

Providence College

DigitalCommons@Providence

---

Community Scholar Publications

Providence College Community Scholars

---

1-2012

## Abraham's Folly

William Paul Haas

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.providence.edu/comm\\_scholar\\_pubs](https://digitalcommons.providence.edu/comm_scholar_pubs)



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

---

Haas, William Paul, "Abraham's Folly" (2012). *Community Scholar Publications*. 9.  
[https://digitalcommons.providence.edu/comm\\_scholar\\_pubs/9](https://digitalcommons.providence.edu/comm_scholar_pubs/9)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Providence College Community Scholars at DigitalCommons@Providence. It has been accepted for inclusion in Community Scholar Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Providence. For more information, please contact [dps@providence.edu](mailto:dps@providence.edu).

## ABRAHAM'S FOLLY

William Paul Haas

January 2012

By way of introduction, if not by way of forewarning, this essay is not a work in formal exegesis. It is not based on a thorough examination of all of the scholarly literature available on Genesis 12-22. Moreover, I do not bring to the task any special competence in the ancient languages, in the history and anthropology of the various peoples identified. However, I do attempt to examine some of the theological, philosophical and spiritual works which propose a wide variety of interpretations of the story of Abraham in Genesis, 12-22. Some of these interpretations build upon centuries of faithful and respectful reflection and commentary, and some of them are hostile to any and all interpretations of sacred scriptures, and some current literature condemns the story of Abraham as especially pernicious. Lastly, I do not try to prove or demonstrate here that my own thesis about Abraham's folly is supported by much of this literature, but I do show that the wide variety of responses to the Genesis narrative helps me to formulate a guess that there may well be room for one more perspective - a view which acknowledges the unquestionable difficulties in the Genesis account and yet suggests that there is another way to find the God behind the story, God revealing something about himself, in a way not very evident to believers and nonbelievers alike. The critical questions in most of the reflections over the centuries have been; How could God command Abraham to kill his innocent son and to do it in the same manner as the pagan gods required and how could God expect faith in his promises when God commanded that the promises be voided by the death of Isaac? The answers range from categorical, certain, tentative, oversimplified and hostile to "guess what," maybe something else is going on beneath the surface which the reader must search out.

The Book of Genesis begins with two accounts of creation without troubling to reconcile them both and without identifying the source of this information, coming as it did before there were any humans to witness it. So, from the beginning it may be helpful to keep in mind that Genesis originally records these primordial events from a simple chronological point of view, going forward and backward - one event following or preceding another, an effect following its cause - as if to say, once upon a time God created a universe, and then...and then, and so on. There is another way of looking at the events in Genesis, and in much of literature, philosophy and theology, from outside of time and chronology and that is to view everything ontologically. Looked at this way God is seen as the first cause of all causes causing all the time. Thus, creation was not only an event at history's beginning, although impossible for anyone to experience, but it is the ongoing event which makes the experience of history and within history itself possible in the first place (ontologically). God is seen as the concurrent cause of there being any history at all, as all events interact and move within the totality of God's orchestration. The chronological level is horizontal and the ontological level is vertical. At that intersections of these two dimensions of history and being, we human beings stand, almost overwhelmed. One could hardly expect the original author or authors of Genesis, though necessarily absent, to reveal the mystery they contemplated in any other way but horizontally, as they lived

and experienced the sequence of the rest of life. We do not have to contradict their primitive vision as inadequate or false simply because we assert that the vertical dynamic, less obvious, even hidden, but not less compelling, complements their vision. Furthermore, if we do not respect the depth of that early insight, we can hardly expect to see the larger truth of God's concurrent presence as we also stand at the intersection of the ticking clock and the eternal stillness of God's vision of things. This perspective will guide the following study of Abraham's encounter with God as we pay attention to what is unraveled in the story of his adventures and what also might be going on concurrently in God's role behind the scenes. This may not be the best or the only way to read the Book of Genesis, but it is one way that may reveal more than meets the eye

The Book of Genesis, chapters 12 to 22, unfolds the narrative about Abraham, the son of Terah who lived in Mesopotamia about 1800 years before Christ. At the command of God, he began a journey into the strange land of Canaan, which led eventually to the discovery of a special bond between himself, his family and God and to the emergence of the people Israel. Since the biblical text itself does not establish when and how it was written nor does it identify the author or authors of the original versions, the reader begins the task of understanding at a considerable disadvantage. When someone is talking to you, it is helpful to know who it is and what they have in mind. The Book of Genesis, because of its great antiquity and its unique composition presses these questions from the first words "In the beginning..." The story of Abraham takes place after the creation, the appearance of Adam and Eve and their sons Cain and Abel, after the flood and the Tower of Babel. Then the stage is set for the appearance of Abram (his original name).

In the city of Ur, Terah was a sculptor of votive statues for the temple, so one can only assume that Abraham would have been very familiar with the religious perceptions and practices of his family and neighbors and of the larger society. Moses Maimonides (1204) reflects that Abraham in the beginning "had no one to teach or inform him but was immersed among idolaters and fools... and he was one of them." However, it cannot be forgotten that Abraham's Sumerian ancestors gave to mankind the inventions of the wheel, the plow, the sailboat, the vault and the dome, but most significantly, the invention of cuneiform writing. With this new technology, the Sumerians could indulge their desire for orderly records of commerce, religion, literature, architecture and human behavior. And perhaps most relevant to the argument that follows, King Hammurabi of Babylon, (2200 BC) who oversaw this ancient revolution, codified the moral reasoning of his civilization and promulgated a standard of conduct, as the king's code put it, "to cause justice to prevail in the land, to destroy wickedness and evil, so that the strong may not oppress the weak and justice be given to the orphan and the widow." Abraham was no stranger to this very sophisticated ethical culture as he began his trek into a less congenial new world. Within the earliest books of the Bible, (Joshua 24: 2-3 and Judith 5; 6-9) it is noted that the family of Abraham "served other gods" and that Abraham left the ways of his ancestors and "worshiped the God of Heaven, the God they came to know."

His forebears were not exactly the "idolaters and fools" that Maimonides imagined. But it was Abraham's lot to "come to know" gradually what a fool he was to think that the one God who invited him to begin the search was like all the other gods he left behind

and the ones he found among the Canaanites. One cannot presume that Abraham from the very first step of his departure had a fully developed theology and an effective critique of the religious world in which he was completely immersed. Early Biblical Interpretation, by Kugel and Greer cites the Book of Jubilees and the Apocalypse of Abraham as two other ancient sources, which speculate on Abraham's rejection of his father's idolatry. But there are no grounds for assuming that Abraham had it all perfectly figured out from the start and there is much evidence that he and God took a long time to figure each other out.

David Rosenberg's, Abraham, The First Historical Biography provides a much needed and current examination of the cuneiform record of the culture of Mesopotamia from which Abraham emerged. Rosenberg describes the domestic routine of the "god-statues", made by Abraham and his father, which were treated in the temples of Sumeria as if they were living beings, put to bed, given their meals, entertained with live music, read poetry, dressed, changed, taken for walks. He contends that Terah and Abraham, because of their trade as sculptors of gods for temple use, would have had a thorough and intimate knowledge of these goings-on. Furthermore he argues that Abraham's privileged position would have demanded that he be familiar with Sumerian literature including the Epic of Gilgamesh. C. Leonard Woolley, (The Sumerians, 125) the archaeologist who discovered the ruins of Ur and mastered the Cuneiform language of Gilgamesh, characterized the religion of the Sumerians as "not of love but of fear, fear whose limits are confined to this present life, fear of Beings all-powerful, capricious, unmoral". Rosenberg's suggestions are not conclusive but they leave us cautious about just what notion of the gods Abraham took with him into Canaan and how they colored his perception of what Yahweh was leading him toward. Abraham certainly did not leave his religious home empty-handed.

It is not the purpose of this essay to resolve the many questions about the development of the written texts of the Genesis account. Whether one accepts the scriptures as dictated verbatim by God to Moses several centuries after the actual events of Abraham's adventure, or as a somewhat coherent collection of oral and written traditions patched together over centuries under the less specific but no less real guidance of God, the biblical text before us presents us with the earliest picture of how God and man might have reacted to each other. This essay is based on a simple reading of the English translations readily available without any disciplined attention to the more subtle linguistic issues that scripture specialists concentrate on.

According to the Documentary Hypothesis it may well be that the earliest parts of the Abraham narrative came originally from two documents. The first is distinguished by the use of the name of God, "Yahweh", (J) and is dated around 950 BC, perhaps 1000 years after the events referred to in the story. The second source names God, "Elohim" (E) and dates from 750 B.C. According to Kenneth A. Mathews, recent biblical scholarship suggests that more of the Genesis account was the work of a single author (a Yahwist). He welcomes these refinements as a counter balance to the "topsy-turvy field of source reconstruction". These versions, according to the theory, later merged in Deuteronomy (D). The latest source was the Priestly (P) document from about 530 BC which

theoretically brought the earlier documents together Roland De Vaux (The Bible and the Ancient Near East, pp. 43 and 113) claims that the documentary theory “has been badly shaken,” but the work remains to further understand the purposes of the “author” of Genesis, “a writer or a simple storyteller.” We are caught up in the study of the pre-literary history of these documents and of the oral traditions from which they emerge.” Yet, as a non-specialist, impatient with the “topsy-turvy” complications I can only rely upon the authoritative texts presented by the last several thousand years of scholarship and meditation as worthy of serious reflection.

The incoherent, overlapping and inconclusive segments of the ancient narrative could reveal a human truth that both the divine and human authors chose not to conceal. The God who appears is seen by us only through the evolving perceptions of the narrators who seem to be little concerned with a rigorous theological portrait of divinity, or with every feature coherently delineated. The intent of the narrators, themselves puzzled about what actually happened and about what it all meant, may have been to leave the rest of us guessing. The Documentary Hypothesis does not necessarily destroy the fundamental credibility of the text – it simply tries to explain how the text came to its present form. The Yahweh- Elohim who appears in the text as not too sure of himself is nowhere in the text referred to as the source of the narrative or as the one who prescribed that it be so composed and preserved. If that composition seemed to come together by chance, I would not discount God’s hand in its formation, though I realize that here I am begging a very huge philosophical question. The God unveiling Himself gradually through the interaction with Abraham, perhaps allows Himself to be portrayed by Abraham and the story teller(s) in a disorganized fashion so that the reader can witness the slow and baffling reaction of humans to a single loving divine entity that escaped their wildest imaginations. This essay dares to suggest that in Genesis, 12-22, God is the masterful teacher who teases and provokes his student to discover the truth as the student’s own conviction, a much more painful process than God, the teacher, simply declaring what is to be understood and believed. With the help of Jean Piaget, psychologists, parents have come to see the childish game of peekaboo as a profound formative experience for the child who begins between 4 and 12 months to realize the “object constancy” of the rest of the world and to delight in the discovery. In the Abraham narrative, it is no insult to divinity, to find God the Father playing peekaboo with Abraham and with us readers with serious but well hidden intent and with surprising results.

Another question that must be faced early on is whether Abraham’s idea of God evolved from the polytheism so prevalent in the ancient civilized world to a henotheism more characteristic of Sumeria and Babylon, and eventually to a fully mature monotheism. The intermediate henotheistic vision accepts one god as preeminent among many other gods, such that a particular nation, tribe or region might consider its own god as uniquely powerful in its proper domain, while other groups might pay the same homage to their gods. Along with the public gods in Mesopotamia, there were also private and family gods. Rosenberg suggests that Abraham gradually realized that his personal god was also the god of all mankind, but the text does not indicate this insight from the moment of his departure from his father’s house. Also, if there were such a transition, a growing faith in one god would not from the beginning require the denial of other gods in other

communities. As a Christian I have grown accustomed to the slow pace of Jesus' disciples in catching up to his message, particularly with Peter's inclination to miss the point, to misjudge himself and others, and to fail to discern the will of God, even with Jesus Christ trying to make things clear to him step by step. A powerful example of Jesus' tolerance of the slow pace of his followers is found in John's account (Chapter 6) of the first revelation that "the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." His hearers were dumbfounded at the suggestion that he was serious about eating his flesh and many walked away. Leaving the exposition incomplete, Jesus asked, "Do you also wish to go away? And Peter answered, "Lord, to whom can we go. You have the words of eternal life." His response leaves more unsaid than said. This presentation is also a good illustration of the theory of narrative theology which sees in revelation a gradual unveiling of the message in a story line that moves forward and backward, in and out, above and below the message without necessarily ever isolating the objective truth as if it were seen outside of the context of time and place. I must confess here that I am persuaded that this narrative approach has special value for the examination of the journey of Abraham. Hauerwas and Jones offer a useful overview of the theory in his article Theology of Narrative or Narrative Theology?: A Response to Why Narrative?

Similarly, God's revelation to Abraham would not be any less generous because it tolerated his gradual realization of his own limitations and of what was happening. In fact, would not the truth of the real interaction between the human and divine require that whatever is objectively true must be seen as objectively narrative. Nor would it be surprising to find that the final written account itself of Abraham's journey reflected the same uneven pace of the revelation under the tolerant persuasion of God. There is no reason to suspect that Abraham's discovery of the one God happened perfectly all at once any more than one can find sheer perfection in the unfolding of Christ's message at any one moment in the Christian narrative. Why then must one assume that the Genesis account is perfectly clear, logical and persuasive at every point of the journey? Sometimes the most reverent and faithful posture is that of astonishment.

Ultimately, I must ask what meanings can be found in the Genesis narrative which relate to my own idea of a God who would call Abraham in the first place, make extraordinary promises to him, propose a binding covenant with him and then guide the formulation of a lasting record of how the encounter evolved. I can imagine that the biblical record of his journey of discovery underwent its own journey – a journey within a journey. Gerhard Von Rad (Genesis: a Commentary p. 25) says of the author of the original Yahwist narrative: "Someone has justly called the artistic mastery in this narrative one of the greatest accomplishments of all times in the history of thought... The meagerness of his resources is truly amazing, and yet this narrator's view encompasses the whole of human life with all its heights and depths...both the riddles and conflicts of his visible acts and ways of behaving as well as the mistakes and muddles in the secret of his heart." Against the background of this human sensitivity, Von Rad does not lose sight of the Yahwist's vision of the man to whom "the living God has been revealed and who therefore has become the object of divine address, a divine act, and therefore a divine judgment and divine salvation" The stark imperfections of Abraham's character and of his evolving

vision of God make the written account more credible and the gift of God's self revelation more generous. In the same way the Christian scriptures lose nothing of their credibility for the obtuseness of many of Jesus' followers and his indulgent tolerance of their slowness in getting the point. In fact, their deficiencies show the rest of us that the message is meant for us, too. It has been these stark imperfections that draw me to the narrative as if it has something to say to me personally. If there is folly present in the narrative, maybe the most grateful reader is a fool.

I can live comfortably with my own inevitable misreadings of portions of the text, with my ignorance of the original languages and my lack of historical expertise, so long as I can see, with the guidance of such scholars as Von Rad, Claus Westermann, Walter Brueggemann and Roland de Vaux, some thread of meaning which weaves into the fabric of whatever else I think I know and understand or believe. I see no reason to withhold my judgment of what I see before me until I have mastered all the available scholarly literature on Genesis, any more than I can afford to suspend judgment on all the other important matters that lie more or less beyond my grasp. This is no apology for carelessness or superficiality: it is a simple existential acceptance of my own fallibility. For the moment let me suggest that the admission of my own limitations in the field of biblical scholarship is not the major impediment to understanding or to faith and that Abraham's journey led him to discover this very same truth about himself. The God he discovered, I dare to contend, became more obvious as he realized the depth of his own folly. So, I admit that I read Abraham's search through the eyes of my own searching – the only ones I have.

### The play of reason and imagination

It will be useful here to reflect briefly on the fundamental question of the role of reason in the interpretation of Abraham's expression of faith. Unfortunately, as shall become clearer in the examination of the comments of particular authors, too many interpretations focus exclusively on the very dramatic command of God that Abraham sacrifice his son Isaac to demonstrate his obedience and faith, without paying careful attention to Abraham's other encounters with God. Their indictment of both Abraham and the god imagined in the story is that they are equally irrational. I can see the irrational elements of the narrative but argue that they gradually evolve to Abraham's admission of his own folly. However, to me the sacrifice event, called the Akedah, meaning the binding of Isaac before the sacrifice, is remarkably different from other developments in the lively dialogue that leads up to the sacrifice. More than once the text is critically clear that Abraham challenged God to be more reasonable, to be more just, to be consistent and simply to pay attention as if his newly imagined deity needed constant correction and advice. In wrestling with the inadequacies of God Abraham reveals to himself his own foolishness, and faith becomes a real possibility.

John Henry Newman offers a "faith-centered hermeneutic" that has been helpful in the exegesis of Genesis. In An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent (1870) he exposes his

own dependence on the “illative sense” which is the reliance upon the common sense accumulation of life’s experiences in a practical reasonable judgment. This is not empirical science but it is no less reliable as an introduction to what needs to be understood or needs to be done about Sacred Scripture. According to the understanding of Peter Waters in Cardinal John Henry Newman and the Development of Doctrine Newman sought a methodology that bridged “the gap between probability and certainty” Without realizing it, Newman was reaching for the logic of possibility, abductive reasoning, which I will explore presently. For Newman the illative sense is the same as conscience, a personal judgment that is not antagonistic to faith but is involved in the assent of faith. Newman’s insight is significant here because later on much argumentation will be examined which totally separates Abraham’s faith from his common sense moral convictions. Newman would have no part of that. Secondly, if I had to put a label on my own approach to Genesis it would be “illative.” I want to be as true to my uncompromised reading of the Abraham narrative as I am ever to my own conscience. This may sound like the Reformation “individual interpretation” of scripture that stood Luther against Rome, but it is not. The results of a totally personal reading of the scriptures need not exclude a very careful examination of what others have also found and it may not be quite so esoteric or hostile to sound theology and spiritual experience

Thanks to the insights of the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1838-1914) one can identify in the biblical text the interplay of various levels of reasoning - deductive reasoning with inductive reasoning and with abductive reasoning, interacting in an organic process. This is not the place for an excursion into his philosophy, except for me to expose my own philosophical biases up front since without them I would have little to say on any subject. For Peirce deduction is analytical and leads to certainty. Induction is synthetic and builds toward increased probability. Abduction is hypothetical and reveals only possibility. For Peirce, each function of reasoning is itself perfectly reasonable and each contributes to the organic totality of a reasonably intelligent life. Peirce, as a disciplined scientist, insisted that abductive reasoning was the critical beginning of understanding (and I would suggest of interpreting any text) Abduction takes the form of an educated guess, not a wild flight of fancy, but the construction of a possibility or hypothesis that can be tested in some way so as to lead to further inquiry. Without such creative guesswork science would never advance. This mode of progress Peirce called “pragmatism” which I find tantalizingly close to Newman illative sense. But abduction, being fallible, necessarily entails the possibility of discovering one’s own error, which is not in his view the opposite of discovering the truth. Error discovered is an essential part of the fruitfulness of abductive reasoning toward the truth. In Peirce, Pragmatism and the Logic of Scripture Peter Ochs, exposes the surprising link between the deeper meaning of Scripture and the need to read the sacred words with creative ingenuity. Ochs was drawn to the study of Peirce’s logical works while a student of rabbinic thinking, which he describes as trying to “find reasonably precise ways of talking about imprecise things without losing the meaning of the imprecision itself - a fascination with the irrevocable contextuality “For my purposes here, I do not see guessing as incompatible with sound exegesis and spiritual meditation any more than thinking rationally is irrelevant. I believe that Peirce is correct: one cannot think rationally without guessing (hypothesizing) and scripture demands no less of us than that



we wonder and guess when the message is unclear or begs for our wonderment, which Genesis 12-23 surely does. The question “What if?” haunts the adventures of Abraham from beginning to end.

In much of the literature that speaks of the irrationality of God and Abraham, very little attention is given to the organic vitality of reason in Peirce’s fuller sense. In my examination of the Abraham narrative I am daring to guess that Abraham himself originally dared to guess that his new God could be toyed with and bargained with as all the other gods of Mesopotamia could be. In Newman’s terms my illative sense tries to fathom Abraham’s illative sense: I try to guess what Abraham tried to guess. When Abraham tested that hypothesis with God on the way to Sodom, scolding God for not understanding justice, and with Isaac tied down on a pile of firewood looking into his face, he gradually suspected how wrong he was. Thus, with the triumph of abductive reasoning or common sense, (“Could it be that I have got it all wrong?”) the germ of a deeper faith in the unconditional generosity of God could possibly emerge. As in science, so in religious thought and spiritual living, the discovery that an original hypothesis, or guess, was incorrect in some way is progress indeed. But the creative guess had to take shape first before Abraham could test his own beliefs against the possibility of an astonishingly new kind of God. What a blessing was that folly- not to be so foolish would be to never allow wisdom or faith a chance to flourish.

Given this mindset I wonder why God chose Abraham over others for a special mission that was to be so strangely unveiled. The answer is partially revealed as the narrative takes shape and continues both in the text of the bible and in the 3000 years of commentary, research, meditation, criticism and even ridicule which has followed. If one accepts the scriptures as the verbatim word of God, one can still acknowledge that the story did not begin or end on the pages of the Bible, which places itself in the context of an ongoing journey. It may well be a collection of various oral traditions woven together to produce Genesis in such a way as to beget endless exploration, dialogue and argument, driven by the need to guess wisely, to reason abductively and face up to the prospect that anyone, even Abraham, can be wrong but still discovering. Thus, I presume to enter this lively exchange, late and only partially prepared, by sharing what I have learned in three fourths of a century from philosophy and from theology, (with a special debt to Thomas Aquinas and C. S. Peirce) and from the sacred texts themselves along with the religious, polemical and scholarly literature that continues to respond to this provocative story. In sympathy with Cardinal Newman’s insight, I have read and contemplated the sacred scriptures as unfinished business, not necessarily meant ever to be finished, but still embraced as of mysterious divine origin. In other words to me God would not be less the author of any part of the Bible simply because he employed others in the collection, transmission and unraveling of its implications – even if these participants did not fully realize what they were doing. This is quite consistent with the Christian belief expressed in the Letter to the Colossians (1:24) that “ I am completing what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions.” Indeed, there is no reason to assume that creation itself will ever be completed, nor that the human capacity for suffering and for creative participation will ever be exhausted. So, I ask myself, why close the Book of Genesis as if were finished

business?

There are two contemporary female writers who bring a distinct perspective to an exploration such as this. In her work, The Burning Word: A Christian Encounter with Jewish Midrash Judith Kunst describes the Midrash tradition as searching out “ what is unfamiliar and unclear and to wrestle with the text passionately and playfully and reverently” ... “knowing that at any point our questions may pull us into the place where divine mystery dwells.” The first step is curiosity, which necessarily draws upon imagination, and these two forces propel us into an ongoing conversation. She claims that, “from a mainstream Jewish perspective, it is more important to be in conversation with each other and get it ‘wrong’ than to get it ‘right’ but have the conversation stop.”

Avivah Zornberg, a Jewish scholar who has brought to the biblical texts a significant penetration of psychoanalysis, world literature, Western philosophy and midrashic history encourages the reader of Genesis to dare to be imaginative. In Genesis: the beginning of desire she notes that it is just as impossible in reading Genesis to avoid interpreting as it is to avoid thinking. “And yet, the imperviousness, the closedness of the fragments demands a “respect for their secrets” for their “true lost meaning.” The respect for what is hidden from us and the need to reach for it “communicates a radical and all-but-paralyzing paradox.” She explains, “the slips that come through the pshat, the basic understanding of the words of the text, indicates that there is more beneath the surface than meets the eye.” Zornberg leads one to wonder how long the elements of the story have brewed in human consciousness before they were written down and accepted as the word of God as God wanted the story to be told and pondered. Zornberg sees Abraham becoming “ emblematic of man’s discovering his own life’s energies, as he confronts the hiddenness of God” She goes further and declares “The experience of highest tension, between immanence and transcendence, between the limits of human experience and the ‘signals of transcendence’ that are secreted within these limits, is what draws me in the biblical text and in the midrashic and later versions of those texts.” My own examination of Abraham’s discovery of his own self, while wrestling and arguing with God, will certainly not resolve the paradox, but it might bring me closer to the secrets hidden in the text - Abraham’s secrets and my own. Again, we anticipate taking a closer look at the thought of Meister Eckhart further on in this essay.

And so, I offer here my own reflections on the Abraham narrative for the following reasons. First, during much of my life I have wondered about the truth, the mystery and myth that seems hidden beneath the surface of the story. My own journey crisscrosses Abraham’s journey and he is just as mysterious to me as I am to myself. Secondly, I suspect that there is some message for me in the account which I should realize for myself, so as to be better able to assess my own life, especially in its final phase. And this may be of some value to others who share the same limitations. Thirdly, I find it regrettable that, compared to the great amount of literature from Jewish and Protestant saints, scholars and theologians about the significance of Abraham’s trials, there is so much less searching comment at this time from Catholic sources. On the surface my own commentary may appear to be less than traditionally Catholic but still worth evaluating under the light of Catholic experience. Yet, I may be more Catholic for undertaking this

examination, assuming that I am not bound to only one “ Catholic “experience. Lastly, I have come to a conclusion about Abraham’s struggle, which is as much influenced by the most severe critics of the Abraham account as by those who believe that God is indeed revealed in the text of Genesis. It would not surprise me if God, for reasons implied in this struggle, intended to stimulate the very vehement criticism and even ridicule that currently assaults the biblical text. Perhaps in the current intense argument, as in the constant exchange between God and Abraham in the text itself, God may have something up his sleeve, something further to say at this time to me and to others about Genesis and therefore about ourselves. God keeps us guessing for his own reasons: not to guess is not to think. Faith is being willing to play and be played with – perhaps a suspicion, which Abraham brought from Sumeria. Whatever it was that made Abraham and Sarah laugh at God’s persistence is worth wondering about.

To summarize my conclusion then, I suspect that eventually Abraham discovered that he radically misunderstood God’s role in his life. It took a long time for him to distinguish the God he was bumping into from all the other gods he was encountering. The major crisis occurred when Abraham imagined that his God had commanded him to sacrifice his son, Isaac. In finally saying “no” to this folly, and in acknowledging that God could not be quite as confused as he imagined and that God was not so easily bought off by abject fear and subservience, that Abraham eventually affirmed the absolute, unconditional generosity of God in giving him both sons to love, not to sacrifice. It was Abraham himself that God wanted sacrificed. That was the explosion of mature faith God was looking for. From the beginning of their journey together, Yahweh allowed Abraham to think that he could outsmart God, while cleverly drawing Abraham into the discovery of his own foolishness. Thus interpreted Abraham’s faith, his obedience and his fear of God take on a very different meaning by the end of the journey. The God worth believing became accessible only with Abraham’s admission that he had consistently gotten the whole story wrong, much as Peter, who followed Jesus as closely as anyone could, more often than not missed the point. Eventually it was Abraham’s sacrifice of himself, not the sacrifice of his son, Isaac, that met the divine test. So, the primary object of my enquiry here is the gradual transformation of Abraham’s image of God and his unconditional surrender to Yaweh once he realized that his God was totally different from all the other gods he had encountered on his way. The dawning of Abraham’s common sense and with it a new vision of the penetrating presence of God was the point of this revelation – a revelation which significantly terminated in an awestruck silence such that after the surrender on Mount Moriah, Abraham never heard a word from God again or bothered to seek out God’s company. The silence that followed was as much intended and provocative as was the rambling argument that preceded it. The Hebrew term for the sacrifice of Isaac, specifically for the binding up of Isaac, is akedah, which will appear often in the remainder of this essay

I must make explicit here an assumption which has come to influence my thinking in all theological matters, namely, that grace perfects nature. This premise is characteristic of some Catholic thought but not uniquely so. It denies that there is any inherent antagonism between the natural good of all creation and the supernatural embellishment of God’s self-revelation. God is seen as equally and absolutely present to every fragment of being

in the universe, not as a once-upon-a-time creator, but as the creative cause of all causes causing, all the time and everywhere. Applied to the Abraham narrative, I see no conflict between Abraham's search for a reasonable way to survive in a threatening world of strange gods and strange people and his gradual discovery that there is only one God to be acknowledged and accepted in that very same world, no less confusing for the presence of its creator. The God discovered seems just as spectacular for having been stumbled upon, found by trial and error and the triumph of common sense. The Documentary Hypothesis does not eliminate the subtle hand of God in every instance- the slow evolution of common sense would be no less the work of God than would be a spectacular display of power, a "big bang" of creation or of revelation. Therefore I dare to presume that Abraham is the paragon of faith as St. Paul sees him, because he accepted the generosity of God at face value, as best he could understand it. His faith was not a rejection of common sense or common decency, as Kierkegaard might think, but it was the embrace of the gift of common sense as much as it was in the embrace of Isaac and of Ishmael. I cannot fathom the notion that faith matures only at the expense of reasonable moral understanding as I cannot accept the concept that the supernatural gifts of God are meant to replace all the other "merely natural" expressions of His generosity. All the gifts of God are expressions of the same generosity of one Being. Therefore the greatest miracle of all is the miracle of the simplicity of that being - shared. This was what Abraham finally found out.

### The Narrative

To better appreciate what follows, there is no substitute for reading the best text of Genesis one can find, concentrating on chapters 12 to 22. Yet, it is important to expose candidly how I read the text of the Jerusalem Bible and the New Revised Standard Version before me. David Klinghoffer's, The discovery of God: Abraham and the Birth of Monotheism is a very comprehensive guide to all of the Jewish traditions about Abraham's life, his travels, his encounters with God, and the details of every event in Genesis, and quite a few embellishments that, in the tradition, were only imagined. Though I do not pretend to present a formal exegesis or a comprehensive interpretation of every nuance in the text, I have paid close attention to those scholars who have the skill to unravel almost every problem left in the language and the history of Genesis. At some point one has to draw on the best interpretations available to the general reader in order to make whatever sense is possible: I presume that the biblical text was meant eventually to be read by me. Otherwise the competence to reach the essential meaning of the word of God must be left to the exclusive domain of the self-defining experts. But the texts of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures present themselves as readily accessible to their own respective audiences regardless of their limitations, intellectual and spiritual. Thus I approach my task with great respect for the scholarship that precedes me, but I cannot avoid the responsibility to examine the biblical narrative with whatever disciplines I have assembled throughout my own intellectual and spiritual life, even though I am always aware that the admirable precision of specialized scholars is ongoing and always unfinished, as is my own probing and wondering.

In retelling the story I will skip some events and move back and forth with others so as to

focus on my own search for connections. I will concentrate attention on the following portions of the biblical story: Chapter 12 – the Call of Abraham and his Sojourn in Egypt: Chapter 15 – The Divine Promises and the Covenant: Chapter 16 – The Birth of Ishmael: Chapter 17 - The Covenant, Circumcision and the Response: Chapter 18 – The Final Commitment of Offspring and the Argument with God over Sodom: Chapter 20 – Abraham confuses King Abimelech: Chapter 21 – The Birth of Isaac and the fate of Ishmael: Chapter 22- The Sacrifice of Isaac.

The narrative in Genesis begins suddenly, with no apparent preparation, when Yahweh said to Abraham “Leave your country, your family and your father’s house, for the land I will show you. I will make you a great nation: I will bless you and make your name so famous that it will be used as a blessing.”

Notice that God, Yahweh, took a bold initiative. Leave! The command is resolute. The promises are exceedingly generous. The destination is obscure. The journey is one of dependence but not of helplessness. At the beginning the text gives no hint as to how profoundly Abraham understood God and believed God. It ends as it begins with one last command to go to a mysterious mountain yet to be pointed out. So Abraham and Sarah along with Lot, Abraham’s cousin, and his wife arrived in Canaan. When a famine came to the land, Abraham and Sarah went down to Egypt where Abraham anticipated trouble because Sarah was so beautiful that some powerful Egyptian might well want to take her to his harem. Abraham feared that among these godless people the accepted practice was that if one wanted another man’s wife, he would have to kill the husband first. So Abraham told Sarah: “ Tell them that you are my sister, so that they may treat me well because of you and spare my life out of regard for you.” No less a personage than the Pharaoh took a compliant Sarah from Abraham, having been told the “ lie” about their being brother and sister, not husband and wife. In gratitude Pharaoh heaped upon Abraham abundant riches, animals and slaves. “Then Yahweh inflicted severe plagues on Pharaoh and his household, because of Abram’s wife Sarai.” (This is the original version of their names)

To me, this sudden appearance of Yahweh dominates the rest of the event, especially since Yahweh is represented in the biblical account as clearly misled about the brother-sister relationship. God thinks erroneously that Pharaoh is acting in bad faith and thus actually punishes him and his household. Later on God seems to have realized his error and so he removed the plagues he imposed. Von Rad (Genesis, A Commentary, p. 226) asserts that this story is the work of the Yahwist author who, to me, does not seem to be the least bit concerned that Abraham made a fool of Yahweh. Furthermore, I have found slight acknowledgment that in trading off Sarah to save his own life, Abraham showed little faith in God’s ability to deliver on his promise. The possibility of prayer or a cry to God for help never enters the picture. Pharaoh discovered the truth accidentally, not from the honesty of Abraham or Sarah nor of God. Dare one think that, with Sarah gone, Abraham would have taken another wife and thus have the offspring God promised. Is it too farfetched to assume that Abraham might have intended this all along, since the text certifies Abraham’s calculating mind and his lack of concern for the ultimate fate of Sarah and of God’s promise? The written account of Abraham’s character here leaves

the possibility quite open, clever, maybe too clever. We are invited to guess what was really going on in Abraham's mind or God's mind. More important than Abraham's clever tactics, which outsmart the Pharaoh, is the fact that Yahweh appears to be shamefully compromised in the process for having punished the Pharaoh before realizing that both he and the Pharaoh were tricked by Abraham. It would not weaken my faith in the truthfulness of the Scriptural account if I discovered that God wanted the story to describe accurately how much Abraham was still influenced by the impression of the household gods of his homeland, namely that gods could be played with and that gods could play the same game. Man was on his own, and so were the gods.

The subtlety of this Yahwist story cannot be fathomed further without running ahead in the biblical narrative eight chapters to chapter 20 from the Elohist source (?) where once again Abraham and Sarah face the prospect that Sarah's compelling beauty will endanger Abraham's life. This time in Gerar in the kingdom of Abimelech, where the scripture notes that Sarah is at this later date ninety years old (17:19), the king desires to take her from Abraham. Sarah again claims that she and Abraham are brother and sister. Thus, she is free to be brought to the king without the slightest hint of protest. God appeared in a dream to the king and threatened to kill him for taking Abraham's wife, Sarah. Abimelech claimed that he had not gone near her and confronted God with the penetrating question: "My Lord, would you kill innocent people, too?" This question in another form, which will reappear later on in the argument about the fate of the citizens of Sodom, deliberately introduces into this ancient story a very high level of abstraction and intellectual penetration. The king pleaded: "I did this with a clear conscience and clean hands." God replied "I know that you did this with a clear conscience and it was I who prevented you from sinning against me." Later in this chapter it is noted that "Yahweh had made all the women of Abimelech's household barren on account of Sarah being Abraham's wife", not because she was only his sister. Thus it appears that God is compromised again, as much with Abimelech as with the Egyptian Pharaoh. God actually threatened and punished Abimelech and his household without realizing that Abraham lied again to save his life and again left Sarah to her own fate and left the divine promise suspended. Yet God claimed that he prevented the king from sinning, although in fact God acknowledged that the king was not sinning. Yahweh insisted "Now send the man's wife back: for he is a prophet and can intercede on your behalf for your life." Are we to believe that Abraham, who endangered the king's life by tricking him in the first place, will now save his life by praying for him? The text sets up the dilemma and leaves the reader to figure it out for himself.

To make things even more complicated and confusing the biblical text tosses into the drama at Gerar the idea that Abraham and Sarah actually were brother and sister, having the same father. There is no doubt in the text that they were indeed husband and wife and that this relationship is the only basis for God's condemnation of Abimelech. So their deception of Abimelech was made to seem justified even though the lie jeopardized the king and his family and compromised the credibility of Yahweh. Yet Yahweh is not shown to know of this clever rationalization. Yahweh always speaks of Sarah as Abraham's wife, never as his sister, and punishes both innocent men, Pharaoh and the King, on the misunderstanding that they did deliberately violate Abraham's marital

rights, which they did not. The narrative moves along comfortably without much concern for the shattered image of Yaweh and, perhaps, a quiet admiration for Abraham's clever maneuver.

Abimelech scolded Abraham for this abuse: "What wrong have I done to you that you bring so great a sin on me and on my kingdom? You have treated me as you should not have done...What possessed you to do this?" The reader is left to guess what Abraham's response might be. One cannot miss the clear assertion of high moral principle here, reflective of the Code of Hammurabi: justice must be done. Note, too, that in the vision of the storyteller both Abraham and God are to be judged as any other persons would be judged. Everyone has a right not to be lied to and not to be manipulated or endangered. Furthermore, Abimelech asserts before God the right of each individual to follow his conscience without compromise, as though God needed to be told. The reader is left with the obvious question about why Abimelech, who was so badly treated, should have to rely on the intercession of the real culprit, Abraham, to be spared punishment by Yahweh for a sin he did not commit. Of all the characters in this interchange, God is presented as the most unfocused and baffled. Abimelech is rightly offended and yet he sends Abraham and Sarah on their way with abundant presents of cattle, slaves and silver. As in Egypt, Abraham succeeds in outsmarting his adversaries and is portrayed as oblivious to the presence of God and indifferent to God's promise and to Sarah's fate. Sarah appears to be as unconcerned with God's promise and her own fate as her husband was. Zornberg, quoting Rashi (d. 1105) shows that the Midrashim have not overlooked the perplexing tensions in these episodes. Further on in Genesis, Chapter 26, Isaac and Rebecca undergo a similar trial where they resort to the "brother-sister" rationalization with a similar outcome – all is well that ends well. There is extensive debate about how these various versions of a similar narrative got to be assembled and transcribed in the text. However, I am in no position to settle that matter; of primary importance here is the image of Yahweh as a secondary bit player, largely ignored and uncertain, revealed in both versions of the story.

Abraham leaves the crisis unscathed, with Sarah and a fortune in hand. And God's image is left as much confused as ever. But, this may well be the intent of the way the story is unraveled and the way tradition has preserved its incoherence without any attempt to purge it logically or theologically. Walter Brueggemann (*Genesis*, p. 178) notes the irony in these situations, quoting Calvin: "Abraham attributed less than he ought to God's providence." Brueggemann adds: "Here Abimelech models faith lacking in Abraham the father of faith." Yet Abraham survives with his authority and credibility enhanced not because of his own virtue but because of the strength of God's promise." Brueggemann's is more kind to the image of Abraham than I am. Abraham's image of God throughout the versions of the story is of a relatively unimportant participant in his own schemes. The reader is left to wonder later on if this really is a God worth sacrificing one's son to. This is the point not to be lost.

In the course of Abraham's journey, Yahweh had promised him and Sarah many children

despite their advanced ages (chapter 16). The wait grew too long for Sarah so she took the bold initiative of offering to Abraham her Egyptian slave, Hagar, to bear him a son. By Hammuabi's code such a substitution was quite appropriate. Sarah reasoned at the time "Since Yahweh has kept me from having children," even though Yahweh had promised just the opposite. When Hagar became pregnant she offended Sarah by her disdainful attitude, so Sarah had her expelled into the wilderness to die, where, in the nick of time, she was rescued by Yahweh and promised: "I will make your descendants too numerous to be counted. You will name your son Ishmael" (God has heard). God predicted that Ishmael would be unrestrained, like a wild ass, "against every man, and every man against him, setting himself to defy all his brothers." Hagar's parting comment to Yahweh was to give God a new name, El Roi, saying: "Surely, this is the place where in my turn I have seen the one who sees me." Indeed Hagar and Ishmael would see God on and off in the future. Abraham was eighty six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael, who held the distinction of being Abraham's first born, named personally by Yahweh, several times given a promise of abundant descendants and made a partner to the covenant, being circumcised on the same day with Abraham 13 years later, Genesis, 17: 25, and before Isaac was conceived. In the two events to be described later, when Ishmael's life was in danger and God seemed at first unconcerned, Abraham could not likely forget what God promised Ishmael.

Again God promised to Abraham and Sarah "Nations will come out of her." (chapter 17) When he heard this Abraham fell on his face and laughed, thinking to himself "Is a child to be born to a man 100 years old and will Sarah have a child at the age of ninety." Walter Brueggemann (p. 156) calls this a "mocking laugh" showing that Abraham "completely doubts the promise... here again presented as the unfaithful one, unable to trust and willing to rely on the alternative to the promise. [Ishmael]". Gerhard von Rad (p. 203) speaks of the promise as "so paradoxical that he laughed involuntarily" and fell on his face in the "pathetic gesture of reverence" and the "almost horrible laugh, deadly earnest, not in fun, bringing belief and disbelief close together." To me the laughter is a powerful provocation, all the more so because of its deliberately mixed implications and that the narrators leave the scene unresolved – the focus on laughter may have been intended to leave the reader as confused as Abraham and Sarah. Immediately, Abraham begged God not to forget Ishmael, but God stressed that the covenant would be with Isaac, whose name means even more provocatively "he laughs" Yet, God reassures him about Ishmael that "I will bless him and I will make him fruitful and greatly increased in numbers." This is the second explicit promise for Ishmael. Still, uncertainty and danger lurked in the first son's future.

In short order, (chapter 18), God appeared to Abraham along with two mysterious companions at Mamre to announce at last that in a year Sarah would finally bear a son. Sarah overheard the news and laughed to herself thinking; "Now that I am passed the age of childbearing and my husband is an old man, is pleasure to come my way again?" God asked Abraham, not Sarah, if she laughed because she was too old to bear a child, not mentioning to Abraham that Sarah thought he was also too old. God's question to Abraham did not, perhaps in the interest of domestic tranquility, restate exactly what Sarah did say. Sarah asserted herself into the conversation with: "I did not laugh, lying",



the bible says,” because she was afraid.” God retorted “Oh yes, you did laugh,” seeming to care little about her petty denial and her fear. The narrator (s) do not seem to be greatly concerned that Sarah lied to God with little regret, which leaves the portrait of God somewhat blemished. She might well have feared what would come next, now that her earlier impatience with Yahweh in offering Hagar to Abraham would leave her with two sons, Ishmael and Isaac, and double trouble to come shortly. But for some reason the authors of the text propose for our contemplation this insignificant counterpoint of who laughs, at what and why. To me it suggests that God is portrayed as playing along with the human befuddlement surrounding Him, amused as a father is when playing peek-a-boo with a child. Now you see it and now you don’t. Yahweh is not thus making fools of Abraham and Sarah, he is inviting them to discover their own deeper folly, namely, their reluctance to take God’s generosity seriously.

And the fascination with laughter continues when the child is named Isaac, meaning He Who Laughs. After Isaac is born, Sarah reflected that: ”God has given me cause to laugh: all those who hear it will laugh with me.” Domestic life continued on until Sarah saw Ishmael laughing with or laughing at Isaac, his infant brother. She was so infuriated that she demanded that Abraham drive Hagar and Ishmael away.” This greatly distressed Abraham” but God, siding with Sarah, told him “Grant Sarah all that she asks of you. For it is through Isaac that your name will be carried on.” Then seeming to reverse Himself, God promised for the third time “The slave girls son, Ishmael, will also make a great nation” Despite the promise, Hagar and Ishmael were actually cast into the wilderness where they almost perished, until God rescued them a second time. Thus Abraham, and many readers through the ages, was left wondering what God was up to, if anything. Did God wish to appear to Abraham to take Sarah’s side in the decision to reject Hagar and Ishmael and doom the innocent without justice, only to reverse Himself in the wilderness at the last moment before death? And finally, where was the divine concern for Sarah and Isaac when the command was given later on to Abraham to kill Isaac? Lastly, would not Abraham have had reason to expect another divine reversal at the last moment, having already twice given up the life of his first son, Ishmael? Does not the text ask us to wonder still further? Is a trap (test?) being set, for Abraham and for us readers?

A very different kind of confrontation occurred between Yahweh and Abraham, (chapter 18: 16) concerning God’s plans to destroy the men of Sodom for their sins. He was reluctant to let Abraham know about his judgment of Sodom yet, somehow Abraham figured it out for himself and confronted God with the challenge, “ Are you really going to destroy the just man with the sinner?” Recall Abimelec’s similar question to God: “Would you kill innocent people, too?” Abraham took up the argument, bargaining with Yahweh, if there were fifty just men in Sodom it would be wrong to kill them in order to punish the others. In the process of pressing Yahweh to make ever larger concessions Abraham presumes to lecture God on how a real God ought to think and behave. “Do not think of it. Will the judge of the whole earth not administer justice?” Admitting that it is quite bold for mere “dust and ashes” to scold God, Abraham finally convinced God to spare Sodom if only ten just men could be found. Finally God did indeed destroy the city. Yet, in this exchange Abraham held God to a universal standard of justice that respects

the absolute rights of the innocent. This courageous assertion rises out of the depth of Abraham's self-confidence and rational clarity, likely influenced by the Code of Hammurabi. Clearly, he thinks of Yahweh as less sure of himself than "the judge of the whole earth" ought to be. The same can be said for the courageous question put by Abimelech which holds God to the same respect for the innocent. Here God is expected to be as reasonable as every civilized person is. Neither Abraham nor Abimelech would concede that God is free to do whatever He wills. This fundamental premise of the story is more often than not overlooked. It is my suspicion that the entire exchange on the way to Sodom was guided indirectly by Yahweh himself who allowed Abraham to find for himself his own voice and to claim the prerogative of being himself in God's presence. The test that is yet to come will determine whether Abraham had actually learned the lesson he thought he was teaching God. Would you, Abraham, kill the innocent, too just because a God who should know better told you to? Why would anyone listen to a god whom you had scolded for demanding the death of the innocent? We are left with the question, however, why did not Abraham address the same challenge to God for commanding the sacrifice of Isaac in a manor like the sacrifices offered to Molek and Baal.

As the narrative moves along without dramatic upheaval, (chapter 22), quite abruptly God decided to put Abraham to the final test saying: "Abraham, Abraham...take your son, your only child Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah. There you shall offer him as a burnt offering, on a mountain I will point out to you." Without argument or appeal Abraham surrendered, with no evidence in the text that it dawned on Abraham that God was acting as capriciously as the pagan deities he had encountered, breaking promises, giving gifts only to take them back and destroying innocent life. Moreover, Abraham did not bother to consult with Sarah, who almost certainly would have stood up to God as she had done before when demanding the dismissal of Hagar and Ishmael. Do whatever she asks, God told Abraham "because it is through Isaac that your name will be carried on." Apparently God did not consider what the sacrifice of Isaac might mean to Sarah. Isaac was as much her son as Abraham's. At this moment, the incoherence in the actions and reactions of Abraham and God could not be more obvious. The courage, straightforwardness and candor that guided Abraham in his dealings with God earlier on were gone. As Abraham carried out the command, Isaac asked his father "where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Abraham responded, "My son, God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering." Was this comment a deception, a grasping for hope, that maybe God would change his mind? When they reached the place of sacrifice. Abraham bound Isaac and put him on the altar on top of the wood and "seized the knife to kill his son," just as one would do for a burnt offering to Molek. In the absence of any other indication, I assume that Abraham was following the only sacrificial ritual he knew of, namely, sacrifice to Molek. At that moment the angel of Yahweh called to Abraham: "Do not raise your hand against the boy... for now I know you fear God." Then Yahweh himself again promised great rewards to Abraham for his "obedience." If one takes the word "obedience" to mean finally being true to himself and truly grateful to God for the unconditional gift of his son, then indeed to rewards would be great - a life with one generous and loving God and with his two sons. In a later consideration of the reflections

of St. Thomas Aquinas, it will be possible to look more deeply into the “filial fear“ which entered the picture.

In this brief summary of the most dramatic event in Genesis, I seek only to identify those elements which pertain to my thesis that God was leading Abraham to discover for himself how badly he had misconstrued his obligation to Yahweh. Central to my interpretation is the assumption that Abraham was well aware of the practice of human sacrifice, whether to Molek among the Canaanites or to the gods of other peoples, and that he concluded that Yahweh would not fulfill his promise to him unless he was willing to make a sacrifice no less profound than what his neighbors were willing to offer to their gods. It is impossible for me to be sure how familiar Abraham was with the practice of human sacrifice, but it is obvious in Genesis that he knew what Yahweh was talking about when the command was given and he knew how to prepare for the test.

Genesis does not reveal how Abraham might have been influenced by the common practice of human sacrifice to Molek, but other passages in the Hebrew Scriptures clearly show that over time some Israelites not only imitated neighbors in the sacrifice of their sons and daughters, but that they even claimed that God commanded them to do so. One of the strongest texts is Ezechiel (590 BC) 20: 25-26 “ I [God] went so far as to give them laws, making them sacrifice all their first-born, to punish them, that they might know that I am Yahweh.” Ezechiel acknowledges that sufficient numbers were so punished to show that this was no minor aberration. De Vaux admonishes that “ the words of the prophet cannot be taken literally... he is referring to the permissive will of God.” Indeed his clarification is important but it does not diminish the fact that so many years after Abraham it was still possible for some Israelites to be so confused about the will of Yahweh that they would imitate Molek in the name of Yahweh. Could not Abraham be as confused at his most primitive stage of faith? Jeremiah (620 BC) 32: 35 offers us a further challenge,” They have built the high places of Baal in the Valley of Ben-hinnon, there to make their sons and daughters to pass through the fire in honor of Molek – something I never ordered, for it never entered my thoughts that they would do such detestable things...” Clearly Jeremiah thought that Judah thought that God thought that such sacrifices were sacred. Why else was God intent on condemning their misrepresentation of his will? Concerning this text De Vaux again admonishes us “ that we should not admit without proof that the rites of pre-history Israel had the same meaning in Israel.” Here I do not wish to read into Jeremiah proof of anything more than the warrant to imagine that Abraham, 1000years earlier, might innocently have understood that the God he was only getting to know demanded what other gods expected, that every gift had a price and he had better pay or else. Among God’s many gifts to Abraham and to Israel was the freedom from that enslaving servile fear.

Given Abraham’s confusion about this mysterious God in the beginning of the narrative in Egypt and Gerar, and his condescending argument with God on the way to Sodom, it is consistent for Abraham to consider the possibility that God was holding out for the sacrifice of Isaac yet ready to relent as he did twice for Ishmael. If Wooley was correct about the gods of the Sumerians, Abraham would be well aware that capricious and

immoral deities must always be second-guessed. Yahweh allowed him to act out his servile fear of retaliation from such a god during the three days walk to the mountain and God brought him to look into the face of Isaac tied on the sacrificial altar so that he would realize by contrast that Yahweh's promise was made out of unconditional generosity, with no quid-pro-quo required. The servile fear of punishment, denial or retribution that drove Abraham to climb the mountain in "fear and trembling" was not the filial fear that he finally embraced when he looked into the face of Isaac, when he dropped his knife, unbound Isaac, offered the ram discovered nearby and descended the hill. Abraham's obedience was not the capitulation to a whimsical tyrant, nor the blind surrender of his will against his better judgment, but the acceptance of the demands of love. At this point in the story the free-wheeling dialogue between "the judge of the whole earth" and his clever creature ended in silence, never another word passing between them in the biblical text. All that needed to be or could be said was said. However, this silence did not put Yahweh out of reach - it acknowledged the ineffable proximity of divine love which, once experienced, requires no drawn out elaboration. My interpretation of Abraham's eventual spiritual enlightenment is much influenced by Thomas Aquinas' view of the gifts of the Holy Spirit and by the insights of Meister Eckhart which will be examined later on. In summary, the depth of faith is not measured by how much is said or sacrificed, but by how much is grasped of love in silence and surrender. The more profound obedience was the surrender to thanksgiving.

Thus far I have presented the rough outline of my own thinking and how it affects my reading of the narrative of Abraham. The task remains for me to explore the contemporary attacks on and ridicule of the Abraham figure, and to show how my interpretation tries to address those concerns. I will then reflect on the classical Hebrew and Christian interpretations of the narrative, not as confirmation of my own views but to show where the rich variety of interpretations leaves room for one more, maybe only a good guess.

### The Roots of the Contemporary Challenge

In the past few decades the Abraham narrative has been given renewed attention from two very different perspectives. One view identifies the story as essentially pernicious because it is the source of the patriarchal myth that fathers own their children and claim the right to sacrifice them to gods of their own invention. From this fallacy, it is claimed, all the evils of the Judeo-Christian world follow. The other reevaluation of the Genesis account seeks to apply new research and insight to the sources and implications of the narrative in order to expose its richness in the light of contemporary insights and needs.

Craig Jones attempts to summarize the history of the Akedah distortion in The Error of

Abraham: The Aqedah Myth and Nietzschean Historical Model. Through six stages he traces the “myth” from its origin as a lesson in the evil of child sacrifice, to the second stage, when Christianity makes Abraham into a model of belief in a promised future, a world to come. Immanuel Kant, in the third stage, and other defenders of the power of reason, see Abraham as an immoral madman. Soren Kierkegaard personifies the fourth stage, wherein Abraham is the champion of a faith which stands in opposition to morality. The fifth stage is led by revolutionary thinkers such as Marx, Nietzsche, Freud and Darwin, free thinkers all, who dismiss morality and religion as immature and unreal. Nietzsche in his Twilight of the Idols, gives voice to the sixth and final stage, the: “high point of humanity” where the slave morality of Abraham is utterly irrelevant. In this essay, I will explore only a few fragments of this claimed disintegration of a “myth.” These fragments will, however, show that the more people of very diverse point of view struggle against the “myth” the more they expose its tantalizing possibilities. Even the wildest antagonism contains a suspicion of truth.

The foundation of much of the contemporary hostility toward the Abraham narrative can be seen in the very concise confrontation from Immanuel Kant, the German philosopher (1724 -1804) who addressed the moral crisis of Abraham in two works, Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone and The Conflict of the Faculties. Kant focused specifically on the response of Abraham to the command from God to kill Isaac. Kant ignored the various exchanges in Genesis between Abraham and his very imperfect image of God. His argument is simply that, since humans can have no direct experience of the divine, they can never be as certain of any supposed commands from God as they can be of the fundamental dictates of morality, such as, that it is always wrong to kill the innocent regardless of who thinks it is commanded. Kant claims: “even did it appear to have come to him from God Himself (like the command to Abraham to slaughter his own son like a sheep) it is at least possible that in this instance a mistake has prevailed” (RWLR, p. 175). Elsewhere he restates his case: “If God should really speak to man, man could still never know that it was God speaking. It is quite impossible for man to apprehend the infinite by his senses, nor distinguish it from sensible beings, and recognize it as such. But in some cases man can be sure that the voice he hears is not God’s. For if the voice commands him to do something contrary to the moral law, then no matter how majestic the apparition may be, and no matter how it may seem to surpass the whole of nature, he must consider it an illusion.” He adds: “For example take the myth of the sacrifice that Abraham wanted to make based on the divine command, the slaughter and fire offering of his only son (the poor lad also had to carry the wood in his ignorance) Even if the voices were to resound from a visible heaven, Abraham should have answered the alleged divine voices by saying, ‘that I should not kill my good son is clear to me: but that you, who appears to me, be God, that is not at all clear and also can never become clear.’” (CF 34)

Kant does not reflect on the fact that Genesis often portrays Abraham as paying limited attention to what God might be saying or thinking and that he had no scruples about questioning or challenging what God proposed, for example, over the expulsion of Ishmael. Nor does he notice that Abraham and King Abimelech were quite conscious that Yahweh could be held accountable against the moral principle that the innocent had

absolute rights to life. This lapse on Kant's part does not gainsay that something odd, strange, perhaps irrational comes into the picture when Abraham yields to the command of God in such an uncharacteristic way, without a word of question or challenge. Nothing ever constrained his dialogue with Yahweh before. In other words, Abraham is not always as gullible or compliant as Kant makes him out to be, though he did acquiesce to Sarah's and God's persuasion in their mistreatment of Hagar and Ishmael

Not that Kant needs assistance from other sources, but Woody Allen offers his version of the same argument with a significant difference. In Without Feathers, he imagines that Abraham should have responded to God's command with: "What? Are you kidding?" God admits that he was kidding and chides him for being so gullible. "Some men will follow any order no matter how asinine so long as it comes from a resonant voice." (WF 27) In the same vein Franz Kafka explores the "comic" thrust of Abraham's confusion in Parables and Paradoxes. Here he imagines Abraham as frightened that God's command was really not meant for him at all and that therefore "the world would laugh itself to death at the sight of him ... and above all, of his joining in the laughter – but in the main he is afraid that this ridiculousness will make him even older and uglier, his son even dirtier, even more unworthy of being called." (PP 45) Kafka's Abraham makes a fool of himself and of the God who pushes him to the brink of irrationality.

Allen, as a comedian with no slight interest in theology, and Kafka, with no reflection on things godly, are making fun of the confusion Abraham faces and they make the same mistake that Kant and others make, by ignoring the deeper implications of the laughter provoked by the rest of this Genesis narrative. Remarkably, the richer possibilities are clearly picked up by the Hasidic tradition as described in Abraham! Abraham! Keirkegaard and the Hasidim on the Binding of Isaac by Jerome Gellman (pp.22-24) where the image is enlarged to suggest that God says back to Abraham "What? Are you kidding? Do you really think you are doing anything for God in sacrificing Isaac? Do you think you can placate the Infinite One that is forever beyond your ken? This is absurd." Abraham's misunderstanding of the whole relationship between himself and God "is one big joke," according to Gellman's reading of the Hasidics. Isaac's name in Hebrew, Titchak, meaning He laughs, carries the "comic seriousness" of Abraham's idea that God would be more impressed by the sacrifice of Isaac than by the offering of the ram which just happened to be caught nearby. God could not care less. Gellman does not hesitate to conclude: "Acknowledging the comic character of his act is the highest worship possible of God: it is to acknowledge God's unfathomable infinity." This is certainly not the wisdom Kant, Kafka or Allen expected to find hidden between the lines of the narrative. It seems clear to me that one does not have to deny their perception of the irrational hints in the narrative to still find a deeper implication in the way the story is set up from the beginning. Someone, perhaps God or Abraham himself and King Abimelech, want those questions about irrationality to be asked. To me the Genesis account loses none of its credibility even if Kant, Kafka and Allen are as right as they are wrong. They do see something which cannot be overlooked for the sake of keeping faith uncomplicated. Of course, the burden remains to show that this bit of Hasidic wisdom is not alien to a certain Catholic perception that the admission of one's own ridiculousness is a positive

step toward faith. Or a consequence of a growing faith.

But, there is one more important vision of Abraham which influences much of the current polemic and that is the profound reflection of Soren Kierkegaard (1813 – 1855) the Danish thinker who took the internal struggle of Abraham as the paragon of faith in God. The last person to ever see anything comical in Genesis, Kierkegaard meticulously unravels the agony of Abraham in Fear and Trembling where he realizes that God's command requires that Abraham forego the fulfillment of the divine promise, that he become a murderer without excuse, that he violate essential moral principles without the expectation that all would turn out fine, all in blind acceptance of God's utterly inscrutable will. Pushed to extremes, Kierkegaard sees Abraham as the Knight of Faith. Implied in Kierkegaard's melancholic view of faith is a typical Reformation conviction that nothing man does has true merit. Even in his surrender to God's will, Abraham does not escape the guilt of his sin. Oddly, Kierkegaard is admired by many for trying to put a Christian face on the contradiction and irrationality of Abraham's faith. But his vision is not totally inconsistent with the more cynical views of Kafka and Allen. Funny or sad, pious or blasphemous, Abraham is damned and blessed for the same absurdity. Martin Buber, the Jewish philosopher, faults Kierkegaard for assuming that Abraham did indeed hear the voice of God. Buber is moved out of respect for the Jewish tradition which allows for doubt about what made Abraham think that the voice required that he surrender his rationality - more on Buber later. I would recall here that Abraham had earlier admonished on the road to Sodom the same "voice" to administer justice as the "judge of the whole earth" ought to. Apparently the final "voice" calling him to the akedah was much more compelling or overwhelming than the earlier voice of Yahweh which was consistently challenged.

Hans Urs von Balthasar, the Swiss Catholic theologian, draws attention to the powerful influence which Kierkegaard's emphasis on "fear and trembling" has had on the "stormy crescendo in cosmic and existential anxiety" that rises from him to Freud and then to Heidegger. Anxiety remains for Kierkegaard "a matter of the finite mind horrified by its own limitlessness..." Von Balthasar proposes a Christian theology of anxiety to make up for the irrelevance of the traditional theology of fear. My own understanding of that tradition, embodied in Aquinas' discussion of servile and filial fear, sees it as much richer than Von Balthasar thinks it is and quite relevant to the current views of the Akedah. More on this point later.

### Genesis on Trial

Of those works especially hostile to the place of Abraham in religious history, the most thorough and uncompromising recent study is Abraham on Trial: The Social Legacy of Biblical Myth by Carol Delaney. She approaches her task as an anthropologist who views the text as a cultural phenomenon, not as an exclusively religious expression. She considers it misleading to claim that the story represents a radical "human condition" or "universal human psychology." To make this point she analyzes the 1990 trial in California, which she attended, of a father who killed his daughter in obedience to what he claimed was a command from God. He was convicted of the crime but was acquitted

on the grounds of insanity. When she asked a Jewish study group for their reaction to the trial, she received two answers. The first answer was “God would not ask us to do anything contrary to scripture.” The other answer was:” How can you presume to know the mind of God?” Thus she poses the dilemma for the believer, one either accepts the command from God, although it is insane to do so, or one rejects God’s command despite the scriptural affirmation of Abraham’s faith and obedience. In her view, the Abraham narrative stands indicted as a harmful social force, with or without religious faith, because it discredits the needs of a moral society and stable moral convictions.

Professor Delaney concentrates her trial of Abraham principally on the isolated story of the sacrifice of Isaac, (Chapter 22) She does note that Abraham did not hesitate to argue with Yahweh about the expulsion of Ishmael or the destruction of Sodom, and that he surrendered without a word to the command to kill Isaac. She points out that “Kant does not let Abraham off the hook as does Kierkegaard” who claims that an act of faith could transform murder into “ a holy act well-pleasing to God” Today she would call such faith-claims “a sign of madness”. Her argument that this patriarchal madness is uniquely masculine is weakened by the evidence in Genesis that Sarah was not reluctant to exercise her influence with Yahweh in disposing of Hagar and Ishmael on two occasions, particularly when in Chapter 21 with God’s encouragement she forced Abraham to send them into the wilderness to face certain death. A helpless victim of Abraham’s lunacy Sarah was not.

A very different perspective on the significance of the roles of Sarah and Hagar in the patriarchal narrative is offered in Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children: Jewish, Christian and Muslim Perspectives edited by Phyllis Trible and Letty M. Russell. This work expands the growing attention of women scholars to the complex portrayal of God and humans in their early encounter. Phyllis Trible gives us the gist of these perceptions, starting with a vision of God as “ indeed conflicted.” The deity afflicts Pharoah, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael and Abraham himself, revealing a character torn between compassion and cruelty “ The exalted father Abraham is also the compliant husband. He acts as wimp and pimp. He is the conniving husband, abuser husband and father, solicitous father, shrewd businessman, and faithful worshiper. The princess Sarah is both tool and tyrant. She is the object of patriarchy, abused wife, afflicter of slaves, possessive mother, cruel matriarch, indispensable and disposable woman.” (58-59) God is revealed as just as contradictory and inconsistent as are his human counterparts. And the persistent confusion remains unresolved, especially the antagonism between Sarah and Hagar, which throughout history has contributed to the tensions between Jews, Christians and Muslims.

Trible proposes that in the two “near sacrifices” of Ishmael and Isaac, (Genesis 21, 22) the two boys are treated as mere objects; "God orders their abuse; Abraham acquiesces to the orders, God stops the abuse only in time to prevent their deaths.” To Trible the divine command suggests that the problem is “ Abraham’s idolatry of his son Isaac.” At the moment before killing Isaac, the angel of the Lord says, “ For now I know that you worship God [not Isaac] because you have not withheld your son, your only begotten son,



from me.” Abraham apparently leaves the mountain without his son “Trible concludes: “The bonds of idolatry are broken. What happens to Isaac haunts the story in silence.” (52) Trible’s reading of the Akedah implies punishment, that the test is not meant to reveal a deeper conviction about God, but to discourage and punish Abraham’s misplaced reliance upon Isaac as the only point of the promise. Such an interpretation of the test asserts only that God is represented in the story as just as jealous, capricious and power-hungry as were all the other deities Abraham had heard of. If I am correct in my own assumption, Abraham discovered some profound failing of his own in imagining the divine command in the first place but not that he was represented as an idolater punished by God through the charade of a sacrifice.

Avital Ronnell, professor of German and Comparative Literature at NYU, brings to the current analysis of the Abraham story, in her audacious study, Stupidity, a more relentless challenge which characterizes the biblical account as a masterpiece of ridiculous perversity. She uses Kant, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Kafka, among others, to establish that “in fact, stupidity, purveyor of self-assured assertive, mutes just about everything that would seek to disturb its imperious hierarchies.” Ronnell does not allow the Genesis narrative to stand as an innocuous bit of religious mythology, unworthy of serious attention. Rather, she finds in Kafka’s parable on Abraham the ammunition she needs to reveal the pathetic absurdity of Abraham and his God. She notes that, “Kafka’s text thus presents another version of [Freud’s] Totem and Taboo where, instead of producing a blood-and-guts murder of the primal father, the world horde emerges as capable of laughing itself to death, in a broad sweep of castrate derision.” For Ronnell, then, Abraham makes a fool of himself by thinking that God had called him to make the noble sacrifice, so that this very ridiculousness disqualifies him from such a mission. She concludes this fierce attack with a vision of God and Abraham trying to call each other’s bluff: “they will play chicken and see who first desists” She asks “How can God not be a cheater if he wants to take away what it seems he has given (p. 307) She dismisses Abraham with the glancing blow “Too stupid to know whether your byname was called, you are ridiculous... You set yourself up to receive it, [but] you were set up. A cheater cheated.” Philip Davies in Whose Bible is it Anyway? (pp. 1110-112) sees the test of Abraham in the same light, a game of manipulation and bluff in which Yahweh loses because God loves Isaac and Abraham does not. Davies assumes that Abraham knows that Isaac will be spared just as Ishmael was earlier, but the deity is allowed to act as if he were still in charge by pretending that Abraham had passed the test. Ronnell and Davies leave the reader of Genesis with the conclusion that the real joke of the story was on the reader who thinks that the text was ever meant to say anything worth wasting time on. When she writes the last word on stupidity as Ronnell tries to do, she cannot escape the disease she examined so carelessly. More disturbing than the cynical derision she and Davies cast upon the sacred text is the suspicion that something beyond the grasp of reason is inescapable, but, then, it might never occur to them that there is a vertical dimension to what is read and to the readers penetration of it.

The rhetoric of Stupidity is relentless and ferocious, growing out of centuries of argument among segments of Jews, Christians and Muslims over the tension between blind faith and honest vision. One cannot exaggerate how the Abraham story seems to many in

various religions to contradict every claim of rationality and moral integrity. For example, when Kierkegaard, as a pious defender of Christianity, identifies Abraham as a Knight of Faith and arms him to do battle in the name of faith against every norm of human morality, it is not surprising that his enemies recognize the conflict between moral goodness and holiness, between faith and reasonableness, between freedom and obedience, between sanity and insanity. What Kierkegaard and others see as the paragon of holiness and obedience, can also be seen as the final indictment of the pretense of holiness. It remains the burden of those of us who pay attention to this rhetoric, to face up to the human passions it conceals. In acknowledging the reality of these misgivings and admitting our own discomfort, we may discover some fragment of the truth that has thus far escaped us.

### A Psychological Perspective

It should be useful at this point to note the diversity of views offered by recent psychoanalytic interpretations offered by Silvano Arieti, himself a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, in Abraham and the Contemporary Mind. In addition to his own opinion, the positions of Erich Wellisch and Rabbi David Polish are particularly relevant to the enquiry here. Contrary to Freud's emphasis on the rivalry and hatred the son has for his father, Wellisch stress the rivalry and hatred fathers have for their sons. He substitutes for the Oedipus complex, where the son kills the father and marries the mother, the Laius complex, where the father, King Laius, starts the drama by having his son, Oedipus, killed to protect himself. Wellisch believes that "until Abraham the father's authority was based on the fear [of the son]. Since Abraham it is based on love." The order from God is experienced as an introjected injunction that leads Abraham to the formation of a full superego." In Wellisch's view God challenges Abraham to grow up and become a man. This transformation changes history and even changes God. In the beginning of the Akedah God is called Elohim, after the turning point God is called Yahweh. Arieti is not convinced that Wellisch offers any new evidence in the psychoanalytic penetration of the Akedah. However, I interpret this reversal of Freud's vision of the radical father-son relationship to be more compelling and no less speculative, except that both theorists suspect that the narrative reveals a profound awakening in Abraham's search for fulfillment as a believer in a God and for fulfillment as the father of a son.

Arieti notes that Rabbi David Polish offers a unique proposal, that Abraham attempted to sacrifice Isaac in reparation for having sacrificed Ishmael earlier at the urging of Sarah and the concurrence of God in the plot to get rid of Abraham's first beloved son. For the Rabbi the real test on Mount Moriah was not to see if Abraham was loyal to God but to bring Abraham "to push back the black tide of evil which he once allowed to engulf him." Arieti offers the correction that such guilt would be "excessive, neurotic and probably unconscious. He suggests that the Rabbi makes the same kind of mistake his psychoanalytic colleagues make in thinking that neurotic motivations adequately explain the full meaning of myths or historical events. It is obvious, Arieti explains, "that the

biblical test, although not wanting to portray Abraham as perfect, does not, on the other hand, want to stress Abraham's guilt concerning Ishmael... Abraham's test is not an expiation." To this clarification I would add that Abraham's acknowledgement of his own folly throughout the entire journey with God need not be the result of any neurotic compulsion to make amends, but the result of the maturing wisdom that came from the continuous give-and-take with God, as well as he could understand what was actually going on beneath the surface of their encounters. There is no guilt attached to being a fool: it is the natural human condition of one searching for wisdom and for whatever is beyond reach.

Arieti finally presents his own vision of the Akedah, focusing on the tension between Abraham's faith and his doubt. On the one hand, Abraham believes "everything in the end will turn out well. But how can one be sure, after God has requested that he sacrifice Isaac?" Great faith balancing great doubt, "both originating from God." The element of doubt is what makes the test difficult, "when so much was at stake." But, contrary to Kierkegaard, there was no trembling, terror, anguish or angst. Arieti presses the question, "What does He [God] want to prove? He represents many things, but, in my opinion the main one is love." Thus Arieti opens up the discussion with the profound insight that Abraham, in proving his love for Isaac, demonstrates the "love for anything and everything that God makes us love. But to love anything and everything that God makes us love is to love God. By making such an enormous request of Abraham, who is the first on earth to discover love for the One and Imageless God, God compels him to see the limitless dimensions of such love" Arieti's powerful words go beyond what we think of as the typical psychoanalytical vocabulary. His expression comes close to the vision of the fourteenth century mystic, Meister Eckhart, (more about him later) who said in his sermon, Videte qualem caritatem, that "Knowing and seeing God, we know and see that he makes us see and know." Arieti adds that "The whole spirituality of humanity has its foundation in this love, and love requires full commitment, and any sacrifice. Without such love the whole world would remain a world of idolaters and pagans." Fully aware of Kant's dismissal of any real divine command worth paying attention to, Arieti shifts the focus away from the problematic command to the transformation which occurs with Abraham's discovery of the universal requirements of love. I have much sympathy with Arieti's emphasis on Abraham's maturing to the point that love need not be commanded. Love can only be accepted with the same generosity of spirit from which it is given.

### On Behalf of Folly

Thus far much has been said about the foolish, ridiculous, stupid, absurd and irrational goings-on in Genesis 12-22. So, it may be well to examine the other side of that folly which borders on wisdom. Erasmus (1468-1536) was not the only person of letters to write something like In the Praise of Folly but he does stand as the one who made the most thorough and respectful study of classical and Christian insights into this common human characteristic. He seems to have most fun taunting his contemporaries, royal and ecclesiastical, for their foolishness, in contrast to another kind of folly, less pernicious and self-indulgent. Thanks to the 1980 work of M.A.Screech, Erasmus: Ecstasy and the Praise of Folly it is now possible to reexamine the full scope of Erasmus' penetration of

that special folly which is more than simple human perversity. From Screech's study of all that Erasmus had to say on the subject, an Erasmus emerges who is very different from the one who amused much of Europe by his witty and sarcastic ridicule of everyone under the sun. Screech argues that from the beginning Erasmus's intentions were anything but frivolous. "Erasmus worshiped a God who saved the world by an act of divine madness: the mission of His Son as the incarnate Christ. God incarnate also acted as a mad man." (p. xviii) Screech reminds us that for Erasmus' generation "humour and piety make very good bedfellows." Note too, that Erasmus was not trying to be comical in speaking of the divine as madmen. He was well aware, perhaps more than anyone else at the time, of the importance given to this notion by St. Paul, Origen, Chrysostom and Augustine and aware that folly could be applied both to the incomprehensible mystery of God becoming man and the "uncouth and ignorant disciples" of Christ chosen to proclaim his message (p. 39) In Origen's words, "We were a people foolish and lacking wisdom: he made the foolishness of preaching so that the silliness of God might be wiser than men." (p. 24) In the words of St. Paul (1 Corinthians, 1:21) "Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For, since in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation to save those who believe." If God's generosity was baffling to humankind, even after the intimate approach of Jesus Christ, one can imagine how ridiculous the human response appeared to God and eventually to those who figured out the message. It would be quite conceivable that, at the beginning of the human search for a relationship with a single deity, Abraham might think it absurd that a God could actually love a human being, with no strings attached, and just as insane that a human could avoid paying an exorbitant price for any concession from a typical Sumerian god.

In his attempt to identify the unique folly at the heart of the relationship between God and mankind, Erasmus explored the vision of several classical Greek philosophers, especially of Plato. Writing in the *Phaedrus*, Plato identified the various manifestations of madness or insanity, ranging from mental illness to the highest form of communion with the gods, which is the "choicest of the divine gifts it was a gift vouchsafed to poets, seers and lovers." (129) Erasmus did not try to identify the Platonic divine madness with Christian experiences but he was content to show that some forms of madness were associated with many different kinds of extraordinary experiences - that some forms of madness are ennobling. One can understand how Kafka, Delaney, Ronell and others would emphasize the ridiculous or irrational coloring found in the Genesis narrative without being able to see any defensible connection with some other unrecognizable forces at play. Without faith, madness is just madness. Yet we can see in their concerns a prophetic lament that the stupidity they so cleverly portray is actually all they can find in their own empty lives. How could they ever imagine their lives otherwise? Erasmus seeks to unveil something beneath the folly, without denying the reality of the folly and this turns the page to a new possibility. I would like to think that Erasmus' insight supports, or at least leans toward, my own contention that Abraham's discovery of his own folly was a sacred event, perhaps the most significant event at the beginning of the God-man interaction. Moreover, the Christian scriptures do not conceal the foolishness at play even amongst Jesus' closest followers. In that light, it would not seem irreverent to suspect that Abraham was no less a fool than Peter, Paul and Thomas were when it came to deciphering

what God was up to.

That “comic seriousness “ is inherent in all religious acts, surprisingly appears in the Hasidic commentary on Genesis, according to Jerome Gelman. “ The more seriously one performs the ritual knowing it is all comedy, the more one attests to the greatness of God. It is a comedy because it is done so seriously, “ (19) In the Hasidic vision, he claims, this is the “comedy of the akedah.” It is “ one big joke,” that Abraham thinks that the sacrifice of Isaac will bring him closer to God. (23) It is important to acknowledge the proximity of the paradox of comic seriousness to Avital Ronell’s conclusion that Abraham was too stupid and ridiculous to realize that he never was called by God. “ A cheated cheater” she called him. But Gelman’s understanding of the Hasidic penetration offers a much deeper reflection on “the comedy involved in the very notion of God’s revelation to us.” As with ritual, we must take with great seriousness “ the comic aspects of thinking that God has really revealed God to us.” Not to be dead serious would be to “ betray our desire to have heard from God.” (18) While Gelman’s view smacks of William James’ pragmatic compromise with faith there, to my way of thinking, is an important hint in Gelman’s relating revelation to comedy, namely, that in the act of revealing himself God may well be playing a game such as any good teacher does. To draw his students gradually into the surprising realization that the truth was staring them in the face, God came so close that he allowed himself to be mistaken for something or someone else. Good teachers do not cheat their students by hiding the most important lessons to be learned so that the eventual discovery is the student’s. Then the student is transformed, not simply informed. This appears to be typical of the way that Jesus gradually drew his followers into the truths they were reluctant or not ready to embrace, for example, when Jesus spoke of the necessity of his crucifixion, the prospect of giving his flesh and blood as food and drink, and his assertion that before Abraham was “ I am.” If Woody Allen had been present he would surely have muttered, “You’ve got to be kidding.” Indeed, how long would it take for the likes of Mr. Allen to realize that the joke was on him? Jesus was dead serious and that is why he could wait until the truth sunk in. The “comic seriousness “ in Abraham’s trial was not that God was “ kidding” about the test, but that Abraham, on behalf of all mankind, had to risk everything (Isaac) to discover for himself that Yahweh was totally and absolutely different from anything he could have imagined. Abraham’s best defense against Ronell’s indictment of stupidity might be that he eventually embraced his own folly and had the courage and generosity to pay the price that only he could be willing to pay

### An Overview of the Jewish Tradition

We must assume that between the actual time of Abraham’s encounter with God, perhaps 1800 BC and the actual writing of the Book of Genesis by Moses, about 800 BC, over one thousand years of reflection shaped the final written form or forms. Around 200 AD, the meditations and commentaries took the form of the midrashim which have ground ever since. Najum Sarna’s work, Understanding Genesis, is a reliable guide into this tradition, where he makes it clear that the Akedah cannot be understood except in the context of the earlier dismissal of Hagar and Ishmael from the household of Sarah and

Abraham. He asks:” How could the Bible conceive of God as acquiescing in what is manifest inhumanity?” Under the pressure of the explicit urging of God, prompted by Sarah, Abraham reluctantly agreed to the banishment of his firstborn to the wilderness where he might have died save for the intervention of an angel. Ishmael was considered by God and Sarah to be expendable, yet God relented, leaving the reader to wonder why Abraham would not have questioned or contested the reliability of the similar command to kill Isaac. Much later on.

Sarna addresses another dimension of the Akedah which cannot be avoided. The history of Mesopotamia reveals the prevalence of the practice of infanticide, often performed as the sacrificial burning of the firstborn to the God, Molech, done to ensure abundant offspring later on. To some commentators the test at Moriah was meant to say once and for all that Yahweh and his people absolutely rejected this practice and that the sacrifice of an animal was completely acceptable as an alternative. Sarna states, however, that the text of the Bible narrative allows that Abraham does not see the notion of human sacrifice as irreconcilable with the concept of God. He argues that the scriptural text evolved “ from its ancient primitive nucleus to become reflective of Israel’s normative standpoint.” He refers to this evolution as the “ literary recasting of the original story” as a transformation so that the narrative as it stands is almost impatiently insistent upon removing any possibility of misunderstanding that God really intended Abraham to sacrifice his son.” The text that “ God put Abraham to the test “ signals to the reader that God knows exactly what is going to transpire, Isaac will not be sacrificed. It was taken for granted, Sarna says, “ that God rejected the practice as utterly abhorrent.” Yet, he is confident that Abraham would not dream up such a sacrifice on his own. The argument continues that there is no explicit or unambiguous renunciation of child -sacrifice because such would be unnecessary. Child-sacrifice was unthinkable in the Akedah story. However, I must interject that not only was child-sacrifice thinkable, but the common misunderstanding was serious and wide spread enough to warrant specific condemnation. Aside from the sacrifice of Jephthah’s daughter to Yahweh, we read of the practice in Jeremiah, 32: 35, where Yahweh not only condemns the practice, but is compelled to insist that “ it never entered my thoughts that they would do such a detestable thing and so they have led Judah into sin “ The Jeremiah text makes it quite clear that too many Israelites did indeed believe and claim that God had in fact ordered and condoned human sacrifice precisely as God’s idea. Why else would Jeremiah make it explicit that human sacrifice was not God’s idea. If Abraham did appear to think that God might condone (actually demand) the sacrifice of Isaac, it is no wonder that subsequent generations of Jews would harbor the same suspicion. Jeremiah leaves us wondering what was going on in Abrahams’ head and in the heads of some later Jews.

The truth of the matter, in Sarna’s view, lies outside our reach, in the “ ancient, primitive nucleus “ of the original Akedah story. Yet, I believe that it is not vain speculation to return to the shadowy event in the mind of Abraham because the biblical narrative often lets the reader know what Abraham is thinking. The best example of that is the account of Abraham’s dialogue (or argument) with God on the way to Sodom which is clearly Abraham’s own explanation of what transpired between them, Someone wanted the reader to experience the dynamic of that exchange from his human perspective. When

God agrees with Sarah in condemning Hagar and Ishmael to certain death in the wilderness, the text describes Abraham as being “greatly distressed” - one of the shortest and most painful lines in the Bible. Sarna’s assertion that Abraham would never have dreamed of sacrificing Isaac “of his own initiative” must be modified by the realization that Abraham did finally consent to sacrifice Ishmael under pressure from Sarah’s initiative and God’s compliance. Having failed to convince God to reject Sarah’s intervention and to remind God, that thirteen years earlier Abraham circumcised Ishmael in compliance with the covenant offered by this same God, The biblical text wants us to sense the turmoil in Abraham’s heart. And the reader is left with the unasked and unanswered questions; what could this God really expect Abraham to believe? What of the promises yet waiting to be filled? What of the death of the innocent?

Sarna explains the difference between Abraham at the beginning of the journey from Haran to Abraham at the trial of the Akedah which measures his progress in relationship to God. The first promise was a reward, “The final one held no such expectation. On the contrary, by its very nature it could mean nothing less than the complete nullification of the covenant and the frustration forever of all hope of posterity. Ishmael had already departed, Now Isaac would be gone, too. Tradition has rightly seen in Abraham the exemplar of steadfast disinterested loyalty to God.” I would add to Sarna’s insight that this loyalty emerged out of an imperfect awareness of who God was and what he really expected, as well as out of the darkness of abandonment. No one of us is less loyal to God for seeking him while not understanding exactly what we seek. Thus, to discover that we have more often than not misunderstood God is itself no disloyalty. Growth for us and maybe for Abraham, too, can be the growing awareness of how inadequate our notions of God and his demands really are. And, if I see this correctly, maybe God sees it even more clearly.

There are many who see no connection between the Akedah and the pagan custom of child-sacrifice. “The frightening demand made of Abraham is the demand to give up everything.” This is the perspective of Aharon Agus in The Binding of Isaac and Messiah; Law, Martyrdom and Deliverance in Early Rabbinic Religiosity. He finds it quite trivial to suppose that Israel in its “spiritual infancy” came to realize that human sacrifice is abhorrent. The story of Abraham is for him “a drama of such intimacy and loneliness,” to those who are “far along the road of religious sensibility.” It is a powerful and “even ungraspable picture of religious being.” While it is inviting to contemplate the deeper spiritual martyrdom of Abraham and Isaac, it is disappointing that Agus dismisses the possibility that the suffering of Abraham encompasses the suffering of Hagar and Ishmael as well as his own and Isaac’s. In his meditation on the “dark night of martyrdom” Agus sees that the covenant and the abundance of blessings promised with it are finished. Isaac is not longer for the promises he held, but for his own sake, a “futureless child”, without expectations, without yearnings. Agus, continues, as Abraham took the knife in his hand to effect the sacrifice “he will attain absolute perfection and freedom...” Then Agus asks, “What terror does this vision of God Almighty strike in man’s heart that he is driven to this?” His answer is that “Abraham is a religious man because he finds the call to martyrdom irresistible.” I am not persuaded by the eloquence of his description that Agus realizes that Abraham’s martyrdom might

have been a lot less dramatic, emerging out of the loneliness of his hopes unfulfilled and the baffling uncertainty about just what God was up to. With the staying of his hand and the further promise of rewards for his obedience, Abraham goes back down the mountain in silence, never to hear another word from the God who was his companion every step of the way. Isaac's unanswered questions remain suspended and Sarah is left to live out her life unaware of the puzzling trial she was left out of. Incidentally, there is a tradition that Sarah died upon hearing what had happened. Finally, Agus makes a valuable contribution to the search for Akedah's truth by bringing us to the threshold of Abraham's intense spirituality, but there is much more yet to be pondered. I dare to think that there is more to spirituality than martyrdom.

The surest guide for a study of the variety and diversity of insights accumulated over the centuries of Jewish traditions is The Last Trial: on the Legends and Lore of the Command to Abraham to offer Isaac as a Sacrifice by Shalom Spiegel. It could certainly serve our purpose here to examine a few critical questions, which come from the midrashic meditations on the Akedah, beginning with the often overlooked wonderment "Where is Isaac?" After the ordeal on Mount Moriah, the Bible describes Abraham's return but seems to forget about Isaac, at least for the time being. Of course, such an omission is an invitation to speculate on Why the silence? Did Abraham actually kill Isaac? About this one proposition, more later. Spiegel unveils all such speculations. Given that Isaac did indeed survive, some have assumed that he went off alone to study for three years, or, perhaps returned home without Abraham to share his experience with his mother, Sarah. Then, he may have gone abroad to prepare for marriage. Or, he could have visited Paradise for a few years while his wounds from the attempted sacrifice healed. Spiegel cites several *Mira shim* that attempt to follow the text of the Bible while allowing the possibility that Abraham wounded Isaac by shedding one quarter of his blood which served as an atonement for Israel. In exasperation, Spiegel exclaims "This is the kind of midrashic exegesis that can blow the top off everything said in the Torah about the Akedah event." It is impossible here for me to assess how much the Christian belief in the redemptive blood of Jesus Christ influenced later Jewish meditations on the significance of Isaac's self-emulation. According to Spiegel there is a pre-Christian lore that connects the Akedah and the archaic practice of sacrificing the firstborn. "The blood of Issac's Akedah" may be the remnant of the ancient legends, the last and faint echoes of some pagan and prebiblical version of the Akedah story" Who knows, he utters, the bloody slaughter of Isaac may "reach back to a remote past of the world of idolatry, possibly before biblical religion came into being." If Spiegel's suspicion is well founded I would assume that the enlightening angel who stayed Abraham's hand on Moriah finally rejected the biblical caricature of a god as a petulant and capricious tyrant and the announcement of the appearance of a very different kind of divinity.

In this monumental work exploring the riches of the midrachim Shalom Spiegel gives attention to a twelfth century poem by a certain Rabbi Ephrim of Bonn, which provides him with the perfect example of how elaborate and sometimes contradictory interpretations become assimilated into a vision of how current events reveal hidden possibilities which were not apparent in the past. Spiegel's subtitle for the poem is The Slaughter of Isaac and His Resurrection. Which carries forward the enduring



interpretation that Abraham did in fact kill Isaac, believing that God would raise him from the dead. Spiegel cites the martyrs of Mainz who, in 1096, slew one another in imitation of the Akedah and in absolute obedience to God, rather than submit to the violence of the Crusaders and to accept forced conversion. Judah Golden, translator of Spiegel's work offers the insight that the Scripture "are not only a record of the past, but a prophecy, a foreshadowing and foretelling of what will come to pass...Text and experience are not autonomous." This notion is not foreign to the Catholic perception that scripture alone, outside the faith of the receiving and reacting Church, lacks its full meaning. In other words, it appears to be a vision shared by some Jews and Christians that the richest meaning of the words of scripture unfolds in the ongoing experience of the believing community.

Although Aharon Agus dismisses as trivial the idea that Israel in its "spiritual infancy" came to realize that human sacrifice was abhorrent, Spiegel offers a more compelling account of the evolution of the potential or implicit content of the story over time. He observes that in the scriptural text of the Akedah, the name for God shifts from Elohim, the God of exacting justice, to YHWH (Yahweh, the God of mercy and compassion). Elohim is used five times in the first half of the text, while YHWH is used in the second half five times. This indicates to Spiegel and to other recent scholars that one part of the story is more ancient than the other and therefore reflects a more primitive view of divinity than the personification of the God of Mercy. It appears to me that Elohim, a name used by the Canaanite community among which Abraham dwelt, represents the Mesopotamian eye-for-an-eye, everything has a price, *lex talionis* morality of strict accounting found in the Code of Hammurabi, with which Abraham was probably familiar. There persists much controversy over whether the Akedah narrative "was established by an Elohist narrator, to which a Yawist interpolator or editor inserts additions." Spiegel summarizes the heart of the difficulty thus: "are there before us two distinct religious layers, one from the stratum of ancient idolatry where the sacrifice of the human firstborn was practiced, and the other from biblical religion which puts an end to this cruel practice and substituted animal sacrifice?" In formulating my own question this discussion is provocative, if unresolved, because it acknowledges the ancient concern that the true implications of the divine command to Abraham are conditioned by what kind of god Abraham thought he was dealing. This concern then forces me to ask what kind of god do I think is part of the story or is actually telling the story or is orchestrating the story as it evolves. The prospect is haunting that Abraham himself was aware of the emerging and awesome generosity of Yahweh in contrast to the demand of Elohim that every gift and promise has a price, a quid pro quo. Perhaps, the actual test put to Abraham was to find his way from Elohim to Yahweh.

This overview would be incomplete without some attention to the great medieval commentator Rabbi Solomon Isaac, also called Rashi (d. 1105) who candidly posed the central question, was God's test of Abraham capricious? Was there any real reason for God to test Abraham in order to discover what he already knew or should have known? If the test were arbitrary or whimsical, Abraham's "virtue" in accepting the test without challenge would be diminished in moral worth, as would the benevolence of God be questionable. Rashi, however, sees nothing at all capricious about the test because the

three day journey the mountain of sacrifice was time enough allowing Abraham ample opportunity for coerced reflection so that he could freely offer to God his obedience. BY this strategy God would prepare Abraham to fully earn the reward that was prepared for him and his people. Rashi concludes that “God will look upon the Akedah every year [at Rosh Hasanna] to forgive Israel and save them from punishment.” with a century of Rashi’s commentaries, Moses Maimonides questions still further the meaning of the ancient text. In Guide for the Perplexed he explains that the scripture does not mean that God actually put Abraham through the test, but that God knew what Abraham would do and thus wanted him to set the example for all of Israel of the extreme limits of love and fear of God. God’s knowing the outcome did not diminish the freedom and generosity of Abraham’s response. I see in Maimonides’ comments the complement of Rashi’ earlier proposal that “ Abraham was tested so that his authentic reaction could justify God’s unending munificence.” In passing one wonder whether Thomas Aquinas, who had such respect for the work of Maimonides, was aware of his Jewish colleagues attempts to reconcile God’s omnipotence and omniscience with the flowering of Abraham’s freedom and conviction .It is presumptuous for me in this august company to introduce something else worth contemplating. Abraham’s absolute obedience to God may have taken the form of his rejecting the mistaken notion that God demanded the burnt offering of Isaac in this explicitly pagan format and the self-reliant and courageous assertion that he must be wrong to think such a thing. This act of self sacrifice, the abandonment of his old pagan way of thinking, was the only sacrifice God had in mind. The test was not to help God find out anything, but for Abraham to find out about himself and then to discover the God he sought. On the way to Sodom God allowed Abraham to think he could instruct the divinity about simple justice (do not kill the innocent), so that eventually Abraham might discover justice for himself. In the Akedah, God again allows Abraham to act out for himself the terrible consequences of his misunderstanding that God would not hesitate to have the innocent killed. The painful realization that he had fundamentally and profoundly overlooked the fact that Yahweh’s generosity was unconditional brought him to drop the knife. The test was completed and past

It is not surprising that the rabbinical commentaries have continued to this day, too numerous for me to penetrate. Yet, one of the most provocative and current perspectives is outlined in the Jewish Encyclopedia which reviews the commentaries of Hagar, Sarah’s servant, Abraham’s consort, Ishmael’s mother and conversationalist with God Scripture say that Sarah treated Hagar “ so badly that she ran away from her.” And Abraham raised no objection and failed to intervene. In the wilderness and angel of Yahweh appeared to console her and predicted tat her son, top be named under God’s direction Ishmael (He whom the Lord will hear). Will be a wild ass of a man, against every man and every man against him, setting himself to defy all his brother.” Genesis 16. Hagar named the place “ Been-lahai-toi “ saying to God “ this is the place where I have seen the one who sees me.” She returned to Sarah and bore her son, Ishmael. Later on, after the birth of Isaac, Hagar and Ishmael were again cast out in the wilderness to die and again God came to her aid. Although Hagar disappeared from the biblical story commentators continued to speculate about her fate. There has been introduced into the rabbinic literature the sense that Isaac eventually resided near Beer-lahai-roi and knew that Hagar lived there. The supposition continues that, after Sarah died, Isaac brought his

father, Abraham to be reunited in marriage to Hagar, perhaps called Ketura, the name Genesis gives to Abraham's second wife. Hagar (Ketura) and Abraham had six more sons. The scriptures do reintroduce Ishmael into the drama when Abraham died. Both of his sons, Isaac and Ishmael, came to bury their father with the remains of Sarah. God blessed "his son Isaac" with no mentions of blessing Ishmael at all, yet the scriptural account ends with the note that Isaac lived near the well Lahai-roi, the very place where Hagar first talked with God and saw God seeing her. This brief reflection on the Jewish tradition could not be completed without dues recognition of how Abraham's life was formed by his fidelity to Hagar and Ishmael. The man who stood before the altar on Mount Moriah contemplating the death of one of his sons would not likely forget the other.

### Early Christian Reflections

After the centuries of Jewish meditation and commentary on the Akedah we might imagine that every conceivable question and hidden implication had been pried loose. Still, the tragic human character of the drama remains as does the suspicion that there are yet more questions to be asked. The Christian response to God's command to Abraham cannot be divorced from the pathos or from the puzzlement that never quite disappears. The Christian tradition accepts in full the Hebrew scriptural account. From the very beginning of the Gospels, Mary, Jesus' mother, thanks the Mighty One who "has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever." Clearly Mary sees Abraham as a key figure in the attention God gives to Israel and therefore to her. She rests comfortably within the ancient history of God's chosen people. However, the Christian meditation concentrates more explicitly on those details of the narrative which point to Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the Son of Man sacrificed on the cross for the salvation of all of mankind. For example, as Isaac carried the wood for the sacrificial offering on the altar, Jesus carried his wooden cross to the place of crucifixion. Both Isaac and Jesus approach the sacrifice as innocent lambs. The early Christian writers do not probe so much into the why behind the details as they explore all the ways that Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, anticipates the revelation of Jesus' sacrifice. R. J. Daly, SJ, in his study The Soteriological Significance of the Sacrifice of Isaac, notes how important it was in Jewish thinking at the advent of Christianity The Isaac's sacrifice was seen as a genuine atonement because of his free consent to being offered. He concludes his thorough examination of the idea that it is "now proven that there is a relationship between the Akedah and the NT, but that the sacrificial oenology of the NT can no longer be discussed without consideration of the Akedah." Christian meditation on the sacrifice brings all of salvation history into focus on the cross. Of special significance for my probing is the similarity between Jewish and Christian desire to continuously seek the full implications of the two sacrifices in the lives of individuals and communities throughout history. Thus, this essay may never adequately prove its point, but it may demonstrate that there is always much richness to be discovered if we keep returning to the text with new questions and puzzles and an occasional wise guess.

The most powerful reference in the New Testament to Abraham's test is found in the

Epistle to the Hebrews 11:17-19 “ By faith Abraham, when he was put to the test offered Isaac. He who had received the promises was ready to offer his son of whom he had been told ‘ It is through Isaac that descendants will be named for you.’ He considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead - and figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.” The author of Hebrews appears to be saying that it was not the deed of Abraham raising his hand to kill Isaac that moved God to change his mind and to stop the sacrifice, it was the absolute conviction in faith that God would act with generosity regardless of what happened, completed the sacrifice or not. The Epistle to the Romans, 4:13 makes this critical point more forcefully, “ The promise of inheriting the world was not made to Abraham and his descendants on account of any law, but on account of the righteousness of faith.” St. Paul quotes Genesis 15:6 “ Abraham put his faith in God, and this faith was considered as justifying him.” I would venture a an additional reflection to Paul’s teaching, namely, that it was an act of profound faith for Abraham to finally reject his old imperfect vision Yahweh and to accept the overwhelming generosity of the giver of the gift, Isaac. It was the painful acknowledgment of his deficient response to God’s incomprehensible generosity and his final surrender that justified him, that is, made him holy, accepting God totally on God’s, returns, without any further arguing and bargaining, realizing that there was nothing left to offer God that was not already received. Remember the bargaining on the way to Sodom: Abraham acted as if he had beaten God by his persistence. But maybe God just let Abraham talk himself into silence. Several times Abraham was promised offspring as numerous as the stars, but it never happened the way he expected it to. So Abraham might well have calculated that his last bargaining offer would be that of the Canaanites: to have the courage, the manhood to gamble everything At that final desperate option, Abraham realized that there was indeed one greater gamble, namely, to take God at his word, to trust that God acted out of love alone, which could not be purchased, won, or extorted: it could only be accepted. And that acceptance required the rejection of all of his old plans and schemes, indeed of the self he thought was himself. And that was the sacrifice on Mount Moriah that God was waiting for.

In Romans 4:22 St. Paul paints a somewhat different picture from the one I see; “ Since God had promised it Abraham refused to either deny it or even doubt it, but drew strength from faith and gave glory to God convinced that God had power to do what he promised.”

Paul chooses to overlook the struggle and uncertainty Abraham went through on almost every page of Genesis 12 -22 on his way to the final surrender and discovery. One does not have to deny St. Paul’s understanding of the final flowering of Abraham’s faith, to take seriously the whole characterization of Abraham’s ordeal leading to the triumph of his faith at the last test. Martin Luther wrote that the moment before Abraham raised the knife to sacrifice Isaac, he must have assumed “ that God would fulfill his promise even out of the ashes.” When the angel cried “Abraham, Abraham,” we see how the divine majesty “ is at hand in the hour of death, We say, “ in the midst of life we die‘ and God answers,’ Nay in the midst of death we live.” From Luther’s interpretation of St. Paul, I suspect that Abraham was brought by faith to the moment of death in which the gift of life is finally seen for what it really is - an unconditional gift of unspeakable goodness.

The Epistle of James 2:21-24 presents a necessary modification to the emphasis on Faith over works with the explicit claim, “was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with works and faith was brought to completion by the works.” This emphasis on the power of good works in addition to faith would appear to be anathema to Luther’s stress on faith alone. Yet there have been notable attempts recently to reconcile Luther’s view and that of Catholic theology. I am haunted by the possibility in James’ epistle that, at the Akedah, faith and works fold into one act, surrender. The physical act of sacrifice at the altar with the knife and the firewood, etc. is only the evidence of the interior act which if inseparable (indistinguishable?) from faith brought to fulfillment in the acceptance of the gift. And, is there not a hint that this is what we Catholics mean when we offer by way of acceptance Jesus Christ, body and blood, to God in the Eucharist? The work in both cases is the actual surrender to the gift, acceptance.

### Patristic Reflections

Clement of Alexandria (215) makes clear how Isaac is a unique type of Jesus Christ, not the perfect replica of the Saviour to come, but a sure indication of the essentially significant qualities to be found eventually in him. “He is Isaac (for the narrative may be interpreted otherwise), who is the type of the Lord, a child as a son: for he is the son of Abraham as Christ was the Son of God, and a sacrifice as the Lord [was], but he was not immolated as the Lord. Isaac only bore the wood of the sacrifice, as the Lord, the wood of the cross. And he laughed mystically, prophesying that the Lord would fill us with joy... Isaac did everything but suffer, as was right, yielding the precedence in suffering to the Word. Furthermore, there is an intimation of the divinity of the Lord in his not being slain. For Jesus rose again after his burial, having suffered no harm, like Isaac released from sacrifice.” This passage demonstrates the latitude of some patristic interpretations in the use of such language as “type”, “laughing mystically”, “yielding the precedence”, “intimation of divinity” “Jesus like Isaac released from sacrifice”. Admitting that there may well be other ways to speaking about the relationship of Isaac to Jesus, Clement claims only the value of the evocative richness of the possibilities uncovered. Origen (251) adds his own vision of how the figures in Genesis serve as types of what was prefigured. Since Christ was the Word made flesh, the ram, which is mere flesh, is the type of Jesus. However, Isaac is the type of Jesus according to the spirit. “Therefore, Christ himself is both victim and priest, and he is himself offered on the altar of the cross.” Clement and Origen show how the Genesis account of the Akedah was useful to the early Church to enrich the reading of the Gospel. They do not appear to be trying to discover who wrote what and why.

Tertullian (195) digs deeper into the role of Isaac as the victim of sacrifice, which prophesied the suffering of Jesus, who also carried his own wooden instrument of torture, a tree to supplant the tree of Adam. His head was crowned with thorns, as the ram’s head was caught in the brambles. “He was led as a sheep for a victim and like a lamb before his shearers so opened not his mouth.” Tertullian does not pretend to be a poet inventing

metaphors and analogies: he writes as one who sees the clear prophetic lines in the ancient narrative. In his meditation on the final petition of the Lord's Prayer "Lead us not into temptation," Tertullian turns to the scene on Mount Moriah: "For God had commanded even Abraham to make sacrifice of his son, for the sake not of tempting, but proving his faith in order to make an example for that precept of His, whereby he was, by and by, to enjoin that he should hold no pledges of affection dearer than God." Again, we are invited to look back at the ancient drama, not to unravel some hidden entanglement, or to enjoy the rich imagery it conjures up, but to see through the elaboration of the Gospel what God considered worth remembering.

John Chrysostom (407) brings us back to Abraham's trial in order to discover why God might have tested him. "Not that he might himself learn, but that he might show to others and to make his fortitude manifest to all." It is not of necessity nor of capriciousness that God Commands the test; "God exercises His won athletes" so that we might bear our burdens more courageously. Chrysostom's focus here is not specifically or exclusively Christological: he has more universal, humanistic concerns. He further probes the apparent contradiction in Abraham's faith - what he calls 'the paradox of faith.' On the one hand Abraham believes that promises God has made, but, on the other hand, he believes that the command to destroy Isaac must be obeyed." In this case it was necessary not only to go beyond reasoning, but to manifest something more. For what was of God seemed to be opposed to what was of God, faith opposed to faith, and command [opposed to] promise." He adds this Christological insight that Abraham as a prophet would know, as Hebrews 11:19 claims "that God could raise Isaac from the dead" which he did: in typical patristic fashion Chrysostom adds "in a figurative sense."

St. Irenaeus (200) contrasts Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac with God's actual sacrifice of Jesus by stressing that God "is pleased to offer for all His seed His beloved and only begotten Son, as a sacrifice for our redemption." In the Christian view God so loved the world that He gave His son, with no quid pro quo or testing to find out or demonstrate anything. The gift was absolutely gratuitous. Irenaeus' emphasis fuels my sense that when Abraham finally realized the vast difference between the gods of his past and the God who shepherded him through so many misadventures, he woke up startled to realize that what he eventually found was not at all what he thought he was looking for. Going one step further, the prospect appears to me that the narrative itself of Abraham, unceasingly being retold to this day, is making the same journey of discovery that Abraham himself unknowingly unravels.

The early Christian scene would not be complete without some attention to the always probing comments to St. Augustine (430) who was especially attentive to the ways that things and words projected their meanings. He refers to the ram which Abraham sacrifices in the place of his son Isaac; though the ram was only a thing, it was a sign of other things. Augustine examines the meaning of God's test of Abraham, which was intended to make Abraham's obedience "known to the world, not to God." His explanation is primarily philosophical." And for the most part, the human mind cannot attain to self-knowledge otherwise than by making trial of its powers through temptation, by some kind of experimental and not merely verbal interrogation: when it has

acknowledged the gift of God, it is pious.” Odd as it may seem odd , so deeply into the mysterious story, to reintroduce the reader to C S Peirce who could not have illustrated better than Augustine has here, his notion of the necessity of pragmatic experimentation, abductive reasoning, and the role of fallible reason in uncovering some truths beyond reach. This essay is itself a pragmatic experiment in Augustine’s sense of search and discovery. Augustine applies the rigor of reason to the interpretation of the biblical narrative with more careful attention to detail than found in much patristic literature. He points out that God called Ishmael and Isaac both “ thy seed,” though it would only be through Isaac, according to Genesis and Hebrews, that the promises would be fulfilled. Still, Ishmael, who was abandoned in the wilderness to die, with God’s approval, was spared by the same God and promised “ I will make him a great nation.” Augustine lets stand the difficulty of the two sons, both firstborn of different mothers, both promised posterity and prosperity and both spared death, without pretending that he had any simple and clear explanation of the meaning of the puzzle. To some readers, Augustine’s ability to clarify the puzzle he cannot solve, his candor and self-knowledge obvious in these brief comments ,adds much to his credibility

The may be the place to reflect that the Jewish contemplation of the Abraham narrative leading up to the Akedah concentrates on the inner workings of the story itself, questioning, imagining, challenging and even embellishing the possibilities. The tradition asks God :what is it all about? What is it telling individuals and communities to expect in the future? The early Christian reactions seem to know exactly what it is all about - the mystery of the incarnation and redemption. There seems to be little attention given to the full biblical account with all of its tantalizing possibilities and questions. There was obviously enough work to be done in the first centuries in unscrambling the contradictory interpretations and applications of the Gospel itself. But, now in the twenty-first century because of the growing contemporary interpretations, both hostile and sympathetic, it would be well to begin the work again.

### Divine Command Theory

It should be obvious that, implicit in several of the critiques we have considered thus far is the notion that God had every right to command that Abraham sacrifice Isaac and that Abraham had a clear obligation to obey that command. On the surface, God’s command does not appear to be at all different from the similar commands executed by all the other gods of Mesopotamia and Canaan. The very concept is very aggravating to many faithful readers and to hostile readers who find in the explanation the ultimate insanity of the Akedah. Historically, the substance of the divine command theory maintains that human actions are morally good or bad for no other reason than that God wills them so. This is not the place to review all of the arguments that have evolved over the centuries, actually millennia, but the problem cannot be avoided totally because the drama of the Akedah is perhaps the first and most critical event in Judeo-Christian religious history where God is portrayed as demanding that a father kill his child for no other reason than to obey the command out of fear Moreover the command violates one of God’s own commandments ( Thou shalt not kill the innocent ) and it violates the common practice of civilized

individuals and communities and, finally, it defies common sense.

In Plato's dialogue, Euthyphro, Socrates addresses the problem with the comment that certain actions are loved by the gods because they are pious and holy: the actions are not pious or holy because they are loved by the gods. This classic humanist's view makes human beings responsible before the gods for their own action. Relevant to the Abraham narrative is the detailed exposition of Abraham's argument with God over the fate of the good people in Sodom during which he brazenly holds Yahweh to a standard the thinks God is overlooking. "Far be it from you to do such a thing - to kill the righteous along with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you Will not the judge of all the earth do right?" It certainly appears from the tone of the exchange that Abraham suspected that God needed to be straightened out on the rights of the innocent, which is ironically the same point of the test at Moriah, Who was testing whom and when? Who passed the test and who failed? Without the benefit of revelation, Socrates did not hesitate to make man alone responsible for himself. Abraham on the way to Sodom came close to the same conclusion but not at Moriah. It may well be that the author (s) and retellers of the Genesis account meant to leave the dilemma stand so that the reader, thousands of years later, would have to ask the same questions Abraham put to God and to himself. Thus revelation ought to be seen ontologically as well as chronologically.

It saddens me that St, Thomas Aquinas did not give closer attention to the total Abraham story in Genesis before tackling the divine command question, but what he adds to the ensuing debate is quite provocative ( II-II, q. 104, a. 4 ad 2 ). " The command to Abraham to kill his innocent son was not against justice because God is the author of death and life." The terse comment seems to portray God as the willful ,if not capricious, arbiter of justice, but it seems to hang on to a deeper conviction that God " does nothing against the nature of the things" he fashioned and God gives life and death to all things, innocent and guilty, with no finite being having a right to live physically forever. He implies that, when and how individuals die has nothing to do necessarily with their personal guilt or innocence, except that In Thomas' view, all humans die because of original sin ( I-II, q. 94, a.5 and q. 100, a. 8 ad 3 ) If God punished Isaac for doing something which he did not do, God would be unjust to have him killed. So, the demand for the death of Isaac was as natural for Isaac as was his birth . I have found no evidence that Thomas' interpretation of the Akedah was based on any thorough reading of the entire context which surrounds the tension between the lives of the innocent and the rights of God, including the fate of Ishmael, the encounters in Egypt and with Abimalech and the argument on the way to Sodom . Thomas accepts, without reflecting on Abraham's on going confrontation with Yahweh, that " being admonished in a prophetic vision, he prepared to sacrifice his only begotten son, which he nowise would have done had he not been certain of the divine revelation ( II-II q. 171, a.5 ) Nothing in the text of Genesis suggests a "prophetic vision" that would so overpower Abraham that he would obey it without question; he did not hesitate to question and challenge God on other occasions.

Against the assumption of a "prophetic vision" it is difficult to reconcile Aquinas'



strongly held position that each individual ultimately must follow his best rational judgment ( conscience ) even if it is in fact erroneous ( I-II q. 19, a.5 ), unless one also assumes that Abraham concurred with Yahweh that the command was perfectly reasonable. But that seems unlikely in view of his previous confrontations with God about what was reasonable. Kierkegaard did not see it this way: for him the agonizing torture for Abraham was to accept the demands of faith in God and to put aside the otherwise compelling demands of conscience. For Kierkegaard murder is murder, take it or leave it. For Aquinas, killing in obedience to God is not murder at all. Faith triumphs over reason in Kierkegaard's understanding, even when reason is not at fault. Faith and reason concur in Thomas' understanding because what God commands is perfectly reasonable, God being God. Thus, without resolving the dilemma that so perplexed Kierkegaard and many other thoughtful Christians, Aquinas avoids the catastrophic clash of faith and reason, of morality and holiness.

When the angel of God stops Abraham from executing Isaac, he says ;” now I know that you fear God.” Unfortunately Aquinas does not apply his profound insight into the “ fear of God” to this biblical moment, but it would appear fruitful in this present discussion to examine the richness and relevance of that insight. In his treatise on the gifts of the Holy Spirit ( II-II, q. 19, a. 9 ), specifically the gift of fear, Aquinas distinguishes two kinds of fear: servile fear is the fear of punishment for failure to obey God, while filial fear dreads the possibility that one would fail to appreciate the love and kindness of God. Servile fear is the naturally wise and virtuous recognition that our actions can have serious consequences. Filial fear, on the other hand, is the beginning of wisdom and holiness and leads to a deeper surrender to love. Filial fear does not fear that God would withdraw his help from us, but that we might withdraw ourselves from his help. Filial fear complements hope with the total surrender to the demands of love itself. Although Aquinas does not apply this insight to the experience of Abraham, once one examines the total Abraham narrative in the light of Abraham's initial confrontation with God to his final realization that surrender to God is surrender to love without reservation, not surrender to a command out of fear of the consequences. As Abraham began the journey to Mount Moriah, in servile fear and trembling, in Kierkegaard's narrow view, at what God might do if he disobeyed, he reached the summit to discover that the command was actually an invitation to risk all for love. It would be consistent with Thomas' thinking to make the further parallel that as God leads all believers to greater holiness as they surrender to his gentle coaching, Abraham was led by God to discover that God ruled by love, not intimidation. It wasn't Isaac who was sacrificed, it was Abraham ,who became holy by his surrender. And why would we not acknowledge that the gifts of the Holy Spirit are not limited to Christians?

The spirit of Thomas Aquinas reappears in the work of the contemporary Dominican scholar, Dominique Barthelmy, O.P., who reminds us in his God and His Image: an Outline of Biblical Theology that Abraham could hardly be surprised by the command to sacrifice his son. In the region of Canaan the sacrifice of the first - born sons to god was a well known custom. “ We only realize the gratuitousness of a gift when it is taken away, or at least after it has nearly escaped us entirely.” He proposes that God claimed the boy for himself, leading Abraham to realize, in the final moment, that he must not appropriate

to himself his own son except as the expression of the gratuitous love of God . Barthelmy points out that Abraham may have discovered “ on that little stretch of road that makes up his earthly life” that God loves him and knows him better than he knows or loves himself.” Barthelmy advances the examination of the Akedah one more step into the mystery that Abraham faced on the mountainside: it was the test of obedience, of course, but a profoundly different kind of obedience - the transformation of one’s being. At the early stage of God-seeking it would be perfectly natural to assume there was something that one should do to meet God’s expectations. Thus, Abraham realized in the nick of time ( that is, at the edge of eternity ) that there was nothing he could do beyond becoming completely transformed. This transformation is not the onset of inactivity, it is the beginning of a new engagement in the total context of life. Here I am reminded of Meister Eckhart’s assertion that Martha was more spiritually mature than her sister Mary and therefore more readily prepared to take up the tasks at hand. As noted earlier, from the moment of the conclusion of the Akedah, Abraham returns to the pedestrian pursuits of a retired patriarch and his arguments and pleadings with Yahweh simply cease. Both Abraham and the reader are left speechless.

Matthew Pattilo in his commentary on the mimetic theory of Rene Girard The Resurrection of Sacrifice in the Hebrew Scriptures p. 11, proposes, without reference to Thomas Aquinas, a fuller contemporary expression of the undeveloped point of Aquinas, namely that it was perfectly reasonable and natural for God to determine the moment of Isaac’s death and for Abraham to realize this. “Abraham renounces the rivalry with God ( negative mimesis) of Adam and Eve and reestablishes submission to God ( positive [ conversionary ] mimesis ) as the model for the human relationship to God.” He acknowledges the principle that to be loved by God requires the willingness to accept death at the hand of God, that is, “ submission to the fate of death that awaits all those born into God’s creation. “ Thus Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac affirms “ the goodness of creation in all of its aspects, including death.” In his understanding, the command to Abraham is for a sacrifice of conversion, not a blood-letting expiation of scapegoat. Without intending it, Pattilo’s reading of the Akedah provides a useful response to James Wetzel’s The Shrewdness of Abraham and its superficial blending of the position of Aquinas and that of Kierkegaard in what he characterizes as “ ruthless simplification” Wetzel argues that the natural law in Aquinas, i.e. moral reasoning, is an “ empty notion” easily suppressed by any divine comand. In my own view, Aquinas does not do justice to the whole Abraham narrative, but he surely does not jettison the natural law for the sake of defending the arbitrary annihilation of Isaac for the sake of demonstrating faith and obedience, as Kierkegaard appears to do. For Aquinas death, as God determines in creating us in the first place, is a rational and natural conclusion to everyone’s life, and Abraham was smart enough to realize this. If Aquinas had realized the relevance of his teaching about servile and filial fear to the internal anguish of Abraham as he faced the overwhelming test, he might have come to a more complete conclusion.

Abraham’s servile fear would be more intense if he imagined the consequences of disobeying the divine command - damned if he did and damned if he didn’t in Kierkegaard’s characterization. Ronell’s suggestion comes back to haunt the discussion, what if Abraham wondered whether he got it all wrong, that God never did demand any

such thing. Stupidity indeed.. Abraham might end up with nothing, no son, no God and therefore no hope. That servile fear, the timidity of one who sees himself as a helpless slave, must be experienced to be recognized for what it is, can only dissipate with the assertion of independence, the courage to make one's self responsible for his own judgment and action. To say no, is to finally say yes .That act of self-reliance, the rejection of servility, the claim of freedom is as much a gift from God as was the birth of his two sons. Filial fear grows out of and beyond servile fear, as mature love grows out of and beyond infantile dependence. "Now I know that you fear the Lord." is a most auspicious beginning for God's people. Kierkegaard missed the possibility that, under God's tutelage, Abraham's mature faith was faith in himself as much a faith in God, one without the other would still be an unfinished work.

One study of Aquinas' treatment of the gifts of the Holy Spirit ( Garrigou Lagrange ) likens virtue to the ability to row a boat, while the gifts of the Holy Spirit, including the gift of fear, are likened to the ability to sail. When the wind is not blowing and you want to go to the other side, you need to row., a wise and virtuous decision. But, if the wind is blowing, and you know what you are doing, you can raise the sails and throw yourself on the power of the wind A good sailor respects the force of the wind and knows how to move even against the wind by the way he surrenders to it. Servile fear, like rowing the boat, is sometimes called for. Filial fear is dangerous business unless you can read the wind correctly and have the courage to take charge. In filial fear Abraham made the final surrender to God, not out of helplessness, but with daring conviction, as the sailor accepts the wind on its terms, but with the skill to make it work. Surrender to someone you love and trust explodes into new possibilities, unlike the surrender which connotes helplessness and weakness. Picking up the pieces from Aquinas can be rewarding, too.

It is generally acknowledged that Rene Girard had relatively little to say about the sacrifice on Mount Moriah, although as an anthropologist he developed the theory that violence, blood sacrifice, scapegoating and religious ritual have common roots. It all began with Cain's murder of his brother Abel, because Abel's blood sacrifice of the firstborn of his flock was more pleasing to God than Cain's offer from the produce of the fields. The blood of Abel was in imitation of the blood of the sacrificial animal leading to the continuing contagion of sacrifice after sacrifice. God seemed more accessible through blood from then on. As Girard developed a deeper understanding of the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, what he called the sacrifice of sacrifice, he saw Jesus as the wisdom of God who alone is able to liberate us from the cultural snares of scapegoating violence. Unfortunately Girard does not analyze the various psychological, philosophical and theological implications of the Abraham journey as it comes through history. Others, however, most notably Robert Hamerton-Kelly, have been moved by Girard's emphasis on the transformation of sacrifice to add a deeper grasp of the trial of Abraham. In The Emergence of the Idea of Radical Love in the Biblical Traditions he notes that "Radical love in the Bible is a transformation of the idea of sacrifice, from the offering of the other to the offering of the self. It is a transformation of the memetic situation from the imitation of each other's desires to the imitation of the divine desire, or more traditionally, to love radically is to do the will of God, and that is the command of all the great Western Religions. " And we are to understand that this is the command to

Abraham which serves as the foundation of the faith of Israel, Christianity and Islam. In a later sermon ( June 30, 2002 : Abraham - Living Dangerously, Hanerton-Kelly confesses that he is “ out of my depth” in wrestling with the mysterious Akedah, yet he dares to imagine that the hardest thing for Abraham was to slay the ram rather than his son. This took a “ faith beyond faith”, that is “ humble love.” “ Thus by faith God knocked the pride out of him... the obedience he gave to God turned into humility received from God...he discovered that love is the truth that faith seeks.” He thus enriches the notion of command and test to extend to Abraham’s discovery of his own impoverishment, embodied in the helpless ram - to accept love on its own terms, not as a reward for endurance or for suffering tragedy or loss. He makes the remark in passing “ Here God is testing our faith sorely,” which I take to mean that we can get no closer to what Abraham experienced when looking into the face of Isaac than we are willing to face in the mirror in order to discover the emergence of “humble love.”

The power of fear in the Akedah drama is the focus of Sherryl Mleynek’s Abraham, Aristotle and God: the Poetics of Sacrifice, p. 15, Abraham’s motivation is never pyre, she thinks, because “ fear of God is a contaminated basis for faith.” If she were familiar with Aquinas’ treatment of fear, she might realize that the fear which contaminates faith is likely the lowest level of servile fear, which is not motivated by love but by self-interest while the spiritually mature filial fear is perfectly compatible with love and faith. She likens the Akedah to a play in which God, the director, knows the ending while the players are trying to work it out. “God generates Abraham’s fear, and that fear provides the dramatic energy of the Akedah and the didactic vehicle the Eloquent author requires in order to produce the desired effect on the audience/believers.” Mleynek is on to something but does not allow for the progression from servility to filial love under the guidance of God. Also, I think that Abraham had been thoroughly exposed to the fearful dieties of Mesopotamia, without any intervention from Elohim. In a sequel to this article, she recognizes that the Hebrew Bible uses the term virat to denote two distinct attitudes of fright or fear and awe or reverence. This distinction is close enough to one difference between servile and filial fear, yet she would have been more helpful if she acknowledged that the biblical account draws the picture of an organic progression in Abraham’s journey leading to a profound realization by Abraham that the mysterious god he started out with was not the same kind of God he finally faced on Mount Moriah.

### The Witness of the Koran

The Holy Koran ( Shakir, Sura 37: 101 ) represents the command of God to Abraham in a manner which modifies the Divine Command Theory in a unique way. “ So We gave him [Abraham ] that good news of a boy [Isaac or Ishmael ], possessing forbearance. And when he attained to working with him, he said: O my son! Surely I have seen in a dream that I should sacrifice you: consider then what you see. He said O my father! Do what you are commanded: if Allah please, you will find me of the patient ones.”

In seeing Abraham responding to a dream the implications of an absolute command are

avoided, though the reading allows for the possibility that the command was delivered through a dream. In the Bible God often communicates through dreams. However, the son responds as if the directive was clearly a command, but one more dependant upon the willingness of the son patiently endure the ordeal than dependant upon the obedience or steadfastness of the father to consummate the sacrifice.' So, when they both submitted and [Abraham ] threw him [ the son ] down upon his forehead And we [Allah] called out to him saying O Ibrahim! You have indeed shown the truth of the vision; surely thus do We reward the doers of good." The Koran preserves the essentials of the Akedah as a test of Abraham's obedience and concludes with Allah's proclaiming: " And We showered Our Blessings on him and on Isaaq [ Isaac, not Ishmael ]; and their offspring are the doers of good." There is no doubt that Allah is portrayed as asserting the right to demand the sacrifice. The Koran lacks the dramatic build up wherein Abraham and God spar with each other in several settings long before the final test. Absent also is any suggestion of the soul wrenching struggle in the soul of Abraham as presented by Kierkegaard Abraham must act in blind faith without any moral justification, in fact convinced that he was acting immorally. There is a hint of " fear and trembling" when Abraham submits to God and throws Isaac " down upon his forehead," leaving us wondering whether Isaac's patient submission alleviated or intensified Abraham's anguish before the altar.

### Meister Eckhart and the Problems of Language

Meister Eckhart, the fourteenth century German Dominican theologian and mystic fits into this examination of Abraham's experience in several ways, despite the fact that he had little to say explicitly about Abraham's journey in search of God's promises. First of all, Eckhart wrote two works on Genesis, Commentary on the Book of Genesis, a more literal and theological interpretation, and the Book of Parables of Genesis, a more allegorical and metaphysical treatment. In these two efforts, Eckhart explains his various approaches to exegesis and demonstrates his substantial dependence on St. Augustine. A second reason, for applying Eckhart's insights to the Abraham narrative is that, as a mystic, he boldly explores all the ways that a seeker of God can talk about the illusive being beyond language. Furthermore, from his acknowledgement of the ineffability of God and being, he has had a profound influence, direct and indirect upon several recent philosophers, ( Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Levinas, Martin Buber) and upon their reflections on Abraham. Lastly, Meister Eckhart comes out of the scholastic tradition and yet does not shy away from the demands of a " God beyond God." Personally, Eckhart's penetrating reflection on the Godhead has led me to ask whether Abraham wrestled with the same " God beyond God" without realizing it until he faced the test on Mount Moriah where the hiddenness of God became manifest.

Meister Eckhart was not reluctant to approach the scriptures with both faith in their unique revelation and with the tools of natural reason in seeking beneath the surface of the text. It took courage to suggest that there could be any truth beneath or in addition to the literal sense of every word on the biblical page. In the tradition of " faith seeking

understanding” he urges that “ the believer would be a lazy coward not to seek out natural reasons and likenesses for what he believes.” He relies on St. Augustine who readily admits that every true sense of a passage of scripture is a literal sense, put there by God to be discovered by the seeker of truth. Thus, Eckhart was emboldened to indulge his deeply speculative approach to exegesis. To “ bring to light the more hidden sense of some things in scripture in parabolic fashion. Under the shell of the letter.” He recalls Augustine saying that God “ made scripture fruitful in such a way that everything any intellect could draw from it has been sown in it and sealed upon it.”

Ultimately, Eckhart confronts the paradox involved in trying to speak of a God who totally transcends the limitations of language, as a “ God beyond God.” In this negative or apophatic (unsaying) theology, the final utterance about God’s presence is silence. As Augustine put it, “ The best we can say about God is for one to keep silent out of the wisdom of one’s inward riches.” The absolute ineffability of God applies as well to us human beings who discover that God, unencumbered with words is closer to us than we are to ourselves. Just because eventually words fail, seeing does not fail. On this point, Eckhart reflects the Pseudo Dionysius who, in the sixth century, dared to suggest “ The most divine knowledge of God is that which knows through unknowing,” - an unknowing which is an illuminated unknowing, docta ignorantia, vastly different from mere ignorance or indifference. The unutterable truth hidden beneath the literal sense of any biblical passage, bring us to some insight into the ineffability of the divine, which leaves us, like Abraham, speechless.

This is hardly the place to attempt a full elaboration of the many facets of Eckhart’s approach to God’s self revelation, except to say that the inadequacy of language does not mean that words are useless or misleading. Quite the contrary, to me words serve two purposes, one is to guide the seeker step by step closer to the goal and the other use is to dispel along the way the confusion caused by those who think they have the last word on anything. So, it is useful, if not necessary, to ask ourselves whether the language of the whole Genesis narrative should be peeled away to find the unspeakable possibility that God was keeping himself hidden in the revelation, so as to reveal himself hiding. The words are not useless, they are only the instruments which God uses, through human instrumentalities, to guide us in the search for him. Wonder then, if is it even thinkable that the silences, where talk and explanations cease, that, as much, if not more, is being revealed about God. God can show himself as effectively by what he does not say or do as even a human being can. In the entire narrative leading up to the sacrifice, God appears so often to let Abraham make a fool of him, standing mutely by, but the silence is working. As in music, the silences are as much a part of the whole reality of music as are the sounds and rhythms and dynamics. The words on paper are sacred, but not as sacred as the vision they point to beyond the page.

Eckhart leads me to suspect that what is not being said in Genesis, or cannot be said, is more important than what is said, and that Abraham only slowly discovered that he was being led by God’s silence - a silence enveloped in the inadequate language of the time and place of the Genesis narrative. In the words of Meister Eckhart: “Now God wants no more of you than that you should, in creaturely fashion, go out of your self and let God be

God in you.” Is this the deeper divine command, dramatized in the Akedah story, that Abraham sacrifice himself, i.e. empty himself of all his ambitions and expectations, rather than sacrifice Isaac? Destroying Isaac would not have made any more room for God to be God. It would be foolish for me to suppose that the narrator (s) of Genesis or that Abraham himself wrestled with such esoteric notions, but it would not be foolish or useless to suppose that Abraham was being led by God toward a discovery that neither he nor the narrators could articulate or described. If I understand Eckhart and Augustine correctly, language is a human problem obscuring the “ God beyond God”: language is no problem for God communicating the intimacy of his presence, in Eckhart’s phrasing, “ so completely that you with him perceive forever his un-created is-ness, his nothingness, for which there is no name.” To call God “ nothing” is to acknowledge that God is not one thing among all other things that clutter up the universe. He is the “is-ness “ that pervades and transcends all of creation - thought and language, too. Earlier on in this essay, I suggested that this ontological or vertical dimension of scripture can be seen as complementing the chronological or horizontal dimension. Eckhart is a reliable guide in facing this possibility.

No surprise to anyone who reads Meister Eckhart and knows the work of Martin Heidegger, that Heidegger considered Eckhart to be “ one of the greatest thinkers of all time.” The Meister’s Commentary on the Book of Genesis asserts a vision of being and time which astounded Heidegger and later philosophers by describing creation, not as a once-upon-a-time event, but as an ongoing dimension of being itself. Eckhart explains that God had “ created the world in the very now in which he was: God, thus, God speaks [calls into being] once and for all.” Contemporary with Eckhart, The Cloud of Unknowing, suggests that, “one turns to God with the burning desire for Him alone, and rests in the blind awareness of his naked being”

Heidegger was much taken by Eckhart’s emphasis on this need for letting go (Gelassenheit) and detachment (Abegescheidenheit), in the search for some realization of God as Being, which cannot be intellectually appreciated as an object among objects, but can only be experienced subjectively by surrendering to participation in being’s own richness. I imagine that another word for “ letting go” might be “sacrifice.” Heidegger presses the need to surrender to the truth of being by participating in it before assuming that God can be surrendered to in advance. This is not to suggest that Meister Eckhart and Martin Hedegger see eye to eye on even the essentials, nor that they adequately reconcile the identity of man and of God with the undeniable differences between finite man and infinite God. Their insights are valuable here for throwing some light on the possibility that Abraham might have been seeking unknowingly the closest union with the One and Only Godhead in the darkness of his own limitations and background. After all, this is the first conversation between man and God in a primordial language. One need not claim that the narrators of the ancient text realized any more than Abraham himself did, what was going on between the unknowing soul and the well disguised God who led him through his spiritual journey. In the Cloud of Unknowing, there may have been just enough light to hint at the outcome.

In his sermon on Jesus driving the money changers out of the temple (Matthew, 21: 12)

Meister Eckhart reflected on those who “ want to exchange one thing for another and to trade with our Lord: they are “very foolish “ because they forget that whatever they would trade is already a gift and therefore there can be no quid-pro-quo. Gifts, Eckhart says, can only be accepted, not purchased. It would likely take some time and effort for Abraham to grasp this notion as he traveled from Sumeria to Canaan where the myriad of gods gave nothing away without exacting a price, sometimes the very high price of the firstborn. Eckhart’s use of “very foolish “ does not mean very rare; rather, this folly is the general disposition of mankind, which Abraham could hardly escape. The interior surrender took the form of the abiding obedience that God wanted Abraham to discover for himself, so that the sacrifice would be genuinely his own. The external formality of the sacrifice of Isaac or the ram, too similar to the usual pagan rites of the Canaanites, was only a symbol of the real sacrifice God demanded. No price was enough to secure the spiritual gift, hence the ram was appropriately sacrificed because the poor beast could never be seen as anything more than a mere symbol. The real sacrifice, once begun, was to be life-long and absolute, infinitely beyond the symbolic, as real as one being himself.

Eckhart’s suggestion has an interesting relevance to the contemporary struggles of Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas, both Jewish thinkers, to put into words (or take out of words in true deconstructionist fashion) the perception of a mystery given to mankind. Beyond the “violence of language “, which seems to them to misrepresent everything it touches, especially God, there is the singular gift of the puzzlement - What is hidden? Is it worth trying to figure out? And what can we do about it? The gift, “ if there is any”, in Derrida’s phrase, defies reciprocity. “ It must not circulate, it must not be exchanged, it must not be exhausted...It is perhaps in this sense that the gift is impossible.. It announces itself, gives itself to be thought of as impossible, "Derrida sees no God behind the veil, God is more God for keeping himself secret, yet the texts hide something which can be found as remaining hidden, only by taking risks. In an extended discussion of Abraham as the paragon of hospitality, welcoming the three strangers at Mamre and welcoming Isaac with laughter, Derrida exposes the contradictions inherent in the notion of hospitality, namely, that to be open to the unfathomable possibilities brought by the welcomed guests is to welcome death - “it is to death that hospitality destines itself.” Thus, in my own understanding of Derrida, Abraham can be seen as destined to be drawn ever closer to death, not Isaac’s death, but his own. God has no role in this realization in Derrida’s reenactment, his religion is a “ religion without religion, where death is absolute - annihilation” But it is unclear to me that Derrida can conceive of a spiritual immolation, beyond physical death. Levinas, on the other hand, does see God emerging through the painful disclosure. Both authors see the necessity of surrender Gelassenheit, as Eckhart did, before the gift (whatever it might be), can be rightly received. It is not clear that these writers conjured up the possibility that that the gift of Isaac involved Abraham in the thought that he would some day have to pay for the gift, by death, Isaac’s or his own. In passing, the reader may come to the conclusion that those writers, old and new, venerable and secular, who explore the impenetrability of language add their own share of obscurity to the puzzle they describe.

Emmanuel Levinas focuses a powerful light on the moral ordeal which tests Abraham. When Abraham looks into the face of Isaac, there at the altar on Mount Moriah, as if for



the last time, he sees for the first time the true face of God - a God who commands not blood sacrifice, but the surrender to love: God's love and Isaac's love. Levinas rejects Kierkegaard's false antagonism between the demands of God and the demands of ethics. Responsibility to God is affirmed in the face of the other - no earth shaking commands are required. Kierkegaard's misrepresentation can be seen as an "unmitigated sacrilege." Derrida suggests that Levinas "idea of ethics rests on "the symbolism of the Jewish absent God" and upon the infinite responsibility that we have to both God and to each human "other." Thus, for Levinas, the opposition to Kierkegaard, ethics and religion can never be separated or seen in opposition. This way of thinking is totally compatible with the thinking of Aquinas and Eckhard and surely brings us back to the unavoidable question, Did God actually command Abraham to murder Isaac, or was it made a virtuous act, not murder, because God commanded it?

The remarkable vision of Martin Buber, also a Jewish scholar, will help to conclude this examination. Buber wrote his doctoral dissertation on German mystics and became thoroughly familiar with the work of Meister Eckhart whom he considered, "The greatest thinker of Western mysticism." Important to our examination of the experience of Abraham is Buber's work on Hasidism, where, following Eckhart, he differentiates the Godhead abiding in pure being and the active God." He quotes Eckhart "God and the Godhead are as different as heaven and earth," which leads him to reduce man's relationship with God to an "I-Thou" relationship in which, the closer the soul realizes its intimacy with God the more the human I evaporates into the unchanging I of the Godhead "For Buber, God is represented in the Bible in the language that can be followed up to the point of union with the unutterable Being, the Godhead, absolutely unified and intact. Buber faults Kierkegaard for imagining that the voice of God disrupts the organic continuity of the life of ethical responsibility with the life of faith. Kierkegaard never doubts that the voice is God's, but Buber, reflecting Kant's challenge, asserts that the Jewish tradition does doubt "even Moloch can imitate the voice of God." Remembering Aquinas' respect for conscience, even when in error, I welcome Buber's claim that conscience is not the "inner light" from God dictating answers to all questions. It is the "unknown conscience in the ground of being, which needs to be discovered ever anew... it is human and can be mistaken." Conscience is "the individual's awareness of what he really is," a self, and I standing before a Thou. In his argument (or discussion) with God on the way to Sodom, Abraham does not hesitate to challenge God to act justly as the judge of all the earth should act. His faith in the justice of God does not inhibit his moral courage to risk admitting that he is "mere dust and ashes," a very fallible I becoming familiar with the Thou who called him in the first place. I am moved by Buber's vision that, in this evolution of radical yet fallible conscience, one inevitably discovers his own folly, his own finite inadequacy and the need for unconditional surrender of the isolated self to the Godhead beckoning. Through Aquinas' analysis of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, it was possible to envision Abraham's transition from the state of servile fear to the emergence of filial fear and the loving obedience to God that followed. The Jewish tradition respecting doubt easily recognizes Abraham on the right path to self-realization, evaporating into the "unchanging I of the Godhead."

## Conclusion

I must admit that I have undertaken this exploration of Abraham's exploration or journey on the suspicion that I might find some better resolution of the concerns created by God's command to Abraham. If any one came to me and claimed that he was commanded by God to sacrifice one of his children, or even of his dog, I would try to convince him that he should see a competent counselor or psychiatrist as soon as possible. I could never pretend that I believed that God did indeed command Abraham's bloody sacrifice of Isaac. The more I studied the text of Genesis 12 - 22 and a sample of the enormous literature on the subject, the more it became clear that I was not alone in my uneasiness, in fact that I had hardly scratched the surface. Also I was encouraged by the forthrightness of so many commentators, Jewish, Christian and unbelievers, who also thought that the Genesis account warranted a more than casual reading. Even the most hostile attacks on the Biblical message awakened me to the need for more careful attention to the loose ends of the story. Ignoring the diversity of interpretations and the persuasiveness of the attacks, only added to the hopelessness of the task.

So taking the advice of the late Charles Sanders Peirce and following the example of the venerable Thomas Aquinas and of Meister Eckhart, I decided to try to outsmart the text, that is, to guess that the text was telling one story on the surface and another story, more illusive and haunting, beneath the surface. True to the pragmatic nature of abductive thinking, I considered that, at age 84, it would be worth as much work as I could put into it, to follow my guess as far as it would take me. If Abraham, who exudes self-confidence from the first page, was being led by God to discover what a fool he was, that discovery should be discoverable within and beneath the text itself, without doing violence to the biblical text or to sound theology and philosophy.

As I confessed at the beginning of this undertaking, I do not have the training or intellectual depth to examine all of the literature on the subject of the Akedah. Especially I have no competence in the ancient languages, anthropology and history which establish the facts and possibilities of the story. I have had to rely on the authoritative English translations of Genesis, assuming that there was indeed some practical consensus after several centuries of brilliant scholarship. I have concentrated on those authors who were more or less available to me, within my limits, and which represented as a wide range of intellectual approaches as I could handle, from Jewish and a variety of Christian view points, from philosophers of different stripes and ages, and even from a comedian or two. I tried to avoid being stuffy or obtuse, though I am sure I allowed my mind to wander into some deep water at times. Living by the Atlantic shore, I find some useful bundles of tangled line on the beach in the winter and I have discovered that the best way to untie such complicated knots is not to pull too hard, especially tempting when one finds a loose strand. If you work the loose pieces back into the center of the knot, or knots, you might be lucky enough to salvage some useful rope, without ever getting close to unraveling the whole thing. This is more than a homely metaphor, it is a way of intellectual life for me. If I cannot solve the whole problem, I work at solving what I can. It is no tragedy to be only partially successful, the tragedy would be not to try in the first place because I was afraid of failure.

Thus, in the exploration of Genesis 12-22, guessing that Abraham, under the wise tutelage of God, finally discovered what a fool he was, I am doing the same thing myself in writing about Abraham. I have begun a journey in which I will certainly discover more of my own inadequacies, deficiencies, and mistakes, than I really want to admit to. This essay, then, is not the last word on anything, but it is an honest beginning in the search for the fuller truth beneath the story of the trial of Abraham

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Agus, Aharon (Ronald E, ) The Binding of Issac and Messiah: Law, Martyrdom and Deliverance in Early Rabbinic Religiosity, State University of New York Press, 1988
- Aquinas, Thomas, Summa Theologica, Secunda Secundae , Biblioteka de Autores Christianos, Madrid, 1963
- Allen, Woody, Without Feathers, Ballantine Books. 1990
- Barthelmy, Dominique, God and His Image: An Outline of Biblicl Theology, Sheed and Ward, 1966
- Daly, S.J. Robert J. The Soteriological Significance of the Sacrifice of Isaac, The Catholic Biblical Quarterly, vol. 37, 1977.
- Davies, P.R. and B.D. Chilton, The Akedah: A Revised Tradition History, The Catholic Biblical Quarterly, vol. 40, 1978
- Delaney, Carol, Abraham on Trial: The Social Legacy of a Biblcial Myth, Princeton University Press, 1998
- Erasmus of Rotterdam, In Praise of Folly, Hendricks House Farrar Straus, 1946.
- Friedman, Hershey, Humor in the Hebrew Bible, Humor, Vol. 13 – 3, 2000
- Gellman, Jerome I. Abraham! Abraham ! Kierkegaard and the Hasidim on the binding of Isaac. Ashgate Publishing, Burlington VT
- Girard, Rene, I See Satan Fall Like Lightning, Orbis Books, New York, 2002
- Green, Ron, Religion and Moral Reason, Oxford University Press, 1988
- Hammerton-Kelly, Robert, Violent Origins: Walter Burkell, Rene Girard and Jonathan Z Smith on Ritual Killing and Cultural formation, Stamford University Press, 1988
- Jones, Craig, The Error of Abraham: The Aqeda, Myth and Nietzschean Historical Model, [www.people.memphis, edu/-Avatar/papers 2000 aqeda v31 htm](http://www.people.memphis.edu/~Avatar/papers/2000/ameda/v31.htm).
- Kafka, Franz, Abraham in Parables and Paradoxes, Schocken Press, New York, 1958
- Kant, Immanuel, The Conflict of Failures in Basic writings of Kant, ed. Allen Wood, Modern Library New York 2001. Religion within the limits of Reason Alone, Harper, 1960

- Kerr, Fergus, Theology after Wittgenstein, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1986
- Kierkegaard, Soren, Fear and Trembling, Penguin Books, 1986
- Lash, Nicholas, The Beginning and End of Religion, Cambridge University Press 1996
- Maimonides, Moses, Guide for the Perplexed
- McGhee, Michael, Philosophy, Religion and the Spiritual Life, Cambridge University Press 1991
- Moberly, R.W.L. The Bible, Theology and Faith: A Study of Abraham and Jesus Cambridge University Press. 2000
- Morreall, John, Taking Laughter Seriously, State University of New York Press, 1983.  
Sarcasm, irony, wordplay, and humor in the Hebrew bible: A response to Hershey Friedman, Humor, vol. 14 –3 , 2001
- Patai, Raphael, The Jewish Mind, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1996
- Pattillo, Matthew, The Single Victim Mechanism and the Akedah, [www.sla.purdue.edu/jewish studies// cor&papers.Pattillo pdf](http://www.sla.purdue.edu/jewish_studies//cor&papers.Pattillo.pdf)**
- Ronell, Avital, Stupidity, University of Illinois Press, 2001
- Russell, Letty and Phyllis Trible, editors, Hagar, Sarah and Their Children: Jewish, Christian and Muslim Perspectives, Westminster John Knox Press, 2006
- Sarna, Nahum M. Understanding Genesis, Schicken Books, New York, 1962
- Spiegel, Shalom, The Last Trial on the Legends and Lore of the Command to Abraham to offer Isaac as a Sacrifice: The Akedah, Schocken Books, New York, 1969
- Vaux, Roland de, Ancient Israel, Its Life and Institutions, McGraw-Hill Book Co.
- Zornberg, Avivah, The Beginning of Desire: Reflections on Genesis, Doubleday, 1996