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PedaGod: God as Teacher¹

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The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, And the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding (Proverbs 9:10)

I will instruct you and teach you in the way which you should go; I will counsel you with My eye upon you (Psalm 32:8)

They have turned their back to Me . . . though I taught them, teaching again and again, they would not listen and receive instruction (Jeremiah 32:33)

Elsewhere in this book, we have explored the role of religion and the Bible in helping shape our educational imagination. While continuing with that theme, but this time focusing on the Old Testament exclusively, our aim here is a bit more daring, and playful, in that the subject of the chapter is no other than God Himself through the purview of Him² as teacher. Focusing on God as teacher, “reducing” the Almighty to only one of his many facets, might appear troubling—even blasphemous—to some but, as we have indicated earlier, the main purpose of the Bible is educational—beginning with the education of a newly-formed human race and then shifting to a more focused education of teaching the Nation of Israel in the ways of the Lord.

Indeed, Torah, the Hebrew word for the first five books of the Bible, shares the same root as the words *teacher* and *teaching*. Accordingly, words related to education are abundant throughout the Hebrew Bible: *Teaching* and *teacher* appear 106 times, *instruction* 67 times, *learn/learning* 69 times, *knowledge* and *knowing* 861 times and *wisdom* 163 times. Other educationally related terms such as *testing*, *discipline*, and *command* are also prevalent in the text (*religion*, on the other hand, does not appear even once). The profusion of the above terms in the text helps demonstrate the importance, prevalence, and scope of the educative mission underlying the Hebrew Bible.

If the primary purpose of the Bible is to educate, the main teacher in this pedagogical endeavor is no other than God Himself. Taking, then, as our assumption, that God is not only the primary Biblical teacher but is primarily a teacher, our focus here is on His pedagogy, His forms of teaching, and His overall trajectory as a teacher.

¹ This chapter was co-authored with Scott Jarvie, doctoral student at Michigan State University.

² Although the Bible refers to God both in the singular and plural and as masculine/feminine at the same time, we follow tradition here and refer to God as *He*, both in the masculine and in capitalizing His name.

One could, of course, claim that in whatever God does, He teaches. That is, God always teaches, whether He does so explicitly or implicitly, through His presence and even through His absence (e.g., during the Holocaust, though some suggest that He was present even there, that He is always present, even if the kind of teaching demonstrated and its outcomes are impossible for us to fathom). In this chapter, however, we take a less philosophical approach and, instead, read (and read into) the Bible—in this case, the Old Testament—more closely to explore God’s engagements in actual, direct teaching. In other words, His explicit encounters with people—His students—as they appear in the Biblical text. Of interest to us are His pedagogical stances, His approaches as teacher, His forms of instruction, His teacherly tone, His development and presence as teacher, the curriculum He structures for His students and the educative encounters He creates for them as learners. As teacher educators, rather than Biblical or religious scholars, our approach here invokes some of the field’s current understandings about pedagogy and teaching and use those as the prism through which to explore God as teacher and His teaching.

This sort of endeavor inevitably conflates time and space, imposes current understandings about teaching to the past and to someone—God—who obviously never enrolled in a university-based teacher education program and who surely had in mind plans in/for His teaching of which we are not (and never can be fully) aware. We understand those limitations. Still, we find value in this superimposition, as fraught with problems as it might be, to tease out the teaching aspects of God’s work and then, later in the chapter, examine ways in which God’s pedagogy is both still prevalent in our thinking as teachers today and the ways in which His pedagogy continues to in/form our thinking as teachers and teacher educators.

To be sure, God is no “regular” teacher. Unlike earthly teachers, He does not stand in front of a classroom, does not directly teach a group of 20-something students confined in one room. Instead, He teaches in informal places (e.g., the desert, Mount Sinai, the Garden of Eden, the halls of Pharaoh’s palace) and often uses props (e.g., the burning bush), proxies (angels) to convey His message rather than directly appearing in His own image. Moreover, while His ultimate audience is humanity as a whole and, later, the larger nation of Israel, God rarely addresses them as a whole. Instead, he teaches individuals (e.g., Abraham, Moses, Samuel) who either follow His orders to impact that larger audience or convey God’s word to them, becoming the actual, day to day, teachers of God’s word. In that regard, God’s teaching mostly takes the form of one-on-one instruction more so than on instructing large audiences directly. Indeed, though His main audience through much of the Hebrew Bible are the children of Israel, God appears to them in his own image only once, in Horeb, in the context of the giving of the Ten Commandments. Other than that, God’s teaching of the Israelites is conveyed either through symbols (e.g., the splitting of the Red Sea, the pillars of cloud and fire guiding the Israelites through the desert) or through words conveyed to the people through God’s messengers.

While God does closely monitor his students (To Adam: “Where are you?”, to Cain: “What have you done?” Genesis, 3:9, 4:10), takes attendance (to Cain: “Where is Abel your brother?” Genesis, 4:9), gets frustrated with His students (“They have turned *their* back to Me . . . they would not listen and receive instruction” (Jeremiah 32:33), and punishes them (the flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, the destruction of the temple), He also closely interacts with some of His students (Abraham, Moses), cares about them, allows them to speak back to Him, even negotiates with them to amend His intended actions. In all, we encounter God as a multifaceted teacher who, while often absent, provides confusing instructions, and is short tempered, but is also reflective, open to suggestions, adjusts instruction in light of student responses, and wants to be respected—even loved—by His students. Not unlike most “regular,” contemporary teachers.

Where God is also quite similar to our contemporary teachers is in his career trajectory as teacher. Like many teachers today, we find God in the early parts of the Book of Genesis eager and motivated to teach yet somewhat unprepared to do so, surprised by the outcomes of his teaching, disappointed with his students, and “learning on the job.” Upon reflection, He recognizes his mistakes and chooses, accordingly, to amend his pedagogy, getting more involved as a teacher and focusing intently on forging more intense and longer-term relationships with students. This intense teaching period—a “honeymoon period” in some ways—exemplified by His teaching of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses, takes place in the remainder of Genesis and Exodus, and into the Book of Kings with Samuel. Following that, and as the nation begins to grow, we find God “increasingly remote and noncommunicative” (Kass, 2003, p. 662), somewhat retreating from teaching, removing himself from the “classroom” and using substitutes to do His teaching. One could consider God, at that point, an administrator of teaching rather than a teacher, creating the curriculum but having it delivered by others (the prophets), yet still orchestrating events from above. This is not unlike contemporary teachers who devote five years to classroom teaching and then, for multiple reasons, often move on to administrative positions that take them away from direct instruction. One could suggest that God, as teacher, was able to distance himself from the “classroom” having provided a strong enough educational foundation that He could step back and leave the students, with the help of His messengers, to manage on their own. But, as history indicates, removing Himself from the classroom did not produce the kind of learning He hoped for. If we take the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and the exile of the Israelites as the end point, we see that removing Himself from the classroom might have not been the wisest pedagogical approach, at least not from the teacher’s perspective.

We proceed to explore God’s teaching, beginning by looking specifically at two of His teaching encounters, those with Adam and Eve and then with Abraham. We use those two examples to both provide a closer examination of His teaching as well as to identify a variety of themes from those two encounters which we then use to explore God’s teaching more broadly and across contexts. We conclude the chapter with an exploration of the degree and ways in which God’s teaching still remains in our collective imagination about teaching and teacher education.

Teaching and Learning in the Garden of Eden

God's first act of teaching begins on the sixth day of creation and concludes in the Garden of Eden, where, as readers may recall, Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge and were subsequently punished and banished from the Garden. Of interest to us in this story are its complex and nuanced pedagogical underpinnings, maneuvers, and outcomes that, beyond the particular lesson itself, shed some light on God as teacher, or at least in His first attempt at that; one for which He seemed somewhat unprepared (at least from our perspective today) and ultimately must have been disappointed with its results. After all, why would He have gone through the trouble of creating an entire garden to house Adam and Eve and then banish them from it, closing the garden thereafter by placing cherubs at its entrance to prevent anyone from entering?

Several aspects in the encounter in the Garden are worthy of exploration when one examines them through the purview of teaching: the intent of the lesson in relation to the pedagogy applied, the nature of guidance provided the students, the students' ability and readiness to learn, the positioning of knowledge, and the degree to which the teacher achieved His initial goals through the lesson. We address these in turn.

One of the hallmarks of teaching, many teachers suggest, is providing students clear and unambiguous instructions to all students to help guide them through one's lesson. How well did God do in that regard? That depends on which chapter of Genesis one reads. But assuming one reads all, as we did, the answer is inconclusive. This is because Genesis has two stories of creation—two different stories, one in the first chapter of Genesis, the other in chapter two. In each, God gives Adam and Eve a different set of instructions—actually giving those instructions to both Adam and Eve in Chapter One but only to Adam (prior to making Eve) in Chapter Two.³

In Chapter One of Genesis, at the end of the sixth day of creation, God blesses Adam and Eve, stating they will multiply, prosper, and rule the earth. He then adds: "Behold, I have given you every . . . tree which has fruit yielding seed; it shall be food for you" (1:29). In the second story of creation, in Chapter Two, however, God instructs Adam otherwise, saying: "From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die" (2:16-17). What we have here are two sets of rather contradictory instructions with regard to the teacher's intent (a blessing in Chapter One, a command and a threat in Chapter Two), tone (loving in Chapter One, Perilous in Chapter Two), and consequence (prosperity in Chapter One, pending death in Chapter Two). Added to that is the fact that while the first set of instructions—the blessing—was given to both Adam and Eve, the second set of instructions—the command forbidding the Tree of Knowledge—was only

³ Biblical scholars (e.g., Friedman, 2003) have long determined that the two different versions are not necessarily contradictory but, rather, the consequence of the Bible being a compilation of several textual versions formed into the Bible we know today. These different versions often recount the same events differently—as is the case in the two stories of creation. Our reading of the Bible uses the entire Biblical text, as we currently know it, as one, continuous text.

provided to Adam. What are the students—Adam and Eve—to do with those instructions, especially with Eve only receiving the first set? Are they to choose which one to follow since they can obviously not follow both at the same time? How, however, may they choose, since choice requires knowledge and they have yet to eat from the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge? They might ask God, but the teacher seems to no longer be around for the asking. And wouldn't the very idea of asking, and one's state of confusion as the impetus for asking require knowledge of a lack, of being confused without actually having the knowledge to know that?

As teachers, we ought always question whether our students are ready and able to learn that which we wish to teach them. Do they have the capacity to learn in and from our intended pedagogical encounter? Will they fail or succeed? While we already have the answer to the last question—one we all carry with us as descendents of the fallen Adam and Eve—one ought to inquire, as Kass (2003) does, as to whether Adam and Eve were in fact sufficiently self-conscious or had the depth and experience to understand God's command to not eat the fruit or what the consequences of such an action might entail? How could they know that before eating from the apple, an act that, while giving them the capacity to know already positioned them as disobeyers of the teacher's command?

Though Adam did convey the prohibition to Eve, as evident from her discussion with the snake, she, after much shrewd cajoling from the serpent, eats from the tree of Knowledge and then feeds it to Adam. Both, now in the know, not only realize they are naked, and cover themselves, but also that they have sinned by disobeying the Lord. God, obviously aware of what has taken place, calls onto Adam: "'Where are you?' He said, 'I heard the sound of You in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid myself.' And He said, 'Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?' The man said, 'The woman whom You gave *to be* with me, she gave me from the tree, and I ate.' Then the LORD God said to the woman, 'What is this you have done?' And the woman said, 'The serpent deceived me, and I ate'" (3:9-13).

Whether five thousand years ago in the Garden of Eden or in a contemporary public school today, it seems that some aspects of teaching and learning never change: teachers asking questions for which they already know the answers, students not responding to questions asked but providing answers to questions never asked, or students portending innocence and laying blame on others. How familiar, but nonetheless disturbing—now and then. We also, however, see a teacher begins the dialogue not with assertions or accusations but, 'like a good teacher and investigator, with a question' (Kass, 2003, p. 142), one that invites Adam to confront his actions. Questions are used in order to engage the students in discourse, without pushing students so as to entrap them in their own responses. Instead, taking their responses at face value—as a form of non-answers—and moving on, though the movement, in this case directly toward the punishment phase, seems somewhat hasty in light of the questions about student readiness raised earlier. Still, the punishment imposed, banishment from the Garden and enduring hard labor (both as physical work and childbearing), is not sure death, with which they were

threatened initially. Some compassion there, along with providing Adam and Eve with clothing to ensure their survival and comfort in the world outside the Garden.

In all, we see in this first Biblical pedagogical encounter numerous elements in play: a teacher who is of two minds with regard to the instructions provided to students, a teaching encounter that, by the results, was not fruitful in promoting the knowledge initially intended, students who do not follow instructions, who are rebellious in disregarding the teacher's orders, and a teacher who, not knowing how to proceed, moves directly to punishment, albeit a reduced punishment shrouded in compassion and care. Not a resoundingly successful first attempt at teaching but not a total failure either—we are, after all, still here to recount the story.

From a teaching perspective, however, larger pedagogical questions loom heavy in the context of this lesson: Why, for example, one may ask, tempt one's students with something that is forbidden and carries with it the penalty of death? Why incorporate such a lethal hazard in one's lesson? One could, of course, argue that the Tree of Knowledge and its forbidding stand at the heart of the lesson, that without then there would be no lesson at all. That may be true, but from a teacherly stance, one could question whether the lesson—any lesson—justifies such ends, as powerful as the lesson may be.

One could equally question why knowledge—the prized result of learning—and the process of ascertaining it are forbidden, punishable, and lethal. How, under such conditions, do knowledge and learning relate and correspond? What might be the purpose of education if not wisdom and knowledge—even when the latter include knowing both good and evil?⁴ And what messages might be conveyed, one ought to wonder, as does Kass (2003, p. 3), when knowledge and understanding are associated with obedience and reverence to the teacher rather than with curiosity, wonder and open inquiry? How do such associations position students to know and not know, to inquire and challenge or remain docile and silent? And how might they position future teachers and the enterprise of education as a whole?

The education of Abraham

To understand God's education of Abraham⁵, Kass (2003) claims, “it is necessary to keep in mind the pre-Abrahamic world, which is to say the natural and uninstructed, human condition and to see just what needs educating and why” (p. 251). Biblical stories—such

⁴ The words “good and evil” are inaccurate translations of the Hebrew “good and bad” which, in the original, most probably refer to the tree rather than to knowledge itself.

⁵ This early in his education, Abraham was still called Abram, his original birth name. The “H,” which stands for “Hamon”—multitude, in English—and signifies him as a father of a multitude of nations, was added later in the context of the Covenant with God. For consistency, however, we use the name Abraham and Sarah (initially called Sarai) throughout.

as those of Cain and Able, Noah and the Flood, or the Tower of Babel, to which we will return later—that preceded Abraham, Kass adds,

have shown us why it will be extremely difficult to establish a better way of life for human beings. For they have exposed the perennial problems in human relations and laid bare deep psychic roots. From these stories we have learned especially about the dangers of human freedom and rationality, about the injustices that follow from excessive self-love and vanity, and about the evils born of human pride and the aspiration to full self-sufficiency. (p. 251)

To embark on a new form of education, and beginning with Abraham, God is determined to be more actively involved as teacher, to “take Abraham by the hand,” “to serve as his tutor,” and to “educate him to be a new human being, one who will stand in right relation to his household, to other people. And to God—one who will set an example for countless generations, who, inspired by his story, will cleave of these righteous ways” (Kass, 2003, p. 252).

Abraham’s encounters with God, his teacher, begin in Haran, where God appeared to him and said, “Go forth from your country, And from your relatives, And from your father’s house, To the land which I will show you; And I will make you a great nation, And I will bless you, And make your name great” (Genesis, 2:1-2). Not knowing who is speaking to him or where this land might be, Abraham obeys with no hesitation—passing his first “test”—and sets out with his family to Canaan. In that, begins the education of Abraham and the nation of Israel. Abraham’s education comprises multiple commands and tests given by God as well as promises and blessings, “with the promises more prominent at the outset, and the commands more prominent toward the end and increasing in difficulty. ‘The carrots come before the stick’” (Kass, 2003, p. 264). Some of God’s lessons embedded in those commands and tests relate to Abraham’s personal and familial life, some about regional politics more generally. Mostly, however, they are about establishing a relationship with God, a trust in, and a sense of obedience to Him, an element already present in the Biblical text above. God speaks to Abraham and commands him to leave all that is known to him but does not identify Himself to Abraham. Nor does he tell Abraham where he will be led. It is a request for full compliance, one that requires and evokes a full trust, blind following and a sense of obedience.

God’s continued education of Abraham—much exemplified through a series of tests and required action on his part—occurs once Abraham has reached Canaan, the destination to which God led him. That education included familiarizing Abraham with the land which God promised to him [“Arise, walk about the land through its length and breadth; for I will give it to you” (Genesis, 13:17); Understanding and appropriating the rules of the Covenant with God, where God promised Abraham that he will father a great nation and required all males to be circumcised as a sign of allegiance; learning to “manage” familial issues through handling the fraught relationship between Sarah and Hagar, which two wives, and the issue of birthright between Ishmael and Isaac; learning to assert himself within regional politics through engagement with area kings; learning the art of

hospitality as demonstrated through his hosting of the three messengers (angels) carrying God's word that Sarah will soon bear a child, and, finally; the most crucial and problematic of tests: the binding of Isaac on Mount Moriah.

Though much of Abraham's education comprised an imbalanced relationship between teacher and student, whereby God commands (or blesses) and Abraham, by and large, complies immediately, fully and with no question, that relationship also included much more than blind obedience. Indeed, there is no other teacher-student relationship (perhaps with the exclusion of Moses) where God cares as much about His student in ways that exceeded the teaching offered to others. Beyond commands and a desire for reverence, we also find in that relationship much care, compassion, and protection, even a sense of equilibrium, where God treats Abraham not simply as a student to be merely instructed but as a partner in the endeavor and a councilor to God.

Examples of the above include God reaching out to protect Abraham, as in the case of striking Pharaoh with great plagues or threatening Abimelech, King of Gerar, and sterilizing the women of his palace, for taking Sarah (deceivingly presented by Abraham in both cases as his sister) into their households; and saving Lot and his family from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorah, where Lot and his family lived, due to God's relationship with Abraham.

We also find some intimate teacherly moments, for example, when Sarah laughed having heard that she will be carrying a child at her old age. When God questioned Abraham as to why Sarah laughed, adding, "Is anything too difficult for the LORD?" Sarah denied laughing and the implied disbelief in God's promise. , "I did not laugh," She said, "for she was afraid. And He said, "No, but you did laugh" (Genesis, 18: 14-15). Though God appears to scold Sarah (and, implicitly, Abraham too) for her lack of reverence toward Him, the exchange reveals less a sense of anger on God's part, or fear to speak her mind on Sarah's part, and, instead, signs of the intimate relationship God had with Abraham and Sarah that allowed for some coyness, and the kind of banter one would find within a family more so than in a relationship with the Almighty.

And when God was determined to use brim and fire to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah for their sins, He pondered to Himself: "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do . . . For I have chosen him, so that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice [?]" (Genesis, 18: 17-19). When God revealed his plan to destroy the two cities to Abraham, Abraham did not keep silent, but approached God with the following question and ensuing exchange:

Will You indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will You indeed sweep *it* away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from You to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous and the wicked are *treated* alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?" So the LORD said, "If I find in Sodom fifty

righteous within the city, then I will spare the whole place on their account.” And Abraham replied, “Now behold, I have ventured to speak to the Lord, although I am *but* dust and ashes. Suppose the fifty righteous are lacking five, will You destroy the whole city because of five?” And He said, “I will not destroy *it* if I find forty-five there.” He spoke to Him yet again and said, “Suppose forty are found there?” And He said, “I will not do *it* on account of the forty.” Then he said, “Oh may the Lord not be angry, and I shall speak; suppose thirty are found there?” And He said, “I will not do *it* if I find thirty there.” And he said, “Now behold, I have ventured to speak to the Lord; suppose twenty are found there?” And He said, “I will not destroy *it* on account of the twenty.” Then he said, “Oh may the Lord not be angry, and I shall speak only this once; suppose ten are found there?” And He said, “I will not destroy *it* on account of the ten.” As soon as He had finished speaking to Abraham the LORD departed, and Abraham returned to his place. (Genesis, 18: 23-33).

Of note is that, while there is certainly an element of respect in God’s sharing his plan with Abraham in advance of its execution, there is also an element of teaching involved. And it is not for God to miss such an opportunity. Having chose Abraham to lead a nation who will “keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice,” God saw this as an opportunity not simply to address those issues with him at a theoretical level but to also explore them with him in the context of a real life-and-death issue and gauge his reaction, hoping, perhaps, that Abraham would in fact respond the way he did.

If that was indeed God’s plan, he was correct. Contrary to other exchanges with God, where Abraham silently followed God’s plan without question, this time the student steps up and challenges the teacher and does so repeatedly. And God, as noted, relents each time, accepting Abraham’s bartering down the number of needed righteous people to prevent the catastrophe. In doing so, the exchange illustrates that God’s previous lessons to Abraham about righteousness and justice were well received and that Abraham not only understood them, but also was committed to them, and willing to stake a stand on them, even if that meant challenge God in the process, pushing God to consider and re-consider multiple times.

Though Abraham confronted God and argued with him to save the lives of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, he did nothing of the kind for the life of his own child as told in the story of the binding of Isaac—Abraham’s final and most daunting test. Much like in God’s first encounter with Abraham, when Abraham was told to leave his homeland and go to a place God will show him, the sense of being guided to an unknown location, a place whose name is not provided, in order to encounter a life altering—and, in this case, also life shattering—experience, also underlies the test administered to Abraham in the context of the binding of Isaac.

As the Biblical narrators tells us, “God tested Abraham, and said to him, ‘Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ He said, ‘Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the

mountains of which I will tell you’,” (Genesis, 22: 2). And like in the first encounter, Abraham obeys not only without question but with a sense of readiness. Showing his eagerness to comply, he gets up early in the morning, saddles his donkey, splits the wood to burn the offering, takes two of his servants and Isaac, and ventures off “to the place of which God had told him”⁶ (2:3). Abraham leaves the two servants and the donkey at the base of the mountain, takes Isaac, who was made to carry the wood, and takes the fire and knife himself. As they walk up the mountain, Isaac says, “My father!’ And he said, ‘Here I am, my son.’ And he said, ‘Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?’ Abraham said, ‘God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son’. And “the two of them walked on together” (22: 7-8). When they reached the top of the mountain, “Abraham built the altar there and arranged the wood, and bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, ‘Abraham, Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ He said, ‘Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.’ Then Abraham raised his eyes and looked, and behold, behind *him* a ram caught in the thicket by his horns; and Abraham went and took the ram and offered him up for a burnt offering in the place of his son” (22: 9-13). The angel then reappears to tell Abraham, on behalf of God, “because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only son . . . I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies. In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice” (22: 16-18). Abraham returned to the base of the mountain, took the two young men with him, and took the long journey back home to Beersheba.

If there was, at some point, any doubt that, despite the close relationship between God and Abraham described earlier, the ultimate goal of his education was obedience to God, the story of the binding of Isaac ought to put an end to any such doubt. One finds in this “educative” encounter much to question and wonder about through the lens of pedagogy: What are the relational and psychic costs of this lesson? What does this test add that was not already known? Were there not other ways for Abraham to demonstrate his ultimate devotion to God without having to sacrifice that which was most dear to him? Why did Abraham and Isaac have to go through this ordeal if God already knew, as He surely did, the outcome--that it was the lamb that will ultimately serve as the sacrifice? Or was the lesson intending to demonstrate that, contrary to other gods, God wishes to sanctify life rather than have it sacrificed to him? If so, would a declaration from Him to that effect not suffice? And, finally, one might ask, as any teacher does when preparing one’s lessons: do the means justify the ends? Does a lesson, important as it is, do more harm than good? To what limits might students be pushed to ensure learning without causing too many long-lasting damaging effects?

⁶ The “place” is commonly identified as Mount Moriah, where the God’s Temple in Jerusalem was subsequently built and where the current mosques of Omar and Al-Aqsa currently stand.

We must, of course, assume that God pondered such questions and still decided to proceed, presumably for reasons we cannot fully fathom. Though Abraham passed God's test, and was blessed by Him for it, the Bible does, at least implicitly, tell us that the passing of the test came at an immense expense for his family. While the biblical narrator tells us that both Abraham and Isaac climbed up the mountain, we only learn of Abraham coming down. We can only assume what went through Isaac's head and why he chose not to accompany his father down the mountain. No encounters took place between Abraham and Isaac thereafter, implying their relationship was forever severed from that moment on. Indeed, the only time they are mentioned in conjunction is when Isaac and Ishmael attend Abraham's funeral. We further learn that while Isaac grieved the death of his mother, no similar sentiment is recorded in conjunction with the death of Abraham (Kass, 2003). And once must, of course question, though no answer is given by the narrator, the impact the binding might have had on the relationship between Abraham and Sarah, who remains out of the know throughout (or, at least, Abraham never speaks to her prior to taking Isaac up the mountain and/or does not explain—apologize for?—his actions thereafter.) These are not only moral issues but familial ones and ones worthy of noting because besides devotion to God, one of the main lessons throughout Genesis, as God was establishing his new nation, was about the proper conduct of family life: about respect, the proper treatment of family members, relationships between husbands and wives, children, and slaves. In that regard, the story of the binding of Isaac is not only problematic in itself but also in that the desire to successfully achieve one of God's lessons—the demonstration of full devotion to God—came at the expense of one of God's other important and recurring lessons about the primacy of the family unit.

The importance and impact of the lesson about the binding on Isaac is also enhanced as this was God's last teaching encounter with Abraham. Having passed this final test, and possibly not having anything more to teach him, God never appeared to or spoke with Abraham again until his death.

The pedagogy and teaching of God

In the two examples above, about God's teaching of Adam and Eve as well as the education of Abraham, several themes emerge that we now wish to expand upon, exploring them in God's teaching more broadly and over time. These themes—some of which were already explicitly addressed, others only hinted at—include: 1) obedience, punishment and lovingkindness; 2) instruction and abandonment; 3) tone and interactions and; 4) testing. Our purpose in this section of the chapter is to substantiate and extend these themes by examining their prevalence in other instances of God's teaching of others, and expand upon them.

Obedience, Punishment and (some) Love

In the third of the Ten Commandments, as He warns the children of Israel against worshipping idols, God also speaks of consequences: “For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments. (Exodus 20: 4-6) Later in Exodus, as Moses is in the process of replacing the original tables—the ones [with the above quote] he broke in anger as he came down the mountain and saw the Israelites worshipping the Golden Calf—God passed in front of Moses, and, addressing the Israelites, proclaimed: “The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished.” (Exodus, 34: 6-7).

As we have already seen in the context of God’s teaching of Adam and Eve, as well as of Abraham, the prominent terms in the above quotes—obedience, punishment, and lovingkindness—reflect not only God’s stance toward idol worshipers or His approach to justice but also serve as important elements in His teaching. Yet as the examples about Adam, Eve and Abraham’s educational experiences also indicate, not only were the elements of obedience, punishment and love present, there was also a particular hierarchy with regard to their prominence, where, it appears, obedience supersedes the others. We find this hierarchy prevalent throughout God’s teaching.

Whether in the case of Adam and Eve, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, or Samuel, God primarily teaches for, and seeks, obedience to His orders and commands. Obedience and reverence to Him and His word underlie the very essence of his teaching, whether the taught is an individual or the nation as a whole. Non-obedience, as in the case of Moses disbelieving God will provide water from the rock—has its price: punishment (in Moses’ case, not being allowed to enter the Promised Land with the Israelite, whom he led through the desert for 40 years). Punishment for disobedience or lack of reverence is meted equally to those who are close to God (e.g., Moses, David) as it is to those who are close to those who are close to God (e.g., punished Miriam, Moses’ sister, with leprosy for her lack of reverence to Moses and God). Interestingly, God is often at his most imaginative as a teacher when punishing, as when he turns Lot’s wife into a pillar of salt for disobeying his command to not look back. He is also quite specific—even poetic—in describing potential punishment, as when God claims He will never forgive a man who turns away from Him, and proclaims: the anger of the LORD and His jealousy will burn against that man, and every curse which is written in this book will rest on him, and the LORD will blot out his name from under heaven. Then the LORD will single him out for adversity from all the tribes of Israel, according to all the curses of the covenant which are written in this book of the law” (Deuteronomy, 29: 20-21).

Punishment meted to the larger population often comes in more sweeping and violent forms: flooding the world for the wickedness of its people; confusing the language of the people of Babel and scattering them over the face of the earth; leveling the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah in punishment for their sins; punishing the Egyptians with the ten plagues and drowning their armies in the Red Sea; and, finally (following a long list of

other forms of punishment throughout the Bible), using the invading armies of the Babylonians to destroy Jerusalem and exile its people for disobeying and turning away from Him.

Indeed, God of the Old Testament as teacher appears to be first and foremost a disciplinarian, who frequently teaches through instructive punishment—one of His favorites methods being banishment and exile. In Genesis, Adam and Eve have barely entered the room (the world!) before “He drove [them] out” (Genesis 3:24), evicted from the Garden for disobeying His command. Banishment was also the punishment for Cain, their son, for killing his brother Able. The inhabitants of Babel were banished from their city and scattered for wanting to make a name for themselves. The Israelites were first made to be slaves in the exile of Egypt for 400 years—not as their own punishment but to allow for the pending annihilation of the Amorites when the Israelites return—and then to wander in the desert for 40 years on their way from Egypt until the generation of the Golden Calf died off. The Israelites were banished, scattered among the nations by the Assyrians and the people of Judea exiled to Babylon, both “because of all the evil of the sons of Israel and the sons of Judah which they have done to provoke Me to anger—they, their kings, their leaders, their priests, their prophets, the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem” (Jeremiah, #2:32). Exile, banishment, and wanderings in deserts it seems, were methods employed continuously as forms of punishment throughout God’s teaching.⁷

God’s main lesson for his human student is, more often than not, *obedience*, with disobedience followed by swift, severe punishment. Such punishment is not exceptional to God’s teaching in the Old Testament but instead very much part and parcel with his engagement with human beings; it is His most consistent response to disobedience and irreverence.

But, as we have also seen from the examples of the education of Adam, Eve and Abraham, obedience and punishment were not God’s only pedagogical tools. As we saw, compassion, care, lovingkindness, and an element of forgiveness were also part of God’s pedagogical equation. As we may recall, God commuted Adam and Eve’s punishment from death to banishment and ensured they were well clothed prior to leaving Eden. He also didn’t punish Cain with death following Cain’s murder of Able. Instead, God assigned him as a vagrant, condemned to wander the earth. Still, to protect Cain, God put a mark on Cain’s forehead “so that no one finding him would slay him” (4: 15), even

⁷ Removing someone from their home/land—a form of exile and banishment—was also used by God in order to enable (Zornberg, 1995) and protect. Abraham was told to leave his homeland in order to begin a new life with God in a land that He will show him (Canaan), and Hagar, was sent into the desert (and protected by God during her journey) in order to start a new life, away from Sarah. Using this positive concept of exile, God, as teacher, demonstrates how a pedagogical tool can be used differently for different purposes.

though slaying was at the very root of Cain's own punishment. We have also seen God protect Abraham in several instances of his own wrongdoing (e.g., twice presenting Sarah as his sister rather than his wife while in Egypt and Gerar). ADD STUFF ABOUT MOSES. More generally, one may also consider the exodus from Egypt, the providing of the Promised Land and all other victories provided by God to the people of Israel—as they entered the land and were already settled in it—as forms of lovingkindness, at least toward the Israelites if not their enemies.

Lovingkindness, a disposition or characteristic God attributed to Himself, however, should not be conflated with love. While love does prove an important aspect of God's education, that love is generated by the students toward their teacher rather than the other way around (or at least as a mutual sentiment). It is a love that is obligatory, ordered and enforced, regardless of whether it might also have been genuine and self-motivated (which it surely was). Deuteronomy is abundant (and abundantly clear) on this issue: "[T]he Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, so that you may live (Deuteronomy, 30: 6); "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" (Deuteronomy, 6:5); "I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in His ways and to keep His commandments and His statutes and His judgments, that you may live and multiply, and that the Lord your God may bless you in the land where you are entering to possess it" (Deuteronomy 30:16). A similar call for Love is also embedded in the "Shma Israel," the most important and sacred Jewish prayer, recited twice daily by believers, often uttered on one's deathbed and said by children before going to bed: "Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. ⁶These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates" (Deuteronomy 6:4-9).

Love, as we have seen, is not conditional, not dependent on God's actions, and not reciprocal. It is a required rather than organic sentiment from the student toward God, the teacher. It is a love by the obedient, of the obedient, and as such is an obedient love, not one necessarily found through self-discovery. And it is this specific notion of love, and its relation to obedience and punishment, that underlies God's educational endeavors with His students, regardless of his particular relationship with them—the demand for love of God is universal and uncompromising.

Instruction & Abandonment

Perhaps one way to explain why God is always punishing his students is that he's only intermittently around to keep them in line. For a teacher, God is often absent from the classroom, appearing briefly to teach and then removing himself for days, even months at

a time. Surely not the best way to keep students in check, and ensure they follow the teacher's directions and achieve the intended pedagogical goals. We see this in the story of the Garden of Eden, where God leave Adam and Eve alone and only reemerges once they have eaten the forbidden fruit. We find a similar pattern with Noah, who is taught (through command) to "make for yourself an ark" (Genesis 6:14) and obeys, only to find himself on his own for over a year (Biblical time), floating in his arc and trying to determine if the waters have sufficiently receded, before God re-enters the picture. While God presumably keeps in contact with Abraham as he initially led him to Canaan, the Biblical narrator does not reveal this. Instead, we read that the first encounter between God and Abraham following his departure from Haran took place only after Abraham arrived in Canaan—a rather lengthy journey in those days. When God ordered Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, He waits three days before re-appearing, at the last moment, to substitute the Ram for Isaac. He also left the Israelites for 400 years as slaves in Egypt without a sign, a visit, or any other form of assurance from Him. In Exodus and Numbers, God teaches by providing the children of Israel with the Ten Commandments before leaving to them to their own wicked devices, only to return later to punish them for these devices. ADD MORE

What might we make of a teacher who demands continuous obedience—and punishes so harshly for not getting it right—but does not remain with His students every step of the way to see the lesson through, who isn't available to add instruction, redirect, and answer questions? One might understand this pattern of instruction and absence by looking at its consequences—it makes punishment almost inevitable as God's sets students up to fail. It provides (many) opportunities for God to teach through punishment, but it also establishes the need for divine mercy; the Teacher must be willing to forgive His students for their inevitable mistakes. Yet even in forgiveness—indeed, in order to forgive—mistakes must be the provenance of students, since, "As for God. His way is blameless" (2 Samuel 22:31). Regardless of the teacher's absence mistakes are pinned on students, who do not follow instruction, who are wicked, or simply refuse to listen and learn. For as the teacher noted: "They have turned *their* back to Me . . . though I taught them, teaching again and again, they would not listen and receive instruction" (Jeremiah 32:33).

Tone and interactions

The various tones that God uses in the act of teaching are of interest to us, too: it may be that such a substantial variety of tones, the modulation of voice(s), reflects the polyphonic nature of the Bible as assembled text(s), as some scholars have suggested (Friedman, 2005). In any case, a consideration of different voices is essential to our project, interested as we are in the different versions and visions (plural) of teacher present in a (singular?) God. "Teacher-voice" is a concept both colloquial—as in the popular t-shirt and coffee-mug meme, "Don't make me use my teacher voice!"—and scholarly, having been well-theorized by various voices across the intellectual spectrum (e.g. Goodson, 1991; Dana, 1995; Kirk & MacDonald, 2001). As a teacher, God often orders, adopting the commanding tone of a parent, supervisor, or, well, lord. His commands can be imbued with literal and sonic force, as with Jacob ("I will not let you go unless you bless me" [Genesis 22:26]), or Job ("Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me" (Job 40:7); He can also sound perfunctory and

professionally specific, as with the detailed architectural instructions God gives to Noah as He describes how to build the ark, or to Moses, on the summoning of plague: “Tell Aaron, ‘Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt—over the streams and canals, over the ponds and all the reservoirs—and they will turn to blood.” (Exodus 7:19). God’s voice is by turns accusatory (Genesis 3:11: “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?”) and disinterested (Exodus 32:10: “Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn”). The distinction to make here is one of the personal, emotional investment in His voices; while God’s irate and accusatory tone can betray hot-blooded, rash—human, even—feeling towards His students, the distance of God’s alternatively dispassionate, professional Teacher-voice emphasizes the technical aspects of God as teacher, establishing a relative indifference in what seem to be almost contractual encounters.

Interestingly, God’s tone in teaching can seem at times (surprisingly, perhaps) sarcastic, disdainful, and even cruel in the commanding. We hear this when God tells Abram to “Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them” (Genesis 15:5), taunting His subject’s lack of ability. Later in the education of Abram (now Abraham), God shows a darker side in the famous story of the Sacrifice of Isaac, revealing that He knows *full well* (as any all-knower should) the cruelty of what He asks of Abraham: “Take your son, *your only son, whom you love* [emphasis added]—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you.” (Genesis 22:2). As if to not be misunderstood (and to help us make our case), God repeats himself in Genesis 22: 16-17: “because you have done this and have not withheld your son, *your only son*, [emphasis added] I will surely bless you”. The cruelty in God’s voice here lies in his brash confirmation that He indeed knows of the awful place he puts Abraham in by asking him to sacrifice not just his son, but *his only son*; not just Abraham’s unloved child but the one *whom he loves*.

But the Old Testament God can teach His students with compassion, even love in His voice, too. God reasons in a compassionate tone when deciding that “it is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him” (Genesis 2:18). In changing His mind and agreeing to spare Lot’s life, He adopts a conciliatory tone: “Very well, I will grant this request too; I will not overthrow the town you speak of. But flee there quickly, because I cannot do anything until you reach it.” (Genesis 19:21-22). This willingness to grant Lot’s request is also representative of another aspect of God’s voice: in listening to His subjects, God’s tone can become absent altogether. God demonstrates an ability to listen elsewhere, as with Moses in Exodus 22. There is a certain tension between such a thoughtful, sensitive, soft-voiced tone and the authoritative and power filled voice described earlier. Of course, there are many other tones we could make use of here—God the teacher is many-voiced. Our intent here, however, is not to be exhaustive but rather to point out this many-voiced-ness, to complicate the notion that God teaches through a *singular* tone. Pluralizing the sound of God as a teacher helps establish that while God teaches, He does so in a multiplicity of sometimes contradictory and discordant ways.

A Testing God

As we have noted earlier in the book, testing, much like in our current culture of education, was an inherent element in God's teaching. And He is an equal opportunity tester—"The Lord tests the righteous and the wicked" (Psalm 11:5)—and testing each according to his needs: "I, the Lord, search the heart, I test the mind, Even to give to each man according to his ways, According to the results of his deeds" (Jeremiah 17:10). As the Bible describes, God tests His students "as gold is tested" (Zachariah 13:9), "His eyes behold, His eyelids test the sons of men" (Psalm 11:4), testing their hearts and minds (Deuteronomy 8:2; Jeremiah 17:10).

Why, we may ask, administer all this testing? Deuteronomy responds: "The Lord your God is testing you to find out if you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul (Deuteronomy 13:3) as well as to determine "whether or not they will walk in My instruction" (Exodus 16:7). All this testing, the Bible promises those being tested, will "do good for you in the end (Deuteronomy 6:16). Sounds familiar? Indeed, more than five thousand years later, down here on earth, we seem to still adopt a similar stance.

As we have already noted, testing appears very early on in Genesis; it is incorporated into God's first act as teacher. Embedded in the lesson in the Garden of Eden, and possibly its essential part, is a test, which Adam and Eve failed miserably. Abraham was administered multiple tests (Kass, 2003, identifies 11 in all) throughout his education, all of which he passed, most with flying colors. Among those is Abraham's last test—the binding of Isaac ("God tested Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am" (Genesis 22:1). God tested Jacob at night, as he struggled with the angel, to determine Jacob's endurance and patience until getting God's blessing (to compensate for the first blessing he stole from Isaac). Pharaoh and the Egyptians endured ten tests, one for each plague. Moses was tested (and failed) in not trusting God's ability to produce water from the rock as well as in measuring his concern for the children of Israel and his willingness to confront God when He was about to wipe them out for their turning on Him in the desert (a test Moses passed). Elijah's loyalty to God was tested after he fled the wrath of Jezebel, as was Hosea's, when God required him to take back his straying wife.

The most prolonged of God's tests (an entire book, in fact) was that given to Job, as he is made to endure multiple trials and tribulations—losing his livestock, servants, sons and daughters, home, and health—in order to demonstrate his enduring loyalty to God. But there were also tests further akin to those we administer in education today. Prior to sending Jeremiah off to prophesize, God twice tested his abilities to perform the job: "The word of the LORD came to me saying, 'What do you see, Jeremiah?' And I said, 'I see a rod of an almond tree.' Then the LORD said to me, 'You have seen well, for I am watching over My word to perform it.' The word of the LORD came to me a second time saying, 'What do you see?' And I said, 'I see a boiling pot, facing away from the north.' Then the LORD said to me, 'Out of the north the evil will break forth on all the inhabitants of the land'" (Jeremiah 1: 11-14). In the case of Gideon and his war with the Midianites, God wanted to ensure the victory is not attributed to Gideon's large army but to God's own hand. So he kept ordering Gideon to downsize the army, at some point,

administering his own test to the soldiers to lower the numbers: “Then the Lord said to Gideon, ‘The people are still too many; bring them down to the water and I will test them for you there. Therefore it shall be that he of whom I say to you, ‘This one shall go with you,’ he shall go with you; but everyone of whom I say to you, ‘This one shall not go with you,’ he shall not go’” (Judges 7: 4). Sometimes God’s test simply meant leaving students to their own deed, observing their actions without interference, as in the matter of King Hezekiah and the visiting envoys from Babylon, where “God left him *alone only* to test him, that He might know all that was in his heart” (2 Chronicles 32:31).

Exodus 20 (in giving the Ten Commandments): “All the people perceived the thunder and the lightning flashes and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw *it*, they trembled and stood at a distance.¹⁹ Then they said to Moses, “Speak to us yourself and we will listen; but let not God speak to us, or we will die.”²⁰ Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid; for God has come in order to test you, and in order that the fear of Him may remain with you, so that you may not sin.”

Testing, as illustrated above, acts as a measure of control and an instrument of power to ensure obedience, both in the present and the future. As such it serves the purposes of intimidation and examination, determining the degree to which an individual or a collective has followed God’s instruction(s). But testing also serves as an instrument of validation and affirmation by the one conducting the test as well as by the one to who it is administered—that is, when the student has done well. Indeed, while most of the references in the Bible to testing refer to God as tester, there are also illustrations of the test-taker wishing to be tested, appealing to God: “Examine me, O Lord, and try me; Test my mind and my heart” (Psalm 26:2). Or, having passed a test successfully, praising oneself by saying, “You have tested me and You find nothing; I have purposed that my mouth will not transgress” (Psalm 17:3). And, then, there are still others, who request to take God’s test again, having failed it the first time, as in the case of Gideon and the sign of the fleece (where the fleece was supposed to be try to indicate God supporting his military moves against Midian): “Then Gideon said to God, ‘Do not let Your anger burn against me that I may speak once more; please let me make a test once more with the fleece, let it now be dry only on the fleece, and let there be dew on all the ground.’ God did so that night; for it was dry only on the fleece, and dew was on all the ground” (Judges 6: 39-40).

Testing, as the above example help illustrate, is a mutually reinforcing process. Not only are tests administered on a recurring basis to ascertain students’ knowledge and their fidelity to the teacher and to that which was taught; testing is also a means to punish the deviant and to reward the compliant, the one who demonstrates reverence to the instructed word. When testing is utilized in such a manner—whether in the Bible or, as we will discuss later, in contemporary education—testing becomes a form of validation and affirmation, whereby the student, at least the eager student, relishes the test to affirm his/her fidelity.

On Reflection and Changing His Mind

Like any teacher, God is not monolithic or uni-dimensional. And like any of our earthling teachers, He develops over time— shifting and refining his pedagogical approaches as He learns “on the job,” trying new plans after old ones fail, making concessions to unavoidable—yet still undesirable—human traits. He reflects back on the effectiveness of his teaching and, sometimes, especially at the beginning, changes course, even changing his classroom. He sees His teaching succeed with some students, while others disappoint Him. In many ways, he is the embodiment of what we have come to know as a *teacher*.

God’s lessons are not set in stone but respond to the situation and to the students involved. He announces to Adam and Eve that eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge will result in sure death but then substitutes it for banishment instead. Though the diet prescribed to humans in Creation was vegetarian, God changed His mind and allowed humans, following Noah, to eat meat as well (Kass, 2003). Following the pleas of Abraham, God changes his initial plans for the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and through an exchange with Moses, decides to not follow up on His plan to annihilate the Israelites in the desert. In both cases we see God change his plan following feedback from his students.

Some of those changed plans are a result of God’s own reflection and a recognition that things need to change, both because of the nature of students and His own misconceived assumptions about them. Prior to the flood, and an impetus for it, “the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. The LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart” and was, thus, determined “blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, from man to animals to creeping things and to birds of the sky; for I am sorry that I have made them” (Genesis 6: 5-7). Following the flood and the destruction of all living things (other than those on the arc), God ponders on his actions and “said to Himself, ‘I will never again curse the ground on account of man, for the intent of man’s heart is evil from his youth; and I will never again destroy every living thing, as I have done’” (Genesis 8: 20-21), a pledge He repeats a chapter later, saying: “and never again shall the water become a flood to destroy all flesh (Genesis 9:15).

In the above, we find a reflective God willing to acknowledge his limitations and negotiate; He does not, it seems, know everything or get everything right as a teacher. We encounter a teacher who understands that the measures applied were ineffective, that His students are different than what He expected and that new pedagogical approaches are needed. In some ways, what God determined at that point was not only to alter his pedagogical approach but also to change His classroom and shift the target of his teaching. While God initially saw Himself as teaching “all of humanity all at once” (Kass, 2003, p. 217), God devises a different plan following the flood and, instead, chooses to focus His teaching on only one nation—the one He will create through Abraham. This shift marks God’s third incarnation as teacher with a new set of students (or, his third placement, so to speak). His first was with His original students, Adam and Eve. When human life was eradicated following the flood, Noah—in a sense, the second

Adam—became God’s student. And with Abraham, God has moved to His third classroom, though he would remain in that setting with Abraham and his descendants for a very long time.

God and Contemporary Teachers/Teaching

While it is impossible to fully determine in what ways (if any) God’s teaching—and its image in our imagination—might shape teachers understanding of their profession, there is some evidence in research that there may be a closer relationship between God and teachers than we might assume, and that God does in fact play a role in teachers’ thinking about teaching, learning and students. Not surprising in the context of a U.S. a society that, by and large, identifies itself as religious.

A 2008 Pew study states that 92% of Americans reported a belief in God or a universal spirit and that 82% of those reported that religion was either very important (56%) or somewhat important (26%) in their lives. An earlier study by Gallup (1999) reports that 90% of Americans pray, with 75% of them reporting praying on a weekly basis (Hartwick, 2015, p. 59). Studies of public school teachers report similar data with regard to prayer and belief in God. A 2003 survey of Wisconsin public school teachers found that 90% of them indicated a belief in God and prayed to God or a Higher being on a regular basis (Hartwick, 2015, p. 62) and believe those prayers “an important part of their professional life” (p. 68). Almost a third of those teachers agreed with the statement that “prayer prior to teaching helps me achieve a state of readiness, an openness to my students and to teachable moments” (p. 69). The study also found that “the stronger the teacher’s spiritual beliefs ... the more profound influence the spiritual beliefs may have on how the teacher thinks and acts professionally” (Hartwick, p. 59). In all, those teachers “were more likely to believe they had been called by God to teach, prayer was important to their professional lives, and praying made them better teachers” (Hartwick, p. 70). Such findings about the religiosity of public school teachers are corroborated by other researchers (Logan, 2015; White 2010).

Kimberly White’s qualitative study of six public school elementary teachers found that teachers’ religious beliefs “impact how they view students and how they structure social relationships between students and between themselves and the students” (White, 2010, p. 45). Students in White’s study who identified as Christian saw teaching as a way to witness God’s love—to “be a model of God’s light and love” to students and colleagues a ‘mirror to reflect God’s light” (White, p. 46). Some of those teachers “connected mistakes and repentance to the Christian belief in forgiveness and redemption through Jesus Christ as dying to save people from their sins” White, p. 49). Teachers “who believed in a dichotomy between the eternal consequences of heaven and hell were more likely to adopt authoritarian, teacher-directed methods of behavior modification” (White, p. 50).

Kimberly Logan’s (2015) research of teaching and religious beliefs with early childhood pre-service teachers at a large public university in the US southeast reports that teachers with strong religious beliefs often spoke of teaching as a calling that “was influenced by God’s guidance” (p. 45). One teacher “spoke of her connection to God and ‘doing stuff

for Him” Logan, 2015, p. 43). Several of the teachers spoke of God wanting them to support their students and forge trusting relationships with them. Speaking to these issues, one of the preservice teachers noted she is able to demonstrate God’s love through her relationships with students and other teachers” by using “the love that God has poured out on me” (Logan, 2015, pp. 46-47).

That the public school teachers depicted in the above studies find God to be a force in their professional thinking is of import, and one the field is increasingly exploring. Of more interest to us here, however, are the possible ways in which our image of God as teacher impacts the thinking of the fields of education more broadly, and teacher education specifically. That is, to what degree and in what ways might contemporary public education—an arena from which God has supposedly been extrapolated through a variety of legal cases—still resemble, some of the very characteristics we have identified above in relation to God’s teaching? In other words, and despite the fact that God or religion are not normally referenced in the literature on teachers and teaching, can we still recognize God’s methods in current educational practices? Or has time made them no more than archaic relics no longer in use?

That White (2010), among others, found a correlation between Godly teachers and those who teach in authoritarian, disciplinary ways seems a good place to begin, given the ubiquity of punishment and teaching-as-discipline in the Old Testament. In the current climate of no excuses and zero tolerance, we often see teachers who operate in God’s disciplinarian image: those who see their role, first and foremost, as establishing order within the classroom, punishing students who step out of line. Such a commitment is manifested explicitly in the military-like disciplinary procedures currently on the rise in some fast growing charter-chains (Lack, 2011) as well as in the well-documented, widespread (ab)use of school suspensions in recent years (e.g. Skiba & Knesting, 2001). This latter phenomenon seems especially pertinent to our work here: it’s not just that teaching is so often equated with punishment (as it is in the Old Testament); it’s also the specific type of punishment used. Increasingly, teachers punish—and teach—as God so often did, through banishment by suspension and expulsion, exiling problematic (and disproportionately, Black, Brown, and disabled) students from the Edenic space of the rigorous, high-expectations classroom. Regardless of the type of pedagogical punishment used, teaching-as-punishment, in line with practices in the Old Testament, demands obedience at all cost. Think for example, of the emphasis on SLANTing and behavioral programming, where students’ every moment is disciplined, bodies made docile (Foucault, 1977) so that they might better learn. Such an orientation towards students presumes that they are always, already fallen, as it were; that they enter the classroom as a behavioral problem to be addressed (solved?) through obedience or banishment.

The idea of banishment as punishment might gesture towards another aspect of contemporary teaching: the increased (and increasing) banishment of the teacher from the classroom. We note this positioning in relation to scripted, standardized curricula prominent across a diverse set of educational contexts: because designers of such curricula are increasingly removed from the classroom (as teacher autonomy is stripped away) and the community, the effect is one of appearance and absence: a curriculum is

dropped into a classroom, announcing itself—I AM, it might say—but those best prepared to explain it (district, state and national level curriculum designers) are troublingly absent, leaving teachers and students to flounder on their own. The absence of curriculum designers would not be so much of a problem if the teacher could reshape the curriculum herself. In the advent of data-driven accountability, however, teachers are often expected to refrain from such modifications. Under this increasingly precarious and reduced role, the teacher (as historically conceived) has little alternative but to make him/herself absent, even when physically present and “teaching” students.

Teaching as proxy and the role of proxies in education is not limited to the Hebrew Bible. Quite the opposite. The recent excitement surrounding the “transformative” possibilities and proliferation of virtual and online education, especially on a massive scale (Guthrie, 2014) provides one example of how such teaching proxies enter the classroom. These digital programs operate under the assumption that new technologies (the Skype terminal, the online portal), providing a proxy of a teacher rather than an actual in-person teacher, are not only useful but become central to the project of education. This holds true of k-12 teaching and of teacher education, both of which are making increasing use of virtual education to instruct, graduate and certify. While not digital, the Old Testament God nevertheless sent avatars of His own to teach in his stead. Often enough, these proxies are angels, as when God intervenes in the sacrifice of Isaac (Genesis 22) or when punishing the people of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19) or Egypt (Exodus 8-11). We might read these examples, simplistically perhaps, as God’s way of sometimes sending someone else to do his teacherly work. In other cases, God appears to Moses in the proxy form of a burning bush in Exodus 3, while He appears as a mysterious man who wrestles with Jacob in Genesis 32. It is this latter that is of particular interest, as the mystery of this interaction pairs well with the mystification of education through proxies. “What is your name?” (Genesis 32:27) Jacob asks, only to receive not an answer but a blessing. ‘*Who is teaching?*’ is a question increasingly obscured in contemporary education; as proxies become the norm, critical questions like “Who decides what is taught?” and “whose values and visions of teaching are being represented in our schools?” become difficult to ask, not so much because we don’t realize the value of such questions but because we don’t know *who* to ask. Instead of answers to such questions or revelations of the (wo)men behind the teaching curtain, students are increasingly blessed, as Jacob was, by proxy with the approval of certification and graduation.

We made much of the ubiquity of Godly tests and testing in the Old Testament earlier; this is, in part, because that frequency is curious to us, but more so because tests are so numerous and prominent in teaching today. While many scholars have documented the proliferation of assessment of all forms and especially standardized testing (Council of the Great City Schools, 2015) in the advent of No Child Left Behind for its connection to teacher evaluation, accountability, and punishment (Ravitch, 2010), we want to note here that testing in teaching today, like in Biblical times, produces, validates, and affirms as much as it disciplines. That is, testing is increasingly not simply a part of teaching—the undesirable but necessary “evil”—but rather is (becoming) wholly constitutive of it. When tests become so ubiquitous in classrooms, both teaching and learning become increasingly equated with testing. Indeed, testing becomes the prominent form of

teaching and learning and their validation. Teachers narrow their curricula to adapt to the demands of a test (“teach to the test”) as it becomes tied to their continued professional existence; students, as we have seen in some Biblical examples, come to internalize the evaluations produced by tests as credible measures of their intelligence and academic capability and a valued—often *the* most valued—venue through which to demonstrate their fidelity and reverence to that which was taught.

Like testing in today’s classrooms, discourses of reflection have long saturated the world of teacher education (e.g., Brookfield, 1995; Clift & Houston, 1990; Grimmett & Erickson, 1989; Korthagen & Kim, 2012; Zeichner & Liston, 2013) We are not suggesting that the prevalence and prominence of reflection in teacher education is due to God’s use of reflection as teacher. Still, that God spent much time reflecting on His practices early on as teacher, makes for an interesting connection, possibly giving some credence to reflection not only as a necessary bread-and-butter element of teaching but also as an important—even Godly—activity. While it is difficult to think of God as needing to reflect on his practice and having to amend—He is so often characterized as “omniscient” and “omnipotent”—but our earlier analysis of His use of reflection and willingness to change His mind demonstrates instances in which He does indeed regret His actions, recognizing them as mistakes. We may recall, for example, the story of Noah and the Flood, in which the Lord reflects on his teaching and resolves to “never again destroy every living thing, as I have done” (Genesis 8:21) or in His relenting to Moses in Exodus 32:14 (“the Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened.”). God shows not just that he is a merciful teacher but that He is willing to acknowledge the limitations of His teaching and negotiate their outcomes. Though the stakes attached to teachers’ mistakes aren’t Biblically high, they nevertheless can have violent consequences for students, as some have noted (Butler, 2010; Zembylas, 2015). God then could act as one teacherly model for what it might mean to reflect on the violence of pedagogy and change course, hopefully—though not always—for the better.

But God’s reflections also point to another aspect of teaching: it’s complexity and impossibility. There seems to be analogous questions related to the tension between God as Teacher and God as, well, God: How can a divine being make mistakes? Why would an omniscient God need to reflect on his actions, to doubt Himself, or change His mind? That this contradiction, wherein teachers are simultaneously teachers and students—that is, students of their own education by learning from, and reflecting on it—is laid out first in the Old Testament. God’s dilemmas of how to convey His messages to His students and assessing whether His pedagogical means justify His pedagogical ends—indeed, whether what one teaches in fact promotes or subverts the intended lesson, assuming a lesson is ever learned as intended—help illustrate to us not only the difficulty of teaching but possibly, as Freud more recently suggested, also the very impossibilities, holy or not, underlying teaching as a profession (Britzman, 2009).

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