



THE BINDING
OF ISAAC
A RELIGIOUS MODEL
OF DISOBEDIENCE

OMRI BOEHM

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To fear God is not the same as to be afraid of him. We are afraid of God when we have transgressed and feel guilty, but we fear him when we are so disposed to conduct ourselves that we can stand before him.

—Kant

To my parents, Eti and Amnon Boehm

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FOREWORD

Jack Miles

Before you lies a book that, long before I met its author, I yearned to read. Perhaps no passage in all of Scripture—surely no passage in the Tanakh—has provoked so broad and deep a literature of commentary as Gen 22, the story of the heart-stopping human sacrifice that somehow never took place. But this literature, many centuries in the writing, comes down to us in three streams that no one before Omri Boehm has brought fully to confluence. The first and oldest stream is that of traditional Jewish and Christian religious commentary: midrash, hagiography, and rabbinic or patristic exegesis. The second stream is that of philosophical and theological commentary, Jewish and Christian, again, but rising and subsiding in powerfully different waves: what Maimonides and Aquinas do with this haunting story is not what Spinoza and Kant do, and theirs was far from the last wave to break. The third stream is that of modern historical commentary, reading the ancient Israelite text critically by reading it in and against its context in the recovered literatures and reconstructed cultures of Semitic antiquity.

Even the oldest of these streams continues to flow in a new way. Aggadic midrash—commentary by artful narrative expansion—lives on as biblically inspired poetry and fiction, now being written by women as well as men. As for philosophical and theological speculation inspired by Gen 22, it has been given a grim but overwhelmingly powerful new impulse by the Shoah. Finally, as regards the unfinished enterprise of historical-critical Bible scholarship, there awaits the still unexcavated and inexhaustible immensity of the ancient Near East. In the present context, I might mention, as just one example, the Harvard Punic Project, which unearthed the tiny skeletons of literally thousands of sacrificed infants from the “Tophet” of ancient Carthage.

Because this trio of discursive streams continues to flow, but not for that reason alone, the last word about the Akedah, the Binding of Isaac, will never be written, and Omri Boehm makes no claim to the contrary. He has produced, nonetheless, an original thesis about the righteous

disobedience of Abraham that, far from merely listing earlier opinions, builds both on them and, so to speak, into them.

The silences of the Bible may be its most eloquent moments. In the original, laconic version of the Akedah, as Boehm reconstructs it, Abraham falls silent after what is surely the most poignant exchange in the entire episode:

Isaac: Father!
Abraham: Yes, my son.
Isaac: Here are the firestone and the wood; but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?
Abraham: God will see to the sheep for His burnt offering, my son.
 (Gen 22:7–8)

“And the two of them walked on together,” the text continues, clearly implying silence. Abraham’s reply to his son’s question may no less grammatically be translated: “Let God see to the sheep for His burnt offering, my son.” In Boehm’s reconstructed text, these are the last words Abraham speaks, and they hang in the air as a challenge to the God who has commanded the inhuman. Is Abraham willing to comply or not? In an interpolated passage, the received text has an angel of the Lord *attribute* obedient, submissive intentions to Abraham, but Abraham never gives voice to these himself, nor does he express acquiescence or pleasure in the angel’s praise. In effect, even in the received text, his last words to Isaac are his last meaningful words. Modern commentators have tended to be troubled by Abraham’s presumed, scandalous obedience. Ancient commentators, less ready to credit the angel’s praise, were often troubled by what they saw or suspected to be his latent, scandalous disobedience. Boehm—and this, I repeat, is the great merit and charm of this book—brings both “families” of interpretation into a single great conversation.

Abraham’s silence after Gen 22:8 is equaled, in the Bible, only by the thematically related and comparably portentous silence of Job 40:4–5 and 42:5–6. “I am of small worth,” Job says to God in a first attempt to retreat into silence:

What can I answer you?
 I clap my hand to my mouth.
 I have spoken once, and will not reply;
 Twice, and will do so no more. (Job 40:4–5)

But Job’s silence only further enrages the Lord, who hears it, correctly, as resigned rather than repentant and who, in reply, blasts forth—“from the tempest”—the single most overbearing oration in the entire Bible.

But Job will not be provoked. His terse and enigmatic rejoinder ends, in the Jewish Publication Society translation:

I had heard You with my ears,
But now I see You with my eyes;
Therefore, I recant and relent,
Being but dust and ashes. (Job 42:5–6)

I have argued elsewhere for the translation:

Word of you had reached my ears,
But now that my eyes have seen you,
I shudder with sorrow for mortal clay.

The wording aside, the effect upon God is beyond dispute. As before with Abraham, so now with Job, it is God who must be satisfied with his defiant creature's response rather than the creature with God's. In both exchanges, divine rhetoric inadequately masks a divine defeat.

These two paradigmatic biblical encounters come together in the climactic eighth of Boehm's ten chapters: "'He Destroys Both the Innocent With the Wicked': Between Job and Abraham." At the end of Job's career as at the beginning of Abraham's, the issue is divine destruction of innocent life, and the reader must determine whether God's Favorite—the father of Israel or the archetype of all righteous Gentiles—is to be celebrated for his gracious submission or for his terminal defiance.

In our day, as never before, theology has come round to theodicy. By bringing his exceptionally rich consideration of the Binding of Isaac to a focus on the death of the innocent, Omri Boehm—Israeli by birth and early education, American and European in his more recent formation—has written a commentary on one chapter of one book of the Bible that becomes, in its most cogent moments, an apology for the continuing, fertilizing relevance of the Bible as a whole and a refreshing reminder of why the wise look back as often as they look ahead.

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I began thinking about the ideas presented in this book when I was eighteen, and still a high-school student. Special thanks are due to Leiki Saban and Tami Ezer, my *Tanakh Hagbarah* teachers, for inspiring my initial interest in the subject. I wish to thank also my friends, Ortal, Eliel, Alex, Shuvi, and Haggai, who encouraged me in pursuing the first steps of the writing. Professor Avi Horvitz, of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, read an early draft of my first paper on Gen 22, and Professor Ed Greenstein offered a great deal of help, criticizing and commenting on the material in the second and the fifth chapters. I have benefited greatly from my teachers, including Robert Adams, Sara Klein-Breslavi, Robert Burt, John Hare, Yair Hoffman, Menachem Fisch, James Ponet, and Osnat Zinger, as well as from the help of Christoph Levin, Hanna Kasher, Ilana Arbel, and Mati Schechtman. My grandmother, Shoshana Boehm, has provided much help with German texts, and Mira Reich proofread and corrected the manuscript, preventing many embarrassing errors. Special thanks are due to the red head girl, Anat Schechtman, for giving my book its name.

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INTRODUCTION

“Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering...” Must Abraham obey his God? It is usually thought that the Akedah presents not only an ethical question but also an ethical reply. But for the intervention of the angel, Abraham would have killed his son. The moral to be drawn would be that obedience to God takes precedence over morality as humanly conceived. However, in a textual study of Gen 22 (first presented as a paper in *Vetus Testamentum* 52 [2001]: 1–12), I suggested that the figure of an “angel of YHWH” (vv. 11–12), apparently checking Abraham at the last moment before he kills Isaac, is a secondary interpolation in the original text (together with the second angelic speech which is usually considered as such). If this is so, in the original narrative Abraham actually disobeyed the divine command to slay his son, sacrificing the ram “instead of his son” (תַּחַת בְּנוֹ, v. 13) on his own responsibility:

Then they came to the place of which God had told him, and Abraham built an altar there and placed the wood in order, and he bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar upon the wood; And Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son... But Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold behind him was a ram caught in a thicket by its horns. And Abraham went, and took the ram, and offered it up for a burnt offering instead of his son. (Gen 22:9–10, 13)

The assumption that Abraham obeyed God’s command has been commonly accepted by generations of readers. It is adopted not only by biblical scholars—philosophers, poets and painters have presumed it in their works, as well as Jewish and Christian theologians.¹ In Judaism, Abraham’s readiness to kill his son symbolizes the moment when the blessing of his children—Abraham’s “seed”—is confirmed. “Because you have done this...” the angel proclaims, “I will indeed bless you”; “your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies” (vv. 16–18). In

1. There is an Islamic version of the narrative presented in the Qur’an, but it differs significantly from that of the Hebrew Bible.