A JEWISH PERSPECTIVE ON THE SACRIFICE OF ISAAC (the *aqedah*)[1]

Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac is celebrated in Judaism, Christianity and Islam as a symbol of his obedience, courage and absolute faith. However, Immanuel Kant interpreted the *aqedah* differently and used it to support his position against biblically based morality. Following Kant's lead, modern psychologizing critics also described Abraham as being a mentally unstable child abuser. However, their views disregard the context of the norms written in scripture and tradition. Through his radical obedience to the divine commandment, Abraham becomes not only a paradigm but also a founder of worship.

In Second Temple and rabbinic Judaism, the *aqedah* is seen as the tenth and greatest test of Abraham, irrefutable proof of his love for God above all else and his unwavering faith in Him, and it becomes the foundation legend for the Temple of Jerusalem and for the sacrifices to be offered there over the generations. To this day, Jews call upon God in prayer to remember to their benefit that sacred act of Abraham and to look favorably and compassionately upon them as a result of it. In Christianity, Abraham's refusal to spare his beloved son becomes a paradigm for another father's incomparable act— the heavenly father's refusal to spare his own beloved son, and this, in turn, becomes the basis of the hope for forgiveness, reconciliation, and atonement. And in those Christian communities with a sacrificial theology of the Eucharist, the death of Jesus —foreshadowed typologically in the near-sacrifice of Isaac —serves, once again, as the etiological foundation for the continuing worship of the church.

This traditional celebration and appreciation of Abraham's performance during his tenth and last trial is dramatically reversed in some Enlightenment thought, and that reversal continues to reverberate throughout modern Western religious thinking, including our own time. The essential move of the Enlightenment reevaluation of the *aqedah* is to subject Abraham's deed to an ethical critique. The presupposition is that a divine directive can never make right an action that, in the absence of God's involvement, would be wrong. Immanuel Kant, from whom this presupposition is most often and most clearly derived, puts it well: "We ought, therefore, to do a thing not because God wills it, but because it is righteous and good in itself - and it is because it is good in itself that God wills it and demands it of us."[2]

But what if God demands of us something that is not righteous and good in itself? It is in answer to this question that Kant addresses the *aqedah:*

> We can use, as an example, the myth of the sacrifice that Abraham was going to make by butchering and burning his only son at God's command (the poor child, without knowing it, even brought the wood for the fire). Abraham should have replied to this supposedly divine voice: "That I ought not to kill my good son is quite certain. But that you, this apparition, are God—of that I am not certain, and never can be, not even if this voice rings down to me from (visible) heaven."[3]

The moral law, in other words, is certain; voices are at best in the category of an "apparition" and thus always ambiguous. The criterion for determining whether a voice is really that of

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[1] Extracted from Jon Levenson, "Abusing Abraham: Traditions, Religious Histories, and Modern Misinterpretations," *Judaism* 47.3 (1998): pp. 259-77.
[2] Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics* (London: Methuen, 1930), p. 22. The book is based on lectures Kant delivered roughly between 1775 and 1781.
[3] Kant, *Lectures on Ethics,* p. 61.

God is its conformity to the moral law, and given the patent immorality of slaughtering and immolating Isaac, from Kant's point of view, Abraham failed his last trial miserably. And what are we to make of a man who would rather obey an “apparition” than the obvious prohibition upon murdering his own son? Though Kant does not make it explicit, he must have believed that Abraham, in acting so unreasonably and immorally, manifested the symptoms of a dangerous mental imbalance.

It is important to understand that for Kant, the *aqedah* is merely an especially pointed illustration of the general failure of any biblically-based morality. In this, his critique is vastly more radical than that of contemporary Jewish and Christian theologians who single out the *aqedah* because of its alleged potential to incite domestic violence while remaining devoted to the Bible as one source of normative behavior. In Kant's thinking, the higher type of theologian is not the “biblical theologian,” whose expertise centers “on laws proceeding from another person's act of choice,” but the “rational theologian,” who is “versed in reason with regard to religious faith, which is based on inner laws that can be developed from every man's own reason.” If that is our understanding of religious faith, then, at least as far as law is concerned, the Bible is quite dispensable. In fact, it is an obstacle to the development of a genuine moral disposition, for “laws proceeding from another person's act of choice” are, in Kant's thought, clearly inferior to “inner laws that can be developed from every man's own reason.” The former are to the latter as the particular is to the general, and as heteronomy (subjection to external laws) is to autonomy (the state of being self-determined and self-governed).

Kierkegaard's Defense

The great defense of Abraham against the Kantian indictment comes from Soren Kierkegaard in *Fear and Trembling* (1843). Kierkegaard concedes that Abraham's deed was, from the vantage point of ethics, totally heinous and without excuse, but unlike Kant, he goes on to relativize ethics and to subordinate it to a religious category that he tends to call “faith”:

> The ethical expression for what Abraham did is, that he would murder Isaac; the religious expression is, that he would sacrifice Isaac; but precisely in this consists the dread which can well make a man sleepless, and yet Abraham is not what he is without this dread…For when faith is eliminated by becoming null or nothing, then there only remains the crude fact that Abraham wanted to murder Isaac—which is easy enough for anyone to imitate who has not faith, the faith, that is to say, which makes it hard for him.[4]

Faith here refers to Abraham's complete trust in the divine promise that it is through Isaac that the promised nation shall emerge (Genesis 21:12). Ignore that faith, as Abraham's contemporary psychologizing critics do, and you are left with just one more crazed father attempting to murder his son—which is all those critics, in fact, see and all that their presuppositions allow them to see. By treating “[t]he ethical expression for what Abraham did” as the complete and final description of the deed, they see only an attempt at an unjust execution and miss the religious expression of Abraham's act as a near-sacrifice. And if, like them, we see only the ethical category, then the motivating affect is clear: in Kierkegaard's

[4] Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and the Sickness unto Death* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1954), p. 41. *Fear and Trembling* was published in 1843.

words, “he hates Isaac.” The problem is that God has asked him to sacrifice not a son that he hates but the son whom he loves (Genesis 22:2). And, thus, lest one level the difference— as Abraham's psychologizing critics now do—Kierkegaard warns that “if he does not love like Abraham, then every thought of offering Isaac would be not a trial but a base temptation”: “Can one then speak plainly about Abraham without incurring the danger that an individual might in bewilderment go ahead and do likewise? . . . [I]t is only by faith one attains likeness to Abraham, not murder.” To imitate Abraham's deed alone, abstracted from the love, the promise, and the faith, is grossly to misinterpret him. That such a misinterpretation can arise is clear from its ample presence in the writings of the contemporary psychologizing critics of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his beloved son. By restoring the *aqedah* to its context in Genesis, Kierkegaard has profoundly undercut the analogy between Abraham and the violent fathers of his day and ours.

Revelation, Scripture, Tradition

The attacks on Abraham for his willingness to sacrifice Isaac derive from the awareness that no sane person today would identify as God's a voice that demanded the immolation of his innocent child. The underlying assumption is once again Kantian, an assumption of universalizability: if it is wrong for us, it must have been wrong for Abraham. What the Kantian framing of the issue neglects is the identity of “us.” It assumes—and celebrates— a self that is unencumbered by tradition and all other culture-specific forms of identity— a human *tabula rasa* that accepts its duties on the basis of universally available and historically unconditioned reason. Whatever is to be said in favor of this generic human, it is beyond doubt that he is not a practicing Jew, Christian, or Muslim. For historically, Jews, Christians, and Muslims have approached their duties in the light of a deposit of revelation established in a canon of scripture and (usually) authoritative tradition. This precludes the very procedure that Kant and the contemporary psychologizing critics of Abraham presuppose, in which a person appropriates a voice that claims to be God's in a vacuum and thus heeds it without deference to the norms laid down in scripture and tradition.

I conclude with a brief discussion of why this is true in the case of rabbinic Judaism. It is to be hoped that it is unnecessary to point out again that the Torah forbids child sacrifice (e.g., Leviticus 20:2-6) and requires the redemption rather than the sacrifice of the first- born son (e.g., Exodus 13:11-16; Numbers 3:44-51). In rabbinic tradition, obedience to God entails adherence to these and all other commandments in the Torah as they are understood and explicated by the rabbinic authorities. Prophetic oracles cannot set aside rabbinic law (*halakhah*). “We give no heed to a heavenly voice,” according to the Talmud (b. Pesachim 114a), and “a prophet is not authorized to introduce anything new” (b. Temurah 16a). Between Abraham and us lies the whole deposit of revealed law and authoritative interpretation that the rabbis associated with the revelation to Moses in Mount Sinai. Any attempt to derive practical norms for ourselves immediately and directly from Abraham's experience in Genesis 22 is thus a denial of the Torah rather than an implementation of it. Those who do so may seem too traditional, but the truth is the opposite: they are not traditional enough. They still substitute their individual judgment for the binding norms of the tradition…The point, rather, is that Judaism appropriates the figure of Abraham in and through concentric circles of context, including the Book of Genesis, the rest of the Written Torah, and the Oral Torah of the rabbis.

To the extent that Abraham serves as a paradigm— and the rabbinic tradition is not without fierce criticisms of him—he exercises his paradigmatic role through these larger conceptions

in large part as the man who scrupulously observes God's commandments (Genesis 26:5). For example, he becomes, paradoxically, a model for those who would abominate child sacrifice. He does this through the radical obedience to the divine commandment for which the *aqedah* —the binding and near-sacrifice of his beloved son— made him famous. Abraham is, in short, not just a paradigm but a founder, and within the structure of authority of Judaism, one cannot appropriate him in the one role without consideration of the other. There is more to Abraham both as paradigm and as founder than is dreamt of in the philosophy of those who associate him with child abuse.