Restorative Thoughts on an Agonizing Text: Abraham's Binding of Isaac and the Horror on Mt. Moriah (Genesis 22): Part 2*

Laurence H. Kant
Lexington Theological Seminary
Lexington, Kentucky

THE STORY

Let us review the outline and substance of our story. The Genesis narrator introduces the passage by indicating that a period of indeterminate time had elapsed after the covenant of Abraham and Abimelech in Beer-sheva in Genesis 21. The phrase, “some time afterward,” serves to link Genesis 21 and 22, but neither specifies a specific duration of the interval nor aids the reader in determining the age of either Isaac or Abraham. Clearly, Isaac has reached an age where he can walk and climb a mountain, where he can not only speak, but converse, and where he can carry firewood. This suggests that the story depicts him certainly not as an infant and probably not as a young boy, but more likely as at least a youth or adolescent (teenager), if not a fully-grown adult, counter to many popular

*Part 1 of this essay appears in LTQ 38, 2 (2003): 77-110. This article is based on my Inaugural Address at Lexington Theological Seminary April 3, 2003. I want to thank LTS and all my colleagues for giving me the opportunity to join the faculty of this wonderful seminary and to participate fully in its community life. In particular, I wish to express my gratitude to Philip Dare, Hal Watkins, and Robert Cueni for helping to make this possible. I also want to express my gratitude to Jerry Sumney for his assistance in the editing process, as well as Dianne Bazell for her advice throughout. In addition, my colleagues and students at LTS and the participants in several adult study groups at Temple Adath Israel in Lexington have contributed in one way or another to the ideas put forth here. I hope that having a Jewish professor teach here will serve as the beginning of a new chapter for interfaith dialogue in the Bluegrass region and beyond.
artistic renderings. Isaac has the capacity to exercise some limited judgment if a youth and retains his full critical faculties if an adult.\textsuperscript{75} The text then refers to God testing (הָנָּשָׁה = nasah) Abraham (v. 1).\textsuperscript{76} In doing this, the author for the first time in the Torah explicitly places a person in the position of having to prove oneself. God expects Abraham to pass through an ordeal in which he will walk the right path.\textsuperscript{77} Naturally, the reader knows the result, though Abraham operates without this foreknowledge, as the events of a terrifying mystery unfold.\textsuperscript{78} God addresses Abraham once by name,\textsuperscript{79} and Abraham (like Jacob, Moses, and Samuel) responds as the open vessel through whom God works, “Here I am” (יהי = hinneni).\textsuperscript{80}

Apparently at night,\textsuperscript{81} Abraham receives a dream, vision, and/or auditory revelation in which God commands him to take his beloved and favorite, son, Isaac, on a journey to Moriah where Abraham is (as he understands it) to sacrifice Isaac as a burnt offering on one of the mountain heights (v. 2). As some have noted,\textsuperscript{82} the Hebrew does not simply say “take” (יָקַח = qakh), but adds the participle (נָא = na’) to the imperative form (יָקַח-נָא = qakh-na’), which we can translate in more than one way: “Take”; “Please take”; “Take, I pray”; “Would you take”; “I ask you to take”; “I urge you to take”; etc. Following rabbinic authority in his commentary on the passage,\textsuperscript{83} Rashi explains that na’ does not indicate a command, but a “request” (חריש = baqqashah).\textsuperscript{84} As a result, the trial that Abraham undergoes involves real choices; his ordeal is genuine, based in “reality” (מַמְשָׁה = mamash), and is not a divine setup.\textsuperscript{85} Theoretically, he could have declined the offer, though he ultimately chose to undertake the challenge.

The literary structure of God’s request consists of a dramatic buildup that culminates in the climactic mention of the name, “Isaac”: 1) “Take”; 2) “your son”; 3) “your only one” (or “your favored one”); 4) “Isaac whom you love.” By postponing reference to the name of Isaac, the text makes the reader wait in suspense before referring to him, thus allowing for the startling revelation that discloses Isaac as one of the main protagonists of the episode. And God’s words specify that the beloved and favored son is not Abraham’s eldest, Ishmael, but his youngest, Isaac. If we translate (אָח = ’et-y’kha) as “your only one,” we not only further lower the value of Ishmael, but virtually nullify him out of existence. Right from the outset, the reader knows that there exists a hierarchy of value within Abraham’s family.\textsuperscript{86}

It is also noteworthy that the word, “love” (הָעַבָּד = ’ahav), occurs here for the first time in the Torah, describing Abraham’s love
for his son right before God ostensibly asks Abraham to sacrifice and kill him. The connection between love and possible violence therefore has its roots in the earliest sections of the biblical narrative. One further irony is salient: the object of violence is not the son with lower status (Ishmael), but the one having greatest familial prestige (Isaac).

Significantly, God does not give specific and detailed instructions. He does not explain how Abraham might identify the mountain, what sorts of preparation Abraham should make, the time of day for the sacrifice and other particulars concerning the sacrificial procedure, or the reasons for it. The narrator leaves the reader wondering how Abraham could embark on such a task given his lack of information. Perhaps we are to assume that the text omits some items or, more likely, that God expected Abraham to interpret the vision and fill in the details. As Sigmund Freud long ago observed, reconstruction of the specific elements of a dream involves a complex process of recall and interpretation. From the very outset, God expects Abraham to use his intellect and wits to understand God’s instructions, to interpret them correctly, and to carry them out accordingly.

The next morning Abraham arises, harnesses his ass, splits the wood for the burnt offering of Isaac, and takes two young male servants and Isaac with him on his journey to Moriah (v. 3). In no way, does Abraham question God’s request, nor does he doubt his own interpretation of God’s language, nor does he relate the experience to any other associates or family, especially his wife, Sarah, or Isaac. Given that God’s words came more in the form of a request than a command, and given the horrifying nature of the request, this is a rather surprising response (though similar to his behavior in Genesis 12) and might naturally lead a reader to question Abraham’s motivations here.

While Abraham appears to have displayed no hesitation in his response to God, the language of the text suggests that God’s frightening request had left Abraham overwhelmed, staggering, and confused. In a strange reversal of the expected order of preparations, Abraham split the wood only after harnessing the ass and summoning Isaac and his servants. Naturally, we would expect Abraham to have split the wood first. Here Genesis 22 suggests that Abraham felt the numbing pain of a parent facing the news of the impending death of a child.

On the third day of his journey, a time that must have engulfed Abraham with agony and grief, he finally saw Moriah at a distance (v. 4), though the text does not explain how he identified the mountain. In a section filled with the language of vision, the word for “seeing”
(har: = ra’ah) makes its first appearance in v. 4, paralleling the frequent references to sight throughout the vision-filled book of Genesis. Then Abraham explains to his two servants that they should wait for them with the ass and that he would ascend the mountain with the “youth (or “boy” or “young man,” namely Isaac), ”worship” or “bow low” together (presumably in association with the sacrifice of an animal, later identified as a ram), and return afterwards (v. 5).

From the point of view of those readers who view God as omniscient, Abraham’s commitment to return shows that God knew all along that the sacrifice would not take place and that, at an unconscious level, Abraham knew this as well. In this way, the story exists in parallel dimensions: that of the dramatic protagonists--Abraham and Isaac; of the all-seeing director--God; and of the observers--the knowing audience of readers and listeners.

In addition, the story here (and also in v. 14) refers to Moriah as μννα ( = hammagom), “the place.” In the Bible, “place” can sometimes specifically refer to holy structures, for example the Temple, and in rabbinic literature, it serves as another title (such as “Lord” and “Name”) to substitute for the actual name of God. In Jewish tradition, the very word, “place,” therefore suggests sacrality and the presence of God.

Next, in mundane, matter-of-fact language, the passage describes an unnerving scene. After taking one of the sacrificial elements (the wood) and placing it on the person of his son, Isaac—a terrifyingly ironic act in which Isaac bears the fuel for his own apparent death to come—Abraham takes up the other slaughtering instruments, a firestone and knife. Together, father and son ascend the mountain in hushed stillness (v. 6). Then Isaac breaks the silence, calling out to Abraham, “Father,” with Abraham replying, “Yes, my son” (v. 7). Here Abraham addresses his son as “my son,” just after he had referred to him as “the boy,” while speaking to his servants. For dramatic reasons, the narrator heightens the tension by personalizing the dialogue, which reminds readers of the intimate and affectionate relationship between father and son and stresses the poignant anguish of the moment.

Here the Hebrew word for “knife” or “cleaver,” מְגַל ( = ma’akhelet, which appears here in v. 6 and later in v. 10 right before Abraham is to slaughter Isaac) alludes both to the apparent imminent destruction of Isaac and to his last-second rescue. Ma’akhelet derives from the verb הָכָל ( = ’akhal), “to eat,” but ’akhal also means “to consume” and “to destroy,” is frequently used in concert with “fire” (as
and often refers to God’s destruction of human beings, and occasionally of animal offerings. Thus, ma’akhelet suggests Abraham’s intended sacrificial slaughter of Isaac. At the same time, ma’akhelet, sounds like נָּאַכְלֵת (ma’lakh), the “angel” (or “messenger”) who stops Abraham from killing Isaac at the end of the story. Thus, the Hebrew word for “knife” suggests both the readers’ greatest fear and their fondest hope. These sound patterns also recall the strikingly powerful phrase at very the beginning of the episode, לֶךְ-לְךָ (Lekh-lekha), “Go forth,” which God speaks to Abraham in v. 2.

More drama follows. Apparently in his own private (though restrained) suffering, Isaac asks Abraham why the instruments of sacrifice are present (the firestone and wood), but not the actual sheep to be sacrificed. Abraham replies that God will “see to [provide] the sheep for the burnt offering, my son.”

Bereshit Rabbah 56:4 observes that the reader can interpret the Hebrew of Abraham’s reply in two ways: 1) “God will see to the sheep for the burnt offering [offering-up], my son”; or 2) “or, if not, the burnt offering will be my son.” In his commentary on the Torah, Richard Elliott Friedman puts it this way: 1) “God will see to the sheep for the burnt offering, my son”; 2) “God will see to the sheep for the burnt offering: my son.” Given that the Hebrew has no punctuation, either reading is legitimate. In the latter instance, “my son” stands in apposition to “sheep”: That is, Isaac (“my son”) is the sheep! Therefore, the author shows Abraham speaking ambiguously here, which effectively highlights the anguish of the circumstances.

Further eliciting the emotions of the reader, the narrator concludes this section of the story with a simple and brief description of father and son, poignantly stating, “And the two of them walked on together” (v. 8): two forlorn figures slowly treading to a destiny of anguish, while the readers await Isaac’s rescue.

Instead of depicting a lively dialogue between father and son, the text leaves its readers in terrifying and ominous quiet with a spare description that forces us to contemplate the horror that the two protagonists expect to encounter. Except for the one brief conversation between Abraham and Isaac and Abraham’s instructions to his servants, the narrator sets the journey to the mountaintop of Moriah in gloomy silence, with a lack of sentiment and passion, and with an economy of language that uses only the two names of Abraham and Isaac (not a mention of Sarah, Ishmael, or the names of the servants) and indulges in very few descriptive phrases. Yet, the connotations of the words form a rich web of significance. As readers, we find
ourselves in the atmosphere of a dream, where the symbols refer to one another in mysterious and elusive ways, but without the noisy commentary of conscious, waking life. 

So concludes the first half of the Aqedah episode directly prior to its climax. Characterized by Abraham’s preparations for the sacrifice and by movement from one place to another (first from Beersheva to Mt. Moriah, and then from the foot of the mountain to its summit), this portion of the narrative in some sense serves as a commentary or midrash on God’s command to Abraham, “Go forth” (אֲלֹהֵלֶךְ לְךָ lḵ-leḵa) 22:2. This phrase appears only one other time in the Bible, in Genesis 12:1, when God commands Abraham to “go forth from your native land and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you.”

For Abraham and for his descendants, the people of Israel, going forth means moving from a position of comfort and stability (a settled life in their ancestral home) to one of transition and change, where, as Søren Kierkegaard puts it, “fear and trembling” lurk on all sides of our path. Far from a vacation or a pleasant outing, the journey consists of an encounter with a God who is both profoundly terrifying and awe-inspiring.

In Genesis 22, we find ourselves in a world where some persons can avail themselves of God in the form of visions and dreams, but the narrator depicts this God as a force at once beneficent and solicitous, but also forbidding and perilous.

“To go forth” in Hebrew (from הַלָּכָהּ hālakh) occurs frequently in Torah (especially in Genesis), with many meanings. They include (among a broad range of possibilities) “to go,” “to come,” “to walk,” “to move,” “to traverse,” “to travel,” and “to grow.” Throughout the Genesis narrative, characters are walking from place to place. In the Aqedah, in v. 3 Abraham walks to Moriah, while in vv. 5, 6 and 8, Abraham and Isaac walk up the mountain. In v. 19, Abraham and his two servants walk back to Beersheva. In 15:2 Abraham describes life as a “walk” which concludes with death. In 17:1 God asks Abraham to “walk in my ways.” In later Jewish thought, an important word arises from halakh, namely הַלָּכָהּ (halakhah), literally meaning “something to go by”, in other words, rules, practices and customs. In a sense, the references to halakh in this narrative suggests from a historical perspective that the walk of Abraham and Isaac refers not simply to a single event, but to the voyages and journeys that the Jewish community has taken throughout its existence: the walks of our matriarchs and patriarchs, the walk in freedom out of Egypt, the walk in the wilderness, the walk to the promised land, the walk of rabbinic tradition and observance, the
walk into the diaspora, the walk out of Spain, the walks that many in Europe took to the lagers, the voyages that many of our families took to this country, and the walk on the road on which we currently travel. The journey in Genesis 22 can function as a metaphor for the experiences and travels of the Jewish people (and for others as well). The question remains: What kind of walk does Abraham take, and does he embark on it for the right reason? If not, how can we understand this story so that we can redirect our steps in the right direction?

Finally, the two hikers reach their destination (9a), and the story enters a new stage, as the verb bo’ (אָבֹא, “to come, to arrive”) introduces the second section. Whereas the first half of the narrative focuses on movement from one place to another, the two protagonists now arrive at the site (“the place of which God had told them”) where they plan to fulfill the divine request. The narrator refers to the location simply as “the place,” without further detail. Frugal language, a marker of the entire story, especially characterizes vv. 9-10. A series of verbs and their direct objects (most with object markers) follows. There are no adverbs or adjectives, rather a series of unadorned, declarative statements that describe horrifying events in a dispassionate tone: reaching the summit; building an altar; laying out wood; binding Isaac; placing him on the altar above the wood; and picking up the knife to slaughter him. In rapid-fire succession, the narration builds the plot to a crescendo through a swift, stark sequence of actions initiated by Abraham.

Several words suggest the violence of the event presumed to come. The double reference to an “altar” (אֵינָהֲה = מִזְבֵּאת) indicates an intended sacrifice (from the verb, יָבֹא = זָוָאכֵח, “to slaughter [as a sacrifice]”). For the only time in the Bible, the narrator uses the word that gives our passage its name: אֶלְגָּד (אֶלְגָּד), literally meaning in later Hebrew “to tie bent limbs together.” That is, אֶלְגָּד refers to the “binding” of the forelegs and hindlegs of a sacrificial animal, here Isaac. The “wood” (אָץ = עֵץ) indicates the material used for burning the animal, while the “knife” specifies the instrument of slaughter. For the conclusion of this build-up, the narrator describes Abraham raising his hand with the knife. The author then uses the verb, לֵדֶת (= שָׁקָחַט), meaning “to slaughter” according to proper ritual rules—a term used in later Judaism for kosher butchering to indicate the slitting of the throat of an animal in a particular, swift way so that the blood drains immediately.117 The last word before the slaying speaks to the poignancy of the moment: אָנָה (אָנָה, “his son”). Abraham does not
plan to sacrifice a typical animal, but a human being, his very own son.  

Finally, on the verge of this hideous act, an angel of the Lord halts Abraham by calling out Abraham’s name twice and then ordering him not to raise his hand against his son. The angel explains that Abraham has shown his fear of God by not withholding his favored son.

Describing the angel as speaking to Abraham from the “heavens” (מֵית = shamayim), the text depicts angels as beings that dwell in the celestial sphere (the starry sky) and that can move between earth and heaven. The angel repeats Abraham’s name twice to which Abraham responds, “Here I am” (ָּני = hinneni). This sets a pattern found in several later biblical passages where God speaks to individuals whom God favors and chooses to perform certain special tasks: Jacob, Moses, and Samuel. Each time God uses their double name, and they respond, “Here I am.”

By stating “since you have not withheld your son . . . from Me,” verse 12 also suggests a blurring between the identity of God and the angel. The reader cannot clearly distinguish between the two, a typical phenomenon in some biblical texts, suggesting the nature of God as both unitary and multitudinous, singular and plural. In turn, this ambiguous demarcation conveys a sense of the text itself as never fixed or certain. Like God whose identity always remains unclear and labile, interpreters can transform the text over time into new shapes in response to changing contexts. This observation may help readers to understand the angel who says in v. 12, now “I know that you fear God,” implying that God learns as events unfold, responding to them as they occur. Like a text, God does not remain stationary or unresponsive to the efforts of human beings, but alters course in the ebb and flow of circumstances.

Significantly, not only does the angel ask Abraham to refrain from slaughtering Isaac, but the angel refers to Abraham’s “hand” (י = yad), not his knife, and requests that Abraham not do “anything” (המִנ = mʼummah) further to Isaac. Why does the text mention Abraham’s hand, when the knife apparently constitutes the real danger? What does the angel mean when it refers to other possible actions that Abraham might perform on Isaac? The story seems to suggest that Abraham has more in mind than cutting the throat of his sacrificial victim. According to Genesis Rabbah 56:7, God’s tears had melted away the knife, and Abraham, fearing that he could not slaughter Isaac, planned to strangle Isaac or draw blood from him with his own hands in order to
fulfill the divine commission. That explains why the angel told Abraham not to “do anything” more. In any case, these rabbis viewed Abraham as so committed to slaughtering his son that he would attempt to do so even without his sacrificial implement, with his own bare hands. Does this reflect the intensity of this man’s commitment to his sacred mission, or does it suggest the spillover of adrenaline when engaged in an act of violence?

After the angel’s brief speech, Abraham lifts his eyes and sees a ram, caught behind in a thicket by its horns, which he then takes and offers as a burnt offering in place of his son. Just as Abraham looked up and saw Moriah from a distance in v. 4, here he looks up again. Where was he looking earlier? Could the ram have been wandering in the area all along? Do we know how carefully Abraham uses his vision? Does this suggest that God had provided a ram for Abraham before Abraham ever had arrived at the summit?

With Isaac spared, Abraham acknowledges God by naming the mountain “Adonai-yireh” in v. 14. Intentionally, this phrase can have multiple meanings depending on the vowel pointing. It can refer to Abraham and all his descendants who “fear” (אָרְעֵ: yare’) God. It can refer to the sheep that Abraham “saw” (הָרָא: ra’ah) and realized could substitute for Isaac. It can refer to Abraham who “saw” God on the summit of the mountain in a sort of prophetic vision. It can refer to God who “appeared” (הָרָא: נירָא, “was seen”) on the mountain. It can refer to God who “showed” (הָרָא, = her’ah) Abraham both Godself and the sheep. Through an aural pun (not graphic), it can also possibly refer to God who “instructed” (הָרָא = yarah) Abraham and his descendants.

This kind of wordplay characterizes the entire story and suggests that the text itself welcomes multiple interpretations. Here is another example: “Moriah” (hY:rImo). As Genesis Rabbah 55 suggests, it too has numerous meanings. It can indicate “instruction” (as in Torah, from yarah, “to teach”), because it serves as “the place from which instruction goes forth to the world.” It can indicate “religious awe” (הָרָא = yir’ah; or הָרָא = morah) because it serves as “the place from which religious awe goes forth to the world.” It can indicate “showing” (from הָרָא = her’ah), because God showed it to Abraham. An interpreter could also link it with “light” (הָרָא = ‘orah) or dominion (אַתְוָא = maruta’). There are many more possible derivations, including the modern scholarly attempt to connect the proper name to the ancient Amorites, based on a reading in the Syriac Bible, the Peshitta. Words such as Moriah and Adonai-yireh resonate with
numerous connotations and can never find a fixed definition, since (at least in Jewish tradition), the text always, deliberately, and continually allows the readers to find new import in it.

In vv. 15-18, the angel calls out to Abraham a second time. As the mouthpiece of God, the angel rewards Abraham for going to Moriah and not withholding his favored son from sacrifice. Swearing an oath, God through the angel promises to make Abraham’s “descendants” (literally “your seeds”) “as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sands on the seashore” and to bring them victory against their adversaries (“the gates of their foes”). Because Abraham obeyed God’s voice, Abraham’s descendants will serve as a blessing for all the nations of the earth.

The reference to “your seeds” (יִשְׂרָאֵל = zar’akha) ties the Aqedah to Abraham’s future. Because Abraham agreed to sacrifice Isaac, Isaac and his future sons will procreate and produce many children, a huge economic advantage in the ancient world. Carol Delaney has commented on the male orientation of this language, which points to males as the creative force in human reproduction. For Delaney, this language not only perpetuates a false, gender stereotype, but it suggests the violence that joins sacrifice and sexuality in this story. The reference to conquering enemies would certainly confirm this.

The repetition of the angelic voice has caused considerable comment throughout the centuries. Traditional Jewish midrash has explained the repetition in a variety of ways. One strand saw the angel (not God) as speaking in vv. 11-12 and again in v. 13, but God suddenly interrupts the angel this time to confirm to Abraham that Abraham will not need to go through with the sacrifice. That is why the text says, “By myself I swear” in v. 16: to let Abraham know that now he hears not simply an angel, but God Itself. Other commentators understand Abraham as interrupting the angel, when he saw the ram in v. 13 and sacrificed it. Consequently, in order to continue the unfinished divine revelation, the angel speaks again in vv. 15-18.

The apparent break in the narrative, as well as the different content and language, has suggested to some modern scholars a different source for this section: vv. 1-14 and 19 come from the Elohist (E), while another, later source (possibly the Yahwist, J, or a later redactor of Genesis) inserted vv. 15-18. Although a few view this chapter as the work of a single author, most regard it as comprising two sources, first connected, then integrated, by an editor.
Nahum Sarna describes this section as a “reaffirmation” of the promises made to Abraham by God in the prior Genesis narrative. In this vein, T. Desmond Alexander makes the interesting suggestion that God did not conclude the covenant of circumcision with Abraham in Genesis 17, but in Genesis 22:15-18, when God acknowledges Abraham’s successful completion of the test of the Aqedah: According to God’s instructions in Genesis 17:2, Abraham had “walked” before God and was rendered “blameless” because of his actions in the Aqedah. Further, Alexander notes that a sacrifice does not take place in Chap. 17 (as in the covenant with Noah in Gen 6-9), but finally does in Chap. 22. Thus, vv. 15-18 would have transformed an older tradition of the Aqedah story into a fulfillment of the covenant of circumcision initiated in Genesis 17.

This makes interpretation of the passage even more complex. God’s request and Abraham’s response have different meanings within the different layers of tradition. When framed by a later interpreter, the original story of the Aqedah acquired a new significance.

Finally, the story comes to its melancholy conclusion in v. 19. Apparently without Isaac, Abraham descends the mountain. He then meets up with his servants, and they return together to Beer-sheva. The quietness of this verse belies its power. The repetition of Beer-sheva may serve to emphasize a pun on [b'v; (= shava’), “to swear an oath,” which God declares in v. 16. The fulfillment of God’s promise has come at a severe price. Whereas in v. 8, Abraham and Isaac ascended the mountain “together” (yəḥdav), Abraham returns to Beer-sheva without his beloved son, “together” (yəḥdav) only with his servants. The absence of Isaac suggests a separation between father and son, who never again speak to one another in the text. A few verses later (23:2), Sarah, his wife of many years, dies. Abraham returns to Beer-sheva alone, only to lose his wife a short time later. The covenantal promise brings with it not only joy, but sadness.

ANOTHER READING

So what do we do with this passage? Do we accept the painful legacy of an impeded child sacrifice and all the attendant traumas that have afflicted Abraham’s family and his descendants—namely, us? Given our heritage of violence and the dangers of unquestioning obedience, can this passage any longer serve as a foundation stone of our tradition? I believe it can.
Traditional interpretations of the Aqedah still have a place in communicating the power of this passage. If nothing else, the customary, positive explanations have resonance within certain communities and elucidate aspects of the story that a more critical approach may never uncover.

All of us who work on biblical texts are engaged in a process that never truly reaches conclusion. Once you exhaust the text, it no longer speaks or has meaning for new generations. The Torah—scripture—resembles plants that need constant tending and maintenance. Remember how God describes Adam’s task in the Garden of Eden in Genesis 2:15: “Till it and tend it.” If we stop watering and stop trimming it, the plant will fall into decay and die. Parts of a plant die every day, just as cells in our own bodies, but the plant lives and thrives if we nurture it. The plant remains the same plant in most ways, but also undergoes alterations and transformations that allow it to flourish. Torah follows a similar path. Interpretations that work in one generation may no longer suffice in the next. We may need to add to them, alter them, and possibly transform them. That’s what Jewish midrash does. While striving to stay within the text, midrash builds on the multiple meanings of words that allow a text to grow and take on shapes in new contexts. In fact, for Jews, midrashic interpretation forms not merely an appendage to Torah, but a part of the Torah itself.

I readily admit the legitimacy of some other readings that may even seem to contradict my own. In the words of midrash editors, I simply present “another interpretation” (davar akher), which might stand alongside the numerous, insightful interpretations that scholars have previously discovered over the centuries. Following this rabbinic tradition, which usually does not attempt to resolve the competing interpretations into a unified argument, I simply accept the presence of multiple meanings in a text and await their resolution (if there is one).

In studying Jewish commentaries on the Aqedah, readers can sometimes find a brief reference to an interpretation that gains little notice otherwise. Writers from diverse backgrounds from antiquity to the middle ages to modern times have noted this reading. Genesis Rabbah (56:8), Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Gersonides, Baþya, Aaron ben Elijah, Abravanel, Joseph Herman Hertz, W. Gunther Plaut, and others cite variations of it. Yet, usually noting this reading in passing, neither they nor others follow it fully to its logical and surprising conclusion. In general, all these commentators suggest a reading in which God did not ask Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, but
simply asks Abraham to bring Isaac up to the summit of the mountain to make a burnt offering.

Particularly important is the word הָלָּה (‘alah) in 22:2, used twice therein. As a noun, הָלוֹח (‘olah, from ‘alah) usually refers to a “whole, burnt sacrifice,” literally a holocaust, because the smoke rises up (to God). In this context, the verb can also sometimes mean “to offer” (as in “offer a sacrifice”). Consequently, the JPS and NRSV editors translate the clause in 22:2 “offer him there as a burnt offering.” Since these renderings do not capture the sense of upward movement inherent in the word, Everett Fox translates “offer him up there as an offering-up.”

Yet, ‘alah has a double meaning. Normally ‘alah as a verb means “to go up,” “to rise,” or “to ascend.” Here the form is causative (called hiphil in Hebrew), normally meaning to “bring up,” “cause to ascend,” or “cause to rise.” The traditional translation of 22:2 omits this common meaning. Therefore, following the above-mentioned Torah commentators, I would suggest another translation: ‘bring him up for an offering-up.” Here ‘alah does not refer to a sacrificial event, but to an ascent of a mountain.

The text does not specify who or what constitutes the offering. God does not identify Isaac as the offering, only that Abraham should bring him up to the summit and make an offering of some kind. God never uses the word, “slaughter,” because God never intends to slaughter Isaac. Abraham could have figured that out, if he had listened carefully or asked good questions. Genesis Rabbah 56:8 puts it this way. “Did I tell you, ‘slaughter him’? No, but ‘bring him up.’ Now that you have brought him up, bring him back down.”

Abraham misinterpreted God’s instructions. God simply told Abraham to bring Isaac up the mountain. God may have mentioned a sacrifice, but God does not name the victim. God never told Abraham to kill Isaac, but simply asked him to make an offering, presumably an animal. Abraham (not God) decided to identify Isaac as that animal.

After the angel stops Abraham from killing Isaac, Abraham looks up and sees the ram. Possibly God intended that ram as the sacrifice all along, but Abraham, while looking down, in an unconscious stupor caused by the anguish of his misinterpretation, never bothered to observe it. Or Abraham could have brought another animal with him. An angel then stops Abraham from sacrificing Isaac, not God. Why? Conceivably because God had learned to Its horror how Abraham could misinterpret God’s words. In any case, the text does not say “kill Isaac,” but rather “bring him up for an offering-up.”
Basing his interpretation on Exodus 11:3, Bajya suggests that “for an offering-up” (ḥl[^l])= ḥolah in v. 22:2 actually means “instead of an offering-up.” That is, by bringing Isaac up the mountain, Abraham would have made an offering that would take the place of a sacrifice. God never intended a sacrifice, but rather considered the act of ascent the equivalent of an offering. Because Abraham did not catch this subtle addition of the preposition, ḥ, to ḥolah, Abraham misinterpreted God’s instructions (which Bajya sees as the result of Abraham’s overwhelming love for God).  

Another possibility remains. Abraham misheard ḥolah as “sacrifice” or “offering,” when he should have heard “ascent.” In Ezekiel 40:26, the prophet uses the word, ḥolah, to describe an “ascent” or “stairway, while ḥolah (ma’aleh) regularly means an “ascent” or “climb.” Thus, we could translate: “Bring him up for an ascent.” Perhaps by ḥalah God planned for Abraham to make a pilgrimage to a sacred high place, or to go up to Jerusalem as pilgrims did on holidays, or to make a heavenly ascent as Jacob did in his dream in Genesis 28, but we will never know for sure, because Abraham assumes that a sacrificial ritual will take place.

Abravanel makes a further interesting observation. He suggests that “that I will say to you” refers to the object of the verb, ḥalah as its antecedent: “Take your son, your only one, Isaac, whom you love, and, on one of the summits there, offer it [the animal], which I will say to you, as a whole offering.” In light of this, one could also translate 22:2 in the following manner: “And [God] said, ‘Take your son, your only one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and, on one of the mountaintops, bring him up there for an offering-up [whole offering] that I will say to you.” Here “that I will say to you” refers to “offering-up [whole offering]” as its antecedent. In other words, God will explain to Abraham what kind of animal Abraham will sacrifice when he reaches the summit of the mountain. Given the word order (with “mountain” immediately preceding “that” in the Hebrew, I would not view the above translation as the natural construal of the text’s language. But it is also possible that we are meant to read this sentence in more than one way. That is, the standard reading and a counter-reading exist simultaneously within the same text. The text is intentionally ambiguous.

In any case, the wordplay on ḥalah and its repetition fit a pattern that characterizes Genesis 22. The entire story is filled with puns and wordplays of various kinds, some of which I have discussed: Adonai-Yireh in 14; Moriah in v. 2; seeing; swearing (šav’a in v. 16)
and Beer-sheva (B’er Shav’ā in v. 19); walking; the words for “together” (yakhdav in vv. 9 and 19), “only” (or “favored,” y’hid’kha in vv. 2, 12), and “a certain” (“’akhad in v. 2); “take” (qakh in vv. 2, 3, and 6), Isaac (Yitskhaq), and “from afar” (merakhoq); Abraham (Avraham), “father” (av in v. 7), and “love” (’ahavta in v. 2); “knife (ma’akelet in v. 6) and “angel” (ma’lakh in vv. 11 and 15); “bring him up/(burnt) offering” (’alah and “on” [’al in v. 2); “youth” (na’ar in vv. 3, 5, and twice in v. 12) and “gate” (sha’ar in v. 17);152 and probably many more. Also the narration provides numerous examples of word repetition. “Abraham” occurs thirteen times; “son” occurs nine times; and a surprisingly large number of words occur more than once.153

And that may serve as the very point of the Aqedah. ‘alah has more than one meaning, as do a number of the words, phrases, and sentences in the story. The natural reading may not be the correct reading. Or several different interpretive options may exist simultaneously. The scriptural text expects its readers to ponder its significance and question its intentions, just as God expected Abraham to consider carefully the content of God’s own words. Ambiguity within certain parameters characterizes the language of the Aqedah to such an extent that it compels readers to make their own interpretive and moral decisions. In other words, Torah does not always provide direct answers, but leaves enough room for questioning to allow us to draw our own conclusions.

Indeed God tested Abraham, but it is a different test from what we usually think. Here are the unstated instructions that God did not provide: I am using ambiguous words to make a request of you; study them; ponder them carefully; ask me questions; talk to your family and friends; do not assume my intentions; follow my instructions precisely; and better check it out before you draw your final conclusion. Students here can probably relate; God does not give transparent and simple assignments. God expects us to study, to think, to pay attention, to engage in debate, and to work hard at understanding what God says and means.154

Yes, this is a very difficult test155 with ambiguity, multiple interpretations, and doubtful answers. But God sets the bar extremely high for humans.156 After all, what else would God expect from creatures made in God’s own image?157

Abraham made a number of errors on his test: he did not study or ponder God’s words sufficiently; he did not ask God questions; he did not speak with his wife, son, or friends; he looked down, when he should have looked up; he was relatively unconscious,
when he should have remained aware; he presupposed meaning, when he should have doubted and inquired; and, sadly, without suspecting the limits of his own understanding, he assumed that God meant for him to sacrifice Isaac. Now, on the other hand, God did not fail Abraham on his test (maybe he would now receive a “C,” or a “B-” in light of grade inflation). Why? Prior to this event, he had shown tremendous courage and fortitude by leaving his home in Haran (Genesis 12), by rescuing Lot after Cherdolaomer’s forces had captured him Lot in battle (Genesis 14: 13-16), and by agreeing to have a son in his old age (Genesis 18, 21). Ultimately, he did not kill Isaac; he obeyed the angel’s voice and restrained his hand. His own love for Isaac, though apparently ambivalent, may have held him back too. He loved God and tried to obey God. He had reasons for misunderstanding God’s instructions: given that God had already destroyed the human race once before in Noah’s time, and that child sacrifice existed in Abraham’s time, Abraham would have naturally assumed that God might expect him to kill his son. Since God regularly surprised Abraham, Abraham could have reasonably expected another surprise. And Abraham did not have the benefit of much prior human experience in dealing with God.

Like many of the other protagonists of Genesis (e.g. Adam, Noah, Sarah, Jacob, and Joseph), Abraham is flawed. Yet God rewards him and his descendants with the covenant and its promise, as indicated in 22:15-19. Why? In spite of their shortcomings--our shortcomings-- God looks at our better nature and rewards us when we make even limited use of it.

We who live now do not share, however, the same situation as Abraham. We have fewer excuses. We have plenty of experience with persons claiming direct experience of God. The study of history should make us less prone to surprises and help us to understand that God’s words exist in community contexts that shift and change over time. God may not require perfection from us, but God does expect a lot, even more than from the biblical protagonists.

The message is simple, though not the implementation. When you hear the voice, or read the words, of God, do not assume their surface meaning. Convey your experiences to others, ask questions, study and read, think long and hard. God not only works, but speaks, in mysterious ways. It is up to us to unravel that mystery.
TRANSLATION OF GENESIS 22:1-19 (Aqedah)\textsuperscript{150}

\begin{itemize}
\item[1.] Now, after some time, God tested Abraham and said to him, “Abraham.” He said, “Here I am.” \textsuperscript{2} [God] said to him, “Please take your son, your only one, Isaac, whom you love and go to the land of Moriah, and bring him up there for an offering-up on one of the mountaintops that I will say to you.” \textsuperscript{3} Early the next morning, Abraham arose, harnessed his ass, and took with him two of his youths and Isaac, his son. He split wood for the burnt offering, got up, and went to the place that God had said to him.

\item[4.] On the third day, Abraham raised his eyes and saw the place from afar. \textsuperscript{5} Abraham said to his youths, “You stay here with the ass, while the youth and I will go over there so that we can worship and return to you.” \textsuperscript{6} Abraham took the wood for the offering-up, placed it on Isaac, his son, and took the firestone and the knife in his hand. And the two of them walked off together. \textsuperscript{7} Then Isaac spoke to Abraham, his father, saying, “My father.” He said, “Here I am, my son.” And he said, “Here are the firestone and the wood, but where is the sheep for the offering-up?” \textsuperscript{8} Abraham said, “God will see to the sheep for the offering-up, my son.” And the two of them went off together.

\item[9.] They came to the place which God had said to him. There Abraham built the altar, arranged the wood, bound Isaac his son, and put him on the altar on top of the wood. \textsuperscript{10} Then Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. \textsuperscript{11} But an angel of the LORD (\textit{YHWH}) called to him from heaven: “Abraham! Abraham!” \textsuperscript{12} He said, “Here I am.” It said, “Do not stretch out your hand against the youth, and do not do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only one, from me.” \textsuperscript{13} Thereupon Abraham raised his eyes, and he saw a ram caught behind in a thicket by its horns. Abraham walked over, took the ram, and offered it as an offering-up in place of his son. \textsuperscript{14} Thus Abraham called that site, \textit{Adonai Yireh (YHWH Yireh)}, from which comes the saying today, “On the mountain of the LORD (\textit{YHWH}), it will be seen.”

\item[15] Then an angel of the LORD (\textit{YHWH}) called to Abraham a second time from heaven. \textsuperscript{16} It said, “By myself I swear as a declaration of the LORD (\textit{YHWH}), ‘Because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only one, \textsuperscript{17} I will truly bestow a blessing upon you and I will truly make your seed as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore, so that your seed will seize
the gate of their enemies. All the nations of the earth will enjoy blessing through your seed, because you have hearkened to my voice.”

Abraham then returned to his youths. They arose and went off together to Beer-sheva. And Abraham stayed in Beer-sheva.

End Notes


Some rabbinic traditions understand this phrase to mean “in connection with these things”: that is, the Aqedah is connected to a specific, prior event that precipitated it (*BR* 44:5). A midrash arose to explain what
event was. Satan (Sammael) had caused Abraham to sin by dressing in the guise of a beggar and asking for alms outside the house of Abraham at the time he was holding a banquet on the occasion of Isaac’s birth. Busy with other obligations, Abraham (and Sarah) neglected him. This gave Satan the pretext to challenge Abraham’s loyalty to God and set in motion the Aqedah test. See the references collected in Ginzberg, *Legends*, 5:248–49 (nn. 226–8). See also the story found in *Jubilees* 17:15-18, where Prince Mastema (Satan) challenges Abraham before God on the grounds that Abraham loved Isaac more than anything else, including God.


73For Isaac as a teenager (fifteen years old), see the interpretation of *Jubilees* in Eberhard Nestle, “Wie alt war Isaac bei der Opferung? [Miscellen],” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 26 (1906): 281–82.

74If we understand the *Genesis* account in chronological terms (though that is certainly debatable, and W. G. Plaut not illegitimately objects to it--*Torah*, 146), then the claim of the rabbis that Isaac was thirty-seven years old seems reasonable: *BR* 56:8. Since Sarah was ninety when she gave birth to Isaac (Gen 17:17), and since Sarah died at the age of one hundred twenty-seven immediately after the episode, the rabbis arrived at the figure of thirty-seven (127 - 90 = 37) for Isaac at this time. Of course, in the end, we have no way of knowing, and the text is probably intentionally vague.

Two additional issues complicate the matter. Ancient ideas about stages of life (childhood, adulthood, old age, etc), and the precise ages they cover, are somewhat different from our own. Also, given that the life spans of the patriarchs (as depicted in the Torah) are
considerably longer than those of the actual Jews who composed these texts at a later time, it is possible that the narrator altered her/his understanding of life stages. For example, does childhood last the same amount of time for someone living to fifty as it does for someone living to one hundred and twenty? That may explain why the rabbis can conceive of Isaac, whom Abraham calls a תער (na‘ar — “boy,” “youth,” or “young man”) in v. 5, as having attained the age of thirty-seven.

The text ambiguously suggests different age categories, ranging from older boyhood to youth to adulthood. Readers face a representation of Isaac both protean and malleable.

Rabbinic texts see this as the tenth and ultimate test for Abraham. The specific nature of the test actually differs from source to source. See Pirque Avot 5:3 and the numerous commentaries. The idea of God testing Abraham does create a problem for the exegetes, because it implies that God does not know the final result. Yet God’s uncertainty about the results of this test reflects a pattern throughout the Genesis narrative, when the creation appears to take unexpected turns (the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden, the murder of Abel by Cain, the corruption of the Noahide generation, the building of the tower of Babel, etc.).


Knowledge of the events of the story and the eventual outcome presumably leave readers much less anxious and fearful than the protagonists themselves. Recently I spoke with a young girl (Josephine Elwood) who was reading and studying this story and asked her whether she was scared. She said, “no,” and that she really liked the story. When I asked why, she replied that God’s request to sacrifice Isaac was a “test” for Abraham, and she knew what would happen. For a similar viewpoint, see Coats, “Abraham’s Sacrifice,” 392–93. Another person (John Harrison) suggested to me that we ought to regard the Ḥaqelah as a kind of Japanese Kabuki drama, where everyone knows the precise course and outcome of the unfolding events.
As opposed to the command in v. 11, where God states the name of Abraham twice; but see the Septuagint (LXX) version, where God says “Abraham” twice in v. 1 (as well as in v. 11).

The reference to the early morning in v. 3 shows that the events of v. 2 took place the night before. This parallels Abraham’s vision of God in Gen 21:14 in regard to Sarah and Hagar, whereupon Abraham arose early the next morning. For other parallels with the Hagar story, see Lawlor, “Test,” 33–35; Crenshaw, Whirlpool, 18, n. 31; McEvenue, “Elohist”; Wenham, Genesis, 99–100; Wenham, “Akedah,” 97–100; Curt Leviant, “Parallel Lives: The Trials and Traumas of Isaac and Ishmael,” Bible Review 15, no. 2 (April 1999): 20–25, 47; and A. Marx, “Sens et fonction de Gen. XXII 14,” Vetus Testamentum 51 (2001): 199–202.

Cf. Abimelech’s dream of God concerning Sarah in 20:6ff., after which Abimelech awoke early the next morning. Also Abraham departed early the next morning after God had destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah (19:27). All this recalls the sequence found in Gen 1:5, 8, 13, 19, 23, 31: “And there was evening and there was morning, a first [etc.] day” (דַיְּאָרֵיָאָר כוֹזְפִּאָר זִיוָעְר יָדָאָוֶאָד = וַיָּהָיָי הָיָה וַיָּהָיָי הָיָה וַיָּהָיָי הָיָה וַיָּהָיָי הָיָה וַיָּהָיָי הָיָה וַיָּהָיָי הָיָה וַיָּהָיָי הָיָה וַיָּהָיָי הָיָה וַיָּהָיָי הָיָה וַיָּהָיָי הָיָה וַיָּהָיָי הָיָה וַיָּהָיָי הָיָה וַיָּהָיָי הָיָה وַיָּהָיָי הָיָה וַיָּהָיָי הָיָה וַיָּהָיָי הָיָה וַיָּהָיָי הָיָה וַיָּהָיָי Hekhad).

Including Rashi and Sarna, Genesis, 151.

So Rabbi Shim’on bar Abba in BR 55:7.

See the story in *BT Sanhedrin* 89b: “This is comparable to a story (parable) of a king of flesh and blood, against whom arose many wars, and he achieved victory because of one great warrior. Later a severe battle arose against him. The king said to the warrior: ‘I have a request of you: stand with me in this battle, so that people may not say, ‘there was no reality in the earlier ones.’ So also did the Holy One, blessed be He, say to Abraham, ‘I have tested you with many trials, and you have withstood them all. Now stand tall in this trial, so that people may not say, ‘There was no reality in the earlier ones.’”


The biblical text does not identify the two servants. Later rabbinic interpreters name them as Ishmael and Eliezer.


Rabbinic sources suggest that God placed a cloud and a pillar of fire over the mountain to indicate its location: Ginzberg, *Legends*, 1:278–79. The text itself remains silent.


While “Moriah” appears in v. 2, “seeing” occurs in vv. 4, 8, 13, and 15. The text and the rabbis understand Moriah as in part referring etymologically to seeing, with the recurring consonants, “resh” and “heh” and the assumption of an “aleph”, as in r - h - h: 1) so R. Judah in *BR* 55:9 on v. 4, where Moriah is understood as the place “I will show you” (that is, the place, “I will have you see” [ḥarīm = marʾeh]—see the discussion in Sarna, *Genesis*, 391; 2) “... see to the sheep” in v. 8; 3) “... Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw” in v. 13; and 4) “and Abraham named that place *Adonai-Yireh*, from which comes the present saying, ‘On the mountain of the Lord there is vision,’ ” in v. 15.

For example, the phrase “The Lord appeared” or “The Lord was seen” (from the niphal verb root form of ḥar: = raʾah) occurs three times with Abraham (12:7, 17:1, 18:1), twice with Isaac (26:2, 24), and once with Jacob (35:9). See the discussion of this phenomenon in Sarna, *Genesis*, 91–92. In 18:2, Abraham follows his vision of God with his vision of three men appearing at his tent. In Gen 16:13, Hagar calls God *ʿel roʾi* (yair† lae), for which Sarna offers a variety of translations: “God of seeing,” “God of my seeing,” and/or “God who sees me”: *Genesis*, 121, with references (p. 350, n. 12). To these I would add the following paraphrases: “God who gives me sight,” “God who allows me to see God,” and/or “God who allows me to continue to see even after God saw me” (following the text of the midrash that Gen 16:13 itself offers). This may recall Leah’s prayerful comment that, because the Lord saw her in her affliction, her husband would love her (29:32). Later in the Ishmael portion of the narrative, Hagar explains that she does not want to look upon her son, Ishmael, while he is dying (21:16). At the beginning of the Abraham story in 12:1, God tells Abraham to leave Haran and go to the land that God will show him (literally, the land that God will make him see). In Gen 12:12-13, Abraham fears that the Egyptians will see Sarah and kill him; in turn the Egyptians see Sarah in 12:15. Note how both Lot and Abraham look out on the territory that they will occupy in Gen 13. Both Isaac and Jacob have trouble seeing at various points (see comments in Part 1). God frequently looks out on God’s creation in...
Gen. 1. In Gen 6:2, the divine beings (“sons of God”) see the “daughters of humanity.” Noah uses a dove to see whether the waters had receded in 8:8, Noah sees the happy sight in 8:13, and God promises to remember the Noahide covenant, whenever God sees the bow in the clouds (9:16). In 9:22, Shem and Japheth see their father’s (Noah’s) nakedness and cover him up so that they do not see it any longer--presumably an allusion to Adam and Eve seeing that they were naked in the Garden of Eden in Gen.3. God acts as one who sees, a witness, in 31:50. When water covers the earth, Genesis describes its emergence as an appearance or sight (1:9, 8:5). The references to evening and morning in Gen 1 suggest an alternation of darkness and light, sightlessness and sight, though sometimes God’s very light can produce impaired vision: 19:11.

95ז"מ'ח'נ'ה'ה'ר ה'ה'א'ר Here Abraham interestingly uses the same word that the text earlier uses for Abraham’s two servants. According to BR 56:2, Abraham asks the two servants whether they see what he sees: that is, the cloud (discussed in n. 91). Because the servants (like the asses) do not see the cloud, Abraham does not allow them to accompany him and Isaac on their climb up the mountain.

96“Bow down low”: הָנַשְׁתָּקֵה (nissenkheh), from the root, ה - ג - י (sh - kh - kh), similar to the act of prostration (that is, where the body lies flat and stretched out on the ground with the face down--a posture of submission and reverence), though possibly also indicative of a crouching position. In many cultures, the act of bowing down low (or prostration) is associated with submission before a higher authority (monarch, tribal chieftain, landholder, or a deity), and thus naturally with worship.

97Ginzberg, Legends, 1:279, 5:250, n. 239.

98See the numerous references in BDB, 880.

99Maqom derives from the verb מַעָמ (qum), “to stand,” which in later Hebrew, can mean “to exist”--close to the concept found in Ex 3:14, where God describes Godself as “I am who I am” or “I shall be who I shall be” (רָאָה הָיָה הָיָה, הָיָה הָיָה). For discussion of maqom as referring to a sacred place, see Sarna, Genesis, 358, n. 10 (chap. 12).

100For the identification of “fire” (רָאָה = ’ets) with “firestone,” see Ephraim A. Speiser, Genesis, Anchor Bible 1 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), 163; Sarna, Genesis, 152.
One other biblical text connects “testing” with “walking” (מַחְלִיק = halakh): Ju 2:22, where God tests Israel to see if they will “walk faithfully in the way of the Lord” (יְראוֹל, יְרָאת א, יְהֵמוּר חַלָּח = hashomrim hem et-derekh lalekhet ban).

See the references collected in BDB, 37.

[ma'lahk] actually derives from the verb triconsonantal root, מ - ל - ק (M - L - K), “to be sent, “to minister”, but the two words sound and look almost the same.

While the text does not explicitly indicate Isaac’s state of mind, his question strongly suggests internal doubts of some kind: E.g. see BR 56:4, which describes Sammael (Satan) as the cause of Isaac’s questioning.

Note that my translation (see p. 178) follows Everett Fox in his translation of ה'ו = “offering-up.”


Erich Auerbach dramatically describes the setting: “Thus the journey is like a silent progress through the indeterminate and the contingent, a holding of the breath, a process which has no present, which is inserted, like a blanc duration, between what has passed and what lies ahead . . . ” [ Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature, (Originally published as Mimesis: Dargestelle Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur: Bern: A. Francke, 1948), trans. Willard Trask (Garden City: Doubleday, 1957), 7].

For the use of word repetition and puns, see p.176 and n. 153 below.

There are several other parallels between Genesis 12 and 22: God appears to Abraham and speaks to him (12:1 and 22:1); God says to Abraham that he should go to “a land” (אֵרֶץ, *erets; 12--an unspecified land; 22--“the land of Moriah”); Abraham answers God’s command affirmatively by immediately leaving his home to fulfill his mission without so much as a question or even a word in response; in return, God makes a commitment to bless Abraham’s progeny and make his descendants a great multitude and a blessing for all the peoples of the earth (12:2-3 and 22:17-18); Abraham takes a journey...
with others (from Haran to Canaan with Lot, Sarah, and servants in 12:5-6; and from Beer-sheva to Moriah with Isaac and two young male servants in 22:3-4); and Abraham builds an altar (12:7-8 and 22:9). For further, more detailed, discussion of the parallels, see Gary Rendsburg, _The Redaction of Genesis_ (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1986), 30–35.

111 See _Fear and Trembling_.

112 Something many of us in developed societies forget. See also the “great dark dread” (hakhol ḫashekhah g’dolah) that descends upon Abraham in Gen 15:12, right before God tells him of the coming enslavement and oppression of the Israelites in Egypt.


114 This is a common expression (with many variations) throughout the Bible: See _BDB_, 234.


117 hf’yjiv] = sh’khitah.

118 For some medieval Jewish interpreters of this text, Abraham did in fact successfully sacrifice Isaac: Spiegel, _Last Trial_. V. 12 does not necessarily pose a problem for this, because the text does not indicate one way or the other whether Abraham slit Isaac’s throat with his knife, only that Abraham should not use his hands to prepare the body further. The angel does not mention the knife (but only Abraham’s hand), because the knife had already done its job.

119 The word “to fear” (ḥar’ay = yare’) sounds orally similar to the word for “to see” (ḥar’ay = yare’), and this kind of pun exists throughout the chapter, especially in v. 14, when Abraham names the mountain.
The angel could mean either “since you fear” or “since you see.” See discussion on p. 170 below.

120 See especially Gen 28:12.
121 Gen 46:2; Ex 3:4; 1 Sam 3:10.
122 See the references cited in Sarna, Genesis, 383.
123 Just as earlier he lifted his eyes and saw Moriah from a distance (v. 4). The interpretation of 'akhar remains challenging. 'akhar normally means “after” (or “afterwards,”), but, only with some difficulty, does this reading make grammatical sense in either Hebrew or English. The New Jewish Publication Society translation emends it to 'ekhad, meaning “a” (or “a certain” or “one”), following “Heb. mss. and ancient versions.” Some have suggested that 'akhar means “behind him” (wjrj' = 'akharav). Marvin Pope (following Rashi and Ugaritic texts) suggests an alternative reading. Pope humorously notes that “behind him” could “suggest that Abraham had eyes in the back of his head.” Instead, Pope understands 'akhar as referring to a chronological sequence, indicating “immediate” and “direct” “action.” Following Pope, one could translate 'akhar as “just then.” See Marvin H. Pope, “Enigmatic Bible Passages: The Timing of the Snagging of the Ram, Genesis 22:13,” Biblical Archaeologist 49, no. 2 (1986): 114–17; Walters, “Wood, Sand, Stars,” 305–06; and Wenham, “Akedah,” 99.
124 For discussion of the significance of the ram as a symbol of the Temple cult that alluded to the priesthood and sacrificial atonement, see Walters, “Wood, Sand, Stars,” 308–10.
125 The word for “in place of” is tjr' (= takhat), which medieval rabbis interpreted as also meaning “after.” Therefore, for them, Abraham sacrificed the ram after sacrificing Isaac. See Spiegel, Last Trial, 60–61.
126 According to Yehuda Amichai, “the true hero of the Akedah was the ram,” because it volunteered to die in Isaac’s place. Neither Isaac, nor Abraham, nor the angel bothered to look and see it. In this way, Amichai understood the ram as a proxy for those dying in Lebanon in the 1980’s and the indifference to their deaths. See his poem as quoted in Abramson, “Reinterpretation,” 109–10.
127 Literally “caused to see.”
128 hrw = Torah, from hr ( = yarah); also hrm ( = moreh), “teacher.” The midrash actually cites hr'm ( = hora’ah, “instruction”).
129 Delaney, Abraham on Trial, passim.


rejects any attempts at determining sources and early traditions behind the current text: Abraham in History and Tradition, 228–37.

132 Sarna, Genesis, 154.

133 In my opinion, the references to “walking” throughout Chap. 22 support this.

134 See T. Desmond Alexander, “Genesis 22.”

135 See Gen 21:33.

136 For a brief survey of some of this material, see Schmitz, Aqedat Yiʿāq, 42–43.

137 An acronym for R. Solomon Isaac, Ra-SH-I, born in Troyes in northern France, studied in the academies at Mainz and Worms (German), wrote perhaps the definitive commentary on almost the entire Torah, Talmudic scholar, halakhic authority, and teacher of numerous students: 1040-1105 C.E. See the section in his commentary on Genesis 22 (y*vr vwryp µḥ = Khamishah Khomshe Torah ‘im Perush Rashi = The Five Books of Torah with Rashi’s Commentary).

138 Abraham Ibn Ezra, from Spain, peripatetic scholar who travelled widely in North Africa, Egypt, Italy, Provence (southern France), Normandy (northwestern France), and London, Torah commentator, transmitter of Arabic texts into Hebrew, conveyor of the Spanish Jewish tradition to northern Europe, poet and liturgist, grammarian, philosopher, theologian, mathematician, astronomer, and physician: 1069-1164 C.E. See his commentary on Genesis 22 (hr ṣr wp = Perush ‘al ha-Torah = Commentary on the Torah).

139 Levi ben Gershom, also known by his acronym, Ralbag (Ra-L-Ba-G), from Provence (southern France), Jewish Aristotelian philosopher and theologian, Talmud scholar, astronomer, and mathematician, 1288-1344 C.E. See his commentary on Genesis 22 (hr ṣr wp = Perush ‘al Sefer ha-Torah = Commentary on the Torah).

140 Baṭya ben Asher ben ÿlava, Torah commentator, born in Saragossa (Spain), early interpreter of the Zohar, died c. 1320. See his
commentary on Genesis 22 (ḥrwt yvmj hvmj l[yj b wbbar vrdm = Midrash Rabbeu B’khayye ‘al Khamishah Khumshe Torah = The Interpretation of our Teacher Bābye on the Five Books of Torah.

143 Also known as Aaron the Younger, Karaite scholar from Nicomedia in western Turkey who lived in Constantinople, Torah commentator, poet, liturgist, and expositor of Karaite thought: 1328-1369 C.E. See his commentary on Genesis 22 (ḥrwt rtk = Keter Torah = Crown of Torah).

144 Isaac ben Abravanel, Jewish Torah commentator, court minister to kings in Portugal, Spain, and Italy (Venice), wealthy businessman, and philosophical and theological scholar: 1437-1508 C.E. See his commentary on Genesis 22 (ḥrwt l[y wyp =Perush ‘al ha-Torah = Commentary on the Torah).


146 See Torah, 150 for the standard Reform Jewish commentary.

147 “JPS” refers to the Jewish Publication Society, while “NRSV” refers to the New Revised Standard Version.”


149 Not surprisingly, this essay understands Abraham’s reasoning a little differently.

150 Biblical texts very frequently employ ‘alah when referring to a journey to Jerusalem. It is perhaps significant that the very last word of the Hebrew Bible (according to the traditional Jewish order of biblical books as found in the TaNaKh) in 2 Chron 36:23 is ‘alah. In this case, ‘alah refers to the return (ascent) of the Jewish exiles to Jerusalem where the Temple will be rebuilt at the instigation of Cyrus, King of Persia.

151 In order to rescue Abraham, some of the commentators interpret God as saying, “Act AS IF you are going to sacrifice Isaac”; that is, “bring him up, AS IF you are making Isaac into a sacrifice”: See especially Ibn Ezra who cites Jer 35:2, where he interprets the imperative as an
“as if” statement: “Go to the house of the Rechabites, and speak to them, and bring them to the house of the Lord, to one of the rooms, and act as if you were giving them wine to drink.”

That is, since the Rechabites were forbidden from drinking wine, God did not actually intend for Jeremiah to make them drink wine.

For this pun, and some other possible ones, see Crenshaw, “Journey Into Oblivion,” 251.

E.g. “God” in vv. 1, 3, 8, 9, and 12; “Abraham” in vv. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 (twice in a row), 13 (twice), 14, 15, and 19 (twice); *hinneh*, “here I am” in vv. 1 and 7, and “here is” in v. 7; and 11; “said” in vv. 1, 2, 5, 7 (four times), and 8; “take” in vv. 2, 3, and 6; “Isaac” in vv. 2, 3, 6, 7, and 9 (twice); “only” (or “favored,” in vv. 2 and 12; “son” in vv. 2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, and 13; ‘*alah* in vv. 2 (twice, once as verb and once as noun), 6 (verb), 7 (verb), 8 (verb), and 13 (twice, once as verb and once as noun); “seeing” (see discussion in Part 1); “walking” (see discussion above on p. 167); “two” in vv. 3, 8, and 15; “youth” in vv. 3, 5, and 12 (twice); “ass” in vv. 3 and 5; “wood” in vv. 3, 6, and 7; “place” in vv. 3 and 4; “raised his eyes” in vv. 4 and 13; “firestone” in vv. 6 and 7; “father” (twice in v. 7); “sheep” in vv. 7 and 8; “raise . . . hand” in vv. 10 and 12; “angel of the Lord” in vv. 11 and 15; “from heaven” in vv. 11 and 15, and “heaven” in v. 17; “LORD”/Tetragrammaton in vv. 11, 14 (twice), 15, and 16; “called” in vv. 11 and 15; “do” in vv. 12 and 15; “bless” in vv. 17 and 18; “descendants” (“seed”) in vv. 17 (twice) and 18; and Beer-sheva in v. 19 (twice).

Lippman Bodoff and Jung H. Lee have also suggested that God wanted Abraham to object: see the references in n. 58 in Part 1.

Just as the Milgram experiment was. See Part 1.

As God had done for Adam and Eve, Abel and Cain, and Noah, with obviously mixed results.


The following translations provided crucial assistance and some of the actual language used here: New Revised Standard Version
(NRSV), 1989 (Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.); Wenham, *Genesis*, 2:97–99; Fox, *Five Books*, 93–97; The New Hebrew Jewish Publication Society Translation (JPS, 2nd ed.), 1999; Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah*, 73–78. I also want to thank Thomas O. Lambdin, Judah Goldin, and Steven D. Fraade whose teaching and publications have given me many invaluable insights on Hebrew translation (and interpretation). Needless to say, any shortcomings are my own.