Sacrificing Isaac: A Kaleidoscopic view

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The sacrificing of Isaac, described in Genesis 22, is one of the most troubling stories in the Bible. In that story, Abraham was faced with a moral dilemma and compelled to choose between two bad options: to disobey God or to kill his own child. Why was Abraham willing to commit the most horrendous thing one can imagine: killing his own child? Did God really ask Abraham for such a sacrifice, and if yes, did He really expect Abraham to obey? Several attempts to explain Abraham’s behavior as well as God’s command have been made. Most often, Abraham is portrayed as a model of faith. God, on the other hand, is usually seen as “only testing” Abraham, but not really expecting a sacrifice. Many scholars are questioning these interpretations, though. To some of them, Abraham is no more than a criminal, and God a moral monster.

In this study, I am taking an analytical approach to existing literature and commentaries on the sacrificing of Isaac. I am describing, classifying and comparing different attempts to resolve the obvious conflict between divine obedience and morality. Since the command to sacrifice Isaac is often regarded as a divine test, I will also examine, what exactly might have been the focus of that test: faith, obedience, fear or something else? I am also referring to some contemporary crime cases to show that sacrificing a child in God’s name doesn’t belong only to history. Thus, contrary to some Bible commentators who claim that nothing similar could happen today, I will show that some people have used the story of Abraham and Isaac as a justification for their pernicious action.

Finally, and as the title of my thesis implies, I will propose a “kaleidoscopic” approach to the story of sacrificing Isaac. Just like an image in a kaleidoscope is prone to change with each new treatment, so is the interpretation of the story. Even more, the story in Genesis 22 is like a Rorschach test: it allows for the viewer to see what she wants to see, and to project her preconceptions of Abraham and God to the troublesome image.
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1. Introduction

Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, “Abraham!” “Here I am,” he replied. Then God said, “Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you.” Early the next morning Abraham got up and loaded his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about.

On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. He said to his servants, “Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you.” Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, “Father?” “Yes, my son?” Abraham replied. “The fire and wood are here,” Isaac said, “but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” Abraham answered, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” And the two of them went on together.

When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son.

But the angel of the Lord called out to him from heaven, “Abraham! Abraham!” “Here I am,” he replied. “Do not lay a hand on the boy,” he said. “Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.” Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son (Genesis 22:1—13; NIV).

1 Unless otherwise mentioned, New International Version (NIV) translation will be used hereafter.
The story of sacrificing Isaac is one of the most well-known in Hebrew Bible. Of all the stories in the Bible, it is also one of the most troubling. Should it be seen as an attempted (but failed) murder, or is it rather an exemplary act of Divine obedience? Would anybody kill his child just to please God? From generation to generation, the story has cried out for explanations, but rarely have we been given satisfactory answers. Several scholars and sages have studied the myth, several attempts to solve the paradox have been made. Each new interpretation challenges a previous one.

The Binding of Isaac is also known as Akedah or aqedah, a Hebrew word for binding. In Christianity, however, the same story is known as Sacrifice of Isaac. Some English Bible translations render the word Akedah no less frightening as the holocaust, coming from a Hebrew term olah.²

Needless to say, there were no bookkeepers in Abraham’s time. There’s not even consensus whether Abraham was a historical person. The story of Akedah is based in oral tradition, and it must have gone a long way. ”The current consensus among historians is that the [written] material dates to the first millennium B.C.E. (some of it even to the second half) and is thus centuries removed from the supposedly historical figure it renders.” Most probably several different narratives are combined (Levenson 2012, 14).

Several books have been written on this theme. One of the most referred is Søren Kierkegaard’s Fear and Trembling, signed by one of his pseudonyms, Johannes de Silentio. The whole book focuses on the story of the Binding of Isaac. Kierkegaard starts with creatively rewriting the story four times, each time with a different tone and interpretation. So

² That’s the word e.g. Derrida uses in his own translation: ”God himself will provide the lamb for the holocaust, my son.” (Derrida 1995, 74).
compelling has Kierkegaard’s approach been that several philosophers and theologians have been interested, not only in *Fear and Trembling* but in Kierkegaard himself.

Why was Abraham willing to commit the most horrendous thing one can imagine, killing his own child? Did God really ask Abraham for such a sacrifice, and if yes, did God really expect Abraham to obey? Why is Abraham, a potential murderer, regarded by many as a hero of faith today? These questions were the starting point for Kierkegaard and for my study as well. With only a few exceptions, Bible commentators, Sunday school teachers, pastors and writers of all times — in Christianity as well as in Judaism — are praising Abraham as an example of faith. Not only human beings give kudos to him, even the angel of God gives credits to Abraham (Genesis 22:1—19).

It is not only Abraham’s obedience to God that is commended: it is also the willingness to take a violent action that is seen as a measure of faith. Charles Spurgeon, the ”Prince of Preachers” says: ”Unbelief would have left the knife at home, but genuine faith takes it” (Spurgeon 2016). To many, this sounds almost as a proclamation of religious war. To some, regardless of faith, this is admirable. Many are still willing to subscribe to that kind of violent religion.

But anyone who has read Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*, is compelled to ask: what if most Bible commentators have understood the story completely wrong? Kierkegaard is a despiser of easy answers and shortcuts to explanations. He was strongly disappointed with Danish Church in general, and especially with those pastors, who without pains passed all the difficult parts of Bible and jumped to happy results. ”But people are curious about the result, as they are about the result in a book - they want to know nothing about dread, distress, the paradox. They flirt aesthetically with the result, it comes just as unexpectedly but also just as easily as a prize in the lottery; and when they have heard the result they are edified” (Kierkegaard 1941, location 138/281). It is much easier to say ”God moves in
mysterious ways” than to wrestle with a dilemma — or with a paradox, as Kierkegaard calls the Akedah.

Others, like Alice Miller (1990), are even more critical than Kierkegaard. They say that the whole story is about insanity, domestic violence, psychological aberration, mental sickness, delusion, tragic mistake, an evident crime, a murder of the worst kind. Miller goes on to say that Genesis 22 may have contributed to an atmosphere that makes it possible to justify the abuse of children.

Is the obedience of Abraham still the model for faith, or more importantly, is violence today to be accepted, if it is ordered by God? Sons and daughters are sacrificed today for political reasons. If a person is willing to defend sacrifices in warfare, to obey what the state commands, is it morally wrong then, to obey what God commands? In both realms, secular as well as religious, the decision causes pain and troubles to both the victim and his or her family.

The question in Akedah is all about a conflict: moral contradicting with obedience, common sense in a war with religious ideas, and love for humans conflicting with love for God. It is even a conflict within God: one who wants to kill, the other who wants to rescue. It is a philosophical, religious, historical and especially moral conflict.

In this study, I will take an analytical approach to existing literature and commentaries on Akedah. The leading research question is: Taking that obedience to God seems to negate moral in the case of Akedah, what are the typical attempts to resolve that conflict? More specifically, is it possible to combine a divine command to kill with a moral requisite not to kill? A Related question is if there can be seen any consistency in Abraham’s moral behavior in general, in the wider context of the book of Genesis.

I will base my study on existing literature, much of this rabbinic, and also on writings from fields of philosophy, anthropology, law, and theology in general. I first take a look at
how "divine obedience" is related to some moral theories, and then elaborate the concept and history of sacrifice and its relation to religious violence. After studying briefly the key concepts of moral and sacrifice in the context of religion, I will evaluate how applying the concept of morality (as well as immorality) to Abraham and God affects the interpretation of the story. Since the Scripture strongly implies God "tested" Abraham, I will examine several possible aspects of testing, e.g. testing faith, obedience, or fear of God. Finally, I’ll put Akedah in the context of Abraham’s family and raise up some troubling conflicts that it caused within his family. Resolving a conflict in one place, unfortunately, can cause conflicts elsewhere.

Sacrificing a child in God’s name is not only history. I will take some contemporary examples of crime cases that resemble the sacrifice of Isaac. Thus, contrary to some Bible commentators who claim that nothing similar to Akedah could happen today, I will show that some people have used the story of Abraham and Isaac as a justification to their pernicious actions.

Justifying one’s actions or opinions based on sacred texts is a topical question in many religions today. Studying Akedah helps us, hopefully, understand what is a man’s responsibility in interpreting as well as executing religious commands. Categories such as good/bad and right/wrong do not always apply when trying to apply religious ideals to everyday life. A more versatile approach is needed.

The title of my study is "Sacrificing Isaac — a kaleidoscopic view". Why the name kaleidoscopic? A Kaleidoscope is a tube with many mirrors inside, causing numerous reflections. Even a small change in one of the small mirrors causes the whole picture to change. This is exactly what happens to a researcher "looking at" Akedah. Each new "treatment” and each new insight tends to change the whole picture, the way one understand the story. Sometimes the change is a minor one, sometimes radical. None of the pictures is
completely false, nor is one picture perfect or solid. The only sure thing is that any new insight will change the view again. I hope to show that while any one of the solutions to this ancient religious conflict is not totally sufficient, there is at least one solution — somewhat surprising, though — where obedience and ethic need not be compromised. The morality, or goodness, of both God and Abraham can be preserved, but with a high cost.

2. Moral theories and approaches

"The child must be protected beyond and above all considerations of race, nationality or creed." (Declaration of the Rights of the Child 1948)

It is not difficult to find criticism for Abraham’s obvious willingness to sacrifice Isaac. In judicial terms, it was not only a question of "mere preparation": it was an attempted murder of first degree. The command to kill is also against everything Hebrew Bible teaches. There are overwhelmingly many examples of this. "Choose life, so that you and your children may live", was God’s command to Moses (Deuteronomy 30:19). In the case of Akedah, paradoxically, choosing death was necessary for Abraham’s children to inherit the blessings promised by God. Is there any way to solve this "divine conflict"?

When considering theories trying to address a moral conflict in religion, especially the moral dilemma of Abraham, Robert Adams’s modification of the Divine Command Theory is perhaps the most relevant. In addition to Divine Command Theory, I will present Kierkegaard’s and Kant’s ideas as well, since both of these scholars have much to say not only on moral, but on Abraham as well.
2.1. Divine Command Theory

"Can we accept a divine command theory … assuming a potential obligation to perform such horrible deeds [as killing]", asks Adams. (Adams 1999, 277)

At one extreme of moral theories, there stands an approach called *Divine Command Theory*. It has a couple of key statements. First, God has absolute authority over human reason. Second, God is not obliged to justify his commands in terms of any external principles. Third, God could command to do anything and it would be right to do it by definition. In brief: according to Divine Command Theory, an action is always morally good as long as it is commanded by God.

The Divine Command Theory is connected to a so called *Euthyphro Dilemma*. In a modified form Euthyphro Dilemma asks: Is morally good commanded by God simply *because it is morally good*, or is something morally good because it is commanded by God? In other words, does the mere existence of God’s command make an act good, or is it so that God chooses to command only things that are already good per se?

The Euthyphro Dilemma leads to further questions: Why would something that is morally good in itself need God to command it? What’s the need for God if all good things remain good even without God? If on the other hand, anything God commands is or becomes morally good, then the term ”Moral” becomes unnecessary. In other words, since there are no moral values external to God, God and moral become synonyms. Either God or moral become superfluous. That is also the view of Kierkegaard (2001, 68—81).

Robert Adams builds up his own ”Abraham’s Dilemma”, with three contradictory statements (Adams 1999, 280). He claims that in order to restore consistency, one of the following three statements needs to be denied:

1. If God commands me to do something, it is not morally wrong for me to do it
2. God commands me to kill my son.
3. It is morally wrong for me to kill my son.

Adams goes through a series or logical evaluations and eventually ends up rejecting statement #3. Thus he concludes: it was not morally wrong for Abraham to kill Isaac.³

To Adams, killing Isaac was not wrong since God did not forbid it. This position illustrates well the idea of Divine Command theory: there is no moral outside God. If there is no divine order either to do a thing or not do a thing, moral evaluations do not apply. Adams does not claim killing of Isaac wasn’t bad, though. "All available alternatives [to a moral dilemma] may indeed be bad in important ways, but there must always be at least one that is not wrong" (Adams 1999, 283). Adams seems to be thinking of two categories of good: quantitative (good vs. bad) and qualitative (right vs. wrong), and connecting moral only with qualitative.

Adams wants to detach religion from moral, even to detach religion from normal life. To him, the whole idea of religion is at risk, if no sacrifices are needed: "Religion’s connection with the transcendent would be threatened if it could not demand costly sacrifices for distinctly religious reasons". Stated differently: religion is religion only when it is at odds with everyday life. To his view, it is the very fact that religion challenges our moral opinions, which gives religion its value and richness. "If we believe in divine commands at all, we should not want to hold that they can never be surprising". Religion is not safe, and it is not predictable (Adams 1999, 285).

In the case of Akedah, however, Divine Command theory seems to fall down: it is logically impossible for a command to kill and a command not to kill to be moral at the same time. Yes cannot be no, even if the words are spoken by God.

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³ Kant, no doubt, would have rejected #2; see e.g. Kant 1979, 115.
2.2. Kierkegaard: suspension of ethics

"Ethically speaking", says Kierkegaard, "Abraham was going to murder his son." 

Religiously, he adds, "he was going to sacrifice him." —Omri Boehm (2007, 18)

"Let us then either consign Abraham to oblivion, or let us learn to be dismayed by the

tremendous paradox which constitutes the significance of Abraham’s life...”

— Kierkegaard (1941, under chapter Problemata: Preliminary expectoration).

One of Kierkegaard’s merits is in his questioning of the unquestioned religious glorification

of Abraham’s unethical act. Kaufmann summaries this will: "Fear and Trembling is directed

in large measure against those who read the Bible from an asthetic point of view, admiring

Abraham along with the beautiful story which tells of his readiness to sacrifice his son,

although the readers would abhor as a religious fanatic any contemporary who resolved to act

like Abraham.” (Kaufmann 1962, 16)

Kierkegaard was disappointed with how light-minded most people took the story. "No

one wants to know anything about anxiety, agony and paradox. It is the outcome that people

flirt with” (Kierkegaard 2001, 86). To Kierkegaard, the story is paralyzing: "When I think of

Abraham, I am as though annihilated. I catch sight every moment of that enormous paradox

which is the substance of Abraham’s life, every moment I am repelled, and my though in spite

of all its passion cannot get a hairs-breadth further. I strain every muscle to get a view of it —

that very instant I am paralyzed" (Kierkegaard 1941, location 351/1753\(^4\)).

The key concept Kierkegaard introduces is "Teleological suspension of ethics”, which

means to temporarily remove ethical demands — for a higher purpose, and based on

\(^4\) Unfortunately, most of Amazon’s Kindle e-Books do not offer any page numbers. Even the
given "location" is an estimate, based e.g. on the chosen end device, view and font size.
Abraham’s act was not an ethical sacrifice—e.g. to save a nation by appeasing the anger of God. Those who have done these things Kierkegaard calls ”tragic heroes”. Abraham was not a tragic hero. To Kierkegaard, he was a knight of faith. A knight of faith doesn’t seek justification for his act from man, but from God only.

Kierkegaard doesn’t say Abraham was immoral. Rather he was above general morality. ”Otherwise he was a murderer.” If Abraham was above morality, why then was there a need to temporarily suspend ethics? Kierkegaard’s answer is interesting: it was exactly ethics that was a temptation for Abraham. Ethics prevented God’s will. This is why ethics needed to be sacrificed for a greater good, something not yet known to Abraham.

Kierkegaard introduces also a term ”movement of faith”5, in an attempt to solve the ethical dilemma. Kierkegaard himself was not, however, able to make the movement, but to describe it: ”For the movements of faith must constantly be made by virtue of the absurd, yet in such a way, be it observed, that one does not lose the finite but gains it every inch. For my part, I can well describe the movements of faith, but I cannot make them” (Kierkegaard 1941).

Abraham’s moral conduct does not get total acceptance from Kierkegaard, though. Kierkegaard asks, for example: Was it ethically defensible for Abraham to conceal his intention from Sarah, From Eliezer, and from Isaac? I will come back to these questions later in my study.

There’s no doubt Kierkegaard puts God above ethics. ”God’s personal command overrides his universal command”. Furthermore, ”a relationship with God is a higher aim than just making the world a better place.” On the other hand, Kierkegaard thinks that an individual is always more valuable than a general moral principle (Kierkegaard 2001, 74; 92—95).

5 or ”leap of faith”, as translated by Torsti Lehtinen (Kierkegaard 2001)
In his introduction to one of Kierkegaard’s book, Walter Kaufmann writes: ”If it really were axiomatic that God could never contravene our conscience and our reason - if we could be sure that he must share our moral judgments - would not God become superfluous as far as ethics is concerned? A mere redundancy? If God is really to make a moral difference in our lives, Kierkegaard insists, we must admit that he might go against our reason and our conscience, and that he should still be obeyed” (Kaufmann 1962). In this view, God is above ethics. Otherwise, we wouldn’t need God at all.

Kierkegaard’s concept of “teleological suspension of ethical” is problematic for many reasons. If religion is seen as something beyond ethics — even for a short moment of suspended time — what are the consequences? Fanaticism, says Hedley. ”Kierkegaard’s rejection of an identification of religion with the ethical has the unwelcome effect of furnishing warrant for fanaticism” (Hedley 2011, 4).

It might appear that Kierkegaard’s views fit perfectly well with the Divine Command theory. However, that’s not quite the case, argues Hedley. ”This is not the case that faith simply trumps ethics”, he writes. ”Rather, the two are related mysteriously” (Hedley 2011, 135). What makes it difficult for a reader to evaluate Kierkegaard’s logic is his use of terms ”Knight of Faith” and ”Knight of infinite resignation”, which are difficult to decrypt. A shared understanding between Kierkegaard, his several interpreters and a reader is not easy to achieve. Kierkegaard writes sometimes as a theologian, sometimes as a philosopher, and sometimes as a novelist. The transition between these roles is not always clear.

2.3. Immanuel Kant and categorical imperative

Immanuel Kant has a different stance to Kierkegaard: “Abraham should have replied to this supposedly divine voice: ”That I ought not to kill my good son is quite certain. But that you, this apparition, are God—of that I am not certain, and never can be, not even if this voice
rings down to me from (visible) heaven” (Kant 1979, 115). In other words, since Abraham could have never been certain that the command was truly divine, he should have disobeyed. According to Kant’s moral theory, other people should always be treated as a goal, not only as a means to a goal.

It is difficult to say what would have been the exact goal for Abraham for scarifying Isaac. On one hand, the task was letting go of a goal, namely the blessing by God. On the other hand, Isaac’s role was very instrumental, either a gift to God or a means to avoid God’s possible punishment for not obeying.

In Kant’s view, morality should be determined by categorical imperative: man should always behave so that his act could become a law in any time and anywhere. ”Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.” For an action to have moral value, it must be universally good and necessarily binding. Moral cannot change depending on circumstances. Even if killing might sometimes be seen justified, e.g. in war or in self-defence, giving ones’ own innocent child as a burnt offering contradicts all contemporary ethical thinking, and is categorically wrong (Kant 1979, 1996). Kant’s categorical imperative is perhaps the most troubling standard to be reconciled with Divine commands.

Kant also states that humans are not able to verify a divine revelation. There is always room for skepticism. The only case one can verify this is when a command is in direct conflict with morality. In that case, a command cannot be seen as divine. Any command that contradicts the moral law, in Kant’s words, negatively discloses its source: It may not be possible to say, what is the source for a command to kill, but it is possible to say that it is not of God.
3. Sacrifice

"Any explanation of sacrifice is, in fact, a theory of religion in miniature."

— Jonathan Z. Smith

3.1. Defining sacrifice

Literally, sacrifice means making something or somebody holy; from Latin: *sacer* (holy) + *facere* (make). Historical descriptions of sacrifices typically focus on various aspects of gift, communion, magic, and different kinds of mediation between a subject (man), receiver (typically God) and object or victim (a human or an animal). In the process of sacrifice, a profane wants to connect with divine, for one reason or another. Since direct contact with the sacred is either fearful or impossible, resulting possibly in a death, a mediator is necessary. This is where a victim plays a role: It serves as an intermediary, a link between sacred and profane.

Hubert and Mauss underline the etymology of sacrifice, which is to make the object (victim) sacred, or consecrated. The victim "serves as a conduit of sorts for moving religious power in either direction between the human and divine realms". A sacrifice can also rid the subject (sacrifier) of an impurity, in which case the "power is moved from the sacrifier to the victim" (Hubert and Mauss 2003, 90). In Hubert’s and Mauss’s definition, both subject and object are gaining something: The object (e.g. animal) is made sacred, but during the process also the subject (e.g. a human, tribe or even a nation) is transforming in a positive way. Thus there is often a double effect in sacrifice. Hubert and Mauss arrive at the following definition of sacrifice:
Sacrifice is a religious act which, through the consecration of a victim, modifies the condition of the moral person who accomplishes it [personal sacrifice] or that of certain objects with which he is concerned [objective sacrifice]. (Hubert and Mauss 2003, 93).

Sacrifice is always consecration, but not all consecration is sacrifice: e.g. an act of anointment does make an object "sacred", but nothing more is achieved: The subject performing the anointing ceremony doesn’t gain anything, nor does he get rid of something unwanted. According to Hubert and Mauss, it is essential that in sacrifice something is destroyed. Typically blood is shed, but even a vegetable can be broken, thus constituting a proper sacrifice.

**Sacrifice as a gift**

One way of classifying sacrifices is to make a distinction between gifts and repairs. As a gift, a sacrifice can be seen as an act of goodwill, showing gratitude. Even if a Gift sacrifice is seen a gift, the sacrificer is usually expecting something from God in return, e.g. a blessing. This type of sacrifice is closely related to mutual recognition, which, as Hénaff says, can be seen as "the hidden spirit of the act of changing gifts" Saarinen, 2015, 21).

Levenson points out that according to a majority of Bible scholars, the gift of a first-born to God is not the same as with the first-born of animal: an animal is to be sacrificed; a human redeemed (Levenson 1993, 4).
Sacrifice as a repair

As a repair, a sacrifice is fixing something that’s gone wrong, a means of expiation or propitiation. To Hare, sacrifice is especially an expiation of “ritual impurity”, e.g. menstruation, birth, or death. Hare introduces a term of ”Moral gap” between people and God: God’s moral demands something that we don’t have a capacity to comply. A good example of a moral gap is a command to ”be holy”. This is where sacrifices come to place: through them, a human being is trying to narrow the gap between him and divine. Hare argues that there are two things differentiating us from God, namely death and sex, and it is especially because of these that sacrifices are needed. Sacrifices not only narrow down the moral gap but also — especially in forms of food offerings — make God stay with his people, like a tabernacle in the history of Judaism (Hare 2011, 112).

Both of the above types are all about human’s relation between deity. Both of them aim at maintaining or repairing a relationship between God. A third type of sacrifice, which I will present later, is one introduced by René Girard. Unlike the first two types of sacrifices, no deity is involved as a receiver. The object, or victim, is ”sacrificed” — not to God — but to maintain peace in a community or people.

Why bloodshed?

Hare states the Biblical belief that the life of the flesh is in the blood (Leviticus 17:11). What happens in killing ritual is that the blood (and thus also life) is returned to God. While the owner of the animal was initially man, this ownership is now transferred to God by a sacrifice ritual. There is a good rationale for this: In a case of a transgression, instead of killing himself (as a blood debt to God), man is now allowed to kill an animal, a substitute. In other words, the blood becomes a ransom for man’s life.
In the Bible, the blood is also seen as a mechanism of cleansing. It cleanses a sanctuary or a sacred place, and absorbs the impurities. In this way, blood helps maintain God’s presence. Hare makes an important note, though: ”The key is the separation between death and blood. Blood can cleanse because it is the principle of — not death — but of life” (Hare 2011, 120). In other words, the value of killing doesn’t rely on death itself, but on blood.

Hare didn’t quite explain why God wants life (blood) instead of some other offering, especially since the ”initial sin” of Adam was not a major one, only eating a forbidden fruit. How does a blood sacrifice fix anything? God’s ”pleasure of smelling aroma of burnt offering” or seeing blood is difficult for modern a man to understand.

What type of sacrifice was Akedah?

The sacrifice of Isaac can bee seen as a burnt offering, a gift sacrifice as well as a first fruit offering. In burnt offering, according to Moses’s law, the blood was collected and sprinkled on the outside corners of the altar. The corpse was then flayed, and the skin kept by the priests. Then the flesh was divided into pieces and then placed on the altar (see e.g. Schwartz 2011, 154). All of the meat were to be given to God, nothing consumed by a priest. In a burnt offering according to Mosaic ordain, however, the victim is to be slaughtered before putting it on the woods (Leviticus 1:3—13). That’s not what Abraham did: He laid Isaac on top of the woods first, and was about to slaughter him after that.

Akedah is also usually understood as a gift sacrifice. It ”expresses the worshipper’s desire to present something to the LORD as a token of love and reverence” (Schwartz 2004, 206—207). There is no expiation of guilt, no intention for economic transactions, and no channelling of violence — an aspect which I will discuss later. The problem of considering Akedah as a gift sacrifice is that Abraham did not own Isaac like he owned cattle or his house. It is also troubling to see a gift as something required by other. A gift should usually show
gratitude or apprehension, motivated by free will. A gift should also take into consideration the receivers values and expectations. Would a sliced human corpse be a gift to God? With Adams’s words: ”How would you like to receive for your birthday a brightly wrapped box with a card on it announcing 'the costliest and most precious gift I could find’, and open it to discover the severed head of either the giver or the giver’s child?” A gift like that would be both horrendous and insulting. ”Who but a monster would like such a gift as this?” (Adams 1999, 289–290).

The sacrifice of Isaac can also be seen as belonging to a special instance called ”first fruit offering”. In Hebrew Bible, the firstborn belongs to God. Even though from Abraham’s view the firstborn was Ishmael, from Sarah’s view he was Isaac. In Judaism, it is the status derived from a mother that counts. Besides, Ishmael is never described as firstborn in Hebrew Bible.

3.2. Evolution of Sacrifice

Westermarck says that in the history of humanity, sacrifices have been a life-insurance — not originating from God’s demand but from human psyche: when people have been in great danger, they thought that God was about to take their life. Sacrifice then, being a substitute for man, was a way to avert a certain death. With such insurance type of sacrifices, a community or an individual has been seeking ”relief from a trouble-making god” (Westermark 2003, 101).

Tyler (2003, 13) points out three phases in the evolution of sacrifices. In the first, original phase, the basic idea is simple gift giving. Blood, which is the essence of sacrifice, was given to spirits or deity in a way that is most proper to the receiver. Thus, for example, if the receiving spirit was in the air, the sacrifice was burned, if the spirit was a god of water, the victim needed to be drowned.
In the second phase of sacrifice, people started to believe that gods truly care for their wellbeing. Humans started to ask for favors from gods. Thus, what was new compared to the first phase, was dialogue, which often took place in a context of sharing a meal. Even in the many sacrifices today, there can be seen this kind of contractual element, an exchange of services. To Robertson Smith, sacrifice is essentially and originally a meal shared with a god, a communion (Smith 2003, 55).

In the final phase of development of sacrificial practices, the focus shifted from giving to receiving, and some economical calculations took place: people gave up something valuable to get something back. During this phase, Tyler argues, people also started to substitute sacrifices: Instead of killing a whole person, e.g. only his hair, or an animal, was given.

Alcorta and Sosis see sacrifices and rituals in general as the very core of religion. Their view is that rituals came first, sacredness followed as an add-on. "Sacred things are created by rituals, by rituals they are given power." Their view is that eventually all the myths end up a holy doctrine (Alcorta & Sosis 2013, 574).

Hare does not completely agree with evolutionist views, where the history of sacred is seen as a primitive stage of magic, which by time advanced towards ethics. "The theory of sacrifice as pre-moral magic - - relies on a quasi-Hegelian evolutionist methodology that posits a development of religion from magic to ethics" (Hare 2011, 114). To Hare ethic is, and has always been inseparable with a sacrificial system: God was expecting not only a sacrifice but also, and maybe even more, a way of life — a "sacrificial spirit", or a broken heart as in Psalm 51.
3.3. Sacrifice in Hebrew Bible

"You shall give me the first-born among you sons" (Exodus 22:28)

"They built high places for Baal in the Valley of Ben Hinnom to sacrifice their sons and daughters to Molek, though I never commanded—nor did it enter my mind" (Jeremiah 32:35).

Did God need sacrifices? Were child sacrifices at some point mandated, were they "silently accepted" or clearly forbidden? The interpretation of Exodus 22:28, "You shall give me the first-born among you sons" has caused much trouble. Isn’t God clearly commanding human sacrifices?\(^6\)

In Exodus (13:1—2) Lord said to Moses: "Consecrate to me every firstborn male. The first offspring of every womb among the Israelites belongs to me, whether human or animal.” In Jeremiah (7:22), on the other hand, it says: "For in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, I did not speak to your fathers or command them concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices.\(^7\) The most striking contradiction, of course, is in the story of Akedah: God first ordered a human sacrifice and a few days afterwards forbid it.

Levenson argues that in Hebrew Bible "law often articulates a theological and moral ideal; it does not always stipulate a practice that all can reasonably be expected to undertake”. Also, according to Levenson, it remains unclear if God will really "exercise his proprietary claim on the first son and how the father is to honor the claim, should YHWH [God] choose

\(^6\) Most sacrifices in Bible are animal sacrifices. However, even animal sacrifices seem to contradict God’s standards: throughout the Bible God seems to show compassion to animals. This is why Hare asks, "how are we to take the prescriptions for animal sacrifice?” (Hare 2011, 112).

\(^7\) See also: Hosea 6:6, Micah 6:6-8, Psalm 51:16-17.
Levenson (1993, 126), Adams (1999, 279) and Boehm (2007, 15, 52—55) are stating that child sacrifice was a practice at that time. They might have caused horror but were nevertheless accepted. They were not only pagan rituals but also given to YHWH. One evidence for non-pagan child sacrifices come from the book of Judges. Jephthah made a vow to Lord: “If you give the Ammonites into my hands, whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the Lord’s, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering (Judges 11:30—31). Jephthah won the battle, and for his misfortune, the first one coming out of the house was his only child.8 Adams writes: ”The book of Judges contains no suggestion that anyone disapproved of Jephthah’s killing his daughter … the story evidently comes from a culture in which a father’s sacrificing his child to YHWH was a recognized part of the religious repertoire” (Adams 1999, 279). Jephthah’s sacrifice does not prove that God required sacrifices, only that is was not uncommon.

In addition to Jephthah, other child sacrifices are recorded in Bible as well. This time, however, they are condemned by God. One of them is the king Ahaz sacrificing his son (2 Kings 16:14). Ahaz ”offered sacrifices and burned incense at the high places, on the hilltops and under every spreading tree”. Child sacrifices were also given by king Manasseh (2 Kings 21:6) and king Mesha, who sacrificed his son as a burnt offering in a hope to win a battle. (2 Kings 3:26-27)

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8 Interestingly, Bible don’t even mention by name of daughter. It is interesting to compare this story with Sacrifice of Isaac. In both stories a child was given to God without them resisting. However, Jephthah was kind enough to give his child a two months time to be with her friends before execution (Judges 11:37—38). Whether or not Isaac asked for this, he was not given none.
3.4. Sacrifice and violence

It has been thought that there once was an original killing, which somehow developed to religion. René Girard is one, how takes this approach. According to his theory, a sacrifice is a channel for violence.

His theory, oversimplified is this: mimetic desire (basically meaning: envy) once caused ”an original murder”. In the context of Christianity, one could probably think of the murder of Abel as such a thing: Kain wanted something Abel had, namely the favor of God. This original murder, in turn, caused a cycle of violence, which eventually culminated in a crisis of violence. Finally, the community channelled all violence onto a randomly and non-consciously chosen victim, called scapegoat. This scapegoat, or victim, was eventually seen as a ”savior”, something divine (Girard 2003, 239—274).

This process, starting with mimetic desire and ending with a killing, basically ends the cycle violence, but only violence towards human(s): the community still needs a new target, this time an animal, which is called a secondary substitution. The good thing in using animals (or such humans who are in a marginal) is that they do not generate any new cycles of revenge among humans. They are not capable for vengeance. Animals don’t have friends capable or willing to repay.

Even more interesting in Girard’s theory is that once aroused, the urge to violence does not disappear, even if the initial cause gets out of the picture. ”When unappeased, violence seeks and always finds a surrogate victim” – something that happens to be near. He even goes to claim of a ”fundamental truth about violence; if left unappeased, violence will accumulate until it overflows its confines and floods the surrounding area” (Girard 2003, 249). In addition
to the cumulative effect of violence, new sacrificial crises emerge all the time, and mimetic
desire never stops.  

To Girard, violence is at the core of every sacrifice — even here in the sacrifice of
Isaac. ”There is no question of expiation” in sacrifices. To him, the violence comes in a quite
creative manner all the way from Adam’s children. He refers to Muslim tradition, which says
that the ram God gave was exactly the same Abel offered to God. (Already killed, but now
somehow live again.) ”The ram was to take the place of Abraham’s son Isaac; having already
saved one human life, the same animal would now save another.” (Girard 2003, 244—245).
Girard sees that all religious phenomena have their origin in sacrifices, and more specifically,
on scapegoat mechanism. It follows to him that if we understand sacrifices, we understand
religion.

It is not possible to reflect much on Girard’s theory here, but one critical word should be
said. In Hebrew Bible, the purpose for sacrifices is not channelling of violence. Girard might
have explained well the phenomena of sibling rivalry and scapegoating, but not Biblical
sacrifices. A scapegoat is not the same as a sacrifice (see e.g. Hare 2011).

Girard is typically criticized for his focus on violence as the defining characteristic of
sacrifice (e.g. McClymond 2011, 321). As seen before, sacrifice can consist as well of e.g.
vegetal offerings, and crushing of vegetables only rarely is violent or aggressive. ”Even the
ancient Jewish tradition (the source of Girard’s ”scapegoat”), as expounded in the Bible and
the Mishnah, presents a vast array of offering substances, including grain-cakes and wine, and
a complex manipulation of animal victims that focuses not on their death, but rather on their
division sea distribution” (McClymond 2011, 323).

9 Girard sees that the need for sacrifice, and violence, eventually ended with an ultimate
sacrifice, one of Christ’s. With this, the violence and all its mechanisms were exposed.
McClymond notes that the Christian view of sacrifice tends to be more violent than in some other religions. “This Western-driven understanding has become paradigmatic, shaping the investigation and interpretation of sacrifice such that the terms sacrifice, violence, and killing have become virtually indistinguishable” (McClymond 2011, 322). Sacrifice in Christian context focuses often on atonement, and presupposes an “angry God”, where an appeasement of divine wrath is needed, while many other approaches do not focus that much on violence (McClymond 2011, 322—324).

Girard is right in saying that there is a societal function with sacrifices, but the claim that the mechanism is always of channelling violence — and doing this unconsciously — is difficult to support.

### 3.5. Akedah as a paradigm change

Several researchers see Akedah as an etiology of a new sacrificial practice, a new norm, where human sacrifices are abolished and animals come to substitute. Paul Mosca even sees that the "original purpose [of the Akedah] may have been to explain why YHWH no longer—or ever—demanded the sacrifice of the first-born son” (Mosca 1975, 237).

This raises a question, though: why did God accept human sacrifices in the first place? If God never wanted human sacrifices, why didn’t he clearly and consistently forbid them? Maimonides thinks that maybe God made a concession: He waited until the time was right, then took man’s old way of worshiping idols, and transferred them to “His service” (Maimonides 1956, 322—327). In other words, God tolerated man’s immorality because He knew that man is simply not capable of better. Richard Swinburne thinks along same lines. He says that primitive people could not learn some moral truths because they were "beyond their capacities.” Swinburne concludes that God probably inspired some holy writings, which, as originally understood, have an inadequate morality” (Swinburne, 2011,
211). This reminds me of Jesus’s teaching in Matthew 19:9: "Moses only wrote this commandment [concerning divorce] because of their peoples hardness of heart”.

Levenson argues that Akedah cannot be taken as a paradigm change in sacrifices, only an example of ritual substitution: God retains a claim on the life of first-born, but now an animal sacrifice is enough. Hereafter the first-born undergoes only a symbolic death. It is not that human sacrifices became forbidden, though: “The Akedah does not forbid the sacrifice of the favored son or mandate the substitution of an animal” (Levenson 1993, 112).

4. Moral attributions in Akedah

How have scholars and authors tried to make sense of the story, and tried to solve the problem between ethic and obedience? More specifically: whose moral is questioned: Abraham’s, God’s or both’s? Several interpretations on Akedah have been made. In the following chapter, I will place them into four different categories, based on how morality is attributed to Abraham and God.

4.1. Good God, good Abraham

In Church sermons and commentaries, Abraham is usually regarded as a model of faith. However, much of what is written in Bible commentaries can be defined as eisegesis: reading into the text something that’s actually not there. What seems to be an obvious paradox, is often explained away, and what is too bloody, is whitewashed, and some extra motives are added. Jack Miles, in the foreword of Omri Boehm’s The Binding of Isaac (Miles 2007) says it well: "In our day, as never before, theology has come round to theodicy.”

There is a risk of whitewashing Abraham and thus avoiding discussion on the ethical problem. As Sherwood puts it: "Knowing, just as surely as Soren Kierkegaard knows, that this
story opens up a fundamental cut, or wound, between religion and ethic, and that it takes place in the shadows, beyond morality’s searchlight, they aim to bring the patriarchal outlaw back within the law and to bring these extreme, mountaintop events down to a safer, more human(e) place” (Sherwood 2004, 844). It is not only of presenting Abraham in a good light, it may also be seeing monotheism better than other religions. ”The perception of the story as a teach-text for the rudimentary elements of ethical monotheism, or a counter-blast to their heinous practices of neighboring Canaanites or Phoenicians, reflects the deep need for monotheism to purge itself of violence, expelled to a geographical or chronological elsewhere” (Sherwood 2004, 845). Following are some interpretations which do not question at all the motives and morality of God and Abraham.

"Isaac would not really die”

It is often thought in Bible commentaries that Abraham believed he would, after all, not lose Isaac, but somehow get him back, even restored from the dead (see e.g. the commentaries of Clarke and Matthew Henry). Even Kierkegaard, clearly not a typical Bible commentator, was thinking that God could give Abraham a new Isaac by restoring him to life. What’s even more important to Kierkegaard, is that Abraham did not think he would be blessed in a future life but that he would be blessed already in this life. ”But Abraham had faith, and had faith for this life. Yes, had his faith only been for a future life it would indeed have been easier to cast everything aside in order to hasten out of this world to which he did not belong” (Kierkegaard 2001).

"Abraham was acting prophetically”

Many see the binding of Isaac as an analogy to the death of Christ: binding prefigures crucifixion. God sacrificed his beloved son just like Abraham was willing to sacrifice his
beloved son. Guzik even says that Abraham knew that God would provide "the ultimate sacrifice for salvation on that hill someday" (Guzik 2012). To underline the analogy between Isaac and Christ even more, Guzik claims that Isaac was “reckoned dead” by Abraham as soon as God gave the command. By this thinking both Jesus and Isaac can be seen as being “dead” the same period time, three days. Genesis 22 itself does not, however, suggest that Abraham knew he was acting prophetically.

"It was not wrong for Abraham”

Sometimes there’s a double standard for moral: one for Abraham, one for the rest of us. I once discussed the moral dilemma of Abraham with a friend, who was also convinced God could have resurrected Isaac from death. He added: "Besides, Isaac was a grown up man, and he volunteered to this.” I then mentioned about a man who was recently sentenced to prison because of sacrificing his child while firmly believing in God’s intervention to stop the procedure. My opponent then stated: "Yes, but there’s a big difference. This man is not the Father of Faith, like Abraham” Of course, my friend had it right: The man in question is not any of the New Testament heroes.

A double standard might apply to another aspect as well. While Abraham is praised for obeying God without hesitation — beginning his journey as a first thing next morning — that’s not probably an advice given today. If somebody claims to have received a divine instruction to kill, he would be asked at least to think again or consult a good friend before jumping to action.

Perhaps the most extreme apology comes from Paul Copan, who sees even the very command to sacrifice Isaac as gentle. "Even the hard command to Abraham is cushioned by God’s tenderness. God’s directive is unusual: 'Please take your son’ — or as another scholar translates it, 'Take, I beg of you, your only son.’ God is remarkably gentle as he gives a
difficult order” (Copan 2011, 47—48; italics in original). One can only wonder if this alleged
tenderness of God’s order to kill would have made the ordeal any easier for Abraham and
Isaac.

4.2. Bad God, bad Abraham

A parent felled her on her bridal day,

Making his child a sacrificial beast

To give the ships auspicious winds for Troy:

Such are the crimes to which Religion leads.

— Lucretius (1916, lines 98—101), referring to Agamemnon’s sacrifice of Iphigenia

Like some other troubling stories in Bible, e.g. genocide in Jericho (Joshua 6) and killing of
all Egyptian firstborn (Exodus 12), the command to sacrifice Isaac has caused a large number
of scholars to call God evil, or at least having a dark side. Numerous negative attributes to
such a God have been given, including ”Cosmic child abuser” and ”a Moral monster” (see
e.g. Copan 2011). Abraham’s behavior, in turn, is evaluated as a complete moral failure or as
an example of religious fanaticism.

Even though God himself was not the actor in the scene of Akedah, the divine command
for killing did come from God. And even if God’s command to kill Isaac is seen only as a test
(an aspect I will elaborate in detail later), the question is: Why would God toy with our
feelings, even with human lives in such a way? There are even books and essays where either
God or Abraham have been ”put to trial”.

Much of today’s critical assessment is largely rooted in Enlightenment philosophy.
Levenson sees Immanuel Kant as one of the ”forerunners” of critique. ”In locating the story
exclusively within the domain to ethics, Kant proved to be a forerunner of much with which
we are familiar today, when in some circles the negative interpretation of the Biding of Isaac has become a staple and Abraham is seen as a model of the abusive father, the violent male, the man pathologically anxious about the paternity of his offspring, the hideousness of ”patriarchy” in general” (Levenson 2012, 108). To summarize the view of Kant and several critical historians and contemporary writers, both the command of God and the subsequent obedience of Abraham were categorically wrong.

There’s an interesting exegesis that gives support to Kant’s view. It can be observed that most of Genesis uses a word Elohim, translated as God. However, God’s angel in Akedah is called YHVH, translated ”the Lord”. This, in turn, has lead to a hypothesis of two different text sources, one of so called source E (standing for Elohim) and of source J (from Tetragrammaton YHVH). Importantly, the source containing angelic speech is seen as being newer, an interpolation. Supporting this hypothesis is e.g. a different writing style, structure and wordings (Boehm 2007, 2). What exactly does this mean for the story and, especially, for our evaluation of Abraham’s moral? Two scenarios open, quite different from each other.

*Abraham killed Isaac?*

As is told in Genesis 22, an angel of the Lord called out from heaven and told Abraham not to harm his son. He also mentioned: ”Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son.” If the angel was missing from original scriptures, this could mean one of two following: Abraham actually killed Isaac (thus obeying God), or he was disobedient to God by letting Isaac go, and possibly sacrificing a ram instead. Both of these interpretations can be supported by the context of Genesis 22.

Let me first examine the possibility that Abraham actually sacrificed Isaac. If the angelic speech is an interpolation, a later addition, then the *original* story flows as this: God
told Abraham to give Isaac as a burnt offering. Abraham then made all the needed preparations. Finally, ”Abraham returned to his servants” (Genesis 22:19).

Supporting this interpretation is that while in the beginning of the story Abraham and Isaac are told of going together. When returning from Moriah, however, the verb is singular. ”So Abraham returned.” (see e.g. Spiegel 1993). Moreover, most commentators note that Bible never reports Isaac and Abraham talking to each other after that episode, although such talks are not presented before Akedah, either. There is not even mentioned Isaac getting a fatherly blessing from Abraham, as other patriarchs did. Instead, it was God who blessed Isaac! (Genesis 25:11).

The absence of two things in the story — a missing dialogue between Abraham and Isaac after near-sacrifice, and a missing notion of Isaac coming back his father — has led to a conclusion that a sacrifice really took place. Otherwise one could ask: why didn’t the narrator in Genesis 22 seek out any response of Isaac to the dramatic episode? Why the silence? Yvonne Sherwood writes: ”Historical critical scholars of the Bible have long maintained, very plausible, that the biblical narrative is itself a story that has been modified from actual sacrifice to almost sacrifice” (Sherwood 2004, 841). A poem of Rabbi Ephraim ben Jacob of Bonn, from the twelfth century, speaks directly of the death of Isaac.

He [Abraham] made haste, he pinned him [Isaac] down with his knees.

He made his two arms strong.

With steady hands he slaughtered him according to the rite,

Full right was the slaughter.

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10 A more likely option to a contemporary mind may be that these two men simply took different directions, Abraham walking and Isaac running for his life.

11 Interestingly, nor did the blessing go well with Isaac’s sons, either. The blessing that was meant to Esau was given to Jacob.
A further argument in favor of actual killing can be raised. If nobody was killed and
everything continued as normal, why would the story have lived for so long? If sacrificing of
Isaac was only a thought in Abraham’s mind, but never completed, what heroic or what
dramatic there is, at least comparing to some real sacrifices mentioned in Bible? A real hero
not only accepts a divine test but also finishes it (Zuckerman 1991, 21).

If Isaac was killed, there’s a couple of simple question that must be asked: First, how is
it possible that Isaac is alive in next chapters? Secondly, how can a dead man give birth to
Esau and Jacob? The answer to these questions relies on the idea of interpolation: the source
of these problematic post-sacrifice texts is the same later redaction as is the source of angelic
interpolations (Levenson 2012, 86). Simply put: Abraham’s son Isaac was killed, and another
Isaac — maybe even two new Isaacs — later came to picture.¹³

This first scenario just described supposes an actual death of Isaac. The second scenario,
if the story is still read without angelic intervention, is that Abraham disobeyed God’s
command to sacrifice Isaac. This is the theme in next chapter.

¹²The entire poem is printed in The Last Trial (Spiegel 1993, 143—152).

¹³There is also a legend, quite seriously supported e.g. by Spiegel, that Isaac did die, but was
soon resurrected from death.
4.3. Bad God, good Abraham

"So I gave them other statutes that were not good and laws through which they could not live” (Ezekiel 20:25).

If God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, if no angelic objection was heard, and if Isaac still was not killed, this leads to only one conclusion: Abraham was disobedient. Abraham chose not to follow God’s direct command, and thus saved a human life. Abraham can still be seen as a hero, but now for a totally different reason: for saving Isaac while risking his own life by resisting God. In this case, Abraham was not a hero of faith, but a hero of ethics.

This is exactly a view Omri Boehm supports. "If Abraham actually disobeyed God’s manifestly illegal order, it was he, the monotheistic believer, the ”Knight of Faith” [of Kierkegaard], who was responsible for the determination of good and evil — not God. He thus presents us, not with the ’suspension of the ethical’, but with a preference for it” (Boehm 2007, 2, 33).

However, Abraham’s disobedience might not have been disappointing to God. On the contrary: rejecting His own command to kill may have been exactly what God expected from Abraham. As Bodoff sees it, Abraham showed ”moral stance”, which actually pleased God, and for which Abraham was rewarded. Abraham passed a very malicious test. It was like God was saying to Abraham afterwards: ”I wanted to be sure you were not an immoral, mechanical, ’Yes man’” (Bodoff 1993, 72).

But in the absence of angel(s), something else must have caused Abraham to change his mind in the very last moment. Did he first see a ram and then come up with a clever idea of substitution, or, did he simply come to his senses, thinking ”what on earth I am about to do”,

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then dropped the knife and went on to search for a substitute sacrifice?\(^{14}\) Boehm settles for an interpretation that the ram appears surprisingly, and at a right time. It was not an angel pointing to a ram, *rather an angel was added later as an explanation why Abraham noticed the animal*. In other words, an angel was not a direct cause for halting the procedure, but still had some role in it. (Boehm 2007, 32).

If we accept Boehm’s view, what explains the motive for an angel to praise Abraham for his *willingness to sacrifice Isaac*, if that was not what God wanted? The angel said: "Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son." How can it be that God expected Abraham not to kill and angels expected him to kill? To Bodoff, there is one key difference between angels and humans: angels have no other option but to mechanically obey God. Angels don’t have the "luxury" of private thinking and of opposing God. Killing Isaac was exactly *what angels would have done in Abraham’s place*. This is why Angels praised Abraham for what they perceived to be Abraham’s *intention*. (Bodoff 1993, 80—83).\(^ {15}\)

What could be the motive for adding the angelic text to the story? "To make the story look better", says Boehm. A later redactor was anxious to attribute the halting of trial not to Abraham but to an angel, this way making Abraham *look obedient to God* — and concealing Abraham’s disobedience. It would have been unthinkable that the Father of faith was opposing God. What kind of exemplar would this Abraham be to other generations!

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\(^{14}\) One can also see Abraham’s promise to come back as a prove of disobedience, an early commitment not to obey God. Abraham said to his servants: "Stay here with the donkey. The boy and I will go yonder. We will worship, and come back to you" (Genesis 22:5). In other words, even before the test was about to take place, Abraham knew how he would act.

\(^{15}\) It is interesting how Bodoff sees angels role in a completely opposite way than other supporters of the theory of interpolation. Most often angels are seen as compassionate, last minute saviors. To Bodoff they are robotic, non-emotional observers, even simple-minded, since "Angels are never given more than one task at a time", Angels understand only Hebrew, they cannot empathize (Bodoff 1993, 80—81).
In the story of Akedah, "the issue is divine destruction of innocent life, and the reader must determine - - whether Abraham is to be celebrated for his gracious submission or for his terminal defiance" (Jack Miles in Foreword to Boehm 2007, xi).

Boehm points out the uniqueness of Akedah compared to other child sacrifices at that time: "In the usual story the people are saved because its leader was ready to sacrifice his "beloved son"; in this story [of Akedah] they are saved because of his refusal to do so. Abraham's ethical integrity thus becomes an essential foundation, underlining the very existence of his seed" (Boehm 2007, 57; italics mine).

4.4. Good God, bad Abraham

As told in Genesis 22, the angel of God told Abraham to abstain from killing, although at the very last moment. Thus, Abraham can be seen as guilty of attempted murder, or at least unable to make a difference between right or wrong. An angel was needed to save Isaac from death.

While Abraham is seen here as unmoral, God doesn’t need to be. Actually, to some, the purpose of the story is to demonstrate God’s love. Guzik writes in his commentary: "God emphatically showed Abraham that He was not like the pagan gods worshiped by the Canaanites and others, gods that demanded human sacrifice and were pleased by it.” With the help an angel’s intervention God showed that He really don’t want human sacrifices: animals will suffice.  

In his book The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son, Levenson (Levenson 1993) examines the religious idea of child sacrifice as it appears in the Biblical and extracanonical literature of Judaism and Christianity. Sacrificing the first-born son to God, despite the horror such an act evoked, occurred early in the history of Israel. God had a legal

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16 This explanation ends up with some troubles, too. As Guzik himself later notes, God did at a later time require a human sacrifice, namely his own son.
claim on the first-born (Exodus 22:28). While the first-born does belong to God, Levenson emphasizes that it was unclear if God would ever really "exercise his proprietary claim" and if yes, "how the father is to honor the claim". Abraham might have accepted that Isaac belonged to God, but not "literally dead".

For some it would be tempting to think of Abraham as an archaic figure with no clear understanding of what’s right and what’s wrong, blindly continuing the practice of child sacrifices until God taught him what’s right and what’s not. But why all this drama for God only to deliver a simple message: "Do not kill — I mean, ever!" Wouldn’t a single word from God suffice? Moreover, if human sacrifices were really an abomination to God, shouldn’t God have rebuked Abraham after heading to an order to kill? "Did you really think I am a God like this?" It was not until Moses, when God gave his law, carved in stone, to make sure it was clear for all.

All in all, the near sacrifice of Isaac can be seen as Abraham’s mistake to interpret correctly God’s will. God’s command not to kill still remains, but for one reason or another, Abraham took his knife. Eventually, all boils down to Abraham’s possibly bad character, which will be discussed later.

4.5. No God, bad Abraham

As mentioned in chapter X, Immanuel Kant might argue the there was no God at all in this episode. According to Kant, Abraham should have responded to the "voice" as following: "But that you, this apparition, are God—of that I am not certain" (Kant 1996). Lippman Bodoff says that anyone commanding to violate a Jewish law is a false prophet in Judaism — even if God has spoken to him or her (Bodoff 1993, 72—72).

Hearing voices is not unthinkable to contemporary psychology. It can be argued that Abraham was hearing voices because of an immense psychological stress. Such voices could
have been a manifestation of his own emotions and thoughts, like aggression or fear. What becomes a problem in cases like this, is the inability to differentiate an "inner voice" from an "outer voice" (Vuorinen 1996). It does not take much imagination to think that some traumatic experience, e.g. guilty related to casting out of Ishmael might have caused Abraham an ethical struggle, which led to hearing voices. Psychologist Julian Jaynes claims that before the development of written language, hearing voices was actually a normal thing (Jaynes 1973).¹⁷

It has also been thought that maybe Abraham was only dreaming of hearing God. First of all, as is told in Genesis 22, Abraham took up his task early in the morning — during a time when one often wakes up from a dream. Secondly, in Qur’an Abraham tells Isaac that while sleeping, he has seen himself slaughtering him (see e.g. Levenson 2012, 104).

It would not be the first time in history when somebody claims to hear God’s voice and then commit a crime, as I will show later. It would not be the only incident in Hebrew Bible, either. Critical historians often take the view that a very problematic (and often violent) order has been described by a redactor as God’s command, to get justification e.g. to a war or a genocide.

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¹⁷Interestingly, the invention of the original Semitic alphabet occurred in Canaan around the 18th century B.C.E., close to Abraham’s time. Bodoff writes: "[writing skills] broke the monopoly on knowledge previously enjoyed by society’s ruling elites, allowing literacy to spread to ordinary people.” This emphasizes the importance of written text over private revelations, enabling a "religion based on covenant between God and all the people, in a revealed text to which all had access and which all could master” (Bodoff 1993, 74).
5. Aspects of testing

_God:_ How could thou doest such a thing?

_Abraham:_ But thous said —

_God:_ Never mind what I said. Dost thou listen to every crazy idea that cometh thy way?...

_Abraham:_ See, I never know when you’re kidding.

(Allen 1983, 24)

Teachers often devise hypothetical scenarios to their students. These dilemmas have no perfect solutions and might require a tragic choice between the lesser of two evils. Maybe God was doing to Abraham what e.g. law professors have done throughout history: teaching by giving a difficult dilemma to solve (Dershowitz 2015, 13). Typical questions might be:

- Does end justify the means? Is there a "defense of necessity" where small crimes are allowed to prevent a greater harm?

There’s a story in Book of Jubilees (Not canonical in Western Christianity, though), closely reminiscent of the opening words of the Book of Job:

> And it came to pass in the seventh week, in the first year thereof, in the first month in this jubilee, on the twelfth of this month, there were voices in heaven regarding Abraham, that he was faithful in all that He told him, and that he loved the Lord, and that in every affliction he was faithful. And the prince Mastêmâ came and said before God, 'Behold, Abraham loves Isaac his son, and he delights in him above all things else; bid him offer him as a burnt-offering on the altar, and Thou wilt see if he will do this command, and Thou wilt know if he is faithful in everything wherein Thou dost try him. (Jubilee 17:15—16).
If it was a test, then what exactly was the test about? Did God want to know how great Abraham’s faith was, or was he interested to see if Abraham was ready to obey blindly? Why, on the other hand, would an omniscient God need information on something he knows already?18

Isaac was the long expected child — a child of great promise. It is obvious that with Isaac, Abraham was asked to sacrifice his glorious future, his everything. Isaac was more than a son, he was the promise. Whatever the test was about, there was much more at stake than the life of Isaac. To von Rad, giving up that promise would be for Abraham ”a road out into Godforsakeness” — A road to hell, so to speak. God appeared as if he wanted to remove the salvation — his own original idea — from history, and Abraham is asked to accept this decision. (von Rad 1972, 238).19 Old Testament scholar James Crenshaw (1984, 12), in turn, refers to to the test as "a monstrous test".

Moberly thinks that the test was a real one, not something to prove what God already knew. ”Now I know…” God said at the end of the test. Moberly notes that there’s a tendency for many commentators to reduce ”testing” to ”only testing”20, as a way of reducing the drama in the story. God did not test only to teach, he tested to learn himself! (Moberly 2004).

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18 In the end of the test, a voice says: ”Now I know”. Bodoff’s explanation to this is that God did know all the time, but the Angel of God, who said that, did not. According to Bodoff, an angel cannot have foreknowledge on man’s moral choices (Bodoff 1993, 80—81).

19 It is not difficult to compare this with Jesus’ struggle in Gethsemane, on his way to death. Would God allow for killing the long waited child of promise, Isaac, as well as Jesus?

20 See e.g. Copan (2011, 47).
5.1. God was testing Abraham

5.1.1. Testing faith

"By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice… Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death" (Hebrews 11:17—19).

Abraham is the hero of faith. That’s what the unknown writer of the Book of Hebrews tells. Abraham is the Knight of faith, said Kierkegaard. Bodoff goes almost to an extreme in commending Abraham of his faith on God. To him, Abraham never even thought that God really required killing of Isaac! He compares Akedah to the story to Exodus, where the people of Israel plunged into the Red Sea confident in faith that God would somehow save them. Abraham had faith in ”God, who does not want human sacrifice or murder of any kind” (Bodoff 1993, 84).

Faith is often thought of as a synonym for trust. Dershowitz points out that there are two different kinds of trust: *moral trust* and *empirical trust*. Moral trust means that Abraham thought God was right in ordering a sacrifice. Empirical trust means Abraham believed God would never actually let the slaughter happen. A typical example of empirical trust is when one is asked to fall backward into a friend’s arms. If there is trust, one will fall (safely). Moral trust, on the other hand, is a willingness to fall backward even if one knew the friend would not catch you. You know you may break your neck, but you still ”trust” your friend’s judgment! (Dershowitz 2000, location 1445/3978).

The problem with many interpretations of Akedah is that it is unclear in which sense the idea of trust — or faith — is used. Did Abraham have faith in God’s goodness in whatever happened, or did he have faith in God intervention to rescue Isaac? Dershowitz takes an example from Kierkegaard: “All along he had faith, he believed that God would not demand
Isaac of him, while still he was willing to offer him if that was indeed what was demanded” (Kierkegaard 2001, 65). This is the same as saying: ”God would never ask, but if he did…”

5.1.2. Testing obedience

”God, by his providence, calls us to part with an Isaac sometimes, and we must do it with cheerful submission to his holy will”. This is what Matthew Henry writes in his Bible commentary (Internet source). ”Faith had taught him [Abraham] not to argue, but to obey.” David Guzik, a more recent Bible commentator, describes Abraham’s obedience: ”There was not the slightest hint of hesitation on Abraham’s part.” Abraham rose early in the very next morning and immediately begun his journey. To him, obeying without arguing — or even understanding — is seen as desirable, something he calls ”wonderful, trusting obedience”, and ”faith without feelings.”

Levenson questions Kierkegaard thought that Abraham acted because of faith in the promise. More probably, it was all about blind obedience. ”Abraham may have been the knight of faith that Kierkegaard, like most Christian and Jewish thinkers, have seen in him. But texts like Genesis 22:1-9 and 26:2-5 stress another side of the Patriarch — Abraham as the knight of observance, rigorously keeping his divine master’s charge” (Levenson 1993, 141). Thus, Abraham’s act is seen not as a prove of faith but as a prove of obedience. ”Abraham's willingness to heed the frightful command may or may not demonstrate faith in

21Guzik says that ”it must have been a sleepless night for Abraham, which sounds a little contradicting, however: If there really was ”no slightest hint of hesitation”, Abraham should certainly have slept well! One thing that speaks against prompt and unhesitating response from Abraham is that his journey took a total of three days. Omari Boehm notes that in normal circumstances the journey to Mount Moriah should have taken only one day. ”Was he deliberately delaying his arrival?” (Boehm 2007, 42).
the promise that is invested in Isaac, but it surely and abundantly demonstrates his putting obedience to God ahead of every possible competitor” (Levenson 1993, 126).

The test can also be seen as a test of disobedience. God might have hoped for Abraham to disobey! Bodoff gives in interesting explanation for this claim: "For the Angels, the test of the Akedah was the test that angels pass every day — to give God mechanical, unquestioning, obedience.” The angels wanted to see if Abraham obeys same way they do, thus making Abraham one of them. And to angel’s eyes, Abraham seemed to pass the test. But God had a different test plan. God wanted to know that Abraham doesn’t obey blindly heavenly commands for immoral acts.
(Bodoff 1993, 81—82).

5.1.3. Testing fear of God

For now I know that a fearer of God are you because you have not withheld your son, your only one, from me" (Genesis 22:12).

Moberly (2004) emphasizes that what is tested is not so much faith or obedience but Abraham’s fear, or reverence of God. Abraham was hardly motivated only by faith, rather he must have feared of the consequences of refusal.

Phyllis Trible notes that the term "fearer of God" includes awe, terror, and devotion in the presence of mysterium tremendum (fearful mystery). She writes: ”Abraham had formed an attachment to his son. Attachment threatened the obedience, the worship, the fear of God. Thus the test offers Abraham an opportunity for healing” (Trible 1991, 177). In other words,
Abraham’s love for Isaac was a possible threat to God. By passing test Abraham showed he chose fear of God instead of love for Isaac.\footnote{In the New Testament, Love and fear stand in opposition each other. In Jesus’ teaching ”perfect love casts out fear”. In Abraham’s case it seems to be the opposite: perfect fear casts out love.}

But is this kind of reverence admirable? Not to Dershowitz: ”Acceding to an immoral command out of fear does not show much courage or virtue. What if a powerful human king had presented Abraham with a similar terrible choice: “Either kill your child or I will kill you”? Would we praise a father for being “afraid of” the king or being “in awe of” the king and killing the child? Of course not” (Dershowitz 2015, location 922/3850; around 41).

If the motive for obeying God was a fear of punishment, Abraham’s act was nothing but self-serving, aiming at self-preservation. What extraordinary is it in passing this kind of test? Besides, Abraham had all the reason to fear God, who earlier, out of anger, destroyed almost all humankind by flood, and who even killed Abraham for not being circumcised! Even if Abraham’s obedience is seen admirable, it can be argued that Abraham acted out of fear of punishment, not out of fear of God. Kant argues that a fear of punishment should never be the motivation for good. ”Morality must not lower herself.”

5.1.4 Testing confidentiality

Jacques Derrida, when reflecting on Akedah, gives attention to God being silent. Everything goes in secret, and God does not reveal his intentions. Abraham is silent as well, and even Kierkegaard is silent: his book Fear and Trembling (of Akedah) is not signed by himself, but by Johannes de Silentio — silent John ”This pseudonym keeps silent, it expresses the silence that is kept.” (Derrida 1995, 58).

If obeying must have been difficult to Abraham, hiding the mission from his family was not easy, either. According to Caputo, keeping a secret makes Abraham great: ”The greatness
of the faith of the father of faith lies in his ability to keep a secret” (Caputo 1997, 197). Was it the ability to keep a secret God was testing Abraham? To be a ”friend of God”, as Abraham has been described (Isaiah 41:8; 2 Chronicles 20:7), means one needs to keep a secret. Abraham kept the secret from Isaac and Sarah, and from the servants who accompanied him to Moriah. He kept the secret ”from anyone who would ask what he is doing, who do not know what the patriarch is up to because he does not know himself why God has called upon him thus.” Abraham has left the sphere of public, and entered into the secret (Caputo 1997, 199).

Was silence in Abraham’s case ethical? Derrida’s answer is negative. ”By keeping the secret, Abraham betrays ethics. His silence, or at least the fact that he doesn't divulge the secret of the sacrifice he has been asked to make, is certainly not designed to save Isaac” (Derrida 1995, 59).

5.1.5. Testing love

The first time ”love” is mentioned in Bible is in Genesis 22, in the foreword of Akedah: ”Take your son, your only one, whom you love”. Abraham is the first one in Bible mentioned as loving somebody. Now the object of his love, Isaac, is asked by God to be given as a sacrifice. Zierler writes: ”This test appears to be about Abraham’s need to declare the priority of his love for God over his love for his son” (Zierler 2005, 20). Levenson agrees: ”To fulfill the frightful command Abraham will have to suppress his paternal affections, placing obedience to God not above ethics, as Kierkegaard would have it, but above his love for Isaac—in some ways a more daunting task” (Levenson 1993, 127-128). Thus, sacrificing ethics would have been an easier task than sacrificing love.

23What is in question here is ”love” in the sense of deep affection, not e.g. within an expression of ”made love” as with Adam and Eve, nor as love as kindness, as in Genesis 20:13.
In other words, two things were in opposition to each other: on one hand, fear of God, and on the other, love for Isaac. There is a surprising omission of word "love" right after Abraham has passed his test: When God asked Abraham to offer Isaac, he was described as "your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love". *After the test*, however, he is only "your son, your favored one". Love disappeared almost as soon as it appeared, and it was only until writing about Isaac’s emotions towards Rebekah that love came to picture again (Genesis 24:67).

Did the love for Isaac become a threat to God? Was God jealous of Isaac? There’s a corresponding theme in New Testament. According to Jesus nobody should love a man more than God, and not only that, one should even be ready to hate: “If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple” (Luke 14:26).

### 5.1.6. Testing moral

Akedah can also be seen as a moral test — actually belonging to a *series of moral tests* designed by God. In many of these tests, Abraham can be seen as a real anti-hero, capable of sacrificing family members even before Isaac. In Egypt, for example, he gave Sarah to Pharaoh, perhaps as a means to save his own life.

Gunn and Fewell provide an interesting, alternative view for Akedah: "Suppose, however, that God is well aware of Abraham’s tendency to forfeit his family to danger and uncertainty. What if the test is really designed to see just how far Abraham will go [this time]?” Abraham has already put at risk other members of his family — will he go so far to

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24Zierler makes an important notion: When mentioning love in Genesis 24:66, there is no reference to Abraham; the reference is Sarah. "[Isaac] loved her; and Isaac was comforted after his mother’s death. Isaac no longer appears as Abraham’s loved one. "Sarah is the one who keeps the notion of love alive in the text” (Zierler 2005, 21—22).
maltreat Isaac as well? Maybe God already knew Abraham’s tendency to choose wrong. How about this time? ”Will he go so far as to implicate himself in the violence?” (Gunn and Fewell 1993, 98). Bodoff suggests that ”God was testing Abraham’s willingness to refuse to commit murder even when commanded by God to do so” (Bodoff 1993, 72).

5.2. ”God does not test”

A traditional interpretation of Akedah is that God wanted to test Abraham’s faith. But didn’t God already know Abraham inside out? Isn’t God omniscience, already knowing the outcome of the test? What more information could he possibly obtain?

The idea of testing in the opening verse of Genesis 22 has also been translated as proving. ”And it came to pass after these things, that God did prove Abraham ” (Genesis 22:1; ASV). The word ”prove” has quite a different meaning. According to British dictionary, it means ”demonstrating the truth or existence of something by evidence or argument”. This is exactly how Omri Boehm says Medieval commentators read the original Hebrew word: Rather than testing, God presented or ”exhibited” Abraham as a model for others (Boehm 2007, 121). Boehm refers to Maimonides, who sees that actually the purpose for all trials in Torah is not to examine but to demonstrate an ideal, something that can be followed. God did not set up a test procedure in order to learn something new himself. He knew already what would happen, and now, by proving, makes this information available to everybody.

In New Testament, it is told that God does not test, nor is God to be tested. When Jesus was tested in the desert, the tester was satan, who said: ”Throw yourself down. For it is written: 'He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.' Jesus answered him: 'It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test" (Matthew 4:6—7).
5.3. Abraham was testing God

What if Abraham was never to obey God’s command to sacrifice Isaac in the first place? Besides, Abraham told his servants in the beginning of the story: "We will be back", him together with Isaac. Maybe, only out of curiosity, he was willing to see how far God would let him go. Perhaps Abraham was "playing cards with God", trying not to show his hand (see e.g. Caputo 1997, 213; Derrida 1995, 96; Dershowitz 2015, 42), just wanting to see who would blink first? The story suggests it was God who blinked, not Abraham. God needed to shout "no", and thus prevented Abraham from going any further. The test was over, Abraham won.²⁵

Bodoff is one who believes Abraham never intended to kill Isaac. To him, it was Abraham testing God, not the other way around. Abraham wanted to know "what kind of covenant and religion he was being asked to join. Was it one that required man to follow heavenly voices to any length, even to immorality?" Abraham was about to establish a new religion, and it was he who had moral expectations of God. "If the God I have found demands the same kind of immorality that I saw in my father’s pagan society, I must be mistaken. I must look further. To obey such a God is not a moral advance at all." (Bodoff 1993, 77).

Why, then, didn’t Abraham challenge God at the very beginning, at the moment when heard the command to sacrifice Isaac? Bodoff points out a difference between Akedah and Sodom and Gomorrah: Challenge is necessary only when it is God about to do something, thus God being in control. That was the case with Sodom And Gomorrah. However, when man is being asked to do something immoral, like in the case of Akedah, man is in control. One possible strategy then is stalling for time (Bodoff 1993, 77) — which is exactly what

²⁵ Abraham can be seen as testing God also in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham tested God’s willingness to destroy innocent.
Abraham did. This is also what Jonah did when asked to preach against Nineveh. He escaped (Jonah 1:1—3). Abraham didn’t escape but there’s a reason to believe even he tried to stall for time: A trip to Moriah should have taken only one day, but Abraham spend three days in his journey (Boehm 2007, 42).

There’s even in interpretation that God put himself on trial. If in Christianity Jesus is seen as a realization, or replacement, of Isaac, it follows that God is the realization of Abraham (see e.g. Levenson 2012, 101). Both of these Fathers, Abraham and God alike, had their "only beloved son", and both of them showed willingness to sacrifice this son, thus passing the test. Or, substituting "proving" for "testing", both demonstrated their true nature, and an ideal to be followed.

6. All in a Family

"I would like to know if the only connection between Abraham and general moral was, that Abraham disregarded moral" —Kierkegaard

6.1. Two faces of Abraham

Even with a surface reading of Genesis, it is easy to discover two strikingly different aspects of Abraham. The first, described in Genesis 18, can be named as an attorney, defender of justice, an empathetic spokesperson of people in Sodom and Gomorrah. Whether sinners or righteous, Abraham was shocked to hear that God was about to destroy those two cities. With Bodoff refers to a boss, who gives a bad order. It is wise not to challenge the idea head on, but give the boss time and a chance to change his mind. "They don’t tell their boss that his or her proposal is a bad idea — in the hope that the boss will decide that way, eventually. Abraham didn’t want to upset God by direct confrontation (Bodoff 1993, 77).
a courage unmatched anywhere in the Bible, he questioned God himself, and stood for mercy and justice.

When God informed Abraham about a coming destruction of those two cities, Abraham didn’t say “let that happen”. On the contrary, he ended up with a long dialogue with God, questioning God’s moral. “Will You indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Far be it from You to do such a thing – to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous should be like the wicked. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do justly?”27 (Genesis 18:23–25)

What strikes in Genesis 22, then, is a total absence of dialogue. Unlike with Sodom and Gomorrah, neither God nor Abraham was willing to engage in a conversation. Unlike Jacob, Abraham’s grandson, who wrestled with an angel, Abraham did not argue with God at all. “Suddenly Abraham, the radical iconoclast and chutzpahnik lawyer, appears to transform himself from one willing to challenge his God into a compliant fundamentalist who elevates dogma over reason” (Dershowitz 2015, xiii).

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in his book *Covenant & Conversation* (Sacks 2009) is one who praises Abraham for his courage to question the God himself on the issue of justice in the context of Sodom and Gomorrah. He writes: “Judaism is a religion of argument and debate – even if it involves argument with heaven itself” (Sacks 2009, in sub-chapter: Challenging God). However, when Sacks later in the same book reflects on the story of Abraham and Isaac, he is not willing to explain the absence of dialogue.

One possible reason for a missing dialogue, according to Levenson, is that the call to sacrifice a child was totally legitimate. “There is no reason to suggest that the child sacrifice

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27An interesting comparison to Noah can be made here. Noah faced a similar situation when God threatened to destroy — not only one or two cities — but the whole world by flood. Unlike Abraham, Noah didn’t say a word in defense for possibly innocent victims. Did this create such a bad conscience for Noah that he later had a drinking problem? (Genesis 9:20)
commanded in chapter 22 contradicts what the society at the time identified as God’s own norms” (Levenson 1993, 130). If on the other hand, a command to sacrifice had contradicted with what Abraham understood as a law of God, it should have been expected to hear Abraham arguing with God the same way he argued in case of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18: ”Far be it from you to ask me such a thing…” In Genesis Abraham questioned God’s conformity to his own principles, whereas in Genesis 22 no such conflict was found.

In his book Creation and the Persistence of Evil Levenson goes back to comparing Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18) with Akedah (Genesis 22). He shows that these two stories belong to two different categories. In Genesis 18 the context is forensic. Abraham is ethically engaged with God, asking questions like ”what if innocent people are killed? In Genesis 22 the context is devotions. Here Abraham is submissive. Preferring devotions over ethics Abraham demonstrates unconditional obedience. In Genesis 22 The question is not about justice, but about sacrifice. It can also be said that Genesis 18 represents autonomy over divine, and Genesis 22 heteronomy before divine (Levenson 1994).

Genesis 18 and Genesis 22 can also be seen as balancing each other. Both stories are needed. There is a time to obey, and a time to argue: ”Left to its own, Genesis 22… would lead to a religion of fanaticism, in which God would be so incomprehensible that even the praise of him as wise or just would be meaningless: no act, no matter how silly or unfair, could be ruled out as the will of God, and faithfulness to him would be indistinguishable from mindless, slavish obedience. - - In this larger, dialectical theology, both arguing with God [Genesis 18] and obeying him [Genesis 22] can be central spiritual acts, although when to do which remains necessarily unclear.” (Levenson 1994, 151-153)

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28This calls for some speculations, though. What if God had said in Genesis 18: ”I want all the people of Sodom and Gomorrah as a sacrifice”, would Abraham have questioned this? Also, it is interesting that whereas the killing of innocent in Sodom and Gomorrah would be wrong, for a sacrifice to be acceptable, the object must be innocent. Sacrifice is accepted by God only if the victim (object) is blemishless.
I would like to suggest one more possible explanation for the seemingly radical change from a provocative Abraham to a submissive Abraham. As has been noted, Abraham went into lengths in arguing with God over Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham might have been arrogant in the dialogue, but he also showed reverence to God. Like a humble servant to his master, his speech was submissive: Sir, I’m terribly sorry to bother you. As the last line of a dialogue Abraham says: ”May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak just once more (Genesis 18:32).

Maybe that was literally what Abraham meant: I have been talking a lot, and I promise, this is the very last time I speak to you. The book of Genesis verifies that was the case.29 So, when having a next discourse with God, Abraham realized he had already played all of his chips, and he could do nothing but submit to God — and keep his promise to shut his mouth.

Several commentators, among them Moses Maimonides (Maimonides 1956) tell that God has tested Abraham ten times, the last one being a command to sacrifice Isaac. The ten tests are: God tells Abraham to leave his homeland (Genesis 12:1), Abraham encountering famine (Genesis 12:10), Egyptians bringing Sarah to Pharaoh (Genesis 12:15), Abraham with a battling with kings (Genesis 14:14), Abraham marrying Hagar (Genesis 16:3), God telling Abraham to circumcise himself (Genesis 17:24), A king capturing Sarah (Genesis 20:2), God telling to send Hagar away (Genesis 21:12), Ishmael becoming estranged (reflected in God’s commandment), and finally, the sacrifice of Isaac (Genesis 22:2).30 Bible itself speaks only Akedah as a test, none of the nine other.

The purpose of these commentators is, of course, to show Abraham passed all these tests, thus being qualified to become the father of the nation of Israel. But did Abraham really pass these tests? It can be argued that he failed — if not all — many of them. Following are

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29Abraham did say ”Here I am” to God, in the beginning of Genesis 22. These words can hardly be taken as a ”speach”. In Hebrew it is actually just one word: hinneni.

30For some reason Maimonides don’t mention the dialogue on the future of Sodom and Gomorrah as a test. Other Rabbis, like Jonathan Sacks, take this as a grande test.
some examples that paint a very different picture of Abraham, not a hero but more like a moral failure.

When Abraham faced famine, he left his home in Canaan for Egypt. However, this trip caused him many troubles. He tried to save his life by lying to Pharaoh and Abimelech about Sarah (Genesis 12:10-20). He told that Sarah is his sister, thus probably saving his own life, but proving himself guilty of incest. If Abraham was seen as a husband, he would have been killed, since (even for Pharaoh) having sex with a married woman was illegal — even more illegal than killing an innocent man.

It can be argued that only by claiming Sarah his sister, and thus saving her life, God’s promise of great blessing could come true. However, then the logic for justifying Abraham’s behavior is different to Akedah: If Abraham believed that God could raise Isaac even from death, he should have believed in the resurrection of Sarah as well.

So it looks that by deciding to go to Egypt Abraham failed a test. Isaac, later in the similar situation, did not go to Egypt, obeying then God’s specific command to stay at home. It is like God was saying to Isaac: ”Do not do the same mistake Abraham did. Stay home.”

Abraham was guilty of nearly killing Ishmael, as well, by his expulsion to desert (Genesis 16). Without God’s miraculous intervention Ishmael would have died. It was not even God commanding Abraham to expel Ishmael, it was Abraham’s wife Sarah! One could

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31 Abraham says Sarah is his sister from his father’s side. Dershowitz writes: ”This sort of cost-benefit thinking seems to run in the family: Isaac later did the same thing to his wife. (Dershowitz 2000, location 1235/3978).

32 Like in Sarah’s wish to cast out Ishmael, so was it with God’s command to sacrifice Isaac: Abraham accepted it with silence. Why was Abraham silent in both cases? There’s an old joke about a Jewish kid, who told his mother that he got a role of a Jewish husband in a school play. His mother, disappointed, replied: ”I was hoping you would get a speaking part” (Dershowitz 2015, xiii).
also ask, if taking of ram (as a substitute for Isaac) was morally right: If Abraham didn’t own the animal, this was a theft.\textsuperscript{33}

When considering Abraham’s life in the light of previous examples, a question of whether he ”temporarily suspended ethics” — using Kierkegaard’s expression — sounds inappropriate. A better question might be if Abraham’s conduct was never truly ethical.

\textbf{6.2. Listening to Sarah?}

\textit{Sarah: ”Where are you going?”}

\textit{Abraham: ”Sacrificing Isaac”}

\textit{Sarah: ”Ok. Have a good day.”}

Akedah is full of mysteries. One of them is Sarah’s absence — not only in the actual episode — but also in most commentaries. ”The opening of Chapter 22 [of Genesis] constitutes a forgetting. Abraham, Isaac, the servants, the angel of God, and the ram all appear in the ensuing verses, but Sarah, who loomed so large in the preceding chapter, in person, laughter, and speech, has now gone missing from the narrative” (Zierler 2005, 11).\textsuperscript{34}

Sarah exclusion of the narrative is even more serious taken that she is also a victim for Abraham’s undertaking. It is possible that Sarah actually died from the shock after hearing Abraham’s report of his journey. The order of Biblical narratives supports this view: Sarah’s death is recorded in the very next chapter after Akedah. ”The placement of passages in the Torah has been executed with the highest degree of intentionality and self-consciousness. - - It

\textsuperscript{33} In that case, things get even more complicated. If the ram was not legally owned by Abraham, God would not have been accepted it as a sacrifice by God (Abrabanel 1964).

\textsuperscript{34}Even Zierler forgets one key person from his list, namely Ishmael, Isaac’s brother.
must, therefore, have been the report of the Akedah, reaching Sarah in Kiriath-arba (Hebron),
that precipitated her demise” (Levenson 1993, 133).

Louise Antony writes: (2011, 22; see also Zlotowitz 1989): “According to the medieval
Jewish commentator Rashi, Sarah actually dies from the shock.” Avivah Zornberg elaborates
Sarah’s death even more. She interprets the shock being like dizziness, a kind of nausea, or
vertigo, a shock in the sense of the loss of orientation. Sarah was “almost slaughtered”, her
"soul flew away” (Zornberg 1997, 181—182). Without making any deeper diagnostics of the
cause of Sarah’s death, it suffices to say that the Rabbinic tradition in general seems to
attribute Sarah’s premature\(^\text{35}\) death to Akedah.

Derrida asks, rhetorically, is there a specific reason why sacrifices are seen only a man’s
business: "Would the logic of sacrificial responsibility within the implacable universality of
the law... be altered, inflected, attenuated, or displaced, if a woman were to intervene in some
consequential manner?” He goes on to say, that by Sarah’s exclusion a woman was actually
sacrificed. (Derrida 1995, 76)

Phyllis Trible, in her essay, also offers a nonpatriarchal perspective. She claims that it is
indeed Sarah that ought to have been tested. It was Sarah, not Abraham, who had a problem
with attachment to Isaac. Sarah should have been liberated from possessiveness and learned
the meaning of obedience to God. The story has excluded Sarah and gave all the glory to
Abraham. She writes: "From exclusion to elimination, denial to death, the attachment of
Genesis 22 to patriarchy has given us not the sacrifice of Isaac (for that we are grateful) but
the sacrifice of Sarah (for that we mourn). By her absence from the narrative and her
subsequent death, Sarah has been sacrificed by patriarchy to patriarchy (Trible 1991,
189-191).” Zierler is even more dramatic in her expression: "The Akedah thus becomes the

\(^{35}\) ”Premature” may not be the perfect term, though. Sarah was 127 years old.
story of the narrative binding, sacrifice, and burial of Sarah, not only out of Abraham’s sight but also out of the sight of the reader (Zierler 2005, 16).

Abraham was not ordered by God to neglect Sarah. On the contrary, God had specifically told Abraham to hear what Sarah has to say. "Listen to whatever Sarah tells you" (Genesis 21:12). Here, by obeying the command to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham simultaneously disobeyed God. Caputo captures this paradox well: "Were he to respond to Sarah, to the human community, which is the ethically responsible thing to do, he would betray his absolute responsibility to God" (Caputo 1997, 200). Should Abraham have listened to Sarah, the story must have had a radically different end.

Finally, and what is often forgotten, is: Abraham was not only sacrificing his son. He was sacrificing Sarah’s son as well — her only child. But was Isaac just a baby without his own will and understanding? just a helpless victim? This will be the question for next chapter.

6.3. Isaac, a partner in crime?

Isaac volunteered

Isaac was not a passive object in Akedah. Most commentaries suppose he was a grown-up man. However, there is not even a hint that he wanted to escape from Abraham. Would that be the case, there were many possibilities to flee, at least to resist Abraham.

Was Isaac submitting willingly to his coming death? Or, was it even a sort of self-sacrifice, facilitated by Abraham, not a homicide but a suicide? McClymond sees that Isaac is partly to blame: "At best, a willing sacrificial victim embraces metanarrative that justifies the violence performed" (McClymond 2011, 325). If Isaac was volunteering, even cooperating, in putting the sacrifice into effect, he should share the "credit" — or reprehension.

36 Abraham did listen to Sarah wen casting out Ishmael, but not when sacrificing Isaac.
However, when considering the possible willingness of Isaac, the very act of binding becomes problematic. If Isaac accepted his fate, why would he want to be tied? Spiegel and Levenson think that Isaac himself asked to be bound so that the sacrifice would be perfect. Otherwise fear might have caused him to do something that would spoil the sacrifice. Isaac might have requested: "Father, I am a young man, and I am worried that my body may flinch because of the fear of the knife and I will cause you distress, lest the slaughter become invalid and not be accredited to you as a sacrifice. So tie me up very securely" (Spiegel 1993, 147; Levenson 2012, 79). Ronald Green goes even further by noting that in some Jewish interpretations Isaac expressed his willingness to be sacrificed even before God commanded this (Green 1982, 9).

Isaac was retarded

Even if Isaac was a grown up man, capable of physical resistance, he might not have been the brightest of the figures in Hebrew Bible. There are at least four reasons to think so.

First, Isaac needed Abraham’s help in finding a wife. Abraham ordered one of his servants to accomplish this task, and to swear that the servant will not get a wife "from the daughters of Canaanites", but from Abraham’s home country. The servant then asked: “What if the woman is unwilling to come back with me to this land? Shall I then take your son back to the country you came from?” It is easy to see Isaac here as an object with no will or capabilities of his own: not capable of traveling, nor to make decisions (Genesis 24:1—6). An excessive care taking makes sense for a small child, but Isaac was forty years old at that time (Genesis 25:20).

37 It is difficult to see any rationale for this request. If Isaac asked to be sacrificed, why giving all the credit to Abraham? If Isaac was willingly sacrificing his life, one can surely admire Abraham’s courage to raise the knife, but hardly regard him as a hero of faith.
Secondly, Isaac was in mental bondage to his mother. The death of Sarah was obviously traumatic to Isaac, and the role of his new wife, Rebekah, is told to be a comfort after Isaac’s mother’s death (Genesis 24:67). Isaac even brought Rebekah to Sarah’s tent, which can be interpreted as Rebekah being a mother substitute for Isaac.

Third, there is not much Isaac accomplished in his life, besides planting crops, digging wells, and giving birth to two sons. One of the rare things that are told of Isaac, is that he liked food. Isaac stayed home and liked to eat wild game, which his older son Esau took to him.\(^{38}\)

Last but not least, in his old age, Isaac was not even able to tell the difference between his two sons, Jacob and Esau. As Levenson puts it: "The middle patriarch [Isaac] does not strike one as an intellectual giant" (Levenson 1993).

If Isaac’s post-Akedah behavior is seen as a symptom of a trauma, there are two alternatives: either the trauma was caused by Akedah, or it was a genetic one, caused by a birth from old parents. Having a child in the age of hundred years, as was the case with Sarah ad Abraham, do have risks. According to Dershowitz, several commentators have speculated that Isaac might have been mentally retarded. "Throughout history parents have sacrificed retarded and disturbed children. This may explain Abraham’s willingness to accept God’s command" (Dershowitz 2000, location 1601/397).

Isaac being retarded seems to be a very compelling theory. It might explain both Abraham willingness to sacrifice, as well as the lack of resistance from Isaac’s part. However, if Isaac is seen as retarded, it raises a question whether he was suitable for being sacrificed to God: According to Mosaic law, only flawless objects were to be given to God.\(^{39}\)

\(^{38}\) The stew Jacob cooked for Isaac was actually so tasty that Esau was willing to sell his birthright to Jacob in exchange of it!

\(^{39}\) Besides, in a proper burnt offering the sacrifice (victim) was never bound. It was first killed, then flayed, then put to pieces, and finally the pieces were burnt.
It is somewhat surprising that even when considering Akedah, scholars and Bible commentators tend to focus only on Abraham’s, not Isaac’s feelings. Even Kierkegaard falls into this trap. In the second of his imaginative versions of Akedah, he writes: "From that time on Abraham became old, he could not forget that God required this of him. Isaac throve as before, but Abraham’s eyes were darkened, and he knew joy no more” (Kierkegaard 1941).

Isaac throve as before? Not likely. No human can live a normal life after a near death caused by his father. Whatever we think of Isaac’s role, the emotional damage done to him must be immense. There’s no record of conversations between Isaac and Abraham since that episode. No happy farther-son-afternoons, no celebrations. The Hebrew name Isaac has a meaning which couldn’t be more ironic: “He will laugh” (Yishaq). Even if Isaac did laugh before the episode, he probably didn’t laugh any after.

Isaac was blind during his death. He couldn’t tell the difference between Esau and Jacob. What could be the last images for Isaac before his going blind? An approaching knife above his head? Elie Wiesel, who survived concentration camp makes an interesting connection between Isaac, blindness and burnt offering (or: holocaust). He writes: "We have known Jews — ageless Jews — who wished to become blind for having seen God and man opposing one another in the invisible sanctuary of the celestial spheres, a sanctuary illuminated by the gigantic flames of the holocaust” (Wiesel 1985, 96).

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40 Bible tells Isaac and his brother later came to bury Abraham. What might have been Isaac’s memorial words for his father? "We had such a good time together…”

41 [About laughter] Elie Wiesel is more optimistic. He writes: "Isaac, of course, never freed himself from the traumatizing scenes that violated his youth; the holocaust had marked him and continued to haunt him forever. Yet he remained capable of laughter. And in spite of everything, he did laugh” (Wiesel 1985, 97).
6.4. Ishmael, the loved one

Isaac is known as the child Abraham loved. In the light of Genesis, however, Abraham seemed to love Ishmael even more. Ishmael was the firstborn, the child to first carry the sign of the covenant: circumcision.

It is told that Abraham was "greatly distressed" for Sarah’s command to send Ishmael away. Abraham then said to God: "If only Ishmael might live in Your presence" (Genesis 17:18). While in the story of sacrificing Isaac there’s no sign of emotions towards Isaac, the story if casting out Ishmael is full of weeping, pathos and drama. "We are left in no doubt that Abraham is attached to Ishmael" (Sacks 2015, 115).

Not only did Abraham love Ishmael, so did God. Jonathan Sacks notes that Bible itself goes to "extraordinary length" to state that it was Ishmael who will be blessed by God. "As for Ishmael, I have heard you. I have blessed him and will make him fruitful and will multiply him exceedingly. He will be the father of twelve rulers, and I will make him into a great nation" (Genesis 17: 20). Ishmael was never rejected by God."42

7. Sacrificing Isaac today

"There is no recorded example of Jews or Christians using the text to justify their own abusing of killing of a child" (Moberly 2004, 129, emphasis in original).

Not quite so. Actually, there are recorded examples of people using Genesis 22 to justify their killing of a child in God’s name. And contrary to Guzik, who claims that "there is no way God would ever direct someone to do this same thing today" (Guzik 2012), there are people who claim to have heard God’s command to do the exact same thing. One of them is Andrew Cate.

42 Sacks says: “The most radical of monotheism’s truths [is] that God may choose, but God does not reject.” (Sacks 2015, 123).
7.1. Case studies

In November 1991, Andrew Cate, 31 years at that time, killed his 2-year-old daughter Christina (Cate vs. State 2015; 2005; 1994). Cate shot his child with a semiautomatic handgun, while she was waiting for a diaper change, and then carried her body through the neighborhood. The killing and the subsequent trial was reported a year later in some local newspapers like The Blade and Indianapolis Recorder.

According to his testimony, Cate was convinced that a miracle would happen. Just like with the story of Abraham and Isaac in Mount Moriah, God would intervene at the last minute and save his child. This miracle, Cate hoped, would then be a testimony of God’s grace to Cate’s brother.

The jury didn’t quite buy his assertions of having acted in accordance with an unshakeable faith in divine intervention. Cate was found guilty but mentally ill, not ”legally insane” but ”sane enough to be held legally accountable for his actions” and sentenced to prison for 60 years.

After a few corrections to the length of his sentence, Cate was released 2. September 2015. He is now living in Beech Grove, Indianapolis.43

Delaney (Delaney 1998, 35—68) reports a trial of another man, who murdered his daughter on 6. January 1990 in California, for about same reasons that Andrew Cate: to offer her to God. The man, Christos Valenti, thought of having heard the voice of God. Some time earlier, the man (attendance not confirmed, though) and his church were studying Genesis 22 — where the story of the sacrifice of Isaac is described.

43 The date of writing this is 8. April 2017. Some Internet services allow for identifying his place of residence. I have not tried to contact him in person, though.
Christos Valenti reported to police that he walked to a park together with his daughter, then asked her to lie down on the grass and to pray Our Father who art in Heaven, then took his knife and killed his daughter. When coming back to home, holding his dead child, Valenti said: "Call the police, I have given her to God" (Deleney 1998, 35).

A Jury of twelve (ten of whom were familiar with the story of Abraham and Isaac) found him guilty of first-degree murder. The judge, however, overruled the verdict and found Valenti "legally insane". Valenti had had a history of hallucinations and head injuries, and a diagnose of mental illness.

Dershowitz, a Jewish lawyer, who sees Abraham as his "colleague" in judicial proceedings, says he has once referred to Abraham’s near-sacrifice in court when defending his customer. It is not thus only the perpetrators, but lawyers as well, who have used Akedah as a leverage for their case. Dershowitz reports:

The defendant was holding a knife above his victim when the police burst into the room demanding— much like the angel— that he drop it, which he did. He claimed that he intended to frighten— not kill— the victim. The prosecution argued that he intended to kill and would have but for the unanticipated intervention of the police. On appeal, I cited the Abraham story and argued that we could not know with any degree of certainty, and surely not beyond a reasonable doubt, what was in the defendant’s mind and whether he, like Abraham, would actually have killed were it not for the intervention of a deus ex machina— an outside force. We won the case on other grounds, and it was never retried, so we don’t know how the courts would have decided the perplexing “Abraham issue” (Dershowitz 2015, location 970 of 3850).
Child sacrifices to gods are certainly not restricted to Christianity. Three frozen, amazingly well preserved Inca mummies were found in northern Argentina by archeologist (Wilford 1999). These three children — two girls and one boy — were victims of a ritual sacrifice some 500 years ago. They were buried beneath five feet of rock, with textiles and pottery associated with Inca religion.

18 more apparent human sacrifices have been found also in the mountains of Argentina, Chile and Peru. Some of the textiles associated were of high quality suggesting the victims were elite members of the society.44

Should there be an appendix to the law that takes into account such extreme religious beliefs? Should theologians engage in enforcing law and interpreting Bible in cases where the crime motive is religious? Adams doesn’t think so. "God’s giving such a command is not to be expected. I doubt that a theology should try to prepare conditionally for such a radical shake-up of its own convictions as the acceptance of such a command would entail.” (Adams 1999, 290).

7.2. A different type of hero: Bonhoeffer

Andrew Cate is probably not celebrated as a hero of faith. However, there’s another person in recent history, who attempted a crime, who was executed for this, and who is regarded as one of the heroes in Christianity. His name is Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

To Bonhoeffer, a man should be willing to sacrifice for obedience not only ethics but everything. Bonhoeffer writes in his Letters from prison: ”Who stands fast? Only the man whose final standard is not his reason, his principles, his conscience, his freedom, or his

44 According to one of the archeologists, Richard Burger, these discoveries are likely to prove wrong the assumption that Spanish conquerors have exaggerated their accounts of odd Inca practices, to justify their conquests. In addition to human sacrifices, there are accounts of cannibalism and odd sexual conduct. (Wilford 1999)
virtue, but who is ready to sacrifice all this when he is called to obedient and responsible action in faith and in exclusive allegiance God — the responsible man, who tries to make his whole life an answer to the question and call of God. Where are these responsible people?” (Bonhoeffer 2015, 2)

For Bonhoeffer, sacrifice meant execution by Nazis in the end of second World War. He was accused of being associated with the plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler. One might ask, if Bonhoeffer would have been ready to sacrifice his own son for a greater good, e.g. to help remove Hitler from power. Does ”sacrificing all” include one’s family members?

While Bonhoeffer did not succeed in his attempt, another man did, in a reminiscent situation: An Israeli ultranationalist and fundamentalist named Yigal Amir, who murdered Yitzhak Rabin. Amir believed he was following God’s command (Dershowitz 2000, location 1617/3978).

All this is not to justify a direct comparison between Cate, Valenti, Bonhoeffer and Abraham. Each had their own motivation for action and interpretation of religion. What is common fo them, however, is their uncompromising obedience and opting for violence in God’s name.

7.3. Derrida: sacrifice as everyday experience

Jacques Derrida sees that sacrifice is basically unavoidable. ”As soon as I enter into a relation with the absolute other [e.g. God], my absolute singularity enters into relation with his on the level of obligation and duty.” This involves, to Derrida, a risk of ”absolute sacrifice”. When fulfilling an obligation to one person, a person is at the same time sacrificing others. ”I cannot respond to the call, the request, the obligation, or even the love of another without sacrificing the other other, the other others. Every other (one) is every (bit) other [tout autre est tout autre], everyone else is completely or wholly other” (Derrida 1995, 68). Derrida sees that
every person is equally responsible to all others, something he calls as "Infinite responsibility".

Since everyone of us is continuously sacrificing his or her Isaac, it is hypocritical to point a finger to others. Derrida writes: "In terms of the moral of morality, let us here insist upon what is too often forgotten by the moralizing moralists and good consciences who preach to us with assurance every morning and every week, in newspapers and magazines, on the radio and on television, about the sense of ethical or political responsibility. - - What the knights of good conscience don't realize, is that "the sacrifice of Isaac" illustrates... the most common and everyday experience of responsibility" (Derrida 1995, 67). Nietzsche expresses the same idea as following: "Love to one only is a barbarity, for it is exercised at the expense of all others. Love to God also!" (Nietzsche 2014, Aphorism 67, 38)

A defining moment for Abraham’s relation to God is when he answered God’s call: "Here I am”. To Derrida, that was a moment, a response that excluded all other people and all other responsibilities. That was also a point of sacrificing ethics: "As soon as I enter into a relation with the other, with the gaze, look, request, love, command, or call of the other, I know that I can respond only by sacrificing ethics, that is, by sacrificing whatever obliges me to also respond, in the same way, in the same instant, to all the others. - - Day and night, at every instant, on all the Mount Moriahs of this world, I am doing that, raising my knife over what I love and must love, over those to whom I owe absolute fidelity, incommensurably" (Derrida 1995, 68).

Akedah is thus at the same time a demonstration of responsibility, and a sacrifice of all law and ethics. Moriah is everywhere, Isaac is whoever, whenever. Derrida makes sacrifice universal.
8. Conclusion

In the opening chapter I asked, can the obvious conflict between divine obedience and moral in Akedah be resolved? To help answer this questions, and to summarize my findings from the literature on Akedah, I will present the following diagram with four dimensions (picture 1).

1. *God’s involvement:* whether the commandment to sacrifice Isaac came from God, or whether the sacrifice was Abraham’s own initiative.

2. *God’s motive:* Did God design a test for Abraham, or did He expect Abraham to sacrifice Isaac without any moral considerations or speculations?

*Picture 1. Explaining Akedah.*
3. *Angel's involvement:* Were angel(s) present in the original version of Akedah, or was this a later addition, an interpolation?

4. *End of story:* Was Isaac eventually killed?

If God never even asked Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, then either insanity or immorality should be attributed to Abraham. If, on the other hand, the request *did* come from God, as a non-negotiable command (the left side of diagram), *and* if we accept Bodoff’s view of angels as ”robot-like servants” who cannot object God, then it follows that no angel was present, and verses 11—18 in Genesis are an interpolation.

This, in turn, leaves us with two possible outcomes: Either Abraham disobeyed God by not killing Isaac, or he obeyed God by killing. Both of these scenarios are unlikely: if Abraham resisted God’s absolute demand (and did not sacrifice Isaac), he should not have left unpunished. What happened, however, was the opposite: Abraham was blessed. If on the other hand, Abraham killed Isaac, thus fulfilling God’s wish, this raises some difficult questions: were there two Isaac’s in Genesis 22, one who was sacrificed and one giving birth to Jacob and Esau — or — did Isaac raise from death?

As presented, one alternative was that God’s command to sacrifice Isaac was a non-negotiable demand. The other alternative is that God had a secret agenda, namely testing Abraham. If we take God’s request to sacrifice Isaac as a test, the key assumption is that God did not want Isaac’s death. In chapter 4, I presented six alternative scenarios for testing of Abraham: Test of faith, obedience, fear, secrecy, love, and ethics. Supposing that God
expected Abraham to show love or high moral, the test should be taken as "failed", since an angel's intervention was needed to prevent Abraham to kill Isaac.\footnote{Levenson writes: "It is passing strange to condemn child sacrifice through a narrative in which a father is richly rewarded for his willingness to carry out that very practice." If the question was about testing Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his child, Abraham passed the test, hands down. If, on the other hand, God’s purpose was to abolish human sacrifice, and substitute animals instead, then Abraham cannot be regarded as having passed the test (Levenson 1993, 13).}

There is still one option left, one that views both Abraham and God "morally good" and maintains at least some integrity within the Biblical text. This resembles the theory of "divine disobedience" presented by Boehm. According to this view, Abraham made the decision to save Isaac’s life all by himself, without angel’s help. He took the risk of standing up against God the same way he did in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. The voice of an angel, then, was a later addition, aimed at making Abraham look obedient to God. In other words, since no reason for Abraham suddenly withdrawing the procedure of sacrifice could be seen, and disobedience to God was unthinkable for Bible redactor at that time, some explanation was to be found. An angel served that purpose.

One possible aspect of testing is still left, however: God testing Abraham’s ability to keep a secret. This is perhaps the easiest to abandon. Had Abraham really kept the secret, Sarah wouldn’t have died of shock, and even more, we wouldn’t have heard of the whole story.

Why would God have been willing to test Abraham’s moral? The idea of a morality test becomes even more compelling when remembering Abraham’s conversion with God over Sodom and Gomorrah. Then, Abraham tested God’s willingness to destroy innocent people, reported by one of the longest conversation with a human and God in the Bible. Wouldn’t it
be fair, then, that God tested Abraham the same way? "How about you, Abraham, will you
sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Are you doing this right?’\(^{46}\)

If Abraham was brave enough to question God’s moral, why wouldn’t God do the same,
to ”pay back the courtesy”? This is, to my understanding, the most logical explanation for
Akedah. Abraham once called for justice. So did God, however, in a most horrifying
experimental setup.

Abraham might have passed the moral test with God, but he definitely didn’t succeed
with relation to his family. If killing a child was unthinkable for Abraham, why did he start his
journey to Moriah in the first place? Why didn’t Abraham protest sooner — for the sake of his
family — and be still seen as passing the test? As mentioned earlier, Bodoff thinks that
Abraham might have been stalling for time, not wanting to upset God by direct confrontation
but to give God time to change his mind. Abraham ”suppressed his feeling for his wife and
child in order to demonstrate to the world his unshakable faith” (Bodoff 1993, 84—85).

This makes Sarah and Isaac something like a collateral damage, an unfortunate side
story. It is impossible to praise Abraham for his courage, his sense of justice, or even his
”divine disobedience” while acknowledging how his conduct must have affected both Sarah
and Isaac psychologically. Abraham did withhold from killing his child, but way too late, thus
causing damage to both Isaac and Sarah.

8.1. Sacrifice of interpretations

For the readers of Akedah, there’s an almost irresistible temptation to fill in the gaps in the
story, either to make it coherent, make it fitting to one’s religious views, or just to make it
look better. We might accuse a redactor e.g. of adding an angel to the story, but we at the risk
of doing the same: adding an element that changes the interpretation of the story, and cutting

some corners. I am guilty of exactly the same: trying to see logic where is no logic, reducing an absolute paradox to only "some incoherences", and even worse, applying 21st century moral to ancient Biblical characters.

Maybe one just needs to withhold from interpretations, stop reading anything into text or filling in the gaps. Maybe guessing the intentions of the actors is not right. As Levenson says: "It is to be wished that the narrator’s reticence about Abraham’s and Isaac’s thoughts and feelings would be honored by theologians who interpret the story of the Akedah” (Levenson 1993, 132). If the narrator was able to withhold from psychological profiling, maybe we should also.

Phyllis Trible also calls us to refrain from interpreting. "To be faithful to the story no interpretation can become an idol.” There might be a specific interpretation we love so much, and it is exactly that interpretation that we should take and "sacrifice it on the mount of hermeneutics” (Trible 1991, 191). Boehm says that Genesis 22 is a good example of a complex text which "lacks one simple interpretation that elegantly resolves the various difficulties found in the text” (Boehm 2007, 9).

To Kierkegaard, there is no category for Binding of Isaac. What happened, happened beyond good and evil. Nor is there a common language for Kierkegaard to describe what Abraham experienced. Moriah is a "holy land", and one needs to take off his shoes before entranter into it. This is why, when trying to understand the story, Kierkegaard uses terms as paradox and absurd time and again.

47 There’s a traditional saying of Torah having seventy faces. Or even more: ”The revelation at Sinai took place in the presence of 600 000 Israelites because the Torah can be interpreted in 600 000 different ways. Each person carries part of the potential meaning of the text” (Sacks 2015, 218).

48 "What is done out of love always takes place beyond good and evil”, wrote Nietzsche (2014, aphorism 153). What is unsure, though, is whether the motivation for Abraham was love or fear.
James, in his letter, says: "Our ancestor Abraham was justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar, wasn't he?" (James 2:21; International Standard). It is worth noting that even James seems to be somewhat unsure: The sentence ends with a question, although a rhetoric one.

8.2. A kaleidoscopic view on Atonement

The binding of Isaac is of big importance for Christianity, since it is almost unanimously interpreted to foreshadow the crucifixion of Christ. Several details in both episodes match: a three days journey to an unknown, bearing one’s own woods, thorns etc. Also, the questions asked are the same: Did Abraham (God) really want to kill his son? Did Isaac (Jesus) really volunteer? What purpose did the sacrifice of a goat (Jesus) really serve? What was the actual, effective mechanism of atonement, or pleasing God? Why blood, suffering, testing and all the horror?

Joel Green (2006) has introduced a hybrid model of soteriology which he calls Kaleidoscopic. "God sent his Son to save, and this is worked out in a kaleidoscope of purpose statements." Unlike almost all other theories of atonement, which focus only one aspect of salvation, it allows for multiple views, even multiple truths at the same time. Green writes: "Paul, and with him other New Testament writers, generated a wide array of models for communicating the saving importance of the cross. Taken as a whole, these images tend to congregate around five spheres of public life in antiquity: the court of law (e.g., justification), the world of commerce (e.g., redemption), personal relationships (e.g., reconciliation), worship (e.g., sacrifice), and the battleground (e.g., triumph over evil)."

Green emphasizes that Jesus’s death relates to many contexts and to many human, historical and political situations. Atonement solved several problems, and it does not do full justice to Jesus’ death to pick only one aspect. Whenever and however one looks at the
sacrifice of Jesus, it is possible to see *ever more new nuances, pictures, and even new types of narratives*. During a process of studying and looking, the picture never remains the same.

This is exactly the case with Akedah. The picture never remains the same. Sometimes even a small change in wordings, even one element in a single Hebrew letter, changes the whole picture. At any given time there seem to be multiple equally valid interpretations, levels and angles. Additionally, like in all seeing, there is a risk of seeing only what is hoped for. Even the idea of Sacrifice is in itself "kaleidoscopic". Hedley argues for a polyvalence of the language of sacrifice. "Its symbolic power lies in its capacity to resonate with the psyche at various different levels, while conveying truths" (Hedley 2011, 13).

Just like the corresponding story in New Testament, the sacrifice of Jesus, the (near) sacrifice of Isaac allows for multiple views and explanations. Caputo writes: "One wonderful thing about Genesis 22 is its endless reinterpret ability, which is testified to by the staggering literature surrounding it" (Caputo 1997, 205). Akdeah, like a kaleidoscope, submits to reader’s treatment and returns a question: "what do you see?"

Needless to say, my own view on Akedah was subjective, and influenced what I personally expected to see: at least some logic in the story. Moreover, not being a Bible exegete myself and without any capabilities in reading the original manuscripts in Hebrew, I needed to rely on what other people have studied. The vast amount of literature surrounding Akedah made my work easier, but also challenging: there is not one criterion to decide, who is an expert for interpreting a thousands years old story.

**8.3. Who do you say I am?**

When Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea, Jesus asked his disciples: “Who do people say I am?”. Several answers were given. Jesus then addressed the same question to disciples: “But who do you say I am?” (Mark 8:27—29).
This is the question that Akedah poses to its readers. "Who do you say I am?" Who is the God asking to sacrifice a child? A murderer or a savior? A child abuser or child protector? A good God or a bad God? It challenges the reader to react, to think and to disagree. Akedah is like a Rorschach figure presented by a psychologist: "tell me what you see?". It allows for multiple interpretations, none of these completely wrong. People in Jesus’ time were puzzled as well: Jesus didn’t fit any category — and on the other hand — he matched all of the categories, being a prophet, a priest, a king and a servant.

Not only God but also Abraham can be seen in different lights. To some, Abraham is an advocate for justice, to some, he is a complaint fundamentalist. These two contradicting faces of Abraham are well illustrated in how the stories of Genesis 18 and Genesis 22 are typically interpreted. Mordecai Roshwald says it well:

In the last resort, there can be no compromise between the two stands, so well exemplified in the two stories of Abraham. Abraham of the Akedah stands for the believer who abdicates his own reason and moral judgment in the act of faith. Abraham arguing with the Lord about the iniquity of destroying the just with the wicked stands for the human being who shares with God the capacity to think and to judge. His belief is open-eyed, he is personally involved in the ways of God, even it this means questioning Him. It is this kind of Abraham who represents the noblest in Judaism and in the ethical evolution of man. He is the prototype of the reflective, committed and morally responsible individual. He leaves the Abraham of the Akedah far behind, at a primitive stage of religious development, where blind trust could lead men to commit senseless atrocities. (Roshwald 1991, 399).
The Divine Command theory calls for obedience, and turns a blind eye to human responsibility for justice. Abdicating our human responsibility, Dershowitz writes, is the first step on the road to fundamentalism. "The Sodom narrative appears to reject the fundamentalist approach and to suggest that God has submitted Himself to at least some human judgment through the covenant (Dershowitz 2000, location 953/3978).

My suggestion is that Genesis 22, the Akedah, does not need to represent a fundamentalist Abraham. On the contrary, by abstaining from sacrifice and choosing life Abraham showed "Godly disobedience". In Genesis 18 Abraham tested God. In Genesis 22 God tested Abraham. Both passed the test. They became friends.

When Abraham left his father’s house to unknown, he sacrificed his past. In Akedah, he was asked to sacrifice his future. If Abraham had really killed Isaac, he would have sacrificed ethics, love and religion as well. There would be no God left for worship.

How could Isaac, after the tragic episode, keep his faith in God? How can we, reciting God’s horrendous command to burn a child, trust in the goodness of God? In the end of his first, imaginative version of the story in the book Fear and Trembling, Kierkegaard proposes a genuine answer. In this version, Abraham acted like a maniac before raising his hand over Isaac. Abraham claimed to worship an idol, not the real God. In Kierkegaard’s words, Abraham was "absorbing all the evil to himself" and keeping God good. Abraham was thinking himself: "0 Lord in heaven, I thank you. After all it is better for him [Isaac] to believe that I am a monster, rather than that he should lose faith in You” (Kierkegaard 2001). In Kierkegaard’s version of Akedah, Abraham "sacrificed" his own dignity for the sake of God, and secured Isaac’s faith in (good) God.

One hero who offered up her sons is the woman mentioned in Maccabees (4 Mace 14:26). The mother, Hannah, refused to bow down to an idol, and because of this, all of the
family died. The following words of the mother have been frequently quoted: "Go and tell Father Abraham: let not your heart swell with pride! You built one altar, but I have built seven altars and on them have offered up my seven sons. What is more: Yours was a trial, mine was an accomplished fact!" (see e.g. Boehm 2007, 16).

In the case of Isaac, God’s angel is said to intervene. In the case of Hannah, like with Andrew Cate, he didn’t. In most of the sacrifices and martyrdoms of last centuries, there was no rescue. Hundreds of thousands of Jewish children were "sacrificed" in holocaust — without God’s last minute help. Spiegel compares the sacrifices of Crusades to Akedah: "They too offered up their sons, exactly as Abraham offered up his son Isaac… There were 1100 victims in one day, every one of them like the Akedah of Isaac son of Abraham” (Spiegel 1993, 25–26).

"Who do you say I am?” Moriah, the scene of the binding of Isaac, is the place where Dome of the Rock Mosque is located today. It is near to via Dolorosa. It seems that Moriah is the very center of key religious things, in history and even today. It is a place of conflicting images of God. Caputo writes: "Moriah is not only a symbol but the very scene of the bloodiest conflicts among the concrete messianism, while the name of Abraham, which ought to be a name of hope, has become the name of a war among his children. – – Each one puts its own historical-political spin on Messianism and the sacrifice of Isaac” (Caputo 1997, 205–206).

The story of Sacrifice of Isaac stays as a litmus test, not only for how we see God, but how we see our own moral responsibility. Are we doing our utmost to prevent killing in God’s name? Are we like the angels of the story who call for mercy: "Do not harm the child!”
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