AAR ARTICLES

Binding–Unbinding: Divided Responses of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam to the "Sacrifice" of Abraham's Beloved Son

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Media treatments of religion and violence after 9/11 have tended to polarize into two equal and opposite positions: the view that the attacks represent the "hijack" of the "Abrahamic" religions which, *properly* understood, are antithetical to violence, and the claim that violence and religion are virtual synonyms—a view epitomized in the British journalist Nick Cohen's "Damn Them All."[1] Both positions share the belief that

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[1] The subtitle of Cohen's article is "If blame is to be cast, then the world's religions must take a major share," and the central illustration is Jacopo da Empoli's "The Sacrifice of Isaac." For a discussion of the polarized responses to religion and the metaphor of "hijack," see Castelli.

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violence can be expelled to a putative outside: either outside religion or outside progressive secularism as it frees itself from the ties of its religious other, conceived of as an archaic site of submissiveness, passivity, and heteronomy. This study problematizes these easy antitheses through a close reading of tangled, ancient responses to the so-called sacrifice of Abraham's beloved son. The contemporary antitheses seem both inadequate and naïve when compared to paradoxes of binding–unbinding in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM AFTER 9/11

> The ethical expression for what Abraham did is that he was willing to murder Isaac; the religious expression is that he was willing to sacrifice Isaac, but in this anguish lies the contradiction that can indeed make one sleepless.
>
> —Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*

THE VIOLENT RUPTURE THAT we know, by shorthand, as "9/11" raises new possibilities, and responsibilities, for those who study sacred texts and their afterlives—not least through the challenge of two new "religious" texts discovered, not in leather cases or stone jars at Nag Hammadi or En Gedi but in unchecked luggage at Logan airport and in the wreckage of American Airlines flight 93. In their brief public lifetimes these two documents have already gone through several versions, translations, and recensions and are already gathering complex textual histories to rival those of ancient papyri. The first document (which exists in three versions) was first published as a four-page letter, in Arabic, by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) on Friday, 28 September 2001, under the heading "Hijack letter found at three locations." (Having first, mistakenly, described the document as a "suicide note," the FBI cautiously offered no interpretation or translation, but translations swiftly followed from *The Observer*, *ABC News*, and the *Los Angeles Times*). However, an article published on the same day by *Washington Post* journalist Bob Woodward described a *five*-page document that he had been shown that began with a heretical *basmallah*, "In the name of God, of myself and of my family," and that was adorned with various doodles—suggesting that a now missing page, never published, was retracted after being briefly waved before the public eye. Confusion was compounded by the existence of a second document (often confused with the first, not least because of the FBI's early misinterpretation of the first document as a suicide note): a will, found in Muhammad Atta's luggage and including reference to "this action,"

though it was last updated on 11 April 1996. Published in translation by the FBI as a document beginning "In the name of God all mighty Death Certificate [sic]," it was first published by *Der Spiegel* on October 1, in a German translation based on the FBI English translation, and was also published on October 4 by *ABC News*.[2]

As is now well known, rather than evoking an explicitly political context—for example, the Israeli occupation of the West Bank or the presence of American military bases in Saudi Arabia—the first document locates the "action" in the mythical environment of the "state-building" period of Islam (622–632) and conceives of that action as a *ghazwah*, a raid. As Makiya and Mneimneh put it, it scripts a "sacred drama" (2002a: 19) played out in the arena of Boeing 757s, where contemporary vocabularies of "taxis," "100%," and "passports" mingle uneasily with a lexis of paradise, ablutions, prayer, and *jihad*, and where the United States' "equipment and gates and technology" are pointedly juxtaposed with a rudimentary tool kit of "bag," "cloth," "knife," "tools," and "weapon." Seventh- and twenty-first-centuries, script and fact, uncannily collide as the text considers what to do if passengers launch a "counterattack" (as they did on American Airlines flight 93): "If God grants (*manna*) any one of you a slaughter, a *dhabaha*, you should perform it as an offering on behalf of your father and mother . . ." *Dhabaha*, a far more specific word than *qatala* ("to kill"), refers to slaughter, the act of cleaving, slitting, or ripping something open—as Makiya and Mneimneh put it, "one does not slaughter with a gun, or a bomb, from afar" (2002a: 19). And the objects of *dhabaha* are dehumanized as animals—a point chillingly highlighted by the ABC translation of the passengers as "prey."

For readers of Old Testament/Tanakh the animalization of human beings and the detailed preparations of bag, cloth, knife, and tools are more than vaguely reminiscent of the "sacrifice" of Isaac (note the eery use of the verb שחט as Abraham prepares not to "kill" but to "slaughter"

[2] The FBI press release of the first document, in Arabic, is still available at the time of writing at www.fbi.gov/pressrel/pressrel01/letter.htm. Translations can be found at http://observer.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,6903,560773,00.html and in Makiya and Mneimneh 2002b: 319–327 and Lincoln: 93–98. However, compare this widely published four-page version with Woodward's piece in the *Washington Post* where he quotes the heretical *basmallah* and describes how "The author doodled on the paper, drawing a small, arrowhead-like sword. Two circles entwine the shaft which also has serpentine swirls drawn onto it. The doodle also resembles a key." (Lincoln cites Woodward as implying a conventional *basmallah*, as well as the heretical one, and builds this into his hypothetical first page, but I find no mention of this in Woodward's text.) For a brief discussion of the discrepancy between the FBI and *Washington Post* versions, see Whitaker. For the text of the will or "death certificate," see *Der Spiegel* 40/2001 "*Im Namen Gottes, des Allmächtigen*" (1 October 2001) and http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/atta/resources/documents/will1.htm. The text of the will is no longer available on the FBI website.

Isaac [22.11] and the emphasis on tools and preparation: the belabored saddling of the donkey, the cutting of the wood, and the carrying of the rudimentary tools of "knife," "wood," and "fire" [Gen. 22.3, 6]). The unsettling echo is driven home—home, that is, to Islam and Judaism and Christianity—by the way in which the two al-Qaeda documents more than hint at an allusion to the Abrahamic sacrifice in the Qur'an. Though used in colloquial street Arabic, the verb *dhabaha* (used of the terrorists' justified "slaughter" of resisting passengers) arguably also refers back to Ibrahim's near-sacrifice of the one popularly known in Islam as the *dhabih allah*, the "intended sacrifice of God" (Makiya and Mneimneh 2002b; Ruthven: 37). Though the status of the allusion is debatable, a reference to the Abrahamic "sacrifice" as the epitome of Islam, *aslama*, surrender, would certainly not be out of place in a document in which the "first" (more likely second) page begins with an exhortation to "present [to God] our sacrifices and obedience" (ABC translation) or to undertake "actions that make us closer to God and actions of obedience" (Makiya and Mneimneh's translation in 2002b: 320). And the reference back to this primal scene of sacrifice is made explicit in the second document—Atta's will. Here, just before the author embarks on long and detailed instructions of what is to happen to his corpse (gloves are to be worn when touching the genitalia; pregnant women or other unclean people are to have no contact with him; women are not to go to the grave either during the funeral or afterward), he exhorts his family and everyone who reads this, in his memory, to "do what Ibrahim (a prophet) told his son to do, to die as a good Muslim."

This particularly deviant citation and mutation of the "Abrahamic" seems to urge a new kind of analysis from those who, as I do, study Judaism, Christianity, or Islam primarily through their texts. It signals a need to sacrifice traditional disciplinary *focus* (around one particular author or time frame) for a larger macro-interpretation across the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic, and also a need to move away from a certain reification of the word alone and its particular Protestant and Lutheran heritage (cf. Asad: 287). Indeed, there could be no starker illustration of the need to study sacred texts within a wider web of structures, institutions, and performances than Muhammad Atta's instructions that the Qur'an be spoken into cupped hands, then rubbed into the bag, tools, knife, and bodies of the perpetrators (Lincoln: 9). These abhorrent declensions of the Abrahamic grammars point to a need for textual scholars to push beyond the quest for ever more precise presentations of the text's philology, sources, historical context, and literary qualities, toward questions of responsibility, critique, and, above all, the complex, always imperfectly resolved, negotiations between religion and ethics. For the minutiae,

nuance, and relative freedom of academic work can and must also be used to explore how—in a place beneath the necessary public pragmatism of the Sunni Cairo Statement and its firm separation of Islam and killing—lies the specter of religious violence that cannot simply be exorcised into a renegade "Islamism" outside "Islam" proper any more than it can legitimately be expelled into a scapegoat body of militant Islam outside the Judeo-Christian West.[3]

This study is a modest attempt to suggest what it might mean to read the ancient texts in ways that matter. It is an attempt to show how the ancient sources open up timely questions about wounds between the religions and between ethics and religion, and also how they resonate, unexpectedly, with contemporary themes of "missing persons," "collateral damage," and sacrifice as productivity versus sacrifice as waste.

THREE SIBLINGS, EACH THE "ONLY": ISAAC-SLASH-ISHMAEL-SLASH-JESUS

A particularly bland response to 9/11 was that of Tony Blair, who, in rather paternalistic political-e(a)se, affirmed that "Jews, Christians and Muslims are all children of Abraham" and that "This is the moment to bring the faiths closer together in the understanding of our common value and heritage." In contrast, any close reading of Genesis 22 and Sura 37 (99–113) and the genealogical and interpretative lines that extend from them would have to say that far from offering a tranquil scene of hospitality played out beneath the generous canopy of the Abrahamic, these narratives stage conflicts or cuts of identity along the lines of Isaac/Ishmael/Jesus. (These dividing lines should be vocalized not as the gentle British "stroke" but as the North-American "slash": "Isaac slash Ishmael slash Jesus."[4])

[3] The Sunni Cairo Statement, issued in November 2001 by the Islamic Research Council at al Ahzar in Cairo, maintained that Islam was based on "ethical norms" that "forbid the killing of non-combatants"—a crucial political intervention, though one that imperfectly represented the relationship between religion and ethics in Islam (and also Judaism and Christianity; for the potential for what could be called "domestic violence" on the "home" ground of the so-called Judeo-Christian is also the issue here). For samples of the numerous displacements of the specter of religious violence onto Islam (alone), see, for example, Kenneth Adelman's description of "Islam as a militaristic, not a peaceful religion" and his declaration that its founder was a "warrior and not a peace advocate like Jesus" and Eliot Cohen's declaration that "militant Islam" was the new enemy of the United States (as cited in Fisk). For the separation of Islamic and Islamist, see Ruthven and the Sunni Cairo Statement above. The distilling out of the Islamist from the Islamic is, of course, intimately related to the larger move that expels the violent Islamic from the Jewish and the Christian.

[4] This observation on the violent "slash" versus the more pacifying "stroke" is borrowed from Moore: 377.

The biblical "sacrifice" of Isaac fits perfectly into that biblical book of thwarted, tortured Geneses, where, as Regina Schwartz has noted, monotheism is tied up with scarcity (blessing *only* for the *one*) and where the founding myths are not those of autochthony but of sibling rivalry, filial struggle, belatedness, and inverted primogeniture (often haunted by a residual guilt over the one who has been dispossessed). It effects the legitimation of the second true son, Isaac, now the "one" and "only" (Gen. 22.2) *over and above* the first son Ishmael, who has just been expelled, with his Egyptian slave-mother, Hagar, into the desert. As Fethi Benslama argues, the Egyptian woman, Hagar, who conceives her "wild-ass" or animal son through natural means (sexual intercourse with his father), and her son seem to exist to be a foil to the supernatural promise child, conceived by postmenopausal, divinely "visited" Sarah (Gen. 21.1). Their demotion to the realm of the desert and the animal serves to highlight the elevation of the promise child: as they are of the creaturely, the natural, the animal, the ground, so he is of the miracle, the sky, the mountaintop, the stars (Benslama: 132).[5] But Ishmael and Hagar are also figures of residual guilt and anxiety. There is something deeply counterproductive about the way in which Genesis 22 mimics and recalls Genesis 21 and (as Phyllis Trible and others have noted) something strange about the way in which the Egyptian flight from the oppressive house of Israel seems to take the form of a proleptic *reverse* Exodus.

The opening gambit of the biblical narrative, "Take your son, your only son, whom you love/your favored one," seems to make of Ishmael a missing person and raises the question whether Ishmael is, like so many missing persons, dead or, at the very least, dead in effect. But then the biblical text, as it sometimes does, draws attention to this act of repression (or supersession) by beginning Genesis 22 with the words "After these things" (22.1) as if deliberately to bring Genesis 21 to mind, and then (guiltily?) tells the story of the almost-death of Isaac in a way that seems to mimic the vocabulary and structure of the story of the almost-death of Ishmael. God's command "Take your son, your only son, the one you love" is, we could say, anxiously overqualified, and the fifth-century midrash *Genesis Rabbah* (c. 400–450 C.E.) exploits this anxiety by opening up all the old

[5] Benslama seems to go a little too far in identifying Isaac as the child born of "spirit" (132) and generally seems to assume too much closeness between Judaism and Christianity as opposed to Islam. Compare Levenson's warning that one needs to describe the difference between Ishmael and Isaac in Genesis's own terms without retrojecting Pauline idioms of the replacement of "birth" with "faith" and the "natural" with "spirit." Levenson carefully defines Isaac as "the son [or one] whose very existence from the moment of the angelic annunciation of his impending birth, has *run counter to the naturalness of familial life*" (70, 126; my italics).

wounds of identity[6] in the biblical text. The midrash imagines Abraham punctuating and querying God's strangely garrulous command as follows:

> God: Take your son
> Abraham: I have two sons
> God: Your only one
> Abraham: This one is the only son to his mother and this one is the only son to his mother
> God: The one you love
> Abraham: I love them both
> God: Isaac. (*Genesis Rabbah* 55.7; cf. *B.Sanhedrin* 89b)[7]

The exchange is remarkable, making it clear that God is unable to make a clear distinction between the sons from any solid conceptual ground whatsoever and can only close the discussion by pronouncing what alone is unique and proper to Isaac, what alone can affirm the primacy of Isaac: his name. *Genesis Rabbah* as good as affirms that only the name and the choice of God can make any difference between the only (the one) and the not-only (the other) prior to the sacrifice, but at the same time[8] it argues that the priority of Isaac *is* established by the fact of the sacrifice, so that Isaac *is* authentically first, and not second, when he comes back down from Mount Moriah. According to the Midrash the sacrifice is preceded by, and contextualized within, a *competition* between Ishmael and Isaac over which son is the most loving and beloved, interpreted in terms of who is the *most circumcised* or who bears the deepest love-scar for God:

> Isaac and Ishmael were engaged in a controversy: the *latter* argued, "I am more beloved than you, because I was circumcised at the age of thirteen" while the *other* retorted "I am more beloved than you because I was circumcised at eight days." Ishmael said to him: "I am more

[6] This apt phrase is taken from Brett: 73.

[7] This same conversation creeps through midrash into early Islamic interpretation in an abbreviated form. One early source attributed to Uthman Ibn Hadir (d.249/823) reports: "Abraham said to his Lord 'Which of my two sons am I to sacrifice?' And his Lord revealed 'The one most loved by you (*ahabbu-huma ilay-ka*)' " (cit. and trans. in Calder: 381).

[8] As Jacques Derrida has pointed out, we use the phrase "at the same time" to mark a disjunction and a conjunction: "it is like this, but at the same [i.e., different] time, it is different." This divided phrase perfectly expresses the midrash's division between the similarity and (at the same time) difference between Ishmael and Isaac, a division based on the difference in time between the "before" and "after" of the sacrifice. For Derrida's discussion of "at the same time," see 2002: 93. For his fascinating response to this particular midrash, which he reads as "the beginning of secularization: the transition from heteronomy to autonomy," see Derrida 2004.

> beloved because I could have protested, and yet I did not." At that moment Isaac exclaimed "O that God would appear to me and bid me cut off my limbs then I would not refuse!" God said, "Even if I bid you to sacrifice yourself, you will not refuse."
>
> Another version: And it came to pass after these things when Isaac and Ishmael quarreled. Ishmael said, "I am the one who is most appropriate to inherit from my father since I am his first-born." Isaac said "I am more appropriate because I am the son of his wife Sarah while you are the son of Hagar, my mother's maid." Ishmael said to him: "I am more beloved than you, since I was circumcised at the age of thirteen, but you were circumcised as a baby and could not refuse." Isaac retorted: "All that you did was to lend to the Holy One, Blessed be He, three drops of blood. But I am now thirty-seven years old yet if God desired of me that I be slaughtered, I would not refuse." (*Genesis Rabbah* 55.4)[9]

By reading the sacrifice as, in effect, a *hypercircumcision*, the midrash affirms the primacy of Isaac and constructs Jewish identity around descent from Isaac, the true, most wounded son. Similarly, but this time at the expense of the "Jew," the New Covenant/Testament constructs Christian identity around descent, by faith, from the Christ who is both Isaac and the lamb, and achieves what could be called the Ishmaelization of the Jews. In the *striking* typology[10] of Galatians 4.21–4.31, Paul cuts antithetical slashes between the children of the flesh and the children of the promise, slave and free, Mount Sinai and Mount Golgotha, so effectively making a new map of the terrain of salvation in which Golgotha is either overlaid on Mount Moriah or conceived of as part of the same mountain range (Sinai now being a long way off, in a different mountain range, in the region of "Law/Works" rather than "Promise/Faith"). Reading the collective noun "seed" (*zera*; *spermatos*) in Gen. 13.16 and Gen. 17.8 as a deliberate, emphatic *singular*, Paul claims that this explicitly refers to Christ, the *only*, and thus makes it clear that the Abrahamic promise is being universalized, paradoxically, by being focused through a single christological channel (Gal. 3.13–3.16).[11]

As H. Richard Niebuhr says, "to be a self is to have a God, to have a God is to have a history . . . and to have one God is to have one history"

[9] This translation is taken from Freedman and Simon: 484–485. I have italicized their "latter" and "other" as it seems (perhaps more than accidentally) to suggest that, from the vantage point of each son, each other is "latter" and "other," and each other is secondary. This is less to the fore in the terser Hebrew original where each son is referred to simply as "this one," "*zeh*."

[10] As Mark C. Taylor points out, "typology" derives from *tupos*, related to *tupto* "to strike," and signifies an image/model and the mark or trace left by a blow or the application of pressure, like the mark of the nails in Jesus' hands (56).

[11] For a more detailed discussion of the implications of this transition, see Levenson: 210–213.

(59), but when there is more than one self and more than one monotheism, then history, theology, and geography must split—a split staged, most self-consciously, in the tangled lines of (af)filiation to Abraham's most beloved son. This is not to say that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are Abrahamic in any simplistic sense or that labeling these three religions "Abrahamic" might be any more helpful than labeling them as "monotheistic":[12] each comes *after* Abraham but traces itself back to Abraham, the autodidact with monotheism welling up inside him before Sinai, before Jesus, before Muhammad, and before Torah, Qur'an, and Christian Bibles, but each is also so-much-more-than-Abrahamic. Judaism is also Mosaic and Davidic and Rabbinic, Muhammad repeats and affirms some of the actions of Ibrahim but takes the center of the new religion elsewhere (both chronologically and geographically), and in Christianity Jesus, in the line of Abraham, is also more and better than Abraham (Hebrews 7) and also prior to father Abraham because before Abraham son-Jesus was, or "is" (John 8.58).

Yet even as they exceed Abraham the three religions are also involved in a struggle to possess this pure origin, or father, from whom everything and everyone is descended and to make the man from Ur the ur-man of their own religion. In the battle of the competing narratives time itself is reinvented: Jesus "is" prior to Abraham, and Christian theology makes of Jewish-Ishmael a usurped elder, a first that now comes second. And then (in a revolution that contests the very sequence implied by this "then") Islam, the old-new, first-last religion, relocates Judaism and Christianity somewhere between its own culmination in the revelation to Muhammad, the last prophet, and its own beginning in Abraham, the *hanif*. These reconceptions of time are absolutely impervious to contextual historical studies that have themselves been skewed by Orientalizing structures of geography and chronology, locating the center, source, and culmination "here" in the richly overspilling "West." Scholars have habitually traced interpretative lines that assume that the putative hybrid, the "Judeo-Christian," is superior to Islam, that the Bible and post-biblical literatures are prior to the always derivative Qur'an, and that the story-trade between Jews, Christians, and Muslims only ever went in one direction, *to* the East from a (qualifiedly Eastern) proto-West.

Sura 37 of the Qur'an famously does not name the *dhabih allah* or "intended sacrifice of God," referring to him simply as the "gentle son." But though early Islamic sources argue, in about equal proportions, for

[12] Compare Martin Jaffee's questions about "monotheism" and whether "there are other, more salient ways of dividing the turf of religion than counting divinities" (754).

Isaac and Ishmael as the *dhabih*, by around the tenth century this twoness had consolidated into a oneness and the Islamic site of the story had moved south from Jerusalem to the Hijaz.[13]

In the early centuries of Islam there was a strong geographical dimension to the debate over the identity of the son, which in turn was tied to the question of Islam's distinctiveness and its relation to Judaism and Christianity: it was generally (though not exclusively) assumed that scholars must adjudicate between an Isaac-and-Syria tradition, on the one hand, and a Mecca-Ishmael tradition, on the other. As Ishmael came to the fore as the *dhabih*, Islamic scholars increasingly disparaged the alternative view, now increasingly marked as distinctively "Jewish" (and also "Persian"). Al-Tha'labi (d.427/1036) reported that "the Jews claim that it was Isaac, but the Jews lie" (*Ara'is al-Majalis*, cit. and trans. in Firestone: 137),[14] and a popular story, found in no less than eight sources, told how a Jewish scholar who had converted to Islam had confessed to the Ummayad Caliph Umar that the Jews had known all along that the intended was really Ishmael but had purposefully denied that fact. According to this "confession," the Jews had deliberately changed the story because they "envied the Arab community because their father was the one commanded to be sacrificed, and *because he was the one who was ascribed for merit for his steadfastness*" and had falsely inserted Isaac into the text in order to redirect the flow of divine blessing and merit toward the Jews (al-Tabari, *Commentary* 23.84–23.85, *History* 299; al-Thalabi 92; al-Zamakhshari 3.350; al-Tabarsi 23.75; Ibn Kathir, *Commentary* 4.18, *History* 235–236; Mujir-al-Din 140–141, cit. and trans. by Firestone: 143; my italics). Ibn Kathir (d.774/1373) claimed to find the evidence for this substitution in the biblical text, which he read closely, with an eye to its wounds, lacunae, and contradictions. He argued that one could clearly see how the Jews had "dishonestly and slanderously forced Isaac in" because the reading "Isaac" actually "contradicts their own book"—indeed, they could only have read it thus by squeezing from the words "your only son" the sense that "you have no other than he" (Imad al-Din

[13] In the seventh and eighth centuries Islam was more open to Biblicist traditions than it became in the ninth and tenth, when a distinct intellectual and theological identity was consolidated under the Abbasid Caliphate (750/132-1258/656). According to Reuven Firestone the battle between Isaac and Ishmael was probably won by Ishmael even before the time of al-Tabari (d.310/923), although the Isaac tradition survives because it is grounded in the first two centuries of Islam. For discussion, see Firestone: 320–321.

[14] I do not want to create any illusion of having read the Arabic texts in the original. I have relied entirely on translations by Islamicists (primarily Firestone and Calder) and, where possible, comparisons between them. My study has been circumscribed by the range of texts available in English translation.

Isma'il b. Umar ibn Kathir, *Tafsīr al-Qur'an al-Azim* 4.14, cit. and trans. by Firestone: 139).

As early Christianity Ishmaelizes the Jews and as Islam deflects the true line away from Isaac toward Ishmael, so early Judaism condemns impostor Muslim and Christian sons who inauthentically trace their ancestry back through the true, almost sacrificed son. Whereas pre-Islamic *Midrash Rabbah* is ambiguous about the relationship between Ishmael and Isaac (making the similarity explicit and the differences slight), the ninth-century *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* is more zealous about effecting the disinheritance of Ishmael and his sons. This midrash, written in the context of the expanding Muslim empire,[15] imagines a conversation between Eliezer and Ishmael, in which a self-interested Ishmael expresses his eagerness to possess the inheritance that will now be his (now that Abraham is slaying his rival up on the mountain) and imagines Eliezer castigating him (in a speech obviously designed to elicit the pleasure and *schadenfreude* of the Islam-dominated Jewish community): "You will not inherit . . . He has already driven *you* out like a woman divorced from her husband, and has sent *you* away to the wilderness" (*Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* 31; my italics). The text, demoting Ishmael-as-Islam and, to a lesser extent, Eliezer-as-Christianity, acts, as Burton Vizgotzky suggests, as an antidote for the impotence of the Jews, over and against the larger Empires struggling for control of the Mediterranean basin, while also celebrating Isaac as the most authentic son as the forerunner of Rabbinic Judaism (11).

What in the early texts appear to be fresh, still smarting, cuts of identity are now just scars, no longer enflamed by debate: for Jews the son *is* Isaac, for Muslims he *is* Ishmael, and for Christians he *is* both Isaac and the Isaac-Christ. Yet even within the academy, western, Christian-authored dictionaries and encyclopedias of Islam have tended to overemphasize contemporary Islamic identification of the son as Isaac (now all but nonexistent) and to disingenuously suggest that the question of the identity of the almost-dead son is, for Muslims, still alive. The 1927 *Encyclopaedia of Islam* includes the account of the sacrifice under the heading "Is-hak" and not "Isma'il" (Houtsma et al.: 4. 532; compare the 1978 revised edition, which discusses the sacrifice under both names [van Donzel et al.: 4.109–4.110 and 184–185]), whereas Edward Westermarck's suspiciously titled *Pagan Survivals in Muhamedan* [sic] *Civilization* reports that the Moroccan Muslims generally believe Isaac to have been the *dhabih* (62).

[15] The *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* gives the name of the wives of Ishmael as Fatima and Ayesha and refers to the land reforms of Mu'awiya, to the caliphate of the sons of Harun al-Rashid, and to the Muslim conquest of Rome. There are also several allusions to Islam as the "fourth kingdom," destined to persecute the chosen people prior to the dawn of the messianic kingdom (see Baron: 163).

The Christian-authored *A Dictionary of Islam* claims that because 11.74 says, "we told her that she would give birth to Isaac," and then 37.99 reports, "we gave him news of a gentle son," "there can be no doubt in any candid mind that, as far as the Qur'an in concerned, Isaac and not Ishmael is intended" (Hughes: 219). (This appeal to all candid minds conveniently ignores the fact that, even if one were to accept that it were legitimate to interpret the Qur'an chronologically, the birth of Isaac also comes after the "sacrifice," if strict chronology is to be observed.[16])

The interpretative slashes between Ishmael/Isaac/Jesus are revealing, cutting as they do along the distinction between Abraham as the special father of the Synagogue, the Church, and the Umma and Abraham as the father of generally dispersed Abrahamic seed. Abraham can no more sacrifice both sons than any one of the monotheisms can fully relinquish the precious status of the only-one-ness. The impossibility of the true blood- or faith-line—flowing equally through both branches/sons—points to the vexed relationships of all the monotheisms to questions of "particularism" and "universalism": the wide-ranging discussions in Judaism on the relations between the chosen and the others; Christianity's reach toward a "democratizing," universalizing vision that stumbles over the limit of the non- and never-to-be Christian other (of whom the Jew, as insider-outsider, is the iconic representative); and Islam's assertions of the commonality of the Abrahamic monotheisms (Sura 3.64) but also of a definition of Islam that is more supersessionist and exclusivist (e.g., Sura 3.19; 3.85; 61.9). Now, more than ever, it seems crucial to emphasize the struggle between universality and particularity that takes place within all three "Abrahamic" religions—not least to counter prevalent mythologies of a Christian universalism allied with progressive, secular democracy over and against Jewish or Islamic tendencies toward "theocracy" and "xenophobia" (this not to deny the need for a careful analysis of relations between religion, democracy, and theocracy but rather to confront the deep mythologies that often dictate a reflex response). Far from being a simplistic canopy, the Abrahamic family tree is a tangled thicket, sprawling, impossibly overdetermined. And if we go back to the Bible—where we find, in addition to the problematic two, six more named Abrahamic sons (Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah, sons of Keturah, see Genesis 25), not to mention the sons of Abraham's concubines, to whom he "gives gifts" (Gen. 25.6)—we see that, in truth, the Abrahamic family, and so the truth, is overdetermined from the start.

[16] Cf. the brief discussion in Combs-Schilling: 320–321. Note the emphatic point that *no* Moroccan Muslim interviewed ever expressed the view that Isaac was the *dhabih*.

THE HIGHEST, HOLIEST OF STORIES AND GOOD (PRODUCTIVE) WOUNDS

As if to demonstrate the importance and centrality of the sacrifice narrative—which the biblical version locates, instructively, on a mountaintop—the story gravitates toward the highest, holiest days in the liturgical calendars and converges on the geographical and ritual centers of the three religions of the book. Christianity embraces it, as it were, with a *passion*, tying it to the gift of the blood and body of God's beloved, his *agapētos*, and the bound lamb (*agnus dei*) who is symbolically a composite of the paschal lamb and the Isaac (and ram) of Mount Moriah.[17] Liturgically and iconographically, the story clusters around Good Friday and the celebration of the Eucharist or Lord's Supper: as in the sixth-century altarpiece at Ravenna (figure 1), when the Eucharist is offered, the son-offering Abraham frequently stands nearby.

As the early Christian fathers took the wood from Isaac's back and made it into a cross, and took the thicket and made from it a crown of thorns, so Jewish tradition takes the basic material of the narrative and redistributes it around its central symbols, performances, and texts. According to tradition the ashes and wood of the Abrahamic altar formed the basis of the altar in the Solomonic temple, at the geographical height, and heart that is the Holy of Holies, on the temple mount in Jerusalem (see, e.g., 2 Chron. 3.1 and *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* 31).[18] Liturgically, the ram offered on Mount Moriah was linked to the two daily lamb offerings in the temple and hence, in the shift from physical offerings to sacrifices of the lips, to their substitution by the two daily offerings of the *Shemoneh esreh* or *Amidah*, the central pillar of Jewish prayer. Not only does the *akedah* thus inhabit the deep history of the liturgy, but it surfaces, overtly and explicitly, on Rosh Hashanah—the head of the year and the beginning of the High Holy Days—where the redemptive, memorial, and intercessory power of Abraham and Isaac's self-offering is evoked in the blast of the ram's horn, the shofar.[19] In Islam the sacrifice of Ibrahim is imprinted on the landscape and ritual performances of the

[17] The influential Septuagint translation of Hebrew *yahid*, the favored one (Gen. 22.2, 12, 16), into *agapētos* (the beloved son) can be traced through Mark 1.11 (Matt. 3.17, Luke 3.22), 2 Pet 1.17, and John 3.16 (cf. Rom. 8.32). Jesus is paschal lamb in 1 Cor. 5.7, the last supper in the synoptics and the crucifixion in John. As Jon Levenson argues, the Johannine crucifixion scene seems to fuse the paschal and the *yahid* through allusions to Exod. 12.46 and Zech. 12.10. See Levenson: 206–207.

[18] For a more detailed discussion of how Judaism uses and redistributes the basic word material of the Akedah, see Sherwood 2004.

[19] For the explicit relationship between the daily offering of lambs in the temple to the binding of Isaac, see *Leviticus Rabbah* 2.11. For the redemptive power of the binding evoked through the blast of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah see, for example *Targum Neofiti* to Lev. 22.27, *B. Rosh Hashanah* 16a.

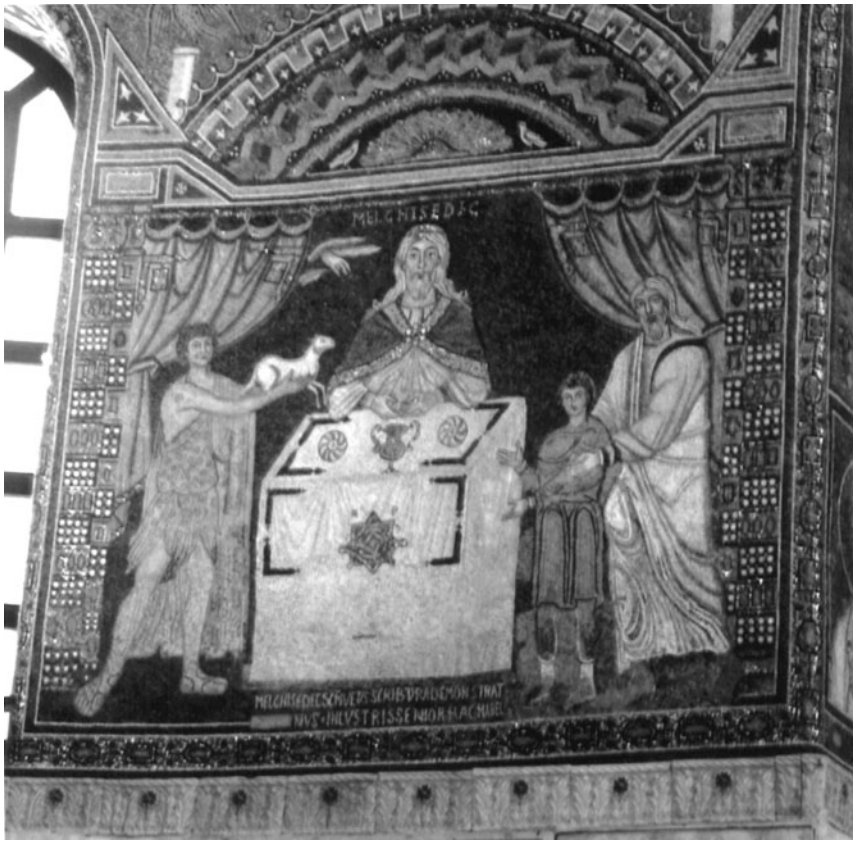

Figure 1. Abraham offering Isaac on the right hand side of the eucharistic altar (on the left hand side Abel offers a lamb and Melchizedek presides). Ravenna, *S. Apollinare i Classe*, sixth century. Photograph Alastair Hunter.

Hajj and so built into the foundations of one of the pillars of Islam. The running ritual (*al-sa'i*) between Safa and Marwa evokes Hagar's search for water in the desert; the act of throwing stones at the three pillars at Mina recalls Ibrahim and Ishmael's defeat of Satan as he tried to thwart the sacrifice; Ibrahim's dramatic act of obedience is remembered by the Hajjis as they meditate on the plains of Arafat; some traditions also say that the ram's horn was hung on the Ka'ba; and the sacrifice is commemorated with the slaughter of a goat or ram on *Id al-Kabir* (the "Greater Festival") or the *Great Bairam* or *Id al-adha* (the "Sacrificial Feast") that lasts for three days from the tenth day of the Hajj.

The three religions also share the sense that, theologically, this "sacrificial" moment serves as a kind of Waterloo, Midway, or El-Alamein in the showdown between Good (God) and its Opponents: as Christianity locates the narrative, typologically, at the heart of the drama of salvation, so, as if to emphasize the absolute preciousness of what is achieved, Islamic *tafarsĭr*[20] and Jewish midrashim imagine the sacrifice vigorously opposed by iblis/the devil/Satan/mastema/al-shaytan.[21] An Islamic tradition authenticated by Ka'b al Akbar depicts al-shaytan as seeing this text as his greatest crisis and greatest opportunity and vowing, "If I do not beguile the family of Abraham now, I will *never* beguile them" (Firestone: 111; my italics).[22] Jewish and Islamic traditions embroider the biblical and Qur'anic narrative with details of how the devil turns himself into a river and almost drowns Abraham; throws stones at Isaac in an attempt to make him ritually unfit; whispers fiendishly to Sarah and Isaac or Hagar and Ishmael that the son is *not* actually going on an errand or going out to gather firewood, as Abraham has told them; and at the crucial, climatic moment, attempts to knock the knife out of the patriarch's hand (see, e.g., *Midrash Aggadah*, *Vayera* 51; *Midrash Tanhuma*, *Vayera* 81; al-Tha'labi, *Ara'is al-Majalis* 94–95; Ibn Kathir 4.15; al-Tabari, *Commentary* 23.82 and *History* 292–294; Islamic sources cit. and trans. in Firestone: 111).

The ubiquity of Satan, particularly in Judaism where he is usually only a minor player, testifies to the absolute importance of what is demonstrated in the sacrifice—namely, the creative, productive power of surrender to God, expressed with different inflections in the distinctive monotheistic vocabularies. In the *kenosis* of the Christ, Jesus submits even unto death on a cross (Phil 2.8), and that humbling is productive of a whole world of descendants as the single Abrahamic seed falls to the ground and dies (Gal. 3.13–3.16; John 12.24). Similar, though not identical, declensions in Judaism are suggested by a medieval *Machzor* for Rosh Hashanah that imagines the sacrifice taking place beneath the canopy of the final *k* ך of "king": מלך ("*melek*")—that is beneath, and as a supreme illustration of, God's kingship (figure 2); by the comment of Saadia Gaon

[20] *Tafsĭr* (plural *tafarsĭr*) is Islamic textual commentary, as opposed to *ta'rikh*, history, and *qisas al-anbiya* ("tales of the prophets"). It is akin to Jewish midrash (Jewish textual commentary that often takes the form of narrative). As midrash comes from the root d-r-s, "to seek," so *tafsĭr* comes from the root f-s-r, "to reveal."

[21] In Judaism, in a tradition that goes as far back as the book of Jubilees (second century B.C.E.), the sacrifice of Isaac is the culmination of the so-called trials of Abraham. The Qur'an also reports the trials of Abraham (2.124) but rarely makes a connection between the sacrifice and the trials (see Firestone: 108).

[22] For the associated sense that this moment is the tradition's greatest point of weakness—and hence Satan's greatest opportunity—see below.

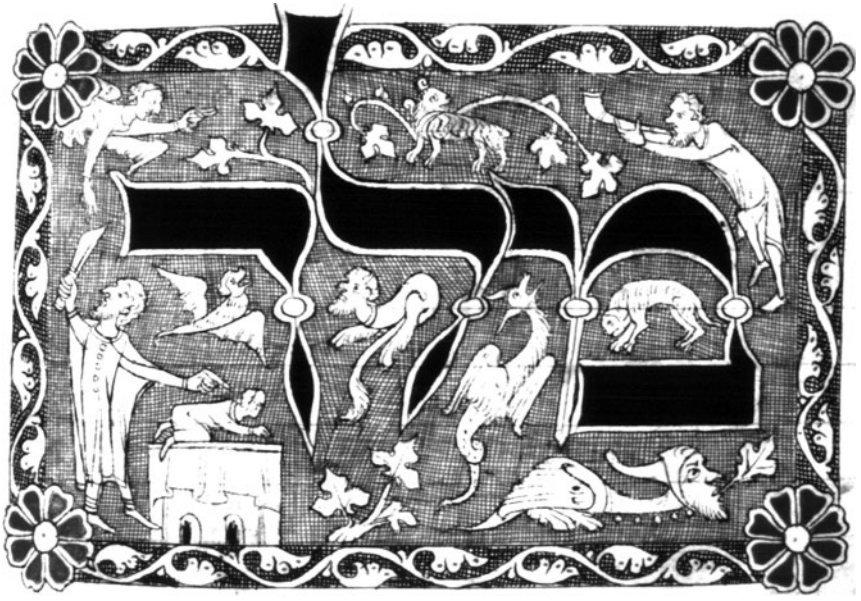

Figure 2. The sacrifice taking place beneath the canopy of the final ך of "king": מלך Klm. Ms. Reggio 1, folio 159v. Machzor, Germany, first half of fourteenth century. Copyright Bodleian Library, Oxford.

(882–942) that the shofar is blown to "remind us of Isaac who offered his life to Heaven and to exhort us to offer up our lives to heaven" (39); and by *Sifre Deuteronomy*'s statement that "Isaac, who bound himself upon the altar" becomes the iconic example of loving God with all your soul, according to the injunction at the heart of the *shema* (*Sifre Deuteronomy* 32 on Deut. 6.5). Relatedly, in Islam, by surrendering (*aslama*), Ibrahim and Ishmael demonstrate the fundamental principle of Islam ("surrender"); moreover, as the *halim*, the son is the "patient and forbearing" one, an epithet also applied to Abraham (cf. 9.114 and 11.75) and even, in a different sense, to Allah (Caspi and Cohen: 100). With his forehead (*jabin*) to the ground—the posture explicitly given to him in the Qur'an—the gentle son takes up the typical posture assumed by a Muslim at *salat* and becomes the perfect example of the absolute emptying of the self for Sufis like Ibn 'Arabi.

Judaism and Christianity add a further declension of the scene of submission that is virtually absent in Islamic grammar. For a brief moment that too-easily-invoked hybrid, the "Judeo-Christian," actually seems to come into existence, as the two religions cross (surprisingly enough)

around the figure of the cross and read the story in a similar vein by linking it to the same vein of wonder-working, atoning blood. In Christianity the lamb and the son become one; the second, greater Isaac really dies and rises again, and, in a logic embraced more openly in some epochs and theologies than others, the scars (stigmata) are productive, for new life grows from those scars (figure 3).[23] Curiously, Jewish Isaac bears an uncanny resemblance to Christian Jesus, and just as Christian typology makes a cross from the wood on Jesus-Isaac's back, so some midrashim imagine Isaac carrying his cross (*Genesis Rabbah* 56.3; *Pesikta Rabbati* 31; *Midrash Sekhel Tov* 61). To intensify the sense of a tangled, "Judeo-Christian" thicket of interpretation, some medieval midrashim suggest that *the ram was also called Isaac*, so making it possible for "Isaac" to die, or *perhaps* to die, or for "Isaac" to die *and*, at the same time, for "Isaac" to be spared (*Midrash ha-Gadol* on Gen. 22.13; "Midrash Composed Under the Holy Spirit" in Mann: 67). Turning dying "Isaac," for a brief moment, definitively into the son, the Rosh Hashanah liturgy proclaims that God "deals with his children in accordance to the attribute of Mercy" when he sees heaped on top of the altar the "ashes of Father Isaac," whereas other midrashim delicately maintain the paradox by claiming that Isaac left "a quarter [a *log*] of his blood upon the altar" (a *log* being, undecideably, all the blood a person has and also just a quarter), so that Isaac is, at the very least, scarred, burnt a little bit, or subject to a wound as mini-death.[24] This delicately balanced "death of Isaac" is productive, producing sustained life through divine forgiveness (because of the Akedah, reports of Israel's sin will go in one of God's ears and out the other; see *Genesis Rabbah* 56.3 and *Midrash ha-Gadol* 353) and also the first instance, and sometimes even the basis, of resurrection, for "by the merit [or blood/ash] of Isaac who offered himself upon the altar, the Holy One Blessed be He will in future resurrect the dead" (*Pesikta de Rav Kahana*, 32, 200a; cf. *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* 31). It seems that both Judaism and Christianity take that biblical burst of star-sons, that superlative promise of so much more life in Genesis 22.17, and convert it into what it always seems

[23] It would be too simplistic to consign this understanding to a particular denomination (most obviously, Catholicism) or to a particular epoch (the medieval European). The fecund productivity of the blood of Christ flows through different theologies, past and present, in complicated ways, that can only be reductively polarized between "Protestantism" and "Catholicism" as homogeneous macroentities.

[24] For the ashes of Isaac, see "Traditional supplication for the one who sounds the shofar" *Vienna Machzor* (ed. by Heidenheim, 1827), cit. in Spiegel: 38; *Tanhuma Vayikra* 23; and *Midrash Rabbah* on Lev. 26.42. Cf. *Ta'an* 2.1 and b.*Berkakhot* 62b, where ashes are placed on the head as a "reminder of the ashes of Isaac." For Isaac's blood, see *Midrash ha-Gadol* 353. The definition of a "*log*" comes from *B.Sotah* 5a.

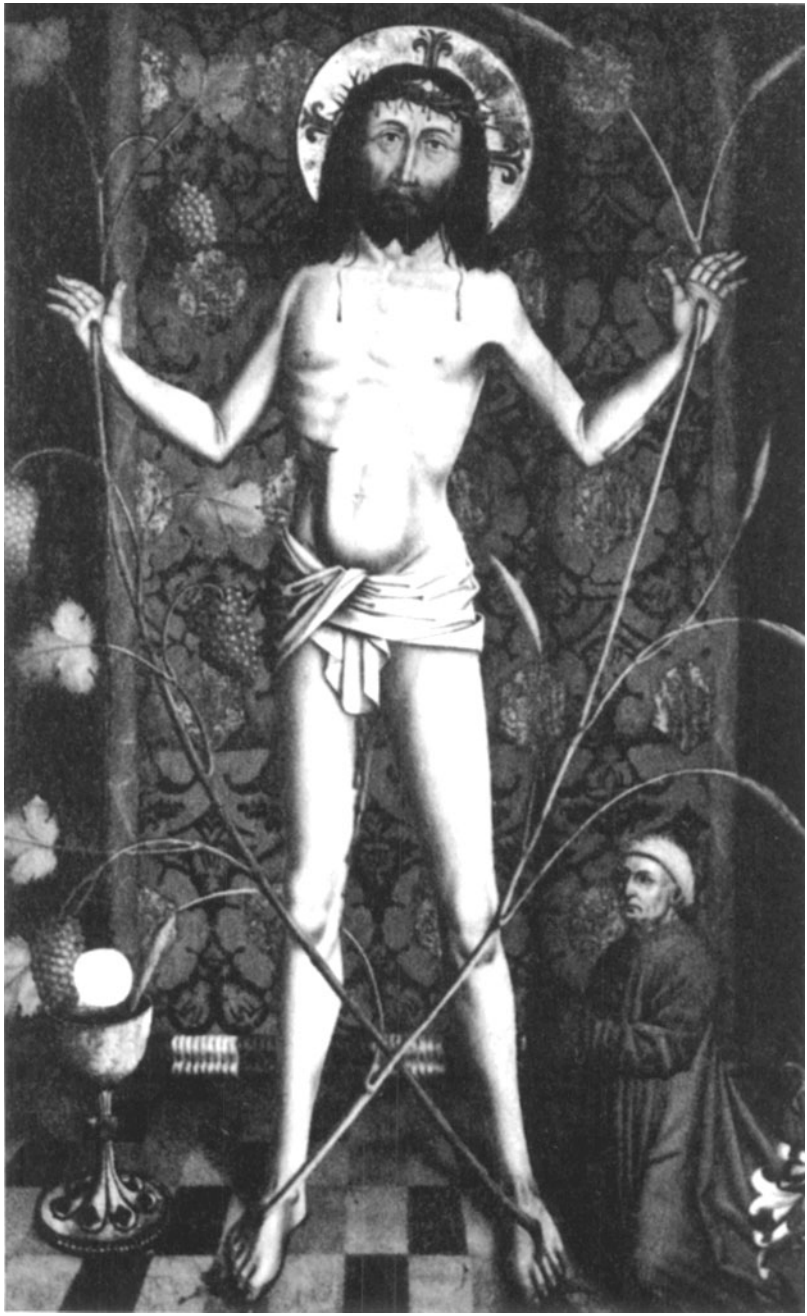

Figure 3. *Christ with Ears of Wheat and Grape Vine*. From the studio of Fritz Herlin, German artist of the early Swabian School, 1469. Hirsch, Nördlingen.

to be dreaming of being—that is, a promise and prooftext of the resurrection, more life in the most superlative and everlasting sense.

Islam, in contrast, relates the sacrifice to resurrection only insofar as it locates the narrative in a Sura about the righteous who will obtain paradise. It emphatically does not let the beloved die, even in a partial, momentary way, and makes hardly anything of the sacrificial logic whereby life is made from, and is dependent on, the redemptive power of death. In fact, searching through translations of Islamic *tafarsīr* on Sura 37, I can only find two related early traditions that bring the role of the *dhabih* anywhere close to that of Christian Jesus and certain Jewish Isaacs. Two slightly different early traditions tell how Allah granted Isaac a wish in acknowledgement of the fact that, as Reuven Firestone puts it, in his own gloss, "the sacrifice ordeal was unfair to its intended victim and that [Isaac] was therefore deserving of recompense, or that Isaac's merit was so great for having agreed wholeheartedly to the act that he was deserving of reward" (133). According to these two traditions Isaac used his wish either to request that Allah would allow "any person in any era who does not attribute any partner to you[25] to enter Paradise" or to be permitted to intercede for all the Muslim people who died after him, and in both cases the wish was granted (al-Tha'labi 92 and Ibn Kathir 4.16, citing a tradition attributed to Abu Huraya; cit. and trans. in Firestone: 132). However, the fact that these narratives are associated with Isaac, that they never "took" to Ishmael, and that they were later criticized (e.g., by Ibn Kathir) for being inferior and reliant on a single source suggests that they represent an early Jewish and/or Christian legacy that Islam chose to marginalize if never quite expel.

In Islam the *dhabih* never dies, nor is there any extensive tradition of Ishmael/Isaac's wound comparable to Jewish Isaac's scar (or ash) and Jesus' stigmata. In the Shi'a[26] al-Tabarsi tradition Ishmael *is* cut, but only *accidentally* and not *productively*: Ibrahim actually brings the knife down on the son's throat before Gibreel turns it over onto its blunt side (for more on this frequently repeated protective action, see below), and when Sarah rushes to the scene she does indeed see "the sign of the knife scratched into [her son's] throat" (al-Tabarsi [d.518/1153] *Majma 'al-Bayan fi 'Ullum al-Qur'an* 23.77, cit. and trans. in Firestone: 112–113). Another tradition traceable back to the Jewish convert to Islam, Ka'b al-Qurazi (d.735),

[25] The question of the masculinity and asexuality of God "without a (female) partner" is of course a common feature of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (albeit made more explicit in the phraseology of Islam) and is hardly unrelated to the questions that we are exploring here. For a cogent critique of the implications of this theological axiom as it relates to the whole problematic of sacrifice, see Delaney.

[26] It is generally the case that the Shi'ites borrow more freely from Jewish tradition than the Sunnis.

reports how when Moses asked why the Israelites referred to God as the God of *Abraham*, *Ishmael*, and *Israel*,[27] God replied that Abraham loved him superlatively, that Israel (Jacob) never despaired of him, and that "Ishmael was most generous with his blood" (al-Zamakhshari, on the authority of Ka'b al-Qurazi, *Al-kashshaf 'an Haqa'iq al-Tanzil wa'Uyun al-Aqawil fi Wujuh al-Tawil*, cit. and trans. in Firestone: 141). However, though a very little bit of the son's blood seeps into Islam, it seems that nothing comes of (or grows from) it, and the blood is not so much fertile or redemptive as a sign of the very most that we can give. The son's blood seems to stop its signifying flow at the point where it indicates, simply, the utmost that can be offered, rather as in the *tafsīr* which describes how Abraham worked up to the sacrifice of the son by increments. This version of the sacrifice reports how Ibrahim first sacrificed a bull, but God demanded something greater, so he sacrificed a camel, but God demanded something greater: only then did he realize that he was to sacrifice the most precious thing, that is the *dhabih* (al-Kisai, *Qisas al-Anbiya*, cit. and trans. in Firestone: 124–125). Like *Midrash Rabbah* this narrative imaginatively reconstructs the pre-sacrifice drama but stops short at the observation that body, blood, or life is the most that one can give, rather than flowing into the risky but powerful terrain of the redemptive power of blood and the demonstrable *efficacy* of whole- or part-body "circumcision."

LIFE, REGENERATION, PROTECTION: MAKING A MOOT (OR MUTE) POINT OF SACRIFICE

This dampening of the sacrificial theme is evident if, with all the caution that such a comparison would involve, we compare Genesis 22 with Sura 37 of the Qur'an.[28] It seems significant that in the Qur'an the second

[27] The report that the Israelites were calling their God the "God of Abraham, Ishmael, and Israel (Jacob)," thus naming Abraham as the father of Ishmael and Israel (rather than Isaac and Israel), is an interesting variation on the relationship of the sons. The passage is worth quoting in full: "A pious Israelite used to say when praying 'O God, God of Abraham, Ishmael, and Israel.' And Moses said 'O Lord, what should the pious children of Israel say when praying? O God of Abraham, Ishmael, and Israel, I should be included among them. You let me hear your words. You have chosen me as your messenger!' God replied: 'O Moses, no one ever loved me with Abraham's love and nothing ever tempted him away from Me. Ishmael was most generous with his own blood. And as for Israel, he never despaired of My Spirit despite the hardships that befell him.' "

[28] It is, of course, inaccurate to think of those who wrote down the oral recitation of the Qur'an as working to annotate and rewrite a pre-given biblical text, or even as working on a model of scripture similar to that of the Bible (this untranslatability of what Christians mean by Bible also applies, in a different sense, to Jews). For the more accurate model of Qur'an and Bible as "written precipitates of wide-spread story-telling tradition," or as Qur'an as drawing on oral "biblicist" traditions (i.e., traditions that included those unorthodox and sectarian traditions outwith what became Christian scripture proper), see Calder: 387 and Firestone: 3–10.

voice of God says simply, "Abraham, you have already fulfilled the vision" and not (and I am summarizing here to convey a sense of Gen. 22.16–22.17 that Jews and Christians often, for very good reasons, soften[29]), "*Because* you have done this, I will surely bless you and scatter your sacrificially fertilized seed throughout the world" (my italics). Fascinatingly, the Qur'an retains the metaphor of seed but cultivates it in a different direction, training it away from the seed that by dying, germinates, and grafting it onto something closer to the seed in the Christian parable of the sower: "We blessed him and Isaac. But of their progeny are those that do right and those that clearly do wrong. They reap their own rewards" (37.113; following Firestone's translation, 107). The meaning of seed is earthed (that is discharged of potential sacrificial sparks and shocks) by bringing it down to the level of a general ethical exhortation along the lines of "What you sow, you will reap." Similarly, although the sacrifice is located in a Sura about the resurrection of the righteous, resurrection is in no way tied to death, even part-death, or interiorized or metaphorized "death" (in inverted commas). Ibrahim and the *dhabih* do right but not superlatively, sacrificially so: they are simply part of a long chain of surrender that stretches through Noah, Moses and Aaron, Elijah (Ilyas), Lot, and Jonah. The hearer is exhorted to join the ranks of the righteous who will live eternally in paradise, but there is no hint that the "sacrifice" of the beloved son establishes the very basis of that afterlife. Thus, the role of the *dhabih* is limited and separated from that of some Jewish Isaacs and Jesus.

But this muting of sacrifice is by no means an exclusively Islamic move. The interpretative thicket becomes denser and more complex when we realize that the softening within the Qur'an reflects a recoil *already taking place within the biblical text*. Historical critical scholars of the Bible have long maintained, very plausibly, that the biblical narrative is itself a story that has been modified from *actual* sacrifice to *almost* sacrifice, the editorial smoking gun or "bloody knife" leading to this conclusion being the return of the father and servants in Genesis 22.19 *minus the son*. That is, for the biblical editor this scene must not be sacrifice, but "sacrifice," an event to which those marks that we colloquially call "scare-quotes" (i.e., grammatical frighteners, qualifying "beware" marks) quite literally apply. The Qur'an extrapolates, and heightens, this biblical tradition of making a moot, or mute, point of sacrifice: there is no fire, no knife, no firewood, as if to deflect the attention away from the image of the (almost) cut and (almost) burnt son. Moreover, the *dhabih* is consulted by the father and, crucially, gives his consent. Having heard the

[29] For a fuller discussion of these modes of softening, and the reasons for them, see below.

command of Allah in a dream, Ibrahim asks, "Son, what is your view?" and the son replies, "My father, do as you are commanded."

This conversation effectively pours salve on the major ethical wound in the biblical narrative: the fact that this is not a text of (almost) martyrdom (which would be one thing) but of (almost) martyrdom *at one remove*. The fact that the powerful trinity that is God, Abraham, and the narrator never explicitly seeks out the response of Isaac (even as his father holds the knife above him) is the omission that gives readers most torment. Unable to bear this particular lacuna, Martin Luther, for example, supplies an in-depth father–son consultation and castigates "Moses" for his negligence (113). The reason for Luther's, and many others', anxiety is clear (though often repressed) and can be translated into starkly contemporary terms: although the analogy needs to be firmly swaddled in qualifying clauses and caveats, the absence of consultation with the victim means that there is more potential for closeness than we would like between this fundamental text and the script and actions of Muhammad Atta, Abraham's "fundamentalist" imitator. In many respects the difference is comfortingly abyssal: one kills, one only "kills"; one kills nearly three thousand, one "kills" only one; one loves the one he "kills," one hates. One takes life when we know for certain that the desire of those whose life was taken would have been emphatically not to die; one "kills" when the complicity of the one to be killed is simply not stated. Isaac may have agreed to be the lamb, he may not; the unbearable thing is that the voice of Isaac is a question mark, a white space.[30] Painfully, this means that the only firm barricades that we can erect between ground zero and the outlands of the patriarchal "out-law" on Mount Moriah are degree, scale, and the difference between an inauthentic hearing and a genuine hearing of the voice of God (though the basis on which we do that—on the Kantian grounds that true religion is ethical, or that it never demands the killing of non-combatants as the Sunni Cairo Statement affirms—again begs questions of this foundational ur-text). Treading very, very carefully, and trembling as we go, we have to concede that this white space, this negligence of the victim, leads to a possibility that this story that Judaism calls the binding—after the fact that Isaac is "bound"[31]—cannot be absolutely severed from the possibility of acts of terror. It suggests, unnervingly, that we cannot completely eradicate the possibility of "binding" between this biblical text of "fear and trembling" and those "terrorist" acts

[30] For a more detailed exploration of the unsettling role of Isaac as question mark within the biblical text, see Sherwood 2004a.

[31] The detail of the binding (*aqd*) of Isaac (Gen. 22.9)—highlighted by the Jewish title for the story—is hardly irrelevant here, for it *foregrounds* the question of Isaac's compliance. Was Isaac bound because he resisted (if he willingly submitted, why bind him?), and why does he say nothing when he is being bound?

that inauthentically make the world convulse and that we name, as Mark Jurgensmeyer says, from the root *terrere* ("to cause to tremble") (5).

Those within the cultural universes of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam know this and indeed acknowledge it every time they attempt to modify, or even nullify, the theme of sacrifice and counteract the potentially explosive qualification that this story adds to the precious "Thou shalt not kill" (Exod. 20.3–20.17; Deut. 5.7–5.21; cf. Qur'an 6.152). Although the three religions habitually instigate qualifications along the lines of "unless you are killing an animal" or "unless you are killing the one who threatens violence against you, from outside the community," they all instinctively recoil against the more dangerous parenthetical qualification "Thou shalt not kill a human being (although you should be prepared to offer a family member as a burnt offering if God tells you to)."[32] Knowing, just as surely as Søren Kierkegaard knows, that this story opens up a fundamental cut, or wound, between religion and ethics and that it takes place in the shadows, beyond morality's searchlight, they aim to bring the patriarchal outlaw back within the law and to bring these extreme, mountaintop events down to a safer, more human(e) place.

The biblical narrative opens with the qualifier (?) "God tested Abraham," and the Qur'an frames the "sacrifice" with the statement "For this was a clear [straightforward[33]] test," implying that this is clearly (only) a test, as well as implying the clarity of the lesson. N.J. Dawood goes further, to the point of virtual critique, translating/interpreting 37.106 as "This was indeed a *bitter* test" (my italics). Perhaps by way of reaction to Jewish and Christian conflations of man and ram (the conflation of Isaac and the Isaac-ram in midrash, the Isaac-Jesus led like a lamb to the slaughter), or perhaps by way of a counter-pull to the disturbing connotations of *dhabaha* in its own narrative (cf. Genesis 22.11's "slaughter"; שחט), the Qur'an places the *dhabih* on his forehead, not on his side, facing Mecca, so making his posture markedly different from the accepted position for a sacrificial *animal*. Although the sacrifice of Id al-Kabir draws on the power of the Abrahamic "sacrifice," it also ushers the significance away from "sacrifice" firmly into the realm of ethics. The emphasis is deflected toward survival and redemption from death (sons emphatically *don't* die; rams, camels, or goats do), toward an economically (metaphorically) "sacrificial" gift that can cost up to twenty percent of the household's annual income, and toward charity (*zakat*) as testified to by

[32] For a cogent discussion of how the phrase "Thou shalt not kill" has never been understood as an unqualified "Thou shalt not put to death the living in general," see Derrida 1995: 279–283.

[33] The Arabic verb used here is the verb used in the Qur'an to describe the nature of the Qur'an: simple, straightforward, clear.

the strangely traditio-modern phenomenon of refrigerated planes flying out to Africa from Saudi Arabia.

Similarly, the Christian reworking of the basic materials of Genesis 22 into the cross and resurrection can be seen as, among many other things, a means of *treating* the ethical "sin" of virtual martyrdom-at-one-remove. For the *conflation* of the roles of God, father, son, and ram (or lamb) *in a single body* and the grounding assumption that the father and son are, this time, *homo-ousin*, of one being, substance (so will and agency) creates an at-one-ment in the Christian passion narrative that in some sense attempts to foreclose connotations of paternal/divine "child abuse."[34] Moreover, Christianity celebrates the gift of God's son (Rom. 8.32) and the productivity of son sacrifice but also understands this as the sacrifice to *end* all sacrifice, hence sacrifice in some sense turning back on and sacrificing itself, thus replicating and intensifying the move that puts inverted commas round the "sacrifice" of Genesis 22. The doubled proclamation and anxious qualification of the power of death finds its most classic expression in the welter of understandings that attend the gift of God's son's body—bread and wine, blood and body, mass, host, but also "eucharist" (thanksgiving), or "meal" (according to Calvin), and holy *communion*—with different understandings often entwining within the same community, or the writing of the same theologian, and intimating a strand of anxiety that, in some qualified sense, anticipates explicit contemporary Christian recoil from understandings of atonement as forensic and feudal.[35] From the first centuries of the Christian era onward, Genesis 22 has been a subject of worry, qualification, and even parody for Christians: the Christianized Jewish Testament of Abraham (after first century C.E.) parodies Abraham as a would-be murderer and law-breaker; whereas, long before Kierkegaard, Thomas Aquinas was clearly suffering sleepless nights over God's seeming abrogation of the natural moral law and his suspension of his own command that the innocent should not be slain (*Summa Theologicae*, Questio 94 [S-Th I-II, 94, 5]).[36] Reading emphatically in the direction of life, early Christian funereal art orients the narrative around its ending, understood in terms of resurrection and recreation. In third- to sixth-century

[34] This is not to say that this attempt is entirely successful. For discussion of implications of divine child abuse in traditional Christian atonement theologies, see, for example, Carlson Brown and Parker; Nakashima Brock and Parker.

[35] For contemporary discussions that attempt to marshal traditional Christian resources as a counter-voice to the dominant Anselmian strain in understandings of atonement, see, for example, Bartlett; Tanner. (I am grateful to Kathryn Tanner for sharing this paper prior to publication.)

[36] For the parody of Abraham as murderer and adulterer, see "Testament of Abraham," recension B, chapter 12 in Charlesworth: 871–902 (901). For discussion, see Jeffers. For a discussion of Aquinas's anxious response to Genesis 22, and his equally anxious answer that the God who makes the natural law can change it, see Jans.

sarcophagi, catacombs, and frescos, Abrahams and Isaacs get up from their altars alongside Noahs, Daniels, Jonahs, or Lazaruses walking out of their arks, furnaces, fish, or tombs (see Kessler).

This deflection is mirrored in contemporary commentaries which, still using the very same subterfuges that Kierkegaard specifically detailed in the 1840s, regularly use God's *second* command, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him," dialectically to subsume and nullify the *first* command, "Take your son and burn him as a holocaust," and write repeatedly of an Abraham who, now rehabilitated as perfect ethical paradigm, does not give his *son* so much as his abstracted "*best*."[37] This deflection in turn reflects a distancing (or rather interiorizing) move already taking place in Hebrews 11.17–11.19, where the significance is deflected away from Abraham's actions toward his faith or belief (indeed, as Hebrews has it, Abraham's "belief" also coheres with, and reinforces, the ending of the story *as opposed to* the beginning, for Abraham has faith that God is able to resurrect the dead and Isaac is indeed "resurrected"). Bolder yet is the commentators' move that claims—despite the internal textual evidence that Abraham clearly feels unable to speak the command to anyone (suggesting, quite clearly, that he hardly inhabits a world where child-sacrifice is normative); despite the fact that he is rewarded, *not* castigated or corrected, for his willingness to sacrifice Isaac; and despite the fact that that "sacrifice" is productive of a world of sand sons—that this story was conceived as a piece of anti-child-sacrifice polemic.[38] This perception of the story as a teach-text for the rudimentary elements of ethical monotheism, or a counter-blast to the heinous practices of neighboring Canaanites or Phoenecians, reflects the deep need for monotheism to purge itself of *violence*, expelled to a geographical or chronological elsewhere (an ur-time, or geographical out-lands, before and beyond the Bible proper). A similar desire is reflected in Emmanuel Lévinas's curiously Hegelian move that sees the *first* command of God "Burn your son" as a sensation-and-adventure-filled view of religion that is typically Christian and Protestant and Kierkegaardian—not typically Jewish—and that reads the *second* voice as far more illustrative of the ethical "flat calm" of Judaism (1990: 33; cf. 1996a and 1996b).

[37] Compare Kierkegaard's criticisms of commentators who speak in Abraham's honor by "making it a commonplace: 'his greatness was that he so loved God that he was willing to offer him the best he had.' That is true but 'best' is a very vague expression. In word and thought one can quite safely identify Isaac with the best, and the man who so thinks can very well puff at his pipe as he does so, and the listener can very well leisurely stretch out his legs" (59).

[38] For an early critique of the anti-child-sacrifice-polemic theory, with its reassuring sense of an "awakening," "protesting" "humanitarianism," see von Rad: 243–244; for a more thorough rebuttal, which nevertheless omits the internal evidence of Abraham's marked silence within the biblical text, see Levenson.

Lévinas's claim can only be made in unawareness of the significance of the redemptive power of Isaac's blood and Isaac's ash in Jewish tradition and of the way in which strands of all three Abrahamic monotheisms attempt to bring the Akedah down to the "flat calm" he aspires to (ironically, given the marginality of the Arab and the Qur'an in Lévinas, it is the Qur'an that most overtly brings the text down to the flat).[39] But Lévinas's attempts to defuse the "sacrifice" and make it safe mirror earlier moves in Judaism: as Islam ensures that the *dhabih* is consulted and the Christian father-son-lamb takes death into his own body, so Jewish tradition makes Isaac into a thirty-something adult male who goes knowingly *yachdav* (together) with his father, and through togetherness, and the *virtual* synonymity of son and fathers, also makes from the twoness a less problematic oneness.[40] Midrash, too, proclaims divine protection and safety and the sublation of death in life (and so the first command in the second) in protracted scenes in which the angels melt the knife with their tears or turn it over onto its blunt side (*Pesikta Rabbati* 40; *Genesis Rabbah* 56.7). This midrashic scene is extrapolated in Islam, where Gibreel turns the knife over onto its blunt side three times (each time emphatically repeating, and underscoring, the narrative turn from death to life) and where the angels pound a sheet of copper over the son's throat, or even over his whole torso, emphatically encasing his all-too-vulnerable body in a protective shield (see the Sunni al-Suddi, Mujir al-Din, and Ibn Ishaq traditions, and the Shi-ite al-Yaqubi and al-Qummi traditions as summarized in Firestone: 116–121).

COLLATERAL DAMAGE: ISAAC'S MOUTH (AS SPEAKING WOUND), ISAAC'S KICK, AND THE ELOQUENT RESISTANCE OF THE RAM, THE DEVIL, THE MOTHER

Strangely, in a way that rather confuses assumed trajectories of evolution from pious fidelity to *critical* scholarship, or from the archaic swamps of heteronomy toward autonomy, ancient Jewish, Christian, and Islamic sources often seem *more* radical than contemporary scholars in

[39] I do not want to make too much of the perhaps incidental point that Sura 37 is not, like Genesis 22, set on the mountaintop and that the Hajj associates it with the *plains* of Arafat. But the lack of mountaintop can be read as a convenient image of the way in which Islam attempts to discharge the dangers of the "sacrifice" by bringing it back within the sphere of the human, the ethical, down low (see the discussion above).

[40] Developing the biblical text's allusion, twice, to father and son walking on together ("*yachdav*") *Pesikta Rabbati* says, "What is implied by 'together'? *That Isaac was not distressed by what his father had said to him.* Even as one rejoiced to make the offering, the other rejoiced to be made an offering . . . Abraham rejoiced to cut the throat of the sacrifice, and *Isaac rejoiced to have the throat cut*" (*Pesikta Rabbati* 40; cf. *Midrash haGadol* 353).

the depth and range of their ethical critique. Jewish midrashim and *tafarsīr*, in particular, seem prepared to push the question "W*hat if* these events are not ultimately embraced by the all-sublating logic of sacrifice in which pain is always healed and always *productive*?" and are prepared to explore the potential for what John Caputo terms disaster—that is, pain or wasting of life that cannot be incorporated into a "result" or a redemptive, solvent system (28). Those very contemporary-seeming questions about the justification of what we call, euphemistically, "collateral damage" or about the justification of material, physical pain in the name of transcendent truths, greater causes, or starry visions are poignantly played out in the ancient texts. For, more than any contemporary work, the ancient interpreters *press* the question of what the effect would be—on Sarah or Hagar as well as Isaac or Ishmael—of this story that presents itself as a very private story between God and Abraham (only) in a monotheistic *tête-à-tête*.

This critique of wounding—for whatever purpose—seems most pronounced in Judaism, which, even as it expresses the wound from which blood/forgiveness/merit/redemption flows, also explores a very different kind of wound: a wound that testifies to *trauma* and that requires post-traumatic salve and care. This pain is primarily expressed through the body of Isaac and the mouth of Isaac, which also becomes, effectively, the speaking (expressive) wound of Isaac. Isaac is absent in Genesis 22.19, some midrashim say, because he had been spirited away to the Garden of Eden (which functions as a kind of hospital) to be attended by the nurse-angels: "And the angels bore him to Paradise, where he tarried three years, to be healed from the wound inflicted on him by Abraham on the occasion of the akedah" (*Paaneah Raza*, *Yalkut Reubeni*, and *Midrash ha-Gadol* on Gen. 22.19). The negative, messy, s(c)eptic(al) wound of Isaac—the other side of the positive wound of Isaac—is not expressed in the words of Christian interpretation but does find expression pictorially: Caravaggio's Isaac (figure 4) clearly does not feel the comfort of the inverted commas that make this sacrifice just a "sacrifice," and we could say that Isaac's wound is here transformed into Isaac's scream. In Judaism and Islam Isaac's wound and Isaac's mouth seem to merge, and the mouth of Isaac clearly articulates pain, in scripts that perch themselves very precariously on the hyphen in the idea of "binding–unbinding."

For in Judaism and Islam the son, lying on the altar, utters numerous, potentially disastrous, chaos-bringing last words such as: "Father throw me onto my forehead so that you don't have to look at me and compassion overcome you"; or "Father bind my hands and my feet, *for the instinct of life is so strong* that when I see the knife coming towards me, I may move convulsively and have you cut me in a place that will disqualify me as an offering"; or "Father bind me tightly lest I lead you

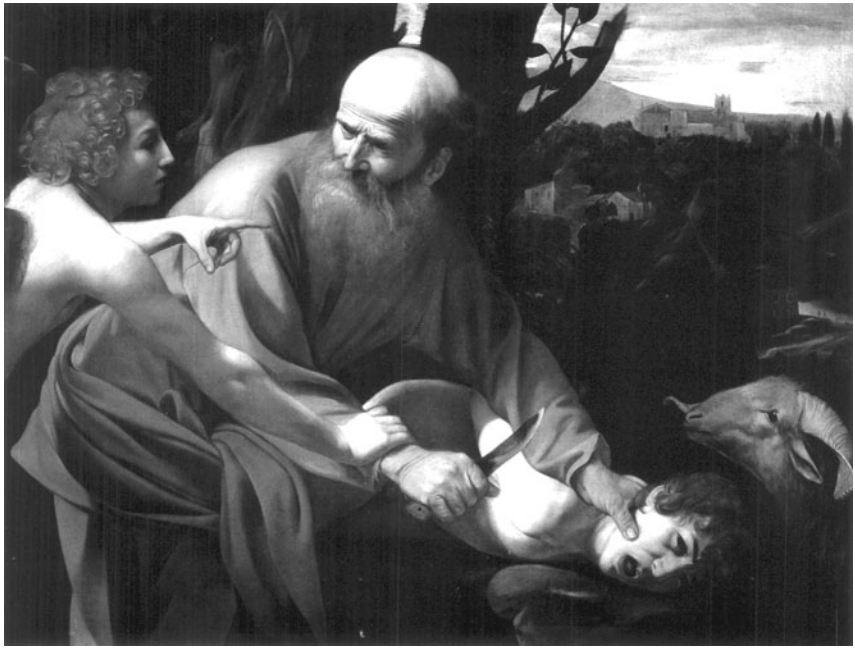

Figure 4. Caravaggio, "The Sacrifice of Isaac", c. 1603. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

astray"; or "Father throw me onto my face so that you will not look upon me and have *mercy* for me, or that I would look at the knife and be anxious, but rather insert the knife from underneath me"; or "Father, tie up my shoulders lest I squirm between your hands and it cause you pain"; or "Father, do not sacrifice me when you look into my face lest you have mercy upon me . . . Tie my hand to my neck and put my face to the ground"; or "Father bind my hands and my feet so I will not kick you and thus be desecrating the commandment of honoring the father, since the soul of a person is uncowable (or 'not to be intimidated')"; or "Sharpen your knife and finish me off quickly, for death is severe."[41] These are not the speeches of a modern, Romantic "Isaac Unbound" who is about to tear off his bonds and run down the mountain: they are

[41] Sources are, in order of citation: Ibn Ishaq tradition in Firestone: 118; *Pesikta Rabbati* 40; Suyuti, *Durr*, V, 283–284, cited from 'Abd ibn Hamid (d.249/823) and attributed to Uthman ibn Hadir, cit. and trans. in Calder: 380; al-Tabari, *Commentary* 23.79 and *History* 309, cit. and trans. in Firestone: 124; al-Kisai, *Qisas al-Anbiya*, cit. and trans. in Firestone: 125; al-Tabari (fragment attributed to Mujahid), *Commentary* 23.80 and *History* 309; *Midrash Tanhuma* on Gen. 22.9; *Midrash Bereshit Rabbati* 55, 90; and, again, the tradition attributed to Ibn Ishaq as summarized by Firestone: 118. I have deliberately alternated Jewish and Islamic sources to show how similar they are. The only significant difference is the Jewish insistence on the bodily integrity of the sacrifice, absent from Islamic vocabulary.

always carefully couched in filial piety but are also delicately, paradoxically, scripted so that Isaac can take a position inside, but also more than slightly outside, the narrative of prescribed obedience unto death. The danger of—and to—the text is mooted through the silent, uncontrollable, reflexes of Isaac's body, in some sense outside the zone of conscious responsibility that is the soul or brain. Like Caravaggio's Isaac's scream (seen but never heard), Isaac's squirm, convulsion, kick, upsurging life-spirit, pleading eyes, or resisting hands evoke at a base, bodily, level a fundamental non-compliance that will resonate with any(human)body, and that by implication mutinies (or kicks against) this over-hard, over-"bitter" test.

The silent reflex of Isaac's body and the prospect of Isaac's bad, untreatable wound express the idea that this quintessential Abrahamic text, which runs through the liturgical and theological center of the three religions, is *also* not one to which they can readily offer "Abrahamic" hospitality, and this theme is taken up, and amplified, by a background chorus made up of the supplementary mouths and bodies of the devil, the mother, and the ram. In the Islamic al-Kisai account of the sacrifice the ram stands up and offers himself to Ibrahim with the words, "O Friend of God, sacrifice me instead of your son, for I am more appropriate for sacrifice than he" (*Qisas al-Anbiya*, cit. and trans. in Firestone: 126), thus obliquely condemning God, Abraham, and the text through a relatively minor, animal mouth for even having countenanced treating a human being like an animal. In two Shi'a sources, al-shaytan appears to Abraham in disguise and says, "Heaven forbid that you will sacrifice an innocent boy," and warns of the dangerous consequences of such a precedent: "O Abraham, you are a leader whom people follow. If you sacrifice him, then all the people will sacrifice their children" (al Qummi, *Tafsīr al-Qummi*, 2.225 and al-Tabarsi 23.77, cit. and trans. in Firestone: 112)—a point to which Abraham, who thus far has answered all the devil's questions, simply "speak[s] to him no longer," as if he has nothing cogent to say (compare the silence of the God of *Midrash Rabbah*, above, who terminates the conversation at the point where he is unable to articulate difference between the sons). Not only does al-shaytan raise a crucial and also timely question ("What could happen if this potentially explosive text were to ignite in the minds of some of the more zealous of Ishmael/Isaac's sons?'), but, far from being overtly devilish, his words seem to have an impressive precedent (a kind of *isnad*?[42]) in the protest of the Quraysh tribe against the most famous of pre-Islamic stories about the

[42] In Islam the *isnad* is the record of authentication that traces the tradition back to its most ancient sources: the closer the saying is to the circle and the time of Muhammad and the greater the number of authenticated witnesses, the more authoritative the source.

evils of human sacrifice. According to tradition, Muhammad's grandfather, 'Abd al-Muttalib, made a vow that he would sacrifice the son who was destined to become Muhammad's father but was prevented by the members of the Quraysh tribe. Crucially, they stayed his hand by posing the rhetorical question "If you do a thing like this, there will be no stopping men from coming to sacrifice their sons, and what will become of the people then?" (Guillaume: 66–68)—precisely the question now posed by Satan to Abraham.[43]

In both Jewish and Islamic traditions the devil seems to become, as Yaakov Elbaum puts it, a spokesperson for "humanity, compassion, and elementary ethics" (109)—someone who plays, in the most literal sense, *devil's advocate* and does so with potentially disastrous effectiveness as the combined forces of the pathos of flesh and the will-to-survival rally to his aid. His recurring presence in retellings of the sacrifice seems to indicate not only the importance of this moment in the battle between good and evil but also the awareness that the "sacrifice" is his greatest opportunity, for it is at this point that God's case (and scripture) seems to be at its most vulnerable. Again, the traditions maintain a delicate "both and" and simultaneously bind and unbind: the satanic counterplot and countervoice also function, as explored earlier, as a way of stressing the fundamental preciousness and goodness of the story by making the forces of evil attack it at every stage. But they are also a means of expressing something deeply critical, at a slant, through the conveniently qualified voice of devils. Precisely because he is only a devil, the midrashic Satan can point to the very thin line between murder and sacrifice (as if he has somehow got his hands on an advance copy of *Fear and Trembling*) and say to Abraham, "Today God says 'Sacrifice your son,' but tomorrow he will say 'You are a *murderer* and you are guilty.' " He can also talk to Isaac of the madness of Abraham, or the offense that the proposed sacrifice constitutes *to the mother*, and can also talk to the mother directly, empathizing

[43] The sacrifice was prevented by Muhammad's maternal uncles, and 'Abd al-Muttalib redeemed the son with one hundred camels. Compare the following widely attested conversation, where Muhammad is referred to as the "son of two intended sacrifices": "We were with Mu'awiya b. Abi Sufyan when they said 'Was the intended sacrificial victim Ishmael or Isaac?' He answered: 'You have come to someone well-informed about the matter! We were with the Apostle of God when a man came up and said: "O Apostle of God, repeat to me [the knowledge] that God has bestowed upon you, O son of two intended sacrifices!" So he laughed. Then I said to him, "O commander of the faithful, who were the two intended sacrifices?" He answered "When 'Abd al-Muttalib was commanded to dig Zamzam, he vowed to God that if it were easy for him, he would sacrifice one of his sons. The lot [arrow] fell on Abdallah. But his maternal uncles prevented him, saying, "Redeem your son with one hundred camels!" So he redeemed him with camels. Ishmael was the second.' " (see, for example, al-Tabari, *Commentary* 23.85; *History* 290–291; Ibn Kathir, *Commentary* 4.18, cit. and trans. in Firestone: 142).

with her "helplessness" with the air of a compassionate counselor (*Yalkut Shimoni* 98; *Genesis Rabbah* 56.4).

Indeed, together with the resistant body and bad wound of the son and the eloquent devil, the mother—and, more specifically, the body of the mother—becomes (for *all* the monotheisms) a major site of ethical opposition to the "sacrifice" (presumably because devils, women, and mutinying sub-rational bodies occupy the same secondary, dubious status, which means that through them anything can be expressed). The mother, who is entirely absent in the biblical and Qur'anic narratives, is frequently brought back to be set up in postures of care or opposition: a sixth-century Christian sarcophagus depicts a woman with her hand to her mouth watching the sacrifice in a seeming attitude of horror, whereas a fourth-century chapel in the El Bagwat necropolis in Egypt depicts her standing beside her son on the altar and lifting up her arms to the sky (in prayer) (see Kessler: 82–83). Two fifth-century Christian Syriac poems, written for performance during the Easter liturgy (see the translation by Brock), radically locate the action within the all-seeing eye of the mother and annotate the drama with her relentless, searching questions: "Tell me your secret," "Where is the child of *my* vows off to?," and "Where are you taking *my* only-begotten?"—this being a new and pointed twist on the motif of the "only" (Gen 22.2), as if that phrase points not only to the clumsy omission of Ishmael but also to the gauche omission of Sarah. (Why use that provocative qualifier "only" when this inevitably begs the question of why the only parent for whom Isaac is indeed the "only" is in fact strangely absent from the scriptural account of the test?).

Indeed, it seems that Sarah can only be construed as a fecund source of "whys?," subverting the fecundity and exemplarity of sacrifice. The Syriac Christian poems imagine Sarah's presence as necessarily interrupting or interrogating the narrative: in one, in response to Abraham's smokescreen announcement that he is taking Isaac to sacrifice a sheep, Sarah says, in so many words, "If you are genuinely wanting to slaughter a sheep, be off and see to the sheep, but leave the child behind *lest something happen to him*"; in the other, when she sees Abraham holding the knife, her "heart groans" and she warns (in a protest worthy of Rita Nakashima Brock or Rebecca Parker), "You are so drunk with the love of God . . . [that] if he so bids you concerning the child, you will kill him without a thought." This pointed critique of God-drunk Abraham through the mouth of Sarah finds analogies in Islamic tradition, where Sarah utters a scandalized "Why?" when told what Ibrahim is up to, or angrily accosts him on his return, "You would sacrifice my son and not inform me?," so castigating the patriarch who thinks that he lives in the rarefied a-social air of the mountaintop where men live alone with

their sons and their God (al-Qummi 2.225, al-Tabarsi 23.77, and the paradigmatic al-Suddi and ibn-Ishaq traditions, as translated and summarized by Firestone: 113, 117).[44]

The Sarah of the Christian Syriac poems encompasses and stifles the narrative and also cradles the body of Isaac in the posture of a pietà: when Abraham returns from Moriah, he finds her grieving over locks of Isaac's hair and clutching at his cloak, as if she were somehow trying to maintain an umbilical attachment to the son's (dead) body, and when Abraham decides to "test" her by telling her that her son has indeed been sacrificed she laments (rather gruesomely): "I was wishing I was an eagle, and had the speed of a turtle dove, so that I might go and behold the place where *my only child, my beloved*, was sacrificed, that I might see the place of his ashes . . . and bring back a little of his blood to be comforted by its smell." As if developing implicit biblical analogies between Sarah and Mary,[45] these two remarkable Christian poems seem to make of Sarah an Old Testament *Mater Dolorosa* and culminate in a request for God to respond not to the sacrificial gift of Abraham or Isaac but to the extreme suffering of the mother: "Because of the suffering of his mother . . . in Your compassion give us what we ask."

The suffering of the mother is given a yet more extreme—indeed final—inflection in Jewish and Islamic interpretations which, taking their cue, or pretext, from the biblical sequence, argue that the effect of the "sacrifice" on the mother was terminal and that Genesis 23 (the death of Sarah) follows Genesis 22 in a logic of cause and effect (al-Tabarsi 23.77, cit. and trans. in Firestone: 113; *Genesis Rabbah* 58.5; *Rashi*).[46] The death of Sarah is imagined as casting a retrospective shadow over the preceding narrative, and in its retelling, the suffering of the mother is conjured up at moments when it is most likely to afflict acute ethical damage on the text. *Midrash Tanhuma* imagines Isaac warning his knife-wielding father not to "tell my mother when she is standing by a pit or when she is on the roof because she will fall and die," whereas (bringing this Jewish mother close to the Christian Syriac mother and

[44] Note that the Sarah in the Shi'ite al-Qummi and al-Tabarsi traditions also adds, "O Lord, do not punish me for what I did to the mother of Ishmael," so explicitly connecting the pain of the "sacrifice" to crimes committed against Hagar and Ishmael by Abraham and Sarah.

[45] I am referring here to the way in which God "visits" Sarah in Gen. 21.1 and she conceives (see the brief discussion above in the section "Three Siblings, Each The 'Only' "). Crossing the important reservations expressed in footnote 5 (applicable to scholars only), the Christian poems seem to intuit that Genesis's Sarah is rather like Mary and that Abraham, in his seeming absence from the scene of "visiting," is like Joseph.

[46] Note that the theme of the mother's death is less prevalent in Islam than in Judaism. It only appears in Shi'ite sources and is usually applied to Sarah.

her longing for Isaac-relics, such as Isaac-blood or Isaac-ash) *Midrash Bereshit Rabbati* imagines Isaac instructing Abraham to "gather the ashes" and to put them in a casket in his mother's chamber so that "at all hours, whenever she enters her chamber, she will remember her son Isaac and weep" (*Midrash Tanhuma*, *Vayera* 81; *Midrash Bereshit Rabbati* 55, 90). Similarly, the Islamic al-Suddi and ibn Ishaq traditions have the son instruct the father to "give greetings (*salam*) to [his] mother" when he returns to her without him (the very fact of these greetings [*salam*] perhaps questioning the use of the story as a perfect paradigm of *aslama* [surrender])—and also have him instruct the father to keep back some of his clothes so that no blood will soil them and cause Hagar or Sarah to grieve, or, alternatively, to return his shirt to his mother so that it can give her some comfort in her grief (paradigmatic al-Suddi, ibn Ishaq, and Mujir al-Din traditions, and al-Kisai, *Qisas al-Anbiya*, translated and summarized by Firestone: 116–118, 125).[47] Even more starkly, when the Isaac of *Genesis Rabbah* is told by his father "You are the lamb," he tears his hair and asks: "Is this what you have told my mother?," invoking the mother as the most natural site of incredulity and opposition (*Genesis Rabbah* 56.4). Supremely, *Leviticus Rabbah* and the *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* say that the six blasts of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah *also* memorialize the final three long cries and three short howls of Sarah in her death-throws, so making the proclamation of redemption and its subversion collide in the very same breath (*Leviticus Rabbah* 20.2; *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* 32).

The functions of the body, and cries, of the mother in these traditional texts are multiple and complex: "she"[48] demonstrates that women are below or outside the *Kampfsreligion* of the fathers but also critiques the "God-drunk" passion that inspires this vision of religion. And as a quintessential figure of the home (the level of the humane, the social, the domestic), "she" makes it clear that this sacrifice story necessarily comes accompanied by the caveat "Don't do this at home," or "Don't tell anyone at home," above all "Don't tell the mothers" (thus *Genesis Rabbah* above). "She" also functions as a point of opposition—a way of saying, in effect, that this death will take place *over her dead body*—and as a means of embodying the possibility of disaster by foregrounding the fact that death is not eradicated, only displaced. Just as the fact that this sacrifice is only "sacrifice," bandaged up and softened by inverted commas, does not always

[47] The image of the mother grieving over bloodstained clothes may have borrowed something from the story of Joseph, the longest continuous narrative in the Qur'an.

[48] The "she" invoked is, of course, a completely stereotypical figure of the maternal. I certainly do not mean to reclaim Sarah as a figure of the ideal mother. See further Sherwood 2003.

prevent the son from getting wounded or receiving a mini-death that requires ministration by the nurse-angels, so the mother's body, like the ram's, *is* given up to death. So deeply, it seems, is Jewish Sarah's soul "bound to" Isaac's soul[49] by an umbilical cord of empathy that the damage done to Isaac's body (the momentary death or the partial death from which he must recover in the Intensive Care Unit at Eden hospital) becomes for her actual whole-body death without any coda of resurrection. Thus, her dead body silently embodies the danger of sacrifice tipping over into disaster: that is, suffering that is absolutely unredeemable and unresurrectable.

BINDING–UNBINDING

This article confirms that the "sacrifice" of the beloved son is, as Judah Goldin once put it (xxi), located at the very *nerve center* of Judaism and Christianity (and Islam) but that—as perhaps intimated by Goldin's intriguing choice of metaphor—it has also perennially set the nerves on edge. Looking over these analyses, I am struck by the combination of a struggle for direct descent and possession combined with a deeply ambiguous relation to the text once that text has been successfully possessed. I am struck, too, by the equally tangled thicket of relations between the "ancient" and the "modern" and the "religious" and the "secular": long before Enlightenment images of the Kantian Abraham-butcher or Kierkegaardian threats of sleepless nights, this text clearly functioned as a source of the most disturbing nightmares as well as the most important star- and heaven-gazing dreams.[50] Responses that are also recoils, approaches that are also a running away, challenge the simplicity with which we habitually construe things like "response," "approach," and "tradition." And the genuflecting position that we instinctively ascribe to the ancient, the fundamental, is disturbed by evidence of an *ancient* battle between heteronomy and autonomy and a sense of profound debt to the sacred text that can also be, at the same time, "hypercritical" (cf. Derrida 1998: 45).

Such a conclusion resonates with recent, important work on religion and violence that foregrounds the "internal pluralism" of religions and the "*ambivalence* of the sacred," or the paradoxical relation between

[49] Cf. Louis Ginzberg's apposite phrase, summarizing the implications of the midrashim in this potentially subversive twist on "binding" (275).

[50] See Kant's revulsion at "Abraham butchering and burning his only son like a sheep at God's command" (1979: 115; cf. 1970: 175). Kierkegaard's sleeplessness is invoked by way of epigraph to this article.

religious violence and hopes for a "tranquil," peaceful "ideal" (see Appleby: 9–10, 31; Jurgensmeyer: 242). Where it gives us pause is at the point where those works identify "the Enlightenment" as the major source of all our hopes of "moderation," "rationality," and "fair play," to be injected into religion's "passion," as it were from outside (Jurgensmeyer: 243), or at the point where social scientific models suggest that it is possible fully to unbind fundamentally violent from fundamentally peaceful expressions of the same religious inheritances. What these discussions seem to bracket out is writing and all the ambiguous things that one can do with writing: far from being unequivocal scripts for actions, religious scriptures give rise to writing and performances through which it is possible (and often desirable) to inherit delicately, ambiguously. How is one to disentangle the embrace of sacred violence from the human(e) recoil in these multiply orchestrated responses where the affirming bass notes of God and Abraham are in counterpoint with the alto of the devil, the soprano of the mother, and the bleat of the animal (or the scream of the human animal)? How is one to disentangle the affirmation of *aslama* from the son's request that the father give greetings (*salam*) to his mother? How is one to unbind the official meaning of the ram's horn on Rosh Hashanah from the under- or overtones of Sarah's scream? Without in any way suggesting a facile collapse between the worlds of these ancient authors and our contemporary worlds, this article suggests that the ancient interpreters come surprisingly close to "us" and also give us some iconic ways of thinking paradoxes still very relevant to "us," we who are still, as Charles Taylor has persuasively argued "on both sides of the great intramural moral disputes . . . between the espousal of hypergoods and the defense of those goods that are sacrificed in their name" (105). In these delicately balanced dramas Abraham and obedience to God as "hypergood" are held in tension with the protests of the "sacrificed" in the graphic, audible form of Isaac's kick and Sarah's scream.

The audacity, risk, and critique of ancient interpretation challenge the common retrojection of a past that allegedly piously affirmed the "transcendental unambiguity of the Holy Word" (cf. Almond: 98)—a past that too easily functions as a straw man in the Religion and Modernity wars and all their academic correlates by representing the conservation of truth in contrast to the modern/postmodern/secular "fall" from truth or, alternatively, "retrogressive fundamentalism". And it might also make us think a little more about the question of choice, and the equation of modernity with the guardianship, even invention, of autonomy and choice, and also about why these ancient interpreters sometimes seem *more* able to live with and through the paradox of *binding–unbinding* than some of their co-religionist contemporaries.

Could it be that the pre-Enlightenment condition of being Jewish, being Christian, being Muslim before all choice leads to more active and audacious acts of interpreting, deciding, and choosing in complex relation to the texts and vocabularies in which one lives, moves, and has one's being—for when the vocabularies and texts of God and Abraham simply *are*, they cannot be feared to vanish or diminish in the face of critique. Instead of simply ushering us into a new era of autonomy and choice, might it be that modernity, by leading us to choose our place as "religious" or "non-religious" and identify with (protect?) that choice thereafter, also—at least potentially—*replaces* these little acts of micro-choosing and micro-critique with one vast act of macro-choosing?

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