father-right"; that is to say, the story effectively shows the undeniable power of God over man's life and death. Thus, Delaney, "the story functions to establish the authority of God the Father. The authority becomes omnipresent but invisible. This, more than anything, legitimates the patriarchal way of life."<sup>99</sup> So, there is a close link between God who demands the sacrifice and Abraham, the executor, in that both of them ultimately reflect a fatherly desire to curb the freedom of Isaac, the

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<sup>98</sup> Delaney, *ibid.*, p.37.

<sup>99</sup> Delaney, *ibid.*, p.39.



biological as well as symbolical son, even if it leads to the death of the son.

But, not every male in the Genesis stories would reflect such an absolute power. If there is any man in whom the existence of the power is highly doubtful, he must be Isaac.<sup>100</sup> Isaac is hardly the figure that may exercise his father-right over and against his wife and his children. It is, of course, unusual since as Abraham's heir Isaac should have shared his father-right as well as the way the right is to be implemented. It seems that Isaac has never learned from his father, he has never known how to be a tough man like his father. It may give us another sign that the relationship between Abraham and Isaac is not so harmonious and that, Isaac prefers to conduct his life in his own way which is in contrast to his father's.

The performance of Isaac as a weak man also breaks with a common mythological theme of a redeemed son who becomes a superhuman.<sup>101</sup> Delaney perceives the departure of Isaac's story from the theme of a special son in that, "if one were attempting to make exact correlations between the Greek and Hebrew stories Isaac, rather than Abraham, would be equivalent with Zeus, for he, like Zeus, was the child redeemed by the substitute. Yet Isaac, the child of

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<sup>100</sup> In addition to that we may also include Lot.

<sup>101</sup> The Christian interpretation that typologically relates Isaac with the figure of Jesus as another sacrificed son who becomes God after a resurrection should, however, be rethought with regard to the realisation that Isaac's performance, after being redeemed in the Akedah, does not encourage any notion of superhumanness.

promise, is strangely not a very prominent figure in the Bible. This fact has given rise to speculation that Isaac was sacrificed, and that the substitution rite was a late modification."<sup>102</sup> After the event as told in the Akedah Isaac disappears for some time. We could only hear other characters (Abraham and his senior servant) speak about him (Genesis 24). Isaac merely lives in the mind of those characters. Isaac himself is not involved in this plan nor is his will heard at all. He simply is erased from the plan that would, ironically, establish his own future. The prerogative right of the father persistently sounds its echo.

In contrast to the account of Hagar's attempt to find Ishmael a wife that only occupies half a verse (21:21b), the account of Abraham's plan to marry Isaac with his brother's descendant takes 67 verses (Genesis 24). The story, besides its lengthy appearance, is also told dramatically.<sup>103</sup> Only that one cannot help wondering, again and again, of the disappearance of Isaac from a story whose characters are merely concerned about him, doing business just for him.<sup>104</sup> As the story goes on, we may virtually not remember Isaac any more. Our attentions are firmly attached to the effort of Abraham's envoy to bring Rebekah back to

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<sup>102</sup> Delaney, "The Legacy," p.35.

<sup>103</sup> Not least the literary critic M. Sternberg is delighted to use this supposedly rich of resources narrative as a basis of his account of biblical literariness. Sternberg, *Poetics*, pp.131ff.

<sup>104</sup> The irony could also be seen in that the commentators of this story do not even consider that it is necessary to indicate Isaac in their chosen title or topic and it is virtually so with the content. The common title applied to this story is "The Wooing of Rebekah". See Sternberg, *Poetics*, p.131.

his master's place. Just before the end, we suddenly and enigmatically find Isaac in a field in the evening (vv.62,63). He is said to have come from Beerlahairoi, the same place where Hagar, in her run from Sarai, saw the deity who urged her to go back to her mistress (16:14). The place may indicate that Isaac himself has been on the run (from his father), just like Hagar, away from some harassment, that brings our mind back to the horror of the Akedah. To meditate (*śuah*), in the field, in the evening are words that simply picture a melancholy situation that may probably inhabit Isaac's mind too at that time. The darkness of Isaac's mind will eventually be disclosed as when his love for Rebekah grows well, "Isaac was comforted after his mother's death" (v.67). Hitherto, Isaac is a sad man. The death of Sarah is not an easy experience for Isaac to come to terms with. But, the narrator, up to the meeting between Isaac and Rebekah, has never unveiled the great loss that Isaac has undergone because of his mother's death. The narrator even does not tell us that Isaac was at his mother's funeral (23:19). How deeply sad Isaac is, not only that he has lost his beloved mother but also that he was not able to bury his dead mother. The Akedah has separated Isaac from Abraham (the reunion between Isaac and Abraham after the Akedah happens only at the burial of Abraham, 25:9) but more than that, it has also removed Isaac from his beloved mother forever (not even the dead body of Sarah, could Isaac see).

Meanwhile, in contrast to Isaac's melancholic life, Abraham

is told to live with another wife and their 6 children (25:1-6).<sup>105</sup> The text does not indicate that Abraham took Keturah to comfort himself after the death of Sarah. Unlike Isaac, Abraham does not seem to suffer a great deal because of Sarah's death. Let alone if he, now, can have another wife and children.

Following Isaac's marriage with Rebekah and the death of Abraham, since when Isaac receives the divine blessing (25:11), hardship is still enveloping Isaac's life. The text shows contrasting lives of Ishmael and Isaac (25:12-34). While Ishmael begets 12 children, the "twelve princes" with their clans and lands (vv.12-16), Isaac still has to beg God for healing for his barren wife (v.21). And, when Isaac can eventually have children, the twins Esau and Jacob, his children bring him nothing to his favour but more trouble, a fraternal rivalry. The trouble can be anticipated even when the children are still in their mother's womb. "The children struggled together (*yithroṣ\*ṣu*) within her" (25:22). And, when they are teenagers, Jacob has cheated Esau, his older brother, to exchange a meal for his birth-right (vv.27-34). It is a harbinger of a yet greater tragedy that also brings in the motive of deception (Genesis 27). Another misfortune comes from Esau's, Isaac's beloved son, supposed misdemeanour. He, to whom Isaac might have planned to bequeath his patrimony, along with his Hittite wife have embittered

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<sup>105</sup>There is also a possibility that besides Keturah, his wife (*'iṣṣah*)(25:1), Abraham has some more concubines (*pilag\*ṣim*) whose sons are granted gifts by Abraham (25:6).

Isaac and Rebekah (26:35).

At the age of 100 or so, Isaac rapidly becomes an unfit man.<sup>106</sup> His eye-sight is deteriorating until he cannot see any more (27:1). It really influences him to the point that he seems to lose his appetite for life. He feels that his day has come to an end. As a matter of fact, Isaac has underestimated his day (v.1). He will have 80 years more to live after this event.<sup>107</sup> However, he is anxious about his death and arranges a special blessing for Esau. The disabled eye-sight will soon plunge him into the, presumably, biggest blunder he has ever made in his life. Isaac is deceived by Rebekah, his wife, and Jacob to give the blessing he intended for Esau to Jacob in a ruthless trick. Tragedy seems to be affixed to every movement taken by Isaac. Before this, his father, and now, his wife and his son, all indifferently use Isaac for their own benefits. What is left for Isaac is tragedy. Doubtful is Isaac when he hears Jacob's voice in Esau's disguise. The hesitation is indicated at least 5 times: (1) v.20: "how is it that you have found it (the game) so quickly, my son?" (2) v.21: "come near, that I may feel you, my son, to know whether you are really my son Esau or not." (3) as in Isaac's inner voice, v.22: "the voice is Jacob's voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau". (4) v.24: "are you really

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<sup>106</sup>To compare with Abraham who, in his 100 plus stage, is still able to beget 6 children (Genesis 25).

<sup>107</sup>Isaac is 60 years old when he begets Esau and Jacob (25:26). Esau is 40 years old when he is said to have brought bitterness to his parents' lives, that is, not long before Isaac summons him to hunt game in order to get the blessing (ch.27). At this time, Isaac's age is 100 or a little bit more. And Isaac died at 180 years (35:28).

my son Esau? (5) finally, not being convinced by the previous inquiries, Isaac smells Jacob/Esau, v.27: "and he smelled the smell of his garments, and blessed him." The more Isaac is doubtful the more shocked he is when he finds that the blessed son is Jacob instead of Esau. The doubts accumulate a greater power for the emotional explosion that is triggered off when the truth is unveiled. It is said that "Isaac trembled violently" (v.33). It is enough to describe how badly affected Isaac is by the deception. If there is any experience that makes Isaac tremble more violently than this, it would have been the Akedah. But, if the text says only a little bit about Isaac's reaction to the deception of Jacob, it does not even say anything about Isaac's reaction during his father's attempt to sacrifice him. Poor Isaac, his suffering never deserves special attention. It is often eclipsed by the shadow of Abraham's majesty.

But, one should never forget that Abraham's majesty owes itself to Isaac's sorrow. The effect of Abraham's grandeur upon Isaac's weakness is noticeable in the whole story of Abraham and Isaac but it is the more so in the Akedah in particular. The Akedah symbolizes the unbalanced relationship between Abraham and Isaac. The authority and power belong only to the father while the son lives under the father's shadow. Without the implication of this condition, Isaac would have never serenely relinquished his life in his father's hands. In other words, the weakness of Isaac is indispensable for the Akedah's narrative

structure. The powerful Abraham, therefore, would gain freedom to express his own will with regard to the divine command. It is entirely up to Abraham, rather than Isaac, whether he will sacrifice Isaac according to God's order. Had Isaac been a powerful man, he might have challenged the sacrifice and therefore, undermined Abraham's intention in every possible way. In fact, Isaac is in no way a powerful character, not in the Akedah nor in the other stories. A contemplation of the characterization of Isaac reveals a disenfranchised figure. A blessed life is maybe not Isaac's fortune but it practically is Abraham's as well as Jacob's, Isaac's son (though not the beloved one).

Genesis 26 tells a story that has a similar motive to that of Abraham when he has just departed on his wandering journey and faced by a famine that urges him to take refuge in Pharaoh's land (Genesis 12). The land of Gerar and the figure of Abimelech echo another wife-sister story in Abraham's saga (Genesis 20). The immediate difference can be seen in the characterization of Abraham and Isaac. Abraham was a canny man who did not only beg for food from Pharaoh but, through his trick, he was able to get as much as he could of various properties from Pharaoh regardless of the unpleasant reaction of the local people. While Isaac may come to Gerar just to follow his father's path before in the time of famine. Only Isaac cannot go to Pharaoh's land because of the divine prohibition (26:2). There is no clear reason as to why Isaac is not allowed to go down to Egypt in order to seek a temporary shelter from the famine.

Nonetheless, we may recall that the relation between Abraham and Pharaoh before was not as good as that between Abraham and Abimelech. Thus, it is not safe for "the weak Isaac" to go and find a help from a man that has been exasperated by his father. Meanwhile, Abimelech had been a friend and a business colleague of Abraham (Abraham's possessions even grew well in Abimelech's land) as well as an ex-husband of Sarah, Isaac's mother (ch.21).<sup>108</sup> Isaac, therefore, may benefit from his parents' good relationship with Abimelech. It proves once again that Isaac can only live under the shadow of his parents. The kindness that he, now, obtains from Abimelech is virtually an expansion of what his parents had formerly cultivated. In Abimelech, Isaac has found a figure he can depend on. Unlike Abraham, Isaac lives for a long time before his disguise as Rebekah's brother is disclosed. We may imagine how torturing life is for Isaac who always has to conceal his true relationship with Rebekah in front of the public. The motive of the disclosure of Isaac's disguise is also different from that of Abraham. It is Isaac's careless or irresistible act that opens the way to the disclosure and not a divine revelation (26:8). Having so long ceased to be husband and wife, Isaac cannot restrain himself from expressing his love for Rebekah any more. After the disclosure, we never hear Isaac create an alibi as it happened with Abraham (20:11-13). On the other hand, his reasoning sounds naive, "because I thought, lest I die

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<sup>108</sup>Of Abraham and Abimelech's harmonious relationship, see the discussion of it in the characterization of Abraham, Genesis 20, pp.124ff.



because of her."(26:9). The humble Isaac has only one simple reason for his disguise, that is, afraid of death. He is not diplomatic, cunning, tactful like his father. He reveals straightforwardly why he pretends to be Rebekah's brother (cf. Abraham's lengthy argument in ch.20).

### The impact of Isaac's inferiority in the Akedah

The contrast between Abraham and Isaac produces, in the Akedah particularly, a repugnant atmosphere in which a father exercises his absolute power to sacrifice his defenceless son. The Akedah clearly reflects the imbalance of power between Abraham and Isaac. And as for God, the focus of his attention seems to be on Abraham's indifferent act rather than Isaac's pitiful manner. God wants to cancel the sacrifice, not because he feels pity for Isaac but, after seeing and being attracted by Abraham's violent act (cf. Ishmael's case: 21:17).

The curse that Isaac unintentionally gives to Esau (27:39,40) may symbolize his own hard life (against his father rather than brother).<sup>109</sup> Sometimes Isaac tries to escape from the hardship but he is barely successful.<sup>110</sup> Tragic is Isaac's fate, the same as when he is on top of

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<sup>109</sup>One may say that the blessing proclaimed in the end of the Akedah is more appropriate for Abraham's descendants (including Isaac) because of its futuristic sense. However, to say that Isaac's life implies the realisation of the blessing is hardly likely.

<sup>110</sup>Isaac's exclusive love for Esau may indicate his longing for a strong figure like Esau, the hunter, the man of field himself, which he cannot find in himself.

the sacrificial altar, bound hopelessly. In fact, the awareness of the tragedy is acute in the text which has chosen to keep silent about Isaac's destiny, when Abraham went back home (22:19). Was Isaac left in the sacrificial site? or was he dead? the text does not tell us. It remains mysterious as if it wants to remind us of the tragedy of Isaac that cannot just be enveloped by the exaltation of Abraham's obedience.

Isaac's tragedy is a symbol of the tragedy of a child who has to succumb to the violent desire of the father. It may become real for us, modern readers, when we realise, as R.P.Carroll does, "the problems of child abuse in society".<sup>111</sup> The Akedah can be seen as an example of child abuse cases in our society nowadays. Meanwhile, in the history of religious interpretation of the Akedah, we cannot hide the fact that thousands of ardent Jews have committed themselves to a mass suicide in the time of the Crusades as an enactment of the Akedah.<sup>112</sup> Tragedy is apparently a real problem both for the readers of the Akedah and the text itself. If the text, for the sake of exposing Abraham's obedience, has tried to subordinate the tragedy, it can never do it successfully. Tragedy would always emerge one way or another. It begs a special attention, like Isaac from under Abraham's shadow. But once attention is given, the text begins to deconstruct itself,

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<sup>111</sup> Carroll, "Discombobulations," p.76.

<sup>112</sup> See S.Spiegel, *The Last Trial: On the Legends and Lore of the Command to Abraham to offer Isaac as a Sacrifice: The Akedah*, 1967, for instance, pp.17-27.

the narrator's voice becomes less reliable. The obedience of Abraham, as persistently argued by the narrator, no longer deserves sympathy. Isaac's sorrow now shifts to the centre of recognition and threatens all the adorations of Abraham. An impartial highlight on Isaac's sorrow might balance the narrator's special focus on Abraham's obedience; thus, we arrive at a point where, to follow Phyllis Trible, no interpretation, including the narrator's own interpretation, should become an idol.

#### III.4. The portrayal of God

As a character, God undoubtedly plays an important role in biblical narrative with regard to his involvement in almost every activity. But, the impact of the presentation of God cannot automatically entail a general speculation about who or what he is. God judges, acts, reacts responsively with the other characters in ways that make his appearance relative. As it is an interaction between God and other story characters that lays the foundation for the story event, it is very unlikely therefore that readers should understand the divinity exclusively, separate from context.

Thus, we may say that a speculative task of bringing out a clear-cut description of divinity from biblical story is not in any way easy, if possible at all. The difficulty is not primarily caused by a text that would prevent readers from inventing such an arbitrary interpretation. Rather

than preventing, the text would invite the readers' participation in producing meaning. But, it is always a great doubt whether a reading should or could lead towards finding a closure of a simpler conclusion. Should naturally multi-dimensional images of biblical narrative be reduced to a certain conception by virtue of logic? The answer to this apparently lies a great deal in the purpose of reading that the readers set as well as their ethic of reading.<sup>113</sup> However, it must be said that there would be a great loss when a text such as the Akedah, particularly with regard to the presentation of God, has, in the end, to relinquish its polysemiotic nature for the sake of a closure. Biblical narrative such as the Akedah, although it may express certain theological or ideological notions, has basically a different nature of discourse in that it would likely deny any conclusive reading. There is not an univocal image of God in the Akedah.

#### The ambiguity of the will of God

God is basically portrayed as an inconsistent character in the Akedah. He pronounces two contradictory commands to Abraham. Each commands conveys a definite message that Abraham could not be doubtful of its intention. The initial command demands the sacrifice of Isaac who, in God's knowledge, is the only and beloved son of Abraham. The

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<sup>113</sup>The Bible has been used in various ways to support certain conceptions particularly in connection with theology. It inevitably results in a reduction of the values of biblical text itself to fit with the concept in question.

attributes indicate how precious Isaac is in Abraham's life in the eyes of God. Ironically, the story reveals that the more precious Isaac is, the more dangerous his life becomes. An infant sacrifice should be reckoned as an unusual activity, it is the more so when demanded by God himself. God who, in the Genesis narratives particularly, is recognised as the maker of life, specifically, the life of Isaac through his promise and fulfilment, allows himself to be seen as a destructor of life.

If God ever commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, he really wants to see the actual result. The consummation of the sacrifice is all he wants to prove in the end. Indeed, eventually the sacrifice is interrupted by another divine appearance. But, it should not automatically bring us to an understanding that God has never meant the sacrifice, as the narrator might lead us into such a thinking (by giving an impression that the sacrifice is in fact only a test). The gesture of the cancellation could never be traced in the initial command, which means that God is absolutely certain about the content of the command. The counter-command, which takes place after some time in the story, could only be understood as a substituting command. God may have changed his mind after having some, unrevealed though, considerations, seeing what Abraham is doing is too unbearable a horror that he never imagined before. It is of course only a possibility. The problem is that we would never know for certain why God suddenly changes his mind and interrupts the sacrifice. It is enigmatic. Mystery is

actually also an inseparable part of the first command. We are never informed about God's motive in demanding Isaac's sacrifice. So, nothing could apparently be found about the reason behind God's will in this story. However, the impact of the will is in any sense sure...Isaac is to die.

The death of or the deadly threat to Abraham's descendant itself is actually not a new reality that just happened to Isaac. It is a common phenomenon that can be found throughout Abraham's life concerning some people who have been reckoned as his descendants. Just before Isaac, we find Ishmael, another son of Abraham, almost loses his life through thirst (21:15,16). Ishmael is commanded to go away from Abraham's house as a result of the birth of Isaac and Sarah's will of making her own son enjoy an exclusive right in his father house. The participation of God in the expulsion of Ishmael is obvious (21:12). God convinces Abraham of Ishmael's fate in the future, "I will make a nation of the son of the slave woman also, because he is your offspring" (v.13), that in a way makes Abraham agree to give his consent to the expulsion. However, what immediately happened after the pronouncement of Ishmael's fate is not its fulfilment but, to the contrary, the story reveals a lethal danger of Ishmael. "Let me not look upon the death of the child (*'al-'er'eh b'moth hayyaledh*)" says Hagar in response to her son's hopeless condition (v.16). Should a dead son be a nation as promised by God ?

The question sounds its audible echo in the Akedah, as we

realise that the threat of the death of Isaac, the promised son in whom Abraham's name will be bore (21:12), in the narrative moves gradually to reach a point of certainty. Both occurrences of Ishmael and Isaac, have created an ironic effect. It is not only because they are the special people who bring a divine promise of being, in the future, a big nation (Ishmael) and the bearer of Abraham's name (Isaac) and now have to encounter a danger that may jeopardise any possibility of their future lives but also, the fact that they are Abraham's sons itself seems inevitably to always engage them in mortal danger. Abraham, in other words, has apparently again and again to face the fact that he is intended to be childless. Consequently, anyone thought to be Abraham's son cannot live away from the bad luck that threatens to eradicate their lives.

From the very beginning of his life as recorded in the book of Genesis (beginning from ch.12), Abraham has gone through a paradoxical life derived from his relationship with God. He walks away from his original country with a divine promise of land and descendant. The promise of descendants promptly looks absurd since Sarai, Abram's wife, is barren. Abram may, however, entertain himself against that absurdity by thinking that Lot, his only nephew, has a right to be reckoned as his son because he himself does not have one.

Lot, as well as Abraham, subsequently develops himself as a prosperous man. This fact alone seems to match with the

implication of the divine promise. Lot, besides flocks, herds and tents (13:5), also gains a land (13:11) that turns out to be the promised land as well (13:14,15).<sup>114</sup> But, Lot's life does not perpetually demonstrate a blessed life. He and the other inhabitants of the land have to live under an oppression of Chedorlaomer king of Elam and some other foreign kings for twelve years (14:1-4). And, in spite of their rebellion, they must, later on, undergo a worse condition than before. They, along with their belongings, are to be taken away to the place of the enemy (14:11,12). Having been freed from it, Lot has to enter another disastrous experience. The land where he and his family live, is to be wiped out under divine judgment (ch.19). The place is to be destroyed because of the wicked (undefined) behaviour of the people of the land that can no longer be tolerated by God. Lot and his family are apparently not involved in the people's misconduct. Nonetheless, they too are to be affected by the divine punishment. Lot will, eventually, survive the disaster together with his two daughters. But, by this time his family is not intact anymore, his wife and his sons in-law failed to follow Lot's way and were to be destroyed.

The plagues that have been experienced by Lot and his family are not likely to have reasons in Lot's sin or such. They are not given as a punishment, at any rate, we do not see the logic of punishment over guilt in the narrative.

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<sup>114</sup>The land shown by Yahweh to Abraham obviously includes Lot's land.



But, as we may more appropriately place them, it is a common phenomenon that as Abraham's descendant Lot and his family have to suffer from one plague after another. God, transparent in the background of the narrative event or appearing in the foreground as the actual actor, seems not to be able to keep his calamitous hands off the life of Abraham's descendant. Indeed, as in the case of Sodom and Gomorrah, God is the one who delivers Lot out of the disaster. But, it is precisely the paradoxical existence of the God of Abraham that he acts as Abraham's saviour as well as the source of the lethal danger that Abraham and his family have to encounter time after time.

If Lot has been saved from the plague against Sodom and Gomorrah, Ishmael has also, by divine intervention, been released from a lack of water that almost killed him (21:19). The Akedah as another story of a tragedy in the life of Abraham's son is ended by showing the deliverance of Isaac from the sacrifice. This time, similar to Ishmael's case that also reveals divine intervention, God in the form of the messenger of Yahweh comes to save Isaac's life. God has released Isaac particularly from Abraham's hand and, more importantly, from the consequence of his own command. The divine intervention that has cancelled the sacrifice effectively represents the opposite will expressed by the initial command. It has countermanded the command to sacrifice Isaac.

We cannot know the reason why God contradicts his own

command, from his own testimony. The text itself includes an utterance of the messenger of Yahweh to Abraham in the time of intervention that he wants Abraham to refrain from killing Isaac, "for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." (v.12). The implication of these words is for the first command to be consummated rather than to be cancelled. The cancellation itself indicated by the previous words: "Do not lay your hand on the lad or do anything to him" does not gain any clear basis. It is here that the narratorial framework, that has put the story as a test story, seems to be functional. It has explained the reason for the cancellation as well as the command to sacrifice itself, that they are all made merely to be a test for Abraham. They are no more important than the response of Abraham that will determine the result of the test. But then it is the work of the narrator, more like a rationalisation of the ambiguity of God's will, which should not be understood as the only possible explanation of the event.<sup>115</sup> The contradictory will of God itself remains surrounded by mystery.

We may also think that the different designations of the deity (*ha'elohim* and *mal'ak Yahweh*) are produced to describe the sense of contradiction related with the two commands. In A.R.Johnson's notion, they are expressing

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<sup>115</sup> See Phyllis Trible, "Sarah," pp.170-191. Trible describes a possibility of building upon the same story another understanding that is a rival to the narratorial understanding. Her reading is based on Sarah's/feminist perspective.

differing aspects of Israel's God. He says, "God is thought of in terms similar to those of man as possessing an indefinable extension of the Personality which enables Him to exercise a mysterious influence upon mankind. In its creative aspect this appears as 'blessing'; in its destructive aspect it makes itself felt as a 'curse'".<sup>116</sup> What Johnson actually sees in the performances of the biblical God is an oscillation in terms of quantity as between the singular (in our text indicated by *mal'ak Yahweh*) and the plural (for instance, *'elohim*) and in terms of quality as between the destructive and the constructive aspects of divine actions. This polarity, according to Johnson, must not be seen as a problem that seeks a logical solution. The motion between those differing aspects does not originate in a lack of knowledge or mistakes but in a specific conception, however incoherent the outlook of the conception may seem. Johnson calls the attempts to look for the source of the polarity on the basis of historical and literary (in the older sense of biblical literary approach, for instance, the study commenced by H.Gunkel) assumptions: "the misleading effect of trying to impose upon the Hebrew Scriptures what one thinks is a more 'logical' coherence"<sup>117</sup> The background of the oscillation of the divine images is more likely to be found in a henotheistic understanding of the kingdom of gods with one of them (*Yahweh*) being the chief. As Johnson says, "there seems to be no gainsaying the fact that one time in Israel (as

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<sup>116</sup>A.R.Johnson, *The One and the Many in the Israelite conception of God*, 1961. p.16.

<sup>117</sup>Johnson, *ibid.*, p.31.

indeed in the Jewish colony at Elephantine so late as the fifth century B.C.) Yahweh was worshipped as a member, albeit the chief member, of a Pantheon."<sup>118</sup> The many faces or manners of God(s) represent, therefore, the idea of the pack of gods who govern the world with many ways and wills. Johnson's description of the biblical God in terms of "the One and the Many" seems to be a factor of our reading of the oppositional wills of God. We are faced by the inexplicable position of God in the light of the sacrifice of Isaac. Does God prefer the first command or the second one? We could never fathom it. The two commands should be regarded as reflecting different wills but at the same time, they are to be seen as bearing the same authority or, as Johnson will argue, they come from the same God.

The contrasting wishes of God, however, might have bewildered Abraham, the obedient man.<sup>119</sup> Abraham who actually obeys the first command of God in executing his own son, will only be portrayed as disobedient with regard to the second command. And when he takes the command not to kill Isaac into account, he has turned down his own obedience to the initial command. Certainly obedience is a confusing term for this absurd situation as it might probably be for Abraham. In confusion, Abraham may look ridiculous. He is, to some extent, the victim of God's play. It seems to be, as it were, a parody about the life

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<sup>118</sup> Johnson, *ibid.*, p.22.

<sup>119</sup> Here we are reminded of Kierkegaard's paradoxical faith of Abraham. As a matter of fact, it is God whose will is paradoxical, Abraham, on the other hand, only straight-forwardly implements God's will, he may not even think about it?!

of an obedient man. And it is God who would have been entertained by the seriousness of Abraham in obeying his contradictory commands.

Nonetheless, it may not be the case if, as we have seen in our earlier discussion about Abraham's characterization, as a matter of fact, Abraham might possibly not just follow God's will in sacrificing Isaac. He may have agreed to sacrifice Isaac but for another reason that God himself would have never been aware of.<sup>120</sup> Thus we have the sacrifice of Isaac intended and acted by different parties with also different reasons.

When we look at the command of Isaac's sacrifice and its impact in the entire narrative, we might realise that God may probably be serious in his demand. He really wants the sacrifice of Abraham's son. It is, therefore, not just a test. We are at once reminded of Abimelech's fear in the previous episode (21:22-34) that God, particularly "Elohim", when present with Abraham may cause a mortal danger for others. The danger could, for Abimelech come without any clear reason. It is just something that can be prevented by binding Abraham, in advance, with an oath of not dealing falsely with him and his family (v.23). The mysterious danger anticipated by Abimelech may well

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<sup>120</sup>We have already considered some possibilities that may make Abraham agree to sacrifice Isaac. Among them are: the existence of Isaac may be seen by Abraham as a harbinger of his own death which he tries to deny by the sacrifice, or else, the expulsion of Ishmael may provoke Abraham to take revenge on behalf of Hagar which opportunity he finds by the sacrifice.

describe the danger that Isaac encounters during the accomplishment of the sacrifice. As the will of God, the sacrifice would remain enigmatic, no one could penetrate God's mind to find out the motive of the sacrifice. Even the narrator prefers to remain silent about it. But, of course, he does it only to allow the readers to concentrate on the plot he has suggested that the sacrifice is a divine test for Abraham. It might certainly be a test for Abraham but what about its impact on Isaac? Should Isaac too, whose life has been tragically put in jeopardy, perceive it as a divine test for his father and deny all the horror? We would think that even if Isaac accepted it as a religious task that his father ought to realise, he could not, however, go away from the sacrificial site without being haunted by the possibility that God may create a terror for his own people for an unknown reason. It is not inappropriate if God is known as "the terror of Isaac (*phaḥad yiṣḥaq*)" (Gen.31:42).

Isaac's experience in the Akedah is reminiscent of the experience of Lot, Ishmael and probably Abraham as well in their relationship with God. We have seen how Abraham expressed his complaint about the trouble he had been experiencing during the journey commanded by God (20:12,13). And also his protest that he had not been granted a child, as promised, even when he had already sensed the end of his life (15:2). Thus, Abraham may not always perceive the presence of God as something on which he can happily depend for the sake of the realisation of

the promise. In the process of general development of Abraham's family God may apparently act more of a hindrance rather than a help. If in the case of Lot and Ishmael, God has indirectly put them into a life crisis, in Isaac's case God is the actual initiator of the sacrifice of Isaac's life. Here, it becomes much more obvious that God has the potency for obstructing the continuation of Abraham's family.

The Akedah well witnesses to the contradictory aspects of God since it unveils, on the one hand, a death demanded by God and, on the other hand, a divine blessing that implies a continuation of human life in the case of Abraham's clan.<sup>121</sup> The ambiguity will remain mysterious because of the lack of clear motivations as well as coherent purposes of God's actions.<sup>122</sup> The discourse about the paradoxical God does not apparently demand a closure that would unravel the paradox. One may doubt even if it needs to be clarified rather than realised as it is. It invites any readerly experience to live in such a world, as Abraham and his family do, the world of protection, guidance, blessing as well as destruction, loss and curse.

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<sup>121</sup> Some commentators tend to consider the divine blessing at the end of the story as having superseded God's initial sacrificial demand and, therefore, the horror can somewhat be overlooked. As against this kind of commentary, we ought to say that the story chronology does not necessarily express the importance of the occurrence. The horror created by the sacrificial command is an essential experience in the process of reading that should never be abandoned as the readers reach the point where God appears to pronounce his blessing.

<sup>122</sup> We should distinguish the pragmatic actions of the divinity from the purposeful guidance of the narrator. The disclosure of God's actions in the story may convey narratorial intention as well as expressing God's own will.

The characterization of God: God as the One and the Many.<sup>123</sup>

What we have seen is God as participant in a narrative event that also involves Abraham and Isaac. Indeed, God may be seen as having a quality that separates him from human beings. For instance, the acceptance of his command and countermand by Abraham implies some presupposition of God's authority over human beings. However, such a quality is merely applicable to support the role borne by God in the narrative. So, the difference of God from human beings should be accepted no more than the fact that each character within the story should reflect various roles. In this regard, God is to be considered an independent character with a distinctive role as Abraham and Isaac have.

Dale Patrick, who has studied the characterization of God in the Old Testament narrative, has shown that the appearances of God in the story cannot be frozen into a theological proposition without losing so much of its dynamic as revealed in the story.<sup>124</sup> God is no more than a story character for Dale Patrick. And he considers two ways by which God as a character is represented in biblical literature. First is by evocation of presence, that is, "the representation of a persona in such a way that the audience entertains his or her existence as a living being...the author must allow the audience to enter into

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<sup>123</sup>The term "the One and the Many" is used by A.R.Johnson.

<sup>124</sup>Dale Patrick, *The Rendering of God in the Old Testament*. Overtures to Biblical Theology; 10, 1981.



the thinking and feeling of the persona and to enact the persona's experience of himself and his world imaginatively."<sup>125</sup> In this notion, the strongest emphasis is on the involvement of the audience or the readers, by their imagination, in pondering the thought and feeling of the character. It is seen by Patrick that the sharing of understanding of the character's world is made possible by the way the biblical author works. In other words, the biblical author, through his works, wanted to communicate or establish a communication with the readers on the basis of the experience of the characters he wrote. Concluding from what Patrick has said especially about the audiences' imagination, the text does not actually come with some certainty regarding the characters, including God. It is the imagination of the readers which, after all, would decide how the construction of the characters should be read. But we should not understand such a construction as something other than that is made for the sake of reading (for instance, theological constructions). Thus, it is highly dependent upon the narrative context or the events in the narrative that are temporal as well as interchangeable.

Nonetheless, one would eventually notice that Patrick's reading has also the purpose of positing a special image of God based on interconnection and consistency of the characterization of God that he argues is presented by biblical text. Yet it is thought to be different from

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<sup>125</sup>Patrick, *ibid.*, p.15.

theological constructions against which he attempts to produce an alternative.<sup>126</sup> Apparently for this purpose, he describes the second representation of character in biblical narrative, which he calls delineation of identity, as a representation of a character with "definite personal traits, coherently related to each other and consistently manifested in speech and deeds...a specific individual with a unique history, a set of beliefs and values, a disposition, manner, moral character with strengths and weaknesses, a physical identity and a social location. The composite of attributes belonging to the persona must, in addition, be synthesized into an identity that impresses itself on an audience as unique and interconnected."<sup>127</sup> We would not argue against Patrick that character performances should not lack plausibility. But, Patrick has apparently gone too far by allowing the character to be considered as a fixed identity bearer. A story character should be distinguished from a real person who would firmly maintain a certain identity that is unarguably necessary for human relationship.<sup>128</sup> A character like the biblical

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<sup>126</sup>The editors of the "Overtures" series in their foreword clearly express the concern of the series, "Our problem (the problem of the people whose ideology is expressed by the series) is to find a mode of articulation which avoids, on the one hand, supernaturalism that is frozen and violates the vitality of the text, and on the other hand, historicizing that is preoccupied with facticity and is therefore unable to make any meaningful interpretative claim which has continuing authority. It is to this difficult matter that Dr. Patrick addresses himself;...He will neither let the text be a fixed absolute nor will he relativize the text away from its faithful referent."

<sup>127</sup>Patrick, *The Rendering*, p.15.

<sup>128</sup>Even in the case of real people, an identity should never be accepted as a static thing that would never change. We would all agree that, especially in our modern time, along with the fast changing life, there must be, at least some, elements of our lives that have been affected and modified by the outside world. In this respect, we can scarcely assume an unchanged identity.

God could be more unpredictable than a real person.<sup>129</sup> A case in point is of course the command to sacrifice Isaac itself that one would never know its motive and purpose except that it has to be as such.<sup>130</sup> Being ignorant of this fact, it is not surprising if Patrick, concerning the divinity, furthermore says, "for the believer, getting to know Yahweh is getting to know one's world in its totality. This is the one to whom we have entrusted our lives and from whom we seek guidance and encouragement. For the majority of us who read the Bible, this religious purpose is undoubtedly primary."<sup>131</sup> In contrast to Patrick's, our reading of God yields a knowledge that there is no sense of totality that we can grasp from the presentation of God. God may act beyond the boundary of consistency. The sense of identity that one may perceive in God is again and again to be challenged by its very oppositional image. Human beings who should live before God may, like Abraham, realise that instead of certainty, they have to face a life full of risk and danger of uncertainty. It is a life of pilgrimage that Abraham and his family should undergo and

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<sup>129</sup>As Johnson has put it: "...Yahweh, though undoubtedly pictured in the form of a man, was nevertheless thought of as a Being of a different substance from the latter....His control, differs from mankind as being of a *more rarefied substance* 'like fire'-in short, *ruakh* or 'Spirit', a term which is reserved in the case of man (at least in the early period) to describe *the more vigorous manifestations of life* on his part, especially such as might be attributed to *the influence of the Godhead*." (my emphases). Johnson, *One and Many*, pp.14,15.

<sup>130</sup>When his inner thought is disclosed, God may also feel sorry for what he has done, he may realise that he has done something wrong (Genesis 6:6). It shows that God in the ongoing events may probably come to a radical change of view as well as identity (the following verse unveils a very different image of God in his relation with human being, he totally rejects the value of human being by blotting them out from reality).

<sup>131</sup>Patrick, *The Rendering*, p.45.

it is a God of pilgrimage that we could recognise from the story of the God of Abraham. The God of a wanderer seems to be a wandering God as well.

The other thing that makes biblical God-language (Patrick's term) deny a closure is because it intermingles with other languages of other characters. The God-language must be understood as being in a dialogic relationship with other languages in the Bible. As Bakhtin says, "any two utterances, if juxtaposed on a semantic plane (not as things and not as linguistic examples), end up in a dialogic relationship."<sup>132</sup> The typical quality of this relationship is that it cannot be reduced "to the purely logical (even if dialectical) nor to the purely linguistic (compositional-syntactic). They are possible only between complete utterances of various speaking subjects..."<sup>133</sup> God-language is, therefore, highly pragmatical, hardly universal.

### III.5. The dominant voice of the narrator but not the only "voice"

#### The narrator of biblical narratives

Every narrative assumes the presence of a narrator that is "the agent which utters the linguistic signs which constitute the text."<sup>134</sup> Since the narrator deals only with

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<sup>132</sup> Bakhtin, "The Problem," p.117.

<sup>133</sup> Bakhtin, "The Problem," p.117.

<sup>134</sup> Bal, *Narratology*, p.120.

the linguistic signs of the text, it can and should be considered as a different body from that of the author/writer. The author of the Akedah, as commonly recognized in source criticism, is E (*Elohist*).<sup>135</sup> This person or group of people lived at a certain time and presumably wrote the Akedah. But, they are not at the same time the narrator of the Akedah. "An author may embody in a work ideas, beliefs, emotions other than or even quite opposed to those he has in real life; he may also embody different ideas, beliefs and emotions in different works."<sup>136</sup> The concern of our study is, however, the presentation of the discourse: how the discourse expresses its ideology through the narrator and what is it?

"The narrator speaks with the authority of omniscience," claims Sternberg.<sup>137</sup> The evidences which endorse the omniscience of the biblical narrator are given by Sternberg as follow:

For one thing, the narrator has free access to the minds ("hearts") of his dramatis personae, not excluding God himself ("the Lord repented that he had made man on the earth and it grieved him to his heart. And the Lord said, I will blot out man" [Gen 6:6-7]). For another, he enjoys free movement in time (among narrative past, present, and future) and in space (enabling him to follow secret conversations, shuttle between simultaneous happenings or between heaven and earth). These two establish an unlimited range of information to draw upon or, from the reader's side, a supernatural principle of coherence and intelligibility. For the narrative provides us with an assortment of plot-stuff that would normally

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<sup>135</sup> It is generally agreed that vv.15-18 reflect J's style that was adopted by E later on.

be inaccessible.<sup>138</sup>

In this status the narrator places itself "above" or superior to the story it narrates. It may be compared with a kind of report that uses bird-eye angle of vision which provides a wider view. The omniscient narrator not only assumes a superior level to the story it narrates but it claims for a disentanglement from the story, neutrality with regard to the events and characters in the story it narrates. Rimmon-Kenan says, "it is precisely their (the narrators') absence from the story and their higher narratorial authority in relation to it that confers on such narrators the quality which has often been called 'omniscience'."<sup>139</sup> In relation with the readers, the omniscient narrator is to be regarded as the most reliable source of knowledge. This would enable the narrator to manipulate the readers for the sake of the achievement of the story purpose.

Sternberg, furthermore, argues that the narratorial model taken by biblical narrative can be linked with a conception of God and the world. In comparison with other ancient literatures, the biblical God has an immeasurable knowledge while "the demigod Gilgamesh, all-seeing and all-knowing, embarks on a quest for immortality".<sup>140</sup> The omniscient narrator in its freedom to weave in and out of minds, to be

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<sup>136</sup> Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative*, p.87.

<sup>137</sup> Sternberg, *Poetics*, p.85.

<sup>138</sup> Sternberg, *Poetics*, p.84.

<sup>139</sup> Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative*, p.95.

<sup>140</sup> Sternberg, *Poetics*, p.89.

in several places at the same time depicts the omniscience of God himself. "The biblical narrator and God are not only analogues, nor does God's informational privilege only look far more impressive than the narrator's derivative or second-order authority. The very choice to devise an omniscient narrator serves the purpose of staging and glorifying an omniscient God."<sup>141</sup> The omniscient narrator is a technique that was presumably intentionally chosen to manifest the ideological awareness of an almighty God.

Sternberg's argument seems problematic. There hardly is any conspicuous link that can be seen between God and the narrator who practically live in separate worlds. We ought to, first of all, assume that God lives, in fact, as a (fictional) character in biblical narrative. He exists in the narrative world, takes part in the activities of other story characters and is bound within the network of relationships with them. On the other hand, the narrator works from outside and is absent from the story it narrates. Consequently, the narrator can claim that it is able to read God's covert mind that is inconspicuous for the story characters (eg. Gen. 18:17-19) but never God read the narrator's mind. By its devices, including revealing or effacing God's judgments at the intended time, the narrator may lead the readers into thinking of God's superiority over human beings. God may unquestionably be seen as omnipotent in the narrative. But, the narrator cannot be like God or it does not seem overtly to play God as

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<sup>141</sup> Sternberg, *Poetics*, p.89.

Sternberg has argued. It cannot demonstrate its authority to the readers just like God presumably does to human beings in biblical narratives. Being omniscient does not necessarily make the narrator assume a divine-like role. Such a prerogative of the narrator scarcely gains a place in the polysemiotic nature of biblical narrative. Omniscience is, after all, a narratological term that is used to identify the characteristics of an extradiegetic (superior to the story) and, at the same time, heterodiegetic (outside the story) narrator. The term itself is, as Rimmon-Kenan rightly thinks, "perhaps an exaggerated term".<sup>142</sup>

The omniscient narrator is still a narrator which at some level may become unreliable that is when its utterances turn out to be unconvincing or even contradictory.<sup>143</sup> Rimmon-Kenan detects "one of the potential sources of unreliability is the colouring of the narrator's account by a questionable value-scheme. A narrator's moral values are considered questionable if they do not tally with those of the implied author of the given work."<sup>144</sup> She, furthermore, explains:

Various factors in the text may indicate a gap between the norms of the implied author and those of the narrator: when the facts contradict the narrator's views, the latter

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<sup>142</sup>Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative*, p.95.

<sup>143</sup>Sternberg would hardly agree to this claim.

<sup>144</sup>In proposing a notion that distinguishes the implied author from the narrator Rimmon-Kenan quotes Chatman who argues: "unlike the narrator, the implied author can *tell* us nothing. He, or better, it has no voice, no direct means of communicating. It instructs us silently, through the design of the whole, with all the voices, by all



is judged to be unreliable (but how does one establish the 'real facts' behind the narrator's back?); when the outcome of the action proves the narrator wrong, a doubt is retrospectively cast over his reliability in reporting earlier events; when the views of other characters consistently clash with the narrator's, suspicion may arise in the reader's mind; and when the narrator's language contains internal contradictions, double-edged images, and the like, it may have a boomerang effect, undermining the reliability of its user.<sup>145</sup>

Nonetheless, it is not always easy to pin down the unreliability of the narrator particularly in the text that offers manifold meanings. "Many texts make it difficult to decide whether the narrator is reliable or unreliable, and if unreliable-to what extent. Some texts-which may be called ambiguous narratives- make such a decision impossible, putting the reader in a position of constant oscillation between mutually exclusive alternatives."<sup>146</sup> The alternatives are perhaps formed by the narrator's reports of an event from various points of view or by characters' thoughts different from the narrator's point of view. Here, instead of judging the differing views on the basis of their reliability, each of them can be accepted as representing one way of looking things among many other ways.

A biblical narrative such as the Akedah is one of the texts that puts the readers in a position of constant oscillation between mutually exclusive alternatives. It is a text in

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the means it has chosen to let us learn." Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 1978, p.87.

<sup>145</sup> Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative*, p.101.

<sup>146</sup> Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative*, p.103.

which what is said by the narrator should be heard not as the only alternative, because what is not said by the narrator which remains as a possible "fact", could probably be taken as another perception of the event and is obviously equally important for the understanding of the story.

### The voice of the Akedah's narrator

Our first and most important encounter with the Akedah's narrator is through this declaration:

After these things God tested Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here am I." (*way•hi 'aḥar had•bharim ha'elleh weha'elohim nissah 'eth-'abraham wayyo'mer 'elayw 'abraham wayyo'mer hinneni*) (Gen.22:1).

According to the narrator, the following episode is a divine test of Abraham. It becomes clear that, as Westermann rightly explains, the word *nissah* describes "the testing by God as a subsequent interpretation of an event, not the event itself." The interpreter is the narrator who "was responsible for the title (i.e. *nissah*) intended the event to serve as a model: the suffering of a person is presented as a testing by God."<sup>147</sup> A suffering of people that is understood as a divine test is quite a common theme in the narratives concerning the Exodus: Ex.15:25, 16:4; Deut.8:2ff. The hardship undergone by Israel in the

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<sup>147</sup>Westermann, *Genesis*, p.356.

wilderness in the journey out of Egypt is reflected as a testing by God, to prove the loyalty of the people. It is this kind of reflection that may well be presupposed by the Akedah. The demand to sacrifice Isaac is seen as a test in which Abraham is to show his obedience. With regard to this event, the faith of the succeeding generations is hoped to be strengthened by recalling Abraham's obedience. The focus of the narrative, therefore, is on Abraham's obedience. But, as von Rad says, "for Abraham the command that was directed to him was deadly serious...For Abraham, God's command is completely incomprehensible: the child, given by God after long delay, the only link that can lead to the promised greatness of Abraham's seed (ch.15.4f.) is to be given back to God in sacrifice...Because the entire previous, suspense-filled Yahwistic story of Isaac's birth (chs.12.1ff.;16.1ff.;18.1ff.) precedes our narrative (through the final reaction of the sources), God's demand becomes even more monstrous."<sup>148</sup> The way Abraham would have perceived the command that is different from the narrator's point of view makes the story a combination of "twofold viewpoint" (von Rad's term). Looking from the narrator's viewpoint it is a divine test addressed to Abraham, but from Abraham's perspective it is merely a sacrifice.

There are probably two achievements intended by the narrative in stating God to be the source of the sacrificial command. Firstly, as stated by R.Davidson, "lest there be any doubt that it is God's doing, the word

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<sup>148</sup> Von Rad, *Genesis*, p.234.

God occurs in the emphatic position at the beginning of the sentence, as if to say 'It was God who...'.<sup>149</sup> This statement may assume that the sacrifice does not originate with Abraham who, as a human being, might have expressed his own desire. Since it is a divine command, there should not be any doubt about its truth.<sup>150</sup> In the meantime von Rad notes the second effect of such an attribution, "the story concerns a temptation given by God, a demand which God did not intend to take seriously." (my emphasis)<sup>151</sup> The logic of von Rad's argument can possibly be traced in the direction taken by the narrator which to von Rad is unlikely to describe God as really demanding a human sacrifice. Scholars (historical critics) tend to distinguish the present form of the narrative from the supposedly older element that can, however, still be perceived in the present form. In the older form, the divine sacrificial demand had not yet borne any other motives than itself. As Nahum Sarna says, "we cannot evade the fact that the core of the narrative actually seems to assume the possibility that God could demand human sacrifice".<sup>152</sup> However, it is generally agreed that in the present form the narrative possesses a didactic motive that

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<sup>149</sup>R.Davidson, *Genesis 12-50*, 1979, p.95.

<sup>150</sup>The emphasis made by Davidson, and before him von Rad, on God as the subject of the demand of the sacrifice may be directed to confront, as well as pointing out the unusual Hebrew syntax of v.1, the rational argument (such as made by Kant) that denies the legitimacy of the sacrifice as a divine command. For Kant's comments, see D.Pailin, "A Hermeneutical Problem Before Kierkegaard" in R.L.Perkin, ed., *Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling: Critical Appraisals*, 1981, p.32.

<sup>151</sup>Von Rad, *Genesis*, p.239. Just like watching a horror film in the cinema while remembering that it is not real, the meaning of the word test seems to diminish the horror of the sacrifice.

<sup>152</sup>Nahum Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 1970, p.157.

by seeing that: "God tests Abraham through his demand of the sacrifice of Isaac and Abraham shows his obedience" one may learn how to live in obedience to God. Looking at this "testing-obedience" motive in particular, von Rad comes to a conclusion that several other stories besides the Akedah also contain the same motive.<sup>153</sup> "The report about God's promise and conduct of Abraham from Mesopotamia (chs.12.1ff.; 15.1ff.) contained a temptation motif. The outbreak of famine must also be understood as a test.....the visit of the three heavenly beings was a test for Abraham..."<sup>154</sup> In von Rad's view, therefore, the life of Abraham amounts to a series of tests where the Patriarch has to show his faithfulness to God.

If this is true, one must, however, make an exception of Gen.22, as von Rad himself eventually admits, "what is here new, however, is the programmatic appearance of the idea of testing in the very verse of the story as well as its destructive harshness."<sup>155</sup> While von Rad can only infer the temptation motive from the presentation of other Abraham's stories, Gen.22 obviously discloses the word *nissah*, at the very beginning of the discourse. Such a rendering may indicate nothing but an attempt to guard the understanding of the story in accordance with the testing pattern. And if we accept the scholars' interpretation of test as something that is not intended to be real, only to prove Abraham's

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<sup>153</sup> Temptation is von Rad's term that refers to "a pedagogical test which God permits men to endure in order to probe their faith and faithfulness". Von Rad, *Genesis*, p.239.

<sup>154</sup> Von Rad, *Genesis*, p.239.

<sup>155</sup> Von Rad, *Genesis*, p.239.

obedience, then we should bear this in mind from the very beginning and throughout the story. Nonetheless, von Rad also mentions that the Akedah is notorious for its destructive harshness. It in itself is contradictory of the supposed meaning of test. The sacrifice of Isaac can be real. This destructive element cannot, after all, only be subordinated for the sake of the testing-obedience motive. The distinction usually made by historical critics between the older (the true sacrifice) and the present (the testing-obedience) element is hardly acceptable as such since the narrative still projects both elements equally.

This could bring in the problem of the subjectivity of the narrator besides the fact that the biblical narrator is an omniscient narrator that is supposed to stand in the neutral position. The subjectivity becomes apparent when we realise that its interpretation does not seem to represent the entire reality of the story. The concept of *nissah* as such may not fairly be understood by all characters. God may possibly view the event from the same point of view as the narrator's although it is by no means certain. He could understand his demand of sacrifice as a testing for Abraham.<sup>156</sup> Nevertheless, the case is far from true for Abraham. As we have seen through some commentaries, Abraham

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<sup>156</sup> Presumably those commentators we mentioned above would not hesitate to argue that God's point of view is just the same as the narrator's in that they see the event as a testing for Abraham. But, the narrator's utterance should not be accepted automatically as equally reflecting God's mind. God may not understand the sacrifice as a testing as such but a pure demand of Isaac's death. It should remain as a possibility throughout the story with regard to the complete absence of any information about God's motive.

would never realise that the demand of sacrifice is only a test for him (that the actual sacrifice would not be happened). When he sacrifices Isaac the consideration of getting any reward from God by so doing may not come into his mind. That Abraham reckons the sacrifice of Isaac as an end in itself rather than as a means of expressing his obedience is obvious in the story. So, there seems to be a discrepancy between the narrator's utterance and the way the character focalizes his own circumstance. It proves that although *nissah* arises as the narrator's explanation of the story, it does not wholly represent what actually happens in the story, that is, how the characters perceive things from their own point of views. Despite the understanding that the sacrifice cannot have happened, the Akedah also projects the opposite view that Abraham can actually kill Isaac just as commanded by God.

Another explanation of *nissah* is made not in relation to the meaning of the word but the structure of the story. Westermann, for instance, considers that the whole text, except vv.15-18, shows one apparent objective, "at every stage and with every sentence the narrator has his goal in view: to tell a story about the testing of Abraham." There are three elements of test that are seen by Westermann in Gen.22: "in the first part (vv.1b-2) a task is laid on the one being tested; in the second (vv.3-10) Abraham carries it out, but only as far as the penultimate act; in the third part, the structure of the test is modified in that the last act is taken out of Abraham's hands. The command

to kill the child, implied in the command to sacrifice, is revoked (vv.11-12a), and Abraham is told at the same time that he has passed the test (v.12b)".<sup>157</sup> Thus in Westermann's view the text does not only reveal the word *nissah* as a heading of the story but also reflects a testing motif in the development of its plot. The test is ended with Abraham being passed because he acts according to the divine command to kill his son. Although Isaac presumably escapes the actual sacrifice, Abraham can be seen, especially in the light of the divine utterance (v.12), to have passed the test. The goal of the narrator, that is, "to tell a story about the testing of Abraham", therefore, has reached a point of achievement. To perceive the testing motif, however, one has apparently to follow Westermann's strategy of reading which he imposes on the text, without which we simply cannot see such a sequential development of the test.

G.W.Coats, viewing the Akedah as a story of Abraham's obedience rather than a test, comes to a similar assumption as that of Westermann about the structure of the story that puts a stress on Abraham's deeds. He says, "structure within the unit thus emphasizes Abraham's action in relationship to his son as obedience to God's command."<sup>158</sup> Coats, however, seems to deliberately underscore the presence of Isaac, which makes Abraham's acts in response to God's command less individual. Isaac has to be taken

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<sup>157</sup>Westermann, *Genesis*, p.355.

<sup>158</sup>G.W.Coats, *Genesis: With an Introduction to Narrative Literature*, 1983, p.158.



into account even though "the subject of the narration is limited to a depiction of Abraham's faith." Coats, moreover, maintains that the narrative inevitably introduces a threat to Isaac's life besides the virtue of Abraham. Whenever the threat of Isaac's life is felt (e.g. vv.9,10) then the projection of Abraham's obedience becomes eclipsed. "Just at this point in the plot a problem in the structure of the story appears. The foreshadowing device suggests that the scope of the story encompasses Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac (vv.11-14). The point of tension in the story is now only the threat to Isaac's life. Obedience to the command is no longer at issue, for Abraham has already demonstrated that he would obey the command without a moment's hesitation."<sup>159</sup> For Coats, the presence of *mal'ak Yahweh* to cancel the sacrifice is necessary to prevent the killing of Isaac, which becomes a real problem as Abraham remains loyal to the first command to the last minute.<sup>160</sup> Coats seemingly considers the importance of the second divine emergence as primarily to save Isaac's life rather than to reward Abraham's obedience. Unlike Coats, Westermann would argue that the importance of *mal'ak Yahweh's* appearance does not chiefly lie in the fact that Isaac has been saved by it but rather to show that Abraham has passed the test, his obedience to God is, thus, confirmed. The highlight that Coats has made of the threat to Isaac's life urges us to think that Abraham may not be the only focus of the narrative, though, surely the dominant one. Coats himself, rather undermining

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<sup>159</sup> Coats, *ibid.*, p.160.

his own proposition, concedes that "this point (the threat of Isaac) belongs to the older tradition" which was presumably embedded to flesh out the story of Abraham's obedience.<sup>160</sup> However, even in the present context this supposedly embedded story should be seen as remaining indispensable. At the same time as looking at Abraham's obedience, the threat to Isaac's life should be equally taken into consideration. But then, how should we take into account the threat to Isaac's life in connection with the divine command and Abraham's obedience?

A study made by Hugh C.White reveals that the demand for Isaac's sacrifice is to be seen in relation to the dilemma of promise (of descendants) in which Abraham, through the test, is brought to find the resolution.<sup>161</sup> The dilemma is this: "even though the child is a miraculous fulfillment of a divine promise, as the previous narrative has made clear, when the object of desire contained in the promise takes on material form in the fulfillment, the bond of faith between the promisor and the promisee is superseded by the relation which unites the recipient with the promised object."<sup>162</sup> In the realisation of the promise, the object of the affection of the recipient (Abraham) might shift from the giver (God), on whom the recipient was dependent before, to the

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<sup>160</sup> A general tendency of historic critics to surmise differing story elements as coming from various time seems to prevent them from appreciating the polysemy of biblical narrative- a story with multifaceted phenomena rather than a compilation of several unrelated stories from different times.

<sup>161</sup> Hugh C.White, *Narration and Discourse in the Book of Genesis*, 1991, pp.187-203.

<sup>162</sup> White, *ibid.*, p.190.

material fulfillment of the promise (Isaac), in whom the future of the recipient becomes concrete. However, the Patriarch is destined to a kind of promissory life which does not allow for such a shift really taking place. Abraham has to always live under God's promises. "This dilemma is avoided so long as the fulfillment is delayed, but it cannot be delayed indefinitely if the promise is to remain credible."<sup>163</sup>

The other solution to this dilemma is by abandoning the fulfillment (Isaac), so that God may be restored as the promisor and Abraham as the promisee. This possibility is alluded to in the Akedah. The presence of Isaac, according to White, creates for Abraham a psychological illusion: "that continuity into the future would be secured by natural succession apart from the word of promise and faith."<sup>164</sup> The death of Isaac through the sacrifice represents the end of the illusion that the future can be such humanly arranged. But if Isaac is really to die, the trust in divine promise prior to the existence of Isaac would become meaningless. More than that, the sacrifice of Isaac would destroy the continuation of Abraham's clan (as well as the innocent life of the son itself). In fact, the narrative introduces the intervention of *mal'ak Yahweh* at the last moment to cancel the sacrifice. Isaac is, therefore, reprieved. "The interruption of the sacrifice reaffirms the place of natural succession within the future

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<sup>163</sup>White, *ibid.*, p.190.

<sup>164</sup>White, *ibid.*, p.196.

of promissory faith, divorced from imaginary fantasies."<sup>165</sup> While the sacrifice Isaac is accepted (vv.12,16) which amounts to the death of the son (symbolically), he can be received back by Abraham in real forms- an unnatural state of affairs which can only take place in narrated actions and not in real life (outside the text). Gen.22 spans the time when the demand of the sacrifice of Isaac is revealed to the time when the interruption of the sacrifice is declared. In between, Abraham gradually arrives at a new realisation where, despite the existence of Isaac, God is still his promisor and he is the promisee, their relationship is determined by promise and faith. The contradictory phenomena of the divine demands for the sacrifice and the interruption can be explained as this: while the sacrifice has an impact in adjourning the continuation of Abraham's family at the level of imagination- Abraham is brought back to the situation where he should spiritually depend on God for the future of his family- the interruption preserves it at the level of a physical, generational succession of the family.

As a matter of fact, Isaac is not only the object of the divine test for his father. He, especially through his question about the sacrificial animal, is actively experiencing the promissory life which, by the process of his sacrifice and the interruption, is uniquely transmitted to him from his father. According to White, "the function of this (Isaac's) question is to break open the closed

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<sup>165</sup>White, *ibid.*, p.196.

logic of this plot in progress, and expose it to a new reality, the lively awareness of the innocent son who will not go along with this plot in total, unthinking silence." When Isaac has experienced his father's experience, he becomes mature, the time when he has to be independent from his father. The disappearance of Isaac from Abraham's journey to Beersheba is deemed by White as the indication that Isaac has reached a state of independence and adulthood.<sup>166</sup> For White, generational succession in the history of promise is the more important symbol that Gen.22 produces. "The event on the mount, though a test for Abraham, was equally or perhaps more important for the narrative as the spiritual and theological basis for the transition to the second generation in the history of the promise."<sup>167</sup>

White shows us the logic that supposedly drives the development of the plot in Gen.22. Nevertheless, there remains a problem concerning Isaac's understanding of "the spiritual and theological basis" of the generational transition. As White himself makes it clear that Isaac's question (v.7) cannot be answered without jeopardizing the completion of the closed plot about the test of Abraham. "If his question is answered the covert plot which focuses upon this test of Abraham's faith will be revealed, and the closed structure of the narrative broken open."<sup>168</sup> Abraham's subsequent reply to this question (v.8) is seen

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<sup>166</sup>White, *ibid.*, p.203.

<sup>167</sup>White, *ibid.*, p.203

<sup>168</sup>White, *ibid.*, p.194.

by White as an attempt to deflect the attention onto God while hiding the truth. Thus, Isaac's question remains unanswerable. Abraham does not tell him that he is actually the intended sacrificial victim. Abraham's evasive answer hampers Isaac's way in realising the command of God as well as Abraham's response to it. Even when his sacrifice takes place, Isaac, who has been uninformed, may not be aware that Abraham is just obeying God's command. In the end, as Abraham renews his awareness of God, Isaac might still understand nothing of his father's faith in God. In other words, as against White, Isaac may never recognise "the spiritual and theological basis" of the whole event. His father's knowledge, through which he is supposed to realise God's involvement in the sacrifice, is never obvious to him.

However, there is no doubt that "the question of Isaac defamiliarizes the conspiratorial plot of God and Abraham against him."<sup>169</sup> Only that the defamiliarization is more likely to be felt by God and Abraham alone rather than Isaac whose question merely represents a logical curiosity about the omission in the preparation of the sacrifice. Indeed, the innocent question from the innocent son is threatening enough to uncover the evasiveness of Abraham and at the same time, the disguised test of God of Abraham. In response to this threat, the narrative is silent, no more discussion about the animal victim is revealed. Isaac is to believe in Abraham's prediction that the animal will

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<sup>169</sup>White, *ibid.*, p.194.

be provided by God (v.8). This prediction itself is actually strange enough to come from Abraham's mouth since he himself, in the light of previous stories, would doubtfully hold on it.<sup>170</sup> Despite Abraham's prediction, the question: "where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" will never cease to demand a genuine answer so long as Isaac is never told that he is the sacrificial victim.<sup>171</sup> The closer the actualization of Isaac's sacrifice the louder the echo of Isaac's question is. The question may probably function as a warning that Isaac is not an animal for a burnt offering and the animal for a burnt offering is not Isaac. The animal should have been provided by God himself (v.8). In the meantime, the later sacrifice of the ram (v.13) should be thought, following the text, as a substitution (*tahath*) for Isaac. The text does not seem to link it with Abraham's earlier prediction or the question of Isaac, it is disclosed rather as a subsequent improvisation from Abraham. Isaac is still the intended target of the sacrifice, consequently his question still pleads for an answer, that once it is given the whole masquerade of Abraham as well as of God would begin to unravel. Instead of unfolding the answer, however, the narrative ends with Isaac disappearing from Abraham's journey back to Beersheba (v.19).

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<sup>170</sup> Abraham is not a figure who is likely to believe more in miracle than in his own plan. He disguises Sarai as his sister, rather than waiting for a miracle, to escape from mortal danger in Pharaoh's land (ch.12). But, he laughs at the possibility (miracle) that he and Sarah, as an old man and woman, could be able to have a son (ch.17).

<sup>171</sup> We may find an analogy of the echo in the hollow voices, in a horror film, that haunt the audiences.

Isaac's question added by his absence represents the element of "otherness", the opposite voice of the closed plot of the divine test of Abraham's faith. It may not only defamiliarize the conspiratorial plot of God and Abraham but is also deconstructive of it. Yes, we may read a *nissah* in which the story ends up with Abraham being rewarded by the divinity (vv.12,15-18), but we are also made aware of a "scandal" which is signaled by the unanswered question of Isaac and his absence later on. The innocent question of "where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" always threatens to break up the secrecy of God's plan to test Abraham as well as the sacrifice itself. And the abandonment of the real answer may create disquieted reactions from the readers who cannot stand the suppression. The wonder of "where is Isaac?" in the end of the discourse leaves a dreadful trace of memory of the event- that Isaac may possibly have been killed! At the same time the question creates uneasiness about the test itself, "must a test of faith employ human sacrifice as its means?". Thus, Gen.22 does not hide, even somewhat deliberately poses, the problem of the abandonment of the existence of the innocent son. Isaac's question remains unanswerable and even a knowledge of his fate is finally omitted. In this case, the *Akedah* does not offer a denouement, an end where everything comes out right or is explained. On the contrary, its phenomenon oscillates between Abraham's supreme obedience to God and the tragic fate of Isaac.

*Nissah*, therefore, does not represent the whole phenomenon



in the narrative since it does not apparently refer to the tragedy experienced by the innocent son. Or else, we should not understand *nissah* itself as indicating something that is not intended to be real, *nissah* is still open to the possibility that Isaac may end up being the sacrificial victim.<sup>172</sup> Reading Gen.22 should take into account equally what is said by the narrator (Abraham's obedience) as well as what is not said by it (Isaac's real sacrifice).<sup>173</sup> "What is actually said in Genesis 22 is given life, radiation, and impact only by what is unsaid and by the unsayable..."<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>172</sup>The term *nissah* itself may refer "to a type of judicial procedure which aims at extracting evidence concerning that which is hidden in the interior of man, in the human heart, as opposed to visual procedures of investigation which collect external information," which, however, does not negate the inclusion of deadly means. H.C.White, "The Legends of Isaac," *ZAW*, 91(1979), p.13.

<sup>173</sup>See Carroll, "Discombobulations," pp.75,76.

<sup>174</sup>J.Fokkelman, "On the Mount of the Lord There is Vision" in *Signs and Wonders: Biblical Texts in Literary Focus*, ed. J.Cheryl Exum, 1989, p.44.

## CHAPTER IV

## THE SACRIFICIAL ELEMENTS IN THE AKEDAH

Violence is the heart and secret soul of the sacred.

René Girard, *Violence*

IV.1. Human sacrifice in the Bible

The Akedah is one of the biblical accounts that contain a divine command for human (infant) sacrifice. The other passages are Exodus 22:29-30 and 13:1-2 which declare the ordinances that are given by Yahweh to Israel by Moses, among them are the offering of the first harvest, the firstborn of animals and people. The setting of those ordinances is post-Exodus, during the wanderings in the desert. Yahweh gives the ordinances that are expected to be a response from the people to what Yahweh had done. By performing the ordinances, Israel acknowledge the work of Yahweh who had delivered them from the bondage of Egypt. As a matter of fact, the sacrifice of the firstborn sons is specifically intended as a remembrance- when another generation inquire the meaning of the practice- of the last pestilence in the night before Israel went out from Egypt when Yahweh slew all the firstborn in the land, both the firstborn of man and cattle (13:14-16). Ironically, by giving the command to sacrifice the firstborn, Yahweh does not only strike the life of Egyptian children as a coercion of Pharaoh to release Israel but demands the firstborn of

Israel, the nation that has been released, too. It is all too difficult to be understood if in a thanksgiving a child and not an animal is to be sacrificed as a symbolic act. In the context of chapter 13, the law is followed by the law of the redemption of the asses and sons (vv.11-16). However, while the asses are to be redeemed by lambs it is not clear as to what may redeem the sons (see also Ex.34:20). The lack of clarity may indicate that there was no general agreement about the redemption. The redemption of human victims was apparently uncommon. What was common was the sacrifice of the firstborn itself. The practice which becomes more and more controversial and that leads to its abolition in later times. In Numbers 3:40ff., the Levites are taken instead of the firstborn of the people of Israel. But, in this context, the offering is not to be understood literally that the Levites were actually sacrificed. This phrase is intended to indicate the peculiar status of the Levites themselves as the divinely chosen tribe among other tribes of Israel who conduct the religious activity of the nation. Furthermore, no detail is given, in the Exodus text, about the parents who will not redeem their children. On the other hand, if one will not redeem the asses, probably because he wants to retain the value of the asses' offering, one may simply break the necks of the asses. The law does not seem to suggest the same method is to be applied for the unredeemed sons. Since the laws that surround the redemption of the firstborn sons are not well expressed, we may suppose that they represented an alternative ideology (probably of the

Deuteronomists) to the ideology that agrees to the sacrifice. The demand for redeeming the firstborn sons was later on inserted in the text, probably in order to justify the substitution of the rule of sacrifice. Apart from such an attempt, the command for the sacrifice of the firstborn itself is hardly ruled out in this text.

The Deuteronomistic ideology that assumes infant sacrifice to be abominable, unauthorised by Yahweh (Lev.18:21, 20:2-5, Deut.12:31, I Kings 16:29-34, II Kings 16:1-4, 17:31, 21:1-9, Jer.7:31) seems to give virtually no chance to a fair description of how Yahweh's command to sacrifice the firstborn is enacted by Israel. What appears is the practice of infant sacrifice to other gods: Baal and Molech as if there is not such a practice devoted to Yahweh. The practice is utterly condemned in Israel. There is only a harsh accusation of the people, who practise it. It is in Ahab's time that the text places the rebuilding of Jericho by Hiel of Bethel (I Kings 16:34). The city is rebuilt "according to the word of Yahweh, which he spoke by Joshua the son of Nun" which in its own right seems to underline the legitimacy of the building project. But we remember that the rebuilding of this town itself has been cursed by Joshua (Josh.6:26). The curse, which is likely to come from a later tradition than I Kings 16, is closely linked with the fact that the process of rebuilding the town is stained by sacrifices of the first and the youngest sons of the builder. Hiel rebuilds Jericho at the cost of Abiram, his firstborn and his youngest son, Segub. It may indicate the

practice of foundation sacrifice which is commonly intended to bring good luck to the building project. Although Ahab worships Baal, it is not clear to whom Hiel offers his sons. Despite the enormous sacrifices by Hiel, the city remains to be seen as under the curse which is also bound up with the figure of Ahab as a bad king. Never mind the actual aim of the infant sacrifices, the rebuilding of the city, from the Deuteronomistic point of view, is just as abominable as Ahab's behaviour. Obviously the report of the rebuilding of Jericho in the context of the account about Ahab itself is already tendentious in terms of "nothing good would emerge in the reign of this wicked king". The sacrifice of Hiel's sons is, therefore, never depicted as anything but abominable. It may be that, despite the Deuteronomists' anti-Ahab report, Hiel did actually offer his sons to Yahweh, although his Yahweh was probably different from the Yahweh of the Deuteronomists.<sup>1</sup> This should be open as a possibility and as Bruce Vawter sees, "both in Israel's laws and in the words of its prophets and historians human sacrifice is excoriated as a heathen abomination, but the same sources leave us no doubt that it was often practised by Israelites all the same, and that it was something regarded by these people as compatible with

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<sup>1</sup>Concerning the polytheistic cult of Israel in the pre-exilic times, Morton Smith teaches us that "to consider 'the religion of Israel' as a unique entity may be misleading....the predominant cult was that of Yahweh and he was recognized to be 'the god' of Israel, as opposed to the gods of the neighbouring peoples. But the cults of the other gods of the common religion of the Near East were not neglected (by Israel). These other gods were worshipped not only at altars and high places dedicated to them but also, together with Yahweh, in the temples of the major cities". *Palestinian Parties and Politics that Shaped the Old Testament*, c.1971, p.21.

the worship of Yahweh".<sup>2</sup>

In spite of the opposition campaign by the Deuteronomists, Micah 6:7 puts the sacrifice of the firstborn at the top of the list of the ways one should come before God. It can ultimately be emulated only by doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with God which are things understood as required by God himself (Mi.6:8). Infant sacrifice is not directly criticised or, even, ruled out here, except that its value is regarded as superficial, therefore, it cannot be better than the real deeds. At any rate, it indicates that human sacrifice was ever accepted as the way to worship God until the emergence of an ideology which favoured real deeds was understood as the highest religious expression.

Another biblical account that indicates infant sacrifice as God's command is Ezekiel 20:25,26 which mentions that God gave his people statutes that were not good and ordinances by which they could not have life. And God defiled them through their very gifts in making them offer by fire all their firstborn in order to horrify them. Far from having a resentment against human sacrifice (Deut.12:31), God seemed untroubled in employing it as a method to make his people horrified. It was in fact aimed, ironically though it may be, to lead the people to know that "I am Yahweh". Knowing Yahweh meant for the people that they have to face the horrifying experience, the death of their own children. We

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<sup>2</sup>B.Vawter, *On Genesis: A new Reading*, 1977, pp.255-6.

do not know what was the reaction of the people against the command and the practice; would they be really horrified and bowed down in front of Yahweh or just run away from him? However, we may know through this statement that Yahweh could use this way, that was simply condemned by the Deuteronomists, to "approach" his people. It is apparently the same way that is used in the Akedah as Abraham is made to sacrifice his "only" and "firstborn" son by the divinity. On a deeper level, however, we may come to the awareness that in the belief in Yahweh the people are brought closer to him through the horrifying experience providing they have courage and compassion to live as such.

In fact, it is in the light of those passages about God's demand for human sacrifice, that the Akedah is to be understood. It is possible that God demands human sacrifice and it is not inconceivable that in response, Abraham may indeed sacrifice Isaac since he is an obedient man. This can be described as an obedience to conduct a tragic life with no apparent hope of a comic end. The statement declared by the messenger of Yahweh in his second appearance may underscore the sacrifice. He says, "because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son" (*ki ya`an 'ašer 'ašitha 'eth-hadabhar hazeh welo' ḥaśakhta 'et-binekha 'eth-y<sup>o</sup>ḥidekha*) (Gen.22:16). Because Abraham sticks only to the divine command, he is justified. How far Abraham is horrified by the command, as Ezekiel might put it, and brought to know God by it, is by no means apparent, but surely he has undergone what we see, in

agreement with Ezekiel, as the most horrifying experience. As against the assumption that the Akedah shares similarity with many stories, inside or outside the Bible, about human sacrifice, scholars commonly take an evolutionary viewpoint in which human sacrifice is thought to be a primordial custom, primitive and barbaric, and was modified only with the advance of civilization. In the present form, as they say, the Akedah is put within the context of *nissah* and either the sacrifice is polemicized or pushed into the background while the substitutionary sacrifice surfaces, at any rate "God did not mean it".<sup>3</sup> However, in contrast to that interpretation Nahum Sarna points out, "we cannot evade the fact that the core of the narrative actually seems to assume the possibility that God could demand human sacrifice. It contains no categorical divine repudiation of the practice as such, and the replacement of Isaac by the ram is not the result of a command by God, but an exercise of Abraham's own initiative. The situation is far more complicated than appears on the surface."<sup>4</sup>

still in devotion to God, although not directly commanded by him, Jephthah sacrifices his only daughter (Judges 11). On the eve of a war against the Ammonites, Jephthah, then known as the leader of Israel, made a vow to Yahweh that whoever (or whatever) came forth from the doors of his

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<sup>3</sup>Such an evolutionary assumption seems problematic in itself, since to prove that the original form of the Akedah was a human sacrifice story, scholars always have to depend on the evidences from the biblical account. So, at any rate, scholars can perceive the human sacrifice motive in the present version.

<sup>4</sup>N.Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 1970, p.157.



house to meet him when he returned victorious from the Ammonites, would be offered as a burnt offering. Jephthah referred to the would-be victim in the third person masculine, "I will offer *him/it* up as a burnt offering" (v.31). Whereas the narrator, in fact, tells us that Jephthah has only one daughter who lives with him (v.34), who, of course, could not be referred as *him/it*. It is not clear as to what is intended by Jephthah as the victim in his vow. A Jewish legend has God infuriated by Jephthah's indefinite vow, "so Jephthah has vowed to offer unto me the first thing that shall meet him! If a dog were the first to meet him, would a dog be sacrificed to me? Now shall the vow of Jephthah be visited on his first born, on his own offspring, yea, his prayer shall be visited on his only daughter. But I assuredly shall deliver my people, not for Jephthah's sake, but for the sake of the prayers of Israel".<sup>5</sup> The same legend also indicates that Jephthah did not mean his daughter to be the sacrificial victim. It is only after some debates that Jephthah could have his daughter agreed to be sacrificed. To expect an animal to come out from his house to meet (to welcome, to congratulate?) him would seem absurd since we would hardly find such a clever animal (except if he kept a trained dog of which we are never informed). Another possibility of the would-be victim is one of Jephthah's male slaves or prisoners. Jephthah was a tough man, he smote his enemies, twenty cities, "with a very great slaughter". His powerful performance makes us wonder if it was necessary at all for

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<sup>5</sup>Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, vol.IV, 1954, p.43.

him to make the vow that only proved a serious need of divine assistance on the awareness of his own weakness. He eventually implements his vow and his victim turns out to be his only daughter, a virgin, innocent as well as compliant, an Isaac-like figure as in the Akedah. The father is most persistent in his vow, the daughter is to submit her life to her father's will. The story ends with the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter which in the tradition is remembered every year through the lamentation of the daughters of Israel (v.40).

We may wonder if the repetitiveness of the tradition may one way or another result in the using of Jephthah's daughter as a symbol that functions to strengthen the solidarity amongst the daughters of Israel. In other words, the tragic fate of Jephthah's daughter is not accepted as it is but is transformed into a state in which she becomes some sort of heroine for the daughters of Israel.

Although unrecorded as such in the Bible, the sacrifice of Isaac is also commemorated in the tradition in which Isaac is first of all depicted as willingly surrendering his life to be his father's sacrificial victim. But, the tradition does not stop at this tragic point, Isaac's sacrifice is furthermore believed to bring about the atonement of the sins of his descendants. It is probably to comply with common sentiment: "Without the shedding of blood there is no atonement".<sup>6</sup> Even though he is not dead (unlike

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<sup>6</sup>See J.Crenshaw, "Journey into Oblivion: A Structural Analysis

Jephthah's daughter), he is reckoned as if he is dead (like Jephthah's daughter). In the mythical understanding, the death of the character inevitably presupposes his glorification. The fact that the character is dead does not necessarily prevent the imagination from imagining that death is never the end of the matter since what arises from it is, at least, an inspiration of heroism (moral), at best, a redemption of sin (spiritual).

Greek mythology seems to take a different route from that of the Hebrew. It does not seem to follow the pattern of "good deeds will result in rewards" in telling about human sacrifices. There is a similar Greek myth to that of Jephthah's story. Idomeneus the Cretan, being in mortal danger in the midst of shipwreck, makes a similar vow as Jephthah's. However, while Jephthah comes to no harm after sacrificing his daughter, Idomeneus' men are struck by plague, and he is banished from Crete.<sup>7</sup> In another instance, Iphigeneia, Agamemnon's daughter, is redeemed with a doe when about to be despatched at Aulis, and then spirited away to the Tauric Chersonese.<sup>8</sup> The sacrifice does not take place here only because of the divine will to save Iphigeneia from it. The sacrifice is not unanimously approved by the deities. To compare it with Gen.22, there hardly is a will to save Isaac in this episode at least not until the sudden interference by the *mal'ak Yahweh* which,

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of Gen.22:1-19", *Soundings*, 1975(58), p.247.

<sup>7</sup>R.Graves and R.Patai, *Hebrew Myths: The Book of Genesis*, c.1963, p.177.

<sup>8</sup>Graves, *ibid.*, p.177.

however, has no apparent background. Unlike the Greek story, Gen.22 does not contain two opposing wills with regard to the sacrifice of Isaac (in Jubilees' version it presumably does). From the very beginning, it is certain that Isaac has to die. Plutarch also has a story of Maeander who promises to reward the Queen of Heaven with the first person who will congratulate him on the storm of Pessinus. This proves to be his own son Archelaus, whom he duly kills, but then he remorsefully drowns himself in the river which is now named after him.<sup>9</sup> The sacrifice that is planned as a thanksgiving to the deity over a success, in fact, only leads to the doom of the doer. Maeander receives a similar fate as Idomeneus. It remains uncertain whether we can conclude that Greek mythology has a motive to reject the practice of human sacrifice either by revealing the doom of the doer or the escape of the human victim. But, at least, we can see that even though human sacrifice is offered to the deity, it still cannot be accepted unanimously. Secondly, the sacrifice is, in the end, unrewarded; instead, it leads to a tragic fate for the doer. Both Jephthah's and Abraham's stories disagree about these facts, the sacrifices of the men's daughter and son receive no challenge, they have divine consent as well as reward either before the sacrifice (Jephthah's victory over the Ammonites) or after the sacrifice (the blessings brought about by *mal'ak Yahweh* in the end of the Akedah).

However, while Jephthah's daughter seems to be killed (not

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<sup>9</sup>Graves, *ibid.*, p.177.

all interpretations maintain this killing), since this is the irrevocable vow of the father, Isaac's fate is indecisive. He certainly does not rejoin his father and the servants at the closing of the story. But, the divine interference and the sacrifice of the surrogate ram, seem to suggest the survival of Isaac. Many legends do suggest the death of Isaac, even though the same legends would also disclose Isaac's resurrection. After all, Isaac, indeed, reappears in the subsequent episode when he is about to get married (Gen.24:62ff).

The reappearance of Isaac in the aftermath of his sacrifice seems to be good ground for the development of mythical understandings since myth basically speaks about the (re)new(ed) life after crisis. Or, as René Girard puts it, "myths are the retrospective transfiguration of sacrificial crises, the reinterpretation of these crises in the light of the cultural order that has arisen from them".<sup>10</sup> There is no doubt that the ancient legends about the resurrection of Isaac themselves had already conveyed the mythical message in which the Akedah was believed to bring atonement for the sins of Isaac's descendants and Isaac's resurrection was understood as a proof of the people's resurrection.<sup>11</sup> It is all made possible if Isaac survives the sacrifice that formed a crisis in his life. However, myth is paradoxical in the way that, besides telling about

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<sup>10</sup>R.Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, tr. Patrick Gregory, 1977, p.64.

<sup>11</sup>For the legends, see Spiegel, *The Last Trial: On the Legends and Lore of the Command to Abraham to offer Isaac as a Sacrifice: The Akedah*, 1967, pp.28ff.

survival, it is hardly ever detached from violent depiction. In myth, an awareness of violence is conspicuous. Isaac would have never effected the atonement had he not been subjected to the sacrifice. The violence is in fact shared by the biblical story. Even though we take the story as a *nissah* of Abraham, it remains doubtful if we can erase the violent impression of Isaac's sacrifice. A *nissah* of Abraham is an *'olah* of Isaac's life.

#### IV.2.Entering the paradoxes in the Akedah

Edmund Leach makes the claim that the Bible is a product that has "the characteristics of mytho-history" rather than "a record of history as it actually happened".<sup>12</sup> Skeptical about the attempts to prove the historicity of the Bible or even if such things ever existed at all, Leach argues that the subliminal meanings of biblical stories can be grasped following a recognition of the structural similarity of the stories with other myths. In his view, the Bible still remains a sacred tale. The sacredness of the Bible for the religious communities (Old Testament for the Jews, Old and New Testament for Christians) is not to be based upon the fact that the characters in the story were historical. "They (the characters) are there because they fill a particular role in the totality of the sacred tale and not

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<sup>12</sup>Edmund Leach, "Anthropological approaches to the study of the Bible during the twentieth century", in *Structuralist Interpretations of Biblical Myth*, ed. E.Leach and D.Alan Aycok, 1983, pervasive in the article, for example, p.21.

because they actually existed in history".<sup>13</sup> Nor does it arrive as a conclusion on the sensibility of biblical stories as a whole. "If we take all the stories together, and assert, as a matter of dogma, that they are all 'true' at the same time, then we arrive at a nonsense because, in detail, the collectivity of stories is self-contradictory."<sup>14</sup> The biblical world, perhaps more precisely the book of Genesis, is depicted as being a liminal world, the mixture of terrestrial and celestial existences, a betwixt and between, therefore, shrouded by paradox and ambiguity. Yet, "it is precisely the self-contradictions which carry religious significance" claims Leach.<sup>15</sup> It is the self-contradictions of biblical stories that form their sacredness. And according to him, the task of the analyst, therefore, is to find some way of discovering the sense behind the self-contradictions, the sense behind the non-sense. "There is a theological meaning (or perhaps several theological meanings) which is *other than* the manifest meaning of the narrative as such."<sup>16</sup>

Whether we agree with Leach that the sacredness of the Bible is determined by its paradox or that the paradox can be reduced to a particular meaning or meanings, biblical studies after Leach have at least to be open to the awareness of the paradoxical nature of the Bible. Biblical stories often frustrate the readers who seek for a coherent

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<sup>13</sup> Leach, *ibid.*, p.10.

<sup>14</sup> Leach, *ibid.*, p.25.

<sup>15</sup> Leach, *ibid.*, p.25.

<sup>16</sup> Leach, *ibid.*, p.23.

understanding of them. The readers can find that their expectations, either in terms of their preunderstandings or something that is built up during the reading process, are eventually disrupted by irreconcilable paradoxes. It is in this realisation that we are trying to enter the world of paradox of Genesis 22, that is, the world that contains images that are incongruous, sometimes conflicting but at the same time, depending on each other for existence. We may notice oppositional relationships either on the semantic level or on the symbolic level (the two levels are often intermingled) as between morning (Abraham's departure) and night (the supposed time of God's presence), celestial and terrestrial, master and servant, father and son, foe ('oy•bhaw) and friend, command and counter-command, death and life, separation (vv.5,19) and unity (*wayyel•khu š•nehem yaḥdaw*), spiritual and material.

#### Spiritual vs. material

Hugh White, in his recent reading of Genesis 22, discusses a symbolic tension between material and spiritual in the promissory life of Abraham that may motivate the sacrifice of Isaac.<sup>17</sup> The relationship between Abraham and his God is understood as between the recipient of promise and the giver of promise. When the object of desire contained in the promise takes on material form in the fulfillment, that is, by the birth of Isaac, the bond of faith between the

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<sup>17</sup>Hugh C.White, *Narration and Discourse in the Book of Genesis*, 1991.



promissor and the promisee is thought to be superseded by the relation which unites the promisee with the promised object. The fulfillment also puts the promise and all effects caused by the promise to an end. "The mediating function of the word of promise is made irrelevant by the fulfillment precisely because the tension between the spiritual and material, which the promise transmuted into a tension between the present and the future, disappears with the material fulfillment."<sup>18</sup> If the promissory relationship between Abraham and God is to persist, i.e., if Abraham has to maintain his spiritual attachment to God, either Isaac should never have been born, which obviously would have shed doubt on the credibility of the promise, or else, the fulfillment is given up after its materialization. The sacrifice of Isaac would have a consequence of the dematerialization of the promised son.<sup>19</sup>

Prior to the exposition of Gen.22, White discusses briefly sacrifice in religion and literature in which, in agreement with Ortigues, he argues that in semiotic terms all sacrifices assume a fundamental cleavage between the symbolic and material realms and serve to annihilate the chief difference between the two realms (spirituality and materiality) so as to achieve mimetic unity.<sup>20</sup> The aim of sacrifice is, therefore, according to White, for man to attain unity with the deity. In spite of his repudiation of

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<sup>18</sup>White, *ibid.*, p.190.

<sup>19</sup>For further discussion of White's essay, see Chapter III, pp.211ff.

<sup>20</sup>White, *ibid.*, p.150.

applying this aim to Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac- as he says, "the command for Abraham to sacrifice his son, . . . , should not be placed within the general framework of cultic sacrifice that aims at achieving unity between the divine and human"<sup>21</sup>- White seems to maintain the dichotomy of spiritual and material in which the sacrifice of Isaac is seen as an attempt to elevate Abraham's relationship with his God to the spiritual level, by annihilating the object of materialistic desire that is supposed to be the obstacle of the spiritual attainment. In other words, by sacrificing the one in whom his former loyalty to God is, now, absorbed, Abraham would achieve (re)unity with his God. If this is the case, asks White, "if Abraham is obedient to this Word, will absolute sacrifice of desire not also undermine his difference from the divine and transform a verbally mediated, intersubjective relation into a relation of spiritual unity (mystical absorption)?"<sup>22</sup> This is one of the radical tensions that White sees working beneath the surface of the narrative. But, White does not seem to consider it more as a real achievement than as a merely underlying potency that contributes to the dynamics of the story. Abraham would never reach such a mystical absorption although, if we are to follow White, he was in the process of reaching it. The question is obviously, Why Abraham would never obtain the spiritual unity with the deity, if his sacrifice assumes it as the highest possible achievement? This is, we might

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<sup>21</sup>White, *ibid.*, p.189.

<sup>22</sup>White, *ibid.*, p.191.

think, not so much a problem of White's exposition of the story as of his theoretical basis of sacrifice. If White is to be consistent with his sacrificial theory, then Abraham is to be seen as someone who tries to gain unity with his God. White might have difficulty in getting the evidence for what will happen if Abraham obtains unity with his God because the story itself changes course by the cancellation of Isaac's sacrifice. Since then the sacrificial object is no longer Isaac whose existence is thought to create the barrier for Abraham's spiritual relationship with his God as a promisee and promisor, but the ram, the surrogate victim. White accepts the substitution with a (new) logic that Isaac must have survived unless the continuity of Abraham's family, through whom the promissory life is to be performed, would have been jeopardized. If this is right, however, then the cancellation of Isaac's sacrifice by the divinity would have been enough to assert the survival of Isaac. The divine utterance states the fact that Abraham has been regarded as having sacrificed Isaac- it in fact fits White's argument that Isaac is, himself, plunged into experiencing the dematerialization of the promise which means that he has to die, although, symbolically- and does not have, furthermore, to implement it in reality. This could have been taken as a signal that the continuity of Abraham's family is guaranteed. In this light, the sacrifice of the ram would have been an unnecessary double assertion. After all, the evidences from Abraham's life do not obviously support the depiction of someone who pursues spiritual unity with God, unless it is seen in correlation

with his richness. Since he went out of his father's house, he has done everything to increase his wealth, even selling his wife if it gives him in return plenty of cattle, silver, gold and land (Gen.12:10-13:2, 20).

Thus, the weight of White's understanding of the tension between spiritual and material should have not been connected primarily with the aim of Abraham's sacrifice since as such the aim will always remain obscure, but, with the existence of Isaac as a symbol of the materialization of spiritual promise. Isaac is the embodiment, the physical representation of the spiritual promise of God. In him, God bound himself with the history of humanity. As long as the promise has not been fulfilled, God may do whatever he wants, he may keep the promise as long as he wants to, or, perhaps, even not fulfil it at all. But, once the promise has materialized, God has opened a possibility for man to be involved in keeping it. In the drama of the Akedah, however, it is shown that the physical appearance of the promise does not automatically entitle Abraham, the recipient, to a full right upon it. Abraham still has to depend on God in the matter concerning Isaac. In fact, since the Akedah, Isaac makes Abraham depend solely on God for the continuation of his son's life. God who gives Isaac, still can take him at anytime and by any means. Thus, in the relationship of Abraham (in the material world) and God (in the spiritual world), Isaac functions as a mediating term that communicates between both parties. "A mediating term, according to structuralist theory,

intervenes between the poles of an irreconcilable opposition and partakes of the nature of both; for each it represents the other. Thus it is rendered ambiguous."<sup>23</sup> In this ambiguity, however, there is always an echo of God's demand of unlimited right on the thing/man that he has given. God is jealously watching the material fulfilment of his promise as if he does not give it voluntarily. This in effect can endanger the material fulfilment himself since God may destroy him. This is the violent desire of God that is faced by Abraham and which ultimately turns him into acting the same violence. We do not know whether by violating and exterminating Isaac, Abraham would have gained a spritual attachment with God. If this were the case then we could only realise how costly is the effort. But then the obedient life of Abraham has always proved to be very costly: separation from his father's family, wandering around all the time and now the killing of the bearer of his future.

While the spiritual unity between Abraham and God is not as apparent as White might suggest, in other words, one would hardly see the difference in the relationship of Abraham and God before and after the event, one thing that remains irrepressible in this sacrifice is the violence both of Abraham's action and of God's command. Rene Girard's theory of sacrifice as implementation of the violent nature of man would help with the understanding of violence in the

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<sup>23</sup>F.Landy, "Narrative Techniques and Symbolic Transactions in the Akedah," in *Signs and Wonders: Biblical Texts in Literary Focus*, ed. J.Cheryl Exum, 1989, p.28.

Akedah. White himself disagrees with Girard who, for him, gives the primacy to absolute violence in human nature and maintains the fundamental role played by violent sacrifice in human culture.<sup>24</sup> For White, Girard has devalued, due to his interest in the negative, prophylactic social function of ritualized violence, the positive goal of sacrifice as suggested by the Indian Vedantic philosophers, namely, the unity with the divine. Nonetheless, the Akedah is, in fact, fraught with negative desire to annihilate "the only and beloved son" of Abraham while the aim or the positive aim in White's understanding of Isaac's sacrifice remains vague. The sacrifice of the surrogate victim demonstrates that the violent desire that has accumulated all along has to be released.

#### Father vs. son

The command of God in Gen.22:2 is a repeat of the previous one: "go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you" which marks the separation of Abraham and his father. The present command, however, as if history repeats itself, affects Isaac's separation from his father. The verb *lekh-l'kha* is gesturing the separation of the father and his son. If in the first event, the death of the father shadows the departure of the son, in the second, the death of the son is to be the cause of the separation. Terah and Isaac are bound within a similar fate, namely, they are to die in

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<sup>24</sup>White, *Narration*, p.152.

front of Abraham. Money-Kyrle, in the application of Freudian theory, says that the sacrifice of Isaac is unconsciously patricide, since the son is the reincarnation of his grandfather, as well as suicide, since Abraham identifies with his son.<sup>25</sup> This interpretation might lack conspicuous evidence in the narrative, though, unmistakably, as Landy claims, "conflict between generations, often linked with jealousy, is all-pervasive in Genesis."<sup>26</sup> As a matter of fact, the generation gap and conflict can be seen as a universal theme in literature. Harold Fisch explains,

Parents are mortally threatened by their children in *King Lear* and *Hamlet* (we remember Hamlet "speaking daggers" to his mother and only with difficulty restraining himself from using them and thus acting the part of Nero); children are threatened by parents in *Richard II* and *Merchant of Venice* ("would she were hearsed at my foot, and the ducats in her coffin"). It is a seemingly universal archetype. Oedipus is the prototype of the murderous son; Agamemnon, of the murderous father. Chronos devours his children; Medea destroys hers; Orestes kills his mother. There is something inevitable about the pattern, making parricide and infanticide something like a law of nature.<sup>27</sup>

On the narrative surface we are told that Abraham leaves his father's house because of God's command. But, the journey also contains a motive of obtaining a better future as reflected in divine promises: a land (becomes more obvious in the later accounts, for instance, 13:14ff),

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<sup>25</sup> See Landy, *op.cit.*, p.5.

<sup>26</sup> Landy, *op.cit.*, p.5.

<sup>27</sup> Harold Fisch, *A Remembered Future: A Study in Literary Mythology*, 1984, p.82.

great nation, great name, national pride before other nations. As Terah's son, Abraham lived a life that is far from that condition. Terah apparently was not a famous man, he had only three sons, one of them, Haran, died before him. His aim of entering the land of Canaan had never come true in his entire life, instead he was stranded in Haran (11:26ff). Prompted by God's command, Abraham launches a journey in order to pursue a better life than his father's which he might undergo unhappily. But, it all begins only with the death of the father. The announcement of the death of Terah just before the command is important to notice. Terah symbolizes the old generation whose death brings the freedom for the next generation to arrange their own way of life. The death of Terah, for Abraham, is like the death of Abraham, for Isaac (Gen.25:7-12). "After the death of Abraham God blessed Isaac his son (*way•hi 'aḥare moth 'abraham way•bharekh 'elohim 'eth-yiṣḥaq b•no*)." The death of the fathers sets a new life for the sons (although, it is not fully realised, the divine promises are not completely fulfilled during the life of the Patriarchs and probably never so). In the larger narrative context of Genesis, the death of Terah also marks the new era where human attempts and skills gain a more important role than before, whereas the divine becomes more and more resident in heaven and his presence is virtually represented by his promises.<sup>28</sup> Semantically, the coexistence between divine

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<sup>28</sup> It is described by Hugh White as it is, "in juxtaposition to the morbid cycles of human existence portrayed in the first eleven chapters of Genesis, the narrative now initiates a new sequence which begins with a new type of word event: the giving of a promise". *Narration*, p.169.



promises and human desire to pursue the state of condition described by the promises allows the recurrence of violence in the narrative. The violence which is seemingly ended merely by death.

The Akedah is, however, a story before the father is dead. It is a story before the son is free to stand on his own. And it is also the story in which conflict between the father and the son is represented. As Crenshaw notes on the assonance of Hebrew words in the story, "since the father becomes an enemy to his son, the unexpected allusion to enemies ('oyebaw) in the repetition of the promise recalls the frequent references to a father ('ab, 'abi, 'abiw)".<sup>29</sup> He furthermore writes, "on a deeper level the conflict depicted in Genesis 22 bears witness to opposing forces: father versus son, parental love versus fear of the gods, and intention versus actual deed. The trained ear can barely distinguish an echo of the Oedipal struggle: in it Abraham abandons his father in favor of a higher allegiance".<sup>30</sup> To imagine with Kierkegaard that Abraham is a monster in front of his son when he is about to slaughter him,<sup>31</sup> is a plausible depiction of the father, which the son would have no doubt to believe. Whatever the motive behind the sacrifice, when it is performed it is absolutely terrorizing.

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<sup>29</sup> Crenshaw, "Journey," p.251.

<sup>30</sup> Crenshaw, "Journey," p.253.

<sup>31</sup> See Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, tr. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, 1983, p.10.

Nonetheless, Abraham is not like the one from whom we may demand moral responsibility. We simply are not informed what kind of moral standards Abraham holds. He does not even seem to consider that sacrificing his son is problematic. But, to say that Abraham recognizes no love for his children is contradictory of the fact that he is dismayed by the expulsion of Ishmael (Gen.21:11). He also saves Lot, for whom he is *in loco parentis*, from the kings (Gen.14) and protects him from divine wrath (Gen.18:22-33). The only question is does Isaac have the love of his father? It is certainly difficult to answer. It is similarly difficult to know whether Abraham is pleased by the existence of Isaac whose prediction he receives contemptuously (Gen.17:17,18). Genesis 22 is, in fact, the only account in which Abraham and Isaac are seen in communication. In other words, this is the only place where, if possible, we can perceive Abraham's love of Isaac. But, his words to Isaac are minimal and hardly are evidence of his love. His reply to Isaac (v.8) is even evasive as if he only thinks of his own intention, never mind misleading his son. Apart from his evasive words, Abraham's action is entirely destructive for Isaac. The preparation of the sacrifice that occupies virtually half of the story is exactly the harbinger of the death of Isaac, besides its ritual performance. The divine blessings assume the death of Isaac, "because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you" (vv.16,17). Thus, the story is shrouded by the desire to kill the son. Perhaps the only exemption is the

divine prohibition of the killing of the son (v.12), but, even this also justifies the opposite, "I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me". While we have no proof of Abraham's love, we are led to acknowledge his destructive impulses towards Isaac.

The narratives preceding the Akedah seem to be in support of the father's desire to kill his son. Gen.21:1,2 reports the process that surrounds the birth of Isaac. After Yahweh visited Sarah, it is said, she was pregnant and bore Abraham a son. The strongest implication of this report is that Yahweh himself is the cause of the birth of Sarah's son. The narrator for some reason apparently leads the readers to receive Isaac as Yahweh's son. The son is eventually named "he laughed" by Abraham.<sup>32</sup> The name reminds us of the event in Gen.17:17, 18:12ff in which the divine prediction of the birth of the son is laughed at, rather than, one may say, Gen.21:6, the laugh of a happy mother. The depiction of the reluctant father continues. No indication that he treats Isaac as a special son, the things which, on the other hand, we can see in Sarah's role. Isaac is seemingly never a special son for Abraham, as for him Ishmael possesses the same right as Isaac (perhaps more). But, Isaac is a special son for God since he is chosen to continue the promissory life after Abraham

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<sup>32</sup>The style of the report makes the present events understood as the fulfillment of divine promises, except the naming of Isaac (21:3) which should have also been correlated with God's action in the past (Gen.17:19). The narrator apparently deliberately portrays the process of the naming as solely Abraham's business.

(Gen.17:19, 21:12).

Here, we may catch a glimpse of contradiction between God and Abraham on the matter of Isaac. The contradiction becomes wider as Sarah, who is conspicuously on God's side, perhaps more for biological reasons, demands the expulsion of Ishmael. Abraham is said to be unhappy about it. Thus, on the one hand, we have Abraham and Hagar who are in favour of Ishmael's existence in the family, and, on the other hand, God and Sarah who defend the exclusive right of Isaac. In ch.21, we are told that Abraham accedes to the expulsion of Ishmael, so does Hagar (after all, she is only a slave who has to remain silent throughout the story). The expulsion of Ishmael can be seen as an attempt to resolve the contradiction which becomes a real conflict as Sarah gives no alternative but the expulsion of Ishmael as well as his mother (Gen.21:10). In the meantime, Gen.22, as if to maintain a balance, reveals the sacrifice of Isaac. Interestingly, while Hagar, in ch.21, never emerges to defend herself and her son, Gen.22 omits the involvement of Sarah altogether. The sacrifice of Isaac is the reminiscence of Ishmael's near death of exposure (Gen.21:15ff), after the expulsion. Reading chapters 21 and 22 simultaneously gives us a mythical understanding, that is, a development from conflict to resolution, from chaos to order. The expulsion of Ishmael and his mortal danger provides only a temporary solution to the original conflict before it adds another crisis. The sacrifice of Isaac seems to be the appropriate solution with respect to the present

crisis, i.e., the imbalance as a result of Ishmael's expulsion, and to the original crisis that is created by the birth of Isaac. If the conflict starts with the existence of Isaac, the resolution demands the annihilation of Isaac. Here, the myth seems to come full circle, but only by subscribing to violence. A violence of the father who, perhaps, is afraid of being emulated by his son, the bearer of divine covenant as well as his name. Or, a violence that is caused by a desire to take revenge on behalf of the expelled son he actually wants to be with. On the other hand, for God, it is perhaps a violence that is based on a kind of solidarity. As Abraham has conceded the expulsion of his own flesh and blood son (Ishmael), God, in his solidarity, responds with giving up "his son" (Isaac). There is some kind of inevitability that the sons have to go through a mortal danger and the fathers cannot prevent the danger.

#### Child initiation and the quarrel between Abraham's wives

The survival of Isaac raises a possibility of reading Genesis 22 as a myth about child initiation, i.e., the gaining of maturity and independent life through a sacrifice or symbolic death followed by redemption or resurrection. It becomes more obvious with several other pieces of evidence. First, the existence of the two young men (*ne'arim*), apart from accompanying Abraham, they may also represent, as in the initiation rite, a class of

young, recently initiated men who serve as guardians or guides for the novice during the ritual.<sup>33</sup> Secondly, by directing the perceptive question to his father, Isaac can be thought of as mature enough to comprehend fully the rite his father is about to perform.<sup>34</sup> His eventual acceptance of the sacrifice describes the moment when the child faces his own imminent death emotionally which is the significance of the symbolic death in the initiation rite. It follows that Isaac is forced to enter the promissory history and this story cannot end without some indication of the continuity of the promise into the generation of Isaac.<sup>35</sup> The promises at the end of the story, that seem to refer to the future state, may serve to establish the promise to Isaac and in this way to ground the continuity between the generations. The maturity of Isaac is, therefore, obtained, violently though, by his being made aware of his father's religion and the taking over of the divine promises from his father.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, the absence of Sarah from the Akedah might further indicate the depiction of the initiation rite. Since "In the archaic initiation rites, the separation of the mother and child constitutes the first element in the initiation drama. The mother gives

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<sup>33</sup>Hugh C.White, "The Initiation Legend of Isaac," *ZAW*, 91(1979), p.14. This class is usually mentioned in connection with orders to murder someone. In the Bible, Absalom has his *na`ar* kill Amnon in revenge for the rape of Tamar (II Sam.13:28,29). David chooses one of his *ne`arim* to execute the Amalekite who brings the news of Saul's death (II Sam.1:15). That the *na`ar* constitutes a certain class is made clear by the report that David kills every man among the Amalekites, except four hundred *'iṣ-na`ar*.

<sup>34</sup>White, "Legend of Isaac," p.15.

<sup>35</sup>White, "Legend of Isaac," p.17.

<sup>36</sup>The promises that are specifically addressed to Isaac echo the deeds of Abraham (Gen.26:4,24).

up the son as if he had died. In the second part of the ceremony he is subjected by the father or the initiands to symbolic death in a variety of ways"<sup>37</sup>

Hugh White demonstrates how the Akedah can be understood as witnessing to an ancient ritual of child initiation, by making a comparison with a Greek myth about Athamas and Phrixus which he believes to belong to the myth of initiation. The myth is quoted by White from R.Graves who also considers it as a significant parallel to the story of Isaac's sacrifice by Abraham.<sup>38</sup> Graves also interestingly suggests that the comparison will solve three important problems raised by Genesis narrative: since Abraham is not founding a city- the common motive that lies beneath the practice of human sacrifice in ancient society- what emergency prompted him to sacrifice his grown-up son? Also, why is his firstborn Ishmael not chosen in preference to Isaac? Lastly, does the quarrel for precedence between Sarah and Hagar, so important in the introductory chapters, bear any relation to the sacrifice?<sup>39</sup>

The myth tells us about Athamas, King of Boetia, who is forced by Hera to marry Queen Nephele of Pelion, a phantom whom Zeus created in Hera's likeness. Two sons, Phrixus and Leucon, and a daughter, Helle, are born by Nephele. Athamas, subsequently falls in love with Ino the Cadmean and begets two sons, Learchus and Melicertes (*Melkarth*:

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<sup>37</sup>White, "Legend of Isaac," p.6.

<sup>38</sup>White, "Legend of Isaac," p.4.

<sup>39</sup>Graves, *Hebrew Myths*, p.176.

"ruler of the city") by her. When Nephele hears of this, she curses Athamas and Melicertes. To combat Nephele, Ino creates famine by secretly parching the corn seed. Athamas sends a messenger to the Delphic oracle to learn what must be done to handle the famine. Meanwhile Ino has bribed the priestess to announce that the land will recover its fertility only if Athamas sacrifices Phrixus to Zeus on Mount Laphystium. Athamas then takes Phrixus to the top of the mountain and is at the point of killing him when Heracles intervenes, crying: "My Father, Zeus, King of Heaven, loathes human sacrifices!" Zeus then sends a golden ram down who bears Phrixus away and deposits him in the land of Colchis.<sup>40</sup> Phrixus in the end sacrifices the golden ram, the deliverer. Athamas learns of Ino's plot. He is, then, driven mad by Hera and shoots Learchus, another son of Ino, with an arrow and tears his body into pieces. Ino flees with Melicertes before Athamas can kill them, and both jump into the sea off the Molurian Rock and drown. Both are then deified by Zeus.

There are many differences between the Greek myth and the Akedah which basically make the events in the Greek myth seem more dramatic and plausible with regard to the revealed motives. It is conspicuous as to why Phrixus is going to be sacrificed by his father. The reason for the sacrifice, unlike the enigmatic Hebrew, lies in the human affair that provides us with the familiarity we need to grasp the semantic direction of the story. Concerning the

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<sup>40</sup>White writes Hera as the one who sends the golden ram.



characters, there is an obvious difference between the performances of Ino and Hagar which indicates that the Greek does not assume a secondary role for the unblessed wife as does the Hebrew (let alone if she is a slave and foreigner). We can only wonder what was the response of Hagar against Sarah's harsh demand of her second expulsion (Gen.21:9ff), even what had made Sarah react that way?<sup>41</sup> It was not impossible if Hagar had acted contemptuously against Sarah as she did before (Gen.16:4). But the narrator is simply silent about Hagar's manners in her relation with Sarah.

Despite the lack of clarity of the Hebrew story, there are still some similarities that we can perceive in both stories. Athamas can actually be paralleled to Abraham. Both of them have two wives, except that Nephele and Ino have more than one child. There are also points of similarity between Nephele and Sarah. Both are favoured by the deity. God chooses Sarah to be the mother of the promised son. This implies that God nominates Sarah as Abraham's only wife, besides the fact that Abraham gets

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<sup>41</sup>In Jan Victors' (closely related with Rembrandt) painting about the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael, Hagar is depicted as a young and beautiful woman, wearing a beautiful dress. In contrast to that, Sarah is a weak old woman, wearing a simple black dress, appears only obscurely in the background (a witch-like figure in the fairy tales). This interpretation may fill the gap of the tension in Hagar's relationship with Sarah. Hagar's beauty and youth might attract Abraham closer to her than to Sarah, which in turn provokes Sarah's jealousy and anger. Looking at the painting, however, one might think that it was Sarah who was abandoned by Abraham (Abraham, like Hagar, is wearing a fine robe, he also looks strong and healthy). At any rate, it undermines the biblical description of Sarah as a powerful first lady whose beauty attracts foreign kings. For the painting see C.Brown, J.Kelch, P.van Thiel, *Rembrandt: the Master & his Workshop*, Yale U.P. in association with National Gallery Publications, London, 1991, p.341.

married again to Hagar and eventually, to Keturah. Like Nephele's reaction to Ino, the intruder, Sarah is also displeased by Hagar and Ishmael. But Ino and Hagar succeed in pleasing Athamas and Abraham. If Nephele curses Melicertes, Sarah insists that Ishmael must leave Abraham's house. Accordingly, as also hinted by Graves and Patai, we may assume that the attempt to sacrifice Isaac is Hagar's revenge just like Ino plots Phrixus' death. Hagar wants the death of Isaac as a revenge for what Sarah did to her and Ishmael. We, certainly, can only see Hagar's role in the background, that is, as one of the tensions which underlies the sacrifice of Isaac. In the foreground this tension is omitted and replaced by God's command. The unprecedented command of God which seems to have lost its reason, might be rendered as a deliberate attempt by the authors to repudiate the impression that the sacrifice is purely motivated by the desire to revenge. After all, God is the giver and taker of life in the Bible, no necessary reason is required when he wants to take somebody's life (cf. the attempt to kill Moses by Yahweh in Exodus 4:24). However, as we have discussed before, the involvement of God in this event invokes the conflict between Abraham in coalition with Hagar and God in coalition with Sarah, concerning the status of Ishmael and Isaac (chapter 21). Thus, the quarrel between the wives cannot be ignored even though it is only alluded to.

The sacrifice of Isaac constitutes a shocking eruption of negativity into Abraham's family which seems to

counterbalance the negativity of Ishmael's expulsion. It is "a threat against Sarah's child that offsets the previous threat to the child of Hagar."<sup>42</sup> As a matter of fact, Ishmael's experience in mortal danger is also suggested by White as another child initiation story.<sup>43</sup> Thus, the experiences of both Abraham's sons exhibit the process of initiation which ends up with their escape from death and, therefore, their separation from the father. "The similarity in the surface structure of both Hebrew legends would indicate that their final formulation took place at the same stage in the growth of the tradition, i.e. the stage identified as >E<. It was at this stage that the figure of Isaac was moved to the periphery of the story so as to permit his symbolic death to serve as a trial of the faith of Abraham."<sup>44</sup>

The last sentence is important to notice since it gives us a warning that in the present form of Genesis 22 the myth of initiation is no longer central. It has been overcome, though not entirely, by the story of Abraham's test. In other words, the main focus of Genesis 22 is on Abraham rather than Isaac. This inevitably changes our impression of the lethal danger faced by Isaac which becomes more urgent in demanding the son's death than if it were a pure initiation story with Isaac as the focus. We cannot just ignore the ultimate horror of the event which arises

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<sup>42</sup>White, "Legend of Isaac," p.22.

<sup>43</sup>Hugh C.White, "The Initiation Legend of Ishmael", *ZAW* 87(1975), pp.267-305.

<sup>44</sup>White, "Legend of Isaac," p.29.

particularly from seeing Abraham's conduct. While Athamas is certainly a reluctant father who is compelled to sacrifice Phrixus to overcome the famine; Abraham looks confident during the preparation, the three days journey, the building of the altar even when he is about to kill Isaac. He does not share Athamas' reluctance (he does so in Ishmael's case only, Gen.21:11). It is not a poignant moment that we find in following Abraham and Isaac's journey but a harrowing one. Abraham is seemingly not like the one whose conduct symbolizes the role of the caring father in the initiation rite. The *mal'ak Yahweh* cannot ignore the seriousness of Abraham in sacrificing Isaac that he has to recognize it ultimately overtly while halting the sacrifice (v.12). Perhaps to deflect Abraham's intention to kill Isaac, the *mal'ak Yahweh* needs to vocalize the acknowledgment (why a revelation if the test is actually a hidden plan?) as well as to grant the flattering credit "God fearing man". When Isaac passed the crisis and became an independent man, he could never delete from his memory the violence of his father.

#### IV.3.Violence in the Akedah

There has been a suggestion that the Akedah reflects a myth of the birth of a new nation (Israel).<sup>45</sup> Hyam Maccoby, for

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<sup>45</sup>Structurally, one may see that this myth corresponds to the initiation myth. They both underline the escape of Isaac from death. The importance of the depictions in the myth of the birth of a new nation becomes apparent in literature in which Isaac is usually used as a symbol of the recent generation (the generation of the writers) in contrast to the old one represented by Abraham, often described as

instance, shows that the paradox that Isaac is the promised and miraculously born child through whom the perpetuation of the tribe is to be secured, and yet at the same time the inevitable victim of the sacrifice, is, in fact, typical of the dilemma of founding a nation, a city or a tribe.<sup>46</sup> Myths reveal several solutions for such a dilemma. The device of having twin founders so that one is sacrificed, as in the case of Romulus and Remus, is one way of solving the dilemma. Another way is by giving the nextborn child the same name as the sacrificed child, thus, regarding him as the resurrected or the incarnated lost one. In both ways, the success of the new tribe can only be assured by complete surrender to the will of the deity. The chief hope of the new nation must be destroyed and it must be left to the deity to renew the hope in some unpredicted way.<sup>47</sup> Maccoby may find his understanding appropriate to the Akedah in which the complete surrender of Isaac, the supposed chief hope of the new nation ends with the divine interruption of the sacrifice (cf.v.12). By the interruption, the hope of the new nation can be seen as renewed.

However, the story tells us nothing of such a complete surrender of Isaac. Isaac is never actually destroyed by Abraham. On the other hand, the real sacrifice only takes

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dying or out-of-date tradition that the new generation want to be independent from. See interpretations of the Akedah by modern writers and artists in Chapter II.

<sup>46</sup> Hyam Maccoby, *The Sacred Executioner: Human Sacrifice and the Legacy of Guilt*, 1982, p.75.

<sup>47</sup> Maccoby, *ibid*, p.75.

place with a ram as the victim. The ram functions as the surrogate victim which is not only being sacrificed in Isaac's stead, but, saves Isaac's life. By this substitution only, and apparently not necessarily by a real destruction of the real victim, the new nation can be delivered. From this viewpoint, the renewal of the hope of the new nation (if we are to accept Maccoby's reading which itself is mythical) is obtained merely by the killing of the scapegoat. Thus the birth of the new nation involves in itself violence. The violence that is both in a form of the mortal danger in the life of the chief hope of the new nation and in the sacrifice of the (innocent) ram.

In the Akedah, the sacrifice of the surrogate victim is a crucial attempt at the continuation of the life of Isaac. The divine interruption alone may not be enough to avert the sacrifice. The event that begins with a demand of and a will to sacrifice needs to conclude with a sacrifice. The sacrifice (of Isaac) in imagination, if any, is to be completed with the real one (of the ram). It is the force that lies beneath the original sacrifice that is exposed in the process of the surrogate sacrifice. The victim may be changed but the force is the same. The force demands expression. That is why, the existence of the surrogate victim is undoubtedly significant, since by way of making itself the target of the force, it has protected the original victim. The death of the surrogate victim amounts to the survival of the original victim. The survival of Isaac, therefore, leaves a bloody trace. The sacrifice of

the surrogate victim demonstrates an appeasement of violence (that threatened Isaac's life) by means of violence.

The sacrifice of the surrogate victim is, however, illusory. It would never actually replace the original sacrifice. The ram is only a scapegoat of Abraham's desire to kill (according to Girard, the destructive desire is the origin of sacrifice). The spontaneous sacrifice of the ram in the story may endorse its existence as a scapegoat. The ram was the only object that happened to be near Abraham and that was thought of as appropriate as a substitute for Isaac. The scapegoat mechanism functions to prevent a total catastrophe that would happen if the original victim, the human one, were sacrificed. But, it may not represent entirely the original sacrifice.

We can hardly imagine that the value of the sacrifice of the ram could equal the value of Isaac's sacrifice. As J.H.M.Beattie observes in the substitution of sacrificial victim in Nuer society, "thus if a Nuer does not happen to have an ox available he may sacrifice a species of cucumber instead...I suspect, that he (the Nuer) knows that what he is performing is a rite, a drama, and not a commercial transaction; his gift, that is to say, is symbolic, not 'real'. It is the thought, the intention, that counts, as we (and perhaps the Nuer also) might say".<sup>48</sup> Similarly, in

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<sup>48</sup> J.H.M.Beattie, "On Understanding Sacrifice," in *Sacrifice*, ed. M.F.C.Bourdillon and Meyer Fortes, 1980, p.31.

the sacrifice of an ox, the animal acts as a vicarious sacrifice of man, the sacrificer. The material form of the sacrificial victim could be a serious economic consideration to the sacrificer, but, at the metaphysical level, economics is not the issue. What matters is the act of sacrifice itself, which is a symbol of gift giving, but gift giving as an expression of reciprocal relationship rather than material exchange. "Gods do not need presents from men; they require signs of submission."<sup>49</sup>

It is said by Edmund Leach that, "one view, which quite often appears to be supported by the language in which people describe their own sacrifices, is that a sacrificial offering is a gift, or tribute, or fine paid to the gods. The performance is an expression of the principle of reciprocity. By making a gift to the gods, the gods are compelled to give back benefits to man".<sup>50</sup> This system can be proved as existing in the Akedah as the sacrifice of the ram that symbolizes the sacrifice of Isaac is Abraham's obedient response to God's will, which in return, as in the reciprocal relationship, God proclaims his blessings to Abraham. It is the sign of submission from Abraham that disarms God who then in some way ceases his evil desire. This is the state where the life of human beings is restored to normality.

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<sup>49</sup> Edmund Leach, "The Logic of Sacrifice," in *Anthropological Approaches to the Old Testament*, edited with an introduction by Bernhard Lang, 1985, p.139.

<sup>50</sup> Leach, *ibid.*, p.139.



The scapegoat mechanism works only symbolically. It does so by manipulation, that is, by concealing or distorting the real nature of things. It assumes that the crisis is over and the order (of the sacrificer's environment) is restored without the actual sacrifice of the original (man) victim. This symbolical process works within the limit of imagination or in metaphorical associations. In reality there could be some discrepancies as the chaotic moment in the crisis does not lead to the intended end. The crisis may even end up with the original victim being sacrificed. The demand of the original sacrifice at any rate cannot be tricked by the subjective imagination of the substitute sacrifice. There is some sort of provisionality in the implications of the scapegoat mechanism which allow them to work only for a limited time. That is why this mechanism is closely linked with sacrificial rites which are performed again and again. At times the rites have even to be replaced by the original sacrifice. Thus, in human consciousness the horror and violence that surround the original sacrifice remain unforgettable. We are inevitably related to them, either as something that we try to shrug off or conduct consciously or not (the degree might range from family abandonment to war). "Nothing, perhaps, could be more banal than the role of violence in awakening desire. Our modern terms for this phenomenon are sadism or masochism, depending on its manifestation; we regard it as pathological deviation from the norm. We believe that the normal form of desire is nonviolent and that this nonviolent form is characteristic of the generality of

mankind. But if the sacrificial crisis is a universal phenomenon, this hopeful belief is clearly without foundation."<sup>51</sup> This awareness may bring us to understand the violence in the Akedah better since it is often ignored or masqueraded behind too optimistic theological arguments (the least admission of violence is usually given by placing it as a part of the ancient barbaric times of Abraham in contrast with the modern civilization of the commentators).

How do we then understand the sacrificial crisis in the Akedah? As a matter of fact, nothing is clear about the cause of the crisis. But, as we know, the story reveals a focus on the relationship between a father and a son on the eve of the son's sacrifice. A father and his son who are united in the journey to the sacrificial site (cf. *wayyel<sup>v</sup>khu š<sup>v</sup>nehem yaḥ<sup>v</sup>daw* in vv.6,8). At the same time it tells us that the father is the executioner of the son and is also the one who abandons his son on his journey home (*wayyaš<sup>v</sup>abh 'abhraham 'el-n<sup>v</sup>'arayw...*{v.19}, but, where is Isaac?). This might indicate what becomes a classic portrayal of a father who endangers his own son's life. The motive that lies behind this scene could be that the son is the harbinger of the death of the father. The very existence of the son- in the case of Isaac, he is the bearer of Abraham's name- reminds the father of his leading position in the world that soon has to be changed by the son, which only amounts to the death of the father. It is

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<sup>51</sup>Girard, *Violence*, p.144.

not impossible, therefore, that the father sees his son as the rival that he tries to get rid of. By the same token, the son can become the rival of his father just because he longs to identify with his father. This is what Girard calls the mimetic desire of a child, though it inhabits adult life too, because of its basic nature in human life. Girard discusses this matter in his criticism of Freud and the Oedipus Complex.<sup>52</sup> In his view, the mimetic desire is rooted neither in the subject nor in the object, but in a third party whose desire is imitated by the subject.<sup>53</sup> "It is the father who directs the son's attention to desirable objects by desiring them himself; thus, the boy's desires are inevitably directed toward his own mother."<sup>54</sup> In this case Girard differs from Freud who says that a son is obsessed by the desire of killing his father because he wants to take over his mother from his father; so that the object, i.e., the mother is, here, the source of the son's hatred of his father. According to Girard the underlying violence of a relationship with such desire is unpredictable, it is endless violence with an uncertain object. The son will always want something that his father wants. Because there is only one thing that both of them want, the son will eventually regard his father as his rival and vice versa, the father may also regard his son as challenging him. Moreover, Girard claims that the mimetic

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<sup>52</sup> See his *Violence*, pp.169ff. For an interesting analysis of the Akedah which uses psychoanalytical categories, see E. Wellisch, "The Oedipus Conflict in the Akedah," in *The Sacrifice of Isaac: Studies in the Development of a Literary Tradition*, ed. Eli Yassif, no page number.

<sup>53</sup> Girard, *Violence*, p.170.

<sup>54</sup> Girard, *Violence*, p.172.

desire is, in fact, a basic desire of human beings. He says, "once his basic needs are satisfied (indeed, sometimes even before), man is subject to intense desire, though he may not know precisely for what. The reason is that he desires being, something he himself lacks and which some other person seems to possess. The subject thus looks to that other person to inform him of what he should desire in order to acquire that being".<sup>55</sup> This kind of desire undoubtedly brings a danger of violence with it although the reason for the violence itself once it happens is not important anymore. It is not the object which attracts one's desire but the desire of another person for the object. If such blind violence threatens somebody or even a community, then, there will be a chaotic situation which Girard identifies as a sacrificial crisis. In the sacrificial crisis, there is no difference anymore between one person and the other. There is no difference between the son and the father in which the son may behave towards his father reverently and the father respects his young one. "At the height of the sacrificial crisis man's desires are focused on one thing only : violence."<sup>56</sup>

Because of his innocent appearance, Isaac may also become a universal symbol of the innocent young child who does not realize the danger following him. Girard argues that, "the adult is quick to sense a violent situation and answer violence with violence; the child, on the other hand, never

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<sup>55</sup> Girard, *Violence*, p.146.

<sup>56</sup> Girard, *Violence*, p.145.

having been exposed to violence, reaches out for his model's objects with unsuspecting innocence".<sup>57</sup> Isaac might not have thought that his father would have ever killed him. For this reason, when Abraham was about to execute him on the sacrificial altar, he might suddenly have seen Abraham as a completely different person from the one he used to know. Instead of a loving father, Isaac has to face the monstrous one. At that moment, Isaac is urged to recognize the other side of his father's nature. In Girardian thought, this is the son's first experience of encountering the violence that inevitably is aroused by his own father. Through this experience, Isaac started to learn how to live in and with violence. "The son is always the last to learn that what he desires is incest and patricide, and it is the hypocritical adults who undertake to enlighten him in this matter."<sup>58</sup>

The double attitude of Abraham to Isaac actually conforms to the double attitude of the divinity. In the Aqedah the divinity is the demander of human sacrifice which gives him a monstrous image. He, therefore, also acts as a destroyer of his own promise. But, the divine is also the one who cancels the sacrifice. By doing this, he guarantees the continuation of his promise in Isaac. This reminds us of the double nature of all ancient divinities, the blending of beneficent and maleficent. Dionysus is at one and the same time the 'most terrible' and the 'most gentle' of the

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<sup>57</sup> Girard, *Violence*, p.174.

<sup>58</sup> Girard, *Violence*, p.175.

gods. There is Zeus who hurls thunderbolts and Zeus 'as sweet as honey'. In fact, there is no ancient divinity who does not have a double face. If the Roman Janus turns to his worshippers a countenance alternately warlike and peaceful, that is because he too reflects the same alternation; and if he comes in time to symbolize foreign war, that is because foreign war is merely another form of sacrificial violence.<sup>59</sup> In the Bible itself, God is best known as the source of life, order, peace as well as death, disorder and war. In the end of the Akedah the divine blessings are given only with regard to the total surrender, i.e. death of the only son.

If the divinity has a double face, so do the mythical characters who involve themselves in mortal affairs. "There is no essential difference between the monstrous aspects of Oedipus and the monstrous aspects of Dionysus...Both have incorporated into themselves differences normally considered irreconcilable".<sup>60</sup> The similarity between the double attitude of the divine and the mythical characters is not accidental since both come from man's experience of his ambiguous existence. The double attitude of the divinity represents the double attitude of man towards violence. Violence may destabilize a community that results in a crisis but, in order to appease violence and restore the order, violence has to be used.

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<sup>59</sup> Girard, *Violence*, p.251.

<sup>60</sup> Girard, *Violence*, p.251.

Although the Akedah tells us about the sacrifice of the ram instead of Isaac, it does not mean that we can dismiss the violent performance of Abraham and God. The ram is not Isaac, but the desire to sacrifice the ram is actually the same desire, directed primarily to Isaac. The sacrifice of the animal instead of Isaac cannot be taken as an evidence of a non-violent gesture. Nor can it be successfully hidden by arguing that it is only a means of Abraham's trial. This is, if we take Leach's point, a part of the paradox that determines the sacredness of the biblical account. If, as Girard says, "violence is the heart and secret soul of the sacred"<sup>61</sup> it is also the heart and secret soul of the Akedah.

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<sup>61</sup>Girard, *Violence*, p.31.

## CHAPTER V

**THE PROBLEM FOR MODERN READERS  
WITH A FOCUS ON KIERKEGAARD'S  
*FEAR AND TREMBLING***

The literary work is essentially paradoxical. It represents history and at the same time resists it.

Roland Barthes, *S/Z*

In the last chapter we were brought to a realization that violence is basically inseparable from the Akedah. This, one way or another, creates uneasiness with us since it may offend our conscience. We will now see how modern readers have to deal with the moral dilemma in the divine command to sacrifice Isaac and the implementation of the command by Abraham.

**The sacrifice of Isaac as a scandal for modern readers**

From the point of view of people who live in the modern world, a demand to sacrifice one's own child even as a religious duty is simply unacceptable. But when the demand is part of the Scripture which is supposed to be the source of religious life in Christianity as well as in Judaism, the problem would not be as easy as having to abandon the story and forget it. There are struggles as the commentators who are faced with the immorality of human sacrifice attempt to look for a way by which the story can



be morally justified and therefore defend it as a biblical passage.

S.R.Driver, among others, distinguishes the world of the Bible where Abraham lived from the modern world.<sup>1</sup> While human sacrifice was acceptable for Abraham and his contemporaries, it is by no means tolerable nowadays- the notion: "it's fine for other people but not for us". It might not be unusual for Abraham if God demands human sacrifice but it certainly is aberrant for us. A similar argument can be found in R.Davidson's commentary. He says, "what to us is unthinkable, that God would demand human sacrifice, is not unthinkable to Abraham. He makes no protest".<sup>2</sup> Despite the view of the archaicness of the sacrifice, Davidson continues so as to demonstrate the relevance of the story for today's life. Although the faith that is related to the practice of human sacrifice is alien ("this faith speaks to us from an alien world") and unacceptable we can, however, grasp the depth of the faith. His suggestion is that "a deeper insight and a fuller knowledge of God...only come to those prepared to live to that limit of vision they possess, however imperfect that vision may be".<sup>3</sup> Thus, for Davidson, even though we cannot in any way practise human sacrifice, we are still asked to live just like Abraham when he had to sacrifice his own son. This argument clearly leads us to understand the story symbolically. The emphasis on the symbolical meaning of the

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<sup>1</sup> S.R.Driver, *The Book of Genesis*, 1911, pp.221-2.

<sup>2</sup> R.Davidson, *Genesis 12-50*, 1979, p.95.

<sup>3</sup> Davidson, *ibid.*, p.95.

story can consequently prevent the divine command of human sacrifice from being perceived as real. But, can we really plunge ourselves into the depth of Abraham's faith if the command is no longer real? can we substitute the image of human sacrifice with something else and still derive the same impact? Surely, the experience of someone who has to sacrifice his own son can barely be transformed into another experience without reducing its essence. If the sacrifice cannot be replaced by arguing for the difference of awareness between the ancient time of Abraham and the modern time, it would remain a scandal.

Von Rad does not directly put the command of human sacrifice in confrontation with modern values.<sup>4</sup> He sees some kind of dialectic in the narrative if the readers perceive the events from two independent perspectives, that is, from Abraham's perspective and the narrator's perspective. From the narrator's perspective the events in the Akedah are a test which, according to von Rad, indicates that the sacrifice of Isaac is not meant to be real. Meanwhile Abraham has no reason whatsoever to think that the sacrifice is not real. Von Rad also indicates that for Abraham, God's command is incomprehensible not in terms of the immorality of human sacrifice but in the awareness that Isaac who has just been given to him after a long delay has now to be given back. Here von Rad does not put forward a discussion of how Abraham would reckon the

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<sup>4</sup>For von Rad's commentary on Genesis 22, see his *Genesis: A Commentary*, 1972, pp.237-245.

practice of human sacrifice itself. The command can only become non-sense in terms of the contradiction of God who fulfils his promise in a special way but demands the fulfilment back. Abraham who has separated from his whole past (Gen.12) has, now, to relinquish his whole future. This is the agony of Abraham that is seen by the readers through his silence. According to von Rad, this silence is the narrator's technique which suggests the inner emotional circumstances of Abraham. It becomes apparent that von Rad tries to emphasize Abraham's admirable endurance in doing the test. For this purpose he employs the play of the perspectives. When the readers identify themselves too closely with Abraham in which the sacrifice becomes too real, von Rad will warn the readers through the narrator's view that it is nothing but a test. Conversely, a relaxation affected by the knowledge of the test is hindered by revealing the agony of Abraham who is not aware that this is a test. In this way, von Rad can direct the readers towards an acceptance of the greatness of Abraham's faith without having to look at the moral dilemma of the sacrifice. The ultimate target of von Rad's reading is admiration for Abraham's loyalty to God. At the same time, the problem of human sacrifice and its impact on modern readers is suppressed.

Westermann disagrees with von Rad and others whose interpretations are focused on holding Abraham up as an exemplar and who read the narrative as a song of praise of

the Patriarch.<sup>5</sup> In Westermann's view, those conclusions are made possible if the readers are not really involved in the events (which is only partially true in von Rad's case). It is a misunderstanding if we act as an onlooker of the events. The narrative can only be understood with our participation in the experiences of the characters, Abraham in particular. This can be regarded as a criticism of von Rad's reading from higher/the narrator's point of view which, besides the dialectic, proves to be prevailing at the end. By binding ourselves regularly with Abraham's viewpoint, it is possible for us to plunge into the bitterness of Abraham's experience. This can only mean that we must not be doubtful that the sacrifice of Isaac will soon take place. This thought of Westermann is similar to that of Speiser who argues that although we are informed about the test, "there is no way of assuring the father that he need have no fear about the final result; one can only suffer with him in helpless silence".<sup>6</sup> Speiser does not see how the world of Abraham can in any way be related with the world of the readers or the narrator as done by von Rad. The view that one can see from Abraham's viewpoint should never be interchanged with the view from the narrator's angle. When we are ourselves bound with Abraham, our reading experience will have to end up in a despairing suffering. Abraham, in fact, does not turn away from such a condition. Speiser sees that the severe experience of the Akedah is not unique in the Bible. "The fact is that short

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<sup>5</sup> Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36: A Commentary*, tr. John J. Scullion, c.1985, p.364.

<sup>6</sup> E.A. Speiser, *The Anchor Bible Genesis*, 1964, p.164.

of such unswerving faith, the biblical process could not have survived the many trials that lay ahead."<sup>7</sup> Speiser therefore understands the test in the Akedah as a suffering undergone by Abraham in which one may not find any sort of consolation. This kind of test opens widely to an end where the father sacrifices his son by his own hands. The faith of Abraham is his endurance in this inconsolable suffering. If we follow Speiser and Westermann then the tragic end of the sacrifice of Isaac has to occupy the mind of the readers.

However, the immorality of human sacrifice itself is never specifically assessed by either commentator. Any reading that is designed for the readers to involve themselves in the story world must deal with the problem of human sacrifice. The commentators may assume that such sacrifice is not problematic for Abraham so that the readers have only to follow this ancient prejudice in order to guarantee the success of their engagement with the character's experience. But it is always questionable whether the commentators can dissociate the readers or themselves from modern prejudices. In Speiser's commentary for instance we can register phrases such as "melancholy pilgrimage", "the most poignant and eloquent silence in all literature", "the harrowing test", "this shattering ordeal" which doubtlessly are a manifestation of modern feelings; Abraham may not have shared those feelings (after all no one knows how or what exactly were his feelings at the moment of the

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<sup>7</sup>Speiser, *ibid.*, p.166.

Akedah). Although our commentators do not seem to be disturbed by the immorality of Isaac's sacrifice (neither does Abraham) we should not automatically be convinced that, as they claim (to partake in Abraham's experience), their understandings merely represent Abraham's emotional circumstances. The ordeal of Abraham is more like a modern reflection which may also have been influenced by Kierkegaard's reading. While it is clear that we are asked by our commentators to experience Abraham's suffering it is still not clear how we should understand the cause of the suffering, that is, the human sacrifice. Is it worth for us to take on suffering whose nature is not clear for us? Should we suffer for a problematic command? Even though our reading of the Akedah will ultimately face this kind of ambiguity, to disregard the problem in the first place is hardly acceptable. We cannot pretend that a command to sacrifice one's own son is not problematic, this is not a scandal that we can conceal and forget as if such thing never happened.

As it is mentioned above, Kierkegaard's reading of the Akedah may have had some influences on Westermann's and Speiser's interpretations. But, unlike the other commentators, Kierkegaard brings the problem of the immorality of the sacrificial command into deep consideration. *Fear and Trembling* discusses at length the ethical responses to God's unethical command. It is assumed, however, that Abraham would have the same way of thinking, prejudices, preferences as that of modern man.

One may say that without this assumption it would be impossible for Kierkegaard to write as detailed and deep as he did. On the other hand, one of the motives that drives *Fear and Trembling* may arise from a tension between the hope that Abraham would act in accordance with modern rational values and the fact that biblical Abraham behaves otherwise. The journey to search for moral justification of the sacrifice- symbolically coinciding with the three days journey to Mount Moriah- leads to a "cul-de-sac" which ultimately demands a suspension of the ethical. At this point Abraham has to leave his "modern understandings" behind and enter the world of absurdity. From the ethical, that is, from a modern point of view Abraham becomes a monster. But Kierkegaard does not stop here as the journey to search for justification of Abraham's faith continues until it finds a proper place which is not in the ethical nor is it in accordance with modern understanding, but in the eccentric world of the religious.

#### The worldliness of faith

In the reception history we have seen briefly Kant's refusal to believe in the legitimacy of the divine nature of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. In *Der Streit der Facultatën* Kant says:

For if God really were to speak to man, the latter could after all never know that it is God who is speaking to him. It is utterly impossible for man to apprehend the Infinite through his senses, to distinguish him from

sensible objects and thereby to know him. He can, though, no doubt convince himself in some cases that it cannot be God whose voice he believes he hears; for if what it commands him to do is contrary to the moral law, he must regard the manifestation as an illusion, however majestic and transcending the whole of Nature it may seem to him to be.

For example, consider the story of the sacrifice which Abraham was willing to make at the divine command by slaughtering and burning his only son- what is more, the poor child unwittingly carried the wood for the sacrifice. Even though the voice rang out from the (visible) heavens, Abraham ought to have replied thus to this supposedly divine voice, 'It is quite certain that I ought not to kill my innocent son, but I am not certain and I cannot ever become certain that you, the 'you' who is appearing to me, are God.'<sup>8</sup>

Kant makes a clear suggestion that Abraham does not have to heed the supposed revelatory command of God since the content of the command contradicts the moral law that he understands and applies to all human beings. To kill someone, never mind one's own son, is obviously immoral and can never be accepted as a divine command. Religious practices should, for Kant, coincide with the will to achieve the universal *summum bonum*. The *summum bonum* reflects the utmost happiness which is the natural desire of every human being.

As we submit our wishes to the moral law, according to Kant, we are in rational pursuit of happiness. However, in practical experience, this concept cannot always come into

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<sup>8</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Der Streit der Facultatën in Werke*, Band VII (Berlin: 1902-), p.63. Translated by David Pailin, "Abraham and Isaac: A Hermeneutical Problem before Kierkegaard" in *Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling: Critical Appraisals*, ed. Robert L. Perkins, 1981, p.32.



being as originally thought. The virtuous from time to time is miserable while the wicked prosper. This could be the antinomy of Kant's moral philosophy.<sup>9</sup> But, to get away from the difficulty Kant suggests that the conjunction of virtue and happiness "does not occur in this world, but that there may be another type of existence, another level of existence where the conjunction would be not merely fortuitous and contingent but necessary". It is in the world other than our world that the virtuous can obtain his proper rewards. While the virtuous still lives in this visible world, he should persistently believe in the truth of the conjunction; he can therefore conceive of himself in a state where virtue and happiness would have to be combined.

Kierkegaard, on the other hand, tends to think of faith as a problem in this visible world. His attention is focused on how a man becomes (or is becoming) faithful amidst challenges he faces in his existence in this world. A faith in God is not to be based on a belief in a promise of happiness in the afterlife. Abraham serves God for no other reason than that God is God. "Kierkegaard's argument is uncompromising in its assertion of religion's autonomy from ethics and even from the common human expectations for happiness."<sup>10</sup> The essential difference between Kant and Kierkegaard in their views of faith and God is summed up by

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<sup>9</sup>Robert L. Perkins, "For Sanity's Sake: Kant, Kierkegaard, and Father Abraham" in *Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling: Critical Appraisals*, 1981, p.51.

<sup>10</sup>Perkins, *ibid.*, p.59.

Perkins, "for Kant, the religious is narrowly constricted by the limitations of his moral philosophy; his view of the religious has no place for the demonic and consequently no place for the idolatrous. Phenomenologically, Kierkegaard is in the stronger position, for the religious, as he understands it, does contain possibilities of the demonic and idolatrous. Kierkegaard faces the facts, the ambiguities, the murkiness of the historical phenomenon of religion; whereas Kant legislates from an ad hoc position what can count as religious".<sup>11</sup>

It is important to notice that Kierkegaard does not write his understanding of Abraham in a "telling fashion" such as one may find in a philosophical or theological discourse but in a "showing form" of what is supposed to be in Abraham's mind during the events. *Fear and Trembling*<sup>12</sup> is a story about someone (the narrator) who tries to follow every step of Abraham in the journey to Mount Moriah. The form of story itself might indicate an awareness of the irreducible paradox of Abraham's experience that can only be reflected through such a fashion.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Perkins, *ibid.*, p.59.

<sup>12</sup> The translation that is used here is that of Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, 1983.

<sup>13</sup> The contrast between story and philosophical discourse is explained by Don Cupitt as this, "story bound you into the human world of the temporal succession and change, whereas philosophy aimed higher, rising above time and story in order to represent genuine knowledge as consisting in the timeless contemplation of the unchangingly and objectively Real. This was a very grandiose idea, and one that religion readily adopted". Don Cupitt, *What is a story?*, 1991, p.xii.

### In search for justification of Abraham's faith

There are three stages of life that Abraham has to go through in looking for justification of his faith. The first stage is the aesthetic. In Problema III of *Fear and Trembling* Johannes de Silentio (Kierkegaard's pseudonym for the authorship of *Fear and Trembling*) distinguishes the immediacy of faith from aesthetic immediacy. In fact, these immediacies have a similarity in the sense that they could make people speechless. They are so absurd and indefinite as if they have no points of beginning nor end. However, there is a discrepancy between the two immediacies. If aesthetic immediacy happens because a person does not reflect on his existence, then the immediacy of faith happens when, after some reflection, a person realises that he cannot express his existence and that he cannot make himself comprehensible. The example of aesthetic immediacy is Don Juan who is a musical character in Mozart's opera.

Don Juan in Mozart's opera is depicted as a person who seeks only pleasure in his lifetime. His life is intended to search for satisfaction in his sexual desire which, in fact, never ceases. In addition to that, he seems never to fail in seducing women with whom he wants to gratify his sexual desire. Kierkegaard calls him the "sensuous-erotic genius".<sup>14</sup> Don Juan is so driven by the power of passion that he cannot properly be called an individual person.

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<sup>14</sup>Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, vol.I, tr.David and Lillian Swenson, 1971, p.86.

Rather his life is a reflection of desire, a concrete expression of the natural force of sensuousness. Kierkegaard gives his impression of Don Juan, "if I imagine a particular individual, if I see him (Don Juan) or hear him speak, then it becomes comic to imagine that he has seduced 1,003; for as soon as he is regarded as a particular individual, the accent falls quite in another place. When, on the contrary, he is interpreted in music, then I do not have a particular individual, but I have the power of nature, the demonic, which as little tires of seducing or is done with seducing as the wind is tired blowing, the sea tired of billowing, or a waterfall of tumbling downward from the heights".<sup>15</sup>

"Language involves reflection, and cannot therefore, express the immediate. Reflection destroys the immediate and hence it is impossible to express the musical in language."<sup>16</sup> For Kierkegaard, music provides the best place for the immediate since music does not need any reflection in order to exist. "There sound only the voice of elemental passion, the play of appetites, the wild shouts of intoxication; it exists solely for pleasure in eternal tumult."<sup>17</sup> Don Juan's sensual gratification cannot be expressed through language. It must be enjoyed in silence. Silence here does not mean the absence of sound. Sensual passion has many sounds. Silence might better be understood

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<sup>15</sup> *Either/Or*, p.91.

<sup>16</sup> Kierkegaard, *Johannes Climacus, or De Omnibus Dubitandum Est*, tr. T.H.Croxall, 1967, p.147.

<sup>17</sup> *Either/Or*, p.55.

as the absence of communication or of speech. So long as Don Juan continues to be fully immersed in prereflective sensual immediacy, he knows nothing- nothing about himself, his world, or other persons.

What is lacking in Don Juan's expression is reflection itself. Don Juan is incapable of speaking about his experiences because he has never reflected on those experiences. Only by reflection can he eventually communicate his experiences to others. Reflection may drive an individual out of his closed individuality and bring him to the universal. Although reflection is likely to be done individually, it also includes the universal demands, i.e. the ethical itself.

If we return to Problema III, it appears to us that a person like Don Juan in his immediate form of life is considered to be vulnerable to the Hegelian criticism. For Hegel, every individual has a social responsibility and must act according to the rules of his society. Unlike Don Juan, Abraham, according to Kierkegaard, has gone through the process of reflection but he finds ethics insufficient to explain his personal experience. Abraham's conduct needs a justification from something other than or beyond ethics.

It is obvious that in a drama the duty of the players is to present some role, which means that they must pretend to be someone else. The performance of drama players exemplifies another expression in the aesthetic stage, that is, the

playful. Playful expression aims simply at entertaining people. It does not involve dialectical thinking or reflection.

Another kind of aesthetic expression is the deceitful. Pretending is still the outer sign of the person who lives in this realm. But as the name tells, the motive of pretence is to deceive. It is a selfish motive which underlies the pretence. The example of it is the merman in the legend about the merman and Agnes. "The merman is a seducer who rises up from his hidden chasm and in wild lust seizes and breaks the innocent flower (Agnes) standing on the seashore in all her loveliness and with her head thoughtfully inclined to the souging of the sea."<sup>18</sup> The merman is a skilful seducer who never wants to reveal his tragic existence (that he is a monster). His princely performance, however, has made Agnes believe he is the perfect man that she has been longing for. The figure of the merman has reminded us of Don Juan who is also a woman seducer. Unlike Don Juan, though, the merman has deliberately arranged his acts. He makes use of his skill to deceive Agnes and many other women. To obtain a personal pleasure the merman has allowed himself to be deceitful.

Johannes de Silentio, furthermore, develops the legend about the merman and Agnes to give a description of what he would call the demonic effect of the aesthetic. Here, the merman is haunted by his guilty feelings. After Agnes is

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<sup>18</sup> *Fear and Trembling*, p.94.

willing to go with him, to give herself to the stronger one, to entrust her whole destiny to him in absolute confidence, the merman breaks down, he cannot seduce Agnes anymore. "He cannot withstand the power of innocence..."<sup>19</sup> The merman can no longer overcome Agnes with his seductive power. "The merman is a seducer, but when he has won Agnes' love, he is so moved by it that he wants to belong to her entirely."<sup>20</sup> The seducer is crushed, he has submitted to the power of innocence, he can never seduce again. "But immediately two forces struggle over him: repentance, Agnes and repentance. If repentance alone gets him, then he is hidden; if Agnes and repentance get him, then he is disclosed."<sup>21</sup> After being aware of his irresponsible conduct towards Agnes, he may be faced with repentance. Yet, this repentance does not necessarily result in disclosing his former intention to Agnes. The repentance is not followed by confession. He does not want to spoil Agnes' pure love for him - he therefore conceals the truth. At the same time the merman becomes very unhappy for he loves Agnes with a complexity of passions and a new guilt to bear. "Now the demonic in repentance probably will explain that this is indeed his punishment, and the more it torments him the better."<sup>22</sup> Still in silence, he can try to save Agnes by provoking her to hate him. He can do this by belittling her, ridiculing her, disregarding her love or even by arousing her pride. He uses demonic ways to enable

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<sup>19</sup> *Fear and Trembling*, p.94.

<sup>20</sup> *Fear and Trembling*, p.242.

<sup>21</sup> *Fear and Trembling*, p.96.

<sup>22</sup> *Fear and Trembling*, p.96.

Agnes to stand on her own again. He does not let Agnes surrender herself to him on account of his love and his tragic existence. By pretending to be an enemy, the merman may rescue Agnes from her blind love to him. "Indeed, it is not inconceivable that in reality it might come to pass that a merman by his demoniac shrewdness has, humanly speaking, not only saved an Agnes but brought something extraordinary out of her; for a demon knows how to torture powers out of even the weakest person and in his way he may have the best intentions toward a human being."<sup>23</sup> Having saved Agnes, the merman remains in his hidden sufferings. He, actually, can speak to Agnes openly and possibly receive her forgiveness. If he did so, he would have had a chance to overcome his suffering; but he prefers to keep silent. "His relation to his suffering is ambivalent. On the one hand, he is repelled by it and wants nothing more than to be free of it, while on the other hand, he is attracted to it and refuses to part with it. The attachment to one's own corruption and suffering that leads a person to guard silence and to turn his back on the possibility of forgiveness is what Kierkegaard means by the demonic"<sup>24</sup>

The other expression of silence of the reflective aesthetic stage is heroic silence. This is supposed to be the most noble form of aesthetic silence. The purpose of the silence is to save other people from misfortune. It

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<sup>23</sup>This is Walter Lowrie's translation: *Fear and Trembling: A Dialectical Lyric*, 1952, p.150.

<sup>24</sup>Mark C.Taylor, "Sounds of Silence" in *Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling: Critical Appraisals*, ed. R.L.Perkins, 1981, p.175.



represents the reverse of the selfish motivation usually rendered to the figure of deceitful or demonic silence. Heroic silence willingly incurs suffering in its attempt to make others happy. Heroic silence occurs in the example derived from a story in Aristotle's *Poetics*. The story is about a young bridegroom who consults the Delphic oracle on his wedding day. He eventually finds out that a misfortune will follow his marriage, namely his life will be in danger. The prediction is revealed to the bridegroom personally by the augurs. Nevertheless, the bridegroom understands that the matter is not only his, but also concerns his marriage life. He has two choices of whether he explains it to his bride or he conceals it. If he remains silent, "should he remain silent and get married, thinking : Maybe the disaster will not happen right away, and in any case I have maintained love and have not feared to make myself unhappy".<sup>25</sup> Johannes de Silentio considers this decision as offending the bride in a way that the bride is not allowed to share the problem and finally make the decision, "...for if she had known of the prophecy, she certainly would never have given her assent to such an alliance."<sup>26</sup> The other possibility in which the bridegroom may remain silent is that while he does so, he cancels the wedding. He thinks by silently cancelling the wedding he has saved the bride from the disaster predicted by the augurs. In this case he might be called a silent hero who hopes that the bride will sooner or later forget her sorrow

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<sup>25</sup> *Fear and Trembling*, p.90.

<sup>26</sup> *Fear and Trembling*, p.91.

while he himself remains suffering in his concealment. Having thought that his bride should not know the impending herald, he hides it for himself. The bride who knows nothing about the prediction will only think that the bridegroom has abandoned her.

Nevertheless, Johannes de Silentio refuses the bridegroom's idea that his concealment is purely private. According to de Silentio, consulting the augurs before marriage was popular in the time of the bridegroom. The augurs, furthermore, would forecast the destiny of marriage in the future which could either be good-luck or bad-luck. It was a usual tradition among young marriage couples. Therefore, albeit the message was conveyed privately, it would be of public knowledge in time. So the concealment of the bridegroom about the disaster would become in vain. His people could in time recognised what he is hiding. On the contrary, if he had spoken of the prediction, he would have been well understood. It was not hard for the people to understand the impending herald since this is one of the possibilities of the augurs' message. Johannes de Silentio thinks, if only the herald were not popular so that the people would never have knowledge of it, the silence of the bridegroom would have been in the same situation as Abraham's. The bridegroom would have been in the paradox. But the actual case of the bridegroom is different. He is simply an aesthetic hero who wants to silently suffer for the sake of another but is unaware that once he speaks, people will understand him well. If he is silent he thinks

that by so doing he can make his bride happy. He does not want to share the sufferings he has incurred after hearing the impending herald as well as in cancelling the wedding he has wished right to the time when he listens to the augurs' message with anyone near him.

The tension between public knowledge and the bridegroom's attempt to be silent leads to the problem of the ethical demand. In the bridegroom's case, the ethical demand is expressed by the demand to speak. It has been shown that the bridegroom's concealment of the impending herald is actually unworthy because people have already been accustomed to hearing such a message from the augurs. Therefore, the best choice for the bridegroom is to speak, to unveil his knowledge about the herald and its consequences for him. It is in this way that he can seek comfort. If, in the end, he decides to cancel the marriage, he will see that his decision is justifiable in the eyes of his people provided that he explains the reason. Ethics demands revelation. It is important for the bridegroom to reveal his problem, lest he is misunderstood.

By revealing himself a person has entered the universal world where he belongs to others rather than to himself as in the aesthetic. As a consequence, he also has to live according to the universal law which will limit him from doing anything privately. Every individual has a duty to apply the universal law in their individual life. The aim of the universal law as it is claimed is to bring the whole

human being into the highest good, the ideal life, so to speak. Since it is concerned with the whole human being, the universal world, each individual is asked to bind his personal wishes to the law, otherwise he is guilty. As soon as the single individual asserts himself in his singularity before the universal, he sins, and only by acknowledging this can he be reconciled again with the universal. But it is also guaranteed that the universal law or ethics will equally represent individual necessity, it is in other words, a democratic law. It is also for everybody's good. Therefore, no transgression is necessary. "If this is the highest that can be said of man and his existence, then the ethical is of the same nature as a person's eternal salvation."<sup>27</sup>

The concept of personal salvation through ethical life is found by Johannes de Silentio in Hegel's philosophy. Hegel, according to de Silentio, qualifies man as the individual and considers this qualification as a "moral form of evil", which must be annulled in the teleology of the moral (the conformity of one's life with the regulations given by his social institution where he is) in such a way that the single individual who remains in that stage either sins or is immersed in spiritual trial.<sup>28</sup>

Meanwhile, it is also understood that the universality of ethics is defined by its applicability to all conditions.

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<sup>27</sup> *Fear and Trembling*, p.54.

<sup>28</sup> *Fear and Trembling*, p.55.

The morality of a proposed action is determined by its ability to be universalized, to be applied under any circumstances. In the same way a person must be able to show the universality of his conduct, that he behaves in accordance with moral principles. In the ethical stage, it is obligatory not only to act ethically but also to explain to others the ethical basis of certain conduct. It is only by this way that the conduct can be seen as having been rooted in moral laws.

Johannes de Silentio uses the story of Agamemnon and Iphigenia by Euripides as the example of the dialectical process of the ethical stage. For Agamemnon it has been revealed that he must sacrifice his daughter, Iphigenia, for the welfare of the state as a whole. Agamemnon's dilemma is whether he had better keep silent about this duty or should he inform the people around him. "Esthetics demands silence of Agamemnon, inasmuch as it would be unworthy of the hero to seek comfort from any other person..."<sup>29</sup> It is the heroic act of Agamemnon that he undertakes suffering for the sake of the whole state's happiness. From the aesthetic point of view, Agamemnon does not need others' sympathy for doing such bravery, thus, he should remain silent. But ethics disagrees with silence; ethics demands disclosure. Agamemnon has to inform Iphigenia and even the people. If he does so, he will become a tragic hero. "The tragic hero demonstrates his ethical courage in that he himself, not prey to any

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<sup>29</sup> *Fear and Trembling*, p.87.

esthetic illusion, announces Iphigenia's fate to her."<sup>30</sup> After she knows her father's reason to sacrifice her, Iphigenia will understand how tragic Agamemnon is in his position and in the end will agree with him. For the whole state, his disclosure is inspirational. In other words, he strengthens the moral fabric of the state by his strong determination to do his duty. If Agamemnon, as the leader of the country, willingly renounces his personal desire to the moral duty, should not his people follow his nobility by devoting themselves to the account of their duty? Therefore, it is necessary that the tragic hero declares himself. If he remains silent, it will not be clear to others what the motive of his sacrifice is, even worse than that, people will think Agamemnon has acted immorally, he can be thought of as a murderer.

It becomes clear to us that ethics tends to pull a person out of his complex and indeterminate desires and brings him into subjection to the universally binding rules. In this stage a person can no longer hide his individual reason - he must actualize himself. His act can only be justified if its motives are revealed. Consequently, man is seen as a social being who is responsible to his society and its principles or rules. His will is, then, subjected to those rules although it must be done as a free act, as a result of his consciousness that public rules are the absolute reflection of the highest good.

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<sup>30</sup> *Fear and Trembling*, p.87.

Nonetheless, ethics cannot actually escape from paradox, neither can reason. Kierkegaard wants to show us that paradox is, as a matter of fact, unavoidable in every form of life, be it aesthetic, ethics or even religious form. Each form of life is destined to struggle in paradox which is an inevitable part of human life. Life is always seen as a paradox between two oppositional desires, "good" and "bad". Ethics, however, seems to deal with only the "good" side and excludes the "bad" side. According to the ethicist, the ideal life is something that must be grasped beyond paradox.

The failure of ethics to admit the existence of paradox as essential in and for human life urges de Silentio to continue the search for the acknowledgement of the paradoxical to another stage of dialectical thinking called religious- a stage in which Abraham's faith is supposed to gain its justification. In this stage, silence reemerges although it has a different nature from that of the aesthetic. The double face of silence is described by de Silentio, "silence is the demon's trap, and the more that is silenced, the more terrible the demon, but silence is also divinity's mutual understanding with the single individual".<sup>31</sup> If aesthetic silence because of its ultimate demonic expression cannot resist ethical demand, this is not the case with the religious silence. As soon as ethics enters the religious realm, it is no longer demanding because religion has its own *telos* which is different from

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<sup>31</sup> *Fear and Trembling*, p.88.

that of ethics; but it is also caused by paradoxical performances of religion which will inevitably remove ethics from its central consideration. Ethics cannot understand the paradoxical silence manifested in religious realm. Or that ethics alone cannot enable us to understand the religious silence. Ethics ironically claims itself to be universal. But it is apparent that its universality fails to incorporate religious experience. Having shown that ethics is unable to define religious experience within its own categories, Johannes de Silentio brings us to another stage of life which is likely to compensate the lack of ethics itself so that the two together (ethics and faith) may dialectically constitute the whole existential description of man.

It is possible that the religious point of view is actually created by Kierkegaard to introduce the failure of ethics in a way that ethics cannot accommodate an individual inwardness which is thought as indispensable in the act of Abraham. "Despite the rigorousness with which ethics demands disclosure, it cannot be denied that secrecy and silence make a man great simply because they are qualifications of inwardness."<sup>32</sup> Inwardness is man's potential quality whose existence deserves attention. It is actually the source of the greatness of man. Kierkegaard obviously disagrees with the ethical solution which regards man's greatness from outward, that is, according to his moral behaviour and the explanation of it. It is also

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<sup>32</sup> *Fear and Trembling*, p.88.



hinted that Kierkegaard is in opposition to all forms of dogmatical solution as shown by ethicists. For him dogma, principle, rule, system have hindered man from standing as an individual. Individuality is reckoned as higher than universality.

Faith is about the individual that is higher than the universal. This claim can be made because faith is paradoxical and only the single individual (individual as individual) can understand a paradox. In faith, there is an absolute duty to God which, as happened in Abraham's life, is contradictory of ethics. In this contradiction, however, ethics must be reduced to the relative. To show the paradox of faith de Silentio has also quoted another controversial biblical (New Testament) verse (besides the Abraham and Isaac story), that is, Luke 14:26 which contains Jesus' utterance that in order to be Jesus' disciple one must hate his whole family, even his own life. Faith would accept Jesus' demand as an absolute duty which must be done. Ethics, conversely, could never teach one to hate one's own family, it even forbids and punishes such hatred. Thus, although a believer may hold Jesus' demand as an absolute duty, he cannot do it without being in paradox because of his awareness of the ethical demand. Providing he ignores the ethical demand he has been in the aesthetic, namely, he has abandoned his family for the sake of his (selfish) ambition to be Jesus' disciple. After all if he tells his family about the requirement for being Jesus' disciple, he might well be understood by his family who will by then

reckon his decision as noble but in doing so he can no longer be the knight of faith, instead he has placed himself as a tragic hero whose tragic act is not only understandable but also admirable. The knight of faith, would rather bear the tragedy of his life on his own because no one can understand his impossible belief that by abandoning his family (for his absolute duty to God) he also loves them.

De Silentio can be seen as attempting to challenge the principle of ethics- that the highest duty of life is to exercise ethical demands- by proposing the duty to God as the actual highest duty. Ethics and the duty to God end up irrevocably in tensional relationship. The dialectical movement of that relationship is, however, significant for de Silentio, that is, in order to understand the existence of a believer or the subject of faith. But as the dialectical movement is not intended to arrive at a synthesized knowledge, it will, therefore, only present an always-paradoxical phenomenon. A person, once being in faith, is forever a paradoxical being. He can never reduce the paradox to a certain knowledge by which he can let another understand him. Faith is the paradox that the individual absolutely cannot make himself intelligible to anybody. The paradox of faith may only shipwreck understanding which in the ethical is unavoidable.

Moreover, the paradox by which faith expresses itself is in fact inherent in human life. It is actually found in

contemplation of human consciousness therefore it is necessary to admit its basic existence. But to admit its existence means to place the individual higher than the universal. Faith is a private matter which cannot be shared with another. There emerges a problem that faith can be mistakenly observed as the same as an aesthetic expression because of the stress on privacy. In this light Johannes de Silentio employs the ethical argument that functions as a parameter which distinguishes the aesthetic from the religious. The silence of faith is not motivated by personal desire since it is related to ethical considerations that would break such a desire. A faithful person must have relinquished even the best thing he ever had for others in which ethics finds its expression. He has emptied himself, that is to say, he is the knight of infinite resignation but in further contemplation he is aware that ethics cannot rightly justify his duty. However, "Precisely because resignation is antecedent, faith is no esthetic emotion but something far higher; it is not the spontaneous inclination of the heart but the paradox of existence."<sup>33</sup> Faith is immediacy after reflection. Nonetheless, like aesthetic immediacy the immediacy of faith is also necessary, something that one cannot argue otherwise. Both are speechless experiences. After all, "while bearing a certain formal similarity to each other, the necessary silence of the sensuous erotic genius and of the believer are quite different. These two sounds of

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<sup>33</sup> *Fear and Trembling*, p.47.

silence represent opposite stages on life's way"<sup>34</sup> that is, the stage before and after the ethic.

It is important to bear in mind that Kierkegaard's notion about man's knowledge of God is specific in that it is gathered as a result of man's (the subject) own perception of his experiences. We may find the basis of this notion in Kierkegaard's view of subjective perception which as R.Z.Friedman observes, "Kierkegaard's indebtedness to Socrates is very great. From Socrates, according to Kierkegaard, comes the notion of the subjective relationship, the subject's commitment to an object of whose truth he is ignorant, and the shift of emphasis from the existence of the object to the subject's perception of the object, the subject's inwardness or psychological development".<sup>35</sup> In this regard, God's existence is not argued on the basis of his own (objective) existence but as it is perceived by man in his psychological development. Man as the subject of perception decides the existence of God. It is from here that Kierkegaard comes to the conclusion that God is as paradoxical as faith itself. Accordingly, we can never make the existence of God certain. Like faith, God is different from, even contradictory of, ethics. His existence can be experienced- that is as a conflict with ethics- but is inexplicable.

Concerning Abraham, Johannes de Silentio recasts the story

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<sup>34</sup>Taylor, "Sounds of Silence," p.186.

<sup>35</sup>R.Z.Friedman, "Looking for Abraham: Kierkegaard and the Knight of Anxiety," *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 27(1987), p.251.

of Genesis 22 in four different possibilities.<sup>36</sup> The main focus is Abraham, how he handles God's command to sacrifice his son and how one would see him. In the end, it is revealed that one can only admire Abraham's courage without being able to comprehend him. One of the stories tells about Abraham as he is in unbroken silence:

It was early in the morning when Abraham arose: he embraced Sarah, the bride of his old age, and Sarah kissed Isaac, who took away her disgrace, Isaac her pride, her hope for all the generations to come. They rode along the road in silence, and Abraham stared continuously and fixedly at the ground until the fourth day, when he looked up and saw Mount Moriah far away, but once again he turned his eyes toward ground. Silently he arranged the firewood and bound Isaac; silently he drew the knife- then he saw the ram that God had selected. This he sacrificed and went home.--  
--From that day henceforth, Abraham was old; he could not forget that God had ordered him to do this. Isaac flourished as before, but Abraham's eyes were darkened, and he saw joy no more. (my emphases)<sup>37</sup>

Silence appears to be the only choice Abraham can express in the above story. Surely, de Silentio is preoccupied with Abraham's silence which is clearly expressed by the above story as well as throughout *Fear and Trembling*. But it does not mean that de Silentio is not aware of Abraham's dialogue with Isaac (Gen.22:7,8). He knows that Abraham answers Isaac's question but "his (Abraham) response to Isaac is in the form of irony, for it is always irony when I say something and still do not say anything".<sup>38</sup> De Silentio does not regard Abraham's enigmatic answer as

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<sup>36</sup> *Fear and Trembling*, pp.10-13.

<sup>37</sup> *Fear and Trembling*, p.12.

<sup>38</sup> *Fear and Trembling*, p.118.

untruthful although Abraham is well aware that Isaac is going to be sacrificed and although he has at that time relinquished Isaac and done no more. "He is not speaking an untruth, because by virtue of the absurd it is indeed possible that God could do something entirely different." De Silentio continues, "so he does not speak an untruth, but neither does he say anything, for he is speaking in a strange tongue".<sup>39</sup>

Abraham wants to share his agony (as a result of God's command) with his wife, his servants and even with Isaac himself. He realizes that if he speaks to another he will be understood. And that if he remains silent, his deeds will only demonstrate a horror, he will even be condemned as a murderer. But, Abraham just does not have something to share with others. His absolute relationship with God cannot be described in common language. He speaks no ordinary language but an alien, incomprehensible language. His words remain concealed. "Abraham remains silent - but he cannot speak. Therein lies the distress and anxiety. Even though I go on talking night and day without interruption, if I cannot make myself understood when I speak, then I am not speaking. This is the case with Abraham. He can say everything, but one thing he cannot say, and if he cannot say that- that is, say it in such a way that the other understands it- then he is not speaking."<sup>40</sup> It is implied that the universal expression

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<sup>39</sup> *Fear and Trembling*, p.119.

<sup>40</sup> *Fear and Trembling*, p.113.

through language is actually necessary. There is nothing wrong with trusting the importance of language in making oneself intelligible. Abraham would have loved to be intelligible, but his faith in God has hindered him from being so. His faith cannot be mediated through language or rational thought. From the point of view of rational thought Abraham's faith is absurd.

Abraham wants to sacrifice Isaac "for God's sake and- the two are wholly identical- for his (Abraham's) own sake. He does it for God's sake because God demands this proof of his faith; he does it for his own sake so that he can prove it".<sup>41</sup> This refers to an exclusive reciprocal relationship between God and Abraham. God's demand and Abraham's response demonstrate nothing but the incommensurability of the relationship. Only God and Abraham understand the meaning of this relationship. In other words, Abraham incurs the absoluteness of his duty from his solemn relationship with God. That intimate relationship eventually makes a barrier for reason to demystify Abraham's obedience.

Moreover, the uniqueness of faith makes Abraham incomparable with the tragic hero. The tragic hero's act which at first seems to be immoral does, however, express a moral demand. The tragic hero may sacrifice his own daughter or son but for the sake of others, for the welfare of the state. The unselfish sacrifice of the tragic

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<sup>41</sup> *Fear and Trembling*, pp.59,60.

hero has, as a matter of fact, a higher moral impact reflected by the happiness of others. Abraham's case is different as de Silentio says,

By his act he (Abraham) transgressed the ethical altogether and had a higher *telos* outside it, in relation to which he suspended it. For I certainly would like to know how Abraham's act can be related to the universal, whether any point of contact between what Abraham did and the universal can be found other than that Abraham transgressed it. It is not to save a nation, not to uphold the idea of the state that Abraham does it; it is not to appease the angry gods. If it were a matter of the deity's being angry, then he was, after all, angry only with Abraham, and Abraham's act is totally unrelated to the universal, is a purely private endeavor. Therefore, while the tragic hero is great because of his moral virtue. Abraham is great because of a purely personal virtue.<sup>42</sup>

Being in private relation with God, Abraham does not entirely detach himself from ethical consideration. Abraham's ethical expression takes form in his truly and fatherly love of Isaac. As a father he owns the common fatherly figure. He loves Isaac in a way a father normally loves his son. That is why, when Isaac is spared from the sacrifice, he receives him with such a great joy. He is happy because his beloved son has been returned to him. Hence, he may love Isaac more than ever; this, according to Johannes de Silentio, can only be understood if Abraham lives in paradox. Since in paradox, even though Abraham willingly sacrifices Isaac, he does it with a (absurd) hope that Isaac will one way or another return to him. This is

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<sup>42</sup> *Fear and Trembling*, p.59.



different from the tragic hero as when he sacrificed his daughter he could never hope to get her back. The tragic hero has renounced his hopes to his daughter's life and he could never have thought of her future anymore. The sacrifice is just the end of his daughter's life. Abraham, on the other hand, has the future in mind for Isaac since he still thinks of and hopes for Isaac to be saved. Accordingly, we may see Abraham as a father who, in his ethical duty, loves his only son. However, the test is precisely about this ethical duty. The test has put Abraham in paradox between loving his son and loving God, between ethical duty and love of God. R.Z. Friedman describes the struggle of the faithful as this, "the individual who professes faith is a Knight, one who does battle with, or who has life in terms of, the struggle of the will. He recognizes that his life is this struggle, the endless task of confronting and choosing in terms of the either/or of faith and reason".<sup>43</sup> Friedman furthermore argues that the struggle will never settle down since the choice, once made, disappears with the moment. "Each new moment requires a new choice, and the will, free and undetermined by those decisions which the individual has made in the past, must again declare itself. But then, the content of faith becomes the choice for faith. The Knight may choose hope and promise, as Kierkegaard assures us, but does not actually live in hope and promise. He does not get beyond the choice."<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Friedman, "Looking," p.254.

<sup>44</sup> Friedman, "Looking," p.254.

It is clear that the absolute duty to God as shown by Abraham would never escape from paradox, it would endlessly be in a dialectical tension with the ethical duty. Had the duty to God become established, it would be nothing else than a dead dogma :

Thus it is proper to say that every duty is essentially duty to God, but if no more can be said than this, then it is also said that I actually have no duty to God... in the duty itself I do not enter into relation to God. For example, it is a duty to love one's neighbor. It is a duty by its being traced back to God, but in the duty I enter into relation not to God but to the neighbor I love. If in this connection I then say that it is my duty to love God, I am actually pronouncing only a tautology, inasmuch as "God" in a totally abstract sense is here understood as the divine- that is, the universal, that is, the duty.<sup>45</sup>

"Fear and Trembling" consists of a fundamental doubting of the dogmatical way of thinking. It shows that in existence there is always something else that is naturally different or even incomprehensible; and faith is part of this thing. Faith consists of many possibilities, even of the impossible possibility. Abraham believes in the possibility that Isaac will return to him which is in itself impossible with regard to the sacrifice. A similar absurdity may also happen when Isaac really comes back since he only returns to Abraham after Abraham "has sacrificed" him. In his mind Abraham has already sacrificed Isaac as his unmoved decision in response to God's command. Paradox seems to

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<sup>45</sup> *Fear and Trembling*, p.68.

appear in every condition which in the end brings him nowhere. The eternal tension between the oppositional possibilities exists forever in the life of the believer which will only destabilize any hope of certainty. "For Kierkegaard, the life of faith is the continuous re-enactment of the trial of Abraham."<sup>46</sup>

How, then, is Abraham to be justified? "His justification is the paradoxical, for if he is, then he is justified not by virtue of being something universal but by virtue of being the single individual."<sup>47</sup> It is implied here that the justification of faith cannot be declared as such. Faith requires privacy and it is only by agreeing to such privacy that the justification of faith can be made possible. However, privacy is at the same time tantamount to concealment from the outside world. As soon as faith comes to the fore, it has renounced its paradox and cannot be regarded as faith any more. In the concealment, though, faith becomes unintelligible. The knight of faith is ultimately a dumb knight. No one can understand him in his silence. Looking at his acts only one may think he is mad or worse, that he is a murderer. Even the narrator himself states, "Abraham I cannot understand; in a certain sense I can learn nothing from him except to be amazed."<sup>48</sup> And to those who claim that they can learn about faith from Abraham, that is to say, they can understand Abraham, Johannes de Silentio says, "if someone deludes himself into

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<sup>46</sup> Friedman, "Looking," p.254.

<sup>47</sup> *Fear and Trembling*, p.62.

<sup>48</sup> *Fear and Trembling*, p.37.

thinking he may be moved to have faith by pondering the outcome of that story, he cheats himself and cheats God."<sup>49</sup>

### Kierkegaard (*Fear and Trembling*) and Genesis 22

There are probably two apparent aspects about *Fear and Trembling* in its relation to the Bible as explained by Friedman, "Kierkegaard rescues Scripture from those who, like Spinoza, dismiss it as moral teaching which, while containing an element of universal truth, is, nevertheless, poorly reasoned and imaginatively presented, and those who, like Hegel, believe that Scripture is a primitive statement which, while true, is yet superseded by literary and philosophical forms more pure and conceptual".<sup>50</sup> From the way he treats the biblical story, Kierkegaard seems to suggest that the use of the Bible as a source of moral laws is highly problematic. The Bible may turn out not only to be logically untenable but morally absurd. And if one hopes that the Bible can make him understand something out of reason, he will be disappointed by its ambiguity. It is not a rational understanding that the Bible can offer but a paradox, an indeterminate conflicting phenomenon. However, if we are persuaded by Kierkegaard that absurdity or paradox is the basic nature of life then we may find that the Bible discloses this truth. But, of course, paradox or absurdity is not something that we can perceive or explain. To do that, according to Kierkegaard, is to let ourselves

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<sup>49</sup> *Fear and Trembling*, p.37.

<sup>50</sup> Friedman, "Looking," p.259.

be deluded. *Fear and Trembling*, after all, persuades its readers to openly involve themselves in Abraham's experience as the only possibility other than to grasp him logically. It, however, leads to despair as one would never achieve any certainty. In this involvement the readers are led to an existential experience, that is, belief in God paradoxically.

Only poetical imagination, as Kierkegaard would argue, can bring Abraham's experience alive (Johannes de Silentio claims himself to be a poet). Abraham's experience reveals antinomies, that is, positions each of which is understood to be true but which are, nevertheless, in contradiction with each other. Reason cannot live with such antinomies as it always seeks a solution, a synthesis. Reading poetically, however, attempts to present the antinomies as they are. Johannes de Silentio is a poet who witnesses the dialectical movements of Abraham's faith but who does not intend to reduce it or to produce a synthesis of it. Johannes de Silentio considers antinomy as an inevitable condition of human existence which one can read from Abraham's story. Ultimately Kierkegaard's reading of Abraham is a reading which aims to give an alternative to, if not to undermine, a dogmatic and authoritative reading as commonly put into practice by both philosophers and theologians.

*Fear and Trembling* in its specific way might demonstrate what is usually called a symbolic/idealistic reading of the

Bible. It is one of the main lines in biblical interpretation in the mid-nineteenth century. John Rogerson says, "the symbolic interpretation regards the story as the expression, in narrative form, of 'ideas' which the interpreter is called upon to separate out from the form. This is a sophisticated version of the allegorising of the early and pre-Reformation Church. It shifts attention from the surface of the text to its underlying ideas".<sup>51</sup> Because *Fear and Trembling* focuses on the underlying ideas of the story so that it can argue about knowing Abraham's mind which is not in any way apparent on the surface, there are some discrepancies that we may see between the knowledge from the depth and from the surface of the text. The most obvious difference between what we are informed by Kierkegaard and what we can see in the narrative is about Abraham's morality. The biblical Abraham is scarcely a character who can contemplate moral consideration as deeply as Kierkegaard might have led us to think. Abraham does not seem to have any doubt whatsoever concerning the sacrifice of Isaac. His performance is likely to remind us of the character(s) in the aesthetic stage of *Fear and Trembling*, the character(s) who does not reflect on his deeds and lacks an ethical commitment. Kierkegaard himself seems to represent Abraham in many similar ways as the aesthetic hero rather than the tragic hero of the ethical stage. The only quality that distinguishes Abraham from the aesthetic

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<sup>51</sup> John Rogerson, "Wrestling with the Angel: A Study in Historical and Literary Interpretation" in *Hermeneutics, the Bible and Literary Criticism*, ed. Ann Loades and Michael McLain, Studies in Literature and Religion, 1992, p.136.

hero is the engagement of the knight of faith with ethics. But when the ethics is finally suspended, as assumed by the religious stage, then there is no longer a difference between Abraham and Don Juan! Indeed, biblical Abraham is more comparable to the aesthetic hero than to the tragic hero. His deeds may seem as precipitous as the aesthetic hero (does he ever think about the sacrificial command before he makes his journey to Moriah?). But, of course, Kierkegaard would not suggest that Abraham is one of the aesthetic heroes. His Abraham is a careful thinker who, however, is different from the Abraham that we find on the surface of the story. His Abraham is a result of a reading on a deeper level of the story. But one may wonder as to how Kierkegaard could come to that deeper level of the story. How can we know that Kierkegaard's Abraham does arise from the depth of the story and not from Kierkegaard's own imagination? We do not deny the depth of Abraham's religiosity in Kierkegaard's reading but, at the same time, we find on the surface of the story (as the only visible thing we have) an Abraham that is reminiscent of the aesthetic hero.

Kierkegaard's reading, after all, aims at finding a justification for Abraham's faith although for this reason one has to face the murkiness of faith. The sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham can finally be vindicated only by sacrificing (suspending) ethics/morals first. There is no relevant question of the rightness or the wrongness of the sacrifice because in so doing Abraham believes in paradox.

It is impossible for us therefore to judge the sacrifice unless we also believe in the paradox. But, can we have such a belief? Or even, is there any such belief at all? Kierkegaard says that this belief demands that the believer leaps from the ethical world, that is, the comprehensible world where one can be understood by others, into the religious world, that is, the absurd world. This is a kind of blind leap which abandons reason. It is a leap into a vacuum where human knowledge is simply unavailable. As a result we, the readers, are faced with a kind of perplexing impossibility: while we know that only by leaping into the absurdity can Abraham be justified, we can never understand the nature of this justification. So can we really justify Abraham in the manner of the Knight of Faith? Apparently the justification demands our commitment to be like Abraham- which is very unlikely. Who among us wants to sacrifice or to be commanded to sacrifice his own son? Who nowadays can tolerate human sacrifice? In the end we have to be very skeptical if we are to be able to justify Abraham's deeds at all. It does not mean that we have to transform the immorality into some kind of action of a more tolerable fashion, as conducted by some commentators above, so that we can justify it. But we may argue that reading does not necessarily have to be followed by such a justification. And, indeed, to measure, let alone to justify, Abraham's deeds is very tricky. Abraham's as well as God's morality is very ambiguous in the Bible.

However, if Kierkegaard comes to the conclusion that he



cannot understand Abraham because of the continuous paradox that the knight of faith has to live in, we also find it impossible to understand Abraham amidst the lack of certainties and ambiguities the text presents us with. The paradox of Abraham in *Fear and Trembling*, although bound up with Kierkegaard's own understanding, seems to coincide with the aporia that we find as the nature of the narrative in Genesis 22.<sup>52</sup>

#### Did Abraham not mishear God?

A kind of aporetic reading of the Akedah is also demonstrated by Kafka.<sup>53</sup> But, Kafka works or plays rather on the aesthetic stage, if we use Kierkegaard's categories, that is to say, while Kierkegaard is busy dealing with ethical questions about the sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham in order to gain justification, Kafka takes another stance by asking whether Abraham has rightly judged God's intention in the first place. Kafka observes uncertainties in the story concerning Abraham's reception of God's command, for which he finds many possibilities of reading. His approach may remind us of midrashic interpretations. And, indeed, if he talks about Abraham who misjudges God and goes to sacrifice his son, there is an equivalent

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<sup>52</sup>The term aporia (adj.aporetic) indicates a final impasse or paradox: a point at which a text's self contradictory meanings can no longer be resolved, or at which the text undermines its own most fundamental presuppositions. It leads to the claim of the undecidability of the meanings of the text. See Chris Baldick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 1991, p.15.

<sup>53</sup>Apart from notes in his letters to friends, Kafka never wrote a detailed reading on Abraham in the Akedah.

midrash. This midrash focuses on the event of the intrusion of the *malak Yahweh* in v.12. After the *malak Yahweh* proclaims the divine message to Abraham,

Rabbi Abba said: Abraham said to God: "I will lay my complaint before you. Yesterday (on an earlier occasion) you told me 'In Isaac shall thy seed be called to thee' (Gen.21:12), and then again you said, 'Take now thy son' (Gen.22:2), and now you tell me 'Lay not thine hand upon the lad!'" The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him, in the words of Psalm 89:35, "'My covenant will I not profane, nor alter that which is gone out of my lips.' When I told you 'Take thy son,' I was not altering that which went out from my lips, namely, my promise that you would have descendants through Isaac. I did not tell you 'kill him,' but 'bring him up' to the mountain. You have brought him up- now take him down again."<sup>54</sup>

When Abraham complains about the contradictions that God appears to produce in his first and second commands, it is disclosed to him that it is not God who contradicts himself but that he has misunderstood God. The reason used by God to defend his intention is related to the meaning of the phrase *ha'alehu Šam* (v.2) which is literally: cause him to go up there or bring him up there. Although, followed by *le'olah* (as a burnt-offering), the whole phrase indicates that Isaac is commanded to be sacrificed, God in this midrash denies this understanding. God holds to the literal meaning of the phrase that he only asks Abraham to bring Isaac up to the mountain. Abraham's misunderstanding leads him to be seen as a kind of a fool or someone who is fooling himself by not making sure of God's intention

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<sup>54</sup> Cited by Rashi, *Pentateuch with Targum Onkelos, Haphtaroth and Rashi's Commentary*, tr. M.Rosenbaum and A.M.Silbermann.

before he is doing the formidable task. As a result, this midrash can be regarded as parodying Abraham's zealous obedience which is commonly reckoned as the highest achievement of man's faith in God.

Meanwhile, Kafka in his letter to his friend, Robert Klopstock, in 1921 says:

But another Abraham. One who wants to sacrifice altogether in the right way, and who has the right mood in general for the whole thing, but who cannot believe that he is the one meant, he, the repulsive old man and his child, the dirty boy. The true faith is not lacking to him, he has this faith, he would sacrifice in the right frame of mind if he could only believe that he is the one meant. He fears, he will ride out as Abraham with his son, but on the way he will metamorphose into Don Quixote. The world would have been horrified at Abraham if it could have seen him, he however fears that the world will laugh itself to death at the sight of him. But, it is not ridiculousness as such that he fears- of course, he fears that too, and above all his laughing along with them- but mainly he fears that this ridiculousness will make him even older and uglier, his son even dirtier, more unworthy really to be summoned. An Abraham who comes unsummoned!<sup>55</sup>

Abraham is described as being doubtful if he is really summoned by God to sacrifice his son. The appearance of the father as a repulsive old man and the son as a dirty boy itself already creates a feeling of pity as well as indicates an unconvincing performance of the characters. But Abraham does have faith in God. He is able to do

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<sup>55</sup> Translated by Jill Robbins from German. Jill Robbins, "Kafka's Parables," in *Midrash and Literature*, ed. Geoffrey H. Hartman and Sanford Budick, 1986, p.276.

whatever God wants him to do. Only that he is unsure if he is meant to do the sacrifice. This hesitation becomes a possibility that Abraham is actually never commanded by God to sacrifice his son. At the end this possibility is accepted as a fact, "an Abraham who comes unsummoned!". And Kafka continues to write:

An Abraham who comes unsummoned! It is as if at the end of the year, the best student is ceremoniously supposed to receive a prize, and in the expectant stillness the worst student, as a result of an error of hearing, comes forward from his dirty last desk and the whole class explodes. And it is perhaps no error of hearing, his name was really called, the rewarding of the best is supposed to be, according to the intention of the teacher, at the same time the punishment of the worst.<sup>56</sup>

An analogy is made between "Abraham who comes unsummoned" with the worst student in the class who perhaps because of sleepiness or carelessness (typical of the worst student?) mishears his name being called. It is a real embarrassment for the student since the whole class laugh at him. But then Kafka thinks of another possibility that there is actually no error of hearing. This possibility becomes a fact since the student is indeed called by the teacher although for the purpose of punishing him rather than rewarding him. By the same token, Abraham might not come unsummoned. He is really commanded by God but for a different reason from the one that he knew. But this reason or in the analogy, the teacher's intention is not to be taken as it is. It is not the intention of somebody by

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<sup>56</sup> Jill Robbins, *ibid.*, pp.276-7.

which we can isolate it from others which are not intended. In Kafka's unfinished novel *The Castle* we have character K. who visits the Mayor asking about the terms of his employment as Land Surveyor. It turns out that nobody has summoned K. to come. Upon a question from the bewildered K. the Mayor in the end says, "...errors don't happen, and even if once in a while an error does happen, as in your case, who can say finally that it's an error?".<sup>57</sup> The effect of the question of the Mayor "who can say finally that it's an error?" echoes in the intention of the teacher or the different reason for which Abraham is called. Thus, as Jill Robbins says, "that intention (of the teacher) is not like the intention of a subject, but the kind of intention that is a law of Kafka's writing: the road to the Castle 'did not lead up the Castle hill; it only led near it, but then, as if intentionally (*dann aber, wie absichtlich*), it turned aside, and if it did not lead away from the Castle, it did not lead nearer to it either'".<sup>58</sup>

We are left with uncertainty about whether Abraham does the right thing in sacrificing Isaac. There is a sense of otherness in Abraham which always multiplies itself and never settles down. Abraham who comes unsummoned, Abraham who is summoned but for another reason and surely it can continue uninterruptedly since this other reason itself is not a final word. There is always a possibility of Abraham being different from what he previously was. At the same

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<sup>57</sup> Cited by Jill Robbins, *ibid.*, p.265.

<sup>58</sup> Jill Robbins, *ibid.*, p.280.

time this differing process seems to lead us nowhere just like the road to the Castle. It is precisely the ambiguous characteristic that we can find in the Akedah narrative, although in different fashions from that of Kafka's or even if Abraham has rightly judged God's command. There are, to borrow Geoffrey Hartman's words, "interesting asymmetries and superfluties in so economical a story- the entire story itself, in fact, introduces something baffling on the level of narrative that cannot be smoothed over or harmonized without further redactional or interpretive moves".<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup>This is Hartman's comment on the story about Jacob's wrestling with a mysterious man (Gen.32:24-32) which can also appropriately be directed to the Akedah. Geoffrey H.Hartman, "The Struggle for the Text," in *Midrash and Literature*, 1986, p.12.

## CHAPTER VI

**CONCLUSION:  
THE INDETERMINACY OF THE TEXT  
AND HERMENEUTICS**

A *mythos* must never be reduced to a discursive summary of its contents and purposes. Its power is presented through the total interaction of its images, sequences, and values.

Michael Fishbane, *Text and Texture*

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Of making many books there is no end,...

*Ecclesiastes 12:12*

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"Hear and hear, but do not understand; see and see, but do not perceive."

*Isaiah 6:9*

We have come to the realisation that because of the lack of motives behind the actions of the characters as well as the limited information about the events, there is hardly any sense of determination of how the story of Genesis 22 has to be understood. Does Abraham merely accomplish the divine command? Or is he a vengeful father who has lost his real beloved son and tried to kill his son's, that is Ishmael's, rival? The sacrifice begins with the command from God but when, where, how and why the command is given remains an unanswered puzzle. There is only the "what" question that can be answered, that is, the existence of such the command

itself. No matter how mysterious it is, it really takes place. What was probably available to the writer was only the act of the command itself based on which the story of the binding of Isaac was made. While we can imagine that the process of development that led to the existence of the story we have in the Bible was very complicated and has undergone several refinements, our story is still by no means unambiguous. The many and different readings produced throughout history give an obvious proof of that. The command of God is still mysterious besides the narratorial attempt to frame the story as a *nissah*, so is the content of Abraham's mind, Isaac's response to his sacrifice, the servants' reaction to Abraham's message and to the disappearance of Isaac.

Surely, the absence of Isaac at the end of the story prompts a dire question about the survival of Isaac. But there is no clue to the answer to that question: Isaac's life remains uncertain. The narrative inevitably leads us nowhere by not mentioning Isaac. Some expositions of the absence of Isaac are given in the midrash which describes the death of Isaac in the sacrifice followed by his resurrection, or alternatively, Isaac is taken to Paradise to be healed there. In another version, Isaac is sent away from Abraham to study Torah. These are a kind of completion needed by the narrative, were it to produce a closure that could clarify all important events while preventing an impasse. The rabbinic interpretation makes certain what is uncertain in the narrative. Apart from the sheer



inventiveness of the midrashic expositions, there is, at least, an admission that the role of Isaac is critical to the story so that one cannot forget him. Our attention is attracted by what Abraham might say to his servants concerning Isaac when he goes down the hill to meet them again since the servants are expecting that they will see both masters (cf. v.5). But no information whatsoever can we hear about it, not even a single word is spoken. The servants do not seem confused by the disappearance of Isaac but the readers- who are aware of Abraham's message (v.5)- ought to ask what should have been the question of the servants, "where is Isaac?". Looking back to the previous verses we may think that if the word *taḥath* (ch.13) is to be understood not in its spatial but temporal dimension: "after", the word might indicate that the ram was sacrificed after Isaac (is sacrificed).<sup>1</sup> So there are two sacrifices delivered by Abraham on the site. It may give a textual explanation for the disappearance of Isaac. Any expectation of the survival of Isaac would certainly be undermined by this understanding. Nevertheless, it is merely one possible interpretation which seeks a certainty about the fate of Isaac, though it is the tragic one, while the narrative offers no such certainty.

A cloud of mystery also hangs about concerning the prompt obedience of Abraham to the controversial command; the command which has provoked various comments over the

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<sup>1</sup>For the twofold or manifold denotations of Hebrew words, see Georg Fohrer, "Twofold Aspects of Hebrew Words," in *Words and Meanings*, ed. P.R.Ackroyd and Barnabas Lindars, 1968, pp.95-103.

centuries but which still cannot provide a satisfactory explanation of its scandalous character. As background, the feud between Sarah and Hagar demands attention in spite of the non-existence of womanly voices in the Akedah. The closeness between the mothers and their sons revealed in the previous story makes the rivalry that ends up in the harassment of each son rendered appropriately to them; Abraham, in sacrificing Isaac, might represent the wish of Hagar as God represents the wish of Sarah in allowing Ishmael to be expelled. Rivalry within a family is not unusual in biblical stories that is often complicated by the involvement of other parties, including God, as proponent or opponent; but the rivalry appears only in the background vanishing from the foreground of the Akedah just like the voices of the women. There is only the immediate agreement of Abraham to kill Isaac that leaves one no doubt of his harmonious relationship, rather than rivalry, with God. It is however important to question why such a tense relationship between Sarah/God and Hagar/Abraham in ch.21 is absent in ch.22 while there is a similar outcome of the events in which the sons are put in mortal danger. Did the writer deliberately omit the quarrel between God and Abraham because it is wicked in the context of Israel's faith? It is necessary for the readers to ask not only what is in the narrative but also what is not in the narrative. The voice of the narrator should be read along with other dissenting voices which may be suppressed in one way or another but still remain and which can be analysed.

Abraham's immediate and unwavering obedience has not always been taken for granted especially in Christian tradition since the Reformation. Calvin described the struggle in Abraham's mind in sacrificing his own son as it consists of oppositional wishes. Abraham is not particularly seen as blindly consummating the sacrifice, his heart is torn between obeying God and loving his son. Abraham has therefore to suffer in this experience. The suffering of Abraham became a crucial theme in the work of Kierkegaard which in its profundity may represent the zenith of Christian understanding of Abraham's sorrowful experience. In *Fear and Trembling* Abraham is reflected as a figure that is too difficult to be understood, his will is multilayered and absurd. This reflection is in contrast with another interpretation of Abraham in Christian tradition which tends to simplify the understanding of Abraham's faith. The common acceptance of Abraham as the father of the faithful has a strong implication that one can comprehend Abraham's faith and exercise it in one's own life. This obviously demands an impossible task since no one could give his approval to the practice of infant sacrifice as obedience to God. But, as a proponent of the argument might say, the application of the faith of Abraham to real life does not necessarily mean sacrificing one's own child. It may not be so but could the fear, the anxiety, the anguish that blanket the sacrifice of son be the same had it been replaced by another form of expression? It is highly doubtful. Thus, to follow the above argument, that is, if Abraham's act should remain exemplary to the faithful, its

demand ought to be reduced to the achievable degree, something that normal human beings can bear. To argue for the comprehensibility of Abraham's faith therefore amounts to the denial of the impossibility of obeying the command to sacrifice one's own descendant. Reading Abraham as an example to the faithful inevitably reduces the sense of fear and horror experienced by the father, unless the faithful are ready to actually reduplicate the sacrifice, for which the experiences of the Jews during the Crusades are unique and incomparable. The view that puts forward the boldness of Abraham's faith also obscures the ambiguity, the incomprehensibility of Abraham's act in the Akedah.

The simplistic understanding of the Akedah as a story that plainly tells of the admirable faith of Abraham in doing the most difficult duty one could imagine is also challenged by Auerbach's reading. *Mimesis* proves that the brevity of the story, rather than providing an obvious picture of Abraham's faith, is full of ambiguities, gaps of knowledge that call for interpretation. The awareness of complexity is not only in relation to the content of Abraham's mind but also to the realm of the story as a whole. Auerbach's close reading shows that there are many contradictions in the Akedah as it is read against the background of the surrounding stories. This reading would certainly undermine the interpretation that puts Abraham's act as a straightforward response to God's command, that is as plain as it appears in the narrative itself. This latter image is presupposed by the Christian typological

interpretation that sees Abraham's voluntary sacrifice of Isaac similar to that of God's voluntary sacrifice of Christ. The emphasis on the voluntariness of Abraham's act denies the multilayeredness discovered by Auerbach in Abraham's mind. There must be some reservations about Abraham's willingness to kill Isaac as he remembers God's promises that Isaac will bear the divine covenant as well as his name, which obviously contradict the present command. Contradictions between previous and present experiences dwell upon Abraham's mind, his journey to mount Moriah is loaded by the heavy burden. Auerbach's Abraham is after all reminiscent of Kierkegaard's tragic hero, although, instead of having the ethical preoccupation, Auerbach's Abraham is shadowed by his past experiences as the receiver of God's promises that seem to be obliterated by the command to sacrifice his only son and hope. The ultimate point of Auerbach's reading is the thought that the equivocality that is characteristic of the Hebrew Bible reflects its belief about God or its religion itself. It is a religion that demands the readers to believe in it, to be involved in its world. Reading the Hebrew Bible, for Auerbach, is believing, but it is a belief merely in the incoherent, many-sided world. It is a very different version of the belief in Abraham as an example for the faithful.

The stress on the voluntariness of the characters in the sacrifice of Isaac, as shown by Abraham as a father who has to lose his son and by Isaac himself as a grown son who

realizes the dreadfulness of the sacrifice, also dominated Jewish interpretation for centuries. The situation is different in Jewish experience from the Christian's as the Jews were ready to imitate the sacrifice of Isaac in actual life during the Crusades or pogroms of Medieval Europe. Nonetheless, in modern awareness particularly after the Shoah the willingness to sacrifice one's own son is regarded merely as weakness that has to be repudiated. A new Israeli generation can no longer accept the value that legitimizes the sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham. The Akedah is, here, interpreted differently from the previous interpretation as it is not seen as a document of faith but as a document of suppression, that is, a suppression of humanity itself. As a challenge to that suppression, the modern Israeli artists maintain that Isaac has to stand up to confront the bold obedience of his father to God as well as to defend his right to conduct his own life.

The scandal in the Akedah is very much realized by modern interpreters particularly after Kant. The vicious command of God has been variously debunked or justified. Not long ago Woody Allen has Abraham pose a question to God, "how am I supposed to know when you're kidding?".<sup>2</sup> Is God kidding? Or is he serious with his command? If he is kidding, it would certainly be difficult to be merely described as funny or tragic bearing in mind the impact on Abraham and Isaac, it may be tragicomic altogether. If serious, why eventually does he let the sacrifice be cancelled? There is

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<sup>2</sup> Cited by Jill Robbins, "Kafka's Parables," p.278.

no doubt that the cancellation contradicts the first command. Commentators tend to explain that the contradiction is necessary because after all it is impossible for God to allow an immoral act. The second command justifies the moral rightness of God while the first command is seen to be held only temporarily. This conclusion, as we have seen before, has put aside the sacrificial command in favour of the cancellation. It has ignored, at least from Abraham's viewpoint, the seriousness of the sacrificial command. If God is kidding, Abraham is madly serious (that is why Kierkegaard could make a profound discourse out of Abraham's solemn act). Our response to the contradiction is more pragmatic: God has changed his mind since he issued the first command, he cannot bear the fact that Abraham is very steadfast in his obedience, he feels pity for Isaac. Or that God is surprised that Abraham can be so adamant- perhaps because Abraham is susceptible and thoughtless, never thinks twice of any command God wants him to do, if we take the story as a satire- and appalled by it. It is as if we have to ask whether God is really in favour of having thoughtless figures, like Abraham, to be his people. Perhaps God expects Abraham to be more resistant to the command to sacrifice. It did not happen, so he has to intervene in order to save Isaac.

To let the text of the Akedah stand on its own is to let all its oppositional motives appear without any attempt to reduce them to a particular closure. God is at the same

time destructive and protective of human life. Our readerly experience of his world is ambiguous; his acts may be unprecedented and shocking. This brings us to a realisation of the violent picture of God and man in the story. The violence is rarely alluded to by commentators although it is always there in the narrative and possibly in the mind of the commentators too. The commentators tend to explain away the violence for the sake of (therefore reducing the oppositional motives) belief in the moral goodness of the message of the story; the thing which has been rejected by Kant and doubted by Kierkegaard. We cannot get rid of violence which is pervasive not only in the Akedah but in the many biblical stories. It is perhaps the paradox of the Bible in which, in the language of Abraham's story, it can be said that there is no fulfillment of divine promises which is not entwined by the desire to destroy or to jeopardize them.

With the awareness of the aporetic nature of the Akedah, what should its interpretation be?<sup>3</sup> First of all, we may have to agree to the necessity of interpretation with its tendency to seek a closure, subjectively though, simply because it is impossible for us to live in uncertainty forever. The suffering of the readers of a text that does not provide a clear or sufficient interpretative angle by which the readers can understand the story world and derive a conclusion from it is explained by Hugh Pypers thus:

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<sup>3</sup>For the understanding of aporia (adj.aporetic), see Chapter V, f.n.52.



Human beings can be distressed by the inability to find an interpretation of the world that will enable them to make consistent predictions within it. That world can be the world evoked by a text. Reading is a process of inference, and a text may not provide sufficient clues, or provide ambiguous clues, and thus defer a coherent interpretation. Up to a certain point, this can be stimulating and enjoyable. The popularity of crossword puzzles and detective novels is evidence of this. Above that level, it becomes frustrating; the unpopularity of some modern verse arises from its resistance to inferential processes. This either leads to boredom and an abandonment of the effort at interpretation, or else to frustration and anger. The reaction will depend on the perceived rewards of deciphering the text. If the reader is merely seeking entertainment, he will quickly seek it elsewhere. If, however, the text encodes the only way of escape from a perilous situation, then the reader will persist to the point of extreme rage and despair.<sup>4</sup>

As a matter of principle we do not want to deny the rage and despair caused by the inconclusive world of the Akedah. At the same time, we see that at some point the suffering can no longer be bearable and the reader has to survive through his own interpretation. This usually amounts to manipulation or twisting of the text by the interpreter. Because the motive of this kind of interpretation is pragmatical then we have to accept that an interpretation can only be accepted for a limited time and context. There is no interpretation that can represent all aspects of the text and derive authority from such a claim. This is to argue that discussions and debates over a reading of a text are always inevitable and necessary. It can also mean that

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<sup>4</sup>Hugh Pyper, "The Reader in Pain: Job as Text and Pretext," in *Text and Pretext: Essays in Honour of Robert Davidson*, ed. R.P. Carroll, JSOTSS 138, 1992, pp.235-6.

we have to always be suspicious of the truth claims of any interpretation, including our own interpretation. This makes interpretation an endless task which in the end would reflect the indeterminacy of the text itself.

Frank Kermode in his *The Genesis of Secrecy* says, "the desires of interpreters are good because without them the world and the text are tacitly declared to be impossible; perhaps they are, but we must live as if the case were otherwise".<sup>5</sup> Like Pyper above, Kermode uses the world as an analogy to the text because in the world, events often happen unpredictably without human control of them. What we often find is a network of events in which anything can happen at any time. It is not only about the present or future events in the world but should also be seen in relation to the history of the past. There is a global tendency of history books to assume the objectivity of their conclusions about past events but it will involve wishful thinking if the world remains logically uncontrollable and their conclusions only represent one opinion. Yet we have ways of working through the uncertainty of the world. In relation to a text, we have ways of explaining the unfollowable text. For Kermode, any certainty with which we think about the world is a fictional construct ("as-if" fact) for which we have to prepare ourselves to be disappointed if it clashes with another fact.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative*, c.1979, p.126.

<sup>6</sup> A philosophical argument of this kind can be found in

Kermode assumes that interpretation is a hermeneutical activity that involves manipulations, even deceptions, to frame and construct an understanding out of an indeterminate narrative. This activity is related to the mythical figure Hermes,

Hermes is cunning, and occasionally violent: a trickster, a robber. So it is not surprising that he is also the patron of interpreters. Sometimes they proclaim an evident sense, like a herald; but they also use cunning, and may claim the right to be violent, and glory in it. The rules of their art, and its philosophy, are called "hermeneutics." This word itself, after centuries of innocent use, turns out to have secret senses; for it is now thought by some to connote the most serious philosophical inquiry, to be the means whereby they effect a necessary subversion of the old metaphysics. Even in its more restricted application, which is related to the interpretation of texts, the word covers a considerable range of activity, from the plain proclamation of sense to oracular intimations of which the true understanding may be delayed for generations, emerging in historical circumstances quite unlike those in which the oracle spoke. Such operations may require the professional exercise of stealth or violence.<sup>7</sup>

Kermode observes the hermeneutical act as it is conducted by interpreters who assume a duty of explaining the meaning of their texts. The way the meaning is presented by the interpreter is not something that we can obviously see in

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Vaihinger's *The Philosophy of "As If"* with one of its claim that the whole world of ideas is an instrument to enable us to orientate ourselves in the real world, but is not a copy of that world. H.Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of 'As If': A System of the Theoretical, Practical and Religious Fictions of Mankind*, tr. C.K.Ogden, 1924, pp.15-16. This distinction makes our knowledges impossible to represent the real world and therefore should proceed indeterminately and not to be frozen as a dogma.

<sup>7</sup>Kermode, op.cit., p.1.

the text. The text may provide some evidence for the reading but the more demanding contribution, if the meaning is to be as it is, is the cunning of the interpreter. It is because the text itself is, after all, polysemiotic while interpretation has to be monosemiotic. Writing an interpretation therefore is virtually the same as writing a fiction that assumes a control over the world by allowing the expected events to take place, while at the same time, negating all other possibilities. "The control may indeed be illusory, a wishful projection of authorial power; but it reflects an awareness that texts exist from the outset as ground to be competed for by various strategies of self-promoting knowledge."<sup>8</sup> The text therefore becomes a pretext for the interpretation, though by no means tameable.

The degree of acceptability of an interpretation depends on its degree of successfulness in satisfying its public; since it is doubtless that, like a story, an interpretation is made (up) for specific audiences (be it common people, academic or ecclesiastical). In this case, the more manipulative the interpreter, i.e., the more followable and interesting the story is for the addressee, the more likely the interpretation is to be satisfactory and acceptable. No wonder then that an interpretation can be much more popular than the original text that has no conclusive meaning and is therefore confusing.

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<sup>8</sup> Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice*, c.1982, p.88.

Interpretation generally assumes that the uncertainties of the text can in one way or another be eventually overcome. In the reception history we may see that if there were some degree of awareness of the obscurity of the narrative it would hardly be accepted as such. It would be considered primarily as a problem that has to be solved by the interpreter, so that the narrative can become understandable. One of the ways to make the narrative appear understandable is by arguing for its deep or latent meaning rather than depending on the ambiguity of its surface. This thought is based on a dichotomy of what is hidden in the narrative that is coherent and comprehensible and what is manifest that is polyphonic and equivocal. However, "while we seek our intimations of latent order we may omit to notice that our text has a manifest gratuitousness, a playfulness- we might add a blindness, a deafness, a forgetfulness- that tells against our scheme".<sup>9</sup> The "our scheme" can also refer to readings that tend to maintain the belief of an overarching theme that will assemble the whole biblical discourse into a particular logic. In other words, each narrative is not analyzed in its detail but is framed in a certain direction in consultation with other narratives. But when we analyze the narrative closely all the gratuitousness and playfulness make the overarching theme(s) absurd or, at least, secondary.

Kermode would rather take the conflicting and unstable

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<sup>9</sup>Kermode, *Secrecy*, p.17.

elements of the text as a challenge that in effect is disappointing the meaning-oriented interpreter. He does not seem to suggest that one should hold perpetually onto the playful aspects of the text. It seems that after all Kermode argues for a fixation of meaning by the interpreter, though only temporarily and imperfectly. It is apparent in the final words of his book, "our sole hope and pleasure is in the perception of a momentary radiance, before the door of disappointment is finally shut on us". This wish perhaps can be described thus: amidst the continuous suffering of reading of an indeterminate and self-conflicting text, as Pyper puts it, Kermode asks for a break of pleasure which, as he knows, will however not last long and be a private matter. But there is also another Kermodian pleasure, though it has less importance than the first one for the author, which is implied by this sentence, "the largest consolation is that without interpretation there would be no mystery".<sup>10</sup> It is a consolation or pleasure for the interpreter to find that the indeterminacy or mystery of the text begins with and exists only by interpretation. The question is why, after all the pleasure of finding the mystery, one has to let himself suffer or be disappointed because of searching for the meaning that is never permanent? Can the readers go on in the pleasure of finding the mystery? In any case, a pleasure may not be had only by escaping from the mystery of the text which will, as opposed to the hope of the escape, again and again appear but also by uncovering and

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<sup>10</sup> Kermode, *Secrecy*, p.126.

probing the mystery.<sup>11</sup> One can probably play with the text in its gratuitousness and playfulness without having to suffer or be disappointed because the meaning that he has been searching for never actually exists or unstable. The task of interpretation may be aimed at recognizing and demonstrating the polyphony of the text. And as it is not directed at grasping the meaning or at bringing the conflicting elements of the narrative into conformity, an interpretation is more prepared to face all possible phenomena reflected by the narrative, conflictual though they may be. "Interpretation is no longer turned back in a deluded quest for origins and truth. Rather, it assumes the vertiginous freedom of writing itself: a writing launched by the encounter with a text which itself acknowledges no limit to the free play of meaning."<sup>12</sup> Kermode himself says, "to be blessedly fallible, to have the capacity to subvert manifest senses, is the mark of good enough readers and good enough texts".<sup>13</sup>

The Akedah consists of clashing possibilities, not only that Abraham successfully passes the divine test and yet receives Isaac back as is usually argued; but that the (signified) meaning of the word *nissah* itself is ambiguous

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<sup>11</sup>What we find in dealing with the polyphony of the text is not necessarily a despairing suffering or disappointment which motivates someone to cry for pleasure. It may be that Pyper and Kermode must engage with the suffering and disappointment of the reader because of the nature of the books that they read, namely, the book of Job (Pyper) and the gospel of Mark (Kermode). In contrast, we may compare Roland Barthes' reading on Genesis 32, "The Struggle with the Angel" which deals a great deal with the pleasure of reading. Barthes' reading can be seen in *Image Music Text*, tr. Stephen Heath, 1977, pp.125-41.

<sup>12</sup>Norris, *Deconstruction*, p.70.

<sup>13</sup>Kermode, *Secrecy*, p.14.

while Abraham has a violent desire to kill Isaac, God contradicts his own command and Isaac's fate is uncertain. Wilfred Owen's *The Parable of the Old Man and the Young* has the old man (Abram) slay his son (Isaac):

So Abram 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 him 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>14</sup>

We may rightly say that the last stanza of the poem describes a twist of the biblical version. It correlates with Owen's *Sitz im Leben* in the middle of the First World War. The twist reflects the frustrating time of the war, seeing a lot of young soldiers die at the hands of (because of the policy of) the old men (the old politicians who themselves never go to war and so are never threatened by death). In turn, the horror and appalling portrayal may bring a message to us that war is inhumane, sacrificing a lot of innocent people and is therefore unnecessary. The tragic end of the poem may also demonstrate the possibility that Isaac actually gets killed. And the coldness of the old man in executing his son does not miss the depiction of the boldness and steadfastness of the Patriarch in the

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<sup>14</sup> *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen*, ed. C. Day Lewis, 1971, p.42.



biblical version. It is all clear if the Akedah has to end tragically, just like the portrayal in Owen's Poem. But, was Isaac really slaughtered by Abraham? Who knows? Nobody does, neither does the text. Interpretation has not yet finished simply because it has come to no useful or clear conclusion.

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