Facing the End of History

The Akedah under the Shadow of Empire

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Abstract

The Akedah is one of the Bible's most haunting and haunted stories. Its silences, secrets, and contradictions lend it a powerful elasticity to do all sorts of difficult, painful, cultural work even millennia after its production. This investigation attempts, in the words of literary philosopher Pierre Macherey, "to trace the path which leads from the haunted work to that which haunts it" (1978, 94). Positioning the story amidst the economic, political, and cultic pressures of the post-exilic period, this discussion explores how the divine demand to sacrifice Isaac and the subsequent divine intervention and promise of ascendancy reflect an anxious communal exploration of the imperial and cultic demands that threaten the end of family and cultural history.

Key words

Akedah; Abraham; constitutive storytelling; Genesis 22; Isaac; Moriah; (Persian) Empire.

The Akedah (Genesis 22) is nothing if not a richly complex and highly irritating text. As a story "fraught with background"—to use the now-famous description of Eric Auerbach ([1953] 2003, 12)—it tantalizes us with what it does not say, it confuses us with what it does say, and it bombards us with blank faces and empty spaces where other faces should be, but are not. [1] We encounter here a peculiar cast of characters. First, there is a god with a split personality: on the one hand, a generic deity willing to inflict indescribable pain on his chosen subjects all in the name of a "test"; on the other hand, a specifically named, last-minute saviour intervening with protection and blessing. Abraham is infuriatingly stoical, a seeming automaton carrying out divine instructions, not even a shadow of the man who rescued his nephew Lot (Genesis 14) or argued over the fate of Sodom (Gen. 18:16-33). And Isaac, except for a potentially anxious question about the missing sheep (22:7), is left an emotionless void—a character who might be described as little more than a collection of "verbal scraps … held loosely together by a proper name" (Martin 1986, 118-19).

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[1] The story is haunted by absences: Sarah, for one; Ishmael, for another; and all the children in the Bible and beyond whose sacrifices in the name of religious fidelity have been carried out without intervention, substitution, or overt critique. See Miller (1990); Delaney (1998).

The story's sparse canvas begs interpreters to fill in facial features, emotional states, even alternative landscapes and settings. The horrific subject matter is magnetic, and countless commentators, theologians, philosophers, social analysts, artists, novelists, poets, playwrights, and film makers have found themselves bound to this text, ensnared by the urge to explain, critique, augment, reimagine, rewrite, and reinvent the journey to, and the scene that takes place upon, the outcrops of Moriah. The casting-call to audition for the parts of Abraham or Isaac or even God has, for some, been irresistible. The story challenges the limits of piety and ethics (perhaps most famously articulated by Kierkegaard 1843; Levinas 1974; and Derrida 1996); it exposes infanticidal impulses (Miller 1990; Delaney 1998); it forces confrontation with issues of betrayal and abuse. It is hardly any wonder that so many artists use this story as an occasion for self-portraiture.[2]

But the Akedah affords more than personally reflective space: even in the increasingly biblically illiterate cultures of the West, it has provided an arena in recent decades to stage communal traumas, protests, mourning rituals, and memorials. From Wilfred Owen's classic poem, "The Parable of the Old Man and the Young," penned in 1917 in the trenches of World War I,[3] to George Segal's 1973 and 1978 sculptures "The Sacrifice of Isaac," dealing with Israeli military conscription and the Kent State killings respectively,[4] and Menashe Kadishman's 1987 towering "Sacrifice of Isaac" produced in the wake of the Israeli war with Lebanon,[5] the story has provided an arena to depict inter-generational exploitation taking place in the context of conflicting social desires and necessities.[6] The Akedah has also functioned as a recurring metaphor of the Shoah; the artistic works of Mordecai Ardon,[7] Diana Kay Lubarski,[8] and Samuel Bak[9] call upon the Akedah to convey an absurd world of choiceless choices in the midst of overwhelming evil.

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[2] For example, the seventeenth century painter Sir Anthony van Dyck becomes his alter-ego Isaac, staring knowingly at the viewer as he travels beside his evasive and distracted father (www.wga.hu/html/d/dyck_van/3other/abraham.html). From the same era, Caravaggio's terrified face peers at us from the grip of Abraham's weathered but unrelenting hand (https://www.uffizi.it/en/artworks/sacrifice-of-isaac). Post holocaust survivor Samuel Bak's Isaac steps straight from the streets of the Vilna and Warsaw Ghettos to assume his role as a Holocaust offering (see Fewell and Phillips 2009; many of Bak's works can be accessed at www.puckergallery.com).

[3] A review of Owen's poems published on 29 December 1920, just two years after his death, read, "Others have shown the disenchantment of war, have unlegended the roselight and romance of it, but none with such compassion for the disenchanted nor such sternly just and justly stern judgment on the idyllisers." This quote is available online http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/305.

[4] Images of both Segal sculptures, along with other visual representations of the Akedah, including Kadishman's, can be found in Milgrom and Duman, available online http://www.talivirtualmidrash.org.il/search-results/page/6/.

[5] See also the review of McBee (2008).

[6] For anthologies of poetry devoted to the Akedah see Caspi (2001); Caspi and Green (2007).

[7] See *Sarah* (1947), which can be viewed at http://www.arthistoryarchive.com/arthistory/european/images/MordechaiArdon-Sarah-1947.jpg.

[8] In Lubarski's sculpture *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, Abraham kneels on a swastika. This can be viewed at http://holocaustimages.org/5.htm.

[9] Bak's pieces on this theme are too numerous to list. See Fewell and Phillips (2009) and www.puckergallery.com.

The silences, secrets, and contradictions within the Akedah lend it a powerful elasticity to do all sorts of difficult, painful, cultural work even millennia after its production. As scholars of this ancient literature, we might well wonder if, in the words of literary philosopher Pierre Macherey, "it is possible to trace the path which leads from the haunted work to that which haunts it," to detect, in fact, "the play of history beyond its edges, encroaching on those edges" (1978, 94). What is the relationship between the work's politically, philosophically, and artistically fecund obscurities and the ethical, theological, social deficiencies in the historical context of the story's production?[10]

It may now be commonplace to note that Genesis's preoccupations with the land, inheritance, and communal and ethnic identity seem to reflect more accurately the concerns, challenges, and ambitions of the Persian colony of Yehud than those of earlier periods (see, for example, Whitelam 1989, 1991; Fewell 1996, 2001, 2002; Brett 2000; Heard 2001; Blenkinsopp 2004; Knoppers and Levinson 2007; Edelman 2013). Moreover, current sociological and anthropological approaches are exposing the complex political and social dimensions of textual production in the Second Temple period (for example, Niditch 1996; Carr 2005; Horsley 2007; van der Toorn 2007; Berquist 2008; Davies and Römer 2013), showing how ideologies, economics, and oral performance factor into the manufacturing of literary texts. The "narrative turn" in the social sciences and cognitive disciplines is also pressing us to consider more carefully how narratives work to structure our personal and social lives. With all these ideas in mind, we revisit Mark Brett's pointed question of Genesis 22, "What does this test of Abraham's faith have to do with the identity politics of the Persian Period?" (2000, 72). Implicit in this query is the notion that the Akedah is more than an ancestral legend about a pious hero, more than a quaint, if haunting, aetiology explaining ritual and theological evolution. Rather, the Akedah is a political performance embodying the concerns of a colonized community.

The story's content identifies this performance as one of social crisis. The narrative discourse constructs a fragile line between life and death, drawn by divine demands, human compliance, impeccably opportune timing, and the deity's confession of his own learning curve: "Now I know that you fear Elohim" (Gen. 22:12).[11] It is a narrative about facing what appears to be the end of history, the history of a family, the history of a people. What social fears are driving this story's performance?

What follows is a post-exilic framing for this story, some theoretical reflections on how cultural narratives relate to communal identity, and a rereading of the Akedah as a story wrestling with collective self-understanding, expressing anxiety regarding communal survival, and making gestures of political resistance.

Historical Considerations

Historians reconstructing the Persian period have done extraordinarily illuminating work in the last few decades. While debates continue regarding many

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[10] See further Macherey (1978, 129).
[11] Unless otherwise noted, all translations are the author's.

details about post-exilic events and social structures, there seems to be emerging consensus on a few points relevant to this reading of Genesis 22. The Persian province of Yehud was comprised of an impoverished, under-populated community that continued to reel for centuries after its near collapse as a result of the Babylonian conquest (see Berquist 1995, 2007; Carter 1999; Cataldo 2003; Janzen 2002; Grabbe 2004; Lipschits and Oeming 2006; Lipschits, Knoppers, and Albertz 2007; Levin 2007). At the beginning of the Persian period, Yehud, like many other provinces, was a highly heterogeneous society, comprised of different ethnic groups both immigrant and indigenous to the area. If our canonical literature is any indication, the early prevailing communal rhetoric not only welcomed all nations to the "mount of the Lord" (e.g. Isa. 58:7; 60:7; 66:18b-23; cf. 2:2-4), but also cast imperial rulers as divine representatives who allocate at least some resources toward the Temple's reconstruction (2 Chron. 36:22-23; Ezra 1:1-11). In time, cracks begin to appear in this initially triumphant and socially inclusive façade. The Persian Empire set limits on financial investments in outlying provinces. The Chronicler's "recitation" of Cyrus's edict notwithstanding, imperial moneys for continued support of the Jerusalem temple were not forthcoming. Moreover, while its cultic practices and personnel structures mimicked the organizational complexities of other temples in the ancient Near East, the Jerusalem Temple, in contrast to many of its contemporary counterparts, did not possess its own land holdings nor was it entitled to siphon profits from the properties of others in order to support itself (Wright 2007).

While many scholars have considered the Temple to be the obvious tax-collecting instrument in Persian Yehud, archaeological discoveries at Ramat Rahel have pointed to a completely separate centre for Persian administration and suggest a more economically competitive relationship between Temple and Empire (Lipschits, Gadot, and Langgut 2011; 2012). Despite this shift in understanding, John Wright's description (2007, 362) still holds merit:

> [F]ourth-century Yehud appears as the geographical core of a dispersed ethnic group with socioeconomic incursions at its periphery and a struggle to sustain a viable socioeconomic life at its center. All data point to the elite Yehudians' struggle to sustain their version of Yehud's cultural, political, and economic heritage by means of the Temple of Yahweh in Jerusalem. From the context of the imperial need for the economic exploitation of Yehud to the necessity for the high priesthood to gain status from the purchase of the office to peasant resistance to sending agricultural income to the temple in Jerusalem—the general picture of the social history of Yehud shows the temple in Jerusalem to be a vital battleground, in reality, for fourth-century Jews.

The imperial demand for tribute, to be rendered in silver, appears to have remained steady despite the fact that the area, due to climate conditions, could anticipate crop failure two out of every five years. Competing directly with the imperial economic pressures, the Temple's demand for financial support would have further depleted the resources of families stretched to their financial limits. Consequently, as Wright concludes:

> [W]e are left with a special socioeconomic situation in Yehud: the need for sufficient revenue to sustain a personnel structure for the Temple of Yahweh … but no actual revenue sources available. Temple tithes and offerings collected from the families of Yehud were the sole source of supply for the centralized gathering and redistribution of goods. Without a temple endowment, the temple and its god in Jerusalem would have to achieve the primary place of allegiance for its Yehud constituency in order to sustain the cultural and economic life of Yehud. (2007, 381)

In Marxist terms, we have in the priesthood a group of people who do not/cannot produce the necessities that sustain either their lifestyle or the workings of the cultic institution. They rely upon those who do produce such essentials to provide for them. However, the population base upon which they rely is drained already by imperial taxation (see further Becking 2010; Yee 2017, 830-1). How then can the cultic administration generate revenue? The primary means appears to be persuasion, if not outright coercion,[12] cast in the form of sacred rhetoric.[13] Hence the calls to bring all tithes and offerings into the storehouse (Mal. 3:10; Neh. 10:32-9) where they, unlike in pre-exilic times, are to be consumed now exclusively by the priesthood; hence the instigation of an elaborate sacrificial system framed theologically to remedy a vast array of cultic impurities and infractions but designed practically to feed the temple personnel (Leviticus 1-7), hence the imposition of oath-taking to pay the temple tax, hence the casting of lots to meet the persistent demand for altar wood, and hence the mandated promise to bring all first fruits, *including firstborn sons*, to the priests at the house of God (Neh. 10:32-9). We have here, in Roland Boer's terms, a society caught in the tensions between a regime of allocation and a regime of extraction, both of which manifest themselves in sacred terms in the social rhetoric: It is God who has allocated the land, the fertility, and the laws that order society and legislate provision for God's house and attendants. Moreover, it is God who has authorized Persian sovereignty over the citizens of Yehud (Boer 2007). Ezra's public prayer in Neh. 9:36-7 conveys clearly this ambivalence: "Here we are, slaves to this day—slaves in the land that you have given to our ancestors to enjoy its fruit and its good gifts. Its rich yield goes to the kings whom you have set over us … they have power also over our bodies, and over our livestock at their pleasure, and we are in great distress" (NRSV).[14]

At the centre of this tension is the Temple itself, both competitor and political liaison with the imperial authorities. In this theo-political framework, God, priesthood, and imperial rule collapse into one another; God becomes simultaneously a generous giver of gifts and one who makes severe demands upon the population.

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[12] As in the threat to confiscate the property of those failing to attend the assembly regarding a moratorium on foreign wives (Ezra 10:8). See also the general imperial backing of religious law in Ezra 7:26.

[13] Much of the ensuing discussion is dependent upon Boer (2007).

[14] According to Janzen (2017), the political complaint in this passage is strikingly out of sync with the rest of Ezra–Nehemiah. He concludes, "The prayer of Neh 9 allows at least a trace of an anti-Achaemenid argument to enter Ezra-Nehemiah, one voiced by some within the assembly who continued to promote a belief in a great divine geopolitical action of the sort articulated by Haggai and Zechariah at the beginning of the Persian period" (856).

Despite implying an overall endorsement of Persian rule, Nehemiah indicates that economic and political oppression, complicated by an emerging class hierarchy, reaches critical proportions. We witness a protesting peasantry who are starving, mortgaging their lands to pay their taxes and to keep their families alive, selling their children into debt slavery, and having to stand by powerless as their daughters are violated and their properties confiscated (Neh. 5:1-5).

Moreover, ethnographers tell us that competition over resources, economic opportunities, or other forms of socially symbolic capital increases concern for developing and enforcing clear identity boundaries. Marking and maintaining cultural differences is a protective manoeuvre that justifies access to and possession of resources.[15] We should not be surprised then to find in Ezra and Nehemiah, books overwhelmingly preoccupied with shifting socio-environmental and socio-economic circumstances, a concern for instituting and sustaining community boundaries. The fixation on who will be allowed to help build the House of God, the worry over who will live inside the walls of Jerusalem, and the concern to send away foreign wives and mixed children become pieces of a larger portrait of a community in crisis.[16]

Constitutive Storytelling

What does any of this have to do with the story telling in Genesis? The notion of "story" presupposed here is not simply artistic literature, aesthetically pleasing and existentially engaging, though the literary artistry and the emotional affects of Genesis 22 are hardly in question. Rather, following theorists engaged in socio-narratology,[17] we are invited to consider the profound relationship between communities and the narratives they tell about themselves. So, for example, social philosopher David Carr writes:

> A community … exists by virtue of a story which is articulated and accepted, which typically concerns the group's origins and its destiny, and which interprets what is happening now in the light of these two temporal poles. Nor is the prospect of death irrelevant in such cases, since the group must deal not only with possible external threats of destruction but also with its own centrifugal tendency to fragment. (1997, 20)

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[15] Ethnicity, then, is not necessarily based upon a set of defined characteristics, such as shared language, territory, or biological origins, but is a more complex product of social interaction within groups who face changes in socio-environmental and socio-economic conditions. See Stern (2007) who draws upon a number of theorists, including Hodder (1982, 28-30) and Banks (1996, 47-50).

[16] On the gradual shift from Yehud's initial heterogeneity to Ezra–Nehemiah's prescribed homogeneity, see Fried 2007. She ties the polemic against foreigners in Ezra–Nehemiah to the Athenian citizenship laws in the sixth-fifth centuries BCE. See also Stern (2007, 230).

[17] Socio-narratology explores the sociality of narrative, in terms of both how stories are socially embedded and constructed and how stories function socially to reflect upon and to attempt to improve social life through both retrospective and prospective narration. See further Fludernik (1996); Herman (2002); Currie (2011); and Frank (2010) who draws heavily on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and Wayne Booth. For further reflections on this in relation to biblical narrative, see Fewell (2016).

Such a description of communal story reflects, in Bakhtinian terms, a complicated chronotope where various spaces and timeframes converge on a single narrative plane, where the world of the story and the world of the story's production find contact points that affect the construction of meaning and effect mutual changes in narrative and social understanding (1981, 365). Not only does the story hold the past and the future within its sites as it attempts to explicate the present, but the community's present, with its internal and external pressures and quandaries, shapes how the past is remembered and how the future might be envisioned.

Consequently, the sociality of the story's construction cannot be underestimated. Even singular storytellers internalize the dialogic quality of social life, forming their stories to answer presupposed questions, and if those stories are well-told, to accommodate multiple perspectives, to perform the multi-dimensionality of truth-telling. According to narrative ethnographer Michael Jackson, the very point of storytelling is "to invoke and counterpoint various points of view," to "cast doubt on the possibility of resolving ethical dilemmas according to any one principle, or on any a priori grounds" (2002, 140). Macherey describes this phenomenon in negative terms, as a lack, a "determinate insufficiency": there is something that the work cannot say, and "this incompleteness, betokened by the confrontation of separate meanings, is the true reason for its composition" (1978, 79)

As a prime repository of constitutive story-telling, biblical narrative presents characters, events, and discourses that do multi-dimensional work. On one level, the characters are credible individuals to whom we might relate existentially and psychologically (whether we "like" them or not). Their stories have dramatic flair, replete with interpersonal tensions and plot complications, by and large appealing to basic human interests and concerns. But on another level, they are characters who, in addition to being interesting individuals, carry heavier cultural burdens. Without forfeiting their personal charm, these characters also assume the roles of metaphors, ciphers, and signifiers—symbols of larger groups, institutions, ideologies, and attitudes.[18] Not surprisingly, the predicaments they find themselves in are remarkably reminiscent of the social issues that constitute the story's own cultural breeding ground. The language that constructs these figures and events may be subtly or overtly multi-vocal, communicating in several different registers at once.

Moreover, the intrinsic "incompleteness" described by Macherey is exacerbated under political and social pressures. Life under imperial domination inhibits truth-telling. Stories are unlikely to be either neutral or forthright about the circumstances that generate their telling. Rather, constitutive stories, in revisiting the past and forecasting the future, might be doing any number of things: promoting or subverting certain courses of action, providing comfort or therapeutic release, proffering hope, expressing anxiety, intimating critique—all while fundamentally creating space for communal reflection, dialogue, and competing points of view. If story content risks imperial suspicion, an arsenal of slipping signifiers, undecidable meanings, and subtle innuendo are put into play.

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[18] Cf. Frymer Kinsky's discussion of character (2002, 333-8).

And we, as critical interpreters, must ask: What does this "confrontation of separate meanings" communicate? How does this "determinate insufficiency" signal communal experience, struggle, anxiety?

Genesis 22

The book of Genesis clearly forms part of a constitutive story that attempts to construct, protect, define, refine, or perhaps even undermine, the communal identity of post-exilic Yehud. This community, if not in overt crisis, is at least in difficult economic and political circumstances, pressed from without by an imperial colonizer assiduously extracting tribute, labour, and area resources, and strained from within by an economy dependent upon collaboration with the empire, a growing divide in economic class, and an influx of immigrants who contribute to already existing challenges of class distinctions, cultural diversity, competition for resources, and conflicting social values. Reflecting this double threat from within and without, the book of Genesis adopts a Janus-face on several fronts, concerning itself not only with communal origins, but also with communal destiny, punctuating its "memories" of the past with visions and promises of future trials and triumphs—visions and promises that acknowledge the reality of, but also project the endurance of, perhaps even victory over, imperial bondage. These two temporal poles frame a stage where Yehud's social dramas are played out.

Thus, we find father Abraham emigrating from the land of the Chaldeans (Gen. 12:1-9), the very people who conquer Israel and deport its nobility. He lives among strangers in a land promised but, with the exception of a burial plot (Genesis 23), not deeded to him. His family is plagued with issues of under-population, his wealth is acquired through compromise with the politically powerful, and each generation has its share of conflicts, separations, and disputes over inheritance and natural resources.

Genesis captures the internal tensions of Persian Yehud with a common ancestry that narrates generation by generation those who are to be included and excluded from the communal family tree (see Fewell 1996). It is no coincidence that Abraham himself confronts some of the same painful choices faced by his future descendants in Yehud. Even Abraham must, at Sarah's insistence and God's own urging, send away his foreign wife Hagar (whose name ironically connotes "the stranger") and his mixed son Ishmael, despite his affection for his firstborn (Genesis 21). The issue? An inheritance that does not bear sharing, or in anthropological terms, a competition over the scarcity of resources (and on another level, competition over the symbolic capital of being the representative agent of the indigenous deity). Hence, Hagar and Ishmael, bearing an uncanny resemblance to the expelled wives and children of Ezra 10 (Fewell 2003), are sent out with only meagre provisions and no substantial support capable of sustaining them. They live in the wilderness, suggestively, just beyond the borders of Yehud (see Levin 2007).

With half of Abraham's family now excised, Genesis 22 then becomes the pivotal episode where the forces of sacred allocation and extraction collide in the person of the long-awaited Isaac. The son generously allocated by YHWH in the

preceding chapter is now being extracted from Abraham's household by a generic, universally adaptable *ha-elohim*, who looks suspiciously like a cipher for an imperially sponsored priesthood.[19] On the surface, Genesis 22, like Genesis 21, portrays an Abraham, and those he stands for, willing to do whatever the deity, and those who represent that deity, demands. Indeed, the history of western art depicting this story is rife with angels who must violently wrest the knife from Abraham's determined hand, and there has, in the history of commentary, been no little praise for Abraham's extravagant obedience. Consequently, one might imagine the story functioning to serve the cult's interests, dramatizing an exemplar, calling others to follow suit in obeying divine commands and making difficult sacrifices in response to divine needs.[20]

But who, indeed, has need of such sacrifices? We are transported to Neh. 5:1-5, 10:33-40, and 11:1-2 where it becomes clear that people, particularly firstborn sons, like other first fruits and domestic products, are also commodities in the sacred economy of Yehud, not only used as collateral for the payment of imperial taxes (Neh. 5:5), but also designated as part of the goods levied by the Temple "as is written in the *torah*" (10:36-7). While Neh. 10:36-7 finesses what actually becomes of these firstborn sons, it indicates that they are being forfeited by individual households to serve the temple system in some way.[21] Families who could so afford might be able to redeem them (with a ram caught in a thicket as it were), but those who could not afford to redeem might literally feel as though they were being asked to relinquish in support of Temple and Empire their last remaining child.

It is no small coincidence that the setting of Genesis 22 is identified both as "mountain of YHWH," a designation that typically refers to either Jerusalem or its temple (Isa. 2:3//Mic. 4:2; Isa. 30:29; Zech. 8:3; Ps. 24:3) and Moriah, a spot identified in 2 Chron. 3:1 as the location of the Temple itself.[22] The intertextual connections with other aetiologies regarding the temple site in 1 Samuel 24 and 1 Chronicles 21-2 are highly suggestive. In those stories, David is "incited" against

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[19] Imperially sponsored in the sense that it is sanctioned by the Empire and exempt from taxation (Ezra 7:24).

[20] Ezra and Nehemiah insist that following the (Persian-backed) divine law is the key to the community's survival; consequently, the laws demanding the divine right to firstborn sons, some of which make provision for redemption (e.g. Exod. 34:20; Num. 3:45-6; 8:15-18) and some do not (e.g., Exod. 22:28), resonate with Genesis 22, where Isaac is portrayed not as the second born, but as the "only son." Abraham, as he is with the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael, becomes an exemplar for following "the law."

[21] Perhaps they were farmed out as laborers on palatine estates owned by the Yehudian elite that would have been better positioned economically to contribute to the temple. On the tension between palatine estates and subsistence village agriculture, see Boer (2015).

[22] This connection is often noted in critical commentary. Typically, the arguments are diachronic, proposing either that Chronicles is overtly alluding to Genesis 22, or that the mention of Moriah, and the wordplay surrounding the name (YHWH will "see," "see to," or "provide") is a later addition to Genesis 22 based upon the Chronicler's identification. For fuller discussions of this connection, as well as how these texts are related to cultural understandings of Davidic legacy, Solomon's temple, and the identity of Jerusalem/Zion, see Kalimi (1990) and Mittmann (2000). There is the tendency to see the literary connection as an attempt to annex ancestral legend as a means of legitimizing the temple site with theophanic history. By contrast, this essay's argument suggests a more complicated set of meanings, which include political critique of cult and empire.

Israel, in Samuel by YHWH in another strange case of divine personality disorder, and in Chronicles by the *deus inversus* Satan. In both cases David is impelled to conduct a census, a tool typically used for purposes of taxation, military draft, and labour conscription. His deed is subsequently punished with a massive loss of innocent life. To mark the end of the divinely sent plague, David builds an altar on the site that will become the house of God, a house built by forced labour—foreign labour in Chronicles, Israelite labour in Kings. Consequently, the very act for which he is punished, the taking of the census, is the very tool that allows the house of God to be built. When these texts, with their preoccupation with testing, sacred sites, and the loss of human life, are taken together with Genesis 22, there emerges a certain ambivalence about the cult and its costs to the community: the house of God may be the cultural magnet holding the community together, but it is grounded upon human suffering and bears the inevitable marks of political interests tainted by both divine and human culpability.

In the end, of course, Isaac is not ultimately sacrificed. An angel of YHWH intervenes, contravenes the demands of *ha-elohim*, allocating a ram in Isaac's stead. The story takes a radical turn, exposing its fissures, its multiplicities, its perceptive but insufficient attempts to capture the sociality of the storytelling moment, to voice the multiple needs and perspectives of the community. How might this story function in the communities of Yehud? Clearly acknowledging the torturous demands placed upon the people, is it suggesting that what is being required by the imperially acceptable *ha-elohim*[23] will eventually be provided by their local, communal god YHWH? "As it said to this day, 'On the mount of YHWH, it will be provided'" (Gen. 22:14). Does it hold out hope where none seems apparent, implying that, in an ultimate embodiment of split personality, God will indeed allocate what is being extracted? Does it, in the politically accommodating spirit of Ezra-Nehemiah, ultimately intimate that, although imperial demands can be exacting, living under imperial rule is still the best option for communal survival? (cf. Janzen 2017) Or does the message of "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him" (v. 12) communicate a plan of resistant action, promote a refusal to give up everything? Does it encourage the citizens under duress to hold back something for the future generation? The story ends with a version of the divine promise often noted to be more political and bellicose than the earlier irenic covenantal language of "blessing" and "families:" "Your offspring," says (the messenger of) YHWH, will become, in the military idiom, "as numerous as the stars of the heaven and the sand on the seashore" (v. 17; cf. Jos. 11:4; Judg. 7:12; 1 Sam 13:5; 2 Sam 17:11). Rather than being a blessing to "all the families of the earth" (Gen. 12:3), they "will possess the gate of their enemies" (v. 17) and blessing will come to "nations of the land" (v. 18) What role does this assurance play? While it appears on the surface to reiterate an innocent promise from ancient times, its subliminal message is one of political resistance, a "hidden transcript" (à la James C. Scott 1992): "Take courage! A day will come when those who currently possess you will themselves be possessed."

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[23] Note how "God of Heaven" and "Elohim" are used in the official Persian correspondence in Ezra 5-7.

As theodicy, this story addresses the kind of profound suffering that forces one to imagine the end of history—the end of personal history, communal history. How can one understand the divine when confronted with such suffering? In the face of emerging post-exilic theologies leaning toward a more universal, omnipotent, singular deity, the story strangely preserves a multiplicity in the deity's persona, mirroring the tensions between the two dominant theologies competing in the post-exilic world: a generic, strikingly universal, deity, *ha-elohim*, who tests, who exacts and extracts, and who is the object of fear, remarkably compatible with the imported, holy, cultically demanding, and imperially sponsored Priestly deity; and a *malak*-YHWH who morphs into YHWH himself, who intervenes to protect and reassure, who allocates the needed resources, who learns something from Abraham's coerced generosity, and who helps him envision a day of reckoning, a figure who strongly resembles the gift-giving, gratitude soliciting, politically resistant deity of deuteronomistic fame.[24]

The bifurcated deity reflects these double theologically-sanctioned regimes of extraction and allocation, but hardly with neutrality. Rather, the pathos generated by the divine demand for Isaac's life invites a critical look at the sacred language justifying excessive extraction. The framing of the episode as a "test" not only attempts to imbue the suffering with some sort of meaning, but also underscores the situation as temporary: true tests eventually end. The promise of "possessing the gate of the enemy" implants a vision of vindication against external pressures. And the blessing of the *goye-haaretz*, the peoples of the land, hopes for a healing of communal fractures within.

As theodicy, the Akedah also stubbornly resists portraying the deity as omniscient—a manoeuvre that keeps the God of Israel from being wholly responsible for imperial oppression. The deity does not know all or control all, but rather must discover what Abraham is capable of and respond accordingly. God must learn for himself—or in this case "himselves"—whether Abraham "fears" God (Gen. 22:12). We might note in passing that the "fear of God" is also prominent in Nehemiah's rhetoric, where the fear of God refers to trepidation both in the face of divine power, but also in the anticipation of divine justice and judgment. "Fearing God," then, is a way of living in recognition of God's power, willingness to intervene in human affairs, and inclination to commute justice.[25] On Moriah, it is seen that Abraham, as an image of the beleaguered people of Yehud, indeed fears God, so much so that it has led him to the edge of an abyss, where his entire future is in doubt, and where the lives of the innocent are at risk.

As a constitutive story, what is the Akedah saying? What is it doing? Perhaps it is making a statement about the importance of obedience and the fear of God in the midst of extreme circumstances. But just as likely the story functions not as a statement, but as a question, a set of questions that gives voice to communal anxiety. Where is the dividing line between fearing God and fearing empire? Can it be determined? Have we lost it somewhere between the command to sacrifice the beloved child and the command to do no harm? Between the initial

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[24] Cf. Carr (1996, 153-9) who observes that Gen. 22:17-19 is "semi-deuteronomistic."
[25]Nehemiah 5-6; Nehemiah asserts that he fears God, but based on the behavior he witnesses in the community, he questions whether others do.

demand rooted in the power to extract and the latter demand grounded in the deity's own growing knowledge and sense of justice? What do we make of this pendular world, hanging heavy, swinging from one extreme to the other? Here on Moriah, communal anxieties and words of assurance echo back and forth: On Moriah, YHWH sees the fear, makes provision, and affirms a more forceful vision of Israel's destiny. Isaac lives. Abraham goes home. And yet, on Moriah, Isaac seemingly lingers (Gen. 22:19).[26] The end of history, once envisioned, is not easily occluded, even branded as a "test," even when promised a sequel of infinite stars, sands, and possessed enemy gates. Its jagged edges remain, haunting the past and threatening the future, especially in a divinely given, but imperially controlled, land that both claims and provides life.

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[26] As midrash has been quick to build upon; see Wiesel (1976).

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