

Kierkegaard's
Fear and Trembling:
Critical Appraisals

Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling:* Critical Appraisals

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Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling
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Series Foreword

One afternoon in the late 1980's and in the course of my dissertation work, I was turning the Kierkegaard's Library in Copenhagen upside down, desperate for help on a chapter on Kierkegaard's *Concept of Anxiety*. After scouring all of the recent literature, I turned to the late Dr. Julia Watkin, for counsel. A world-class scholar, she chuckled and informed me that everything that I was looking for could be found in the works of Gregor Malantschuk. It couldn't be, I thought. After all, Malanschuk's works had been translated into English more than a decade before. As a result of the span of years, I more or less assumed that his interpretations would be dated or at least assimilated into the current scholarship. While everything that I was seeking was not to be gleaned in Malantschuk's studies, his essays cast much light on some very obscure pages of Kierkegaard.

In the process of consulting Malantschuk, I unearthed other valuable studies which, largely on account of their copyright dates, I had previously been inclined to pass over as passé. From this experience and in my capacity as curator of the Hong Kierkegaard Library, I have found that Kierkegaard scholars often burden themselves with the task of discovering the wheel twice. Just browse through the bibliographies of many current interpretive studies and take note of the paucity of references to books published perhaps 15 years before or earlier. There is a tendency to leave commentaries that are more than a few years old on the shelf, as though examining them would be tantamount to a contemporary physicist consulting Newton. The present offering and the other volumes in the Kierkegaard Classic Studies Series will make it plain that the relationship between generations of Kierkegaard scholars is more akin to a conversation, than to a series of conclusions which, once attained, can be safely left behind.

Gordon Marino, Curator
Hong Kierkegaard Library, St. Olaf
Northfield, Minnesota
November 2008

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Preface

This volume of previously unpublished essays on Søren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* is an outgrowth of many minds and reflects a number of very different philosophic perspectives and methods. This is entirely appropriate, for Kierkegaard has influenced many disciplines and methodologies.

The contributors to the volume are all either theologians or philosophers, but it is doubtful whether a blind reading could identify most of them as one and not the other. According to one's perspective, this bespeaks something either good or ill of the two disciplines at the present time. The methodologies represented are historical, comparative, systematic, analytic, existential, and phenomenological. What we hope is accomplished here is the continuing discipline, scrutiny, and criticism of the subject matter under consideration and the consequent illumination of human existence itself by any and all methodologies. The work of Kierkegaard is a potent catalyst in this critical and illuminating activity, and it is only proper that he, too, should be so examined. Given his dim view of professors, the scholarly criticism of Kierkegaard has always made professors aware of the self-ironizing effect of their professional efforts for or against him.

These essays tend to affirm Kierkegaard's insights. Perhaps some reviewer will grant us the grace of time and patience in order to become our teacher.

Quite a number of acknowledgments are called for, particularly when there are so many authors. However, in order to permit the reader to proceed to the real matters at hand, we shall acknowledge only the need for acknowledgments and let those who might have been identified be bemused by their being unnamed.

Robert L. Perkins

Introduction

Fear and Trembling has four beginnings: a Preface, a Prelude, a Panegyric, and a "Preliminary Expectoration"—all before Kierkegaard ostensibly gets down to the problems of the book. Of course, these beginnings are very deceptive because the thesis (or theses), analysis, ethics, aesthetics, theology, irony, philosophy, and whatever else there is, all start with the title. With this bad example before us, it would be utterly un-Kierkegaardian simply to begin. The reader will not find four false starts here. In fact, there may not be a start here at all, false or otherwise. Still, it seems that something of a scholarly introduction is called for in a book of "critical appraisals," and if we cannot have four beginnings, we must settle for less.

I. HISTORICAL AND LITERARY CONTEXT

Fear and Trembling was published on the same day, 16 October 1843, as *Repetition* and *Three Edifying Discourses*. The first two have subtitles, "A Dialectical Lyric" and "An Effort in Experimental Psychology," respectively, and pseudonymous authors, Johannes de Silentio and Constantine Constantius, respectively. Only the *Three Edifying Discourses* came forth unadorned by subtitle and pseudonym.

Sometime in November 1842 Kierkegaard finished the manuscript of *Either/Or* and while he did the proofreading and other chores for this he embarked on a small book, *Johannes Climacus or De Omnibus Dubitantium Est*, in which he made his break with modern philosophy final and clear to himself. About Easter 1843 he stopped work on *Johannes Climacus*; he would never complete it, although some ideas developed in it appeared in later works. On May 8 he made a second journey to Berlin, where he remained for almost two months. Toward the end of May he wrote his closest friend, Emil Bosen, that he would soon be home, and that he had finished a work that was very important to him and had begun another. The manuscripts of the pseudonymous works were finished by July and he dated the foreword to the *Three Edifying Discourses* on 9 August 1843, the fifth anniversary of his father's death. Most commentators think *Repetition* was written first.

The two pseudonymous works, though hastily written, are perhaps Kierkegaard's most perfect. They were born out of the struggle to explain himself to his former fiancée, Regina Olsen, and to raise the possibility within the ethical of repetition, i.e., the restoration of the broken engagement or, in terms of *Fear and Trembling*, receiving back in faith his beloved. Both books were antiquated before they were published: Regina was again engaged to her first intended. The ending of *Repetition* had to be rewritten, but *Fear and Trembling* had been developed in such a way that no changes were necessary.

The consummate art of *Fear and Trembling* was as evident to Kierkegaard as it has been to his latter-day readers: "Oh, when once I am dead—then *Fear and Trembling* alone will be enough to give me the name of an immortal author. Then it will be read, then too it will be translated into foreign tongues."

There are very few entries in the *Papers* about *Fear and Trembling*. They appear in *Søren Kierkegaards Papirer* (Udgivet af P.A. Heiberg og V. Kuhr; Glydendalske Boghandel Nordisk Forlag, 1912 [volume 4, pp. 229–47]). There were four reviews of the book. The signed ones were by J.F. Hagan and J.P. Mynster (literary pen name, Kts). Explicit reference to the reviews are in Jens Himmelstrup's, *Søren Kierkegaard International Bibliografi* (Nyt Nordisk Forlag, 1962); see numbers 49–52.

II. INTRODUCTION TO THESE CRITICAL APPRAISALS

The present volume is in itself an expression of unity in diversity. Some of the essays are scholarly and heavily documented, while others rely more on analytic methods of argument to develop their point. Problems of theology, ethics, and philosophical method jostle the reader of this book as they do the reader of *Fear and Trembling*. The essays touch on many of the major points, but they have neither individually nor collectively exhausted the riches of *Fear and Trembling*. Still, the twelve essays do illuminate much of the text and demonstrate the breadth of interest provoked by the biblical story.

Professor Jacobs' article indicates the varieties of the Jewish interpretation of Genesis 22:1–18. This is the first such overview of Jewish tradition as it bears on Kierkegaard's effort.

Professor Pailin sets the problem of the offering of Isaac in the context of Enlightenment theology. Special difficulties were encountered in that period because of the unstable condition of the concept of authority. Pailin updates the problem in his final section by relating his previous discussion to some contemporary issues in hermeneutics.

Professor Perkins attempts to find some points held in common by both Kant and Kierkegaard by reexamining the conventional wisdom regarding their differences. The result is as much a Kierkegaardian exposition of the salient points of Kant's ethics as it is a Kantian interpretation of *Fear and Trembling*.

Professor Westphal first sets out the logical status of faith in both Kierkegaard and Hegel and then proceeds to show the practical consequences of both views. Westphal argues persuasively that the differences about the concept of faith lie at the root of Kierkegaard's criticism of the Hegelian notion of the social order.

Professor Holmer re-creates something of the feeling that Abraham must have experienced when he realized what it was necessary for him to

do in order to remain faithful to God. Holmer first stresses the moral character of Abraham and elicits a sympathy for him, and then he re-creates the emptiness and confusion occasioned by God's command. Yet the whole essay is essentially about the nature of selfhood vis-à-vis ethics and the religious.

The articles mentioned so far are more introductory and historical in nature than those in the next sequence, which concentrate on specific parts of *Fear and Trembling*.

Professor Mooney focuses on the "Preliminary Expectoration" and argues that *Fear and Trembling* is, among other things, a polemic against the rise of the capitalistic spirit of acquisitiveness. If this is so, then Kierkegaard's attack on bourgeois society in the last years of his life was continuous with some of his earliest impulses.

Professor Donnelly attempts an entirely novel interpretation of "Problem I" and "Problem II." Kierkegaard asked, "Is there such a thing as a teleological suspension of the ethical?" and "Is there such a thing as an absolute duty to God." Kierkegaard is usually understood to have answered both questions in the affirmative. Donnelly argues that it is possible to mount a plausible defense of Abraham qua knight of faith, "a distinctively moral, rational, and philosophical justification." Donnelly argues that the first question must be answered in the negative, but that there is still an affirmative answer to the second question.

Professor Evans argues that it is possible to universalize the concept of the teleological suspension of the ethical. The question of universalizing the case of Abraham gives us logical cramps only because we are mistaken in thinking that every ethical obligation requires a universal rule. Professor Donnelly's and Professor Evans' articles complement each other.

Professor Wren explores the question of silence raised by Kierkegaard in "Problem III" and relates Abraham's silence to the notion of absurdity as it is discussed in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. The prolegmatics of silence are here related to aesthetics, ethics, subjectivity, and the absurd.

Professor Taylor examines the notion of silence in the wider contexts of Kierkegaard's illustrative hermeneutic principle of the stages. From this discussion Taylor implies some interesting suggestions about social and political philosophy and the notion of community.

Professor Crumbine compares Albert Camus' *The Stranger* and Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* and attempts to show the character of Abraham through the characterlessness of Mersault. The operative term is "inwardness" referring to a quality that protects the person from being so socialized that he is merely a reflection of the social environment.

Finally, Professor Gill claims that in *Fear and Trembling* it is Johannes de Silentio, not necessarily Kierkegaard himself, who is attempting an irrational justification of Abraham. According to Silentio, justification on rationalist grounds is not possible. According to Gill, justification on

irrationalist grounds is also not possible. If Silentio is right and if Gill is right, the ground is cut, to a very considerable extent, out from under the several critical appraisals in this volume!

A fitting and proper irony.

1. The Problem of the *Akedah* in Jewish Thought

LOUIS JACOBS

THE NARRATIVE IN THE TWENTY-SECOND CHAPTER OF THE BOOK OF GENESIS, IN which Abraham is instructed by God to offer up his son Isaac as a burnt offering, is known in the Jewish tradition as the *Akedah*,¹ "the binding" (of Isaac on the altar). The *Akedah* features prominently in the Jewish liturgy. It is, for instance, the Pentateuchal reading in the synagogue on the second day of the New Year festival, and it is recited daily by some pietists. It became the prototype for Jewish martyrdom. And it has exercised a powerful fascination over the minds of Jewish biblical exegetes and Jewish thinkers generally throughout the ages, each of whom has tried to bring his own understanding to the narrative.

This essay is concerned with Jewish attitudes toward the most difficult problem connected with the *Akedah*: How could God have ordered a man to murder his son? The problem is aggravated by the fact that in no less than sixteen other passages in the Bible (Leviticus 18:21; 20:1–8; Deuteronomy 12:31; 18:10; 2 Kings 13:27; 16:3; 17:17, 31; 21:6; 23:10; Jeremiah 7:31; 19:5; Ezekiel 20:31; Micah 6:7; 2 Chronicles 28:3; 33:6) child sacrifice is condemned as an abomination before God. Arising out of the initial problem are the further questions regarding Abraham's intention to carry out the terrible deed. How could Abraham have been so sure that God had, indeed, commanded him to kill his innocent child? Even if he was convinced that God had so commanded him, was it his duty to obey? Is obedience to God's will so supreme an obligation that it can override man's moral sense, demanding of him that he commit a criminal act of the very worst kind for the greater glory of God? Can or should one worship a being who wishes to be served by an act of murder? Moreover, the very God who demanded the sacrifice of Isaac had himself performed the miracle of giving Isaac to Abraham and Sarah when they were of advanced age and had promised Abraham that, through Isaac, Sarah would be a mother of nations (Genesis 17:15–19; 18:10–15; and 21:1–12).

Three different attitudes to the problem have been adopted by Jewish thinkers. The first stresses the story's "happy ending." Abraham is, in fact, eventually commanded not to slay his son. The whole episode was only a "test," a divine vindication of Abraham's absolute trust in God. There was never any divine intention for Abraham to kill Isaac. God, being God, could never so deny his own nature as to wish a man to commit a murder in obedience to him. The second attitude stresses, on the contrary, the original command. This view, very close to Kierkegaard's attitude, can imagine God commanding Abraham to slay his son. True the order is

revoked at the last moment but the point has been made, nonetheless, that, in Kierkegaard's terminology, there can be, so far as "the knight of faith" is concerned, a "teleological suspension of the ethical." As "ethical man" as well as "knight of faith," Abraham goes in "fear and trembling" but the ultimate for him is not the ethical norm but his individual relationship to his God. A third attitude seeks to dwell on both aspects of the narrative. On this view, it is impossible that God could ever, in reality, be false to his own nature and command a murder, and yet *if* he could, then Abraham would indeed be obliged to cross the fearful abyss. These three attitudes, it must be said, are rarely given sharply defined expression in the Jewish sources. They tend to shade off into one another, and among some of the Jewish thinkers, all three are combined without any awareness that a contradiction is involved. It is thus far more a matter of where the emphasis is placed than one of precise categorization.

The first attitude seems to have been the earliest among the Jewish thinkers. It is not without significance that the *Akedah* hardly appears at all as a distinct theme in the early rabbinic literature. The only reference to it before the third century is in the Mishnah (Ta'anit 2:4). Here there is a vivid description of the procedure adopted on a public fast-day when the rains had failed to come. The people congregated, we are told, in the town square where they were led in prayer by a venerable man free of sin and experienced in offering supplication to his maker. One of the prayers he was to offer is given as: "May He who answered our father Abraham on Mount Moriah answer you and hearken to the voice of your crying this day." But this is said to be only one of the special "May He who answered . . ." prayers. Others recited on that day contained references to other biblical characters, such as Joshua and Jonah, whose prayers in a time of crisis and danger were answered. Abraham's crisis, it is implied, was basically no different from that of the other heroes. When God answered Abraham's prayer it was to spare Isaac. Implied, too, is the idea that God's "answer," his true will, was revealed not in the original command but in the second command for Abraham to stay his hand and save Isaac. In a later talmudic passage (Ta'anit 4a) it is stated explicitly that God never intended Abraham to kill his son any more than God wishes Baal worshippers to carry out human sacrifices. In a comment to Jeremiah's fierce castigation of the people for burning their sons in fire as burnt offerings for Baal "which I commanded not, nor spoke it, neither came it into My mind" (Jeremiah 19:5), this passage elaborates: "'which I commanded not' refers to the sacrifice of the son of Mesha, the king of Moab (2 Kings 3:27); 'nor spoke it' refers to the daughter of Jephtah (Judges 11:31); 'neither came it into My mind' refers to the sacrifice of Isaac, son of Abraham." Similarly, a rabbinic midrash (Genesis Rabbah 56:8) describes Abraham, after the angel had told him in the name of God to spare Isaac, puzzled by the contradictory statements: "Recently Thou didst tell me

(Genesis 21:12): 'In Isaac shall seed be called to thee,' and later Thou didst say (Genesis 22:5): 'Take now thy son.' And now Thou tellest me to stay my hand!" God is made to reply in the words of Psalm 79 verse 35: "My covenant will I not profane, nor alter that which is gone out of My lips." "When I told thee: 'Take thy son,' I was not altering that which went out from My lips [i.e., the promise that Abraham would have descendants through Isaac]. I did not tell thee: 'Slay him' but bring him up [i.e., take him to the mountain and make him ready to be sacrificed]. Thou didst bring him up. Now take him down again."

In addition to this idea emerging from specific comments to the *Akedah*, it seems to be implied in the typical rabbinic view that God himself keeps his laws. In the Jerusalem Talmud (*Rosh Ha-Shanah* 1:3), for example, the Greek maxim is quoted that the law is not written for the king (i.e., the law is for the king's subjects whereas the king himself is beyond the law). God, it is said, is not like a human king who decrees laws for others but need not keep them himself. God orders man to rise in respect before the aged and God did this himself, as it were, out of respect for Abraham.

All this lends powerful support to an anti-Kierkegaardian understanding of the *Akedah*. Drawing on passages such as those we have quoted it is easy (far too easy, as we shall see) to generalize and to argue that there is no room in Judaism for a doctrine that accepts any teleological suspension of the ethical.

This is, in fact, the attitude adopted by the late Milton Steinberg in an essay entitled: "Kierkegaard and Judaism."² In a lethal attack on the Danish thinker's interpretation of the *Akedah*, Steinberg roundly declares that there is nothing in Judaism to correspond to Kierkegaard's teleological suspension of the ethical and continues:

From the Jewish viewpoint—and this is one of its highest dignities—the ethical is never suspended, not under any circumstances and not for anyone, not even for God. *Especially not for God* [*italics* Steinberg's]. Are not supreme Reality and supreme Goodness one and co-essential to the Divine nature? If so, every act wherein the Good is put aside is more than a breach of His will; it is in effect a denial of His existence. Wherein the rabbis define sin as constituting not merely rebellion but atheism as well.

What Kierkegaard asserts to be the glory of God is Jewishly regarded as unmitigated sacrilege. Which indeed is the true point of the *Akedah*, missed so perversely by Kierkegaard. While it was a merit in Abraham to be willing to sacrifice his only son to his God, it was God's nature and merit that He would not accept an immoral tribute. And it was His purpose, among other things, to establish that truth.³

The opposite view, the "pro-Kierkegaardian" interpretation of the *Akedah*, is, however, also found in Jewish thought, and certainly not as infrequently as Steinberg implies. Philo (*De Abrahamo*, 177–199) replies to hostile critics of Abraham who point out that many others in the history

of mankind have offered themselves and their children for a cause in which they believed. Among examples these critics cite are the barbarians whose Moloch worship was explicitly forbidden by Moses, and Indian women who gladly practise suttee. Philo retorts that Abraham's sacrifice was unique in that he was not governed by motives of custom, honor, or fear but solely by the love of God. It is, then, for Philo a token of Abraham's great love that he was ready to suspend the ethical norm; his love for God overriding all else.

The Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 89b), in a legal context, asks why Isaac (who, in one tradition, was not a docile infant but a mature man) allowed himself to be led to the slaughter. True Abraham was a prophet but is even a prophet to be heeded when he orders another in the name of God to commit an illegal act, in this instance, what amounts to suicide? The reply given is that, indeed, an established prophet can be relied upon, not to cancel any of God's laws entirely but to demand, in God's name, a temporary suspension of them. The commentators⁴ rightly remark that no question is even raised about Abraham's readiness to kill his son since the prophet himself is obviously obliged to heed God's command even if it involves an illegal act. In the "Remembrance" prayer, dating, according to the majority of historians, from the third century and still recited in synagogues on the New Year festival, there occurs the phrase: "Remember, unto us, O Lord our God, the covenant and the loving kindness and the oath which Thou swore unto Abraham our father on Mount Moriah: and consider the binding with which Abraham our father bound his son Isaac on the altar, how he suppressed his compassion in order to perform Thy will with a perfect heart. So may Thy compassion overbear Thine anger against us; in Thy great goodness, may Thy wrath turn aside from Thy people, Thy city and Thine inheritance."

Indeed, there was current in the Middle Ages a curious legend that Abraham actually killed Isaac at the command of God and that later Isaac was resurrected from the dead, the call of the angel to Abraham, commanding him to stay his hand, coming too late. The medieval Spanish commentator, Abraham Ibn Ezra (to Genesis 22:19) quotes this opinion (which, he says, seeks to explain why there is no reference in the narrative to Isaac returning home with his father) but rejects it as completely contrary to the biblical text. Yet in a splendid monograph Shalom Spiegel⁵ has demonstrated how widespread such views were in the Middle Ages, possibly, Spiegel suggests, in order to deny that Isaac's sacrifice was in any way less than that of Jesus; or as a reflection of actual conditions when the real martyrdom of Jewish communities demanded a more tragic model than that of a mere intended sacrifice. It was not unknown for parents to kill their children and then themselves when threatened by the Crusaders.⁶

It is highly improbable that Kierkegaard knew of it, but the Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 89b), in the passage following the legal one we have quoted,

has a Midrashic exposition of the drama of the *Akedah* in which there is expressed all the “fear and trembling” of which Kierkegaard speaks, as Abraham, both “ethical man” and “knight of faith,” is torn in his anguish. The passage deserves to be quoted in full:

“And it came to pass after these words that God did tempt Abraham” (Genesis 22:1). What is the meaning of *after*? Rabbi Johanan said in the name of Rabbi Jose ben Zimra: *After* the words of Satan. It is written: “And the child grew up and was weaned: and Abraham made a great feast the same day that Isaac was weaned” (Genesis 21:8). Satan said to the Holy One, blessed be He: “Sovereign of the Universe! Thou didst give a son to this old man at the age of a hundred, yet of all the banquet he prepared he did not sacrifice to Thee a single turtle-dove or pigeon!” God replied: “Did he not do all this in honor of his son! Yet were I to tell him to sacrifice that son to Me he would do so at once.” . . . On the way (as Abraham was leading Isaac to be sacrificed) Satan confronted him and said to him: “*If we assay to commune with thee, wilt thou be grieved? . . . Behold, thou hast instructed many, and thou hast strengthened the weak hands. Thy words have upholden him that was falling, and thou hast strengthened the feeble knees. But now it is come upon thee, and thou faintest*” (Job 4: 2–5) (i.e., Abraham is being asked to commit a wrong against which his whole teaching has hitherto been directed). Abraham replied: “*I will walk in my integrity*” (Psalm 26:2). Satan said to him: “*Should not thy fear be thy confidence?*” (Job 4:6). He replied: “*Remember, I pray thee, whoever perished being innocent?*” (Job 4:6). Seeing that Abraham would not listen to him, Satan said to him: “*Now a thing was secretly brought to me*” (Job 4:12). I have heard from behind the Veil “*the lamb, for a burnt offering*” (Genesis 22:7) “but not Isaac for a burnt offering.” Abraham replied: “It is the punishment of a liar that he is not believed even when he tells the truth.” In the parallel passage in the Midrash (Genesis Rabbah 56:4) Satan says to Abraham: “Tomorrow He will condemn thee as a murderer”⁸ but Abraham replies: “Nevertheless!”

The analysis of the *Akedah* given by Moses Maimonides (1135–1204),⁹ the greatest of the medieval Jewish thinkers, similarly comes very close to the Kierkegaardian understanding. Maimonides observes that the *Akedah* teaches two fundamental ideas (neither of these, it should be noted, has anything to do with the “happy ending” of the narrative). The first of these is that man, out of the love and fear of God, is obliged to go even to the limits to which Abraham was prepared to go. According to Maimonides’ reading of the *Akedah*, the “test” was not in order to provide God with information about Abraham’s steadfastness that God did not possess, but rather it was to provide a “test case” of the limits to which a man can and should go in his love for God. Maimonides stresses not alone the natural love that Abraham had for the child of his extreme old age but the fact that in this child was centered all Abraham’s hope of establishing a religious community to carry on his teachings. Maimonides adds: “Know that this notion is corroborated and explained in the *Torah*, in which it is mentioned

that the final end of the whole of the Torah, including its commandments, prohibitions, promises and narratives, is one thing only—namely, fear of Him, may He be exalted. This is referred to in its dictum: *If thou wilt take care to observe all the words of this Law that are written in this book, that thou mayest fear this glorious and awful Name, and so on* (Deuteronomy 28:58)."

The second idea contained in the *Akedah*, according to Maimonides, is that the prophets consider as true what comes to them from God in a prophetic revelation. If the prophetic vision ever allows the prophet to remain in some doubt, Abraham would not have hastened to commit an act so repugnant to nature. The man, Abraham, who taught that God does reveal himself to man, was the most suitable instrument for conveying the further truth that there is complete conviction in the mind of the prophet that he is really the recipient of a divine communication so that he is ready to act on it no matter how severe the moral as well as physical demands it makes on him. Maimonides' statement, that the final end of the whole Torah (as he says, including its commandments, which means, the ethical as well as the purely religious commandments) is one thing only, the fear of God, is as close to the idea of, at least, a possibility that the ethical can be suspended for this particular telos as makes no difference. The thirteenth-century exegete Bahya Ibn Asher¹⁰ develops the same line as Maimonides, that the *Akedah* teaches the great love of Abraham and adds that the reason that Abraham took only two lads with him (and ordered even these to remain at the foot of the mountain) was because Abraham knew that if others were present they would, in their horror of the deed he intended to perform, seek to prevent him from carrying it out.¹¹

The renowned contemporary Orthodox teacher Professor J.B. Soloveitchick is the most determined exponent of a Kierkegaardian interpretation of the *Akedah*. In a famous essay, entitled *Ish Ha-Halakah* (The Man of Halakah),¹² Soloveitchick observes that the midrash (to which reference has previously been made) in which Abraham's dialogue with Satan conveys all the anguish and uncertainty of the man of faith, is much closer to Kierkegaard than any idea of religion as offering "peace of mind." The ultimate aim of "the man of Halakah," the man who follows the *Halakah*, the legal side of Judaism, is to obey God's revealed will which transcends man's merely rational aspirations for the good life. The psalmist who speaks of the Lord as his shepherd who leads him beside the still waters (Psalm 23), affirms this only as the ultimate aim of the religious life. He does not mean to imply, according to Soloveitchick, that the religious way itself has anything to do with "still waters." On the contrary, as Kierkegaard affirms, the deeper aspects of religious faith are only to be found in the man tormented by the demands God seems to be making both on his intelligence and his conscience. Soloveitchick only refers to Kierkegaard's interpretation in connection with Abraham's anguish and doubt, not with

regard to the teleological suspension of the ethical, but J.B. Agus¹³ may be right in reading Soloveitchick's essay as a statement that the full Kierkegaardian view is compatible with Judaism.

Although some Jewish thinkers have stressed the "happy ending" as the chief point of the *Akedah* narrative and others have stressed the original command to sacrifice as the chief point of the story, a compromise position in which both aspects are avowed is not as contradictory as might appear at first glance. It can be argued that, after all, the story does consist of these two parts, the original command and the "happy ending"; that this is the only occasion on which God is said to have commanded a man to commit murder as a test of obedience; that, on the other hand, to read the story simply as a homily on the sacredness of human life tends to reduce it to banality; and, at the same time, to overlook the finale is to ignore an element that the narrator never intended should be overlooked. For this reason some modern thinkers, especially, have tried to preserve both insights as essential parts of the *Akedah*.

W. Gunther Plaut,¹⁴ in an essay entitled "Notes on the *Akedah*," implying, perhaps, an avoidance of too tidy a schematic presentation of the complicated narrative, states the problem but offers more than one solution. Plaut first quotes Franz Rosenzweig's understanding¹⁵ of the whole idea of God tempting man. God must, at times, conceal his true purpose. He must mislead man (as he misled Abraham into thinking that he was the kind of God who demanded that a murder be committed for his glorification) because if everything were clear men would become automatons. In Rosenzweig's words, "the most unfree, the timid and the fearful would be the most pious. But evidently God wants only the free to be His: He must make it difficult, yea, impossible, to understand His actions, so as to give man the opportunity to believe, that is, to ground his faith in trust and freedom." Plaut continues: "What kind of God is He? How can the compassionate God of the Bible be presented as asking the sacrifice of a child?" Plaut replies by referring to two different solutions that have been offered. The first is that the test came out of a time when human sacrifice was still an acceptable possibility; in terms of its own age, therefore, it was merely the extreme test and, after all, God did not exact the final price. The real test of faith and obedience consists in being ready to do the totally unexpected, the impossible, for the sake of God. Another solution is that God never intended the sacrifice to be made. According to this way of reading the narrative, concludes Plaut, Abraham's test both succeeded and failed. It succeeded in that it proved Abraham to be a man of faith and obedience. And it failed in that Abraham's understanding of God's nature remained deficient. This latter observation does not seem to tally, however, with the narrative. It is nowhere suggested that Abraham failed in any way in his test, as Plaut would have it. Even if the *Akedah* be interpreted as a lesson on the sacredness of human life and the true nature

of God it is nowhere implied that Abraham was mistaken in his understanding of the demand made on him.

The religious thinker and educationist Ernst Simon,¹⁶ in a discussion of how the *Akedah* narrative should be taught in religion classes, refers to the two different interpretations of the *Akedah* in the Jewish tradition. He calls them the “rationalist” and the “existentialist” and believes that between these two extremes some intermediate possibilities exist, “not necessarily of a compromising nature, but authentic in themselves.” Simon refers to Kierkegaard’s analysis in his *Fear and Trembling* and remarks that though Kierkegaard was not aware of the Jewish traditions his attitude toward Abraham as the “knight of faith” is, in some ways, kindred to them.

Simon formulates the basic problem of the *Akedah* as: “How could Abraham believe that God asked from him the sacrifice of his son? Is that a moral demand? And if not, how can it be a religious one?” The “rationalist” view is that God never intended the sacrifice to be made. This line of interpretation can be followed all the way to Maimonides’ view¹⁷ that God does not really want even animal sacrifices and that these are commanded only as a concession to the psychology of the ancient Israelites who, under the influence of their milieu, could not conceive of divine worship without sacrificial offerings. The “existentialist” school of thought, on the other hand, sees man’s highest perfection in the absolute submission of his will to God’s command, even when this seems most absurd. “According to this view,” writes Simon, “the real victim was not the innocent Isaac, but the knowing Abraham who brought a sacrifice of his intellect and his will, of his emotions and even of his morals, that is, of his whole human personality, *ad maiorem gloriam Dei*.”¹⁸

Yet Simon believes that it is possible to read the narrative in a way in which both extremes are avoided but in which justice is done to the insights provided by both. The command to sacrifice can be read as a warning against too facile an identification of religion with naturalistic ethics. Ultimately, it is in the command of God that ethical conduct is grounded. The “happy ending,” on the other hand, precludes any religious approach that encourages ideas repugnant to our moral feelings. An antiethical religion such as that described in Gustave Flaubert’s historical novel *Salambo*, about Moloch worship in Semitic Carthage, is a real possibility. Thus the *Akedah* teaches that Judaism is neither a secular system of morals nor a blind devotion to a supernatural power. Furthermore, the *Akedah* is the great exception, not the rule. The rule in Judaism is that religious and moral commands are very close to each other.

To sum up, there is more than one Jewish interpretation of the *Akedah*. In this and similar matters of biblical interpretation there is no such thing as an “official” Jewish viewpoint and it is extremely doubtful whether the whole concept of “normative Judaism” is more than a myth. Both Stein-

berg and Soloveitchick are, therefore, correct in claiming that their understanding of the *Akedah* is authentically Jewish. They are both wrong in appearing to claim that theirs is the only possible authentically Jewish interpretation. It is not as if there is any question of the Jew ever being obliged to emulate Abraham's example. Judaism supplies a categorical answer to the question whether a murder is ever permitted when it is believed that God has so commanded and the answer in all the Jewish sources is in the negative. The command to Abraham was, on any showing, a once-and-for-all matter, never to be repeated and not carried out in practice even in the instance of Abraham himself. Yet this does not allow a Jewish thinker to dismiss the Kierkegaardian "midrash" as utter nonsense. There is point in the reminder, and sufficient support from the classical Jewish writings, that a true religious outlook demands of "ethical man" that he acquire a vertical direction to his life and that when the brave "knight of faith" goes out to do battle he does not tilt at windmills.

2. Abraham and Isaac: A Hermeneutical Problem Before Kierkegaard

DAVID A. PAILIN

KIERKEGAARD'S *FEAR AND TREMBLING* IS A PROVOCATIVE STUDY OF THE STORY of Abraham's attempt to sacrifice Isaac. It highlights the question whether it is correct that faith may involve the "teleological suspension of the ethical" since "faith is precisely this paradox, that the individual as the particular is higher than the universal."¹ Consequently, what ethics would condemn as murder, religion may praise as sacrifice.² This "contradiction" produces "the dread which can well make a man sleepless." It makes Johannes de Silentio confess that "Abraham I cannot understand, in a certain sense there is nothing I can learn from him but astonishment."³ Most of this symposium is concerned with the ethical, religious, and philosophical issues raised by Kierkegaard's treatment of the story of the sacrifice of Isaac.

Kierkegaard's treatment of the story, however, while probably the longest, is by no means the first discussion of the issues it raises for religious understanding. For example, Augustine, Abélard and Aquinas discuss issues raised by the story.⁴ Two centuries before *Fear and Trembling* was written, Joseph Hall anticipated both Johannes de Silentio's puzzlement (in terms of a savage heathen observing the incident from the secrecy of some bushes) and Kierkegaard's use of the story to exemplify the character of faith. He writes of Abraham that

Faith hath wrought the same in him, which cruelty would in others, Not to be moved. He contemns all feares, and overlookes all impossibilities.⁵

In this essay, I want to consider various ways in which the story of Abraham and Isaac was treated by some, mainly English, works in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

It is not surprising that during this period a number of theologians and preachers dealt with this story, since it apparently challenges the compatibility of two of their basic religious convictions. On the one hand, it was very widely accepted as self-evident that faith and belief must be essentially reasonable. From the Cambridge Platonists to Paley this principle was regarded by most people, both believers and nonbelievers, as practically unquestionable. A faith that ran counter to reason was, to them, untenable. There were some interesting exceptions to this position, but this essay is not the place to discuss them. On the other hand, it was probably as widely accepted that Christian faith and belief involved treating the Bible as an accurate record of God's dealings with men. Since, therefore, the story of Abraham and Isaac is part of the biblical record, it was necessary

for Christian believers to show how God's demand and Abraham's response could be seen to be reasonable. Some of the ways in which they attempted to do this remind us of those "men of nice and acute perceptions, excellent metaphysicians, and by no means pedants" who, according to Voltaire, try to justify Abraham's conduct toward his wife!⁶

In this paper, then, I want to do three things:

first, to outline some of the treatments of the Abraham and Isaac story produced during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Since most of these treatments are not easily accessible today, I will spend a large portion of this paper in describing them. I do not pretend that the list of works consulted is exhaustive—there is a limit to the volumes of theology and, even more, of sermons that I can cope with—but it does, I believe, provide a fair indication of the different kinds of interpretation that were advanced;

second, to consider why the different interpretations of the story were advanced;

third, to indicate, briefly, what this study suggests about hermeneutics, especially in relation to what is regarded as an intrinsically authoritative text.

This program means that the first two parts of this paper belong to the history of thought and the third to contemporary understanding of hermeneutics. The legitimacy of this combination is defensible on the grounds that a study of past hermeneutical activity may show what happens in practice more clearly than a study of present modes of interpretation. This is because the different cultural context and exegetical presuppositions of a past age make it easier to see how such factors prejudice the understanding of a text than is the case when, as contemporaries of the interpreters we are studying, we share their basic approach and so find it hard to become completely aware of the prejudices at work.

Nevertheless, the views expressed in the first two parts must be placed under the judgment of the conclusions we draw from them in the third part. It is important not to forget this, since one of the conclusions reached by studying what is revealed by the first two parts of this paper is that the attempt to understand past expressions of thought is, to a significant degree, methodologically unsure. Somewhat paradoxically, then, the conclusions reached in part three, while derived from an analysis of evidence provided by parts one and two, include the claim that the kind of understanding found in those parts is in principle suspect! This may well be regarded as a self-defeating result. Such a judgment, however, would fall into the trap of absolutizing a relative: the fact that no understanding of past thought can ever wholly escape (or, at least, can ever be able to show that it has wholly escaped) from being affected by current problems and prejudices does not show that any such understanding must be wholly or even largely a reading of those problems and prejudices into the expressions of that past thought. There is an important difference between

holding that all attempts to understand texts of another culture must be tentative to some extent and maintaining that no claim to such understanding is at all justifiable. As I see it, then, this study does not reach a pointlessly self-defeating conclusion but illustrates the difficulty of understanding past thought. It is always illegitimate for us to claim finality and incorrigibility for our understanding of the expressions of such thought.

Having thus indicated the justifiability of this project, it is time to stop worrying about the nature of the conclusions to be reached and to show how to reach them! How, then, was the story of Abraham and Isaac understood in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries?

I. HOW WAS THE STORY INTERPRETED?

The material available to the interpreters of the story of Abraham and Isaac was, of course, the record in Genesis 22:1–18 and the comments on it in Hebrews 11:17–19 and James 2:21–23. The remarks about Abraham in Romans 4:2f and Galatians 3:6–9 (both presumably echoing Genesis 15:6) could also have been in mind. Most of the treatments of this source material are in terms of the Authorized Version translation, although some of the Hebrew and Greek terms in the originals are occasionally referred to. The various interpreters of the story thus receive it as the record of a historical event in which Abraham was “tempted” by God (Genesis 22:1) or “tried” and responded in an act of “faith” (Hebrews 11:17). Hebrews 11:19 attaches both belief in resurrection and a notion of “figurative” significance to the story.

The various interpreters seem to confine their use of the available source material to the passages in Genesis and Hebrews. The comment on it in James 2:21–23 is generally ignored, as are the comments on Abraham in Romans and Galatians. Fuller is an exception: he attempts to reconcile James’s understanding with that of Paul.⁷ The interpreters find little to explain in the words of their sources. There are some discussions of the meaning of the terms “tempt” (Genesis 22:1), “try” (Hebrews 11:17) and “accounting that” (Hebrews 11:19) but generally the interpreters seem to have no difficulties with the terms used either in the translation or in the original text. Charnock, though, suggests that Genesis 22:14 should be translated “*In the Mount the Lord Jehovah shall be seen; the Particle (of) not being in the Hebrew Text.*”⁸ The vast majority of the interpretations which we shall consider do not, furthermore, doubt that the Genesis story—as any such report in the Bible—is an accurate report of a series of events that actually occurred.⁹ They do not cast doubt on the historicity of the story and, apart from the author of the note on Abraham added to the enlarged English edition of Bayle’s dictionary and Kant, there is no suggestion that Abraham might only have “thought” that God was so ordering him. Indeed, with these rare exceptions, there seems to be little

doubt about the reliability of the knowledge of God's intentions contained in the biblical materials.

The problem for the interpreters, then, was not in deciding the *meaning* of the biblical material about Abraham and Isaac. The texts as such raised no great problems and their meaning was clear. They provide a record of a past event from which, at the human level at least, we can accurately reconstruct what occurred. Their problem was to determine the *significance* of that story or, rather, of the event it described. They sought to do this in three respects, in terms of God, of Abraham, and of themselves and their readers. The composite question they were trying to answer was: What do we learn from this story about God, about Abraham, and about ourselves in relation to God? Some of them felt, as we shall see, that their interpretations must include a moral justification of the actions of God and Abraham; others felt under no such constraint because the report concerned God and was biblical. What, then, did the various interpreters make of the story? Although they run together their different answers to the three underlying questions, I will deal with their views in terms of those questions and not according to the individual interpreters.

The works of the individuals that I have used can be found in the appended notes. Some of them offer only very brief comments on the story, while others give it extended discussion. From my own notes I seem to have found these references through looking at some 230 authors in the period! They are a mixed bag—including an Archbishop of Canterbury, a radically minded glover, and a Master of Trinity College, Cambridge.

What, first, was understood to be the significance of the story so far as it concerned God? In this respect the interpretations can be treated as answers to one or more of three questions: Why did God command Abraham to sacrifice Isaac? If God did it to test Abraham, why was such a test necessary? Was God's command to Abraham morally justifiable? It was generally assumed that these questions must be answerable since God did not do things without a good reason. Consciously or not the canon of reason was applied to God in this period, so that most commentators were not prepared to entertain the notion that God's motives might be unfathomable to them or his actions gratuitous. Here at any rate Chubb speaks for the vast majority when he maintains that "God will not *prostitute* his authority by using it to answer no good purpose."¹⁰

As for the primary question, "Why did God do it?", the obvious answer was that it was to test Abraham and, in particular, to prove the quality of his faith. This answer follows the "tempt" of Genesis 22:1 and the "try" of Hebrews 11:17. Collyer describes it as "the sorest affliction, and most severe trial" of Abraham's faith in and obedience to God.¹¹ According to Fuller, God sees fit "to *try* the righteous" since he sets great value "upon the genuine exercises of grace" which are produced in such situations.¹²