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The Trial of Abraham and the Trembling of the Audience:

Rereading the *Aqedah*

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Honors Thesis

Department of the Classical Mediterranean and Middle East

April 29, 2024

Abstract

This thesis reexamines the *Aqedah* narrative from Genesis 22:1–19, focusing on the conveyance of emotions and the portrayal of characters in a story that lacks explicit descriptions of thoughts and feelings. Approaching the text through a literary and narratological lens, I propose that through phraseological techniques like diction and parataxis and compositional strategies such as allusion and juxtaposition, the text captures the psychological depth of biblical characters, thereby enhancing its emotional impact on the audience. I dissect the narrative into eight scenes and within each scene, I conduct close readings to identify and analyze subtle lexical choices and rhetorical devices. Bridging various methodological approaches of biblical criticism, this study highlights the narrator's inventiveness in producing emotional intensity and character complexity within the constraints of biblical narrative traditions.

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Acknowledgments

This project would not have been possible without the guidance and support of many mentors, family, and friends, to whom I shall express my deepest gratitude.

First, I must thank Nanette Goldman, who has been the greatest inspiration throughout my academic journey. I remember, three years ago, walking into the Elementary Latin class with hesitation but Prof. Goldman's passionate instruction and meticulous explanation of opaque grammatical concepts reaffirmed my interest in ancient languages. After a few months in Elementary Latin, I received an email from Prof. Goldman encouraging me to declare a major in Classics. I did and I have not looked back ever since. The following year, I signed up for Biblical Hebrew with Prof. Goldman and was introduced, for the first time, to the beauty and intricacies of the Hebrew scriptures. I have learned from Prof. Goldman not only to read ancient languages and conduct philological research but also to appreciate the ancient world through texts. Throughout my research and writing process, Prof. Goldman has spent numerous hours talking me through my ideas, answering my questions including the silly ones, and reading every draft I brought to her office. I have had obstacles along the way and moments of confusion and disappointment, but Prof. Goldman has always been there to cheer me on with her kindness and encouragement.

Second, I would like to extend my gratitude to my readers, Andy Overman and Nick Schaser, for their insightful comments and questions. The many conversations we had about the Hebrew Bible and literary criticism have left positive marks on me as a student of ancient literature and made me a better researcher and writer. I am especially grateful to have worked with many professors who have provided me with valuable insights and

guidance. These include Prof. Christina Esposito, Prof. Jim Laine, Prof. Beth Severy-Hoven, and Prof. Susanna Drake.

I would also like to thank my godparents and my friends at Macalester and in the Twin Cities, who have been a constant source of emotional and spiritual support. Thank you all for listening to me ramble about Abraham and Isaac and complain about the numerous hours spent on the fourth floor of the library.

This project is dedicated to my parents and my grandparents who taught me integrity and humility, diligence and perseverance. Thank you for always encouraging me to read and think critically, to constantly question, and above all, to pursue my dreams.

Mikey
April, 2024
Saint Paul, Minnesota

Introduction

The story in Genesis 22:1–19, known as *Aqedah* or “the Binding of Isaac” in Jewish traditions or “the Sacrifice of Isaac” in Christian traditions, is one of the most widely studied and interpreted passages in the Hebrew Bible. The *Aqedah* serves liturgical and theological purposes in both Christianity and Judaism and as a result, generations of philosophers and theologians have attempted to understand and recreate its meaning. However, portraying a father tasked with the sacrifice of his beloved son, the *Aqedah* is, first and foremost, an emotional story. Meanwhile, the *Aqedah*, composed of fewer than three hundred words, consists almost exclusively of actions and gestures, along with a brief dialogue. Explicit descriptions of thoughts and feelings are simply nowhere to be found. This thesis, therefore, answers two questions: 1) How does the *Aqedah* convey emotions? 2) How does the *Aqedah* characterize the biblical figures? I propose that the narrator of the *Aqedah* utilizes phraseological and compositional strategies to implicitly capture the psychological representation and development of the characters and to maximize emotional impact on the audience.¹ Phraseological techniques include the use of diction and parataxes (Hebrew verbal chains). Compositional techniques include allusions, juxtapositions, and sequential organization of the syntactic chains. This thesis ultimately seeks to understand the complexity and individuality of the biblical characters and the emotional experience of the audience through the examination of literary techniques.

In the 19th Century, many commentators started undertaking literary analysis of the *Aqedah*. Scholars, in the 20th century, applying particular critical approaches such as source

¹ Throughout this thesis, I use the term “narrator” as a collective name for the generations of writers and redactors who contributed to the crystallization and canonization of the Hebrew Bible. Similarly, I use the term “audience” to refer to the audience of the received biblical text that we have now, rather than its different earlier levels.

and form criticism, were eager to ground this ancient narrative in modern theoretical frameworks of literary analysis. The existing scholarship, restricted by their methodological affiliations, fails to fully capture the narrator's rhetorical talent.² Incorporating important insights from various schools of biblical criticism, I reorient the focus of my research back to the text itself and attempt to uncover its narratological intricacy from its ostensible simplicity. First, a careful division of the *Aqedah* into scenes will show how different verses function both individually and collectively.³ I divide the 19 verses of the *Aqedah* into eight scenes, distinguished by changes in character, time, space, or theme, as follows:

- Scene 1 God's Command (Gen 22:1–2)
- Scene 2 Abraham's Response (Gen 22:3)
- Scene 3 Journey to Moriah (Gen 22:4–8)
- Scene 4 Building and Binding (Gen 22:9–10)
- Scene 5 *Angelus ex Machina* (Gen 22:11–12)

² John I. Lawlor treats the story with great sensitivity but restricts the lens of his literary analysis to the "textual redundancy" and "triplets." See John I. Lawlor, "The Test of Abraham Genesis 22:1-19," *Grace Theological Journal* 1, no.1, 1980. Yair Mazor praises the application of literary criticism to the *Aqedah* narrative, which he believes "not only brings light to the inner, artistic filaments of the biblical text, but also its psychological motivations and underlying human currents." However, his own literary analysis is not concerned with every literary and rhetorical detail. See Yair Mazor, "Genesis 22: The Ideological Rhetoric and the Psychological Composition," *Biblica* 67, no. 1 (1986): 88.

³ Many scholars perceive the *Aqedah* as a well-constructed tragedy but debate over ways of division. Structuralists dissect the *Aqedah* mainly based on the construction of chiasmus. Jacques Doukhan outlines the story as follows: A, vv 1-2 The word of Elohim; B, vv 3-6 Actions; C, vv 7-8 Dialogue; B1, vv 9-10 Actions; A1, vv 11-19 The word of YHWH. However, this arrangement, placing the dialogue as the center, clearly overlooks the audience's emotional experience. See Jacques Doukhan, "The Center of the *Aqedah*: A Study of the Literary Structure of Genesis 22:1-19," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 31, no. 1 (1993): 19. Lawlor reads this episode as a "two-act play (Act I: Ordeal/Crisis vv 2-10; Act I Resolution: vv 11-18), with both a prologue (v 1) and an epilogue (v 19)." See, Lawlor, "The Test of Abraham," 20-21. Coats presents the story as follows: I. Exposition (vv 1-2), II. Complication: execution of instructions (vv 3-10), III. Resolution (vv 11-14), IV. Conclusion (vv 15-18). See, George W. Coats, "Abraham's Sacrifice of Faith: A Form-Critical Study of Genesis 22," *Interpretation* 27, no. 4 (1973): 390-391. Jonathan Jacobs divides the *Aqedah* into nine scenes, provides a summary of each scene, and points out the changes in narrative elements. Jonathan Jacobs, "Willing Obedience with Doubts: Abraham at the Binding of Isaac," *Vetus Testamentum* 60, no. 4 (2010): 549.

Scene 6 *Aries ex Machina* (Gen 22:13–14)
 Scene 7 Benediction (Gen 22:15–18)
 Scene 8 Homecoming (Gen 22:19)

For each scene, I first translate the Hebrew texts. My rendering faithfully retains important features of Biblical Hebrew syntactic structure. Within each scene, I conduct verse-by-verse close readings and identify relevant lexical choices and rhetorical devices, placing them within a broader biblical corpus when necessary. Engaging closely with existing scholarship, I analyze the narrator’s rhetorical strategies both within and across verses and scenes, and their dramatic effects on both the audience and the characterization of the biblical figures.

Literary Treatment of the *Aqedah*

The most well-known literary work on the *Aqedah* is the *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* by Erich Auerbach. In its first chapter, titled “Odysseus’ Scar,” Auerbach compares Homer’s *Odyssey* to the *Aqedah* in Genesis 22, and contrasts the succinct literary tradition of the ancient Israelites and ancient Greek epic poetry.⁴ As Auerbach notes, details regarding time, space, and feelings in Genesis are minimal; the narratives develop rapidly and literary priorities are largely given to actions.⁵ However, the absence of a detailed foreground does not amount to the lack of artistic storytelling, which is characterized by George Coats as follows:

[The art of storytelling] depends on sensitive construction, that it does not happen automatically. If, for example, a storyteller captures his audience with a challenge, a situation that demands their attention, and then stretches their interest over a range of cruxes to a resolution of the crisis, he will not have done so accidentally.⁶

⁴ Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Ewing: Princeton University Press, 2013), 8-10.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Coats, “Abraham’s Sacrifice of Faith,” 389.

Following Coats' line of thought, this thesis also regards every minute detail of the Hebrew text as the result of the narrator's masterful storytelling. Rather than overreading the textual data for philosophical or theological agenda, my approach, therefore, offers interpretive possibilities that will give due credit to the narrator.

Another equally influential work on literary interpretations of the Hebrew Bible is *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, in which Robert Alter dedicates one chapter to "Characterization and the Art of Reticence."⁷ Acknowledging Auerbach's remarks about the narrator's simplistic style, Alter argues in favor of his skills:

Though the biblical narrative is often silent where later modes of fiction will choose to be loquacious, it is selectively silent in a purposeful way.... I would suggest, in fact, that the biblical writers, while seeming to preserve a continuity with the relatively simple treatment of character of their Mesopotamian and Syro-Palestinian literary predecessors, actually worked out a set of new and surprisingly supple techniques for the imaginative representation of human individuality.⁸

Although Alter does not directly address the *Aqedah* story in his book, he accurately identifies the literary traditions and restrictions that the biblical narrator creatively negotiates. This observation is especially true for the *Aqedah* narrative. My thesis will also demonstrate that the narrator of the *Aqedah* strictly abides by his literary traditions but implicitly expresses emotions and intentions through a series of rhetorical techniques. To further elucidate such techniques, Alter then proposes a "scale of means, in ascending order of explicitness and certainty," which contains critical information about characters' motives, attitudes, and moral nature:

⁷ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 114-130.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 114-115.

Characters can be revealed through the report of actions; through appearance, gesture, posture, costume; through comments on another; through direct speech by the character; through inward speech, either summarized or quoted as interior monologue; or through statements by the narrator about the attitudes and intentions of the personages, which may come either as flat assertions or motivated explanations.⁹

The *Aqedah*, with its abundance of actions and gestures, naturally falls into the lower and middle categories of this scale. Alter suggests that this end of the scale leaves commentators “substantially in the realm of inference,”¹⁰ My study, in the ensuing pages, through the analyses of both phraseological and compositional strategies and their interplay, demonstrates that the characters in the *Aqedah* story can be read with greater certainty.

⁹ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 116-117.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 117.

Scene 1: God's command (Gen 22:1–2)

וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וַהֲאֱלֹהִים נִסָּה אֶת־אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הִנְנִי:

1. And it happened that after these things God tested Abraham, and He said to him: “Abraham!” And he said: “Behold, here I am.”

וַיֹּאמֶר קַח־נָא אֶת־בְּנֶךָ אֶת־יְחִידְךָ אֲשֶׁר־אֹהֲבָתָּ אֶת־יִצְחָק וְלֵךְ־לְךָ אֶל־אֶרֶץ הַמֹּרְיָה וְהַעֲלֵהוּ שָׁם לְעֹלָה עַל אֶחָד הַהָרִים אֲשֶׁר אֹמַר אֵלֶיךָ:

2. And He said: “Please take your son, your only one, the one that you love, Isaac, go forth to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I will tell you.”

The first scene introduces the two main characters: God and Abraham. The narrator withholds the temporal or spatial setting. The only available information is that God “tests” (נִסָּה *nissāh*) Abraham “after these things” (אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה *aḥar haddabārīm hā’ēlleh*).

Verse 1 contains the first biblical occurrence of the verb *nissāh*.¹¹ The rarity of *nissāh* suggests that God intends to do something that He has not done before. Thus attracting the audience’s attention, the narrator places them in an emotionally heightened state. However, some scholars suggest that *nissāh* conveys a sense of irony, a gap between Abraham’s consciousness and that of the audience. Mazor argues that *nissāh*, in fact, imparts the result of the test and consequently some reassurance so that the audience “in contrast to Abraham, is able to follow the forthcoming chronicle without fear since [they expect] a happy ending of the story.”¹² Gerhard von Rad interprets *nissāh* as “a demand which God did not intend to take seriously,” and draws a similar conclusion about the audience’s mental state, “[the narrator] has not caused his reader any premature excitement regarding a horrible experience.”¹³ Nevertheless, the word *nissāh* itself does not suggest the outcome of the test.

¹¹ Lawlor observes that this is the only time when *nissāh* is used to label an event in the Abraham cycle (Gen 11:27- 25:11). He offers a detailed analysis of the narrator’s lexical choice of *nissāh*, its necessity, and theological implications in Gen 22:1. See Lawlor, “The Test of Abraham,” 27-28.

¹² Mazor, “Rhetoric and Composition,” 82.

¹³ Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, trans. John H Marks. Rev (The Old Testament Library. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), 234.

Claus Westermann defines the nature of a test as “to lay a task on the one to be tested; he carries it out, and thus one finds out whether the test has been passed or not.”¹⁴ In the *Aqedah*, Abraham faces an unprecedented trial from God, but nowhere in verses 1-2 does the text suggest that he will pass the test successfully. Therefore, the result remains unknown. The first occurrence of the word *nissāh* instills uncertainty in the narrative and as a result, anxiety among the audience.

Capturing the audience’s attention, the narrator proceeds to reveal the content of this test. In verse 2, God’s command consists of an imperative verbal sequence: *qah-nā* (קַח־נָא, “take”), *lek-lākā* (לֶקֶח־לְאֶכָּא, “go”), *ha-’ālēhū* (הַעֲלֵהוּ, “sacrifice him”). In the first part of the command (*qah-nā*), the narrator presents Isaac, the direct object of the verb *qah*, in a tricolonic crescendo: “your son,” “your favored one whom you love,” “Isaac” (*binkā*, בִּנְךָ, *yahīdkā ’āšer-’āhabtā*, יִהְיֶה יְחִידְךָ אֲשֶׁר־אַהַבְתָּ, *yiṣhāq*, יִצְחָק).¹⁵ Isaac fades out of Genesis 21 after his birth (Gen 21:1-7). The narrator reintroduces Isaac in Genesis 22, after the banishment of Ishmael and Hagar (Gen 21:8-21) and Abraham’s treaty with Abimelech (Gen 21:22-34). The tricolonic crescendo, directed towards the audience, serves as a reminder of Isaac’s identity as a son of Abraham’s old age (Gen 21:2, *bēn lizqunāyw*, בֶּן לְזִקְנָיו),¹⁶ and highlights his dearness to Abraham.¹⁷ The second part of the command (*lek-lākā*) alludes to Gen 12:1,

¹⁴ Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36: A Commentary* (Continental Commentaries. Minneapolis: Augsburg Pub. House, 1995), 355.

¹⁵ Both *yahīdkā* and *’āhabtā* in verse 2 also appear for the first time in the Hebrew Bible. The first occurrence of these words indicates the uniqueness of this sacrificial narrative.

¹⁶ Gen 21:2: וַתְּהַר וַתֵּלֶד שְׂרָה לְאַבְרָהָם בֶּן לְזִקְנָיו לְמוֹעֵד אֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּר אֱתוֹ אֱלֹהִים: Translation: And Sarah conceived and bore for Abraham a son of his old age at the appointed time about which God had spoken.

¹⁷ The sense of paternal attachment and intimacy is beautifully captured in a midrashic passage, which describes Abraham as courageously demanding clarification and engaging in a bargain with God. Genesis Rabbah 55:7: “Said He to him: ‘Take, I pray thee—I beg thee—thy son.’ ‘Which son?’ he asked. ‘Thine only son,’ replied He. ‘But each is the only one of his mother?’ — ‘Whom thou lovest.’ — ‘Is there a limit to the affections?’ ‘Even

in which God commands Abram to leave for Canaan using the same phrase.¹⁸ Initiated by the same imperative phrase (לְךָ־לְךָ *lek-ləkā*), the divine commands in Gen 12:1 contains a similar tricolonic crescendo: “from your land” (מֵאַרְצְךָ *mē’arṣəkā*), “from your kindred” (וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ *umimmōladtəkā*), and “from the house of your father” (וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ *umibbēt ’ābikā*). The reappearance of *lek-ləkā* and the tricolonic crescendo constitute an inner-biblical allusion between the divine command in the *Aqedah* and that of Gen 12:1.¹⁹ The narrator thus parallels Abraham’s journey to the land of Moriah with that to the land of Canaan. Furthermore, a divine blessing (Gen 12:2–3) immediately follows the command of Gen 12:1.²⁰ As the result of the allusion, the narrator insinuates an auspicious association between the command in Genesis 12 and the present command of the *Aqedah*.

God then continues with the final part of the test — “sacrifice him” (*ha ’ālēhū*). Characterized by its brevity and brutality, the imperative verb (*ha ’ālēhū*) immediately shatters the positive association given to the second part of God’s command and creates a dramatic suspension. Jacques Doukhan captures the bitter contrast between the second and third part of the command, “Abraham receives the order to go, and this departure bears in

Isaac,’ said He.” See, H. Freedman and Maurice Simo, trans., *Midrash Rabbah Genesis I* (London: Soncino Press, 1961), 488.

¹⁸ Gen 12:1 וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־אַבְרָם לְךָ־לְךָ מֵאַרְצְךָ וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ אֵל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֶרְאֶה: Translation: And the LORD said to Abram: “Go forth from your land, from your relatives, and from your father’s house, to the place that I will show you.”

¹⁹ On this allusion, see Ellen F. Davis, “Self-Consciousness and Conversation: Reading Genesis 22,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 1, no. 1 (1991). 33; James Crenshaw, *A Whirlpool of Torment: Israelite Traditions of God As an Oppressive Presence* (Overtures to Biblical Theology, 12. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 15; Doukhan, “Center of the *Aqedah*,” 21; Lawlor, “The Test of Abraham,” 22.

²⁰ Gen 12:2 וַאֲנִי־שָׂשָׂה לְגוֹי גָדוֹל וְאַבְרָכָה וְאַגְדָּלְךָ שְׂמֶה וְהִנֵּה בְרָכָה: Translation: And I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and I will make great your name. Be a blessing!

Gen 12:3 וְאַבְרָכָה מְבָרְכֶיךָ וּמְקַלְלֶיךָ אֶאְרַךְ וְנִבְרְכוּ בְךָ כָּל־מִשְׁפַּחַת הָאָדָמָה: Translation: And let me bless ones who bless you and one who belittles you I will curse, and all the families of the earth will be blessed through you.

itself a sacrificing of his hopes, anticipation, and prospects for the future.”²¹ Maximizing the psychological potential contained in this contrast, the narrator organizes the tripartite decree to impose an emotional burden upon the audience. While the narrator arouses curiosity among the audience in the first part and instills an auspicious atmosphere in the second, he withholds the true nature of the trial until the last part. Thus manipulating the audience’s response, the narrator creates an overlapping emotional and conscious experience between the audience and Abraham.

The first scene presents the filicidal theme that extends through the remaining scenes of the narrative and creates a haunting atmosphere. In verse 1, the narrator uses the verb נִסָּה (*nissāh*) for the first time in the Genesis corpus and designates a new action, testing, to God. Verse 2 reveals the content of the test and introduces the existential crisis of Israel.²² The narrator employs a carefully constructed verbal sequence and invokes inner-biblical allusions to Gen 21 and 12 when phrasing God’s command. Specifically, the tricolon epithet of Isaac indicates his significance and, consequently, the severity of his potential death. While God explicitly stipulates the sacrifice of Isaac, the narrator implicitly piques and curates a series of emotional responses of the audience from curiosity, hopefulness, to distress.

²¹ Doukhan, “Center of the Aqedah,” 21.

²² Here I use the term “existential crisis of Israel” to refer to the threat of the end of the Abrahamic bloodline.

Scene 2: Abraham's Response (Gen 22:3)

וַיִּשְׁכֶּם אַבְרָהָם בַּבֹּקֶר וַיִּחַבֵּשׁ אֶת־חֲמֹרוֹ וַיִּקֶּחַ אֶת־שְׁנֵי נַעֲרָיו אִתּוֹ וְאֵת יִצְחָק בְּנוֹ וַיִּבְרַע עֵצִי עָלָהּ וַיֵּלֶךְ
אֶל־הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר־אָמַר־לּוֹ הָאֱלֹהִים:

3. And he got up early in the morning, and he saddled the donkey, and he took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son, and he split the wood for the offering, and he got up, and he went to the place that God had told him.

Abraham's reactions to the divine command are indicative of his character and imply his emotional struggles. Hearing God's command, Abraham responds with little hesitation: he gets up early in the morning (וַיִּשְׁכֶּם בַּבֹּקֶר *wayyaškēm babbōqer*) to prepare for the upcoming sacrifice of his beloved son Isaac. He does not reveal this divine revelation to anyone, including Sarah. He then hurries to perform a series of actions: and he saddles (וַיִּחַבֵּשׁ *wayyahābōš*) the donkey, and he takes (וַיִּקֶּחַ *wayyiqqah*) the young men and Isaac, and he splits the wood (וַיִּבְרַע *waybaqqa*), and he gets up (וַיֵּלֶךְ *wayyāqom*), and he goes (וַיֵּלֶךְ *wayyēlek*).

Though the lengthy syntactic chain in verse 2 may seem chaotic and overwhelming at first glance, a close examination of the order in which Abraham's actions are presented reveals his doubts and creates a shared emotional experience between Abraham and the audience. Similar to the narrator's sequential organization of the tripartite command in verse 2, he also delays Isaac's appearance in the present scene. After Abraham gets up early, the spotlight shifts from Abraham to his donkey, from his donkey to the two servants, and, eventually, to Isaac. This dramatic configuration seems to depict Isaac as inconsequential and runs counter to his significance according to our previous analysis of Scene 1.

Attributing the delayed appearance of Isaac to Abraham's "inner doubts and misgivings," Jacobs offers a midrashic depiction of Abraham's attempt to tarry:

He first saddles his donkey, then takes the attendants—as though expecting, at each stage, a new command that may come and nullify the original one. Only after all of these preparations, and against his will, does he take Isaac. The wording of the verse – “He took his two attendants with him, and Isaac, his son” – conveys the impression that Isaac is almost an afterthought, appended as it were to the taking of the attendants.²³

This line of interpretation, therefore, presents Abraham as a loving father in pain, stealthily trying to delay the death of his beloved son. In addition to the meticulously designed narrative sequence, Isaac’s epithet “his son” (בְּנוֹ *bəno*) further compounds the bitterness in the present scene and highlights the reality of this sacrifice as a tragic filicide. The narrator’s frequent attachment of the title *bəno* to Isaac (verses 2, 3, 6, 9) directly addresses his audience and invites them to participate in Abraham’s inner struggles.

While both Isaac and the servants are ready, Abraham, delaying once again, does not immediately set out for Mount Moriah but proceeds to split wood for the sacrifice (וַיִּבְרַקֵּעַ עֵצִי הָעֹלֶה *waybaqqa ‘āšē ‘ōlāh*). Many scholars notice and comment on yet another one of Abraham’s eccentric actions. Victor Hamilton asks, “Why is it Abraham, rather than his servants, who saddles the donkey and splits the wood? Is not such activity more suitable for servants than for the servants’ master?”²⁴ Jacobs inquires, “Why is there a need to prepare wood at all? It is reasonable to assume that in the vicinity of the mountain, it is easy to find wood. Indeed, a ram was caught ‘by its horns in the thicket (Gen 22:13).’”²⁵ Assuming the necessity to split the wood, we are still left with a question about its timing. Why does

²³ Jacobs, “Willing Obedience with Doubts,” 553.

²⁴ Victor Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994), 108.

²⁵ Jacobs, “Willing Obedience with Doubts,” 554.

Abraham have to split the wood now? Could he have done it before saddling the donkey or summoning the servants and Isaac?

Mazor thus explains Abraham's postponement of wood-splitting from a psychological perspective:

This act is the one that reminds Abraham most of the atrocious mission which he is about to execute. Since Abraham suspends this emotionally-loaded act to the very end, he displays his natural intuitive recoil from his shocking obligation to his Lord and demonstrates the pestering psychological struggle within his bisected consciousness.²⁶

Mazor's interpretation of emotion through word order corroborates the task of this thesis, namely, the identification and analysis of implicit emotions within the *Aqedah*. Meanwhile, the narrator implies the same "pestering psychological struggle" through the juxtaposition of "Isaac his son" and the verb "to split."²⁷ Isaac's delayed entrance onto the stage is ominously followed by a violent act of Abraham, who is expected to commit the very same act on Isaac in the foreseeable future. There is a similar juxtaposition between the sacrificial "knife" (הַמַּאֲכֵלֶת *hamma'ākelet*) and Isaac at the end of verse 6 and the beginning of verse 7. Such sequential arrangement captures a sense of horror that is otherwise not expressed explicitly in the text itself.

The previous analyses explain the order in which Abraham's actions appear and connect the narrator's lexical choices to Abraham's agony and his attempt at procrastination. Nevertheless, one final question remains: why does Abraham, when he could have further delayed, get up early in the morning (וַיִּשְׁכֶם בַּבֹּקֶר *wayyaškēm babbōqer*)? Observing the irregular appearance of a temporal indicator in a narrative that rarely specifies the time and location of an event, Auerbach contends that this phrase carries greater value for its "ethical

²⁶ Mazor, "Rhetoric and Composition," 85.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

significance” than as “an indication of time.”²⁸ Placing the verb *wayyaškēm* within a broader pentateuchal context, the following philological inquiry highlights its narratological significance. The narrator uses *wayyaškēm* precisely to ground the trial in a sacrificial narrative.

The verb **שָׁכַם** occurs 65 times in the Hebrew Bible: 14 times in the Torah, and 8 times in Genesis.²⁹ In the Torah, the verb **שָׁכַם** is associated with two common events: 1) human responses to divine commands, and 2) ritual sacrifices. In Genesis 20, when Abraham and Sarah settle in the region of Gerar, he conceals her identity as his sister and gives her to Abimelech. After God appears to Abimelech in a dream, commanding him not to do anything to Sarah and even threatening him to return Sarah to Abraham, Abimelech gets up early in the morning (**וַיִּשְׁכַּם אַבְיִמֶלֶךְ בַּבֹּקֶר** *wayyaškēm 'ābîmelek babbōqer*) to make amends with Abraham and thus fulfills God’s command.³⁰ Similarly, in Gen 21:14, receiving God’s command to obey Sarah, Abraham gets up early in the morning (*wayyaškēm babbōqer*) to drive out Hagar and Ishmael.³¹ Immediately following God’s commands, both instances of **שָׁכַם** reflect the divine presence in the narrative. Readers unaware of such circumstantial connotations of the verb **שָׁכַם** may link Abimelech and Abraham getting up early simply to their readiness to obey God. On the other hand, in Gen 28:18, Exod 32:6,

²⁸ Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 10.

²⁹ George V. Wigram, *The Englishman’s Hebrew and Chaldee Concordance of the Old Testament*, 3rd ed (London: Samuel Bagster, 1866), 1260.

³⁰ Gen 20:8 **וַיִּשְׁכַּם אַבְיִמֶלֶךְ בַּבֹּקֶר וַיִּקְרָא לְכָל־עֲבָדָיו וַיַּדְבֵּר אֶת־כָּל־הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה בְּאָזְנֵיהֶם וַיִּירָאוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים מְאֹד:** Translation: And Abimelech got up early in the morning and called for all of his servants, and spoke of all of these things to their ears, and the men were very scared.

³¹ Gen 21:14 **וַיִּשְׁכַּם אַבְרָהָם בַּבֹּקֶר וַיִּקַּח־לָחֶם וְחֲמַת מַיִם וַיִּתֵּן אֶל־הַגֵּר שָׁם עַל־שִׁקְמָה וְאֶת־הַיֶּלֶד וַיִּשְׁלַחַהּ וַתֵּלֶךְ וַתֵּבֶע:**

Translation: And Abraham rose early in the morning, and he took bread and a waterskin of water, which he gave to Hagar and put on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away.

and several other verses in the Torah (cf. Gen 19:2, Exod 8:20, and Exod 24:4), the Israelites get up early in the morning to build an altar and offer sacrifices in thanksgiving to God.³² In light of these recurring contexts, the use of *wayyaškēm* in the *Aqedah* suggests that the event should be understood in terms of a divine command or a ritual sacrifice. In fact, the *Aqedah* involves both a command and a sacrifice. Therefore, *wayyaškēm babbōqer* should highlight the sacrificial command, rather than Abraham's faith and obedience.

Scene 2 reports Abraham's response to the divine command in scene 1. However, Abraham's actions themselves as well as their sequence present several difficulties to literary critics. One may wonder why Abraham hastens from one action to another and carries out the duty of his servants. The sequential organization of the verbal sequence in verse 3 is critical to answering these questions. The above analysis has revealed that the word order both within the syntactic chain and across semantic units contains emotional value that is not otherwise available in the text. The remaining interpretive difficulty stems from the rare appearance of a temporal phrase "getting up early in the morning", which precedes the paratactic sequence that dominates the current scene. Having located other occurrences of the same temporal phrase in the Torah and analyzed their context, I connect its usage closely with the theme of a sacrificial command.

³² Gen 28:18: וַיִּשְׁכֶּם יַעֲקֹב בַּבֹּקֶר וַיִּקַּח אֶת־הָאֶבֶן אֲשֶׁר־רָאָה וַיִּשְׂם מִרְאֵשׁוֹ וַיִּשָּׂם אֹתָהּ מִצִּבְּהָ וַיִּצַק שָׁמֶן עַל־רֵאשׁוֹ׃
 Translation: And Jacob got up early in the morning, and he took the stone that he put in his head-place, and he erected it into a pillar, and he poured oil on its top.
 Exod 32:6: וַיִּשְׁכְּמוּ מִמָּחָרֶת וַיַּעֲלוּ עֹלֹת וַיִּגִּשׁוּ שְׁלָמִים וַיִּשָּׂב הָעָם לֶאֱכֹל וּשְׂתוֹ וַיִּקְמוּ לְצַחֵק׃
 Translation: And they got up early the next day and offered sacrifices and brought peace-offerings, and they sat down to eat and drink, and they got up to rejoice.

Scene 3: Journey to Moriah, Part 1 (Gen 22:4–5)

בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי וַיִּשָּׂא אַבְרָהָם אֶת־עֵינָיו וַיִּרְא אֶת־הַמָּקוֹם מֵרֶחֶק:

4. On the third day, Abraham raised his eyes and saw the place from afar.
וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָהָם אֶל־נְעָרָיו שְׁבוּ־לָכֶם פֹּה עִם־הַחֲמֹר וְאַנִּי וְהַפֶּעַר נִלְכָּה עַד־כָּה וְנִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה וְנָשׁוּבָה אֵלֵיכֶם:
5. And Abraham said to his young men: “Wait here with the donkey, and let the young man and me go up there and let us prostrate ourselves and then return to you.”

Despite its simplicity, verse 4 contains critical information regarding Abraham’s state of mind. As Abraham journeys towards Mount Moriah with Isaac and his servants, the narrative shifts from a preparatory stage into a pre-sacrificial stage. Verse 4, in comparison to verses 1-3, does not contain textual irregularity or lengthy syntactic chains. Francis Landy goes so far as to argue that this verse has essentially no narratological bearing on the rest of the plot, which only starts with the sacrifice at the altar.³³ Scholars, based on the limited information disclosed in this verse, attempt to characterize Abraham and capture his emotions. Sarna makes the case for Abraham’s unflinching faith and obedience: “The long trek enables him to regain his composure. It allows time for sober reflection, yet his resolve is not weakened. His decision to obey God is thus seen to be an undoubting act of free will.”³⁴ Westermann argues that the tension among the listeners, which was built up in the previous verses, begins to ease as Abraham looks up toward Mount Moriah.³⁵ Such interpretations, however, overlook the compositional and stylistic relationship between verses 3 and 4. As in verse 3, verse 4 begins with a temporal indicator. The narrator gives particular emphasis to the time passage in verse 4 to bring the imminent disaster closer to the audience and escalate the emotional intensity of the text. The emphasis on the duration of Abraham’s journey shows the precise length and extent of his struggles. However, the

³³ Francis Landy, “Narrative Techniques and Symbolic Transactions in the Akedah,” in *Signs and Wonder*, ed. J. Cheryl Exum (Atlanta, Georgia: Society of Biblical Literature, 1989), 14.

³⁴ Sarna, *Genesis*, 152.

³⁵ Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 358.

brevity of Abraham's actions ("he raised" and "he saw") that immediately follow the temporal phrase ("on the third day") in verse 4 forms a stark contrast to the rapid sequence of actions in verse 3. The narrator magnifies the sighting of Mount Moriah. Thus, focusing on a single action, the audience is invited to participate in his consciousness, to see his vision through his eyes, and to experience his emotion through his thoughts.³⁶

Verse 5 produces its dramatic effects through Isaac's new epithet, the redundant role of the servants, and another verbal sequence. Abraham's emotions and image are presented indirectly, through his actions and words. Approaching Mount Moriah, Abraham turns to address the servants. Abraham now utters his first words since receiving God's command, which, to the audience's dismay, are directed neither to Sarah his wife nor Isaac his son, but to his servant young men who serve almost no purpose in the narrative.³⁷ Landy thus characterizes the role of the young men, "The servants are brought along to be left behind. This is their function, a very strange one in any narrative, characters who are introduced solely in order to take no part in it." Moreover, Abraham calls Isaac "the young man" (הַנְּעָר *hanna'ar*) instead of "my son," as if they barely know each other. Abraham, attempting to trivialize the tragic nature of the sacrifice, is unwilling to accept the reality. He attempts to convince both himself and the audience that Isaac, the only son of his old age (Gen 21:2), the fruit of God's promise (Gen 12:1), and the soon-to-be father of many descendants (Gen 26:24), is as insignificant as the young men.³⁸

³⁶ Landy, "Narrative Techniques," 14.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Gen 21:2, see note 19. Gen 12:1, see note 21. Gen 26:24 וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהֵי יְהוָה בַּלַּיְלָהָה הַהוּא וַיֹּאמֶר אֲנֹכִי אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם אָבִיךָ אֲלֵךְ אֲלֵי־תִירָא כִּי־אֶתְּךָ אֲנֹכִי וּבִרְכָתִיךָ וְהִרְבֵּיתִי אֶת־יְרֵעֶךָ בְּעַבְדֵּךָ אַבְרָהָם עִבְדִּי:
Translation: And the LORD appeared to him at that night and said to him: "I am the God of Abraham your father. Do not fear for I am with you. I will bless you and multiply your descendants on account of my servant Abraham.

Abraham's speech contains another verbal sequence and its grammatical features point to his thought process. Abraham first commands the young men to "stay here with the donkey" (שְׁבוּ לָכֶם פֹּה עִם־הַחֲמֹר) *šəbū-lākem pōh 'im-haḥāmôr*). Then in a sequence of three verbs ("let us go" *nēlakāh*, "and let us prostrate ourselves" *wəništaḥāweh*, "and let us return" *wənāšūbāh*), Abraham enumerates the tasks to be completed by himself and Isaac.³⁹ This verbal chain bears resemblance to that of the tripartite divine command in verse 2 ("take" *qah-nā*, "go" *lek-lakā*, and "sacrifice him" *ha 'ālēhū*). The first part of the command, *qah-nā*, is fulfilled, when Abraham took Isaac in verse 3 and set out for the journey. The second part of the command, *lek-lakā*, then corresponds to the first word, *nēlakāh*, of the present verbal sequence: God commands Abraham to go, and thus he went, speedily and obediently. However, the next two words of the sequence reveal Abraham's intention to deviate from the command. The grammatical feature of the verbs suggests that there is a glimmer of hope buried in Abraham's hesitation and struggles. The first-person plural cohortative form, rather than the simple imperfect ("let us go" *nēlakāh*, "and let us prostrate ourselves" *wəništaḥāweh*, "and let us return" *wənāšūbāh*), directly points to Abraham's consciousness. He envisions not a bloody sacrifice but a bloodless worship. Abraham and Isaac will bow down to God in supplication, so that God might revoke the dreadful command. Therefore, while the speech is addressed to the young men, it embodies, in essence, Abraham's desperate prayer to God and reveals the image of a tormented father.

³⁹ The fact that Abraham is well aware of the truth yet conceals it has provoked a heated debate among scholars about the patriarch's moral character. Extant literary scholarships on verse 5 are overwhelmingly concerned with the moral justification or condemnation of Abraham's act of lying. See Crenshaw, *Whirlpool of Torment*, 22; Mazor, "Rhetoric and Composition," 86; Landy, "Narrative Techniques," 14.

The first part of scene 3 covers Abraham's journey from his home to an unspecified location where Mount Moriah is visible and the dialogue between Abraham and his servants takes place. While Abraham's departure brings us farther away from scene 2 spatially, verse 4, in fact, is stylistically associated with verse 3 in the appearance of another time indicator. Conversely, verse 4 contrasts with verse 3 in the absence of verbal chains and interpretive difficulties. The preceding analysis demonstrates that the temporal phrase in verse 4 serves as a better indicator of emotion than of time passage. The brevity of Abraham's actions signals his misgivings. Verse 5 subsequently presents Abraham's words to his servants through a syntactic chain of first-personal plural, cohortative verbs. Both the linguistic features and the content of the speech depict an image of a loving father and a pious supplicant.

Scene 3: Journey to Moriah, Part 2 (Gen 22:6–8)

- וַיִּקַּח אַבְרָהָם אֶת־עֵצֵי הָעֹלָה וַיִּשֶׂם עַל־יֶצְחָק בְּנוֹ וַיִּקַּח בְּיָדוֹ אֶת־הָאֵשׁ וְאֶת־הַמַּאֲכָלֶת וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם יַחְדָּו:
6. And Abraham took the wood for the offering and put it on Isaac his son and took in his hand the fire and the knife.⁴⁰ And the two of them went together.
- וַיֹּאמֶר יֶצְחָק אֶל־אַבְרָהָם אָבִיו וַיֹּאמֶר אָבִי וַיֹּאמֶר הֲנִנִּי בְנִי וַיֹּאמֶר הֲנִנֶּה הָאֵשׁ וְהָעֵצִים וְאַיִה הַשֶּׁה לְעֹלָה:
7. And Isaac said to Abraham his father, saying: “Father!” And he said: “Behold, here I am! My son!” And he said: “Behold, here is the fire and the wood but where is the sheep for the offering?”
- וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָהָם אֲלֵהִים יְרֵאֵה־לּוֹ הַשֶּׁה לְעֹלָה בְנִי וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם יַחְדָּו:
8. And Abraham said: “God will see to it, the sheep for the offering, my son.” And the two of them went together.

Resorting to another verbal sequence in verse 6, the narrator captures the absurdity and poignancy of Abraham’s actions. As Landy observes, the final farewell to the servants is a turning point in the narrative.⁴¹ The narrator now turns from Abraham’s wishful thinking to the appalling reality. He takes (וַיִּקַּח *wayyiqqah*) the wood, the fire, and the knife — everything but Isaac. Unloading the wood from his donkey, Abraham then “puts” (וַיִּשֶׂם *wayyāsēm*) it upon Isaac, who now carries upon his shoulder the wood that will facilitate his own death. Abraham’s strange decision to forsake the donkey and burden Isaac with the wood has caused scholarly debates. Jacobs attributes it to another example of Abraham’s “deliberate stalling.”⁴² Rad sees a loving and protective father behind the peculiar actions: “He himself carries the dangerous objects with which the boy could hurt himself.”⁴³ Sarna, nevertheless, senses bitter irony in verse 6: “Isaac, unaware, cooperates in carrying some of

⁴⁰ The translation of the term הַמַּאֲכָלֶת is debated. E. A. Speiser translates this “knife” of sacrifice as a cleaver and points that it is a term for butcher knives (cf. Judg 19:20 and Prov 30:14). Robert Alter identifies similar vocabularies in this narrative from butchering rather than sacrificing: לִשְׁחַט (*lišḥōt*) in verse 10, and וַיִּצְקֶה (*wayya ‘āqōd*) which is a rabbinic Hebrew term. See, E. A. Speiser, *Genesis*, ed. E. A. Speiser, 1st ed., The Anchor Bible (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1964), 163. Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and commentary* (New York: Norton, 1997), 105.

⁴¹ Landy, “Narrative Techniques,” 15.

⁴² Jacobs, “Willing Obedience with Doubts,” 555.

⁴³ Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 240.

the instruments of his own destruction. He whose name means ‘laughter’ appears to be on the verge of becoming the personification of tragedy.”⁴⁴ Finally, before Abraham walks off together with Isaac (וַיִּלְכוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם יחדוֹר) *wayyēlakū šənêhem yaḥdāw*), he picks up the firestone and knife of sacrifice (וְאֶת־הַחֶמֶד וְאֶת־הַמַּאֲכֵלֶת) *’et-hā’ēš wə’et-hamma’ākelet*). The narrator designates the knife, a symbol of violence, to be the last item to convey a sense of lingering horror. The threatening presence of the knife, in turn, contrasts with the rapport between Abraham and Isaac as they walk together. The contrast bears the pathos that permeates the current scene and prompts further reflections from the audience upon Abraham’s character and motivations behind his actions.

Reading Abraham’s acts in light of the Hagar-Ishmael episode (Gen 21), we can, with greater certainty, identify his emotional state. Many scholars have commented on a thematic echo between the two stories.⁴⁵ Both stories contain a near-death of Abraham’s son, a divine, angelic address, and a blessing from God. The relationship between Gen 21 and 22, in fact, is also linguistic. The same set of keywords, including the temporal indicator (בַּבֹּקֶר) “in the morning”), verbs (שָׁמַר “to rise early,” לָקַח “to take,” and שָׂם “to put”), epithets of Isaac (הַנֶּעֱרַר “his son” and בְּנוֹ “his son”), appear both passages. Although emotions remain unexpressed in the *Aqedah*, the connection between these two narratives suggests Abraham’s possible inner struggles. In Gen 21:11,⁴⁶ the narrator openly states that Abraham is distressed by Sarah’s command to drive out Hagar and Ishmael from his family. In Gen

⁴⁴ Sarna, *Genesis*, 152.

⁴⁵ See Davis, “Self-Consciousness and Conversation,” 33; Crenshaw, *Whirlpool of Torment*, 18; Jon Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 132. For Gen 21:14, see note 30.

⁴⁶ Gen 21:11 וַיֵּרַע הַדָּבָר מְאֹד בְּעֵינֵי אַבְרָהָם עַל אֹדֶת בְּנוֹ:

Translation: The thing, on account of his son, was exceedingly displeasing in the eyes of Abraham.

21, Abraham is obliged to part ways with his concubine and illegitimate son against his will. In Gen 22, he must do the same thing, except this time with Isaac, the only heir born of his old age, who symbolizes all of God's blessings. Thus, the parallel between these two stories makes clear Abraham's affliction and reveals his emotions of fear and distress.

The remaining verses of scene 3 (Gen 22:7–8), constituting the famous dialogue between Abraham and Isaac, impart critical information regarding both Isaac and Abraham's mental state. Prior to verse 7, the narrator has been reticent in his characterization of Isaac. Each time Isaac appears in the narrative, he does so as a passive recipient of an action (verses 3 and 6). The narrator thus allows the audience to freely interpret Isaac's silence and passivity: either he is blissfully unaware of the violence that will soon befall him or obedient to God's command and Abraham's plan. Either way, Isaac's role in the *Aqedah* so far has been peripheral. However, as Isaac suddenly breaks his silence, turns to Abraham his father, and asks the famous question, he enters from the margin of the stage into the spotlight. In his question, Isaac enumerates the required items for a burnt offering—wood, fire, and sacrificial animal—but overlooks the knife, the last item Abraham picked up in the previous verse. Isaac's question suggests that he is old enough to understand the basic procedures of a burnt offering and, accordingly, the absence of a sacrificial animal.⁴⁷ If so, the seemingly innocent question suggests that Isaac disregards the knife not out of ignorance but out of

⁴⁷ The analysis above involves the discussion of Isaac's age. While different Midrashic and pre-rabbinic Jewish traditions date Isaac to be 37, 23, or 15 years old at the time of the sacrifice, biblical scholars tend not to acknowledge or support this calculation as particularly scientific. Levenson bluntly writes: "If any of these is correct or close to it, then we have to assume that Isaac asks his question in Gen 22:7 out of either stupidity or a desire to probe his father's mind. Though the middle patriarch does not strike one as an intellectual giant, the first possibility would seem out of place in a narrative of this degree of tension and power." See, Levenson, *Death and Resurrection*, 132. In accordance with scholarly consensus, this paper assumes that Isaac is in his early childhood and does not attempt to investigate Isaac's exact age.

fear. The dramatic effect of Isaac’s question is twofold. First, the narrator presents a definitive image of Isaac—a frightened child, neither ignorant nor obedient. He is capable of observing and analyzing his surroundings, including his father’s intentions. Second, by granting agency to Isaac in verse 7, the narrator also opens up the possibility for Isaac’s future role in the narrative. Thus, the question arises whether Isaac should remain a passive recipient or acquire more agency so as to resist and revolt for his own life. As the answer to this question remains uncertain, emotional weight builds up among the conjecturing audience.

Abraham’s answer (verse 8) resembles his response to God in verse 1 and depicts him as a loving father. On their way to the place of sacrifice, Isaac calls out to Abraham his father: “My father!” (אָבִי *’ābîw*) to which Abraham responds: “Here I am, my son” (הִנְנִי בְנִי *hinnenni bənî*). Abraham responds to Isaac as readily as he does God in verse 1. Landy thus captures Abraham’s attitude toward Isaac through this interaction— “ever ready to answer questions, at his disposal, kindly, attentive.”⁴⁸ Abraham responds in verse 1 out of faith in God and in verse 8 out of love of Isaac. Ironically, it is precisely Abraham’s faith in God that requires him to betray his love of Isaac and offer him as a sacrifice. The allusion between verse 1 and verse 8 contrasts Abraham’s love for Isaac with his obedience to God and highlights his dilemma.

Abraham’s answer (verse 8) also alludes to his speech to the servants in verse 5. The grammatical details imply changes in Abraham’s attitude towards the sacrificial reality. First, the similarity between verses 5 and 8 is thematic: Abraham addresses his servants and Isaac, respectively, and describes his vision for the sacrifice. Approaching the place of

⁴⁸ Landy, “Narrative Techniques,” 16.

sacrifice, Abraham's previous schemes of delaying end up ineffective and his prayers are left unanswered. Now as a response to Isaac's question, Abraham declares: "God will see to it (יְרֵאֵה-לוֹ) *ĕlōhîm yir'eh-lô*)." Following the line of interpretation of Abraham's speech in verse 5, this declaration entails his final prayer to God. Second, the difference between verses 5 and 8 is linguistic: verse 8 contains not a syntactic chain but a concise statement, of which God is the semantic agent. Designating God as the subject of the verb יְרֵאֵה, Abraham shifts agency away from himself and Isaac (cf. verse 5) and transfers his psychological burden back to God. Contrary to the first-person cohortative verbs in verse 5 ("let us go" *nēlakāh*, "and let us prostrate ourselves" *wāništahǎweh*, "and let us return" *wānāšûbāh*), Abraham now speaks with greater certainty through the simple imperfect form of יְרֵאֵה. Landy interprets Abraham's response as an effort to "waive responsibility, putting the onus on God, and be half-directed toward heaven."⁴⁹ Westermann describes this effort more vividly, "[Abraham] throws the ball back into God's court, so to speak: 'God will provide.'"⁵⁰ Third, verses 5 and 8 also differ with respect to Isaac's epithet. As the time for sacrifice draws near, Abraham no longer tries to trivialize Isaac as "the young man" (הַנָּעַר *hanna'ar*) as he did in verse 5 when addressing the servants. Instead, Abraham reconciles himself with the reality and recognizes Isaac as "my son" (בְּנִי *bənî*). If the lengthy parataxis in verse 5 represents Abraham's effort to tarry, such an effort is absent in verse 8. The certainty with which Abraham now speaks stems from his reconciliation with the inevitable.

Critics, reading Abraham's response in verse 8 together with his negotiation with God on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 18:23–32), challenge the absence of a more

⁴⁹ Landy, "Narrative Techniques," 17.

⁵⁰ Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 359.

fierce response from Abraham.⁵¹ However, a reexamination of the contrast between Abraham's responses in Genesis chapters 18 and 22, in fact, confirms the previous analysis that Abraham, in the present scene, recognizes the imminence and significance of Isaac's death and reacts accordingly. When God threatens to overthrow (הִפֵּךְ *hāpak*) Sodom and Gomorrah for their transgressions, Abraham questions the fairness in the divine plan and pleads incessantly on behalf of the people.⁵² By comparison, Abraham's short answer to Isaac in verse 8, indeed, seems perfunctory. For this, Moltz bitterly laments: "Abraham failed as perhaps no other father had."⁵³ Acknowledging the contrast between Abraham's protestation in Genesis 18 and his obedience in Genesis 22, Levenson, however, defends Abraham by differentiating the circumstances of the two narratives, "In the episode of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham, ever in a posture of deference and submission, challenges God's *plan*, whereas in the story of the *Aqedah*, the plan remains unknown, and Abraham is left with only a *command*."⁵⁴ More importantly, Abraham's bargaining power in Genesis 18 derives from the premise that he is to become "great and mighty" and a blessing to all the nations.⁵⁵ However, God's command in the *Aqedah*, if carried out, deprives Abraham of any

⁵¹ Howard Moltz, "God and Abraham in the Binding of Isaac," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 26, no. 2 (2001): 65.

⁵² Gen 18:20: וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה זַעֲקַת סְדוֹם וְעֹמֶרָה כִּי־רַבָּה וְחַטָּאתָם כִּי כְבֹדָהּ מְאֹד:
Translation: And the LORD said: "The outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous."

Gen 18:25: הַלְלֵה לָּךְ מַעֲשֵׂוֹת כַּדְּבַר הַזֶּה לְהַמִּית צַדִּיק עִם־רָשָׁע וְהֵיָה כַצַּדִּיק כְּרָשָׁע הַלְלֵה לָּךְ הַשֹּׁפֵט כָּל־הָאָרֶץ לֹא יַעֲשֶׂה מִשְׁפָּט:
Translation: Far be it from you doing this such thing to kill a righteous one along with a wicked so the righteous was like the wicked. Far be it from you! Will the judge of all the earth make such a judgment?

⁵³ Moltz, "God and Abraham," 65.

⁵⁴ Levenson, *Death and Resurrection*, 130 (emphasis original).

⁵⁵ Gen 18:18: וְאַבְרָהָם הָיָה לְגוֹי גָדוֹל וְעָצוּם וְנִבְרָכוּבוּ כָל־גּוֹיֵי הָאָרֶץ:
Translation: And Abraham will surely become great and mighty and all the nations of the earth will be blessed through him.

bargaining power and eliminates his lineage altogether. Abraham recognizes that he will soon be a bereaved father of old age and, thus, makes no additional protest. He simply returns the command to God. The concision of Abraham's answer in verse 8, contrary to his persistent negotiation in Genesis 18, implies his recognition of the divine command and resignation to its consequences.

The second part of scene 3 recounts the rest of Abraham's journey to Mount Moriah after he stops to address his servants in part 1. Verse 6 specifies the preparations for the remaining travel through another verbal sequence, reminiscent of verse 3. Abraham's decision, in verse 6, to relinquish the donkey and put the wood on Isaac provokes a debate among commentators: some interpret it as intentional delay and others sense a protective father behind this act. My analysis, however, focuses on the second half of verse 6, in which I identify the juxtaposition of an act of violence (Abraham picks up the fire and knife) and an act of harmony (Abraham and Isaac walk together). The juxtaposition, enabled by the sequence of the parataxis, thus, foreshadows the Israelites' national crisis. Verse 6 also forms an allusion to the banishment of Ishmael and Hagar in Genesis 21 for their thematic and linguistic similarities. As Gen 21:14 explicitly describes Abraham's frustration, the textual interplay suggests that Abraham experiences similar, if not stronger, emotions in the *Aqedah*.

Verses 7-8 record a dialogue between Abraham and Isaac. I demonstrate that both the question from Isaac (verse 7) and the answer from Abraham (verse 8) are indicative of their characters. Verse 7, first, brings Isaac to center stage and depicts him as a terrified child. Isaac's sudden acquisition of agency creates additional narratological uncertainty as to his future role and participation in the story. Verse 8, then, alludes to verse 1 and records the

poignant opposition between Abraham's faith in God and his love for Isaac. The thematic similarity and linguistic differences between verse 5 and verse 8 make the case for Abraham's willing acceptance of reality. This interpretation is further supported by the reexamination of the contrast between Abraham's reactions in Genesis chapters 18 and 22.

Scene 4: Building and Binding (Gen 22:9–10)

וַיָּבֹאוּ אֶל־הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אָמַר־לוֹ הָאֱלֹהִים וַיָּבֹן שָׁם אַבְרָהָם אֶת־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ וַיַּעֲרֹךְ אֶת־הָעֵצִים וַיַּעֲקֹד אֶת־יִצְחָק בְּנוֹ וַיִּשָּׂם אֹתוֹ עַל־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ מִמַּעַל לְעֵצִים:

9. And they came to the place that God had told him, and there Abraham built the altar. And he laid out the wood, bound Isaac his son, and put him upon the altar above the wood.

וַיִּשְׁלַח אַבְרָהָם אֶת־יָדוֹ וַיִּקַּח אֶת־הַמַּאֲכָלֶת לְשַׁחֵט אֶת־בְּנוֹ:

10. And then Abraham sent out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son.

Scene 4, overflowing with actions, also contains critical information regarding Abraham and Isaac's psychological dimensions. Verse 9 consists of a verbal sequence, by far the longest in the *Aqedah*. As the relative clause in the first half of verse 9 separates the first verb (וַיָּבֹאוּ “they came”) from the rest of the verse, I approach this Hebrew parataxis in two parts—the first verb, independently, and the remaining four verbs together. The relative clause “that which God told him (הָאֱלֹהִים אָמַר־לוֹ הָאֱלֹהִים) *āšer ’āmar-lô hā’ēlōhîm*” poses the first interpretive challenge. This phrase seems an unnecessary deviation from the concise style of the narrator, as the place to which Abraham and Isaac have come was specified as the place of sacrifice (verse 3), Scholars have offered various interpretations. Levenson interprets the relative clause as an emphasis on Abraham's obedience: “The patriarch is doing precisely what he intended, which is precisely what he was commanded to do. His consistency is total.”⁵⁶ According to Landy, the seeming redundancy of the phrase instills a “sense of divine manipulation and of a pattern in the story.”⁵⁷ The sense of divinity is further strengthened by a semantic echo between the verb under scrutiny (וַיָּבֹאוּ *wayyābō’û* “they came”) and the second part of the divine command in verse 2 (לֵךְ־לֵךְ *lek-lākā* “go forth”). Abraham was commanded to go and he has now come to the appointed place. As the

⁵⁶ Levenson, *Death and Resurrection*, 136.

⁵⁷ Landy, “Narrative Techniques,” 18.

journey is completed, the sacrifice, the last part of the divine command (הַעֲלֵהָ ha ‘ālēhū “sacrifice him there”), is expected to soon take place. Evidenced by the semantic correspondence between the verbs “to go” and “to come,” Abraham and Isaac’s arrival at the place of sacrifice advances the *Aqedah* from the pre-sacrificial stage to the current climactic scene. The stylistic deviance of the relative clause “that which God told him,” therefore, can be explained by its narratological significance as it develops the storyline.

The rest of the syntactic chain in verse 9 operates as a whole. Its grammatical feature (number) captures the distress Isaac implicitly experiences. While the first verb, “they came” (וַיָּבֹאוּ wayyābō ‘û), appears in the third-person plural, the following four verbs appear in the third-person singular. While the subject of the first verb is both Abraham and Isaac, the subject of the others is Abraham alone. As Abraham and Isaac arrive at the place of sacrifice, Isaac retains the agency with which he asks the famous question in the previous scene. However, the sudden change in the number of the following verbs deprives Isaac of his agency. Isaac, who carries the wood for his father during the journey, could also hand the wood over to Abraham or help arrange them for the sacrifice, but he does none of this. Previous analysis of verse 7 has suggested that Isaac was filled with terror. Now, Isaac’s fear intensifies, as he sees the place of sacrifice and awaits his own death. By changing the number of the verbs, the narrator highlights Isaac’s silence and passivity as the magnification and continuation of his fear.

The verb וַיַּקְדּוּ (wayya ‘āqōd “and he bound”), from which the later traditional name for the episode derives, suggests the development of Isaac’s character from an active participant to a passive recipient. However, וַקְדַּע (‘qd) as a *hapax legomenon* makes it impossible to reconstruct its exact meaning when the *Aqedah* passage was composed and

transmitted and thus, difficult to interpret its emotional connotations. Westermann, restricting himself to the biblical corpus, maintains that “in any case, we know nothing about עקד (*‘qd*) because it only occurs here.”⁵⁸ Expanding their scope to the post-biblical corpus, many scholars identify עקד as a rabbinic term that means “to bind the legs of an animal for sacrifice.”⁵⁹ In the rabbinic texts, עקד frequently takes an animal object. However, in the *Aqedah*, the grammatical object of עקד becomes Isaac himself. After Isaac’s loss of agency at the beginning of verse 9, his status is now further compromised. Coming to the place of sacrifice as a beloved son, Isaac loses humanity altogether and becomes a victimized object of the knife. Subject to the series of actions performed by Abraham, Isaac transforms into an animal awaiting its own death. Abraham, on the other hand, transforms into a cold-blooded butcher for whom the acts of binding and slaughtering amount to nothing but a rigid routine.

A sudden rhythmic change distinguishes verse 10 from the previous verses of the *Aqedah* and conveys maximal emotional intensity. Contrary to the previous uninterrupted parataxes, verse 10, containing only two finite verbs (וַיִּשְׁלַח וַיַּיִקַּח), does not receive its deserved treatment in commentaries. Moments away from the sacrifice, the narrative, in verse 10, now enters slow-motion. Isaac, lying helplessly upon the wood, lingers in the audience’s visualization. The narrator generously offers a detailed description of Abraham reaching out his hand (וַיִּשְׁלַח אַבְרָהָם אֶת־יָדוֹ וַיַּיִשְׁלַח וַיַּיִקַּח) and picking up the knife (וַיַּיִקַּח אֶת־הַמַּכְרֵת). This irregular narrative pace contrasts with that of verses 3, 6, and 9. When Abraham responds to God’s command, he does so with readiness: getting up early, saddling his ass, splitting the wood, and coming to the place of sacrifice, he builds the altar and lays out the wood. Abraham performs all of

⁵⁸ Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 360.

⁵⁹ Hamilton, *Genesis 18-50*, 110; Alter, *Genesis*, 105; Sarna, *Genesis*, 153.

these actions with great ease and agility. However, when it comes to picking up one last item, supposedly the easiest action to carry out, he does so with tremendous difficulty. The variation of tempo, thus, prolongs Isaac's despair and reveals Abraham's emotional struggle.

A linguistic investigation of the verbs, both finite and infinitive, in verse 10 further characterizes Abraham as a loving father in agony. For the first time in the *Aqedah* narrative, Abraham, taking on the role of a semantic patient, acts upon himself in the sending of his own hand (וַיִּשְׁלַח וַיִּשְׁלַח *wayyishlah* "and he sent"). Meanwhile, the semantic agent of the verb is no other but Abraham himself, as if he absorbs "the entire field of action."⁶⁰ Before Abraham inflicts death upon Isaac, he inflicts the act of "sending" (שלח) upon himself. As another poetic touch by the narrator, this reflexive action is better read in light of the transformation of Isaac's identity and his loss of agency in verse 9. The narrator prolongs the act of sending, as if Abraham's hand were actively resisting to be sent out and the agency deprived of Isaac were regained by Abraham's hand. While Isaac, denied agency and human dignity, is unable to resist the slaughter, Abraham's own hand does exactly that. In verse 10, Abraham the subject tries to carry out God's command, but Abraham the object resists out of his love for Isaac.

The infinitive verb לִשְׁחַח, denoting the appalling aftermath of the finite verb וַיִּקַּח, intensifies Abraham's anguish. Scholars, however, have commonly rendered the infinitive

⁶⁰ Landy, "Narrative Techniques," 19.

lišḥōt as an indicator of Abraham’s “inner disposition.”⁶¹ Jacobs reads the second half of verse 10 as Abraham’s *volte-face*:

When there is nothing left to do and it becomes clear that the moment has come, he acts decisively and with determination... Only when he arrives at the appointed place does he succeed in fully reconciling himself to fulfilling the Divine command, and he takes the knife to slaughter his son.⁶²

A sudden change of mind, nevertheless, is unlikely. As previously analyzed, the textual minutiae in Abraham’s actions and words present him as a grieving father who is about to lose his only son. In his speeches, he prays that God rescinds the command and the disaster does not befall Isaac. The change in the mood of the verbs, from finite to infinitive, does not equate to a sudden change in the mood of the characters. Syntactically, functioning as an infinitive of purpose, *לישחוט* (*lišḥōt*) attaches to the finite verb *וַיִּקַּח* (*wayyiqqah*) and therefore, should not be read independently. The verb *לישחוט* (*lišḥōt*), lacking finite tense and aspect, implies that Isaac is not yet killed and is insufficient by itself to evidence changes in Abraham’s character. Instead, it reiterates the poignant struggle between Abraham’s intention and the resistance from his hand. More importantly, the information conveyed through *לישחוט* (*lišḥōt*) is redundant and it targets the audience. While the intention behind taking the knife is well understood through the overarching theme of sacrifice, the redundancy of *לישחוט* (*lišḥōt*) makes explicit the unexpressed horror.

In scene 4, Abraham and Isaac arrive at the place of sacrifice. The narrator then recounts the altar-building, preparations, and the near-sacrifice of Isaac through a series of

⁶¹ Lawlor, “The Test of Abraham,” 33. Crenshaw interprets *לישחוט* similarly: “A noteworthy shift from finite verb to infinitive takes place in the description of Abraham’s intention. Thus one cannot miss the purpose of these actions described with such minute detail and in technical language of the sacrificial cult.” James L Crenshaw, “Journey into Oblivion: A Structural Analysis of Gen. 22: 1-19,” *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 58, no. 2 (1975): 248.

⁶² Jacobs, “Willing Obedience with Doubts,” 557-558.

actions. The arrival is declared with unusual specificity by the relative clause “that which God told him.” This phrase also divides the verbal sequence in verse 9 into two units. First, I show that the first verb, read in light of the stylistic disruption of the relative clause, serves a structural function rather than an emotional one. Second, I interpret the change of number in the remaining verbs of the parataxis (from 3rd-person plural to 3rd-person singular) as Isaac’s loss of agency. This interpretation reaffirms my analysis of Isaac’s question in verse 7, from which I drew the characterization of a frightened child. Lastly, I discuss the *hapax legomenon*—עקד in verse 9. Its unique occurrence in the biblical corpus makes it difficult to reimagine its usage during the period when the *Aqedah* was composed. Reading עקד in the post-biblical corpus, I connect its semantic association with animal sacrifice with Isaac’s dehumanization.

In verse 10, the narrative enters slow motion, which contrasts with the rapid verbal sequences in verses 3, 6, and 9. I show that verse 10, revealing Abraham’s torment and Isaac’s terror, instills the same emotions in the audience’s vision. I then proceed to analyze the verbs in greater detail. First, I capture the reflexivity in the verb שלח, identifying Abraham as both the subject and the object. Abraham’s physical struggle with sending forth his hand implies his psychological burden. Second, I refute the rendering of the infinitive לִשְׁחֹט (lišḥōṭ) as Abraham’s *volte-face* in the existing scholarship. I argue that the infinitive לִשְׁחֹט (lišḥōṭ) should be rendered only in tandem with the finite verb וַיִּקַּח (wayyiqqah) to which it attaches. As the finite verbs in verse 10 (וַיִּשְׁלַח wayyišlah and וַיִּקַּח wayyiqqah) imply Abraham’s physical and inner struggles, the infinitive verb at the end of the verse prolongs such struggles and reenacts them in the audience’s visualization.

Scene 5: *Angelus ex machina* (Gen 22:11–12)

וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים מִלְאָךְ יְהוָה מִן־הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָהָם | אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הֲנִנִּי:

11. And an angel of the Lord called out to him from the heavens, saying: “Abraham, Abraham.” And he said: “Behold, here I am!”

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים לְאַבְרָהָם וְאַל־תַּעַשׂ לוֹ מְאוּמָה כִּי | עַתָּה יָדַעְתִּי כִּי־יִרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶתְּךָ וְלֹא הִשְׁכַּחְתָּ אֶת־בְּנֶךָ אֶת־יְחִידְךָ מִמֶּנִּי:

12. And he said: “Do not send your hand to the boy and do not do to him anything because now I know that you fear God and have not withheld your son, your only one, from me.”

As the knife in Abraham’s hand winds slowly toward Isaac, a voice cries out to him from the heavens, a voice long awaited by Abraham, Isaac, and the audience. This heavenly outcry signifies the *angelus ex machina* and resolves the tension that has been building up since Abraham’s getting up early (verse 3), seeing Mount Moriah (verse 4), and binding of Isaac (verse 9). While the narrative has returned to an ominous silence in scene 4, the voice of the angel is now deafening, marking both the highest acoustic level and a sense of utmost urgency. Given the exigency of present circumstances, which may quickly deteriorate into Isaac’s death and Abraham’s disillusionment as a father of great nations, scene 5 marks the narrative high point of the *Aqedah* and the starting point of Abraham’s metamorphosis. However, verses 11 and 12 both deviate from the previous succinct prose-narrative style. The following paragraphs address three major textual irregularities: 1) Why is Abraham’s name repeated twice? 2) Why does the angel of the Lord speak in a poetic way? 3) Why does the angel not mention the knife?

The double address of Abraham by the angel (אַבְרָהָם אַבְרָהָם *’abrāhām ’abrāhām*) unveils the motif of the *Aqedah* as the existential crisis of Israel and elevates Abraham as an exalted patriarch. The seemingly insignificant repetition of Abraham’s name has long escaped scholarly attention. Among the few scholars who comment on its significance, Westermann attributes the repetition of “Abraham” to the urgency and intensity of the

scene.⁶³ According to Crenshaw, the angel from the heavens (מַן־הַשָּׁמַיִם *min-haššāmayim*) must call Abraham twice due to the distance between them.⁶⁴ However, these interpretations overlook the rarity of the double address and fail to locate it in a broader biblical corpus. God and/or His angels have spoken directly to many people throughout the Hebrew Bible, including Adam (Gen 2:4–3:24), Noah (Gen 8:15–9:17), Joshua (Josh 1:1–9), and Solomon (1 Kgs 3:5–28). However, God and/or His angels frequently communicate with the people through visions without an initial salutation. Only three other characters, in addition to Abraham, in the Hebrew Bible receive such a double address: Jacob, Moses, and Samuel.⁶⁵ I will analyze the context of each instance, the social, historical, and religious circumstances under which the characters receive the double salutation, and relate them to the *Aqedah*.

וַיִּסַּע יִשְׂרָאֵל וְכָל־אֲשֶׁר־לּוֹ וַיָּבֹא בְּאֶרֶץ שְׁבַע וַיִּזְבַּח זְבָחִים לֵאלֹהֵי אָבִיו יִצְחָק׃
 וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֲלֵיָּהּ לֵיִשְׂרָאֵל בְּמַרְאֵת הַלַּיְלָה וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב אֲנִי יַעֲקֹב וַיֹּאמֶר הִנְנִי׃
 וַיֹּאמֶר אָנֹכִי הָאֵל אֱלֹהֵי אָבִיךָ אֵל־תִּירָא מִרְדֵּה מִצְרַיִם כִּי־לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל אֲשִׁימְךָ שָׁם׃

Translation:

And Israel journeyed, with all that belonged to him, and he came to Beer-sheba, and he offered a sacrifice to the God of his father, Isaac.

And God said to Israel through the visions of the night, and said: “Jacob! Jacob!”

And he said: “Behold, here I am!”

And he said: “I am God, the God of your father. Do not fear going down to Egypt, for a great nation I shall make you there.”⁶⁶

⁶³ Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 361.

⁶⁴ Crenshaw, “Journey into Oblivion,” 247.

⁶⁵ Rabbi Isaac in *Exodus Rabbah*, lists the four occasions and discusses the absence of the *pāsēq* (פְּסֻקָּה) between the repetition of Moses in Exod 3:4. Rabbi Isaac attributes the lack of *pāsēq* to the exigency of the given situation. Rabbi Shimeon ben Yohai contends that it is the language of love and encouragement (לְשׁוֹן חֶבֶד לְשׁוֹן יְרוּזָה). See, H. Freedman, and Maurice Simon, trans., *Midrash Rabbah Exodus*, London: Soncino Press, 1961, 56. While the rabbis refrain from further drawing commonalities among the four instances, David Zucker, consulting almost exclusively the Midrashim and medieval commentaries, concludes that there is not a guiding principle that links all four cases. See David J. Zucker, “God Called: Abraham! Abraham! Jacob! Jacob! Moses! Moses! Samuel! Samuel!” *Jewish Bible Quarterly Dor Le Dor* 50, no. 1 (January 2022): 40.

⁶⁶ Gen 46:1-3

During the seven years of great famine, as Joseph accurately prophesied, the future of Israel was under threat. Jacob, therefore, sent his sons to acquire rations in Egypt, where Joseph revealed his identity to the brothers and invited his family to migrate to Egypt and dwell there. God's consoling promise, following the double address of Joseph ensures both the survival of Israel and the elevated status of Jacob as "a father of a great nation" (גוי גדול *goy gadol*).

וַיֵּרָא יְהוָה כִּי סָר לְרֵאוֹת וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו אֱלֹהִים מִתּוֹךְ הַסִּנֵּה וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר הֲגַנִּי:
וְעַתָּה הִנֵּה צַעֲקַת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּאָזְנִי וְגַם־רָאִיתִי אֶת־הַלֶּחֶץ אֲשֶׁר מִצְרַיִם לֹחֲצִים אֹתָם:
וְעַתָּה לָכֵה וְאַשְׁלַחֵךְ אֶל־פְּרֹעֶה וְהוֹצֵא אֶת־עַמִּי בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרַיִם:

Translation:

And the Lord saw that he turned to see and God called to him from the midst of the bush and said: "Moses! Moses!"

"And now behold the outcry of the sons of Israel has come to Me, and I too have seen the oppression with which Egypt is oppressing them."

"And now go, as I shall send you to the Pharaoh, and bring out My people, the sons of Israel from Egypt."⁶⁷

Generations later, dwelling in the land of Egypt, the Israelites suffered tyrannical oppression. The Pharaoh ordered every newborn Israelite son to be cast into the river and the nation of Israel faced another existential crisis.⁶⁸ God decided to bring his people out of enslavement and appointed Moses to be the implement through which the people of Israel should survive. The double address of Moses, in this scenario, promotes him from a fugitive and a shepherd to the deliverer of Israel and the mediator between God and his people.

וַיִּבֶא יְהוָה וַיִּתְיַצֵּב וַיִּקְרָא כַפְעַם־כַּפְעַם שְׂמוּאֵל וַיֹּאמֶר שְׂמוּאֵל דְּבַר כִּי שָׁמַע עֲבָדְךָ:
וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־שְׂמוּאֵל הִנֵּה אֲנִי עֹשֶׂה דְבַר כִּי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר כָּל־שְׂמֵעוֹ תִצְלֶינָה שְׂתִי אֲזַנְיוֹ:
כִּי־זֶה הוּא אֲקִים אֶל־עֲלֵי אֶת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְתִּי אֶל־בֵּיתוֹ הַחַל וְכִלָּה:

⁶⁷ Exod 3:4, 9-10

⁶⁸ Exod 1:22 וַיֹּצֵו פְּרֹעֶה לְכָל־עַמּוֹ לְאֹמֶר כָּל־הַבְּנוֹת הַיְלֹדוֹת הַיִּאֲרָה תִשְׁלֹכְהוּ וְכָל־הַבָּת תַּחֲזִיב: "Every boy that is born you shall throw toward the river and every daughter you shall let live."

Translation: Pharaoh commanded all of his people saying: "Every boy that is born you shall throw toward the river and every daughter you shall let live."

Translation:

And the LORD came and stationed Himself, and called once as before: “Samuel! Samuel!” And Samuel said: “Speak, for Your servant is listening.”

And the LORD said to Samuel: “Behold, I am doing a thing in Israel, about which whoever hears, both his ears will tingle.”

“On that day, I shall fulfill all that I have spoken against Eli concerning his house, beginning and end.”⁶⁹

In the age of the prophets, the Israelites came under dual attacks, both internal and external. On the one hand, the promiscuous and blasphemous behaviors of the Hophni and Phinehas, the sons of prophet Eli, threatened the established worship of God. On the other hand, Israel’s military defeat against the Philistines cost them the Ark of the covenant as well as the lives of four thousand soldiers (1 Sam 4:1-11). God then appeared to Samuel at night and anointed him to be the last prophet among the Israelites.

In three aforementioned instances, the double address occurs when the people of Israel are under critical threats, including natural disasters, political persecution, religious malpractice, and military defeat. The recipients, correspondingly, experience an affirmation (Jacob) or elevation (Moses and Samuel) of their status among the Israelites. Thus, the repetition of names both bears the continuation of Israel on a corporate level and indicates the transformation of the individual characters into the deliverer of the Israelite nation and/or the intermediary between God and his people. Likewise, in the *Aqedah*, there is a similar catastrophic theme, resolved by the double address: the future of Israel, dependent solely upon Isaac’s survival, would cease to exist, had Abraham missed the call from the angel of the Lord. Similarly, the double address in verse 11 is a call of both affirmation and initiation. It affirms the blessings Abraham receives in Genesis 12 and initiates his transformation from a tormented father to the deliverer of Israel from destruction. The *Aqedah*, containing the

⁶⁹ 1 Sam 3:10-12

first instance of the double address, thus creates the prototype of the national existential crisis of Israel.

Verse 12, from a formal point of view, contains a poetic couplet and captures the sense of triumph and relief. The first part of the speech begins with a prohibition, “do not send your hand to the young man (אֶל־הַנָּעַר אֶל־תְּשַׁלַּח יָדְךָ אֶל־הַנָּעַר) *al-tišlah yādakā el-hanna‘ar*,” and continues with a paraphrase, “do not do to him anything (וְאַל־תַּעַשׂ לוֹ מְאִוָּמָה) *wə‘al-ta‘as lô mə‘ûmāh*). The second part of the speech provides an explanation of the prohibition in the first part. The angel of the Lord, taking on the role of an arbiter, declares that Abraham passes the test successfully for his “fear of God” (יִרְאָה אֱלֹהִים) *yere elohim*). In a poetic restatement, the angel praises Abraham, “You have not withheld your son, your only one, from me.” Following the angelic speech, the command that threatens the future of Israel is revoked and the existential crisis is resolved. A stylistic shift from prose to poetry matches the contrast between the exuberant ambience of the current scene and the previously suffocating atmosphere. The poetic statement, therefore, disperses the fear and distress that fill the preceding scenes.

The absence of the knife from the angel’s announcement serves to further alleviate the emotional burden from the audience. The rabbis, attempting to fill the gaps in the *Aqedah* narrative, thus attempts to resolve both the stylistic deviation and disappearance of the knife:

Where was the knife? [Three] tears fell from the angels [of the ministry] and dissolved the knife. He said to him: “Then I will strangle him.” He said to him: “Do not send your hand to the young man.” He said to him: “Let me bring out from him a drop of blood.” He said to him: “Do not do anything to him! Do not do anything to him!” (*Gen. Rab*, 56:7)⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Freedman and Simon, *Midrash Rabbah Genesis I*, 497.

Although the rabbis' allegorical interpretation reveals the scope of their imagination and creativity, my analysis is not concerned with something that the angel of the Lord may or may not have done. While one may attribute the disappearance of the knife to the metrical and compositional requirements of the Hebrew couplet, it is important to render the knife in light of the transformative power of the double address. The knife, as the instrument that will ultimately bring about the extinction of Israel, symbolizes death and violence. The narrator, in verses 6 and 10, invokes the presence of the knife in juxtaposition with Isaac and conveys the urgency of Israel's existential crisis. However, following the double address, the crisis is averted and, thus, the additional effort to haunt the audience is no longer necessary. Therefore, the narrator passes over the knife and refrains from further torturing the audience with the trauma.

Following the analysis of the double address (verse 11), which the narrator always invokes in tandem with the elevation of the biblical characters, the second part of the angelic speech (verse 12) completes Abraham's journey in the human realm, one that is fraught with deceit and betrayal, violence and injustice, suffering and sorrow. Similar to Isaac's loss of agency and transformation of identity after Abraham's speech in verses 8–9, the angel's speech initiates Abraham's metamorphosis, from a helpless father tested by God to a blessed father of great nations. Abraham is now brought across into the divine realm, in which "the fear of God" overshadows human emotions of love and despair, which have dominated the *Aqedah* narrative up until this point. Accompanied by the shift in Abraham's character, here also begins a gradual split between Abraham's consciousness and that of the audience. While the audience has previously shared Abraham's emotional experience, his pain and misery all the way up to Mount Moriah, Abraham, whose presence is now imbued with

divinity through the angelic benediction, transcends beyond the audience's comprehension. Abraham's character is soon to be revered, his actions to be imitated, his words to be contemplated, and his thoughts perpetually mystified. While Abraham is beatified, the audience is left trembling.

Scene 5 contains the climatic *angelus ex machina* and marks the beginning of the benedictory stage of the narrative. Verse 11 presents a double address of Abraham from the angel of the Lord but this textual detail receives little treatment in the extant scholarship. I identify the other three occurrences of the double address of a biblical character from God and/or his representative in the Hebrew Bible. I propose that the unique appearances of the double address along with the crisis motif suggests its narratological significance and signifies the narrator's awareness of the literary traditions of the Hebrew Bible. Through a comparative analysis of contexts, I show that the double address in verse 9 produces the prototypical existential crisis for the nation of Israel and affirms Abraham's exalted status as the first patriarch. Lastly, verse 12 presents the angel's proclamation in a poetic couplet, in which the knife of sacrifice is no longer mentioned. Given that the double address shifts the narrative focus from Israel's crisis motif to Abraham's metamorphosis, I show that both the poetic form and the absence of the knife serve to ease the tension from earlier scenes. Finally, I will more closely address the change in Abraham's status in my analysis of scene 6. Abraham's actions and speech in verse 13, in light of the angelic speech in verse 12, will further elucidate the development of his character.

Scene 6: *Aries ex machina* (13-14)

וַיִּשָׂא אַבְרָהָם אֶת־עֵינָיו וַיִּרְא וְהִנֵּה־אֵיל אֶחָד נֹאֲתָז בְּסִבְבָּהּ בְּקַרְנָיו וַיִּלֶּךְ אַבְרָהָם וַיִּקַּח אֶת־הָאֵיל וַיַּעֲלֵהוּ לְעֹלָה תַחַת
בְּנוֹ:

13. And Abraham raised his eyes and saw, behold, a ram behind him caught in the thicket by its horns, and Abraham went and took the ram and offered it as a burnt offering instead of his son.

וַיִּקְרָא אַבְרָהָם שְׁם־הַמָּקוֹם הַהוּא יְהוָה | יִרְאָה אֲשֶׁר יֹאמַר הַיּוֹם בְּהַר יְהוָה יִרְאָה:

14. And Abraham called the name of that place “*Adonai-Yireh*,” as it is said today, “on the mountain of the LORD, there will be sight.”⁷¹

Before analyzing the dramatic effects in scene 6 on Abraham’s characterization, I will first address the mainstream interpretation of verses 13–14 in the existing scholarship. Historians and anthropologists have commonly interpreted these verses as an ancient Israelite polemic against child sacrifice.⁷² Crenshaw, in a literary study, argues that the message in verses 13-14 contains the central moral lesson of the *Aqedah*:

The episode thus marks a transitional stage in the history of the cult; it stands at the liminal moment when human sacrifice ceases to commend itself as the proper means of expressing religious devotion. The story concedes the fact that God had once required the ultimate gift, but it declares yet another way to please the deity.... In short, a polemical thrust pervades the story in its present form; it argues for the position that God does not require human sacrifice.⁷³

However, this line of interpretation is brought into question by Sarna in *Understanding Genesis*, in which he points out that 1) animal offering as commonly accepted surrogates of human sacrifice has long been established in the religious practices of ancient Near Eastern

⁷¹ “The phrase at the end means literally either ‘he sees’ or ‘he will be seen,’ depending on how the verb is vocalized, and this translation uses a noun instead to preserve the ambiguity. It is also not clear whether it is God or the person who comes to the Mount who sees/is seen.” Alter, *Genesis*, 106.

⁷² See Shalom Spiegel, *The Last Trial: On the Legends and Lore of the Command to Abraham to Offer Isaac As a Sacrifice, The Akedah*, trans. Judah Goldin (New York: Pantheon Books, 1967), 64-68; Levenson, *Death and Resurrection*, 13. For more scholarly works on the theme of child sacrifice in the *Aqedah*, see Edward Noort and Eibert J. C. Tigchelaar, *The Sacrifice of Isaac: The Akedah (Genesis 22) and Its Interpretations* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2002), 211.

⁷³ Crenshaw, *A Whirlpool of Torment*, 26.

communities; and 2) the *Aqedah* narrative, after generations of redactional effort, did not end up as a censure against certain religious practices but was canonized as “a product of a religious attitude that recoils naturally from associating God with human sacrifice.”⁷⁴ Davis voices similar suspicion, based on the lack of textual evidence as well as historical references, about rendering the *Aqedah* an allegorical condemnation of cultic practice:

[The] most problematic [rationale] for the historical interpretation: God utters no general repudiation of child sacrifice.... In a narrative as carefully styled as this one, it is difficult to escape the impression that the author has deliberately directed our attention away from the historical and ethical issue as the context for interpretation.⁷⁵

Following Sarna and Davis’s line of questioning, I contend that historians and anthropologists, who approach the *Aqedah* as a polemic against child sacrifice, have not taken into account the narratological significance of the double salutation in verse 11. Without extra-biblical records, it is nearly impossible to reconstruct or ascertain the social consequences of the *Aqedah* story and how it was conceived by an ancient audience. I will, therefore, return to the received Hebrew text and concentrate my analysis of available textual data on the shaping of Abraham’s character and the audience’s emotional experience. In the present scene, I identify the narrator’s rhetorical techniques when presenting Abraham’s actions (verse 13) and words (verse 14) and connect them to his newly acquired *sanctitas* and elevated status.

The verbal chain in verse 13 forms two inner-narrative allusions to verse 2 and verse 5, respectively, and points to Abraham’s sovereignty and determination after his transformation. Each verb in this sequence וַיֵּלֶךְ *wayyēlek* “and he went”, וַיִּקַּח *wayyiqqah* “and he took”, and וַיַּעֲלֶהוּ *wayya ‘ālēhū* “and he sacrificed it”) has appeared at least once in

⁷⁴ Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 1st Schocken paperback ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), 158-162.

⁷⁵ Davis, “Self-Consciousness and Conversation,” 31-32.

the previous scenes: וַיִּשָּׂא (wayyisśā’ “and he raised”) and וַיִּרְא (wayyar’ “and he saw”) in verse 5, and וַיֵּלֶךְ (wayyēlek “and he went”), וַיִּקַּח (wayyiqqah “and he took”), and וַיַּעֲלֶהוּ (wayya ‘ālēhū “and he sacrificed it”) in verse 2. Empowered by the double address, each verb, in the present benedictory stage, also acquires a different emotional connotation. In verse 5, when Abraham raises his eyes and sees Mount Moriah, he raises his heart in supplication to God but only sees the mountain of sacrifice glooming from afar. However, in verse 13, Abraham now raises his eyes with confidence and sees a ram (וַהֲנִיחַ אֵילַן wəhinnēh-’ayil) behind him mysteriously caught in a thicket (וַיִּקַּח בַּסָּבָב ne ‘ēhaz bassəbak). In verse 5, the object of raising and seeing is Mount Moriah where the death of Isaac was expected to take place and the verbs וַיִּשָּׂא and וַיִּרְא are, therefore, associated with Abraham’s despair. Now in verse 13, the object of the same verbs becomes the ram that will die in Isaac’s place. While the ram could have been there all along, it was as if Abraham, having acquired salvific power through the double address, whose act of “seeing” brought it into existence. The following three verbs (וַיֵּלֶךְ “and he went”, וַיִּקַּח “and he took”, and וַיַּעֲלֶהוּ “and he sacrificed”) correspond precisely to the tripartite divine command in verse 2 (קַח־נָא “take please”, לֵךְ־לְךָ “go forth”, and הַעֲלֵהוּ “sacrifice him”). As previously analyzed, Abraham, coming to Mount Moriah and taking Isaac (verse 9), fulfills the first two parts of God’s command, but before he is able to carry out the final sacrifice, the test is revoked. However, in verse 13, Abraham, after hearing the angel’s announcement, stays on the mountain and proceeds with the substitute sacrifice. He comes closest to fulfilling the divine command issued in the very first scene, and he does so only after the command is annulled.

As neither God nor the angel orders the sacrifice of the ram, Abraham’s entirely unprompted action is surprising. Omri Boehm regards Abraham’s substitute sacrifice of the

ram in Isaac's stead as a sign of his disobedience.⁷⁶ It is his contention that 1) the original text of *Aqedah* consists of only Gen 22:1-10, 13, and 19, and Abraham flatly disobeys God's command by sacrificing a ram instead of Isaac; 2) later redactional efforts, "anxious to conceal Abraham's disobedience," insert the angelic figure to "[shift] responsibility for interrupting the test from Abraham to the angel."⁷⁷ However, two major issues render Boehm's interpretation improbable. First, Abraham's disobedience is uncorroborated by any textual evidence. Although Abraham has had doubts and hesitation (Gen 22:5, 7-9) and made several fruitless attempts to tarry (verses 3 and 5), nowhere else before verse 13 in the *Aqedah* narrative indicates that Abraham *acts* disobediently or foretells a sudden change of his character into a rebellious one. Second, Boehm's "religious model of disobedience," in fact, disavows the proper rendering of the received Hebrew text merely for the sake of reconstruction of the redactional process. His analysis of verse 13 fails to take into account the transformative power of the double address. What lies behind Abraham's seemingly impulsive behavior is not his rebellious intention but his miraculous acquisition of agency, which allows him no longer to submit to the words and will of God but to act out of his own volition. In a different light, the new Abraham of gratuitous sacrifice and overflowing agency in verse 13 transforms the audience's perception of the old Abraham in verse 5.

Shalom Spiegel is convinced that in alluding to divine provision "Abraham prophesied not

⁷⁶ Boehm's literary reading largely engages with source/redactional criticism and attempts to deconstruct the scribal emendations in the received Hebrew text and potentially reconstruct earlier levels. While Boehm follows a different critical approach, he asks the same question that my study attempts to answer: "A responsible interpretation, then, strives to discover the objective meaning of the biblical stories by asking: how did the author intend to influence the reader's mind?" See Omri Boehm, *The Binding of Isaac: A Religious Model of Disobedience* (Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies, 468. New York: T & T Clark International, 2007), 11-19.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

knowing that he was uttering a prophecy.”⁷⁸ The audience, too, is now privy to the prophetic nature of Abraham’s utterance.

Abraham’s transformation and acquisition of agency are further supported by the contrast between Abraham’s actions in verse 13 and those of Hagar in Gen 21:17-21. Driven out by Sarah and Abraham and wandering in the wilderness of Beer-sheba (בְּמִדְבַּר בְּאֵר שֶׁבַע *bəmidbar bə’ēr šāba*), Hagar desperately watches over her son Ishmael dying of hunger and thirst (Gen 21:16). However, as God harkens to the voice of the young man (קוֹל הַנֶּעֱרָר *qôl hanna’ar*), an angel of God (מַלְאֲכֵי אֱלֹהִים *mal’ak ’elōhîm*) appears to Hagar *ex machina*, and offers her words of consolation as well as benediction (Gen 21:17-18). Levenson thus contrasts the etiological features of the two events:

Hagar “went and filled,” Abraham “went and took,” but in each case what the parent sees and goes to appears with such exquisite timing that supernatural intervention must be assumed. . . . In neither instance is it likely that what is unexpectedly seen is supposed to have been created on the spot. In both cases, however, the act of seeing confirms the promise and enlists the parents in an action that symbolizes the son’s unexpected deliverance from death.⁷⁹

Previous analysis of scene 3 has established the inner-biblical allusion between the *Aqedah* and the Hagar-Ishmael episode. Before the angel’s apparition, the text reveals critical similarities between Abraham’s mental state: he is troubled by both the loss of Ishmael and the sacrifice of Isaac. However, the difference between the two instances of *angelus ex machina* is that the angel addresses Hagar only once but Abraham twice.⁸⁰ For Hagar, it is God who opens her eyes so that she may see the well of water (בְּאֵר מַיִם *bə’ēr māyim*, Gen

⁷⁸ Spiegel, *Last Trial*, 67.

⁷⁹ Levenson, *Death and Resurrection*, 124.

⁸⁰ Gen 21:17 וַיִּשְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶת-קוֹל הַנֶּעֱרָר וַיִּקְרָא מַלְאֲכֵי אֱלֹהִים | אֶל-הַגֵּר מִן-הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ מֶה-לָּךְ הַגֵּר וַיִּשְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶת-קוֹל הַנֶּעֱרָר וַיִּקְרָא מַלְאֲכֵי אֱלֹהִים אֶל-תִּירְאִי כִּי-שָׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶת-קוֹל הַנֶּעֱרָר בְּאֵר-שֶׁבַע הַשָּׁמַיִם:

Translation: And God heard the voice of the boy, and the angel of God called to Hagar from the heavens and said to her: “What (is the matter) to you? Do not fear for God has heard the cry of the boy where he is.”

21:19). Abraham raises his own eyes and sees the ram. Compared to Hagar, Abraham possesses more agency, which is further contrasted by the passivity of the ram caught in the thicket by its horns (נֶאֱחָז בַּבִּבְרֵךְ בְּקַרְנָיו *ne 'ēḥaz bassəbak baqarnāyw*). Similarly, while the angel of God admonishes Hagar to take courage: “Fear not” (אַל-תִּירָא *'al-tîr 'î*), Abraham receives merely a prohibition. The difference between Abraham and Hagar’s reactions to the angelic speeches points to the dramatic effects of the double address and Abraham’s elevated status is reflected in the agency of his actions.

In verse 12, the act of naming also embodies Abraham’s sovereign power after his transformation. Immediately following the sacrifice of the ram, Abraham proceeds to name the mountain, calling the place of the sacrifice “יְהִי־הָהָר יְרֵאֹנָי” (*'ăḏōnāi yir 'eh*). While the possible etiology of *'ăḏōnāi yir 'eh* has attracted much scholarly attention,⁸¹ the present analysis focuses on the act of naming itself, which further elucidates the development of Abraham’s character. First, the acts of naming and calling out share the same Hebrew verb קָרָא (*qārā*). This verb was used previously to describe the angel calling out to both Hagar (Gen 21:17) and Abraham (Gen 22:11). The action of the angel is now transferred to Abraham. Second, the very first instance of naming in the Hebrew Bible is carried out by God in the creation story, followed by Adam, who names both the animals and Eve (Gen 2:20-24). Hamilton comments that “to confer a name (*qārā' la*) is to speak from a position

⁸¹ Crenshaw, along with many other scholars of his time, reads the *Aqedah* as an ancient Israelite polemic against child/human sacrifice that was prevalent in the ancient Near Eastern religious practices. Crenshaw, *Whirlpool of Torment*, 26. Hermann Gunkel proposes a cult-site etiological reading of the *Aqedah* and argues for a different identification of the site as Jeruel. Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis*, trans. Mark E. Biddle (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1997), 239-240. Levenson, also supporting the etiology of cult-site, analyzes the narrative through a source-critical approach and incorporates rabbinic sources. Levenson, *Death and Resurrection*, 111-124. Davis provides a brief summary and a sensitive analysis of the historical approach to the *Aqedah*. Davis, “Self-Consciousness and Conversation,” 31-32.

of authority and sovereignty.”⁸² This observation resonates with the previous analyses of Abraham’s transformation following the first speech and his acquisition of agency.

Hamilton’s commentary on Gen 2:20, to some extent, can be applied to Abraham in the current scene, who solemnly proclaims the name to the audience and exudes dominion over the narrative.

Scene 6 recounts the substitute sacrifice of the ram and records Abraham naming the place of sacrifice. Before undertaking the textual analysis, I first address the traditional interpretation of scene 6 as an ancient polemic against child sacrifice. Having established the importance of the repetition of Abraham’s name in scene 5, I approach the verses in scene 6 in light of the thematic undertones of the double address. The syntactic chain in verse 13 forms inner-narrative allusions to both verse 2 and verse 5. I observe that the verbs acquire stronger agency and positive emotional connotations compared to their previous occurrences and attribute the semantic shift to Abraham’s metamorphosis. This observation is then confirmed by the inner-biblical allusion between Gen 22:13 and Gen 21:17, in which Hagar, following a single address from God’s angel, does not immediately acquire the sovereignty to carry to her own actions. Finally, I show that, in verse 12, Abraham’s act of naming, as an act of power and dominion, also points to his transformation and venerable status.

⁸² Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis : Chapters 1-17*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1990), 117.

Scene 7: Benediction

וַיִּקְרָא מִלְאָךְ יְהוָה אֶל־אַבְרָהָם שְׁנִיַּת מִן־הַשָּׁמַיִם:

15. And the Angel of the LORD called out to Abraham from the heavens for a second time.

וַיֹּאמֶר בִּי נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי נְאֻם־יְהוָה כִּי יֵעַן אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתָ אֶת־הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה וְלֹא חָשַׁכְתָּ אֶת־בְּנֶךְ אֶת־יְחִידְךָ:

16. And he said: “By myself, I swear, thus declares the LORD, for you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only one.

כִּי־בָרַךְ אֲבָרְכְךָ וְהִרְבֵּה אֲרַבֶּה אֶת־זַרְעֶךָ כְּכּוֹכְבֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם וְכַחֹל אֲשֶׁר עַל־שְׁפַת הַיָּם וַיִּרֶשׁ זַרְעֶךָ אֶת שְׂעַר אֲיָבִיו:

17. I shall truly bless you and truly multiply your seed, as many as the stars in the heavens and the sand along the seashore, and they shall inherit the gate of their enemies.”

וְהִתְבָּרְכוּ בְּזַרְעֶךָ כָּל־גּוֹיֵי הָאָרֶץ לְעַבְדְּךָ אֲשֶׁר שָׁמַעְתָּ בְּקוֹלִי:

18. All the nations of the earth shall bless themselves through your seed for you have obeyed me.

Structurally, the second angelic speech, completing Abraham’s transformation is an indispensable part of the story. Verses 15-18, which consist of a lengthy, poetic divine blessing, deviate stylistically from the previous scenes for their employment of parallelism, simile, and metonymy. For this reason, the majority of modern scholarship on verses 15-18 regards these verses as later editorial results.⁸³ J. A. Emerton, representing other proponents of this claim, even declares verses 15-18 as a “clumsy addition of something after the climax of what is otherwise a beautifully written story.”⁸⁴ While this thesis does not follow a source-critical approach, it is concerned with the narrator’s rhetorical considerations behind the decision to include or retain verses 15–18 in the *Aqedah*. First, since the *Aqedah* narrative entered into its benedictory stage in verse 11 (scene 5), following the angelic double address, the audience only hears of an austere prohibition. No specific words of benediction have been announced thus far. Therefore, a blessing becomes necessary. Second,

⁸³ Moberly offers an exhaustive survey of “such interpretation as the verses have received in modern study,” and “[offers] proposals for a fresh interpretation of their likely original significance.” R. W. L. Moberly, “The Earliest Commentary on the Akedah,” *Vetus Testamentum* 38, no. 3 (1988): 304.

⁸⁴ J. A. Emerton, “The Origin of the Promises to the Patriarchs in the Older Sources of the Book of Genesis,” *Vetus Testamentum* 32, no. 1 (1982): 18.

while the first angelic speech initiates the transformation of Abraham’s character, which is then manifested as the agency and sovereignty in his actions (verses 13–14), the second speech logically completes Abraham’s metamorphosis.

The content of the benediction alludes to and magnifies the famous *lek-lakā* blessing (Gen 12:1-3). In Genesis 12:2–3,⁸⁵ the Lord blesses Abraham by promising to make him a great nation (לְגוֹי גָדוֹל *lagōi gādōl*) and a source of blessing (בְּרָכָה *barākāh*), through which all the families of the earth (כָּל מִשְׁפַּחַת הָאָדָמָה *kōl mišpəḥōt hā’ādāmāh*) shall be blessed (נִבְרָכוּ *nibrākū*). In the *Aqedah*, the same blessing is intensified by the consecutive use of two infinitive absolute forms “I shall truly bless you” (כִּי־בָרַךְ אֶבְרָכְךָ *kī-bārēk ’ābārekkā*), and “I shall truly multiply” (וְהִרְבֵּה אֶרְבֶּה *wəharbāh ’arbeh*). Two poetic similes in verse 17 also confirm and renew God’s promise to make Abraham a great nation (Gen 12:2). Finally, while Abraham is the only source of blessing in Genesis 12, verse 18 includes Abraham’s descendants (זַרְעֲךָ *zar’ākā*) as a source of blessing, through which all the nations of the earth (כָּל גּוֹיֵי הָאָרֶץ *kōl gōyē hā’āreṣ*) shall bless themselves (הִתְבָּרְכוּ *hitbārākū*). As the second angelic speech concludes the benedictory stage of the *Aqedah* narrative, Abraham’s metamorphosis culminates with a reiteration and magnification of the initial blessings he received from God.

⁸⁵ For Hebrew text and translation of Gen 12:2–3, see note 20.

Scene 8: Homecoming

וַיָּשָׁב אַבְרָהָם אֶל־נְעָרָיו וַיִּקְמוּ וַיֵּלְכוּ יַחְדָּו אֶל־בְּאֵר שֶׁבַע וַיָּשָׁב אַבְרָהָם בְּבֵאֵר שֶׁבַע:

19. And Abraham returned to his young men and they got up and went together to Beer-Sheba, and Abraham settled in Beer-Sheba.

Scene 8 contains a poignant epilogue: all the emotions die down and the drama comes to an end. However, verse 19 leaves the audience with a bitter mystery. When one expects Isaac and Abraham to journey home happily together, Isaac is now nowhere to be found. The absence of Isaac from scene 8 has confounded rabbis and commentators for centuries. Some claim that Isaac died and was resurrected.⁸⁶ Others believe that he was taken to the Garden of Eden and lived there for three years.⁸⁷ Abraham ibn Ezra refutes these ideas by saying, “Isaac is not mentioned because he was under Abraham’s care. Those who say that Abraham slaughtered Isaac and left him on the altar and following this Isaac came to life are contradicting Scripture.”⁸⁸ Following ibn Ezra’s argument, I suggest that we do not have to contradict or rewrite the scripture to understand Isaac’s absence in verse 19 but should, once again, turn to the dramatic effects of the double address to find answers. In fact, Isaac does not suddenly disappear from the narrative in the present scene. The last time Isaac played a role in the *Aqedah* is in scene 4, when he was bound up on the altar awaiting death. Therefore, the question becomes why Isaac fades out of the narrative after verse 10. Before the *angelus ex machina*, Isaac symbolizes the existential crisis of Israel and his presence is critical to both the development of the plot and emotional engagement from the audience. Following the double address, Israel’s crisis is resolved and Abraham, assuming

⁸⁶ Pirkei De Rabbi Eliezer 31:10

⁸⁷ Midrash HaGadol on Gen 22:19

⁸⁸ Abraham ibn Ezra, *Ibn Ezra’s Commentary on the Pentateuch*, vol. 1, trans. H. Norman Strickman, and Arthur M. Silver (New York, N.Y.: Menorah Pub. Co., 1988), 227.

maximal agency, exerts complete domination over the narrative. Isaac's role is simply no longer needed and his whereabouts are no longer the narrator's concern.

Conclusion

The Hebrew Bible exists stylistically in marked contrast to most literary works that shape our conception of “good literature” in modern European and American culture, from ancient Greek and Roman epic poetry to Shakespearean plays. Texts in the Hebrew Bible exhibit features of repetition and laconicism that we learn to avoid in writing classes. Meanwhile, they lack elaborate descriptions of scenes or explicit expressions of thoughts and feelings that we expect from capable writers. The story of the *Aqedah* is representative of such literary traditions. For this reason, Renaissance and Enlightenment philosophers and theologians have long taken for granted that the ethical value of the *Aqedah* overshadows its literary significance. In the 20th century, literary critics, beginning to realize the hidden literary artistry in the Hebrew Bible, have elucidated the aesthetic value of biblical texts within the limits of their methodologies but have not fully captured the narrator’s rhetorical ingenuity.

Here I demonstrate that the *Aqedah* is indeed a literary masterpiece in its own terms. My analysis, bridging distinct methodological approaches of biblical criticism, unveils that the narrator, on the one hand, functions within the received narrative traditions, and on the other hand, has developed a set of techniques, manipulating available textual data, to achieve his rhetorical agenda. Thus far, I have identified the narrator’s use of particular words and their repetitions, actions and their sequences, juxtapositions, inner-narrative and inner-biblical allusions, and the positioning and ordering of syntactic chains. These narrative devices serve to maximize the emotional intensity of the text and represent the multi-faceted characters. Specifically, the narrator, in the first half of the *Aqedah* (Gen 22:1–10), emphasizes the crisis motif and portrays Abraham as a loving father in pain and Isaac as a

frightened child. In the second half (Gen 22:11–19), following the resolution of Israel’s existential crisis, the narrator portrays Abraham as the exalted patriarch whose agency and sovereignty dominate the narrative.

I should also emphasize that my study is literary in nature and my observations and analyses of the text are interpretive possibilities rather than dogmatic principles that should dictate future readings of the *Aqedah*. The purpose of this thesis is to give due credit to the biblical narrator’s inventiveness. This work should inspire philosophers and theologians to understand the depth and reevaluate the morals of the story. On a grander scale, I hope my integrated approach to the *Aqedah* will be applied by fellow literary critics to other passages of the Hebrew Bible to fully appreciate the craftsmanship of the biblical narrator.

List of Ancient Sources

Hebrew Bible

Genesis	8:20
1	24:4
2:4–3:24	32:6
8:15–9:17	46:1–3
12:1–3	1 Samuel
18:18, 20, 23–32	3:10–12
19:2	4:1–11
20:8	1 Kings
21:1–34	3:5–28
22:1–19	Joshua
26:24	1:1–9
28:18	Judges
Exodus	19:20
1:22	Proverbs
3:4, 9–10	30:14

Rabbinic Literature

Genesis Rabbah	Pirkei De Rabbi Eliezer
55:7	31:10
56:7	Midrash HaGadol
Exodus Rabbah	Gen 22:19
2:6	

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