

Preface

In preparing to write the introduction to this text, I walked next door to the office of my colleague and friend—a rabbi and doctor of theology. I asked him what was the first thing he thought about when I mentioned the Akedah. His response was both surprising and wonderfully revealing. He said, “I think of Abraham testing God.”

Before we both knew it, nearly an hour had passed as we discussed various interpretations and applications of the narrative. And if I did not have a class to teach we might have talked another hour. In the course of our discussion we touched on matters religious, psychological, political, and pedagogical. We viewed the text, in turn, through sociological, historical, and hermeneutic lenses. And I learned something about my colleague that made me appreciate him more as a friend and a scholar.

That is, in the end, the true beauty of this gripping story of a father and son confronted by a divine command; that it not only compels conversation, but the conversations it compels reveal the deepest aspects of who we are. Many stories oblige discussion, but how many force us to reveal something essential about who we are in the process?

My colleague and I, as one would imagine from two theologians, discussed various midrashic meditations on the text. Did the knife actually pierce the skin of Isaac a little before Abraham was compelled to stop? How far? What exactly did Abraham tell Sarah before he took her son on their infamous journey? Was he lying if he told her it was for religious training? Exactly how much influence did Christianity exert on medieval Jewish exegesis? According to my colleague, at least enough for one midrash to reference the wood carried by Isaac in terms of the “cross we all must bear.”

We also talked about the great joy each of us still finds in reading the text with students. How every lacuna in the text opens a world of interpretive possibilities. How each of the multitude of questions left open by the narrative presents a possibility to engage the students in thinking about these characters as people facing dilemmas and making choices. What did Isaac do when his father attempted to tie him up on the altar they constructed? What, if anything, did they say to each other on the way home? How did this event change their relationship? How could it not?

And, of course, we talked of Kierkegaard and *Fear and Trembling*. How did this rather short theological treatise, written in a language read by so few, come to have such a definitive impact on how we understand and discuss this singular chapter in Genesis? As my colleague pointed out, it would be an interesting experiment to see if any two scholars could discuss the Akedah narrative for more than thirty minutes without referencing Kierkegaard.

I would argue that the odds are not good. No matter the influence of Kierkegaard and his text, however, the reality is that in the end his voice (and his interpretation) is just one amidst a myriad of perspectives and arguments regarding a text ever pregnant with meaning. In our world today, Kierkegaard may exert a powerful influence over how we read Genesis 22 (as this very book will surely attest) but we are mistaken if we give that influence too much power to determine the shape and scope of our discussion about the text. This point is critical if we are to truly understand the breadth of influence that the Akedah narrative has exerted on all three Abrahamic religions and the entire Western intellectual tradition. This brief, nineteen-verse tale of a man told by God to sacrifice his “only” son has over the course of time generated discussions in every discipline of the humanities, and more than a few within the social sciences. It is a story compelling to those who are devoutly religious as well as those who hold no religious point of view whatsoever. And it is a story so simple in terms of conflict that it requires every reader to have an opinion on what it says about God, and about humans. That is, of course, the ultimate source of the influence of *Fear and Trembling* on our world today. In this text Kierkegaard offered a critical barometer in the history of the Western world for measuring the relationship between human and God. And, as a result, all subsequent measurements must be compared to his.

To be clear, though, the purpose of this particular text is not to present the full array of academic approaches to the Akedah story. Such an effort would require a volume (or volumes) much more extensive than this one. Instead, what we hope to present here is a history of critical reception. We wish to explore how our reading of the text has been affected by time. As our world has changed, how has our view of the story of Abraham and Isaac on Mt. Moriah? And, maybe just as importantly, how has *the way* we read the text changed? To that end, this book is presented in four parts. The first section explores the traditional interpretations of the Akedah story produced by the three Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Here the emphasis will be to explain the way the story was understood from within a faith perspective. In so doing, it should

become clear how the text became foundational for the three predominant religious traditions of the West.

The second section of the book then attempts to gauge how readings of the Akedah story changed in what we now term the modern era. In other words, how did the Enlightenment project initiated in the wake of the Protestant Reformation affect our view of the story? This shift in the West from a primarily theocentric to an ever-growing anthropocentric point of view produced a fundamental challenge to the faith perspectives that defined the Abrahamic traditions, and to the very possibility of a revealed theology. Thus what we find in this part of the book are approaches to the text that evidence, in rather distinct ways, the expanding influence of the self in relation to the communal in terms of acquiring existential meaning and pursuing the quest for “truth.” To this end, the impact of the Akedah story on three of the most prominent Enlightenment thinkers, Kant, Hegel, and Kierkegaard, is examined here.

The third section of the book emerges from a distinct presupposition, namely that within the West there is an emergent post-traditional perspective that has become more and more influential in terms of defining how we view those foundational narratives on which our religious traditions are grounded. Akin to the postmodern point of view, the post-traditional voice presents an attitude and viewpoint that stands outside of tradition, offering a critical perspective on the very nature and function of tradition within the world today. This part of the book will explore three of the most original voices of the twentieth century: Kafka, Levinas, and Derrida.

The final section of this book, subsequently, will attempt to draw some conclusions from the essays presented in the first three parts. The goal in this last part will not be to argue for some overriding unanimity, but to explore what the history of encounters with a specific text can tell us about who we are now in relation to who we were before. If there is anything to be learned from a project like the one we present here, it can only be achieved through comparison. The true art of this type of comparison, however, lies in discovering the tension between change and constancy. There is something of being human that has never changed. And there is the world today, ever new and remarkably different than anything that has come before. It is, therefore, the claim of this text that how we have read a narrative as seminal to the Western world as the Akedah story will not only tell us something of who we were and who we are, but also something about who we are becoming.