FEAR AND TREMBLING’S “ATTUNEMENT” AND THE RABBINIC INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE

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It has been well observed that Johannes de Silentio offers in Fear and Trembling “his own version of a midrash [a traditional rabbinic interpretation of scripture] on Abraham’s struggle,“152 and several scholars have explored the relationship between his reflections on this struggle and that of the rabbis153. Yet there is more work to be done in this area. In particular, I believe that the first chapter of Fear and Trembling, entitled Stemning or “Attunement,” can—and should—be read as midrash, and studied in relation to the very different interpretations of the akedah (the Hebrew name for the scriptural narrative of Abraham’s near sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22) that are recorded in the Jewish tradition. This essay aims to show that reading “Attunement” as midrash can illuminate the problem of faith in Fear and Trembling, and perhaps even enrich our understanding of the akedah itself.

In at least one essential respect, “Attunement” presents Fear and Trembling in microcosm: it tells the story of anonymous man who—like Silentio—tries to understand the faith that Abraham displays in the akedah, but is unable to do so. What is the point of Silentio’s story? To what is it supposed to “attune” the reader? What accounts for the interpretative failure of its protagonist (hereafter referred to as “the exegete“)? How might it be related to Silentio’s own failure to understand Abraham? These basic questions motivate the present inquiry.

The first section of this essay argues that “Attunement” has significant antecedents in rabbinic literature, and that understanding this text as a kind of midrash clarifies, at least in a general way, what the reader is supposed to do with

it. I also note certain significant differences between the exegete’s interpretative project and that of the rabbis. The second section offers an overview of rabbinic midrash on the akedah, and then begins to examine the details of the exegete’s interpretation. I contend that, while “Attunement” makes audible the inner dissonance of the akedah—a dissonance that is effectively silenced in rabbinic interpretations—it is in its own way insufficiently faithful to the text. Put roughly, the rabbis add too much to the akedah, while the exegete subtracts too much from it. The midrash of “Attunement” is nonetheless instructive, and not simply because it reflects the exegete’s deep anxieties and disappointments. The third section argues that the exegete’s running commentary about weaning a child may help to open our ears to the inner drama of parental rejection that is played out in the akedah. I conclude in the fourth section by reflecting on the ways in which “Attunement” anticipates Silentio’s own inability to comprehend the story told in Genesis 22, and by returning once more to the Jewish tradition for some final thoughts on Abraham.

I. “ATTUNEMENT,” MIDRASH, AND TALMUD

The first chapter of *Fear and Trembling* begins so simply that it is easy to miss its literary complexity. “There was once a man”: this is the abstract and archetypal language of fairy tales and fables, stories that appeal immediately to children everywhere because they explore universal human experiences in the timeless and indefinite region of myth. But it is also the deceptively straightforward language of biblical parable. The complexity of Silentio’s narrative arises partly from its recursively structured form and content. We learn directly that the man of whom he speaks—the exegete—was obsessed with a “beautiful story” he himself heard “as a child.” When the story of “how God tested Abraham, and how

154 I cite *Fear and Trembling* (FT) parenthetically in the text. Translations are drawn from Kierkegaard 2009, although for *Stemmning* I prefer “Attunement” to Walsh’s “Tuning Up.” Biblical passages are cited parenthetically in the text. Unless otherwise specified, translations are drawn from the *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh*, and chapter and verse numbers refer to Genesis.
he withstood the test” was first related to him, perhaps by his father or his mother, he had seemed to grasp it immediately; as an adult, however, he could no longer retrieve this understanding from the written text, because “life had separated what had been united in the child’s pious simplicity.” As time passed, he read the story with “ever greater admiration”; he thought of it more and more, and with an enthusiasm that was inversely proportional to his comprehension. “Finally, he forgot everything else because of it; his soul had only one wish, to see Abraham, one longing, to have been witness to that event.” Provoked by this wish and this longing, he imagined new ways to narrate the akedah, but in the end he still could not fathom the faith of Abraham (FT 7-8).

As this brief summary makes clear, “Attunement” is the story of a man who tells himself stories in the hope of comprehending another story. We shall see directly that telling stories as a way of understanding scripture is a venerable interpretative strategy, and in fact, the man uses versions of yet another story—that of a child who is to be weaned—to comment on his variations on the theme of the akedah. Even more interesting, the exegete’s own story recapitulates the ancient story of Abraham and Isaac, which is in a basic sense the story of all human beings, both individually and collectively. Like all of us, he experiences loss and fragmentation when he leaves childhood, and these experiences seem only to increase with age. He is therefore ever more strongly attracted to Abraham, who in Genesis 22 would seem to furnish the most extreme example of a life that is falling apart, but who nonetheless manages to hold everything together with an apparently seamless grace. At the same time, the transition from childhood to adulthood, and from the fullness and immediacy of the spoken word to the poverty and indirectness of a written text that yields only incomplete and conflicting perspectives, reiterates the overall course of human experience from the viewpoint of religious traditionalism. For with the cessation of prophecy, we latecomers have no recourse but to search scripture for the traces of an understanding that was originally transmitted directly from the mouth of God, so to speak, to the ears of human beings.

We have seen that “Attunement” reflects multiple dimensions of the human experience of loss and fragmentation. Given the universality of its theme and its
incorporation of recursion and repetition, it is unsurprising that “Attunement” has notable literary antecedents. Most striking, perhaps, is its similarity to rabbinic midrash and Talmudic commentary. Let us consider each of these in turn.

The Hebrew word *midrash* designates both the process and the product of interpretation. Emerging after the end of prophecy, midrash substituted for the direct intervention or communication of God. It dates from the 5th century BCE, in the period of Ezra, “a scribe expert in the Torah of Moses” who “dedicated himself to study [*lidrosh*] the Torah [the five books of Moses]... so as to observe it, and to teach laws and rules to Israel” (Ezra 7:6,10). Built on the root *drash*, “to seek,” midrash came to mean specifically the interpretation of both legal or prescriptive (halakhic) and non-legal (aggadic) portions of scripture, including in particular the stories of the Bible. As developed by the rabbis, aggadic midrash is notable for its extraordinarily free-wheeling and imaginative nature. The rabbis’ tendency to find unexpected meanings in scripture, generating interpretations that fill the empty spaces and even overflow the banks of the text, is partly explained by their belief that the Torah implicitly contains answers to the fundamental questions of human existence: “Turn it and turn it over again, for everything is in it.” The exegete of “Attunement” seems to share this conviction, or at least to hold that some humanly essential truth is latent in the akedah. Interestingly, the basic conservatism of this opinion, which privileges the biblical text above any other potential source of wisdom, goes hand-in-hand with interpretative innovation, without which the text could not possibly be construed to contain “everything.” This tension is fundamental to the act of scriptural interpretation as modeled by Silentio as well as the rabbis.

“Attunement” resembles rabbinic midrash in another respect as well: as the rabbis so often do, the exegete uses storytelling as a means of interpreting biblical narrative. It is possible for him to do so because the narrative of Genesis 22 is highly economical. Two whole days, for example, pass without comment between the third and the fourth verses of the chapter. What was Abraham thinking and feeling from the morning he saddled his ass to the moment he laid eyes on the

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155 See Howland 2011, 29-30 with the sources cited there.
156 Mishnah Pirke Avot 5:26.
mountain? It is natural, and perhaps even necessary, to try to respond to this sort of question by fashioning a narrative of one’s own. Constructing such narratives is furthermore a way of personally appropriating the meaning of the story one is trying to interpret, and “Attunement” calls on the reader to engage in just such an act of appropriation. Because all of its narratives, including the frame story of a man who was obsessed with understanding Abraham, are brief and undeveloped—offering, like the akedah, sketches of their subjects rather than a fully realized portraits—readers will inevitably fill in their silences by retelling them in a manner that reflects their particular life-views, concerns, anxieties, and so forth. In this way, “Attunement” solicits its own, peculiarly individual form of aggadic midrash.

Finally, it is worth noting that the literary structure of “Attunement” reflects the kind of open-ended and dialectical discourse characteristic of the great body of rabbinic thought known as the Talmud. The Talmud comprises a detailed code of law, the Mishnah, coupled with an expansive commentary, the Gemara. Since the early 16th century, a printed page of Talmud has included a central block of text, in which passages from the Mishnah are interspersed with corresponding sections of the Gemara, and, in smaller typeface, a thick margin consisting of additional commentary from a variety of sources. This “visually seductive artifact”—text, commentary, and commentary on the commentary—invites readers to participate in many-sided debates that are only rarely resolved. A closely analogous structure appears in “Attunement,” which includes a frame story that surrounds a multi-layered center consisting of a partially edited version of Genesis 22:1-2, in which God commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac; four variations on the scriptural narrative that follows this command; and, as commentary on each of these, four narrative vignettes on the theme of weaning a child. In other words, Silentio—anticipating the poet he describes in the following chapter, who “admire[s], love[s], and rejoice[s] in the hero” (FT 12)—imaginatively produces in “Attunement” something like the meeting of multiple voices one finds in the Talmud. Yet he is ultimately unable to resolve the problem

157 Steinsalz 1989, 49.
of understanding Abraham; as the Talmud so often does, he leaves it to the reader to have the final word, if possible, or else to maintain the silence of perplexity.

The literary affinities we have observed between the first chapter of Fear and Trembling, aggadic midrash, and Talmudic discourse suggest that “Attunement” calls on us to become active and critical interpreters of its interlocking narratives, and thus also of the biblical text around which these narratives revolve. Doing so, these affinities imply, will help us to encounter the akedah in a reflective and self-conscious manner, and so to become fully responsible for the meanings we derive from struggling with it. As we shall see, however, readers who have “tuned in” to the imaginative task of interpretation that Silentio has set for them may ultimately discover more than he bargained for.

Before proceeding further, it will be helpful also to note certain significant disanalagies between the interpretative project of “Attunement” and rabbinic inquiry. In the first place, the rabbi who produces midrashic commentary takes part in a grand tradition, having earned his authority to do so on the basis of his scholarly training. The exegete, on the other hand, is ignorant of Hebrew and is neither “a thinker” nor “a learned exegete” (FT 8); unlike the scribes and the rabbis, sages among the people of the book, he stands alone before the word of God, without availing himself of any tradition or teaching to make sense of it159. What, then, is the source of his authority to interpret the biblical narrative? There is something childlike about his apparent assumption that the meaning of the Bible should be open to anyone at any time. As much as we may applaud this conviction, it raises the distinct possibility that the exegete might have overlooked something essential to understanding the text—a problem that rabbinic Judaism attempts to solve by the participation of multiple voices in the ongoing conversation of a living tradition. To be sure, he is involved in a kind of dialogue, but it is a silent and internal one. Put another way, the polyphony of “Attunement” is the surface of what is literally a monologue; and even when the

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159 Silentio remarks that “had he [the exegete] known Hebrew, then perhaps he would easily have understood the story and Abraham” (FT 8). Conway 2003 observes that this comment underscores the exegete’s insistence on reading the akedah “on his own terms,” and argues that both he and Silentio deliberately close themselves off from genuine attunement to the biblical text.
exegete speaks aloud, as he does at the very end of the chapter, there is no indication that he is talking to anyone other than himself.

It is furthermore important to note that the exegete’s extreme obsession with the akedah runs counter to the spirit of rabbinic Judaism. “He forgot everything else because of it,” Silentio writes; “his soul had only one wish, to see Abraham, one longing, to have been witness to that event.” His goal is not moral or practical, but purely contemplative; he desires not to change his own comportment, but merely to observe that of Abraham. In the rabbinic tradition, however, theoretical activity is not meant to substitute for action, but to potentiate it. Even on the exegete’s own terms, his exclusive devotion to the akedah is pathological. In restricting himself to the role of poet of the heroism of Abraham, he seems to have exacerbated, and not merely to have forgotten, the problem of existential fragmentation that caused him to return to this story in the first place.

Not surprisingly, the exegete’s isolation and quietism are reflected in the details of his interpretation of the akedah, an interpretation that is in certain respects diametrically opposed to that of the rabbis. Developing this contrast will help to bring into focus the relative advantages of this interpretation, as well as essential features of the biblical text that are overlooked both by the exegete and by the rabbinic tradition in general.

II. HEARING IN SILENCE: THE AKEDAH IN RABBINIC MIDRASH AND “ATTUNEMENT”

Louis Ginzberg offers an overview of rabbinic midrash on the akedah in his magisterial book The Legends of the Jews. Ginzberg’s work must be used with caution, because his project of fabricating a unified narrative from multiple sources

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160 I owe this observation to Edward Mooney.
162 Ginzberg 1925.
inevitably makes the tradition of rabbinic commentary seem more univocal than it actually is\textsuperscript{163}. Nevertheless, the stories he has assembled amply display the rabbis’ fondness for innovative scriptural interpretation, while confirming Ronald Green’s assertion that, in the case of the akedah, “the rabbinic mind converts a seemingly arbitrary and capricious act by God into proof of his equity and justice\textsuperscript{164}”.

To begin with, several rabbinic sources fabricate a prologue to the story told in Genesis 22 that assimilates the tales of Abraham and Job. In this prologue, God conceives the command to sacrifice Isaac as a means of setting in motion a public proof of Abraham’s faithfulness—one that will decisively refute Satan’s accusation that Abraham’s blessings have caused him to forget God\textsuperscript{165}. This interpretation establishes that God has good reason for testing Abraham, while simultaneously portraying him as a defender of truth and righteousness. What is more, the rabbis effectively absolve both God and Abraham of moral culpability in relation to Isaac by describing him not as a “lad,” as the biblical text asserts (22:12), but as an adult who participates freely and willingly in the preparations for his own sacrifice\textsuperscript{166}. Indeed, the master-midrash that Ginzberg reconstructs portrays both Abraham and Isaac as knowledgeable individuals with special powers of perception. Abraham repeatedly recognizes Satan in his various disguises, and Isaac has enough understanding—both of himself and of proper sacrificial practice—to ask that Abraham bind his hands and feet before drawing the blade: in his fear at the sight of the knife, he calmly explains, he might inadvertently resist his father, which could cause him to injure himself and thereby render the sacrifice ritually unfit\textsuperscript{167}. Finally, the rabbis imagine

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\item \textsuperscript{163} It is also beyond the scope of Ginzberg’s book to show how midrash on the akedah reflected the historical needs of particular Jewish communities. In medieval Ashkenaz, Isaac was said to have been slaughtered by Abraham and then resurrected by God. Spiegel 1993 demonstrates that this interpretation was crafted with a view to contemporary events; “the biblical figures were drawn in the light of the actualities of the Crusades, when the saints of Germany and France sanctified the Name [of God] in droves” (134).
\item \textsuperscript{164} Ginzberg 1925, vol. 1: 272-73 with vol. 5: 248-49 n. 228; Green 1982, 5. God’s “protagonist” and man’s “accuser” (Halevi 1955, 21), the Hebrew Satan is “not the fallen angel of the Christian tradition, but a heavenly investigator/prosecuting attorney” (Wettstein 2012, 164).
\item \textsuperscript{165} Ginzberg 1925, vol. 1: 279; vol. 5: 249 n. 229. Some rabbinic sources claim that Isaac was thirty-seven years old when he accompanied his father to Moriah; see Midrash Rabbah vol. 1: 485 (= Bereshit Rabbah 55.4).
\item \textsuperscript{166} Ginzberg 1925, vol. 1: 277, 280; vol. 5: 249-50, n. 234 and 250, n. 242. This magnification of Isaac’s “moral personality” illustrates “the Jewish confidence that God cannot command wickedness” (Green 1982, 8).
\end{itemize}
that God shares with Abraham a divine perspective on the meaning of the akedah, one that places it in the context of the past and future experience of the people Israel. He accordingly reveals to Abraham that the Temple will be built on the site of his near-sacrifice of Isaac, which happens to be the same place where Cain and Abel made their offerings to God, and where Noah built an altar to him. Certain features of “Attunement” are immediately apparent when it is considered against the backdrop of rabbinc midrash on the akedah. The silence and solitude of Abraham, Isaac, and God in “Attunement” offer a stark contrast to their wordy interaction in rabbinc sources. The God of the rabbis is transparently rational and good; their Abraham and Isaac, confidant and knowing. The God of “Attunement,” on the other hand, is distant and inscrutable, and Abraham and Isaac are correspondingly ignorant and anxious. This is the hidden God who tells Moses that “you cannot see My face, for man may not see Me and live” (Exod. 33:20)—“God in His own nature and majesty,” as Luther writes, who “neither deplors nor takes away death, but works life, and death, and all in all,” and who is, he warns, “to be left alone.” Silentio’s title is thus deeply ironic; far from introducing a harmonious reading of the text, much less one that is in tune with well-developed Jewish and Christian conceptions of God’s benevolent and loving nature, “Attunement” undertakes a kind of interpretative archaeology that emphasizes the inner dissonance of the narrative it addresses. Its approach to the akedah could therefore be described as pre-rabbinic, and more generally pre-theological, in that it returns us to the rawness, opacity, and sparseness of the biblical text.

The archaeological impetus of “Attunement” is typical of Kierkegaard. It brings to mind his attempt in The Concept of Irony to uncover the nature of the historical Socrates by working backward from the writings of his contemporaries, as well as Johannes Climacus’s endeavor in Philosophical Fragments to uncover the original phenomena of philosophy and faith as exemplified in the speeches and deeds of Socrates and Christ. Analogously, “Attunement” works to correct all interpretations—including Christian ones—that obscure the primitive meaning of the biblical text by reading back into it theological assumptions derived from later

169 Luther 1957, 170.
experiences. Yet the exegete’s interpretative archaeology is much more radical than Climacus’s, and perhaps even scandalous from the perspective of Danish Lutheranism, in that he leaves the New Testament—and thus the loving God of the Incarnation, as well as the suffering God of the Crucifixion—altogether out of consideration.

The exegete rightly emphasizes that Abraham must have approached Mount Moriah in fear and trembling, as he could not have been certain that God would brook no evil. If Abraham does achieve knowledge of the moral nature the rabbis attribute to God, which decisively differentiates him from the terrifying deities of the pagans, it comes only when the angel commands him to stay his hand (22:11-12). Yet if the rabbis read too much into the text, the exegete exaggerates its darkness and density by reading too much out of it. This exaggeration manifests itself in the first instance in his selective editing of the biblical narrative. Here is his paraphrase of Genesis 22:1-2, the scriptural soil in which each of his four variations on the akedah is rooted:

And God tested Abraham and said to him, take Isaac, your only son, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering upon a mountain that I will show you.

This paraphrase differs from the biblical text in several particulars. It skips over the transitional words “Some time after,” which introduce chapter 22 and connect it with the preceding narrative, and it omits the entire second half of the first verse, which precedes God’s command to sacrifice Isaac: “He [God] said to him, ‘Abraham,’ and he answered, ‘Here I am’ [hinein]” (22:1). The first omission disconnects the akedah from the long history, beginning in Genesis 12, of God’s direct intervention in Abraham’s life. The second obscures God’s intimacy with Abraham, to whom he calls out by name, as well as the ready eagerness with which Abraham responds to the divine voice. Taken together, these editorial omissions

170 Cf. Green 1998, 258-60. In assimilating Isaac to Jesus, for example, the church fathers understand the akedah only with the benefit of hindsight. On the similarities between rabbinic and Christian interpretations of the akedah, see Kessler 2004; on the possible pagan roots of both Jewish and Christian atonement theologies, see Speigel 1993.
172 This passage is underlined in the original Danish.
173 Another difference is that, where Silentio writes “take Isaac, your only son, whom you love,” 22:2 reads “take your son, your only one, Isaac, whom you love.”
effectively rewrite the akedah as a story in which Abraham has no substantial personal relationship or special familiarity with God. And yet, the secret of his faith could be supposed to reside precisely in the immediacy of this relationship.

Consider, for example, Genesis 15:6, where God has just told Abraham that his offspring will be as numerous as the stars: “And because he put his trust in the LORD [and here the text has הוהי, the unpronounceable name of God that is usually rendered as Yahweh], he reckoned it to his merit.” “Put his trust in” translates הֶאֶמְינָן בָּה, a Hiphil form of the verb *aman*, which could also be rendered as “believe in.” The Septuagint translates *he’emin* as *episteusen*, and we do well to recall that *pistis*, or “trust” in ordinary Greek, becomes the New Testament’s favorite word for “faith.” In brief, the Bible represents Abraham’s faith in God as a matter of personal trust in the particular individual called Yahweh. Because this trust has been sustained and strengthened by his direct familiarity or intimacy with God, its ultimate grounds may be known only to Abraham. It may therefore be difficult, if not impossible, for him to persuade anyone else that it is reasonable, particularly when he seems to contradict ethical norms in acting on it. But because he ignores—and even suppresses—the rich personal relationship of God and Abraham, the exegete lays the groundwork for Silentio’s later insistence that the story of their encounter cannot be rationally evaluated in anything other than the universal language of ethics.

The exegete’s tendency to separate what is united in scripture is apparent also in the details of the four stories he tells about the near sacrifice of Isaac. The first asserts that Abraham “went up the mountain alone, leading Isaac by the hand,” thus emphasizing the solitude he experiences even in the company of his son (FT 8). The corresponding passage in Genesis, however, states that “the two walked off together” (22:6). The third imagines that Abraham “rode out alone to Mount Moriah” after returning with Isaac: “He threw himself upon his face, he begged God to forgive his sin, that he had been willing to sacrifice Isaac, that the father had forgotten his duty toward the son.” But God did not reply. “More than once he rode his lonely trail,” the story continues, “but found no peace of mind” (FT 10). The silence of God in this narrative reminds us that “Attunement” nowhere mentions the angelic voice that calls out to Abraham on the mountain, and to which he once
again responds “Here I am” (22:11)—“the highest point in the drama,” according to Emmanuel Levinas, because it is where Abraham attends to “the voice that led him back to the ethical order”\(^\text{174}\).

What explains the exegete’s editorial omissions and interpretative exaggerations? There can be little doubt that the way he tells Abraham’s story reflects his sense of God’s absence and unavailability. The exegete, Silentio writes, was “engrossed ... not [by] the artistic weave of the imagination but the shudder of the thought” (FT 8). In narrative, however, imagination functions as the theater of thought—the indispensable means of opening up a space for reflection. One may guess that the exegete’s self-defeating wish to disentangle thought from imagination in thinking through the story of Abraham springs from his desire for a relationship with God that is independent of the medium of scripture. While this inference is necessarily speculative, it is supported by the fact that the commentary he appends to each of his four versions of the akedah establishes an analogy between the relationships of God, Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac and perhaps the most intimate and immediate of all human bonds—that of mother and child. Let us now turn to this most revealing commentary.

III. THE ANXIETY OF THE ORPHAN: WEANING AND ABANDONMENT IN “ATTUNEMENT”

The exegete’s decision to connect the akedah with the experience of weaning and being weaned is rooted in the text of Genesis, and so is not merely a reflection of his inability to recover the “pious simplicity” of his childhood. Some background is in order. In chapter 16, Sarah—then named Sarai, and still

\(^{174}\) Levinas 1996, quoted in Conway 2003. The exegete thus forecloses Levinas’s “developmental” reading of the akedah, on which see Conway 2003 and especially Katz 2005. Goodman 1996 offers a similar interpretation that is independent of Levinas, but also grounded in the Jewish tradition. Goodman asserts that Abraham is rewarded “not for blind obedience ... but for (and through) moral insight”; in the akedah, “violence and terror” are ultimately “debarred from the idea of God” (22, 23).
childless—instructs Abraham to consort with the slave Hagar so that she might have a son. Abraham complies, although Sarai subsequently blames him for her having been lowered in Hagar’s esteem, and, with her husband’s permission, treats Hagar so unkindly that she flees into the wilderness. Hagar is talked into returning by God, and Ishmael is born. When God later announces that Sarah herself will give birth, we are told that Abraham threw himself on his face “and laughed [yitshak]” (17:17). Built on the verb tsahak, “to laugh,” Yitshak is the Hebrew name of Isaac. This becomes a running pun. Sarah “laughed” (titshak) when she overheard the news that she would bear a child, and the verb is repeated three times in the next three lines (18:12-15). When Isaac is born in Genesis 21, the chapter immediately preceding the akedah, Sarah declares that “God has brought me laughter,” and then she revealingly adds that “everyone who hears will laugh for me [yitshak-li]”—for me, but not for anyone else, the point being that she delights in the glory that will be hers alone through having been singled out by God for a miraculous birth175. In her joyful pride, she breaks into poetry:

Who would have said to Abraham  
That Sarah would suckle children!  
Yet I have born a son in his old age. (21:7)

The next verse informs us that “The child grew up and was weaned”—an event that dramatically improves his odds of survival—“and Abraham held a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned.”

At this point, Sarah’s hostility to Hagar resurfaces in a particularly ugly way. She sees Ishmael playing and demands that Hagar and he be cast out into the wilderness, “for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac” (21:9-10). The word “playing” translates mtsahek. In Sarah’s jealous eyes, Ishmael was “Isaacing176”, she could not tolerate his innocent laughter, even—or especially—if it gave pleasure to others, because she had no wish to share the admiration and esteem that Isaac was to bring her. Ishmael would have died in the desert had God not intervened (cf. 21:15). The next verse informs us that “the matter distressed Abraham greatly, for it concerned a son of his” (21:11). In other

175 The JPS Tanakh masks this implication by translating “for me” as “with me.”
176 Jewish Study Bible 44, ad loc. 21:9.
words, Abraham hesitates to stand up to Sarah even when Ishmael’s life is at stake; God’s reassurance (22:12) does not change the fact that he fails to live up to his primary responsibility as Ishmael’s father. The background we have just reviewed is significant in several respects. The weaning of Isaac is immediately followed by the expulsion of Ishmael, and the exegete’s commentary returns repeatedly to the distinction between weaning—a process that lovingly helps a child to achieve greater maturity and independence—and parental abandonment. The exegete thus invites us to read this portion of Genesis as a story about the suffering of children at the hands of adults who are either too cruel to care for them, or, at best, too weak to protect them. (Given the trauma of his childhood, can anyone be surprised that Ishmael became “a wild ass of a man; his hand against everyone, and everyone’s hand against him” [16:12]? The experience of Abraham and Isaac in Genesis 22 furthermore repeats that of Hagar and Ishmael in the preceding chapter, when Sarah drove them into the wilderness of Beer-sheba. In fact, God seems to have Sarah in mind when he instructs Abraham to take “your son, your only one” to Moriah (22:2), for while Abraham has two sons, Sarah has only one. Finally, Abraham himself could be regarded as a pawn in a conflict between stronger personalities—for the Bible presents God, too, as a potent maternal figure, not to say a jealous one. In announcing to Abraham (then named Abram) that he will be “the father of a multitude of nations,” God calls himself El Shaddai (17:1, 4). The meaning of this name is suggested by a play on words at Genesis 49:25, where Jacob prophesies to Joseph that “El Shaddai will bless you with the blessings of the heavens above, blessings of the deep lying below, blessings of breasts [shadayim] and womb.” Modern scholars have traced Shaddai to the Akkadian shadu, which originally meant “breast” and then—through an imaginative association—came to mean “mountain.” Yahweh, who calls Abraham up to Mount Moriah, the future site of his Temple, is thus the “God of Breasts,” a fertility deity who figuratively suckles his

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177 Weiss 2012 nevertheless finds numerous indications in the biblical text that Abraham favors Ishmael over Isaac. If Weiss is correct, Abraham’s behavior is all the more disappointing.

178 The JPS Tanakh mistranslates “your only son” as “your favored son.”

179 This is the translation of Biale 1982, 248.

worshippers\textsuperscript{181}. But for the exegete, this motherly and nurturing deity is utterly eclipsed in the akedah by the brutality of paternal rejection. It is in this connection that the exegete’s imagery proves most telling: far from being “weaned” by God, Abraham and Isaac are separated and abandoned, and left to wander the world as lonely as any orphans.

In the first of the exegete’s stories—all of which begin by mentioning Sarah—Abraham informs Isaac of the purpose of their journey to Mount Moriah. Although “his gaze was gentle, his speech exhortatory,” and his words “full of comfort,” his son could not understand him. Finally, Abraham pretends to be a murderous idolater so that Isaac will lose faith in him rather than in God. “God in heaven,” Isaac cries out, “have mercy on me; God of Abraham have mercy on me, if I have no father on earth, then you be my father!” The commentary explains that, while a mother may blacken her breast to wean a child, “the mother is the same, her gaze is loving and tender as always. Fortunate the one who did not need more frightful measures to wean the child!” (FT 8-9). In the scenario the exegete describes, Abraham is compelled to blacken himself\textsuperscript{182}; Isaac, whom the exegete calls a “boy,” is metaphorically “weaned” from his trust in Abraham in so roughly and abruptly that he effectively loses his earthly father. At the same time, Isaac seems to draw close to a distant God (or to draw God close to him); in one short sentence, “God in heaven” becomes “God of Abraham” and finally “father.” And yet, there is another sense in which Isaac is not weaned at all, and not simply because God takes the place of the parent he has lost. For his prayerful appeal to God rests on a lie his father has fed him—the lie that Abraham himself is responsible for God’s dreadful command. Isaac is thus doubly deceived: he mistakes God’s actual remoteness for intimacy only because Abraham expresses his genuine love as hatred. Could the exegete have conceived this as a commentary on the infantilization of worshippers through theological interpretations that mask the harshness of the akedah—a harshness he seems to regard as emblematic of life itself?

\textsuperscript{181} Biale 1982 also speculates that Shaddai is cognate with the Egyptian shdl, “a verb meaning to suckle” (249).

\textsuperscript{182} Kierkegaard states as much in a journal entry, JJ 87 (Kierkegaard’s Journals and Notebooks 2:155).
The exegete’s other stories emphasize Abraham’s vulnerability and confusion. The second imagines an Abraham who “became old,” whose “eyes were darkened,” and who “saw joy no more” as a result of his experience on Mount Moriah, even though Isaac—whom the story describes as Sarah’s “pride”—“flourished as before.” The commentary likens Abraham to a child who has lost its mother not because she covered her breast when it was to be weaned, but “in some other way” (FT 9). The commentary on the third story, in which Abraham agonizes over his willingness to sacrifice Isaac, speaks of the sorrow of a mother who knows that “she and the child [who is to be weaned] are more and more to be parted.” “Thus together they mourn this brief sorrow,” the exegete remarks. “Fortunate the one who kept the child so close and did not”—like Abraham—“need to sorrow more!” (FT 10). The fourth story, in which Isaac loses his faith when he sees “that Abraham’s left hand was clenched in despair, that a shudder went through his body” as he drew the knife, is perhaps the bleakest of all. In this scenario, both Abraham and Isaac lose their faith, but are unable even to commiserate: “Never a word is spoken about this in the world. Isaac never spoke to any person about what he had seen, and Abraham did not suspect that anyone had seen it.” The exegete’s commentary is very brief: “When the child is to be weaned, the mother has more solid food on hand so the child will not perish. Fortunate the one who has this stronger nourishment handy!” (FT 10-11). The implication is that both Abraham and Isaac “perish,” for just as God has no sustenance on hand for Abraham when he withholds his spiritual milk, Isaac’s faith starves in the presence of his father’s absolute hopelessness.

In sum, the exegete, who seems to be unusually sensitive to the experience of parental abandonment, searches in vain in Genesis 22 for the faith he longs for—faith as a life-sustaining intimacy with God that can weather any storm. It is as if, ignoring Luther’s warning, he hoped to find the loving embrace of Jesus within the inscrutable remoteness of the omnipotent God of creation—aspects of God that were once united in the pious simplicity of his childhood and perhaps also that of the race, before life and experience split them apart. Nor does he avail himself of mediating institutions, such as the rabbinate and the priesthood, that have traditionally helped to connect human beings with God. Little wonder that he
fails. The exegete regards Abraham as the “father” of faith, but his encounter with him succeeds only in generating frustration and fatigue (cf. FT 11). Indeed, his Abraham seems less than fatherly in every essential respect. Having previously abdicated his paternal responsibility to protect Ishmael, he denies (in the first of the four scenarios) that he is Isaac’s father (FT 9). What is more, he is at best capable of producing in Isaac only a childish simulacrum of faith, and one that is furthermore purchased at the price of his son’s trust in him. But it is to the exegete’s credit that, when it comes to faith, he will be satisfied only with what he regards as the genuine article.

IV. “ATTUNEMENT” AS PRELUDE: SILENTIO’S RELATION TO THE EXEGETE

One function of the first chapter of Fear and Trembling seems to be to attune us to the intellectual and emotional constitution of the book’s author. Like the exegete, Silentio has lost the “pious simplicity” of childhood. His primary concern is to understand how a mature comprehension of the ways of the world can coexist with a childlike love of life. The “wonder of faith,” he writes, is that it “preserves an eternal youth”; full of years and experience, Abraham nevertheless seems to engage life with the joyful expectancy of a child (FT 15). Yet also like the exegete, Silentio cannot “think [him]self into Abraham” (FT 28). He regards Abraham’s actions as unintelligible, primarily because they violate the ethical universals or moral norms of reason (cf. FT 47-49). But we have already seen that this way of thinking about Abraham’s faith is inadequate, because it abstracts from the personal relationship with God in which his faith or trust is rooted. Why, then, does he insist on it?

Part of the answer may be that Silentio, again like the exegete, has no direct acquaintance with God, but knows him only through scripture. And yet, he indicates that he, too, longs to transcend the “weave of the imagination”—the very fabric of scriptural narrative. The subtitle of Fear and Trembling, “A Dialectical
Lyric,” suggests that the book is both philosophical and poetic. Having asserted, however, that “the present writer is not at all a philosopher,” Silentio later insists “I am not a poet and go about things only dialectically” (FT 5, 79). Whatever else this contradiction may imply, Silentio strangely separates intellectual comprehension from storytelling in a way that is foreign to the Bible. This is perhaps not surprising, for he indicates in the Preface that his intellectual model—if this is the right word for a man who both affirms and disavows any connection with philosophers as well as poets—is Descartes, who insisted on a degree of clarity and distinctness in thinking that is generally available only in the disciplines of mathematics and logic. More important, Descartes radically rejected the intellectual tradition, and sought truth by employing “a method,” as Silentio remarks, “that had importance only for himself” (FT 4). Silentio’s embrace of Descartes’ example suggests that he is just as intellectually and spiritually isolated as the exegete. Indeed, neither critically engages Jewish or Christian interpretations of the akedah, in spite of the fact that the word “attunement” seems to promise openness and receptivity to the intellectual tradition.

One passage in *Fear and Trembling* decisively establishes the abstraction and emotional bleakness of Silentio’s understanding of God and of life as a whole:

> I am convinced that God is love; this thought has for me a primordial lyrical validity. When it is present to me I am unspeakably happy; when it is absent I long for it more intensely than the lover for the object of his love. But I do not believe; this courage I lack. To me, God’s love, both in a direct and inverse sense, is incommensurable with the whole of actuality. (FT 28)

This is Silentio’s version of the exegete’s problem of uniting the remote God of omnipotence with the loving God of revelation. Notice that Silentio is moved, not by the actual experience of God’s love, but by the mere *thought* that God is love (cf. FT 29)—a thought that is furthermore evanescent. Indeed, his conviction that God’s love is incommensurable with actuality implies that he has neither directly experienced this love, nor expects to do so in this life. On the whole, Silentio seems

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183 If a direct encounter with the faith of Abraham must involve coming to grips with the Jewish tradition in particular, then we may concur with the assertion of Conway 2003 that Silentio exhibits an “eccentric need” to place himself merely “in the vicinity of faith.”
to have observed, men act as if they did not love God, and events proceed as if God
did not love man. The conclusion he draws from this observation, however, rests on
the uncertain presupposition that inductive reasoning gives one access to the nature
of actuality as a whole. Silentio accordingly envisions faith as the solution to a
problem that his intellect has posed, but that springs from an experience he seems
to share with the exegete—that of abandonment in a cold and uncaring world. This
is a far cry from Abraham’s faith as personal trust in Yahweh. It is thus entirely
unsurprising that Silentio, like the exegete, regards Abraham as inscrutable in his
joy.

And yet, the present inquiry suggests that the effort of “Attunement” to
make audible the dissonance of the akedah may ultimately help the thoughtful
reader to overcome Silentio’s puzzlement. Of all the Jewish commentators known to
me, it is the pre-rabbinic and Hellenistic philosopher Philo who most fully registers
this dissonance, and who perhaps also comes closest to understanding the mind of
Abraham as he journeys to Moriah. Noting that the name Isaac suggests laughter,
Philo asserts that Abraham was prepared to sacrifice to God “the well-tuned emotion
[eupatheia] and joy of the mind” which “the wise man is said dutifully to offer in
sacrifice to God, because to rejoice belongs most of all to God alone”:

For the human race is beset with distress and surrounded by fear of
ills either present or expected, so that it is either grieved by
unanticipated difficulties close at hand, or agitated by troubles and
fears yet to come. But the nature of God is free from distress, and
without fear, and has no share in any suffering, and alone partakes
of perfect happiness an blessedness\textsuperscript{184}.

This is a thought worthy of a Greek tragedian. But Philo leaps beyond
tragedy when he explains in the immediate sequel that “to the disposition that has
made this acknowledgment in truth, God is kind and loving, and, having distanced
Himself from any grudge, He fittingly and freely returns the gift [of joy] to the
extent that the recipient’s capacity allows\textsuperscript{185}”. In other words, Abraham’s readiness
to sacrifice his son and his laughter is motivated by his recognition that the
happiness he enjoys on account of his virtues is \textit{itself} a gift from God. Abraham’s
humble acknowledgment that he owes his good character to God is thus an act of

\textsuperscript{184} Philo 1935, §201-02. I have translated the Greek in consultation with Philo 1854.
\textsuperscript{185} Philo 1935, §203, my translation.
justice; he is prepared to repay God in kind. But God’s response is of a higher order than strict justice. His first gift to Abraham, and to all human beings, is beyond justice, and beyond mercy as well: it is the capacity of goodness itself. God’s final, twice-given gift, the life of Isaac, is a repetition of the first one. For had God required the sacrifice of Isaac, he would have confirmed his radical unintelligibility, and thus destroyed the intellectual foundations of human goodness and tranquility alike.

Philo may of course attribute too much resolve to Abraham. In particular, the contemporary Jewish philosopher Howard Wettstein may be right to suppose that Abraham decides neither to obey God, nor not to obey him, but rather “to march forward, not knowing where the path will lead, but ready to follow it, with confidence that he will know what to do when he has to.” These interpretations are nevertheless fundamentally in accord. Both grasp the peculiar combination of uncertainty and anticipation in Abraham’s cryptic remark that “God will see to the sheep for the burnt offering” (22:8), and both recognize that his greatness lies precisely in advancing toward Moriah full of hope and fear alike, prepared for whatever God may reveal of himself, and with no illusions about the risk he is running.

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186 Wettstein 2012, 171.
WORKS CITED


