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THE MOMENT OF FAITH:
AGAINST RELATIVISM THROUGH A REINTERPRETATION
OF THE STORY OF ABRAHAM

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Abstract: In the United States, it is common for people entering christian organizations to receive explanation of what the Bible means before being handed the book and asked to read. Religious ideological transfer stems from this strict codification, and the Story of Abraham highlights the effective blending between original text and interpretation. Recognizing how the Story of Abraham calls for, as Kierkegaard suggested, a suspension of the ethical for obedience, it justifies entrance into a religious state of exception, a fully subjective moment into which the sole sovereign of “divine will” is the self. The social ramifications, beyond a-logical relativism, involve the historic and continued justification of religious otherization and dehumanization, shrined in a belief of divinity. In contemporary debate, the religious hunker down, entrenching themselves within their ideology, while many in deconstructivist camps want to tear these institutions apart. I suggest a middle-ground: a radical reinterpretation—through philosophical, linguistic and literary theory methods—of the Story of Abraham as a narrative reflecting the Tower of Babel motif, to work within the christian ideological system to create strategic biblical interpretations for positive social effect.

Key Words: The Binding of Isaac, Søren Kierkegaard, faith, State of Exception, Giorgio Agamben, sociology of religion, meaning-text, Omri Boehm, ethics, christianity

Introduction: First Throes of Disentanglement

The story of Abraham, of Isaac's binding, is the story of torment. It frustrates in such a way that leaves many asking questions of why, of how. It pours ink from the hands and fingers of writers in the academy, in religious institutions, in society. Regarding this relatively brief passage of biblical text, we know a few things to which we may find comfort in our certainty. We do know the magnitude of discussion surrounding the passage. In word and ink, it is vast.¹ In word and ink, much is imagined. That is to say, authors add details into the text, most notably a dialogue between Isaac and Abraham intending to explain Isaac's role, as well as a sort of inner monologue addressing the feelings of Abraham: what he thought or believed. A number of British plays, for example, craft Abraham in a state of sorrow or mourning over what the god asked of him. Further, "at the heart of the drama is the dialogue between Isaac and his father: a dialogue highly emotional, and emphasizing the mutual love of father and child."² These fictionalizations existed not just as a part of those British plays, but as a main part, the rising action and theatrical climax. And both Abraham and Isaac shine forth in love and goodness. Søren Kierkegaard, as well, begins his *Fear and Trembling*³ with a number of vignettes imagining the biblical text. Fictionalizing the suffering. Crafting monologue. The imaginings, of course, contrast the silence of the original. As Kierkegaard and, later, Brian Bethune confirms, in the original, "Abraham said nothing."⁴

We also know that three large-scale religious groups (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) situate Abraham as a predominate figure within their respective religious narratives,⁵ and they conceptualize him in a positive light, with his act serving the good, as Abraham serving the god. Abraham exists as the father of faith. In Christianity, Abraham's binding of Isaac operates as a caesura, a moment that tore apart the fabric of the social, leaving the frayed strings to dangle in the void of faith. In essence, it changed the way social groups conceptualized and ordered their world, and its continued emphasis in modern religious institutions suggests that a new fabric, a fabric of faith, stitched itself over the tear to construct a religious ideology. This re-stitching is the *moment of Abraham*, and it serves as the "vision of language itself...its end"⁶—it created a break from that which came before, and structured the thereafter.

The story's importance within social religious groups calls for examination. One cannot ignore a social meaning-text⁷ that structures the lives of so many in its ideology. And while some critical theorists and philosophers seem antagonist toward the Bible as a text, allowing bitterness, arrogance and spite to overcome the discussion, I hope to avoid that, to not dismiss the original text as delusion or madness, but to instead see its interpretation as a particular form of ideology that operates within

society to produce certain effects. In other words, I find greater concern in consideration of what, logically, the Abraham meaning-text⁸ produces. It undoubtedly affects conceptual notions of goodness, not to mention actualized behavior. Importantly, I hope to contribute substantially to the discussion of the biblical passage by soldering the state of exception, as the political event, to the religious event existent within the Abraham meaning-text. This I term the *moment of faith*, that moment when the average operant within christian ideology justifies his or her behavior through a belief that it fulfills the god's will and a duty toward obedience. What, in religious ideology, restructures the self and the social away from ethics or morality is a *moment of faith*, where one, like Abraham, perceives a commandment from the god: either directly spoken, indirectly hinted at, logically deduced, deluded in mental illness or encultured from the social environment (to name a few potential causes of individual caesura). In all, action and thought become justified through "faith and faith alone," regardless of logical outcomes, connection to ethics, etc. This perception of faith becomes a-logical, a-ethical, bound to neither and nothing, to no administrative body nor outside actor—only and solely to the self.

This perceived commandment from the god, this moment, allows the sovereign power, the self, to receive a level of supreme authority and justification. Giorgio Agamben observed a similar quality in the borderlands between politics and law, a borderlands that allows for the restriction of personal liberties or legal protections of rights through the justification of a political or security crisis.⁹ The political state of emergency leads to the justification of bare life, a sovereignty that can pull the very being from the Other.¹⁰ Life becomes a mechanism of political bargaining and control, and those held within the excepted state no longer maintain any sense of humanity from the institutions of power. The meaning-text of Abraham justifies shades of similarity with this political and legal state of exception.

While some disagreement about the biblical passage occurs, Kierkegaard and Stephen C. Evans both observe the story of Abraham¹¹ as one in which a theological duty calls for the suspension of the ethical.¹² As Evans explains, "Obedience to God may require the individual to oppose conventional moral views, and even suffer as a consequence of nonconformity."¹³ Evans seems to give some room for flexibility in moral views, using the adjective, "Convention," and setting the suffering within non-conformity, not the unethical. Kierkegaard highlights an even stronger notion in his *Fear and Trembling*, suggesting that the ethic, not just the convention, exists as the opposition to which faith sits. Abraham is told "by God" to sacrifice his son. Put another way, to kill young Isaac. Even another, to murder. And the Ten Commandment (the law) against killing is forgone for this notion of "sacrificing" Isaac. The commandments against killing, to love one another as one's self, serve to lack application. In terms of its contemporary religious narrative, the Abraham meaning-

text serves to break from accepted commandment, social custom or dictate of law: both social law and what even the same text (the Bible) deems as *God's law*. In other words, all of these other qualities exist (or lack existence), within the moment of faith, as suspended in a state of exception. The god's voice shatters the horizon of the moral or ethical, creating a caesura that requires something else as replacement.

And this notion seems to find consistency within the Jewish faith. As Jewish lore recognizes Abraham as a relatively hospitable man, the binding of Isaac as a trial of faith and one that the god, undoubtedly, opposed and therefore "was *not* done."¹⁴ Important to note here is the imagination that the god opposed the act, in which the interpretation of the binding as a trial, not a command, takes place. And while the god finds conceptualization in the ethical, Abraham, on the other hand, still operates under its lack. That is, Abraham acts without knowledge of the command as a trial, that the god will replace Isaac with a ram. He operates in submission. And, in fact, his obedience to the command of sacrifice equals that of his command to put the knife down.¹⁵ This idea has lasted. Omri Boehm, for example, explains how canonical Jewish philosopher Leibowitz, and religious leader Rabbi Shlomo Riskin saw the story of Abraham (and the highest call of the good, for that matter) as strict obedience to the god's will. As Boehm explains, "This theology has been deeply encrypted into the Jewish tradition and continues to hold sway, especially where the Jewish religion and Jewish state intertwine."¹⁶ Meaning that the Jewish faith, consistent with that of Christianity, holds a similar Abraham meaning-text guided by notions of the moment of faith. Moreover, as Agamben observes the intersection of politics and law, the religious interlays within the crosshairs of the social and political. That religious ideology guides public policy and community, not to mention constructs self-identities and local communities, suggests consideration of this work in a variety of disciplines.

To better understand the inner workings of the moment of faith, it might be useful to examine the Gospels. Christ, as a religious figure, sets up two responsibilities or commandments for those who want to achieve the good on earth. Listed first is a duty to God, and second, a personhood that binds one into a duty to provide for the Other, the neighbor. Within the narrative of many christian social organizations, the figure of Christ serves as the paramount guide toward the ethical, the true, the good. As to the god, we might define this duty as one of reverence, to, for example, praise, or as obedience. As to the Other, a duty of not just passive ethics, but an active seeking-out to provide for the needs of one's neighbor. A sort of abstention of the self for the Other. Many call this "love." However, this word complicates itself in notions of Eros, friendship and other forms that lack an easily identifiable distinction between self and other.¹⁷ The Abraham meaning-text sets these two commandments in conflict. The moral, the ethic, the duty to love thy neighbor and provide for their good,

seems limited, if not fully removed, in order to fulfill responsibilities toward the god. In other words, it seems to suggest the potential conflict between the commandment to the god and the commandment to the neighbor, highlighting the importance of the former as an always, every time preference in the conflict.

The meaning-text, then, calls for Abraham to preference duty to god over duty to the Other, the son. And he is an object of Abraham's sovereign, as exemplified in Abraham's silence. Isaac holds no choice over his death. Abraham does not ask, nor even tell Isaac (in the text, itself), of the command to kill and burn his son. Isaac exists apart from voice, from will, completely bound into the sovereignty of Abraham's perception of the god's will. This deserves repeating: Abraham does not ask Isaac for permission, nor for his son's opinion as to whether the voice of the god so heard was a reality or a delusion, whether from an earthly or metaphysical deity. In other words, Abraham holds sole sovereignty over determining whether the voice he perceived was, in fact, the voice of god. And what Michel Foucault traces in 19th Century governance seems to apply entirely within the religious conception of what Abraham means, that a "new right is established: the right to make live and to let die."¹⁸ Consistent with contemporary christianity, doctrine calls upon the individual believer, the *faithful*, to hold *full and complete* authority in regards to perceptions of divine will—to the point of corporal and metaphysical judgment. It exemplifies the *messianic paradox*:¹⁹ the exception becomes permanent, the suspension a constant state.

But Isaac operates within bare life, without the notions of humanity often ascribed to the average individual or child, but only through Abraham's utilization of Isaac's life for a particular political, social and personal purpose. In essence, in order for Abraham to fulfill his duty to the god, he takes political control over determinations of Isaac's life. Most importantly, Abraham's duty is fulfilled, not those of his son or family. The utilization of Isaac's life provides for Abraham to receive blessing, both heavenly (as fulfilling one's duty to the god expects the reciprocation of a joyful and peaceful experience in death, as Abraham's obedience allows for the expectation of an eternal self-interest) as well as the reward of a strong lineage of a great nation. Isaac becomes a tool for the fulfillment of Abraham's duty, seen apart from, not essential to, Abraham's identity. Here, then, consistent with Agamben's theory, we see the full dehumanization of the Other (Isaac), for the full benefit of the self (Abraham), who holds the full and sovereign authority over perceptions of goodness (perceptions of the god's will). Isaac's life receives a trade or commodity value that benefits not Isaac, it physically harms him, but Abraham. And, thus, Rembrandt's *Abraham and Isaac* holds an important detail: Isaac's face fully covered by Abraham's hand. Isaac is just body, just flesh, for Abraham's falling blade.²⁰

Vital to understanding the distinct sovereign established through the Abraham meaning-text, one must consider the extent to which this moment of faith breaks from the same level of oversight as possible within a democratic state operating under law. That is, Agamben denotes November 13th, 2001 as the day a large-scale break in U.S. politics led to an excepted state. On that date, a military order from President George W. Bush removed civil liberty protections from “enemy combatants” otherwise afforded to them through U.S. law and Geneva Convention.²¹ Essentially, it created the category of the unbeing. The category of the fully and totally removed from the un-expected state. In fact, Agamben utilizes the context of the U.S. Patriot Act and Guantanamo Bay detainees in a fundamental way. However, this governmental state of exception exists with some checks and balances. Multiple administrative bodies operate within levels of political and legal authority. Two Supreme Court cases that came after the publication of Agamben’s work, *Hamdan v. Rumsfeld* (542 U.S. 466)²² and *Boumediene v. Bush* (553 U.S. 723),²³ reacted against the Bush measures in the Patriot Act. In important ways, they extended a level of rights to those otherwise held in unbeing; they helped breach the state of exception.

One might, then, suggest some hope that the governmental state of exception allows for a level of oversight to prevent large-scale abuses. Of course, this is not to diminish the realities of rights’ abuses that have and continue to occur in the post-9/11 geopolitical landscape of the United States. They extend with a level of suffering shielded behind bars on islands surrounded by ocean. The notion of administrative oversight only becomes important in that the moment of faith has nothing of the sort. Religious belief lacks that same sort of administrative mechanism. Religious leaders, even the Catholic pope, tend not to have the same direct sovereignty of power as exercised by the Supreme Court in U.S. governance. Religious leaders cannot enact a direct movement against the religious state of exception’s ethics suspension. They tend to act more as spiritual advisors, and while the figures might attempt to persuade²⁴ members of their congregation, it seems socially appropriate to simply shift church attendance if one finds him or herself at odds with the church leadership. In other words, if I believed the god spoke to me to act in a particular way that disagreed with church leadership, I might simply leave that particular institution in favor of another more accepting of my “faith.” This is all to say that the moment of faith seems a somewhat shadowy type of social ideology. One without administrative oversight, encouraged in political and religious strategies to voting populations and church membership/donations, one that underscores a history of the self-interest of man carried out in the name of the divine.

“Faith” as Quintessentially Relativistic in the Abraham Meaning-Text

Anthropomorphism, which in the theoretical presentation of God and his essence is scarcely avoidable for human beings, but otherwise (provided that it does not influence concepts of duty) is yet also innocent enough, is extremely dangerous in regard to our practical relation to his will and for our morality itself; for we then *make a God for ourselves*. –Immanuel Kant²⁵

Some might quickly accept that the moment of faith provides for a self-constructed²⁶ form of the deity. However, others may need a bit more persuasion. As crucial to understanding the religious state of exception, the issue of anthropomorphism within the Abraham meaning-text must be further examined, as well as complimented by contemporary and historic examples that highlight the potential dangers, therein. One point of departure must be observed in regards to Kant. While he examines anthropomorphism in considerations of morality, as mentioned, the moment of faith requires no such ethical considerations. This self-determination is highly relativistic, and its refusal of reason, logic and emotion, its natural propensity to set itself against these things, seems to suggest an almost fully arbitrary and chaotic version of faith. It not only allows for, but seems entirely sufficient with, contradiction and the absurd. The moment of faith, then, is the moment of the absurd.²⁷

And this absurdity can be found both in the historic and the contemporary. Dante casts real people into *The Inferno*; William Blake uses poetics to discuss the soul-body distinction, attributing ideas of their unification unto “The voice of the Devil.” A modern advocacy group, The Christian Coalition of America, which openly defines itself as a political group, and serves under the tagline of “Defending America’s Godly.” Whether purposeful or a simple coincidence of irony, this political group has chosen ten key agenda issues of focus. These are not commandments against murder, theft or adultery, but instead involve political concerns against the Affordable Care Act and gun restriction laws.²⁸ Now, regardless of where one sits politically on these issues, the Christian Coalition highlights the modern invoking of God’s name for political currency, clearly blending the lines between political pragmatics and religious ideology.²⁹

The Christian Coalition turns these lines into rubble, enacting faith in the pragmatics of health care law or questions over gun right constitutionality, and the group’s ideology serves to delineate between the self and the Other. Those who agree with conservative political ideology are the faithful, the godly, the protected, whereas, implicitly, it seems to indicate that those who disagree politically operate outside the bounds of

the godly. That is not to suggest that the Christian Coalition casts U.S. Democrats into the inferno. Some members may, others might not, and it would be unfair to assume the worst of people who may simply be unaware of the effect their ideology holds over them. Far more subtle and complex, the Christian Coalition cast their political agenda for “people of faith,” as “pro-family,” and “Christian,”³⁰ which sets those who disagree as outside these interlocking nodes of religion and politics.

The moment of faith, here, exists within the nexus of such movements. Most notably, in the way such organizations justify skirting certain passages of the Bible, the text that they consider sacred. This thrust into relativism and the absurd exists within these otherwise ideological self-contradictions. One must only read some of the portrayals of Democrats on christian-based conservative sites to understand that many (not all, but many) lack a love thy neighbor type approach, finding potential justification in the need to uphold their ideological stance (defined as consistent with the god), against those they term as political or social enemies or Others. This is all to attempt to highlight the commonality of relativistic faith, that it operates in these hidden forms throughout society as the god is ascribed to whatever one desires to ascribe the divine to.

And modern christianity is primarily self-interested. In the meaning-text of the passage, Abraham could either fulfill his fatherly role to his son, protecting Isaac against suffering in stone and mortality. Or he could fulfill his duty to his god, killing his son for the simple and sole reason, without explanation, that he perceived it as commanded from the divine. Might Abraham have deserved hell for protecting his son? Or heaven if he brought pain and death to his son? This seems the dichotomy set up within the meaning-text. And the perceived command cannot be disentangled from Abraham’s own self-interest. Undoubtedly, the discourse of the divine operates with an understanding that fulfilling a religious role within society allots for entrance into heaven, or a blissful and peaceful joy, after death. So oft repeated in churches, talk radio, television shows, it has become a common christian religious narrative that following one’s duty to the god allows for an eternal reward. Christianity has so linked itself into self-interest, and thus so set itself against a *pure* idea of “love” in the abstention of the self for another, that self-interest cannot meaningfully be pulled out of perceptions of obedience, be pulled out from the moment of faith. And thus, how these institutions define faith seems inherently to set itself apart from love.

This idea did not begin with christianity. The Socratic text *Gorgias*, one of the first examples in which the theory of post-death evaluation is found, existed prior to many biblical stories. Socrates begins by trying to convince the other members of the dialogue to act morally, that one should prefer being unjustly accused than an unjust accuser. However, the other speakers recognize the social benefit to the self in being the unjust

accuser, and continue a belief in this as the preferred role. Only after most other methods of persuasion fail does Socrates include an idea about an eternal judgment in which the good receive reward and the bad, punishment.³¹ That this occurs only at the end, after many starts and stops, provides a particular instructive role. One might interpret the final judgment theory as a noble lie: not necessarily true or false, but intended to produce a particular behavior outcome. For those swept up in self-interest, the idea of eternal bliss serves to actualize that self-interest toward ethical behavior to the Other. It serves the purpose of influencing the self-interested into socially beneficial behavior. Of course, this is set apart from the position of the unjustly accused, the innocent. The distinction reflects what a parent tells a child too young to understand the hermeneutics of the ethic. For Socrates, he told grown men, who otherwise oppressed and abused the Other through their social prestige.

Helpful in understanding the moment of faith: following the perception of the god's word implicates one into this potential, post-death, rewards and punishment system. In Abraham, were he to place his son's interest above his own, if he would have acted against his perception of the divine, he may have very well succumb to the torments of the idea of hell. In other words, he would have had to sacrifice his own potential eternal bliss for the good of Isaac. And herein lies the paradox in the Abraham meaning-text. In a way, he preferenced his own potential for eternal bliss, leveling infanticide and harm against an innocent child, the Other, the tool toward Abraham's own salvation. To act against the god involved acting for Isaac, fulfilling a self-sacrificial type of love. While many create a meaning-text that sees the ram as taking the place of Isaac, is it really Isaac that takes the place of Abraham's sacrifice? In other words, is Isaac to Abraham what the ram was to Isaac, something to step in and take the sacrifice away from the self and into another form? Is it the sacrament of sacrificing the Other? Implicit within the contemporary meaning-text, dominate in the discourse of the divine, it seems justifiable to see faith as a representation of the sacrifice of the Other for one's own securing of physical and eternal goods.

At this point, undoubtedly some might maintain an argument that observes the moment of faith in contrast to self-interest. One might agree that some people cast their own self-interest in divinity, but that Abraham did not do this, he did something else, something divine, in itself. That examples exist in which the moment of faith serves to create something positive within society. Without going too deeply into the currents of debate surrounding whether religion has been more advantageous or disadvantageous in the world, one can delineate between certain positive and negative ideologies.³² While much of the good might stem from the love thy neighbor or other positive ethical qualities within the biblical text, Abraham suspends the ethical. Outside the religious state of exception, one might define faith in love, might see this as consistent with

the god's will, and thus act in their unification. That is, one might find this if he or she rejects Abraham. However, within the Abraham meaning-text, whether action is ethical, unethical or a-ethical is largely a matter of personal subjectivity. The *moment of faith* allots for the Mother Teresas and the Steward Traills, without any standard to distinguish between the two. And recognizing the history of religious justification of oppression (in colonialism; ethnic, gender and sexual discrimination; abuse of the mentally ill; among others) in its commonality, one might understand the extent to which faith exists as a potential social danger. As in Greenbalt's example in "Invisible Bullets," "His essay...referred to a ploy of English colonists, who characterized the diseases ravaging Native populations as God-sent punishment for disobedience to their own colonial masters."³³

This is all to say that the suspension of the ethical for the divine, the sacrifice of Isaac, *the moment of faith*, serves to place into direct conflict the two commandments stated in the Gospels by the Christ, that one might reasonably use the ideological meaning-text of the story of Abraham as a justification for any act that they perceive as god's will. And this might explain antagonism toward christian social organizations. Many who call themselves, "christian," act unethically (in larger and smaller ways) while invoking the god's name, and this angers many who decide not to align with christian organizations. Most frightening, the operand of faith as opposed to logic and reason suggests that one might invoke the *moment of faith* without any reason, justification, or proof that it was, in fact, the god's will. That, much like it only took Abraham's perception of the god's will to begin his moving to the mountain, so too it could take the form of anyone's perception, at any time, to create an image of the truth of one's righteousness regardless of the act in question. Kill my son. God's will. Burn that woman for witchcraft. God's will. Protest at the grave sites of soldiers. God's will. And while one might see some of these examples as abhorrent, as completely wrong, there is something important to note: That those who operate under the dominate discourse of the Abraham story cannot, in any meaningful way, argue against these acts. The very nature of the suspension of the ethical for the religious enacts silence to all those outside the subject and his perception of the god. There is no arguing against something that, in its very nature, resists reason and proof and love, that resists argumentation, itself. For how could I, outside of the relationship that another claims to have with the divine, ever truly say whether god spoke and told her to kill, to hate. If god asked Abraham to sacrifice his son (and told this to Abraham, alone), to suspend the ethic, then what stops the deity from asking the citizens of Salem to burn women? Or the Westbarro Baptist church to protest? Or the extremist to walk into a crowded public space, ignite the explosives strapped to his chest, and receive the blessings of heaven, thereafter.

Must this Always Be? A Reinterpretation

No. The simple, straightforward answer to the question. While the Bible, and many religious texts, are prone to meaning-texts, conceptual space must be initiated that allows more social currency to counter-interpretation. A growing feminist body is gaining such currency,³⁴ and I labor, here, to bring interpretative space into other academic arenas. And I am not the first. As Kant tries to understand the inter-lapping nodes of religion, ethics, reason and society, he examines a key portion of the story of Abraham. He explains,

For if the God should really speak to man, man could still never *know* that it was God speaking. It is quite impossible for man to apprehend the infinite by his sense, distinguish it from sensible beings, and *recognize* it as such. But in some cases man can be sure that the voice he hears is *not* God's; for if the voice commands him to do something contrary to the moral law, no matter how majestic the apparition may be, and no matter how it may seem to surpass the whole of nature, he must consider it an illusion.³⁵

In a footnote relating to the above passage, Kant makes one of the most striking and confident denials of the Abraham meaning-text. He says, "Abraham should have replied to this supposedly divine voice: 'That I ought not to kill my good son is quite certain. But that you, this apparition, are God—of that I am not certain, and never can be, not even is this voice rings down to me from (visible) heaven.'"³⁶ Kant, then, calls for a unification of the moral³⁷ and the theological, not the former's suspension. Kant applies this to the Bible's entirety, that whether the work was the hand of the god is a knowledge never certain, and that one ought to maintain an ethical compass when entering into any work, even religious text. And that, to the story of Abraham in particular, considering who spoke to Abraham may be necessary in breaking down bad religious ideology. By crumbling the belief that the god's voice actually made the command, if this becomes suspect, some might begin to reconceptualize the story for themselves.

So who actually spoke to Abraham? Kant suggested that we will never know, but Omri Boehm, studying the original text in both Hebrew and its English translation,³⁸ primarily focused on the word, "Elohim." First, Boehm suggests that the taxonomy present within the Bible allows that the appearance of an angel (as occurred when Abraham bound Isaac, and who told Abraham to stop) generally takes on a more metaphysically divine connotation than the hearing of the god's will. In other words, the

visual holds more divinity than the auditory. Further, the original Hebrew distinguishes “Yahweh” (personal) from “Elohim” (proper).³⁹ This distinction is worth examination, and for those unpersuaded by the pathos of Kant’s appeal, this historico-linguistic approach may serve useful in understanding the distinction made in Hebrew. Interestingly, this distinction lacks translation currency within English.⁴⁰ As words tend to carry a history with their meanings, those carried by the English translation lack the same important shades and qualities as the distinction between “Yahweh” and “Elohim.” As Boehm explains, “Originally signifying rulers and judges of states, ‘Elohim’ came only derivatively to signify the deity, whom the Bible at times depicts as a state’s ruler or judge.”⁴¹ He continues in relating this distinction to another passage, to Adam and Eve.

The serpent in the story states that by eating from the forbidden fruit Adam and Eve will become “like God” –Elohim– “knowing good and evil.” It is tempting to read this as: “they will become divine-like by virtue of gaining ethical knowledge.” But Maimonides reads this exactly the other way around. Gaining Godlike knowledge of good and evil represents the *punishment* imposed on Adam and Eve. Gaining this knowledge consists in losing the absolute knowledge possessed in Eden, conforming instead to the mere norms of the land and the contingent laws of the state.⁴²

“Elohim,” then, historically carries shades of the deity and the corporal, of earthly rulers, of a man and woman punished for disobedience. Something that its translation to “God” in English does not carry.

Using this as a foreground, one can interpret the voice that commands the death of Isaac with similar shades of meaning. “Elohim” calls Abraham toward killing Isaac, though no angel appears. The angel of “Yahweh,” however, appears and stops Abraham on the mount. On two levels, then, the one who suggested Isaac’s death carries notions of state, not divine, rulers, not entirely of the deity. And through a form, the auditory, relatively less held within shades of the divine as the latter appearance of the angel. Similarly, consistent with Adam and Eve, “Elohim” invokes some notion of punishment. This creates the potential for the hearing of the command, the god’s will that impels Abraham on his journey, not as a divine perfection but as something else. Metaphorically, it may have involved the laws of the state versus the perception of the laws of the divine. In these potentials and others, important to note is the non-divine nature which Elohim suggests, something lost in translation, and *that* something which does the commanding to kill.

With these philosophical and historical notes in mind, literature itself may help continue to build into this counter-interpretation. Undoubtedly, the Bible as literature movement tends to have trouble getting its wheels out of the muck. However, looking at literary qualities might aid in seeing the story more holistically.⁴³ And I utilize the Common English Bible as intended for Christian religious organizations.⁴⁴ This should provide a foundation upon which to see certain characteristics of close reading. However, part of any close reading involves the entirety, the whole of a text surrounding a character. In terms of characterization, one recognizes that pulling one chapter out of an entire narrative leaves much to be desired. A character's intent involves sub-text, and that sub-text exists in other actions or dialogue that construct a notion of the protagonist. Thus, I begin by summarizing the Abraham narrative more holistically.

In the longer story of Abraham, before the binding, one recognizes a few key actions that tend to suggest Abraham's self-interest. Here's a brief summation: Abraham tells his wife, Sarai, to state that they are brother and sister while in Egypt, so that he does not come into harm. In fact, Abraham benefits from this in receiving oxen. Through this, Abraham receives protection against physical harm and economic gains in giving his wife over to an Egyptian pharaoh's household. Sarai, at this time, is silent. Abraham, then, assembles soldiers to rescue his nephew, Lot, which he does, and which culminated in the ordering of the slaughter of his enemy. Sarai then offers a handmaiden, since she and Abraham had yet to bare children themselves, to Abraham. The handmaiden lacks voice during this account. The handmaiden, Hagar, becomes pregnant, and conflict ensues between her and Sarai. Abraham, later, pleads against the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, while his nephew, Lot, protects messengers, offering his virgin daughters to a mob of men who wanted to harm them. Sodom and Gomorrah are destroyed. Again, in claiming Sarai as his sister, a king takes her, and when he finds out that she is Abraham's wife, gives her back along with different animals and land. Here in lies a repetition of the prevention of physical harm and economic gain narrative. After Isaac's birth, Ishmael (Abraham's first son) teases Isaac a number of times, in which, after some existential stress, Abraham follows the advice of Sarai and sends Ishmael and his mother away. While Abraham gave them bread and water, there lacks consideration as to whether any other economic benefits came to these two now banished.

All these stories are filled with Abraham's perception of the god coming in prophecy, and my summary forgoes those considerations for the less mystic acts of Abraham, himself. However, the god of Abraham, his Elohim, generally assents to Abraham's acts, advises him, protects him. Important in a larger consideration of Abraham's character is the complex ethical history that brings him to the moment of the binding. The protagonist is far from a clearly ethical man, and that is not to suggest this

highlights a horrible and cruel nature, per say. The geo-political context which provides the setting for this figure suggests a far more complex vision of his characterization. However, also important to note is that the story, overall, would be a much different thing, that one might read Isaac's binding far differently, if a clearer ethical goodness could be ascribed to Abraham. His character was not like Hector of Troy or King Arthur, in which there seems a distinct suggestion of goodness intended from the author. In fact, in these stories, the characters act as social definitions of goodness. Not so with Abraham. Instead, one recognizes a history of complexity, a history that suggests an extent of self-interest in Abraham's acts, of self-protection in moments of perceived harm, to the extent of manipulating others to ensure against disadvantage. In many ways, he exists as a political savvy figure.

I suggest, then, that one ought to read the binding of Isaac with a consistent understanding of Abraham's character in its entirety. He is a political savvy, complex ethical and self-interested protagonist, and exists obedient to his Elohim. Reading the binding of Isaac as a departure, as a change in characterization, seems less likely in that nothing seems to precede such a change (outside of the desire for social religious groups to construct the binding as other than what precedes it). In other words, many choose to read the binding differently, that Abraham is undoubtedly good in these moments, a Hector of Troy type of character. But they do not tend to hold this same perception of perfection in all of Abraham's previous acts. They recognize the complex ethical issues that precede the binding. I suggest reading Abraham's binding as consistent in his character with what comes before. As it seems more common to not throw out all the preceding chapters of a text when considering a characterization. This would mean that the binding is not a moment of pure and divine faith, but a moment where Abraham may have operated similar to giving up Sarai, his wife, to the pharaoh or abandoning his son, Ishmael.

Further, the chapter preceding Abraham's story is the Tower of Babel. Noah's story concludes with a list of his descendants, in which follows a single, short chapter of the Tower of Babel, and then enters Abraham's lineage. In examining many forms of literature, one might suggest such a break as useful in understanding what comes after. Often, these short, imagistic-type breaks intend to suggest a theme or driving motif in which to understand what follows. In a similar way, I suggest that the reading of the story of Abraham should be done within the motif of the Tower of Babel. While many read these two as separate, the form of the text and the metaphoric quality of Babel suggest a reading otherwise. And here we might also understand Boehm's notion of "Elohim" as punishment. The *moment of faith* extends one into the sky, reaching out toward a void that fills with whatever decides for the mind, so too the citizens build a tower to the god. Abraham's tower, a tower of faith, itself,

serves as a conceptual building of the physical tower of babel. The giving of Sarai, the abandon of Ishmael—these towers built to allow Abraham to believe that he could do anything, suspend the ethical and rational for the whatever being. Abraham builds the tower, one of faith, and he believes he can do anything, even one of the worst of things: killing his own son. As a motif, then, this might serve to suggest that both Abraham, and those who maintain the popular meaning-text as proponents of Abraham, have inoculated themselves within the very belief of power that “Yahweh” warns against.

To return to Boehm, important to consider is that the word used within the Tower of Babel passage is “Yahweh,” not “Elohim,” suggesting a connection from the author, not to the corporeal and the state, but to the metaphysical conception of divinity apart from that. In other words, the one who commands the sacrifice exists apart from the angel of the character who both diminishes the Tower of Babel and also halts Abraham’s hand at the moment of Isaac’s murder. Further, in comparison with Adam and Eve, while one may interpret Godlike knowledge as a form of intended punishment, what if the promise of descendants of power, who conquer their enemies, while at the outset (much like knowledge, itself), seem to act as a good, in fact, work similarly as a punishment? What might this mean to religion if the conquer of the Other, the strength of one’s lineage (the last refuge for a man of self-interest, reaching into the wall of his mortality), are meant to punish?

Conclusions

My intent to utilize philosophical, linguistic and literary theory methods to aide in reconceptualizing the story of Abraham focuses on reasoned interpretation. The political purpose of this attempts to carve out space for reconceptualization, one that allows for a critical and cultural theory of examination into biblical texts. And those self-defined religious should not be hesitant with this. The reality is that interpretations of the Bible have changed over time. Otherwise, christians would still call for the stoning of those who work on Sunday. Thankfully, they don’t. And, in fact, I attempt to gain credibility for even religious readers by showing a counter-interpretation informed by a history of writers both religious and otherwise, defended as to its choices made in regarding the text, itself. I do not, however, intend for this to serve as a new meaning-text, to suggest that the counter-interpretation highlights more accurately the text, itself, or, more dangerous, that this is the god’s word. I simply intend to suggest that such a counter-interpretation may afford certain mechanisms for breaking down the *moment of faith*, pulling apart the absurd for something that focuses itself within the ethical and the love-thy-neighbor narrative.

Important to religious readers: even Kant, somewhat known for his tradition in order and God, finds Abraham harmful. And he seems to provide a justification for a reunification, an observation against suspension. For many, the pathos of a cry against the murder of Isaac, for Abraham to stand up and say, “No, God. Take me or nothing,” fills me with a hope in the protection of a father over his son, of an abstention of the self for the Other. However, to the many currently swayed by the contemporary narrative: this account may not suffice. For one might respond that such would be rebellion, not obedience. I entirely expect this work called heresy or blasphemous—rebellion. But a philosophy of heresy should be embraced. At least, to help break down the cities of men now built behind their own vain proclamation of “god’s will.”

For those both religious and unreligious, who can only see the story of Abraham through the contemporary meaning-text, this intends to open conceptual space for something else, for the *unmoment of faith*. While I make no claim to this counter-interpretation as the one, true way to read the text, it does seem a reasonable interpretation. It does, also, include specific socio-political benefits. Many in cultural religious organizations perceive a conflict between the duty to their god and the duty to the Other. The *moment of faith* justifies the preference of the first, in its relativism and absurdity, in such a way that it can create a state of exception. Paradoxically, a constant state, one in which christianity now is. Frightening—that one might hate, murder and oppress the Other, all within the surety that it carries the will of the god behind it. The counter-interpretation, presented here, acts as a reversal, but does so within the confines of a history that does not spitefully look at the Bible, but instead, recognizes it as an important cultural-historic text. In other words, it means to afford the religious, who claim to, and perceive that, they follow something divine, the opportunity to reach out and build a new narrative, a love-thy-Other narrative, that recognizes the punishment of Abraham, of the oppressor. Undoubtedly, such a counter-interpretation will struggle to ever gain traction within academic or religious communities. The power of the Abraham is strong. The power of self-interest, just as so. And the Abraham allows for their unification. However, if this helps sow the seeds of an action against marginalization, of a narrative against oppression, then its connection to “truth” or “divinity” does not really matter. What matters more is the inspiration of love, of the placement of the Other above the self, of the fighting for the good against the tyranny of evil men.

Notes:

¹ Brian Bethune, "But Where is the Lamb? Imagining the Story of Abraham and Isaac," *Maclean's* 126, no. 36 (2013): 78.

² Anne Lancashire, "Chaucer and the Sacrifice of Isaac," *Penn State University Press* 9, no. 4 (1975): 321.

³ Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin Books, 2005).

⁴ Bethune, 78.

⁵ Carol Delaney, "Was Abraham Ethical? Should We Admire His Willingness to Sacrifice His Son?" (Lecture presented as a part of the Markkula Ethics Center Lecture Series, Santa Clara, CA, April 18, 2002).

⁶ Giorgio Agamben, "The Idea of Language," in *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (California: Stanford University Press, 1999), 46-7.

⁷ The Bible, like any formal piece of writing, allows individuals and institutions to produce a certain text involving its meaning. Commonly called *an interpretation*, this conceptualization of meaning serves as a unique text in and of itself. However, sacred religious texts often lack ideological freedom in interpretation. I call this *the meaning-text*. This phrase attempts to highlight the evolution of interpretation into a codified text, itself. While the word, "Interpretation," gives a sense of flexibility, the word, "Meaning-text," observes the codification of an interpretation with the original text as it sits on the page. The meaning-text holds such social currency that many lack the ability to see it as functionally different than the text on the page. While each person may likely have a unique interpretation of a text, a meaning-text is perceived as the one, true way in which to read within a given sub-culture. Interestingly, even those antagonist to the meaning-text often fail to distinguish it as interpretation, to such an extent that much opposition and criticism still lack a drive toward reinterpretation.

⁸ In the binding of Isaac, this meaning-text surrounds Abraham as a man of faith, his act as in line with the god and the good, his faith something deserving of admiration and emulation. This seems the broadest and most encompassing meaning-text. However, undoubtedly, other interpretations, such as the ordeal as a torment to Abraham, have grown less or more codified within different local and national contexts.

⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 1-3.

¹⁰ Agamben, *State of Exception*, 4-5.

¹¹ I intend the phrase "story of Abraham" to relate to the original biblical passage. This sits intertwined and opposed to, in more or less ways, the *meaning-text*, or *the moment of Abraham*, that codified interpretation of the story within contemporary epistemology. *The moment of faith*, then, is the operant of that same formation of meaning-text within the individual life of an individual ideologue.

¹² R. Zachary Manis, "Kierkegaard and Evans on the Problem of Abraham," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 39, no. 3 (2011): 479.

¹³ C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love: Divine Commands and Moral Obligations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 314.

¹⁴ Roy Bowen Ward, "The Works of Abraham," *Harvard Theological Review* 61, no. 2 (1968): 286-287.

¹⁵ Claire Elise Katz, "The Voice of God and the Face of the Other: Levinas, Kierkegaard, and Abraham," *Journal of Textual Reasoning* 10 (2001), <http://jtr.lib.virginia.edu/archive/volume10/Katz.html>.

¹⁶ Omri Boehm, "The Politics of the Binding of Isaac," *New York Times*, Jan. 14, 2014, The Opinionator section, http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/01/14/the-politics-of-the-binding-of-isaac/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=0.

¹⁷ For more on the complication of love in notions of the self and the Other, one might consider C.S. Lewis's *The Four Loves* as a text that examines various forms of love, meanings ascribed to the word, that often focus more on the needs of the self than those of the Other.

¹⁸ Michel Foucault, "17 March 1976," in *"Society Must Be Defended": Lectures at the Collège De France, 1975-76*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 239-42.

¹⁹ Giorgio Agamben, "The Messiah and the Sovereign: The Problem of Law in Walter Benjamin," in *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (California: Stanford University Press, 1999), 170-1.

²⁰ Rembrandt, *Abraham and Isaac*, 1634.

²¹ Agamben, *State of Exception*, 3-4.

²² *Hamdan v. Rumsfeld*, 542 U.S. 466 (2006). *Hamdan* determined that the executive military tribunals, created to adjudicate guilt with regard to those labelled as "enemy combatants," were unconstitutional in that they lacked extension of rights to those under trial, especially those rights provided from the Geneva Convention and Uniform Code of Military Justice. In an important way, the U.S. Supreme Court dictated a reinstatement of the rights afforded under these two provisions, extending rights to individuals held at Guantanamo Bay. While some might question the effectiveness of this court decision, it did serve to aide in dismantling the unbeing of the Other, reaching out a hand to try and pull them from the excepted state.

²³ *Boumediene v. Bush*, 553 U.S. 723 (2008). *Boumediene* further provided for the reinstatement of the being. It afforded foreign suspects of terrorism similar constitutional rights to due process as afforded to U.S. citizens suspected of terrorism in *Hamdi v. Rumsfeld*, 542 U.S. 507 (2004). In other words, it created a further level of rights protection that limited the bare life of detainees.

²⁴ Of course, civil law prevents the actualization of certain perceptions of the god's will, or otherwise punishes such acts after committed. And the persuasion from religious leaders can, to a greater or lesser extent, affect the mindset of the individual. To say that religious figures lack institutional, administrative power is not to admit that they have no authority. They act more as a hidden sovereign. One of charisma and ethos. To not enter into what could be an entire book, itself, suffice to say that the power of religious leadership is somewhat determined by the leader's persuasive ability, creating a distinction that holds more or less true, depending on context, between administrative/institutional power, as compared to personal authority to persuade. And while law limits physical behavior, the mindset carried by the moment of faith holds no direct oversight.

²⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2009), 186.

²⁶ By "self-constructed" I do not intend to mean that no other forces shape one's perception of the *moment of faith*. It may be influenced by religious enculturation,

social dictum, personal prejudice, psychological disorder, ethics, love and various other social, psychological and subjective facets that shape identity and ideology. By self-constructed, I simply intend to suggest that the *moment of faith* is not bound to all or any of these things. That it may be one or many. That it holds no unique and consistent connection to one or more of these forms. Much like a state holds a monopoly of violence, so too, the self holds a monopoly over the god's will.

²⁷ Kenneth Burke, "A 'Dialectical Lyric' (Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling);" "The Kill and the Absurd;" and "Order, the Secret, and the Kill," in *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 244-267. As a consideration of Burke's writing, he seems to maintain the Abraham meaning-text in its relation to the original. Though far more antagonistic than, say, The Christian Coalition, both operate within the same interpretative framework of understanding in regards to the biblical passage.

²⁸ Christian Coalition of America, "Christian Coalition of America's Agenda for the 113th Congress," http://www.cc.org/our_agenda (accessed Apr. 4, 2014).

²⁹ One who desired to separate the two might note that many U.S. Democrats and Republicans (as an example) want to strengthen health care services for citizens; however, each party recognizes a different pragmatic policy approach that intends to achieve this end. Such a consideration exists as a very different thing than someone who, say, acts against health care, wanting to see people suffer without care. Utilizing concerns of the ethical, one might delineate the desire to improve health care as the good, and the desire toward, or apathy of, suffering as the ungood. And considerations of political policy (state-based versus private business entities, and the numerous forms in between) as a matter of the mechanisms or tools in which to achieve that ethical or unethical end. That is, as the a-ethical. Levels of disagreement in the a-ethical often carry with them a sense of the ethical, but this sense often serves more as a pathos behind which organizations and individuals attempt to garnish a level of credibility and political currency for their unique, a-ethical, policy concerns. With the moment of faith, one is able to forgo these considerations of ethics in order to align their particular policy agenda with their anthropomorphic view of the god's will. In other words, one can throw out any concern for ethics, respect for their political opponents, and state that they are "defending the godly." That organizing against a public policy like the Affordable Care Act is, in fact, a movement for the godly. The discussion no longer operates on the distinction of public policy as a pragmatic mechanism for obtaining the ethical, but enshrines that particular political ideology in the unconcern for ethics, policy and pragmatics. It operates fully on the level of the perceived divine.

³⁰ Christian Coalition of America, "About Us," http://www.cc.org/about_us (accessed Sept. 21, 2014).

³¹ Plato, *Gorgias*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Seaside, OR: Watchmaker Publishing, 2010).

³² "Faith" is a uniquely shadowy word. Its pliability stems from its connection apart from reason or logic. However, "faith" may include issues of the ethic. Often the word faith indicates a unification of the ethical with the theological. Though not always. It is this "not always" that complicates contemporary social and cultural examinations. It is this "not always" that I define within the *moment of faith*, the suspension of the ethical for something else, for, "Faith." But herein lays

the distinction that can help separate the acts done from religious ideology that were good, and those harmful. Those good might have extended from the *moment of faith*, though this would be somewhat arbitrary in its requirement of ethical suspension. It would be harder, however, to justify abuses, from cults to individual bigotry, in a “faith” that unifies the ethical and theological, that unites logic and reason within the idea of faith. More common, ethical suspension allows for justified harm and hate, killing sons, raping women and children, colonializing “heathens,” and walking past the homeless in apathy.

³³ Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, “Introduction: Writing the Past,” in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 506.

³⁴ One to note: Eleanor Wilner, “Sarah’s Choice,” in *Sarah’s Choice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 21–4.

³⁵ Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, trans. Mary J. Gregor (New York: Abaris Books, Inc., 1979), 115.

³⁶ Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, 115n.

³⁷ While Kant uses the term “moral” in most of his writing, this word has become relatively problematic in contemporary critical theory. We recognize the power relations inherent in the word. However, Kant uses the term to relate to those issues of the good not subject to the social. Not to excuse all of his writing, I suggest that a more modern interpretation might involve the use of the word “ethical” as a replacement for “moral.” Contemporary thought tends to hold ethics in a state less potentially corruptible, as we understand certain human acts, like working against oppression and marginalization of the Other, as connected to the good. Though this might be a fruitful discussion in an essay of its own, suffice to say, I plan to utilize the word, “Ethic,” as an interpretation of Kant’s reliance on the word, “Moral,” to highlight the distinction between those beliefs about the good that are corruptible, and those acts that seem to be good, a priori—another question worthy of its own work. I only intend to highlight my subjective interpretation of the passage in question, the lens I bring into this work.

³⁸ Of course, this translated quality largely complicates the term “original” as used here. I hope to gain some forgiveness as to its continued use, for while no “true original” exists, it does help to highlight the distinction between text as symbols placed together to make meaning, and the meaning gained from the reader through his or her subjective interpretation.

³⁹ Jordan Howard Sobel, “‘God’, ‘god’, and God,” in *Logic and Theism: Arguments For and Against Beliefs in God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 3–9.

⁴⁰ Many English versions do translate “Yahweh” and “Elohim” differently within the story of Abraham. However, the former translates commonly as “Lord” and the latter as “God.” And though the words are not translated the same, the distinction between the words, “God,” and “Lord,” is scarce. Many use the former to indicate the believed being while the latter a more pronoun referent. This is almost a reversal of the Hebrew writing, which seems to utilize “Yahweh” as the name and “Elohim” as a pronoun referent. Regardless, both English translations of “God” and “Lord” seem to carry a metaphysical, monotheist quality. “God” lacks the historic qualities connected to “Elohim.” Undoubtedly, the important qualities of “Elohim” do not carry into the English translation, yet another example of the way language complicates text, often distancing meaning between cultures and their translations.

⁴¹ Boehm, 1.

⁴² Boehm, 1.

⁴³ To any religious readers, I do not intend to suggest the Bible as only literature, as many from the *Bible as Literature* movement argue. Instead, I simply suggest that the way we read literature, understand certain moves and methods, therein, might aide in interpretation. Literary studies examines metaphor and motif, sub-text and characterization, in ways that relate to fictionalizations. However, these same qualities exist within personal narrative and analogy, among numerous other forms. In applying these same literary examinations, I do not intend to suggest the Bible as mere literature. The historic-literary relationship of the Bible is another discussion entirely. And since these same literary forms are used in non-fiction narrative, most notably creative non-fiction, there is ample room to suggest that a discussion involving the literary moves of the Bible, as a text, does not need to implicate itself within questions of its truth or fictionalization. This is all to say that this examination does not intend to pick up nor discuss the question of whether or to what extent the Bible is fact or fiction, historic or lore. Suffice to say that for this essay, I suggest reading the Bible similarly to creative non-fiction, memoir, and those forms.

⁴⁴ Common English Bible (CEB), "Gen. 11-23," Bible Gateway, <https://www.biblegateway.com/versions/Common-English-Bible-CEB/#vinfo> (accessed Apr. 3, 2014).

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