Grammars of Sacrifice: Futures, Subjunctives, and what would have/could have happened on Mount Moriah

Abstract

In *A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives*, published seventeen years ago (unbelievably), I looked forward to what would become a significant turn back towards the biblical texts' past futures. In this paper, I look at the density of futurity and modality in these past futures. The sacrifice of Isaac reaches beyond itself into the space of the subjunctive, the optative, the cohortative, poetry and prayer. Drawing on Nietzsche and Steiner's intuition that the uniqueness of the human lies with the grammars of the future and the promise, I revive the memory of lost Christian texts in Greek, Syriac, Coptic and Middle English that show, clearly, that the akedah does not just have a long and obsessive history, but a dense and long history of *longing*. If 'every human use of the future tense of the verb "to be" is a negation, however limited, of mortality' (so Steiner), then the fundamental structure of human grammar is *sacrificial*. In the modest sacrifices of modality, we give up and in a sense negate what *is* in order to make plural possibilities, myriad lives-- more and less substantial. As Abraham offers up one son and gets a heavenful of sons, so modality offers up or qualifies or pluralises what is, in order to make new possible lives: those that were, that could have been; and those that might yet live, or live again.

Keywords

Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, future tense, sacrifice, subjunctive, modality, Romanos Melodos, Amphilochius of Iconium, Gregory of Nyssa, Pseudo-Chyrsostom, Northampton play of Abraham and Isaac (1460).

I dwell in Possibility--
a fairer House than Prose--
More numerous of Windows--
Superior--for Doors

(Emily Dickinson)[1]

The Futures of Man

Throughout the centuries, but most fervently with the rise of a self-conscious 'humanism' when so much depended upon it, the anxious human has worked very very hard on a very long lists of the various capabilities or attributes that will finally separate him from the animal. So, we hope and hypothesise, man alone has reason; technique; laws; cities; speech; writing; cooking; kitchens; altars; gifts; tools; being-towards-death; burial; religion; commerce; or the remarkable hand which can be 'talon, hoof[s] and horn[s] at will'.[2] And *man alone has a unique relation to time and tense*. From Nietzsche's concept of man as a promising animal,[3] to (more recently) George Steiner's *Grammars of Creation*, man begins *qua* man in the future, with the future, and, in particular, the future tense. 'Animals would appear to know presentness and, one supposes, a measure of remembrance', hazards Steiner, venturing boldly into that distinctly human (?) space of the hypothesis or thesis.[4] But unique to human beings is the 'future tense' and the subjunctive or counterfactual modes that are 'kindred to' the future tense.[5] Man's uniquely human soul lies in grammar, the 'nerve structure... of ...consciousness',[6] that allows him to project a time beyond his death; or in outer space a million years hence; or alternative parallel worlds spiralling out from 'if clauses' such as 'If Caesar had not gone to the Capitol that day'.[7] In Steiner's potted evolutionary grammar, the future tense is related to those other fundamentals of man: cooking, kitchens, food storage, tools (and sacrifice?). In all *probability*, he hypothesises, the futures and subjunctives came late to human speech, maybe even as late as the end of the last ice age 'together with the "futurities" entailed by food storage' and 'the making and preservation of tools beyond immediate need'.[8] Man became himself in that first unique utterance of words like 'shall' 'will' and 'if', 'circling around an intricate field of semantic

[1] Emily Dickinson, 466, 'I dwell in Possibility', *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (ed. Ralph W. Franklin; Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999).
[2] Aristotle, *On the Parts of Animals/De partibus animalium* 687 a 1.
[3] Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* (Oxford World's Classics; trans. Douglas Smith; Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 39.
[4] George Steiner, *Grammars of Creation* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), p. 6.
[5] Steiner, *Grammars of Creation*, p. 7.
[6] Steiner, *Grammars of Creation*, p. 6, p. 293.
[7] Steiner, *Grammars of Creation*, p. 7.
[8] Steiner, *Grammars of Creation*, p. 6.

force around a hidden centre or nucleus of potentiality'.[9] In his discovery of the future—here at least as momentous as the discovery of fire—man discovered a way of sustaining life after death, and a mode of infinite regeneration and living-on through those 'supreme fictions empowered by syntax': hope and fear.[10]

I like this possibility that man alone dwells in possibility and its infinitely generative implications (all that follows). I am drawn to this 'what if'. The 'what if' pulls you in. If the human occurs in the grammatical space of alternative or future worlds, then, in the present, in the here and now, man is never uniquely himself. Man is always to come. He is to follow, as in Derrida's punning 'je suis'.[11] The idea that man's unique being lies in or with the future is one of those most fascinating myths of man's distinctiveness: the ones –like Prometheus and Epimetheus or Adam and Eve—that locate man's uniqueness not in his powers, but in the 'pit of lack': man's nakedness, sin, guilt.[12] Man alone, Steiner's origin myth seems to say, has his unique being in ambiguity, and grammatical and literary sleights of hand. To him alone lies the future, the promise (the promise that can always be broken); the subjunctive; and also (because how could this not follow?), the prophetic, the performative; and also irony (simultaneously affirming *and* denying, saying *and* not saying); and also, while we are at it, scare quotes, inverted commas, whereby something is simultaneously 'said' and not said. To him alone is the special art of lying and also literature, a 'kind of writing in which you can neither lie, tell the truth, nor make a mistake'.[13] *'Every human use of the future tense of the verb "to be" is a negation, however limited, of mortality'*, writes Steiner.[14] This fundamental structure of human grammar is *sacrificial*. In the modest sacrifices of modality, we give up and in a sense negate what *is* in order to make plural possibilities, myriad lives--more and less substantial. As Abraham offers up one son and gets a heavenful of sons, so modality offers up or qualifies or pluralises what is, in order to make new possible lives (those that were, that could have been; and those that might yet live, or live again). These alternative worlds and lives cohabit, and haunt one another. In the pedestrian everyday work of the imagination and grammar, what is, what happened, past simple, is haunted and

[9] Steiner, *Grammars of Creation*, p. 7.
[10] Steiner, *Grammars of Creation*, p. 7.
[11] For Derrida's 'je suis' see for example the famous essay 'L'animal que donc je suis' translated by David Willis as 'The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)', *Critical Inquiry* 28.2 (2002), pp. 369-418.
[12] Cf. Derrida, 'The Animal That Therefore I Am', p. 389.
[13] Terry Eagleton *After Theory* (London: Penguin, 2004), p.89.
[14] Steiner, *Grammars of Creation*, p. 7.

hollowed out by what could be, what might have been, what or who could also (yet) take place.

The self-conscious and highly developed idioms of modern scholarship lead us to denounce tricks of literature and language, *while at the same time relying on all the modest modes of modality*. As scholars, our work depends on the expansive freedoms of hypothesis, and the carefully qualified status of that which 'appears' to be, or that which 'might' (in all probability, or at least *some* probability) be the case. Where would we be—how could we breathe and do our work-- without the maybe and the perhaps and the ability to go out on a limb safely in the conditional, ambiguously committed logic of the 'what if?' or the 'if…then'? But at the same time, our training as biblical scholars leads us to imagine that we can and must separate the 'literary', the 'philosophical' and the tendentiously imaginative-speculative, from proper commentary which rests austerely (sacrificially) on the pure historical fact of the text. In an awkward separation of the professional from the confessional, we spin numerous hypotheses, while disavowing acts of writing as acts of hope, risk, decision and faith.

As a consequence, for all mountains of books that have piled up around Mount Moriah, we have repeatedly missed the central point: the fact that this is *a giant act of testimony in the subjunctive or conditional tense*. Had God wanted him to go through with it, Abraham would have gone through with it and this is the whole point. Abraham *would have* done this. The text is about a gesture *towards* an act: a motion on the way to an act--and back. Abraham does not *quite* go through with it. The knife does not go through the skin. The sacrifice is turned into a 'sacrifice', in scare quotes. The act is not completed, but nor is it negated. It hangs eternally in conflicted middle space. Blood turns into ink, but the text retains all the productive power of an actual sacrifice, and the regenerative world-creating power of the futures and conditionals that go with sacrifice. We can read this myth as a myth of grammar: a graphic tableau of Steiner's vision of the infinitely productive power of the future or conditional sense. 'Because you have "done" this' (כִּי עָשִׂיתָ אֶת־הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה)says the angelic messenger,[15] ('done' being in inverted commas, with what Abraham has 'done' shifting, in quick sleight of hand, from a blood sacrifice to a 'not-witholding' אֶת־בִּנְךָ אֶת־יְחִידֶךָ

[15] Note that the angelic messenger speaks for God in the first person.

וְלֹא חָשַׂכְתָּ), I will bless you with sons as numerous as stars and grains of sand (Gen. 22. 16). *Son sacrifice is so powerful that it can produce a whole future, a whole world, even when its powers are contained (or should that be 'infinitely unleashed'?) in the conditional perfect tense*.

The productive power of the act, combined with the retraction or commuting of the act, feels a little like irony, where something is simultaneously affirmed and negated, said and unsaid. But unlike irony, where the emphasis is on the negation or subversion, here the two sides seem equally weighted. And the equal weighting has ethical implications, in both directions. You can hear the text as saying that this is something that Abraham *would* have done (and it's very good that he would have) and at the same time that this is not something that he actually did (and it's also very good that he did not, though a different kind of good). Excruciatingly, the text is even-handedly ambiguous and ambidextrous. The 'act' is suspended between the hand of the angel and the hand of Abraham on the knife. On the one hand; and on the other hand. God commands the sacrifice; aborts the sacrifice; and praises and rewards Abraham for this willingness to sacrifice which he takes as if it were a real son sacrifice, at the same time substituting a ram. So what happens? What does God want? Where is the will of God, and where is truth, between all these hands?

One can only enter this text if one is able to enter that uniquely human space of futurity, promising, modality, and competing futures and subjunctives, which is also the space of the optative, the cohortative, and prayer. The akedah does not just have a long and obsessive history. It has a dense and long history of *longing*. A material forcefield of longing—built up of the 'if only', the 'what if', the prayer for an angel, and the invocation of alternative parallel worlds and stories--have gathered around this haunting text. This dense and conflicted space of grammar and futurity was made tangible, in all its material depth and range of possibility, in Saskia Boddeke and Peter Greenaway's powerful staging of the sacrifice in the Obedience/*Gehorsam* exhibition, at the Jewish Museum in Berlin. Room 5, 'God and the Angel', was presented as prayer room, with removed shoes lying at the entrance. It was tempting to remove one's shoes and feel one's feet sinking into the deep soft white carpet. The walls were lined with soft white feathers and black and white photographs of clasped, praying hands. A dead or sleeping swan curled into itself on the table. In the ghostly video installation playing on a second white table, an angel wrestled with Abraham in an elaborate dance of wills. From

the ceiling was suspended Xooang Chai's 'The Wings' (die Flügel): a fragile mobile of human hands caressing, touching, each other, and fanning out in both directions like a pair of angel's wings.

Fig 1: Room 5, The Angel. Saskia Boddeke and Peter Greenaway, *Gehorsam*, Jewish Museum Berlin 22.05-13.09 2015. (My photograph)

Modern readers have often felt compelled, for good modern reasons, to practice their own strange soteriology, attempting to save Abraham and the Bible by turning Genesis 22 into a straightforward teach-text. 'The true God banned child sacrifice' (completed action, past simple): a reading that relies on the dubious historical assertion that the lesson was needed because the Canaanites had (for inexplicable reasons) been sacrificing (past perfect continuous) their children all the time. This historical assertion in the past simple gets us out of ambiguity and out of the subjunctive, but at the expense of suggesting an *ironic* reading of the text. The canonical modern reading weights the original double-handed gesture as if it were ironic, as if this text were now all for and *only* for the negation or subversion of human sacrifice. When God said 'Sacrifice your son' he *really* meant the opposite. What was

commanded should never have happened. God only commanded this so that it would not happen, so that Abraham would learn that it should never happen. The command was like an ironic statement: said but not really meant.

This simple and in a very narrow sense 'critical', modern reading seems reductive and banal when compared to so-called pre-critical or pre-modern acts of interpretation, which tend to *multiply* subjunctives and conditionals and use them as safe spaces for exploring scenarios that never actually came to pass. Refusing the traditional roles that moderns assign to them, as caricatures of 'tradition', 'literalism' or 'blind belief' (to be opposed to modern criticism), ancient interpreters actively ask what it could/would/should mean to read this text faithfully or to be true to this story*, given that the text itself stops short of the faithful-literal execution of the literal command*. Delicately poised acts of writing enable complex ethical judgements. By staying with the subjunctive, pre-modern interpreters are able to articulate the negative incredulous ('This is dreadful: it is unbelievable that a man would do this') and the positive incredulous ('This is unbelievable, amazing'), and to compress both responses in the same sentence, text or performative space. The two modulations of response are very close together and so it all comes down to tone, performance, and the way you say it, or 'say' it.

Lost Futures

In good scholarly tradition, I will now demonstrate my hypothesis with examples—examples intended to make the probability of my hypothesis more concrete. examples that combine slightly more familiar ancient Jewish texts with some lost Christian texts in Greek, Syriac, Coptic and Middle English that have not (yet) made into that now rather distinct set of canonised afterlives of Genesis 22. Appropriately, Judah Goldin locates the akedah at the 'centre of the nervous system of Judaism'.[16] The choice of the *nervous* system is hardly accidental. And Jewish interpretation uses all the resources of grammar, Steiner's 'nerve centre... of ...consciousness', [17] to unravel the parallel worlds of (im)possibility that spool outwards from this text. In *Biblical Antiquities* 18.5, Pseudo-Philo's God says: 'And he

[16] Judah Goldin, 'Introduction' to Shalom Spiegel, *The Last Trial: On the Legends and Lore of the Command to Abraham to Offer Isaac as a Sacrifice* (ed. and trans. Judah Goldin; Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 1993 [1950]), pp. xi-xxx.
[17] Steiner, *Grammars of Creation*, p. 293.

brought him to be placed on the altar, but I gave him back to his father' *and/but* 'his offering was acceptable to me and on account of his blood I chose them'.[18] The angel comes—and/but the knife is stained blood red. Isaac is (and here come the inverted commas) 'slain'. The medieval Midrash Ha-Gadol claims that the ram was also called Isaac.[19] On one hand, or one hoof, Isaac lives; on the other hand, or the other hoof, Isaac dies. The suggestion also begs the question of substitution (how can a ram stand in for a man?) and creates the riddle of a ram with a proper name. This is not the same inflection of the man-animal that we find in self-consciously modern readings, such as Immanuel Kant's tortured departure from this text.[20] The midrash is not protesting, as Kant does, that by 'treating the poor boy as a sheep', Abraham is denying Isaac's fundamental human dignity or *Würde*. Nor is this like that strangest of Abraham variations, penned by Søren Kierkegaard, where Abraham feels so profoundly 'at variance with what it is to be a man' that he tells God that he may as well have been turned into a centaur, or a horse.[21] The focus is not—as it is in modern readings—on the 'beast' and the 'sovereign' or the claim that Abraham and his God are shading into the bestial (unnatural, or like the natural animal), at the moment when they place themselves outside the law, and specifically the law 'Thou shalt not kill'. In a very different spirit, pre-modern interpretation stages the interchangeability and permeability of the bodies of the Isaac and the ram, and the mother and her son. In two fifth century Syriac Christian homiletic liturgical poems or memra (the grammar of which point to *female authorship*), Abraham and Isaac bring a miraculous golden fleece of many colours down from the mountain, and Isaac gets into, or carries, the skin of the lamb/ram, as Jacob (quite literally) gets into the skin of Esau, and Joseph puts on his exceptional garment.[22] These

[18] *Gen. R*. 55.5; *Biblical Antiquities* 18.5.

[19] *Midrash ha-Gadol* on Gen. 22.13. Cf. 'Midrash Composed Under the Holy Spirit' in Jacob Mann, *The Bible as Read and Preached in the Old Synagogue* (Cincinnati: Ktav, 1940), p. 67.

[20] For Kant's revulsion at 'Abraham butchering and burning his only son like a sheep at God's command' see Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties* (trans. Mary J. Gregor; Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1979), p. 115; cf. Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* (trans. Theodore Green and Hoyt Hudson; New York: Harper and Row 1970), p. 175. I return to Kant, and his very different understanding of the possible and impossible, at the end of this essay.

[21] Søren Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers* (ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), vol 3, p. 714. 'The whole experience has made me forever at variance with what it is to be human. If it had pleased you, O Lord, to let me be changed into a horse, yet remaining human, I would be no more at variance with what it is to be a man than I have become through what has just happened'.

[22] The two poems are translated by Sebastian Brock, 'Two Syriac Verse Homilies on the Binding of Isaac', *Le Museon* 99, 1-2 (1986), pp. 61-129. Throughout I shall be following Brock and distinguishing them as Memra 1 and Memra 2. In Memra 1, Sarah describes the fleece as 'fair, luxurious and glistening...variegated with all sorts of colours', too bright and luminous to be looked on directly, unless one's eye is strong. In memra 2, the

beautifully syncretistic poems are clearly infusing/confusing the ram's coat with Joseph's *ketonet passīm* that the LXX, Vulgate and Targumim read as a multi-coloured coat, with the legend of the χρυσόμαλλον δέρας, the golden fleece. The fleece commemorates the flying *ram* sent by the true mother, Nephele, to rescue her children Phrixus and Helle from *human sacrifice*. The parallels with the sacrifice of Isaac seem irresistible, which is why it is so surprising that Sebastian Brock can only concede the 'remarkable (*but no doubt fortuitous*) parallel in the legend of the golden fleece', conceding that it is '*just conceivable*' that the author had the 'tale of the Golden Fleece' at the '*back of his mind*'.[23] The strange formulation suggests that the author could have known it, but he would not/could not(?) have allowed it in through the front gate of his conscious mind). As Isaac puts on or carries the ram's skin, and becomes the ram/lamb, so several early Christian sources imagine a poignant, or grotesque, conflation and con-fusion of Sarah and Isaac: bodies that the biblical text struggles to keep apart. In the second Syriac liturgical poem, the mother, who intuits the secret to come, groans with great feeling, and pleads:

Let me go up with you to the burnt offering and let me see my only child being sacrificed;
if you are going to bury him in the ground I will dig the hole with my own hands,
and if you are going to build up stones, I will carry them on my shoulders;
the lock of my white hairs in old age, I will provide for his bonds...

When Abraham tests her by returning alone, with accounts of Isaac's actual death, she burst into a perfect continuous optative (even as she passes the test-within-the-test):

I was wishing I was an eagle, or had the speed of a turtle dove,
so that I might go and behold that place where my only child, my beloved, was sacrificed,
that I might bring back a little of his blood to be comforted by its smell.
I had some of his hair to place somewhere inside my clothes,
and when grief overcame me I placed it over my eyes.
I had some of his clothes so that I might imagine (him), putting them in front of my eyes,
and when grief overcame me I gained relief by gazing upon them.
I wished I could see his pyre and the place where his bones were burnt,

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fleece 'does not resemble the fleece of ordinary sheep', has the appearance of all sorts of colours', and cannot be examined, except with the 'eyes of the prophets'.

[23] Brock, 'Two Syriac Verse Homilies', p. 116; my italics.

and could bring a little of his ashes and gaze on them always and be comforted...

With hands outstretched as if in prayer, or on the wing, Sarah wishes that she could fly upwards, backward in time. She longs to have been able to change time and tense and to have been with her son, at the moment of sacrifice, in the same present time and tense. Excluded from that exceptional moment, she wishes that she could have, that she could have had, the lingering smell of her son's blood inside her nostrils; his hair inside her clothes; his hair placed over her eyes, binding her eyes; and his ashes and some of his blood to keep, to look at and smell always. It is as if the poet wants to go as far in the demonstration of mother-love as Genesis 22 goes in its affirmation of Abraham's extreme love for God (even as far as the offering of the only son, the beloved one). The poetry pushes an equally extreme counter-poetics of attachment, that is similarly without limits, and that becomes too intense-necrophiliac for modern tastes.[24] Rather than one figure symbolising another and becoming another in the realm of typology, one body gets into the skin of another. As Isaac puts on the ram's fleece, the mother wants to take Isaac's body (back) into her insides. In an Easter sermon, Pseudo-Chrysostom imagines a Sarah who (had she been consulted), could have, would have and must have assaulted Abraham with a barrage of questions:

Where are you bringing him? Where are you taking him? You didn't have a vision, did you? For how would God have appeared and asked for your son whom He has given to me against all the odds?

Somewhat hilariously for the modern feminist reader, he then adds: '*She would have saught to wrap him up in her womb… Women are in such cases very emotionally involved*.'[25] Isaac, who oscillates between a young boy and a thirty-year old but who is a young child, a *talya* in the Peshitta, now becomes a foetus. Sarah wants to hide Isaac back inside her uterus, for protection, as if in a twisted take on Nicomedus' or Job's twisted understandings of being (un)born again, in strange folds of time. She wants to inhale the smell of her son, as

[24] I do not mean to say that the poetry explicitly hints at incest. However, it does at times dare a deep pleasure in the son that seems to contrast with Abraham's demonstration of love through maximal pain. And it is hard to approach the imagery of one body getting inside another, without evoking birth and sex, even when not explicitly figuring the act of sex.

[25] Pseudo-Chyrsostom, Easter Homily TITLE [check p. 133] *Patrologia Graeca* 56, pp. 541-554.

Isaac inhales the earthy smell of Esau (Gen. 27.27). She wants to keep his blood, and inhale its smell, and place his hair over her eyes. In a kontakion[26] on the sacrifice of Isaac for the fourth Sunday of Lent, the sixth century Byzantine poet Romanos Melodos (490-556) imagines the garrulous stanzas of protest that would have burst from inside of Sarah, had Abraham spoken to her—stanzas that have everything to do with her insides, and her profound umbilical attachment to her son:

The little life which I have left, I want to live it with him. After my death, if you so will, then do with him just as you have said. But don't take him from me, or grief will kill me; I beg you! We only just (barely) got him, when we no longer hoped that anything could come forth from inside of me. If we have only received him in order to lose him, will you cause me to conceive once more, will I suckle once more, and then, when life is ripe, give the fruit back to him who gave it to me?

and:

Get away from me, immediately! *I'm* taking him in my arms, this child who caused so much pain in my belly, because I want to have my fill of him. If the one who called you needs sacrifices, let him have a sheep. Isaac, my child, if I see your blood split on the ground...ah! it will kill me first, and only then kill you. Before you, your mother; after her, her little one.

and, then, to Isaac:

But it is you who will close my eyes, you who, along with your children, will return me to the bosom of my fathers. It is you who will come to cry for me on the bed where you first saw the light. I will never be your chief mourner, for having heeded the words of the executioner (torturer) that is your father.[27]

[26] The Greek word 'kontakion' (κοντάκιον) refers to the shaft of a scroll. According to tradition, Romanos swallowed a scroll, like the prophets, and his compositions were divinely inspired.

[27] All translations are from my rough working translation of the text in Romanos le Mélode, *Hymnes* (ed. José Grosdidier de Matons, *Sources Chrétiennes* 99; Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1964), 'Hymn of the Sacrifice of Abraham, for the fourth Sunday in Lent', pp. 139-165. All following citations are from this edition.

Sarah wants to drink her fill, a life-time's worth, of the son who emerged from her so tenuously, so impossibly, so lately. This woman becomes an exemplary case of Steiner's 'human' because she experiences the pain of the loss of her son as the loss of a very specific future: one in which her son will close her eyes and weep over her corpse on the very bed on which he emerged from between her legs. This Sarah is so fully, poignantly human, because she thinks in the future. Her pain comes from her umbilical attachment to his body, her desired substitution for his body at the place of sacrifice, and her imagination of the various futures, subjunctives, and alternative worlds at and after her death. In this she is a little bit like the theologians, who see the meaning of the test as lying in the apocalyptic jeopardy of all futures. Kierkegaard rightly glosses the biblical text as threatening the universal, the whole world and the whole future concealed in 'Isaac's loins',[28] while Calvin writes even more sensationally of the jeopardy of salvation and all the worlds predicated on that salvation, as Abraham *almost* cuts Isaac and so almost 'cut[s] in pieces, or cast[s] into the fire, the *charter of his salvation*', with 'nothing left for himself [and the whole world] but death and hell'.[29] But unlike them, this Sarah thinks in terms of the microcosm, the minor apocalypse: the one precious body from her body, slipping through the thin membrane that separates his (impossible) life from his (impossible) death.

Abraham, thanks be to God, only 'kills' Isaac, but try telling that to Isaac's mother, or the mother as imagined in *Leviticus Rabbah*. When Isaac comes back down the mountain, Sarah asks him "Where have you been, *my son*?'. (Note that pointed phrase, insisting that Isaac is only *her* only, a fact that early Jewish and Christian Sarahs *will* persist in mentioning.) Isaac tells her everything that has happened and then she asks for confirmation: "Woe unto *my son*! (there's that phrase again) 'Were it not for the angel you *would* already have been slaughtered?", to which Isaac answers 'Yes'. Sarah is not asking whether Isaac was killed: past perfect. That would be silly. The angel did arrive, thank God, and Sarah knows this because her son is standing there before her. She is only asking for confirmation that this would have happened, and this is what she gets. But yet, weak, fond creature that she is, this alone, in *Leviticus Rabbah*, is enough to kill her—I mean, *really* kill her. The midrash ends with her screaming six times corresponding to six blasts on the shofar at Rosh Hashanah and concludes with a nicely qualified, cautious-fictional '*They say that* she died before finishing the six

[28] Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling: Dialectical Lyric by Johannes de Silentio*, trans. Alastair Hannay (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1985), p. 88.
[29] John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses called Genesis, by John Calvin* 1. (trans. John King; Edinburgh: Edinburgh Printing Company, 1847), p. 553.

screams'.[30] Sarah's six screams -- falling away just before the end like a lament or *qinah* –offer an audible counterpoint to the already complex tones of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah. The shofar, which according to tradition comes from the ram of the akedah, is sounded in one long straight blast (tekiah); three medium wailing sounds (shevarim); and nine quick blasts in short succession (teruah). Sarah's screams are imagined as amplifying the tones of mourning and existential exposure already present in the shevarim. The akedah is heard, and performed, as a complex musical score: a confident proclamation of *zekut*, obedience, courage, devotion, safety and salvation in a strong bass masculine and a major key—against soprano or alto mourning, in a minor key. The death of Sarah amplifies the notes of the negative incredulous ('This is awful') in harmony and disharmony with the positive incredulous ('This is awesome: the whole world of Jewish redemption is founded and grounded on this').

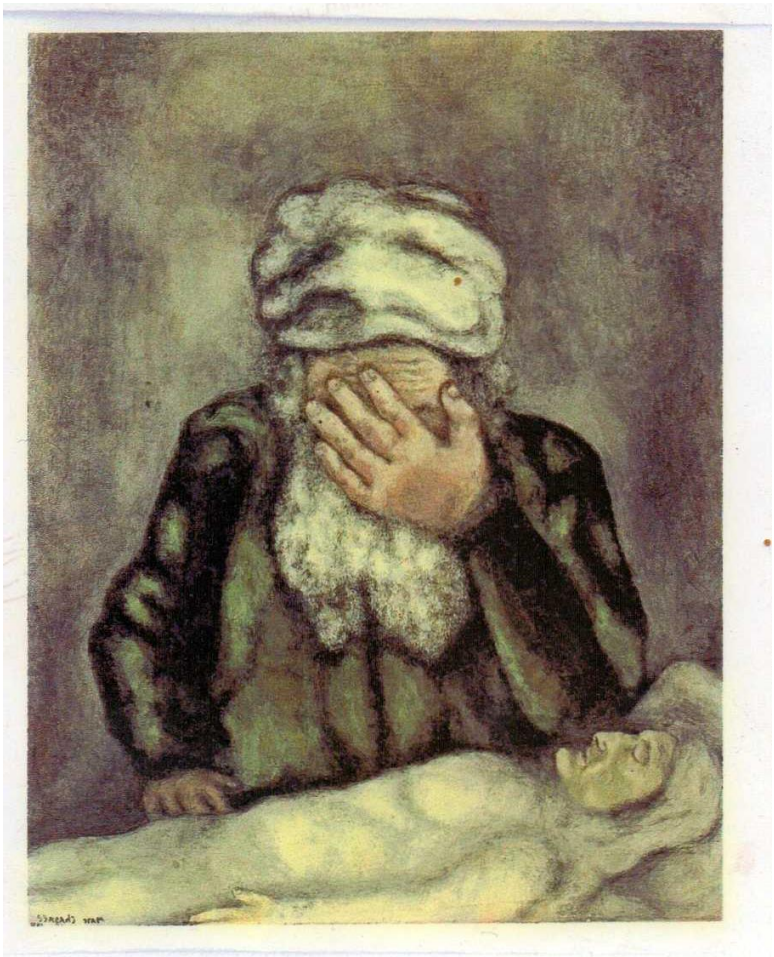
Unlike their modern counterparts, early interpreters are acutely aware of the strange triptych-like structure of Genesis chapters twenty one to twenty three. Genesis 22 is not alone. It is not the only. The text sequence makes this very clear. At the centre: the act of blood sacrifice as 'birth done better',[31] from which women are excluded. And/but on the two side panels, as if to beg the question, two stories centred on women at the two ends of life. On one side, the death and mourning of Sarah. One the other side, nursing mothers: the birth and weaning of Isaac. It is as if the famous paintings by Rembrandt had somehow got attached to his numerous sketches of mother and child –and as we will see, Sarah does regularly become that most famous mother-and-child.

Fig. 2

(if possible I would like these 3 images arranged as if in a triptych, with the sacrifice at the centre)

[30] *Leviticus Rabbah* 20.2.

[31] Nancy Jay, *Throughout Your Generations Forever: Sacrifice, Religion and Paternity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).



In Genesis 21, we also find Sarah's discomforting foreign-Egyptian-slave double and mimic: Hagar, the resident alien, the one who is sent away because her son, Ishmael, is *yizhaq-ing*, (meaning 'playing', but also 'threatening-to-become-Isaac'). Ishmael is an alternative Isaac, a future subjunctive possibility of an alternative Israel, another surrogate family of Abraham; a sign of dangerously doubled worlds. Genesis 21 is all about expelling the one who *would have* inherited *had he not* been removed, and eliminating at least one subjunctive life, one parallel world. Crucially (and we never say this—though arguably this is the text's *main* purpose), *the almost-sacrifice makes Isaac, the almost sacrificed son, the true son—while making Ishmael, the almost-son, the one who would have been, who might have been, but in the end was not*. But the story of the other son and the other mother's expulsion is told in such a way as to deliberately beg the question of the surrogate Israel, there before us, sacrificed before us and for us. Alternative worlds and subjunctive worlds are not easily eliminated. Once the word is said, once the son is born, he and his mother are out there. And these ghostly subjunctive worlds remain, not least on the pages of our scriptures, as we narrate, again and again, the story of how they might have been, but were expelled.

The first room of Boddeke and Greenaway's Obedience exhibition is filled with Sarah. The first (and only) thing the viewer encounters is a gigantic video screen of a very solid Sarah, playing with Isaac, with a ghostly Abraham-god spectre in the background. The wall caption reads: 'What do I tell Sarah my wife? Tell her you are going to study Torah'.

Fig 3: Room 1, Sarah. Saskia Boddeke and Peter Greenaway, *Gehorsam*, Jewish Museum Berlin 22.05-13.09 2015. (My photographs)

Early Christian and especially Jewish interpretation tends to read the sacrifice of Isaac in relation to the après-sacrifice, and particularly the shadow cast by chapter twenty three, beginning 'And, or *But*, Sarah died', followed by Abraham's very expensive, excessive, and perhaps very guilty burial of his wife.[32] In an ingenious gloss on the endless *waws* of biblical parataxis the 'and' connecting Genesis 22 and 23 is read as a 'therefore', which can easily *tip into and out of a 'but'*. The most important thing that Sarah does in her Jewish afterlives is to die. Sarah's death is read as collateral damage: blood sacrifice with its inverted commas, or gloves, off. According to Bereshit Rabbah and Rashi, the sense is '*Therefore* [But on the other hand] Sarah died from that very pain'. The death of Sarah adds force to the restraining hand of the angel and potentially turns it into a chastising hand. 'Don't do this

[32] I explore the relationship between Sarah's death and the excessive guilty narrative of her burial in Sherwood, 'And Sarah Died', in Sherwood (ed.) *Derrida's Bible: Reading a Page of Scripture with a Little Help from Derrida* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004),pp. 261-92.

Abraham. Naughty Abraham. And please don't try this at home'. Christian readings are less inclined to exploit Sarah's death as a direct consequence of the akedah, but they do read the sacrifice back through what happens after Abraham gets home. In a fifteenth century Sacrifice first performed in Northampton in 1460,[33] when Abraham returns home, Sarah asks what her Lord has been doing, and Abraham decides to play an ill-judged guessing game. He has been sacrificing. Can she guess what? 'A living animal?' ('some quyk best?'). Oh yes, says Abraham 'it was certainly a living animal. I may as well tell you lest you hear from someone else, for it will surely come out into the open'. [34] When Abraham confesses, in the most graphic language possible--'...God commanded me to smite off Isaac's head and burn him...until the angel came...'—Sarah is distinctly unimpressed. She cries out '*Alas where was your mynde?'* (Are you mad?) Abraham's reply--' My mynde? Vpon the goode Lord on hy!' –is a comic but insufficient answer. And/but then, amazingly, Abraham himself confesses '*Isaac hathe no harme, but in maner I was sory*'. Isaac is saved, but guilt and regret remains.

We might have expected this medieval Sarah to have been the cartoonish opposite of true piety, like the silly harpy Mrs Noah, a stock of medieval mystery cycles, or, at the other extreme, a kind of patient Griselda, another famous medieval type, praised for willingly giving up her children at her husband's command. Instead, she is rather more like the Griselda in Caryl Churchill's 1982 play *Top Girls*: a fabulous encounter between famous women from history, including Pope Joan and Griselda, in a nineteen eighties restaurant. Like that Griselda, this Sarah ultimately affirms the sovereignty of her husband and her God

[33] 'The Northampton Play of Abraham and Isaac', in Norman Davis (ed), *Non-Cycle Plays and Fragments* (London, New York, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 32-42. All following citations are from this edition. All (rough) translations to modern English are my own.

[34] Abraham: Wif, I went for to sacrifye;

but how trowe you, tell me verylye?

Sarah: Forsoþe, souereigne, I wot not I,

Parauenture som quyk best

A: Quyk? Ye forsothe, quyk it was!

As well I may tel you al the case

As another that was in the same place,

For I wot well it wol be wist...

but adds 'I do think—I do wonder—it would have been nicer if Walter hadn't had to'.[35] The things that Griselda wishes her husband 'hadn't had to' include sending an officer to take her baby daughter, then later her baby son, telling her that the children are to be killed, but actually spiriting them way in secret as part of a convoluted test. The original Griselda makes no protest beyond asking that the children receive a proper burial. The modern Griselda starts to regret. In Sarah's case, the regret and doubt sets in early, in 1460, and, even more strikingly, her husband catches and echoes this in his sorry, his regret. Feudal structures do not necessarily promote obedience. There are many tones—including wry resignation, and incomprehension—to the inevitable affirmation that, as Sarahs, Abrahams and Isaacs all proclaim in pre-modern performances of the sacrifice, that 'The sovereign must have his way'. In the Northampton play, mother, son and father all the characters enact some distance from the plot and the life that they inhabit—but Sarah and especially Isaac are the most distant. In the mountaintop crisis moment, Isaac says:

A, fader, do now what euer ye lyst,
For of my modre, I wot wel, I shal be myst.
Many a tyme haþ she me clipt and kyst,
But farewell nowe, for þat is do.

She was wont to call me hir tresoure and hir store;
But farewel now, she shal no more.
Here I shal be ded and wot neuer wherefore,
Saue þat God most haue his wille.
Fader, shal my hed of also?

Father do whatever you desire
But I know full well that my mother shall miss me
Many times she has embraced and kissed me
But farewell to all that for that is now over.
She used call me her treasure and her store
But farewell to all that—she shall say this no more
Here I shall be killed, without knowing wheretofore
Except that God's will must be fulfilled.

[35] Caryl Churchill, *Top Girls* (London: Methuen, 1981), Act 1, p. 27.

Father, will you also be chopping off my head?

Comedy creeps into the tragedy too early as Isaac asks, almost as an afterthought: 'Will you also be chopping off my head?' The line, which surely raised a smile, is deliberately out of step and out of time with the technically comic ending (the angel and the ram) which only comes much later in the text and the play. Isaac's dangerously comic question is out of sync with the dark tragedy of the sacrificial moment. It is uttered by a very un-Christ-like, poignantly human Isaac, cut off from his own fate and body. He submits, for he can do no other. But he is clear on the separation of his will and his knowing from the sovereign script that commands him (*Here I shal be ded and wot neuer wherefore/Saue þat God most haue his wille.*) And, as if as a last act on his behalf of his own will, he tries to influence Abraham by summoning the guilty memory of the excluded mother and the agony of her future, and her (futile) mourning, to at least gesture to other possible worlds, and alternative possible futures--even at this late stage.

The Enabling Frame as a Safe Space for Ethopoiia and Hypothetical Speech

Subversive possibilities and complex polyphonic tones are enabled by the four-cornered structure that holds the text securely, like a frame. These four corners are:

1. The non-negotiable sovereignty of God. Abraham is not choosing.
2. The tension between supreme, virtually divine spiritual athleticism on the part of Abraham, and the recoil of 'natural' feeling, which offsets the heroism of the trial.
3. Mystery, typology, and secrets. The potentially tragic test takes place within a fundamentally comic structure—not just because Isaac gets up from the altar, but because he is a type of the resurrection and all resurrected endings. The ultimate solidity of the frame comes from the fact that the wood of the woodpile is also the wood of the cross (and what could be more solid and secure than the wood of the cross?).
4. The ultimate security of a particular kind of future: a future that is neat, clean, and singular, and no longer haunted by multiple possibilities, or dark and dangerous subjunctives. Within a Christian framework, this story has already been made New. The creativity of possibility is now channelled into dreaming in how many miraculous myriad ways this story anticipates that single future—or to put it more accurately, how many lines can be drawn between the passion and this story, like the lines that a prism sends out a single point of light. (The Old

> Testament is the New Testament's shadow, but it is also a prism, creating numerous refraction lines from a single point of light). Crucially, this sure relation to certain singular future tense—leaves writers with a freedom to create subversive possibilities around the Old Testament text, in its past and literal sense.

Jewish and Christian traditions, which are sometimes hard to separate in some of these works, are differently secure.[36] Jewish texts are secured by the covenantal binding. In a number of midrashim the 'son binds with all his heart' and the 'father binds with all his heart'—but, from within the secure framework of this secure covenantal binding to the text known as the akedah, Isaac says 'Father, bind my hands and feet, so that I might not curse you, or alternatively kick you,' and worries that 'a [bad] word/a curse may issue from my mouth because of the violence and his dread of death'.[37] Of course, Isaac does *not* kick his father, and he never says this word: he only 'says' it, mentioning the word he fears he might rise involuntarily from him, like the verbal equivalent of that reflex 'kick'. The word that he thinks 'may' rise in his mouth never gets further than this 'may'. But if I tell you now, conditionally, what I *would* have said, *had* such and such been asked of me, the words still happen. I've said them and they are already out there, hanging in the air. Now that he's spoken the possibility and fear of them, the kick and curse are out there in that parallel world of what Isaac would have said/screamed/kicked had the sacrifice taken place.

The Christian framework provides perhaps even more security—or a different kind of security—with the addition of elements three and four. Far from being ultimately 'thwarted by typology', as medievalist Allen J. Franzen argues,[38] anti-sacrificial elements are frequently *heightened* and *enabled* by typology in pre-modern Christian texts. In the Northampton Abraham and Isaac,

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[36] For example, Romanos's Kontakion is profoundly 'Judeo-Christian', with clear borrowings from midrash, and frequent Hebraisms in his koine Greek. Born to Jewish family in either Emesa (modern-day Homs) or Damascus, and baptised as a young boy, Romanos served as Deacon in the Church of the Resurrection in Beirut and sacristan in the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. His kontakion is full of midrashic details, including binding Isaac lest he struggle, and Abraham's protest: 'Have you found something lacking in my sacrifice, so that you prevented me? Have I neglected something, in word or in deed...?'.

[37] See for example *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*, *Midrash Tanhuma*, *Pesikta Rabbati*, the Palestinian Targum and *Midrash Bereshit Rabbati* on Gen. 22.9.

[38] Allen J. Franzen, 'Tears for Abraham: The Chester Play of Abraham and Sacrifice and Antisacrifice in Works by Wilfred Owen, Benjamin Britten and Derek Jarman', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31.3 (2001), pp. 445-476. In contrast, and closer to my own argument, V.A. Kolve describes how these medieval dramas unexpectedly exploit the *'differences'* as well as the 'similarities' between 'figure and fulfilment'; Clifford Davidson argues that the potential for 'mental hurt' is not stifled by typology; while Peter Braeger contends that the plays exploit 'typology *as contrast*'. See V. A. Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966), p. 67; Clifford Davidson, 'The Sacrifice of Isaac in Medieval English Drama', *Papers on Language and Literature* 35.1 (1999) pp. 1-18; Peter Braeger, 'Typology as Contrast in the Middle English Abraham and Isaac Plays', *Essays in Medieval Studies* 2 (1985), pp. 131-149.

when Isaac first learns that he is to be the lamb—the very moment when the play is most securely anchored in the mystery— he protests:

Gentil fader, wot my modre of this
That I shal be ded?

'Does mum know about this?'. The sense is not simply 'has she been told' but 'Had she been told, she would surely not have allowed this to take place.' This sense is echoed in Abraham's truly amazing reply: 'She? Mary, son, Crist forbade!' ('She? Mary's son, Christ forbid!'). Typology collides with curse and expletive. Medieval mystery plays often ran the risk of accidental comedy in the potential clash between high Christian meaning and its incarnation in all-too-human local characters. There are very amusing stories of the humour that resulted when the virgin was played by a local woman well known for her less than virginal past. But here, the script itself embodies the double tone. The sense is 'Christ no! Good god no, I couldn't possibly tell her. Are you mad?' (This could only take place over her dead body.) But this expletive is also an expression of perfect typological correctness, for it is addressed to Isaac: the one who, according to the mystery, *is* Mary's son, Christ.

As well as amplifying Sarah's reaction après-'sacrifice', early Christian interpretation tends to worry what she would have said pre-sacrifice, had she heard of it. (And how could she not have heard of it? How could Abraham have prevented her hearing of it?) The possibilities are developed to a potentially shocking extent using the Greek rhetorical tradition of *ethopoiia*, or hypothetical speech. Gregory of Nyssa asks:

What words *would* she [Sarah] have used? (Open inverted commas) "Spare what is of your own nature, man, otherwise your life will become the subject of an unpleasant story. This is my only child, Isaac, the only one born from my womb, the only one in my arms… If you raise your sword against him, render me, unfortunate one, the service of using your sword first against me… Let us be buried together, let the same earth cover our bodies, let the same tombstone tell our disaster. Then *Sarah's eye* will not have to see how…Isaac is killed by the hands of his father."[39]

[39] From Gregory's paraphrase of an iosyllabic Greek poem wrongly attributed to Ephrem of Syria, strophes 20-95, cited in M.F.G. Parmentier, *Isaak gebonden—Jezus gekruisigd: Oudchristelijke teksten over Genesis 22* (Kampen: Uitgeverij Kok, 1996), pp. 63-64. I am grateful to Marije Altorf for her assistance with translation.

Her 'words'. In a homily that survives only in the Coptic, the fourth century Bishop, Amphilocius of Iconium (339/340 –394–403 CE) amplifies the countervoice of Sarah, while safely containing her words within the mind of Abraham:

> What shall I do? It is impossible that Sarah should know [it]. For if I inform her she…will rise up against me, weeping as if she were mad [and] saying to me (again, open the floodgate of inverted commas) "What has happened to you?' Or 'Who has brought this thought into your mind? … Where have you seen such [a thing]?' Or 'Who of your forefathers has made a sacrifice of this kind to God? Enoch pleased God, but he did not slay his son. Noah has pleased God but he did nothing like that. O man, refrain from this act. O old man, your mind has been upset, since he, who called you, wants a sheep. He surely does not want a human being, does he?"[40]

The question 'He surely does not want a human being, does he?' is also echoed by the Northampton Isaac who in another attempt to save himself asks: 'Can't your king be satisfied by any other kind of beast?'. The only thing wrong with this question is that it is out of time, tense and sense with the biblical narrative. In Genesis 22, God will certainly be satisfied by an other kind of beast--but only later. To anticipate this moment (in a 'surely', one of those subtle words used to convey something affirmed in spite of reasons to believe the opposite) is too proleptic, presumptive, even though, in the future, this is precisely what will be affirmed. Sarah and Isaac often speak or 'speak' the truth too early, and in a text where timing is everything, their statements also seem subversive: at odds with, or out of time with, the text's truth.

Sarah's speech-in-the-mind-of-Abraham fills the vast abyss of silence between Genesis 22.2 and 22.3, where, absolutely unlike the Abraham of Genesis 21.11 who has just found the female/divine[41] pressure to expel the other son Ishmael 'very distressing', this Abraham says nothing. The 'voice' of Sarah is also the voice-of-Abraham, ventriloquised as 'Sarah'. He invents her. He

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[40] Amphilochius, Abraham (ed L. van Rampay) in C. Datema (ed.), *Amphilochi Iconiensis Opera* (Corpus Christianorum; Series Graeca 3; Turnhout: Leuven Univerity Press, 1978), pp. 274-303. All following citations are from this edition.

[41] 'Feminine/divine' because the expulsion of Ishmael and Hagar is initiated by Sarah. God and then later Abraham (but perhaps never the narrator) fall in, somewhat reluctantly, with the woman's will.

projects her. She is his phantom. He imagines her protest. Where is agency? Who speaks? Where is the responsibility for this countervoice, and where is the responsibility for ignoring it, repressing it?

Isaac puts on the skin of the ram; Sarah becomes Isaac; and Abraham becomes Sarah—most queerly in Romanos Melodos's Kontakion for the fourth Sunday in Lent. Amplifying the piercing and pointed command in Genesis 22, where God specifically tells Abraham to take his *yaḥid*, his *agapētos*, and burn him as a whole offering, Romanos's God says 'Listen: Take the child of your body, the very child that you received as consolation in your old age, and for my honour cut his throat'. And then comes Abraham's several stanza long response: a response introduced by the caveat and disclaimer as if in capital letters: PLEASE NOTE THAT ABRAHAM DID NOT EVER SAY ANY OF THE WORDS THAT FOLLOW. Framing Abraham's words with 'Why did you not say...?', the narrator poet gives voice for four passionate stanzas to a negative monologue, a work of apophasis, that articulates what could be said, but that can only be said under erasure or denial. Under these very curious 'speaking' conditions, Abraham protests that God should have called him murderer, for he shall be known not as father but murderer/assassin (sphagose) for all eternity; that those who see him will take him for a madman, a lost spirit (GK ekstanta); that he who is known for his hospitality to strangers, cannot possibly be so brutally brutal to his own son; that he cannot *possibly* bind the one whose swaddling clothes he unbound, the one he nourished, or cut off his infant babbling by his father's hand. Not only does this Abraham seem to have got hold of an advance copy of *Fear and Trembling*,[42] but he appears to be turning into Sarah. There is something rather queer about these stanzas. The typical gender distribution of strength/reason and softness means that as Abraham starts to give voice (or not), to agony, his voice (or 'voice') assumes a higher pitch. Abraham turns symbolically female by the same (reverse) gender logic that leads some early female Christian martyrs to turn male. What happens next is even more surprising. We don't know how it happens (it is a Mystery, after all), but Sarah somehow *overhears* Abraham's words: the words that were never spoken, but that are must have been out there somewhere on some frequency, where Sarah could somehow catch them. (Sarah is particularly good at tuning into words. She overhears the angelic visitors at Mamre who announce the birth of her child, Isaac, to

[42] Kierkegaard, famously, probes the tension between ethics and faith, murder and sacrifice, and the horror of this act once it appears within the sphere of the social, or is seen by the neighbours. In problema 3 of Johannes de Silentio asks: 'Was it ethically defensible for Abraham to conceal his undertaking from Sarah, from Eleazar and from Isaac?', explicitly raising the question of the secret that is so important to these pre-modern texts.

Abraham, when she listens in from outside the tent [Gen. 18.10]). Sarah overhears words not meant for her (a cautionary tale for those who speak in secret, even if they speak apophatically or delete the words as soon as they are spoken). She is the witness to the strange resilience of words: words that exist and persist, even if they are negated, like Isaac's 'kick'. Just as Isaac's 'sacrifice' is able to generate a nation and a Bible, even though it never happened, Abraham's words produce a whole world of words, even though they were never spoken. In the magical logic of sacrifice and the subjunctive, Abraham's 'words' generate intimate, beautiful, defiant and deeply moving counter-assertions of the son's life:

Get away from me, immediately! *I'm* taking him in my arms, this child who caused so much pain in my belly...

Leave the child with me, old man, he is mine; when he who has called you wills it, he will let me know. He announced to *me* by his angel my son's coming into the world: he will surely let *me* know if he wants his blood. I don't entrust/commit the child to you, I don't give him to you...

You, my light; you, my dawn, the light of my eyes; you, the heavenly star that lights up my pride when I see you; oh my child, you appeared, as the belated fruit from inside the depths of me, a grape from a mature vine. No, your father will not extinguish you, he will not catch you...

This Sarah's seemingly subversive words are *true*, or will become so—but only later, when they are affirmed by the second voice and the angel's hand. They are not exactly not true, but they are not true insofar as they are proleptic, out of time with the text's tense and time. Sarah's voice is slightly off-beat, playing to a different time signature in a syncopated and slightly dissonant relationship to the official score. Her protection of Isaac, her single heavenly star (or as the first Syriac memra puts it, the 'light of [her] very self') seems to stand in opposition to the 'necessary' acts of blood sacrifice justified by the dream of creating a starburst of outcomes, nations, securities, salvations, in the future tense. Echoing across the centuries, this sixth century Syrian-Turkish-Christian-Jewish Sarah who passed through and passed between an earlier Homs, Beirut, and Istanbul/Constantinople, seems

to anticipate those contemporary war and sacrifice protestors who re-stage this story as a drama of child protection, and imagine Mama Sarah bringing Isaac back down from Mount Moriah.

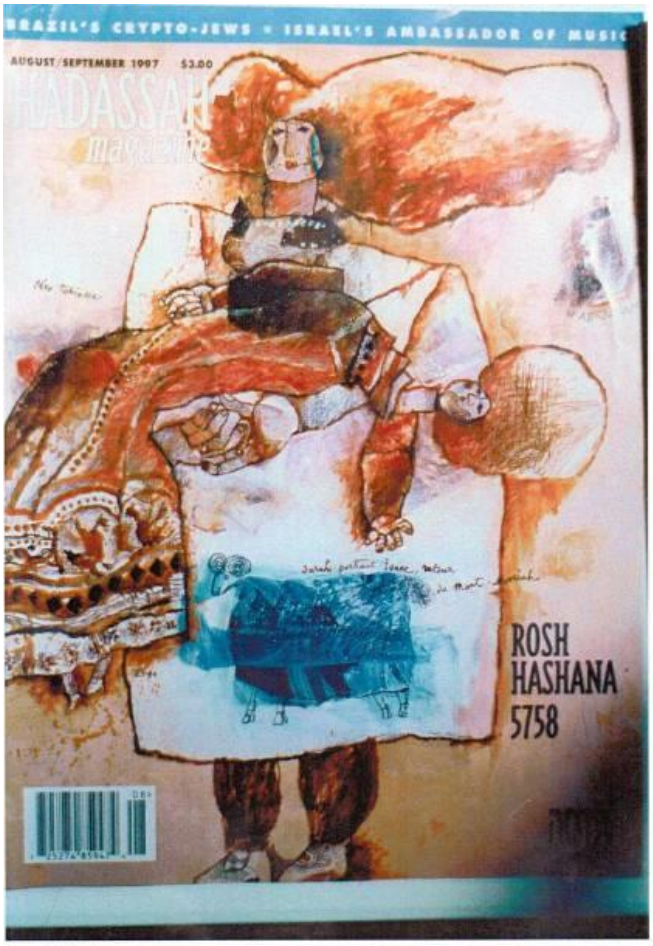

Fig 4: Sarah bringing Isaac back down from the mountain
Hadassah, Women's Zionist Organisation of America, front cover

Romanos's Lenten poem is perhaps the most perfect illustration of the security of the frame. Each stanza full of protest, spoken or spoken, concludes with a coda of affirmation of faith and the mystery: either 'For the saviour of our souls alone is good' or 'praise to you, o merciful one, you who give all good things and save our souls'. The coda of salvation allows for a dissonant *and* affirmative relationship with the content of each stanza. There is more than a hint of a wry: 'The sovereign must

have his way'—on the human plane—as in the Northampton play. But the coda of salvation means that everything is held in the strong arms of the mystery, which is why so much can be said. This poem is a game of two halves. In the second half, the first is retracted. Sarah, Abraham and all their words fall in around a new kind of orientation to the future. The passion will overcome any countervoice, however passionate. Reorganised around this call back from the New future, Sarah, and all the recalcitrant words, fall into line. Emotions are now ventriloquised in the words of the New Testament. Mutating into Mary, Sarah placidly declares herself 'blessed' and presents the fruit of her womb to God (cf. Luke 1.48). The future is no longer haunted by multiple possibilities, or dangerous subjunctives. It is neat, clean, grounded in the certainty, which Sarah now affirms, that the 'creator will not become the destroyer'.[43] When Isaac returns, this Sarah greets him with the words of Simeon and the *nunc dimittis* (Luke 2.29-32), and his safe return is no surprise. In a very docile interpretation of the relationship between Genesis 22 and 23, Sarah proclaims that now she has seen the child return safely, she can die in peace. (This is a far quieter and more quietist reading of the relationship between Genesis 22 and Sarah's death than Rashi and the midrashim.) But subjunctive words cannot be exorcised, once they have been spoken/written. The first half of the poem, the twelve stanzas of pain and protest, still remain. Someone might repeat them, in a liturgical repetition. (In fact, we are meant to repeat these words, every time we recite these Easter homilies and liturgies.) Someone—as good at overhearing as Sarah—might still hear. Exactly like the biblical figures of Hagar and Ishmael, these old, first words are overcome or ostracised, at least by implication. They are replaced by better words; a second attempt at more polished, appropriate and perfect speech. But the first words are also spoken and retained and recorded, so that we always go on hearing the words, the family, and the disaster, that would have, could have been.

The Secret (Double Sense)

Many of these early Christian texts painfully exploit the at least double sense of the secret. The low (and dubious) sense of keeping secrets is held in ironic tension with the higher secret: *raz*; *rāzā*; μυστήριον, mystērium—words that are used and exploited very explicitly. *The full-blooded affirmation of the sacrifice as a mystery allows for a sometimes shocking interrogation of the dubious ethics of keeping secrets, in the lower, more pedestrian sense.* Held within the secure frame of the higher secret, Sarah and Isaac's not-knowing and Abraham's (not to put too fine a point on it) lying

[43] This is different kind of 'God would not' to the 'God would not' of the distinctive modern reading, which makes the text into a ban on child sacrifice. But it

can be explored to a terrifying extent. In the Northampton play, Abraham is clear that he must spirit the child away 'prevely' ('secretly'), lest Sarah oppose them. In the first Syriac memra (Memra 1) 'On Abraham and his Types' Abraham sets off with speed, and/but Sarah (still) sees them, and is 'seized with terror':

Sarah saw (them) and terror seized her, and she spoke as follows:
'Where are you taking *my only begotten*? Where is the child of my vows off to?
Reveal to me the secret of your intention, and show me the journey on which you are both going'

In Memra 2, clearly a close kin of the first homily, Sarah asks:

'Why are you sharpening your knife? Who do you intend to slaughter with it?
This secret today—why have you hidden it from me?'

and Abraham replies simply, 'This secret today women cannot be aware of'. Mount Moriah is no place for girls. The secret is a hard, steely, masculine place. I'm reminded of Søren Kierkegaard's use of Abraham's sacrifice as a type for a hard Christianity that is emphatically not for 'effeminate creatures and eunuchs'[44] or for couch potato, emasculated clergy who peruse the story of Abraham from their armchairs while puffing at their pipes and stretching out their legs.[45] (For Kierkegaard, Mount Moriah becomes a kind of Everest—one that tries the cerebral and spiritual muscles to the limit, and sets in motion massive 'reflection possibilities', a mere tenth of which would be 'sufficient to disturb a feminine head'.[46]) But as in *Fear and Trembling*, gender disequilibrium is not sufficient to dispose of with the ethical dilemmas of the secret. Sarah's protests are her exclusion are justified—and explored at discomforting length. Why is Abraham splitting their oneness, demands the Sarah of the first memra. Before this, in everything— hospitality to 'supernal beings' or the hardship of exile--they have been 'as one person with a single love'.[47] Problematically

[44] Kierkegaard, *Repetition: An Essay in Experimental Psychology* (trans. Walter Lowrie; New York: Harper, 1964) p. 102.
[45] Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 58.
[46] Søren Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way* (ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 270.
[47] Memra 1, Brock, 'Two Syriac Verse Homilies on the Binding of Isaac'.
Sarah's elaborates further on their oneness, thus:

expanding his biblical lies and half-truths, Abraham tells Sarah that he is simply going to slaughter a sheep—as he so often does. Her rejoinder is shocking:

If it is a sheep you are wanting to see to, then be off and see to the sheep and return;
leave the child behind lest something happen, and untimely death meet him,
for I am being *unjustly deprived* of the single son to whom I have given birth
Let not the eye of his mother be darkened, seeing that after one hundred years light has shone out for me.
You are so drunk with the love of God—who is your God and my God—
and if He so bids you concerning the child, you would kill him without hesitation.[48]

This Sarah does not believe her Abraham. She seems to fear the intense fervour for which later (modern) times would invent the term 'fanaticism'. At the moment when the angel intervenes, the poem makes the point that Abraham had to be restrained by the angel because his 'heart was on fire, burning to slaughter his son', and will praise the fact that 'the old man is fervent (*rtaḥ*) for the slaughter' and his love for God is greatly enflamed (*etgawzal*)'.[49] At least one other Syriac source (a Sogitha by Jacob of Serugh) describes Abraham as being 'drunk on the wine that flowed abundantly to him from Golgotha'.[50] But in this Sarah's all-too-human words, the patriarch's drinking seems to slip out of the typological-redemptive into the metaphorical-pejorative. Abraham is as if drunk. He has lost his senses—leading to irresponsibilization, or perhaps in deliberately provocative contemporary language 'radicalisation'. He would do anything for God. And there are many tones to the affirmation that 'Abraham would do anything for God'.

And it seems that he would even lie for God. In the very stripped down skeletal text of Genesis 22, where hardly anything is said, Abraham is twice called on to say too much. He is very deliberately forced to say things to Isaac, and to his young men that are not true, but that are not not true. I and the lad will "go yonder"; God will supply the "ram". Like dramatic irony, Abraham's two awkward speeches highlight different levels of knowing and unknowing and imply inverted commas

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You went off and fetched a calf, while I kneaded unleavened bread:
we were as one person with a single love when we received (those) supernal beings,
when they rested and gave us rest—and the child came as the result of their blessings.

[48] Memra 1. The second memra repeats the lines: 'You are so drunk with the love of God—who is your God and my God—and if He so bids you concerning the child, you would kill him without hesitation'—but suggests that Sarah is now giving them a more positive inflection. This second Sarah intuits the sacrifice to come, and wants to participate.

[49] See Brock, 'Two Syriac Verse Homilies on the Binding of Isaac', note to Memra 1, line 6, p. 112.

[50] See Brock, 'Two Syriac Verse Homilies on the Binding of Isaac', note to Memra 1, 6, p. 112

of euphemism, or belief (or both—it doesn't say). Abraham's parting words to Sarah in the first Syriac memre are far more disturbing, even as they are held in the assurance of the secret in the higher sense:

It is a lamb that I wish to slaughter, and give delight to my beloved son;
then I and your beloved shall enjoy another Lamb.
And I shall take with me two young men so that you will not worry over Isaac,
(thinking) that I am handing him over to slaughter and inviting him to be a whole-offering.

Typology and untruth, split, together. (The disjunction is like the strange conflation of typology and blasphemy/swearing in the Northampton Abraham's pious-expletive, on top of the mountain: 'She? Mary, son, Crist forbade!'). The statement that the young men are being taken as Isaac's bodyguards, or Sarah's insurance, pushes this Abraham out far further on the limb of untruth than the Abraham of Genesis 22. Abraham becomes more like Jacob, or one of the other tricksters in Genesis. Like the old Isaac who will later be deceived by his son Jacob, Sarah is being made blind. She is duped. The memre very explicitly exploits the double sense of the secret. It frequently uses the key word *rāzā* (mystery), used in Syriac for any religious symbol (especially Old Testament 'types'), for sacramental rites and, in the plural, for the Eucharist.[51] But, the poem also makes a point of the fact that Sarah—and Isaac—are being kept out of the secret in the lower case, more pedestrian sense. Developing a point that the Hebrew text hints at when it describes father and son as going *yachdav*, 'together', the poet develops the difference and dissonance in this togetherness:

They went and came to the mountain where God rested
and Abraham began to build the pyre that he had in mind,
while Isaac was bringing along wood on his shoulders to Abraham;
he was offering up a burnt offering without being aware of his actions.
The child rejoices in his work, the old man rejoices in his task.
Abraham built up the pyre while Isaac brought along the wood.
The old man (was fervent) for the killing of Isaac, Isaac to the lamb that would come;
old man and child, both readily became workers for God,

[51] Robert Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*: *A Study in Early Syriac Tradition* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006) p. 21.

though no agreement over what they were doing existed in the heart of each singly,
and though their labours were not equal and their intentions were not in agreement—
for the two of them, without being aware, were entirely different (in their expectations)...

The split in the secret is equally disturbing when Sarahs *believe* what their Abrahams so frequently tell them: that they are taking Isaac to sacrifice a sheep. The hasty exit by father and son is typically surrounded by ironic exhortations from Sarah. Reflecting her chilly north European, rather than middle Eastern context, the Northampton Sarah exhorts Abraham to make sure that Isaac doesn't fall in the mud or catch a chill in the wind:

Than, sithe ye wol haue forthe *my* childe,
Goode, loke that his horse be not too wilde,
And sirs, wayte on hym, that he be not defilde
With neither cley nor fen.

Since 'defilde' means 'violated' or 'destroyed', her anxiety unknowingly anticipates a fate far worse than falling in a little mud. Writing from the more balmy climate of Iconium or modern-day Konya in Turkey, Amphilochius imagines Sarah exhorting Abraham to look after the 'young child' with his 'delicate limbs'—a statement that ironically says much more than is intended, just as Abraham (quite deliberately) says much less. Believing her husband when he tells her that they are going to sacrifice a sheep as an act of worship, this Sarah gives deeply ironic detailed instructions to her son on how to *pray*:

Listen to me! Remember her who has borne you for God will hear you. May the Lord be for you a helper and a force, when you will go with your father, my son and the light of my eyes! Incline your ear a little to me and listen to my words, so that *I may teach you the way to pray to God*. …First of all, bend your knees before him, and throw yourself down with your face to the ground. Place your hands behind your back, like someone bound, until the Good God looks down at you from heaven. Then utter a cry, like that of a sheep led to the slaughter, so that the Compassionate One above may hear you and send his mercy back with you, saying to your father, 'O patriarch, I have thus kept silence over the bloodless offering of your son'. And now, greet your mother and give her a kiss on the mouth. Go with your father and return also with him in peace. For I trust that God will guide you

and bring the two of you back again to me. He who gave you to me as a gift in hope, and has now called you in hope, will bring you safe back to me.[52]

Sarah is kept out of the secret. But, exactly like Old Testament words and stories in general--in fact as a kind of type of Old Testament words and stories in general-- her words say so much more than they know or intend. Sarah's unknowing words pre-figure the sacrifice that she knows not. Sarah's instructions become ironically proleptic and prophetic as we (the audience, but emphatically not Sarah), get to see the 'old man' binding Isaac hand and foot, bending his trunk backwards, pushing his hands behind him, and grasping the hair of his head—in a literalisation of Sarah's metaphorical parallel world, her 'as if'. The oscillation between Sarah's as if and Abraham's very literal sacrifice seems to deliberately evoke the tension between sacrifice and prayer that we find in the Hebrew Bible and the development of Jewish and Christian practise, where literal sacrifice co-exists with the transformation of sacrifice into ethics, liturgy, and prayer as bloodless sacrifice, the 'cows of the lips' (Hos. 14.2). Kept of the secret, Sarah understands sacrifice as prayer. In Abraham's literal act her idea of prayer is reverse-engineered. But Sarah's misunderstanding anticipates what really happens in Genesis 22, when sacrifice is transmuted into 'doing this' and 'not witholding', and blood sacrifice is transmuted into a script for/of a sacrifice. Abraham's act, and Sarah's unwitting metaphorisation of the act, are both true statements about the truth of sacrifice in this double-handed text.

The double sense of the secret allows for a richly productive paradox. Because this must happen, words of critique and protest (from Sarah, and Abraham, and Sarah-in-the-mind-of-Abraham) cannot be spoken. In fact Gregory of Nyssa and Pseudo-Chrysostom specifically make the point that, *had Sarah spoken, the mystery might not have been fulfilled*. But at the same time this statement ascribes extraordinary power to Sarah's 'speech'. If they could have potentially aborted the sacrifice, and prevented the fulfilment of the mystery, then what kind of words could these (must these) have been? *Sarah's putative words are put in the extraordinary position of having, by their very force, to extinguish the possibility of their ever really being.* Because Sarah's protest must be forever 'moot', it can therefore be anything but mute (m.u.t.e). Because they never are, these hypothetical words can be maximally persuasive. *And redemptive*.

[52] Amphilochius, Abraham (ed L. van Rampay) in C. Datema (ed.), *Amphilochi Iconiensis Opera* (Corpus Christianorum; Series Graeca 3; Turnhout: Leuven Univerity Press, 1978), pp. 274-303.

When Sarah becomes Mary, the typological framework saves the sacrifice, but sometimes in risky and unexpected ways. Mary is the co-redemptrix. She is understood to have consented voluntarily to the crucifixion, and to have fully identified with the son in his sufferings. And/but she is conceived as the most devoted and tender of all mothers, who could not but be out of step and time her son's journey to Jerusalem. This leads to beautifully complex syncopated liturgies, and theologies, and deep dramas of pathos, where the mother resists, even as she mirrors, her son's sacrifice unto death.[53] There are all kinds of cadences and tones to the figure of Mary. In Romanos's Kontakion, Sarah becomes Mary the submissive mother who presents the fruit of her womb in a parallel sacrifice. In Amphilocius's homily, Sarah becomes the intercessor for Isaac and humanity. At the moment of reprieve, God declares that he is sparing Isaac in honour of Abraham's obedience *and* because Sarah 'has not ceased to beseech me about him' with intercessory prayer. Similarly, in one the first Syriac memra, Sarah becomes the 'Mother of All Mercies'. The two hands become gendered: on the one hand compassion, *raḥmē* (Sarah-Mary); on the other justice, *kēnūtā* (Abraham): right hand and left hand. No hand dominates. Both attributes (or *middōt*), both hands, are weighted as equally divine.[54] More extremely, Sarah can become the mater dolorosa, the Sarah of the pieta, with redemptive power lying in her suffering and pain. In one of the two Syriac memra, Sarah is a Clytemestra figure, justly raging at her Agamemnon, and also very specifically, the mater dolorosa. She swoons and almost dies over what her God-drunk husband may have accomplished. And the homily ends: '*Because of the suffering of his mother, in your compassion, give us what we ask*'. Here, the text of Genesis 22 is hinged up against the triptych panels of Genesis 21, the mother and-child, and Genesis 23, the death of the mother. The equation between Sarah and the Virgin allows those panels to be developed as a nativity and a pieta. The sacrifice is now surrounded, and in a sense subverted by, the nativity and the pieta. The second voice tells Abraham:

> Because you have offered up your son as a whole offering, I too will offer up Mine to the cross
> if you have not spared your child, neither will I spare Mine.
> You have performed as a human an action that is too hard for humans;
> I, then, as God (will perform) an action even harder than yours.
> Anyone who slays his own son is greater than both angels and men

[53] For Mary's poetic non-compliance in medieval literature, see Rosemary Woolf, *Art and Doctrine*, p. 71.
[54] As Brock notes, there is a clear relation to the Jewish concepts of the divinity balanced between the two middōt: the middat ha-raḥamim and the middat ha-dīn. See Brock, 'Two Syriac Verse Homilies', p. 114.

Since you have loved me to the full, so My love for you is unbounded.

The binding is affirmed as a superhuman 'wonder'. It leads typologically *and causally* to the unleashing of God's 'unbounded' love. And/but the second voice that aborts the sacrifice is described as the voice of *Justice*, to whom the hosts have made supplication on behalf of Isaac (while Compassion flies to earth on the wings of prayer, making sure that Isaac comes to no harm). And/but Sarah almost dies when Isaac tells her what might have happened. 'Pangs grip her', she 'doubles up in fright', and she collapses, at death's very door. And/but Sarah declares to Isaac: 'The fingers which fashioned you in my womb/have now delivered you from the knife'. The 'And/buts' mount. And/but the final prayer concentrates salvation not on superhuman sacrifice, but the 'grievous pain' of the mother. '*Because of the suffering of his mother, in your compassion, give us what we ask*'.

The original text of Genesis 22 is delicately and precariously balanced between two words and two hands: 'Offer your son as a burnt offering' and/but 'Do not lay your hand upon the lad'. The two forces can be perfectly balanced in acts of interpretation, though this is exquisitely difficult to pull off perfectly in practice. The scales tend to tip in one direction or the other. In the sphere of poetry and liturgy—not doctrine or argument—the ambiguity and empathy can go either way. Sarah can be the force of natural compassion, outweighed and outranked by the robust performance of Abraham. This is arguably how the scales tip in Gregory and Pseudo-Chrystostom, and in Romanos and Amphilochius, *although Sarah's hypothetical speeches are never eradicated*. The second Syriac memra arguably tips the other way. Abraham is right—and/but he is also guilty, love-drunk—and it is the force of life, faith, intercession, represented by 'Sarah', that ultimately prevails, and that *should* prevail. There is a temptation, and perhaps not a bad one, to come to rest, and to find peace, in Sarah's embodiment of anguish and mercy and the transmutation of sacrifice into prayer.

Nachleben; Afterlives of Futures

So what happened in the futures of these futures? To cut a very long story short, the world of possibility was contracted and simplified when Genesis 22 became a printed and widely distributed text: the 'word of God', to be discussed in pamphlets, manifestos--and footnotes. The question of probability, possibility, and truth is first and foremost a media question. There is a world of difference between one almost lost handwritten manuscript of a fifteenth century local drama, or Calvin's *Commentaries*, or Kant's *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*. Both the Reformation and the Enlightenment took all these subjunctive

possibilities and possible worlds, and (in different ways) pared them down to a single decision between worlds.

The pre-modern texts all acknowledge and exploit the fact that Abraham's test was very very difficult. It is the ultimate trial for athlete Abraham, who goes out to the extreme edge of possibility, the place where only the supreme heroes can go. The condensed subjunctive of the Reformation introduced a new modality of possibility. The text was no longer simply very very difficult. It was impossible. The difficult and the impossible only appear to be close.

Ramping up the crisis of the future to fever pitch, Calvin and Luther gathered up all the subjunctive possibilities and pared them down to one sensational drama of what would have, could have happened, had there not been salvation by faith. The text became the equivalent of Hollywood disaster movie: *The Command Against the Promise*, narrated by Luther and Calvin as if in the sonorous voice-overs of Don Fontaine. The whole drama was focussed on the text *qua* text, as constructions of grammar that in this case do not and could never make earthly sense. Because God's *command* to sacrifice Isaac was absolutely opposed to his own *promise* of the future in Isaac, it was a paradox, an oxymoron, a catachresis, '*a counter assault of the word*' against itself.[55] What was being thrown into the fire was not Isaac (Isaac was now entirely incidental), but the word of God represented metonymically by this highly self-conscious text. As Calvin put it in the strap line for *The Command Against the Promise*, or *Abraham, the movie*, Abraham was being commanded to 'cut in pieces, or cast into the fire, the *charter of his salvation*' leaving 'nothing' for himself and the whole world 'death and hell'.[56] What would have and could have happened is nothing less total apocalypse: the burning up of all worlds, all futures, all life, all afterlives, all resurrection: a loss of all salvation which depended entirely on the Word and the 'the quasi-sacramental notion of the efficacy of the text'.[57] The only thing that saves the Reformation subject from this horror is not the angel (who is just as incidental as Isaac), but the faith of Abraham mirrored in the faith of the reader, who learns to read according to the 'grammar of the Holy

[55] Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses called Genesis, by John Calvin* 1. (trans. John King; Edinburgh: Edinburgh Printing Company, 1847), pp. 561-562.
[56] Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses*, p. 553.

[57] J. Samuel Preus, 'Secularizing Divination: Spiritual Biography and the Invention of the Novel', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 59.3 (1991) pp. 441-466 (446); Catharine Randall Coats, *Subverting the System: D'Aubigné and Calvinism* (Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies, vol. XIV; Kirksville, Missouri: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1990), p. 20.

Spirit'.[58] Thus the total that would have happened is avoided through a reading lesson: learning to read in faith.

In the Reformation drama of the impossible, Genesis 22 started on a new and inexorable path to a narrowed down future: a future about decisions, and acts of reading as acts of faith. It was only a matter of time before this text became the scriptural battleground for a showdown between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, or deism—better understood as the supreme belief in morality, and the absolute equivalence between morality and the divine. For the 'deists', the very command to sacrifice the son turned the God of the text into, in Kant's words, an 'illusion' (*Tauschung*): an impossibility.[59] Genesis 22 became a test case for the deist *krisis*, and the sacrificial-critical choice 'between life and death'. Newly confining the course of the probable, the deist Thomas Morgan pronounced in 1737: 'It *may be probable enough*, that either Abraham had such a belief or conceit, or that Moses mistook this case; but that God, in this, or any other case, should dissolve the law of nature and make it a man's duty…to act contrary to all the principles and passions or the human constitution, is *absolutely incredible*'.[60] In *footnotes* written in the 1790's, Kant was emphatically clear that Abraham '*should have* replied to this supposedly divine voice: "That I ought not to kill my good son is quite certain. But that you, an apparition, are God—of that I am not certain, and never could be, not even if this voice rings down to me from (visible) heaven"'. [61] The range of the future, the subjunctive, was now far narrower and also more sensational than it was able to be in Romanos, Amphilochius, or the Syriac memre. Many of the ancient texts imagine Abraham worrying about how the neighbours will see him. The Enlightenment readings, in contrast, present authors who shape 'truth' according to the dangers of this text for society, and who are aware of the social persona of the author—the public owner of the written

[58] See Dennis Bielfeldt, 'Luther, Metaphor and Theological Language', *Modern Theology* 6.2 (1990), pp. 121-35. Bielfeldt argues that the grammar of heaven is articulated through the clash of earthly categories. The grammar of the Holy Spirit does not obey the normative rules of grammar, which is why it can break through the grammar of life, which dictates that we are born and, at the end of the paragraph or sentence, die.
[59] I am here combining Kant's comments on the sacrifice in Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties/Der Streit der Fakultäten* (trans. Mary J. Gregor; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979 [1798]), p. 115 and Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* (trans. with introduction by Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson; Chicago and London: Open Court Publishing, 1934 [1793]), p. 174.
[60] Thomas Morgan, *The Moral Philosopher in a Dialogue between Philalethes, a Christian Deist, and Theophanes, a Christian Jew,* Vol. 3 (London: 1740) pp. 133-134.
[61] See Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties* p. 115 and Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, p. 174.

texts--and his relation to truth and plausibility[62] (a word that reveals the social scene of truth through its origins in Latin *plausibilis*: 'acceptable', 'deserving applause'.)

Organised around neologisms like credibility, or plausibility, the probable futures and alternative worlds around Abraham's sacrifice contracted. It is at precisely this point, in the early eighteenth century, that we find the first appearances of the ironic reading (when God said 'Sacrifice your son' he *really* meant the opposite[63]), or textual critical solutions designed to 'render the story *reasonable* and *credible*'.[64] Under the helpful auspices of 'the Enlightenment Bible',[65] the biblical scholar could concentrate questions of plausibility into micro-studies of geography, philology and source criticism, and use standard discourses of the more or less probable to ignore the massive elephant in the classroom: the old question of the incredible, outrageous, divine command. The subjunctive fell out of fashion in a regime of truth ruled by the indicative: the statement of objective facts. Spurious and tendentious *futures* were lost—and far from accidentally—in a turn to historical criticism, centred on scholars' devoted concentration on the past.[66] It is far from accidental that biblical scholarship became *so far removed* from poetry, literature, and drama. Henceforth the scholar use use modest nods to the modal (e.g. 'it could certainly be argued that') to modify a fairly confident indicative, with his whole idiom moving as far as possible away from subjunctives and optatives, and all their connotations of wished for futures, opinions and desires. Strange lost futures could now only return in the retrieval of lost premodern texts – always in danger of simply ending up in that sideroom of biblical scholarship, the one reserved for all the whimsies and incidental sideshows of what is now regularly called 'reception history'. Alternative audacious scenarios of what could have, might have happened—or speculations about 'What must God have said to Abraham...What could and

[62] 'Plausible' in the sense of 'having the appearance of truth' first appeared in English in the 1560s, derived from Latin plausibilis 'deserving applause, acceptable'. 'Implausible' first appears in the 1690's. The terms 'credible' and 'incredible' were first used in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries.

[63] 'God gave the command, not with an intent that it should be obeyed, but that he might take an occasion from it, to shew to Abraham, and to all his posterity, the unfitness of all human sacrifices' (Thomas Chubb 'Treatise XVIII: A Supplement to the Prevoius Question', in *A Collection of Tracts on Various Subjects* [1730], pp. 221-39).

[64] Thomas Morgan, *The Moral Philosopher,* Vol. 2 (London, 1740), p. 128.

[65] See Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

[66] If previous reflections on this question I have argued that we could and should risk the hypothesis that ancient interpreters were freer to carry out riskier more adventurous readings because they were *free* from those large acts of representation by which moderns identify as believers or non-believer (or carefully calibrated gradations of these categories) and publicly sign and take responsibility for printed readings published in their name. See xxxx.

should he have told him?', [67] were left to those we think of as 'philosophers' and 'writers', in the realm of Literature: figures like Kierkegaard, Kafka, and Derrida.

Such strange epiphnaies from the past might help us to reflect on the strange confinements of our discipline, where the scholar uses modest nods to the modal (e.g. 'it could certainly be argued that') to modify the indicative, but his whole idiom suggests that he wants to move as far possible away from subjunctives and optatives, and all their connotations of wished for futures, opinions and desires. It might also help us to subvert accepted stories of we *could* risk the hypothesis that ancient interpreters were freer to carry out riskier more adventurous readings because they were *free* from those large acts of representation by which moderns identify as believers or non-believers—or carefully calibrated gradations of these categories-- and publicly sign and take responsibility for printed readings published in their name.

'Moderns' might well be surprised by these pious-impious, believing-unbelieving responses, that read as if they were written by an impossible persona: someone that we can only awkwardly imagine as an impossible split personality Richard-Dawkins/Archbishop, or feminist fused with the most conservative member of the Church. Inverting modernity's self-serving narrative of the rise of freedom, If we were in a Charles-Taylor-type frame of mind, and were trying to hazard one of those descriptions of the difference between the pre-modern and the modern, we could certainly conclude that 'Belief isn't quite the same thing in 1500 and 2000', [68] or between 500 and 2000. Such a conclusion would be both possible and plausible. But it would be more helpful if we were to move the debate out of the macro realm of the history of ideas, and dawning individualities, and into the more focussed domain of media and grammar and performativity and the changing social construction of truth. Many of the ancient texts imagine Abraham worrying about how the neighbours will see him. The Enlightenment readings, in contrast, present authors who shape 'truth' according to the

[67] Jacques Derrida, 'Above all no journalists!', in Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber (eds.), Religion and Media (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 56-93 (56).
[68] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 13.

dangers of this text for society and government, and who are acutely aware of the social persona of the author and his relation to truth and plausibility (a word that reveals the social scene of truth through its origins in Latin *plausibilis*: 'acceptable', 'deserving applause'.) The world of possibility was contracted, or simplified, when Genesis 22 became a self-consciously printed text: the word of God; a text to be discussed in pamphlets, manifestos—and footnotes; and a self-conscious apparition of truth, capable of substantiation, or invalidation, plausibility or implausibility, applause or lack of applause. There is a world of difference between one almost lost handwritten manuscript of a fifteenth century local drama, or Calvin's *Commentaries*, or Kant's *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*. The former is far less self-consciously responsible; far less centred on religion and the questions and futures of Christianity. Shocking 'religious' meanings emerge by accident. The play is less concentrated; more diffuse. As well as reversing the traditional description of the passage from the pre-modern to the modern as a passage from axiomatic belief to choice (the pre-modern readers are freer in their textual choices, and they can make conflicting textual decisions, simultaneously, because they are not publicly making macro-decisions of avowal or rejection), we could also explore the myriad possibilities that can exist when, in some eternal indicative, the text is not a 'text' and it simply is. Readings were freer, and less sonorous, when they did not have to give any thought to the question: Could this text be? Should this text be?. They an effective, and affective performance. But they are not thinking in terms of plausibility, or applause.

So what happened in the futures of these futures? In my (necessarily) ridiculously speeded up, fast-forward history of these futures, first come the Reformers who ramped up the crisis of the future to fever pitch. Calvin and Luther took all the subjunctive possibilities and pared them down to one probable and inevitable cataclysm. The text became a Hollywood disaster movie: The Command Against the Promise, narrated by Luther and Calvin as if in the sonorous voice-overs of Don Fontaine. Because God's command to sacrifice Isaac was absolutely opposed to the promise of the future in Isaac, it was a paradox, an oxymoron, a catachresis, '*a counter assault of the word*' against itself.[69] What was being thrown into the fire was not Isaac, but the word of God, represented metonymically by Genesis 22. The

[69] Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses called Genesis, by John Calvin* 1. (trans. John King; Edinburgh: Edinburgh Printing Company, 1847), pp. 561-562.

command to kill the son threatened nothing less than the annihilation of the Bible, and the whole world that was supported and predicated by it. As Calvin put it in the strap line for Genesis 22, the movie, Abraham was being commanded to 'cut in pieces, or cast into the fire, the *charter of his salvation*' leaving 'nothing' for himself and the whole world 'death and hell'.[70]

For Calvin and Luther, the test/text threatened the elimination of all futures, all afterlives, and all grammatical *and* salvific sense. The resolution did not depend on the angel. The angel could not eliminate the divine/grammatical contradiction. His arrival only made it worse. Thus the angel became superfluous to salvation. Resolution could only come with the believing individual and his ability to learn acts of reading as an act of faith. The sacrifice became a drama of reading, a test of very very advanced reading skills: the hardest text/test. The 'plain contradiction' could only be overcome if the reader-believer could enter what Dennis Bielfeldt calls the 'grammar of the Holy Spirit': the grammar of heaven as a clash of earthly categories.[71] The grammar of the Holy Spirit does not obey the normative rules of grammar, which is why it can break through the grammar of life, which dictates that we are born and, at the end of the paragraph or sentence, die. The sacrifice becomes metaphorical: a sacrifice of the reader. By dying on the altar of oxymoron—and persisting in his belief in the divine word-- the reader receives the living spirit of salvation and sense. Thus Genesis 22 became a fundamental primer for the special grammar of the holy spirit, and the emblem of a Reformation semiotic, in which everything depended on 'the quasi-sacramental notion of the efficacy of the text'.[72] Qua *text*, and very explicitly so, Genesis 22 embodied a semiotic in which the textual, verbal, grammatical, exegetical was everything—but everything depended on accessing the living spirit that animated and exceeded the printed letter of the text.

The slogan that the Reformers appended to this text was *one stark subjunctive*. Had the Protestant reader not learned to read and to properly negotiate the textual life of the spirit, the text would have languished as a stark contradiction: a loss of salvation and a loss of

[70] Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses*, p. 553.

[71] See Dennis Bielfeldt, 'Luther, Metaphor and Theological Language', *Modern Theology* 6.2 (1990), pp. 121-35. Bielfeldt argues that the grammar of heaven is articulated through the clash of earthly categories.

[72] J. Samuel Preus, 'Secularizing Divination: Spiritual Biography and the Invention of the Novel', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 59.3 (1991) pp. 441-466 (446); Catharine Randall Coats, *Subverting the System: D'Aubigné and Calvinism* (Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies, vol. XIV; Kirksville, Missouri: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1990), p. 20.

sense. And so Genesis 22 was set up to become one of the first texts to fall in the Enlightenment drama of the *necessary sacrifice* of biblical texts and biblical faith.

The pre-modern texts that we explored in this paper all acknowledge, and exploit the fact that Abraham's text was very very very difficult. It is the ultimate trial for athlete Abraham, who goes out to the extreme edge of possibility, the place where only the supreme heroes can go. The condensed subjunctive of the Reformation introduces a new modality of possibility. The text is no longer simply very very difficult. It is impossible (unless, and this is caveat that can never simply come of our volition, one has received the gift/grace of faith and knows how to read.) The difficult and the impossible only appear to be close. They are in fact very different. The drama of impossibility, that the Reformers love so much, opens up the possibility that the text simply cannot, should not, be.

And thus the text was set on an inexorable path to a particular kind of narrowed down future. Newly directing the course of the probable, Thomas Morgan pronounced in 1737: 'It *may be probable enough*, that either Abraham had such a belief or conceit, or that Moses mistook this case; but that God, in this, or any other case, should dissolve the law of nature and make it a man's duty…to act contrary to all the principles and passions or the human constitution, is *absolutely incredible*'.[73] In *footnotes* written in the 1790's, Kant was emphatically clear that Abraham '*should have* replied to this supposedly divine voice: "That I ought not to kill my good son is quite certain. But that you, an apparition, are God—of that I am not certain, and never can be, not even if this voice rings down to me from (visible) heaven"'. The command to sacrifice the son turned the God of the text into an 'illusion' (*Tauschung*) : an impossibility.[74] Genesis 22 became a test case of the heroic Enlightenment, a test case for the deist *krisis*, and the sacrificial-critical choice 'between life and death'.[75]

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[73] Thomas Morgan, *The Moral Philosopher in a Dialogue between Philalethes, a Christian Deist, and Theophanes, a Christian Jew,* Vol. 3 (London: 1740) pp. 133-134.

[74] I am here combining Kant's comments on the sacrifice in Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties/Der Streit der Fakultäten* (trans. Mary J. Gregor; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979 [1798]), p. 115 and Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* (trans. with introduction by Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson; Chicago and London: Open Court Publishing, 1934 [1793]), p. 174.

[75] Talal Asad, 'Is critique secular? Historical notes on the idea of secular criticism', *The Immanent Frame* 25/1/2008. See http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2008/01/25/historical-notes-on-the-idea-of-secular-criticism accessed 9 October 2009. See also the roundtable 'Is Critique Secular? (Berkeley, October 2009) http://townsendcenter.berkeley.edu/swg_crittheory.shtml, recently published as Talal Asad, Wendy Brown,

The text could not, should not be read or accepted, for to accept it would provoke unbelief in morality and divinity. The range of the future, the subjunctive, was now far narrower and also more sensational than it was able to be in Romanos, Amphilochius, or the Syriac memre. An Enlightenment epistemology introduced new futures for the possible and the probable, orientated towards safety, the social scene of truth, and organised around relative neologisms like credibility, or plausibility.[76]

Projected from within this contracted form of possibility, there were now only two options: an either-or, a limited binary future. Either the text should be, must be, rejected, or it must be made otherwise, through the ingenuity of hypothesis. The first response—the rejection of the text—would run the risk of making the reader stand out publicly as heterodox, or deist, even as he saw himself as a progenitor of public safety and morality ('moral belief' as Kant put it). By taking the second option, the author-reader could present himself as Christian, devoted to the work of saving and ameliorating the text. But both paths started from exactly the same premise and the same conditions of possibility and impossibility—conditions unknown to pre-modern readers. The heterodox and the orthodox readers both started from exactly the same presupposition that it was quite simply impossible, incredible, that God would have issued this command. The limited range of hypotheses for restoring the text set in the eighteenth century, are still in use today. First came the hypothesis, first proposed in the 1730's, that 'God gave the command, not with an intent that it should be obeyed, but that he might take an occasion from it, to shew to Abraham, and to all his posterity, the unfitness of all human sacrifices'.[77] Thus, when God said 'Sacrifice your son' he *really* meant the opposite, so the divine command was rather like an irony. An alternative remedy, also very familiar to us, and first proposed in the 1740's, suggested that 'in the short imperfect account of the affair that we have transmitted to us, there may have been some original circumstances relating to it left out, which might have cleared up the whole matter, and rendered the story very *reasonable* and *credible*'

Judith Butler and Saba Mahmood (eds.), *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury and Free Speech* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

[76] 'Plausible' in the sense of 'having the appearance of truth' first appeared in English in the 1560s, derived from Latin plausibilis 'deserving applause, acceptable'. Implausible first appears in the 1690's. 'Credible' and 'incredible' come from the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century.

[77] Thomas Chubb 'Treatise XVIII:A Supplement to the Prevoius Question', in *A Collection of Tracts on Various Subjects* (1730), pp. 221-39.

(1740).[78] Textual criticism could allow access to a lost (more reasonable and credible) original text. With these possible solutions, we can feel the challenge to credibility being subsumed into a more pedestrian university discourse of plausibility and 'reason'. Gradually, under the helpful auspices of 'the Enlightenment Bible',[79] the biblical scholar could concentrate questions of plausibility in micro-studies of geography, philology and source criticism, and use standard discourses of the more or less probable to ignore the massive elephant in the classroom: the old (now lost) question of the incredible, outrageous, divine command. The subjunctive fell out of fashion in a regime of truth ruled by the indicative: the statement of objective facts. Knowing that he does not speak in the idiom of incontestable truth, the scholar uses modest nods to the modal (e.g. 'it could certainly be argued that') to modify the indicative, but his whole idiom suggests that he wants to move as far possible away from subjunctives and optatives, and all their connotations of wished for futures, opinions and desires. It is far from accidental that biblical scholarship became *so far removed* from poetry, literature, and drama. The result is that when such genres are graciously readmitted—or at least allowed to occupy a side room--under the rubric of reception history, such studies of past futures, or afterlives, appear as quaint, superfluous, unscholarly. Spurious and tendentious *futures* were lost—very deliberately—in a turn to historical criticism, centred on scholars' devoted concentration on the past.

Wishing, longing, praying, 'critiquing' but not from the vantage point of the self-consciously critical, protesting, speaking alternative scenarios back to God and Abraham, responding ironically and comically to scripture... 'Moderns' might well be surprised by these pious-impious, believing-unbelieving responses, that read as if they were written by an impossible persona: someone that we can only awkwardly imagine as an impossible split personality Richard-Dawkins/Archbishop, or feminist fused with the most conservative member of the Church. Inverting modernity's self-serving narrative of the rise of freedom, we *could* risk the hypothesis that ancient interpreters were freer to carry out riskier more adventurous readings because they were *free* from those large acts of representation by which moderns identify as believers or non-believers—or carefully calibrated gradations of these categories-- and publicly sign and take responsibility for printed readings published in

[78] Thomas Morgan, *The Moral Philosopher,* Vol. 2 (London, 1740), p. 128.
[79] See Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

their name. If we were in a Charles-Taylor-type frame of mind, and were trying to hazard one of those descriptions of the difference between the pre-modern and the modern, we could certainly conclude that 'Belief isn't quite the same thing in 1500 and 2000',[80] or between 500 and 2000. Such a conclusion would be both possible and plausible. But it would be more helpful if we were to move the debate out of the macro realm of the history of ideas, and dawning individualities, and into the more focussed domain of media and grammar and performativity and the changing social construction of truth. Many of the ancient texts imagine Abraham worrying about how the neighbours will see him. The Enlightenment readings, in contrast, present authors who shape 'truth' according to the dangers of this text for society, and who are aware of the social persona of the author and his relation to truth and plausibility (a word that reveals the social scene of truth through its origins in Latin plausibilis 'acceptable', 'deserving applause'.) The world of possibility was contracted, or simplified, when Genesis 22 became a self-consciously printed text: the word of God; a text to be discussed in pamphlets, manifestos—and footnotes; and a self-conscious apparition of truth, capable of substantiation, or invalidation, plausibility or implausibility, applause or lack of applause. There is a world of difference between one almost lost handwritten manuscript of a fifteenth century local drama, or Calvin's *Commentaries*, or Kant's *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*. The former is far less self-consciously responsible; far less centred on religion and the questions and futures of Christianity. Shocking 'religious' meanings emerge by accident. The play is less concentrated; more diffuse. As well as reversing the traditional description of the passage from the pre-modern to the modern as a passage from axiomatic belief to choice (the pre-modern readers are freer in their textual choices, and they can make conflicting textual decisions, simultaneously, because they are not publicly making macro-decisions of avowal or rejection), we could also explore the myriad possibilities that can exist when, in some eternal indicative, the text is not a 'text' and it simply is. Readings were freer, and less sonorous, when they did not have to give any thought to the question: Could this text be? Should this text be?. They an effective, and affective performance. But they are not thinking in terms of plausibility, or applause.

[80] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 13.

subjunctive in English is used to form sentences that do not describe known objective facts. These include statements about one's state of mind, such as opinion, belief, purpose, intention, or desire. It contrasts with the indicative mood, which is used for statements of fact, such as *He **speaks** English.*The question of truth We could conclude, to adapt Charles Taylor, that 'Belief isn't quite the same thing in 1500 and 2000', or '500 and 2000'. That would be both possible and plausible. But we would be able to escape the clichés if we pushed the truisms out into statements of grammar, and media. Everything changes when Genesis 22 becomes very self-consciously a printed text, the word of God—a text to be discussed in pamphlets, manifestos—and footnotes. There is a world of difference between one almost lost handwritten manuscript of a medieval mystery play, and Calvin's xxx or Kant's xxx. That the dichotomous: plausible, implausible; credulity, incredulity—and also safe and dangerous. The grammar are of security. Narrower and more sensational: could this text be, should this text be?

Ads the Reformers, the single crisis—the command and the promise—the concentrated into a single between the plausible the implausible, and the possible and the impossible. Could this text be? Should this text be?

To invert modernity's self-serving narrative of the rise of freedom, ancient interpreters could risk because they were *free* from those large acts of macro-choosing by which moderns identify as "religious" or "non-religious", and perform those identities in communally established degrees of distance from and identification with the biblical texts.[81]

Narrower and more sensational. They are either-or. they are belief or unbelief.

Enlightenment epistemology—whole new way of ordering the probable, the possible, the plausible, the impossible, belief.

Ads the Reformers, the single crisis—the command and the promise—the concentrated into a single between the plausible the implausible, and the possible and the impossible. Could this text be? Should this text be?

[81] —small acts of micro-choosing. talking about a position that goes beyond the liberal or fundamentalist—importance)

The media Reformation famously replaced the 'medieval sacramental system' with a word system: the Bible, and 'the quasi-sacramental notion of the efficacy of the text'.[82] For the first time, the crisis of the sacrifice became *explicitly* grammatical, textual: a matter of language and sense. Calvin and Luther took all the subjunctive possibilities of the double-handed text of the sacrifice and pared them down to one potentially cataclysmic Hollywood scale showdown or megaclash: The Command Versus the Promise (like Aliens versus xxx). God's command to sacrifice Isaac was in absolute opposition to the promise of the future in Isaac. Therefore it was an elimination of all futures, all afterlives—in the grammatical *and* salvific sense. The command to sacrifice Isaac was a paradox, an oxymoron, a catachresis, '*a counter assault of the word*' against itself.[83] Luther took pleasure (and pain) in turning the 'plain contradiction' between promise and command into a hyperventillating chain of oxymorons or catechreses that introduced a profound nominalist insecurity in scripture. The clash between the command and the promise threatened a spiralling chain of terrifying oxymorons: the foreign God, the alien work of God, death as God's toy, the Isaac who lives and who is ashes, and sacrifice as God's lie or God's game.[84] In Calvin's typically sensational formulation, Abraham was being commanded to 'cut in pieces, or cast into the fire, the *charter of his salvation* and…have nothing left for himself [and the whole world] but death and hell'.[85] What was being thrown into the fire is not Isaac, but the Bible, represented metonymically in this piece of biblical text, understood qua text. The fact that it had been commuted into a text did not make the sacrifice of Isaac any easier for the Reformers. Far from it. It was exquisitely difficult. That is why it was so important. Its very existence in the canon seemed to threaten the very existential status of the Bible, and the whole world and salvation that depended on acts of reading as acts of faith.

In the Reformation reading, the sacrifice became a drama of reading, a test of very advanced reading skills. The crisis was not resolved, but it pointed us to what Dennis Bielfeldt calls the

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[82] J. Samuel Preus, 'Secularizing Divination: Spiritual Biography and the Invention of the Novel', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 59.3 (1991) pp. 441-466 (446); Catharine Randall Coats, *Subverting the System: D'Aubigné and Calvinism* (Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies, vol. XIV; Kirksville, Missouri: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1990), p. 20.

[83] Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses called Genesis, by John Calvin* 1. (trans. John King; Edinburgh: Edinburgh Printing Company, 1847), pp. 561-562.

[84] Luther, *Lectures on Genesis*, pp. 115, 116, 131.

[85] Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses*, p. 553.

'grammar of the Holy Spirit': the grammar of heaven as a clash of earthly categories.[86] The grammar of the Holy Spirit does not obey the normative rules of grammar and language, which is why it can break through the grammar of life, which dictates that we are born and (at the end of the paragraph or sentence) die. The text teaches us that the structure of spiritual scriptural grammar is sacrificial. Only when we go, in faith, in madness through the apparent crisis of sense, the crisis of reading, and die on the altar of oxymoron, catachresis, can we receive life and salvation and sense.

Text, a scripture, a grammar—albeit a text that is the whole world—that the 'text', isolated. The perfect break with Abraham as the emblem of the loss of faith, and separation between the Bible and truth, true religion transcends and remainders, parochialises, localises, the text. That the not being thrown to the flames—(Calvin only the scripture int he flames because he knows he will get it out again)—but the footnotes, pamphlets-- Thomas Morgan concluded in 1737: 'It may be probable enough, that either Abraham had such a belief or conceit, or that Moses mistook this case; but that God, in this, or any other case, should dissolve the law of nature and make it a man's duty…to act contrary to all the principles and passions or the human constitution, is absolutely incredible'.[87] Probable and what is impossible. Enlightenment epistemology, the subjunctives to all the probable and the possible (impossible) Important transition being made here difficult and the impossible. Abraham's trial has always been very very very difficult. The texts we have looked out ultimate trial in Abraham's ten trials: the hardest of tests, on the extreme edge of possibility, where only the heroes can go. Now it is impossible. The most difficult and the impossible only appear to be close. They are in fact very different. Now the sacrifice cannot be. Enlightenment epistemology—whole new way of ordering the probable, the possible, the plausible, the impossible, belief. Ads the Reformers, the single crisis—the command and the promise—the concentrated into a single between the plausible the implausible, and the possible and the impossible. Could this text be? Should this text be?

[86] See Dennis Bielfeldt, 'Luther, Metaphor and Theological Language', *Modern Theology* 6.2 (1990), pp. 121-35. Bielfeldt argues that the grammar of heaven is articulated through the clash of earthly categories.
[87] Morgan, *The Moral Philosopher,* Vol. 3, pp. 133-134.

Where we have been, the Reformation and the Elightenment, ever since. The history of reading, the Occasional Strange exceptions: Fear and Trembling, where Lutheran reading—fundamental crisis, single crisis (murder and ethics)—alongside the return of the older of, the Syriac, in the Attunement section. That the whether the probable and improbable—and a historicity, while eschewing the morality, ethics. That the—the Thomas Chubb, in the 1730, As to the case of Abraham, I think, with submission, that the commanded was in itself morally unfit, and that God gave the command, not with an intent that it should be obeyed, but that he might take an occasion from it, to shew to Abraham, and to all his posterity, the unfitness of all human sacrifices—the ironic that the. Tuned out of the myriad of

In a series of tracts written between 1725 and 1734, Thomas Chubb maintains: 'No matter if angels, dreams, visions, voices from heaven' affirmed it, 'the moral unfitness of the action…was a stronger reason against the divinity of the command, than any of those extraordinary ways in which that command was conveyed to [Abraham] could possibly be for it'. The early Enlightenment was concerned about the miracle—as the exception to empirical reality—but was at least as much concerned with the parallel problem of the exception to morality. Far more important than the conflict between religion and science was the clash of pieties: the conflict between revealed religion and what Kant and his contemporaries called moral belief and moral unbelief. As Chubb put it, for there to be moral belief, and credulity in religion, the essence of true religion must be 'the same in all ages, in all countries, and in all worlds, (if I may so speak)' and all planets and true religion 'must govern any life on Mars'.[88] Applying inter-cultural and inter-planetary principles of moral fitness, Thomas Morgan concluded in 1737: 'It may be probable enough, that either Abraham had such a belief or conceit, or that Moses mistook this case; but that God, in this, or any other case, should dissolve the law of nature and make it a man's duty…to act contrary to all the principles and passions or the human constitution, is absolutely incredible'.[89] Absolutely incredible. Begging moral incredulity. We need to distinguish here between the difficult and the impossible. Abraham's trial has always been very very very difficult. In Jewish tradition, it is the ultimate trial in Abraham's ten trials: the hardest of

[88] Chubb, 'The Previous Question with regard to Religion', p. 217.
[89] Morgan, *The Moral Philosopher,* Vol. 3, pp. 133-134.

tests, on the extreme edge of possibility, where only the heroes can go. Now it is impossible. The most difficult and the impossible only appear to be close. They are in fact very different. Now the sacrifice cannot be. It simply cannot be done. Or as Morgan puts it, it is 'not ...capable of proof by any historical evidence or testimony', since proof of moral unfitness, or moral impossibility, is 'vastly superior and prior to any historical proof'.[90] Even if an archaeologist were to unearth an indubitably authentic scrap of crumbling parchment signed by God himself, confessing that he had indeed uttered the command of Genesis 22.2 exactly as reported by Moses, such evidence would have to be discounted.

Increasingly, I realise that these old readings were not accidentally lost to us. They become illegible, inaudible. It was hard (maybe impossible) for modern biblical scholars to tune into the depth and range of possibility, modality, and competing futures, or to write about the space of the optative, the cohortative, and prayer. Modern scholarly professional language represents a significant paring down, a tuning out. As I've argued elsewhere, the pre-Enlightenment condition of being Jewish or being Christian before all choice enabled more active and audacious acts of interpretation, in acts of writing that were *free* of later segregations between 'literature', 'poetry', 'liturgy', 'drama' and 'theology' or 'Biblical Studies'.

The traditional self-serving scholarship of 'maturation' into genuine criticism, may be true on the plane of history, but it is certainly not true on the plane of ethics, or indeed freedom. To invert modernity's self-serving narrative of the rise of freedom, ancient interpreters could risk because they were *free* from those large acts of macro-choosing by which moderns identify as "religious" or "non-religious", and perform those identities in communally established degrees of distance from and identification with the biblical texts.[91]

So what happened next?

They could therefore risk readings that came perilously close to Kant's critique of Abraham-the-butcher.[92] They could be acutely 'critical' in the loose sense because they were not relating the story

[90] Morgan, *The Moral Philosopher in a Dialogue between Philalethes, a Christian Deist, and Theophanes, a Christian Jew*; Volume 2: *Being a Farther Vindication of Moral Truth and Reason* (London, 1739), p. 126; italics ours.

[91] —small acts of micro-choosing. talking about a position that goes beyond the liberal or fundamentalist—importance)

[92] For Kant's revulsion at 'Abraham butchering and burning his only son like a sheep at God's command' see Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties* (trans. Mary J. Gregor; Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska

of Abraham's sacrifice to the modern/deist *krisis*, where Abraham's sacrifice becomes a test case of critique, and freedom, and the modern sacrificial-critical choice 'between life and death'.[93] Because these pre-modern readings knew nothing of the epoch-defining watersheds of the critical or the modern, they could conjure creative sacrificial transformations between dream and nightmare, destruction and resurrection —entirely separate from the sensational modern *krisis* of taking a knife of separation to the sacred text.

The Reformation reading made the Genesis 22 textual, but the existence

This reading will return in the Fear and Trembling, where Lutheran reading—fundamental crisis, single crisis—alongside the return of the older of, the Syriac, in the Attunement section.

Everything depended on acts of reading scripture, which is hearing promises, are acts of faith. The reading of Dennis Bielfeldt's the 'grammar of the Holy Spirit'—the grammar of heaven as a clash of earthly categories;[94] catechresis, paradox, that the scripture is not a that can be recited, second hand, but
And should there be a conflict in scripture, this would lead to a complete annihilation, of the world, salvation and sense. The is grammatical, verbal, scriptural. What is being being thrown into the fire is not so much Isaac but the Bilbe, and the grammar of Christian salvation and sense. Luther takes the 'plain contradiction' between promise and command and turns it into a hyperventillating chain of oxymorons or catechreses—that militate against the idea of scripture as sum of catechistical, constatitve statements, that can be learnt by heart, or second hand. Abraham would have—and that we --such as the foreign God, the alien work of

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Press, 1979), p. 115; cf. Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* (trans. Theodore Green and Hoyt Hudson; New York: Harper and Row 1970), p. 175. For the anxious insomnia that this text/text provokes in Kierkegaard/Johannes de Silentio see the epigraph to this chapter.

[93] Talal Asad, 'Is critique secular? Historical notes on the idea of secular criticism', *The Immanent Frame* 25/1/2008. See http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2008/01/25/historical-notes-on-the-idea-of-secular-criticism accessed 9 October 2009. See also the roundtable 'Is Critique Secular? (Berkeley, October 2009) http://townsendcenter.berkeley.edu/swg_crittheory.shtml, recently published as Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler and Saba Mahmood (eds.), *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury and Free Speech* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

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God, death as God's toy, God's sport, the Isaac who lives and who is ashes, and sacrifice as God's lie or God's game.[95] The Word of God would have been lost. Sense would have been lost. But what is from the paradox is a normative rules of grammar and language, just as surely as it can break through the grammar of life, which dictates that we are born and (at the end of the paragraph or sentence) die. That homology of structure of language, the structure of sacrifice—that the constantly aware of what have could have been lost—not just the son, but meaning, and existential peace with scripture, life and world itself. Apocalypse, that so much Isaac but *salvation in the form of a text*, Abraham would have—could have—in the act of sacrifice-- 'cut in pieces, or cast into the fire, the *charter of his salvation* and…have nothing left for himself [and the whole world] but death and hell'.[96]

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[95] Luther, *Lectures on Genesis*, pp. 115, 116, 131.

[96] Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses*, p. 553.

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That the Reformation, Renaissance, the turns anthropocentric—a human salvific drama—and potentially tragic.

This break with Abraham first appeared in the writings of the lesser known English deists—such as Thomas Chubb and Thomas Morgan—in the 1720s and 1730s—but it became famous when Kant took it up and linked to the concept of Enlightenment, and the distinctly modern question of 'what is this now? What is unique about this now from which I write?[101] In a series of tracts written between 1725 and 1734, Thomas Chubb maintains: 'No matter if angels, dreams, visions, voices from heaven' affirmed it, 'the moral unfitness of the action…was a stronger reason against the divinity of the command, than any of those extraordinary ways in which that command was conveyed to [Abraham] could possibly be for it'. The early Enlightenment was concerned about the miracle—as the exception to empirical reality—but was at least as much concerned with the parallel problem of the exception to morality. Far more important than the conflict between religion and science was the clash of pieties: the conflict between revealed religion and what Kant and his contemporaries called moral belief and moral unbelief. As Chubb put it, for there to be moral belief, and credulity in religion, the essence of true religion must be 'the same in all

[99] Luther, *Lectures on Genesis*, pp. 115, 116, 131.

[100] Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses*, p. 553.

[101] decisive *'What is happening today? What is happening now? What is this "now" from which we all live and which is the site, the point [from which] I am writing?'*

ages, in all countries, and in all worlds, (if I may so speak)' and all planets and true religion 'must govern any life on Mars'.[102] Applying inter-cultural and inter-planetary principles of moral fitness, Thomas Morgan concluded in 1737: 'It may be probable enough, that either Abraham had such a belief or conceit, or that Moses mistook this case; but that God, in this, or any other case, should dissolve the law of nature and make it a man's duty…to act contrary to all the principles and passions or the human constitution, is absolutely incredible'.[103] Absolutely incredible. Begging moral incredulity. We need to distinguish here between the difficult and the impossible. Abraham's trial has always been very very very difficult. In Jewish tradition, it is the ultimate trial in Abraham's ten trials: the hardest of tests, on the extreme edge of possibility, where only the heroes can go. Now it is impossible. The most difficult and the impossible only appear to be close. They are in fact very different. Now the sacrifice cannot be. It simply cannot be done. Or as Morgan puts it, it is 'not ...capable of proof by any historical evidence or testimony', since proof of moral unfitness, or moral impossibility, is 'vastly superior and prior to any historical proof'.[104] Even if an archaeologist were to unearth an indubitably authentic scrap of crumbling parchment signed by God himself, confessing that he had indeed uttered the command of Genesis 22.2 exactly as reported by Moses, such evidence would have to be discounted.

Increasingly, I realise that these old readings were not accidentally lost to us. They become illegible, inaudible. It was hard (maybe impossible) for modern biblical scholars to tune into the depth and range of possibility, modality, and competing futures, or to write about the space of the optative, the cohortative, and prayer. Modern scholarly professional language represents a significant paring down, a tuning out. As I've argued elsewhere, the pre-Enlightenment condition of being Jewish or being Christian before all choice enabled more active and audacious acts of interpretation, in acts of writing that were *free* of later segregations between 'literature', 'poetry', 'liturgy', 'drama' and 'theology' or 'Biblical Studies'.

[102] Chubb, 'The Previous Question with regard to Religion', p. 217.
[103] Morgan, *The Moral Philosopher,* Vol. 3, pp. 133-134.
[104] Morgan, *The Moral Philosopher in a Dialogue between Philalethes, a Christian Deist, and Theophanes, a Christian Jew*; Volume 2: *Being a Farther Vindication of Moral Truth and Reason* (London, 1739), p. 126; italics ours.

The traditional self-serving scholarship of 'maturation' into genuine criticism, may be true on the plane of history, but it is certainly not true on the plane of ethics, or indeed freedom. To invert modernity's self-serving narrative of the rise of freedom, ancient interpreters could risk because they were *free* from those large acts of macro-choosing by which moderns identify as "religious" or "non-religious", and perform those identities in communally established degrees of distance from and identification with the biblical texts.[105]

So what happened next?

They could therefore risk readings that came perilously close to Kant's critique of Abraham-the-butcher.[106] They could be acutely 'critical' in the loose sense because they were not relating the story of Abraham's sacrifice to the modern/deist *krisis*, where Abraham's sacrifice becomes a test case of critique, and freedom, and the modern sacrificial-critical choice 'between life and death'.[107] Because these pre-modern readings knew nothing of the epoch-defining watersheds of the critical or the modern, they could conjure creative sacrificial transformations between dream and nightmare, destruction and resurrection —entirely separate from the sensational modern *krisis* of taking a knife of separation to the sacred text.

What happens with the futures of the subjunctives? To tell the futures of the subjunctives far too quickly ...the grammar of the akedah takes on a particular in the Reformation—a where the becomes explicitly word focussed 'word system' self-consciously replaces the 'medieval sacramental system' leading to a *performative* sense of scripture or the '*the quasi-sacramental notion of the efficacy of the text*'.[108][109] Dennis Bielfeldt's the 'grammar of the

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[105] —small acts of micro-choosing. talking about a position that goes beyond the liberal or fundamentalist—importance)

[106] For Kant's revulsion at 'Abraham butchering and burning his only son like a sheep at God's command' see Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties* (trans. Mary J. Gregor; Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1979), p. 115; cf. Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* (trans. Theodore Green and Hoyt Hudson; New York: Harper and Row 1970), p. 175. For the anxious insomnia that this text/text provokes in Kierkegaard/Johannes de Silentio see the epigraph to this chapter.

[107] Talal Asad, 'Is critique secular? Historical notes on the idea of secular criticism', *The Immanent Frame* 25/1/2008. See http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2008/01/25/historical-notes-on-the-idea-of-secular-criticism accessed 9 October 2009. See also the roundtable 'Is Critique Secular? (Berkeley, October 2009) http://townsendcenter.berkeley.edu/swg_crittheory.shtml, recently published as Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler and Saba Mahmood (eds.), *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury and Free Speech* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

[108] J. Samuel Preus, 'Secularizing Divination: Spiritual Biography and the Invention of the Novel', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 59.3 (1991) pp. 441-466 (446); Catharine Randall Coats, *Subverting the System: D'Aubigné and Calvinism* (Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies, vol. XIV; Kirksville, Missouri: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1990), p. 20.

[109] See J.L. Austin, 'Performative Utterances' in *Philosophical Papers* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 233-252, and *How to Do Things with Words: The William James Lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1955* (ed. J.O. Urmson and Marina Sbsina ; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975). For acts of writing as acts of faith—

Holy Spirit'—the grammar of heaven as a clash of earthly categories;[110] catechresis, paradox, that the scripture is not a that can be recited, second hand, but *acts of reading scripture, which is hearing promises, are acts of faith*. That a of sacrifice and sacrificial grammar—where all sense is offered up, madness, and at the last minute, . This drama is what *would have happened*—but in a different sense. The conflict Abraham almost *dies of contradiction*. This is no mere conceit. If the very structure of soteriology depends on the grammar of scripture, then a fundamental breach in that grammar means death. And the conflict between the 'command' and the 'promise' sets up a fundamental conflict in scripture that would have complete annihilation, of the world, of salvation, of sense. The is grammatical, verbal, scriptural. God '*shaking the faith which [Abraham] had placed in His word, by a counter assault of the word itself*'.[111] What is being being thrown into the fire is not so much Isaac but the Bilbe, and the grammar of Christian salvation and sense. Luther takes the 'plain contradiction' between promise and command and turns it into a hyperventillating chain of oxymorons or catechreses—that militate against the idea of scripture as sum of catechistical, constatitve statements, that can be learnt by heart, or second hand. Abraham would have—and that we --such as the foreign God, the alien work of God, death as God's toy, God's sport, the Isaac who lives and who is ashes, and sacrifice as God's lie or God's game.[112] The Word of God would have been lost. Sense would have been lost. But what is from the paradox is a normative rules of grammar and language, just as surely as it can break through the grammar of life, which dictates that we are born and (at the end of the paragraph or sentence) die. That homology of structure of language, the structure of sacrifice—that the constantly aware of what have could have been lost—not just the son, but meaning, and existential peace with scripture, life and world itself. Apocalypse, that so much Isaac but *salvation in the form of a text*, Abraham would have—could have—in the act of sacrifice-- 'cut in pieces, or cast into the fire, the *charter of his salvation* and…have nothing left for himself [and the whole world] but death and hell'.[113]

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a concept based on Jacques Derrida's extension of Austin's speech acts to all acts of writing/reading—see Yvonne Sherwood and Kevin Hart, 'Other Testaments', in Sherwood and Hart (eds.), *Derrida and Religion: Other Testaments* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 3-26 (9-11).

[110] See Dennis Bielfeldt, 'Luther, Metaphor and Theological Language', *Modern Theology* 6.2 (1990), pp. 121-35. Bielfeldt argues that the grammar of heaven is articulated through the clash of earthly categories.

[111] Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses called Genesis, by John Calvin* 1. (trans. John King; Edinburgh: Edinburgh Printing Company, 1847), pp. 561-562.

[112] Luther, *Lectures on Genesis*, pp. 115, 116, 131.

[113] Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses*, p. 553.

That the Reformation, Renaissance, the turns anthropocentric—a human salvific drama—and potentially tragic.

This break with Abraham first appeared in the writings of the lesser known English deists—such as Thomas Chubb and Thomas Morgan—in the 1720s and 1730s—but it became famous when Kant took it up and linked to the concept of Enlightenment, and the distinctly modern question of 'what is this now? What is unique about this now from which I write?[114] In a series of tracts written between 1725 and 1734, Thomas Chubb maintains: 'No matter if angels, dreams, visions, voices from heaven' affirmed it, 'the moral unfitness of the action…was a stronger reason against the divinity of the command, than any of those extraordinary ways in which that command was conveyed to [Abraham] could possibly be for it'. The early Enlightenment was concerned about the miracle—as the exception to empirical reality—but was at least as much concerned with the parallel problem of the exception to morality. Far more important than the conflict between religion and science was the clash of pieties: the conflict between revealed religion and what Kant and his contemporaries called moral belief and moral unbelief. As Chubb put it, for there to be moral belief, and credulity in religion, the essence of true religion must be 'the same in all ages, in all countries, and in all worlds, (if I may so speak)' and all planets and true religion 'must govern any life on Mars'.[115] Applying inter-cultural and inter-planetary principles of moral fitness, Thomas Morgan concluded in 1737: 'It may be probable enough, that either Abraham had such a belief or conceit, or that Moses mistook this case; but that God, in this, or any other case, should dissolve the law of nature and make it a man's duty…to act contrary to all the principles and passions or the human constitution, is absolutely incredible'.[116] Absolutely incredible. Begging moral incredulity. We need to distinguish here between the difficult and the impossible. Abraham's trial has always been very very very difficult. In Jewish tradition, it is the ultimate trial in Abraham's ten trials: the hardest of tests, on the extreme edge of possibility, where only the heroes can go. Now it is impossible. The most difficult and the impossible only appear to be close. They are in fact very different.

[114] decisive *'What is happening today? What is happening now? What is this "now" from which we all live and which is the site, the point [from which] I am writing?'*
[115] Chubb, 'The Previous Question with regard to Religion', p. 217.
[116] Morgan, *The Moral Philosopher,* Vol. 3, pp. 133-134.

Now the sacrifice cannot be. It simply cannot be done. Or as Morgan puts it, it is 'not ...capable of proof by any historical evidence or testimony', since proof of moral unfitness, or moral impossibility, is 'vastly superior and prior to any historical proof'.[117] Even if an archaeologist were to unearth an indubitably authentic scrap of crumbling parchment signed by God himself, confessing that he had indeed uttered the command of Genesis 22.2 exactly as reported by Moses, such evidence would have to be discounted.

Womb and mourning and the knife. 'The fingers which fashioned you in my womb' says Sarah to Isaac 'have now delivered you from the knife'.

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The tension between compassion, raḥmē and justice (kēnūtā), right hand and left hand, is, on a human level, gendered, and both aspects are equally divine. The hands on the knife and the hand of the angel; knife and womb; on one hand the hand/justice of the father and on the other the compassion of the mother, the suffering of the mother, which is also redemptive—not just a counter-force to be overcome. The original text is carefully balanced between two words and two hands: 'Offer your son as a burnt offering' and/but 'Do not lay your hand upon the lad'.[118] They can be perfectly balanced, though this is exquisitely difficult to pull off perfectly in practice. The scales tend to tip in one direction or the other. In the sphere of poetry—not doctrine or argument—the ambiguity and empathy can go either way.[119] Sarah can be the force of natural compassion, outweighed and outranked by the robust performance of Abraham. This is arguably how the scales tip in Gregory and Pseudo-Chrystostom, and in Romanos and Amphilocius --*though Sarah's hypothetical speeches are never eradicated*.[120] The Syriac memra arguably tips the other way. Abraham is right—and/but he is also guilty, love-drunk—and it is the force of life, faith, intercession, that tends to be represented by 'Sarah', that ultimately prevails, and

[117] Morgan, *The Moral Philosopher in a Dialogue between Philalethes, a Christian Deist, and Theophanes, a Christian Jew*; Volume 2: *Being a Farther Vindication of Moral Truth and Reason* (London, 1739), p. 126; italics ours.

[118] and relatedly justice and at the same time compassion/mercy, the first memra, Jewish context, Mercy as opposed to Justice (rahamim and din).or the will to sacrifice, and at the same time the corrective (?) will to turn sacrifice into 'sacrifice' or prayer. (already cows of lips, etc)—.

[119] (and in drama or writing it doesn't even need to decide)

[120] , and so bring the difficulty of the test to fever pitch,

that *should* prevail.[121] There is a temptation—and perhaps not a bad one—to come to rest, and to find peace, in Sarah's compassionate of mercy, and the transmutation of sacrifice into prayer.

The original text is carefully balanced between two words and two hands: 'Offer your son as a burnt offering' and/but 'Do not lay your hand upon the lad'.[122] They can be perfectly balanced, though this is exquisitely difficult to pull off perfectly in practice. The scales tend to tip in one direction or the other. In the sphere of poetry—not doctrine or argument—the ambiguity and empathy can go either way.[123] Sarah can be the force of natural compassion, outweighed and outranked by the robust performance of Abraham. This is arguably how the scales tip in Gregory and Pseudo-Chrystostom, and in Romanos and Amphilocius --*though Sarah's hypothetical speeches are never eradicated*.[124] The Syriac memra arguably tips the other way. Abraham is right—and/but he is also guilty, love-drunk—and it is the force of life, faith, intercession, that tends to be represented by 'Sarah', that ultimately prevails, and that *should* prevail.[125]As the

This drama of resistance can be taken even further in Sarah—because she inhabits the Old Testament, at one remove from the New.[126]

For handout
Quyk? Ye forsothe, quyk it was!
As well I may tel you al the case
As another that was in the same place,
For I wot well it wol be wist.

Alas all then had gone to wrake!

[121] Writing the ambiguity of relation of Sarah and/but Abraham, and Abraham and/but Sarah, which can go in several ways. And sarah is prophetic: she says the creator will not turn killer, and God will return the son to me.
[122] and relatedly justice and at the same time compassion/mercy, the first memra, Jewish context, Mercy as opposed to Justice (rahamim and din).or the will to sacrifice, and at the same time the corrective (?) will to turn sacrifice into 'sacrifice' or prayer. (already cows of lips, etc)—.
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[124] , and so bring the difficulty of the test to fever pitch,
[125] Writing the ambiguity of relation of Sarah and/but Abraham, and Abraham and/but Sarah, which can go in several ways. And sarah is prophetic: she says the creator will not turn killer, and God will return the son to me.
[126] The bit at the end of one of the plays, where the story is transformed, old dispensation and thnew

Wold ye haue slayne my son Isaac?
Nay, then all my ioy had me forsake!
Alas where was your mynde?

Father [he says] do whatever you desire
But I know full well that my mother shall miss me
Many times she has embraced and kissed me
But farewell to all that for that is now over.
She used call me her treasure and her store
But farewell to all that—she shall say this no more
Here I shall be killed, without knowing wheretofore
Except that God must have his desire.
Father, will you also be chopping off my head?[127]

'Gentil fader, wot my modre of this
That I shal be ded?

Why did you give me the title of father, master, and not the assassin of my child? Call me what I have become. Because I won't have been called father for very long, but for eternity I will be proclaimed the murderer of my child.

And those who will see me cut my son's throat, what will they take me for? For a madman, alas, or a lost spirit, and those who listen to me will believe that my I'm raving in my old age!

Who will make the man cruel and unfeeling, who with kindness welcomed all guests? I who not so long ago treated (gave plenty to?) strangers, I your father, will I kill you, my heir? Who will be able to listen to me without fleeing from me?

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[127] Rough translation...Haym, Towneley. When Isaac is freed by the angel, he instantly asks to be returned to his mother,

What! Destroy with my own hands the one whom I hoped would close my eyelids with his fingers? He whose swaddling clothes I unwrapped (or unbound—check Greek, pun on binding?), shall I bind him in order to kill him? He whom I watched playing (frolicking), praising you for having given him to me; he whom I nursed (Gk?), I cannot be his assassin; because he alone is the saviour of our souls.

Alas! My flesh, your infant babbling (check Greek) will be made mute by your father's hand, as he cuts your throat.

Stanza 7 begins *'Sarah heard all these words*, my master'[128] –

Leave the child with me, old man, he is mine; when he who has called you wills it, he will let me know. He announced to *me* by his angel my son's coming into the world: he will surely let *me* know if he wants his blood. I don't entrust/commit the child to you, I don't give him to you—

'Get away from me, immediately! *I'm* taking him in my arms, this child who caused so much pain in my belly, because I want to have my fill of him'

I want him to close my eyes on my deathbed. The little life which I have left, I want to live it with him.

In problema(ta)? 3 of *Fear and Trembling*, Soren Kierkegaard, or Johannes de Silentio asks: 'Was it ethically defensible for Abraham to conceal his undertaking from Sarah, from Eleazar and from Isaac?'—a question that has kept continental philosophers sleepless parsing out the relationship between sacrifice and the secret.

[128] The words which she hears must be Abraham's unspoken words, because the poet makes a point of the fact that she hears *all* of them—everything-- and because Sarah makes a point of the fact that God has not spoken to her directly. In fact she says (and she speaks without inverted commas to reply to Abraham's words that were not only in inverted commas but that *were not even spoken*, though she heard them):

So called 'pre-critical' responses are often ahead of so-called 'critical' or post-Enlightenment interpretations of scripture. The traditional Edenic myth of the 'fall' and/or 'maturation' into genuine criticism,[129] may be true on the plane of history,[130] but it is certainly not true on the plane of ethics. (Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, the rise of historical criticism often represented a displacement or disavowal of ethical and political problems with the text.) The pre-Enlightenment condition of being Jewish or being Christian before all choice enabled more active and audacious acts of interpretation, in acts of writing that were *free* of later segregations between 'literature', 'poetry', 'liturgy', 'drama' and 'theology' or 'Biblical Studies'. Ancient interpreters were also *free* from those large acts of macro-choosing by which moderns identify as "religious" or "non-religious", and perform those identities in communally established degrees of distance from and identification with the biblical texts.[131] They could therefore risk readings that came perilously close to Kant's critique of Abraham-the-butcher.[132] They could be acutely 'critical' in the loose sense because they were not relating the story of Abraham's sacrifice to the modern/deist *krisis*, where Abraham's sacrifice becomes a test case of critique, and freedom, and the modern sacrificial-critical choice 'between life and death'.[133] Because these pre-modern readings knew nothing of the epoch-defining watersheds of the critical or the modern, they could conjure creative sacrificial transformations between dream and nightmare, destruction and resurrection —entirely separate from the sensational modern *krisis* of taking a knife of separation to the sacred text.

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[129] ancient not the childhood of consciousness.

[130] As long as one is not a perfect Christian. P. 378 Ricks. Eliot nostalgic for a older traditions of Christian blasphemy which he says 'Impossible to the complete atheist as to the perfect Christian,'. critics, historians, and scholars of religion are already touching on a 'Golden Age of Hypostatic orthodoxy', or Philip Almond's the "Transcendental unambiguity of the Holy Word" (cf. Almond: 98). Impossiblity of perfect believing, devotion and blasphemy/critique a corollary of one another.I'm also thinking of loss of what T.S. Eliot calls 'blasphemy' as the close cognate, indeed companion of 'belief' the 'present generation of versifiers, so deficient in devotion and so feeble in blasphemy'

[131] —small acts of micro-choosing. talking about a position that goes beyond the liberal or fundamentalist— importance)

[132] For Kant's revulsion at 'Abraham butchering and burning his only son like a sheep at God's command' see Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties* (trans. Mary J. Gregor; Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1979), p. 115; cf. Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* (trans. Theodore Green and Hoyt Hudson; New York: Harper and Row 1970), p. 175. For the anxious insomnia that this text/text provokes in Kierkegaard/Johannes de Silentio see the epigraph to this chapter.

[133] Talal Asad, 'Is critique secular? Historical notes on the idea of secular criticism', *The Immanent Frame* 25/1/2008. See http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2008/01/25/historical-notes-on-the-idea-of-secular-criticism accessed 9 October 2009. See also the roundtable 'Is Critique Secular? (Berkeley, October 2009) http://townsendcenter.berkeley.edu/swg_crittheory.shtml, recently published as Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler and Saba Mahmood (eds.), *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury and Free Speech* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

Expressing something like the scandal to modernity's Moralitat and Sittlichkeit, but in the form of narrative, pre-modern sources have Abraham worrying about how to spirit the boy away 'prevely' (that is, secretly)[134] –this being not just a logistical problem, but a very explicitly, a problem of ethics—and worrying about what to tell the servants who are fond of him, or how to explain his murder to his neighbours.[135] I am reminding of Kierkegaard's question about the police, or Derrida's about the newspapers, and the media. The act cannot take simply take place in remote asocial air of the mountaintop (a place for gods and men). In a reading that is more Hegel than Kant or Kierkegaard, it is problematically relocated amidst all the neighbouring bodies and the social thickness or material, ethical life.

I started by giving the punchline away at the beginning...anticipate the future...
The poem unleashes all these tones and sounds simultaneously, as in a polyphonic musical performance. Syncopated times. Time signatures...
Like the strange futures of the economy, it is future that inures itself against risk and surprise.
could have been straw-women
link So Rashi: 'Therefore [But...on the other hand] Sarah died from that very pain'.[136]—to the redemptive pain of Sarah-Virgin.

[134] Two counterpoints to the story—he is her only. And the mother and son are more together—this idea developed throughout the play. not just because of the logistical problem that son and mother are always 'together', but because of the ethical problem that, as Abraham guiltily reflects, 'she has him and no more'
[135] 'How shall I tell the barren Sarah who gave birth to him? How shall I explain to the old woman about her child? What shall I tell the servants who are fond of him, or the maidservants who adore him? How shall I explain away the killing of him to my neighbours?
[136] and why does Abraham tell the Hittites that he wants to out of his eyes?. Cf. Vawter, *On Genesis*, p. 265. and only two hundred shekels, and one precious metal less than Chronicles six hundred gold shekels The Chronicler, who rewrites to elevate the value of the religious in the pre-existing text of Samuel-Kings, literally elevates when it comes to the costs of the temple. The fifty silver shekels of 2. Sam 24.24 undergo extreme inflation in 1 Chron. 21.25 to six hundred gold shekels. The excessive cost of the temple seems to be pegged to the sense of the vast, insolvent debt to the God of the temple: compare 2 Samuel's David's desire not to 'offer burnt offerings to the Lord that *cost me nothing*' (2 Sam. 24.24). Existential debt, and compensatory overpayment are markedly absent from commentary: compare Westermann's prosaic and hugely over-reaching 'deduction', based on Gen. 23.8-9 and I Chron 21.22-24, that becesef malai HEB is an idiom meaning 'the current price' or 'going rate' (!) thus eradicating any sense of a *full* to over-flowing price. (Westermann's deduction also raises the question how far two texts can constitute a sufficient basis for an alleged idiom). to give God what has cost him nothing. Why this hint of debt, a debt to more than the Hittites, signalled by this excessive overpayment undergirding his surface negotiations with the Hittites, are the 'mighty prince's' more pressing posthumous negotiations with his 'princess' (Gen. 17.15).Abraham's guilt is link here. *Genesis Rabbah*

The story of the almost-death of the other son, the angel and the promise in Genesis 21 *deliberately mimics the language and the structure of the akedah* –thereby deliberately risking our uniqueness just before and around the very act that strives to make Isaac the *fils unique*.

The dense rich sounds of the shofar combine emergency and existential exposure (you sound the shofar when you are in trouble); the memory of the triumph of the akedah, and so victory; a call to arms; mourning; and a cry for aid.[137][138]
What all these texts have in common is that they come from contexts that are theologically and doctrinally fluid,[139] and work within performative traditions of scripture:[140] liturgical texts, performative homilies, and medieval mysteries as a 'quick (or living) book'.[141][142]

[to prove how humans orientated towards the future…Watching the clock…choosing…choosing how this seminar will go…which texts to look at, which points to sacrifice… clock and thinking about a necessary end to this little excursus on tense and time. But perhaps there is just enough time…]

Sacrifice turns into writing, and the infinite futures of writing. It seems that this is the most faithful response to a text that turns blood and flesh sacrifice into ink and papyrus 'sacrifice', and then shows how that 'sacrifice' produces infinitely generative futures: sons like sand and stars.

58.5 (Based on the translation in H. Freedman and Maurice Simon (eds.) *Midrash Rabbah*, [London: Soncino Press, 1939]). *Therefore* [the story of the akedah] is next to "And Sarah's lifespan was",

1. [137] *Tekiah* – one long, straight blast
2. *Shevarim* – three medium, wailing sounds
3. *Teruah* – 9 quick blasts in short succession

[138] (Sarah's screams keep up with the shofar, then fall away at the end and she is not in the liturgy. Or is she?
[139] Application of categories of orthodoxy and heresy to early church scene anachronistic—see Murray, Symbols of church, p. 5—a category mistake to speak too much of 'heresy' and 'orthodoxy'—also danger of Romanticisation of heretics.
[140] Elliott, p. 157: 'they achieved their dramatic qualities not in spite of their religious content but because of it'—Kolve, cit Elliott, p. 158: 'not an opposition of interests—the religious and the secular, the devotional and the profane'—but unite in one coherent purpose. Instead I see them as…one another.
[141] Woolf, Art and Doctrine, p. 57—libri laicorum—can deduce from a famous Lollard sermon attacking the Mysteries that popular rhetoric used to argue their superiority over the visual arts: 'this is a deed bok, the tother a quick'.
[142] Art and Doctrine, p. 69, influence of Judaism.

question ‘He surely does not want a human being, does he?’ is echoed by the Northampton Isaac, who asks his father ‘Can’t your king be satisfied by any other kind of beast?’—and of course the only thing wrong with this question is that it is out of time, tense and sense with the biblical narrative.

Coda: futures: the Sequel (the future)

So called ‘pre-critical’ responses are often ahead of so-called ‘critical’ or post-Enlightenment interpretations of scripture. The traditional Edenic myth of the ‘fall’ and/or ‘maturation’ into genuine criticism,[143] may be true on the plane of history,[144] but it is certainly not true on the plane of ethics. (Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, the rise of historical criticism often represented a displacement or disavowal of ethical and political problems with the text.) The pre-Enlightenment condition of being Jewish or being Christian before all choice enabled more active and audacious acts of interpretation, in acts of writing that were *free* of later segregations between ‘literature’, ‘poetry’, ‘liturgy’, ‘drama’ and ‘theology’ or ‘Biblical Studies’. Ancient interpreters were also *free* from those large acts of macro-choosing by which moderns identify as “religious” or “non-religious”, and perform those identities in communally established degrees of distance from and identification with the biblical texts.[145] They could therefore risk readings that came perilously close to Kant’s critique of Abraham-the-butcher.[146] They could be acutely ‘critical’ in the loose sense because they were not relating the story of Abraham’s sacrifice to the modern/deist *krisis*, where Abraham’s sacrifice becomes a test case of critique, and freedom, and the modern sacrificial-critical choice ‘between life

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[144] As long as one is not a perfect Christian. P. 378 Ricks. Eliot nostalgic for a older traditions of Christian blasphemy which he says ‘Impossible to the complete atheist as to the perfect Christian,’. critics, historians, and scholars of religion are already touching on a ‘Golden Age of Hypostatic orthodoxy’, or Philip Almond’s the “Transcendental unambiguity of the Holy Word” (cf. Almond: 98). Impossiblity of perfect believing, devotion and blasphemy/critique a corollary of one another.I’m also thinking of loss of what T.S. Eliot calls ‘blasphemy’ as the close cognate, indeed companion of ‘belief’ the ‘present generation of versifiers, so deficient in devotion and so feeble in blasphemy’

[145] —small acts of micro-choosing. talking about a position that goes beyond the liberal or fundamentalist—importance)

[146] For Kant’s revulsion at ‘Abraham butchering and burning his only son like a sheep at God’s command’ see Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties* (trans. Mary J. Gregor; Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1979), p. 115; cf. Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* (trans. Theodore Green and Hoyt Hudson; New York: Harper and Row 1970), p. 175. For the anxious insomnia that this text/text provokes in Kierkegaard/Johannes de Silentio see the epigraph to this chapter.

and death'.[147] Because these pre-modern readings knew nothing of the epoch-defining watersheds of the critical or the modern, they could conjure creative sacrificial transformations between dream and nightmare, destruction and resurrection —entirely separate from the sensational modern *krisis* of taking a knife of separation to the sacred text.

Like someone who can't tell a joke properly, I'll give the punchline of this essay away at the beginning (while I've still got your attention). So called 'pre-critical' responses are often ahead of so-called 'critical' or post-Enlightenment interpretations of scripture. The traditional Edenic myth of the 'fall' and/or 'maturation' into genuine criticism,[148] may be true on the plane of history,[149] but it is certainly not true on the plane of ethics. (Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, the rise of historical criticism often represented a displacement or disavowal of ethical and political problems with the text.) The pre-Enlightenment condition of being Jewish or being Christian before all choice enabled more active and audacious acts of interpretation, in acts of writing that were *free* of later segregations between 'literature', 'poetry', 'liturgy', 'drama' and 'theology' or 'Biblical Studies'. Ancient interpreters were also *free* from those large acts of macro-choosing by which moderns identify as "religious" or "non-religious", and perform those identities in communally established degrees of distance from and identification with the biblical texts.[150] They could therefore risk readings that came perilously close to Kant's critique of Abraham-the-butcher.[151] They could be acutely 'critical' in the loose sense because they were not relating the story of Abraham's sacrifice to the modern/deist *krisis*, where

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[147] Talal Asad, 'Is critique secular? Historical notes on the idea of secular criticism', *The Immanent Frame* 25/1/2008. See http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2008/01/25/historical-notes-on-the-idea-of-secular-criticism accessed 9 October 2009. See also the roundtable 'Is Critique Secular? (Berkeley, October 2009) http://townsendcenter.berkeley.edu/swg_crittheory.shtml, recently published as Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler and Saba Mahmood (eds.), *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury and Free Speech* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

[148] ancient not the childhood of consciousness.

[149] As long as one is not a perfect Christian. P. 378 Ricks. Eliot nostalgic for a older traditions of Christian blasphemy which he says 'Impossible to the complete atheist as to the perfect Christian,'. critics, historians, and scholars of religion are already touching on a 'Golden Age of Hypostatic orthodoxy', or Philip Almond's the "Transcendental unambiguity of the Holy Word" (cf. Almond: 98). Impossiblity of perfect believing, devotion and blasphemy/critique a corollary of one another.I'm also thinking of loss of what T.S. Eliot calls 'blasphemy' as the close cognate, indeed companion of 'belief' the 'present generation of versifiers, so deficient in devotion and so feeble in blasphemy'

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Abraham's sacrifice becomes a test case of critique, and freedom, and the modern sacrificial-critical choice 'between life and death'.[152] Because these pre-modern readings knew nothing of the epoch-defining watersheds of the critical or the modern, they could conjure creative sacrificial transformations between dream and nightmare, destruction and resurrection —entirely separate from the sensational modern *krisis* of taking a knife of separation to the sacred text.

[152] Talal Asad, 'Is critique secular? Historical notes on the idea of secular criticism', *The Immanent Frame* 25/1/2008. See http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2008/01/25/historical-notes-on-the-idea-of-secular-criticism accessed 9 October 2009. See also the roundtable 'Is Critique Secular? (Berkeley, October 2009) http://townsendcenter.berkeley.edu/swg_crittheory.shtml, recently published as Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler and Saba Mahmood (eds.), *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury and Free Speech* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).