

Sacrificial Heroics:
The Story of Abraham and its Use in the Justification of War
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I would like to begin and end this paper with poems. In between I will provide some thoughts about how and why **this** story – the story told in Genesis 22 of the Hebrew Bible and in Sura 37 of the Qur'an – is used to legitimate or justify war (and to protest against it). Some of you may recognize the first poem:

So Abram rose, and clave the wood, and went,
And took the fire with him, and a knife.
And as they sojourned both of them together,
Isaac the first-born spake and said, My Father,
Behold the preparations, fire and iron,
But where is the lamb, for this burnt-offering?
Then Abram bound the youth with belts and straps,
And builded parapets and trenches there,
And stretched forth the knife to slay his son.
When lo! an Angel called him out of heaven,
Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad,
Neither do anything to him, thy son.
Behold! Caught in a thicket by its horns,
A Ram.

Offer the Ram of Pride instead.

But the old man would not so, and slew his son,
And half the seed of Europe, one by one.

That is “The Parable of the Old Man and the Young,” one of Wilfred Owen’s war poems written during the first World War. Because the story has often been invoked in times of war – it is not surprising that it has also been used in protests against war as in Owen’s poem. Some of you may also recall the Vietnam era songs by Leonard Cohen and Bob Dylan that explicitly referred to the Abraham story.

The poem told the story pretty well, except that in the Bible and the Qur’an the son is not slain. But is that difference major or only deceptively so? Think for a minute. It is not Abraham who prevents the slaughter, but God. Throughout history Abraham has been revered precisely for his *willingness* to go through with it. That is what makes him the “father of faith” at the foundation of the three monotheistic religions - Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Abraham showed his love of God by his willingness to sacrifice his son. But what about his love for his son? The message to humans, affirmed in all three religious traditions is that love of God must come first. Christianity takes the story a step further: it is God the Father who allows the sacrifice of his only son. But what about his *love* for his son? Unlike Jesus, Isaac did not cry out: “Father, father why have you forsaken me?” Regardless, both are portrayed as being at one with the father, a complete submission of their will to the Father. Theological interpretations of “at-one-ment” abound; here I will focus on what I think is behind the story and the implications of this sacred model for human behavior and morality.

Abraham is thought to be heroic precisely because “he concedes nothing to the tie of relationship, but his whole weight is thrown into the scale on the side of acceptability with

God...he did not incline partly to the boy and partly to piety, but devoted his whole soul through and through to holiness and disregarded the claims of their common blood” (Philo, 1959:97). Or take the lines from the prayer of supplication recited during the services of Rosh Hashana where Abraham is extolled because he “suppressed his compassion in order to perform thy will with a perfect heart.” Abraham is *the* model of a faithful man.

The faithful man is one whose faith in an abstract, transcendent *concept* takes precedence over his earthly emotional ties to his child. The unwritten message is that to be faithful, fathers ought to be willing to sacrifice their sons if God, or a surrogate transcendent authority, such as the state, demands. If Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son, so much more so should ordinary fathers be willing. It was especially disturbing to learn just before the conference (and the election) that President Bush reads every morning from a devotional, inspirational book by a 19th century minister, Oswald Chambers, who praises “Abraham for preparing to slay his son at God’s command without...conferring with flesh and blood.” (Wright, 2004).

Emotional ties (with flesh and blood) have been seen as womanly, as impeding moral development; yet I would argue that psychological detachment is far more dangerous because it can lead to a devaluation of human life. To detach oneself from affective ties, to abjure ordinary human emotions are, however, the very qualities desired and instilled in soldiers. This has been reported by those who have undergone military training. The model is authoritarian and hierarchal: as Abraham is obedient to God, so is the son to his father. It communicates a message to sons, and to putative sons - the soldiers. It is their duty to obey. They are not allowed to question: “Theirs not to make reply; Theirs not to reason why; Theirs but to do and die.”¹ *Their* duty is to follow orders; obedience is perhaps the primary virtue and value in the

military. Those who do not obey should be punished, for they threaten not just the authority of the fathers but also the system that supports them. The refusal of a group of soldiers in Iraq to obey a command is but one example.

The story has been used to justify war, especially when the war is seen as ‘holy’ or against an evil one. All three religious traditions have drawn upon it for this purpose. I have heard it used in sermons, in the news, and in fiction. If the references are not always explicit, allusions make it obvious. Following are a few war stories from each of the three religious traditions:

Renowned Talmudic scholar, Adin Steinsaltz “tells us that if we accept the fatherhood of God, we must obey His every command. This vision is compelling enough to elicit the consent of hundreds of millions of men and women of all nations and religions who are able, on faith alone, to accept as the voice of God a command to sacrifice their sons” (cited in Cohen, 1990:54)². In a story, “The Way of the Wind,” by Israeli novelist Amos Oz, a father purposely deceives his wife -- the boy’s mother – and signs the paper that permits the son to join the air force. The son wants to escape from the father, but cannot escape from his father’s desire that he prove himself a man and a worthy son. The paternal desire leads to the son’s death.

A similar story is told in Reverend Robert Herhold’s play “Who Asked Isaac?” set during the period of the Vietnam war. The father wants the son to join the army and fight in Vietnam; *his* own honor depends on it. The son didn’t want to go but risked losing his father’s love and respect if he did not. The son says: “I thought the first job of parents is to protect their children.” The father responded: “I’ll love my son when he proves he’s a man. How can I love a wimp?” and acknowledged that he would be proud if his son died in the army.

The “Sacrifice of Isaac” was the title also of the last chapter of the novel *Fail-Safe* where the President of the United States makes the decision to drop 4 nuclear bombs on New York city, thereby sacrificing millions of his own countrymen including his wife and children, in order to honor a “Gentleman’s Agreement” he made with another Father of State -- the Russian premier.

An Iranian mullah led Islamic guards to the hiding place of his eldest son who was a Marxist. The father eagerly assented as a firing squad executed his son. He said: “Abraham didn’t sacrifice his son, but I did...even today, I don’t regret it.”

During an earlier phase of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Mrs. Arafat was quoted in the *New York Times* as saying: “If I had a son, there would be no greater honor than to sacrifice him for the Palestinian cause.”³

While the story of Abraham and the stories just briefly told are primarily about the relationship between fathers and sons, once it becomes *the* supreme model of faith, some women also adopt it, as in the case of Mrs. Arafat. And there is a midrash on Maccabees where a mother proudly says: “Go tell Father Abraham not to puff up his heart, if he made an Akedah⁴ of one son, I made an Akedah of seven” (Lam. Rab cited in Spiegel, 1969:16). But women who talk like that are seen as symbolic men. Regarding the woman in Maccabees it is written: “she took her womanly thoughts and fired them with manly spirit” (2 Macc.7:21). In short, the story has consistently been seen as related to manliness.

But it is much more than that, for this manliness is embedded in notions of fatherhood, authority and obedience, and ultimately about a particular concept of God. Yet, these are not the usual foci of of interpretation. Before turning to my interpretation, which delves into these issues, and which I discuss at length in my book, *Abraham on Trial: the Social Legacy of*

Biblical Myth, let me briefly outline (and dispose of) some of the more traditional interpretations.

Traditional exegeses proceed out from the story, and move quickly to conventional contexts for interpretation, namely sacrifice and faith, contexts that predetermine the lines of interpretation. For example, when the story is viewed in the context of the theories and meanings of sacrifice, the questions put to it will be how and in what ways does it conform to, deviate from, or shed light on known sacrificial practices? This is the approach taken by Nancy Jay in her book, *Throughout their Generations Forever*. However, *theories* about sacrifice are relatively recent.

And why start there? There is hardly any mention of sacrificial practices in Genesis before this story and most of the theorizing has to do with much later practices - so it is anachronistic both narratively and chronologically.

Why not develop a theory of sacrifice through the story rather than interpret the story through theories of sacrifice?

Another question that often comes up in relation to this is whether the story represents the end of the supposed practice of child sacrifice and the substitution of animal sacrifice. A good example of this interpretation comes from the eminent scholar, Shalom Spiegel, who says: "The ancients can accept the rigors of sacrifice as they offer up their first born to the gods...it is only inch by inch that laws were mellowed and humanized. [The story of Abraham] is the remembrance of the transition *to* animal human *from* sacrifice – a religious and moral achievement which in folk memory was associated with Abraham's name, the father of the new faith" (Spiegel 1969:63-64).

Such a thesis assumes a cultural evolutionary approach – that is, that the more ancient, the people the more barbaric and thus they must have been sacrificing their children – an hypothesis that is untenable anthropologically.⁵ Such interpretations also assume that child sacrifice was practiced in that area before (the story) of Abraham. There is no evidence for such a practice in that early time. The only evidence – and it is hotly debated – for a practice of child sacrifice is from Carthage; regardless, it is much later than *any* estimates for the Abraham story.

Much more important, however, the story **itself** shows that animal sacrifice was presupposed. The most poignant sentence in the whole story

“Father: Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?”

Even Isaac knew that the appropriate sacrifice was an animal. So, the story cannot be interpreted to indicate the substitution of an animal for child sacrifice

And if the story was really meant to put an end to the supposed rampant practice of child sacrifice - why is there no mention of such a practice in the earlier chapters in Genesis? If the intention was to stop it, God could simply have forbidden it. Or the biblical writers could have. As a prominent Jewish scholar has said:

"A prohibition against child sacrifice, if that is what it was, is merely negative, rather than a positive construction of a new faith. The Akedah in its final form is not an attempt to combat existing practice, but is itself the product of a religious attitude." I agree.

For don't forget: Abraham was *willing to go through with it* -- that is the symbol of his faith.

The story is also a performative in that it establishes a notion of the kind of God to whom such faith is owed. That is, I believe that the concept of God and the Abraham story are

interdependent, indeed, that the Abraham story is necessary for the three faiths which is why they all go back to it. This approach is very different from assuming that the notion of God existed first and is somehow independent from the story.⁶

Others, taking a cue from Maimonides, talk about the story as a trial or “a test case of the extreme limits of the love and fear of God.”⁷ Shlomo Riskin, formerly a rabbi in New York and now chief rabbi of Efrat and dean of the Ohr Torah institutions, said this means: “Abraham was asked to do what all subsequent generations of Jews...would be asked to do.... The paradox in Jewish history is that, had we not been willing to sacrifice our children for god, we would never have survived as a God-inspired and God-committed *nation*” (Riskin, 1983:31).

My question, echoed, at least by a number of modern Israelis and others is: Is nationhood worth more than one’s children? That is the question we need to be thinking about. Young people are called upon to make the ultimate sacrifice -- their lives – for what Benedict Anderson called “that invention of imagination” -- the nation. Perhaps it is time to imagine something different!

If the point of the story was to prove Abraham’s faith and obedience why not have him sacrifice himself? That would not be enough says biblical scholar Nahum Sarna (1989:393), because of course Abraham would be willing to sacrifice himself in order to save his son. But there is no evidence for that assumption. Still, if he had been willing to sacrifice himself why does he do nothing to try to save his son? Why doesn’t he argue with God as he did when trying to save Ishmael from banishment and Sodom from destruction?

At the same time, and in seeming contradiction to that view, is the one where Abraham is extolled for being willing to give up the thing he loved most in the world. But giving up

something is quite different from killing the life of another, for taking the life of one's own child. To equate them or put them on the same continuum is entering on the slippery slope of the meanings of sacrifice. Even if Abraham loved his son more than anything else in the world, is the child *his* to sacrifice? This is the question that began to propel my thoughts in a very different direction. Is the child his to sacrifice?

At the very least, Isaac belonged also to the mother. Or did he? By what right did Abraham take his son without consulting with, and getting the consent of, the child's mother? One could say, "Well, God commanded him and thus he had to obey".

But not so fast.

Would an all knowing God ask only one parent for a child when He surely knew that the child came from both and therefore belonged to both (or perhaps only to Him). This has never come up in all the centuries of commentary. The Bible and the exegetes seem to assume that Isaac (or Ishmael) belonged to the father in a way he did not belong to the mother. Some say, "well, it's because of patriarchy." But that just defers the question, since patriarchy means the power of fathers. So, my next question was: what is that power based on? Why fathers and not mothers - what is it about fatherhood that confers such power? Here is where anthropology and especially kinship theory came to the rescue. This is a complicated topic, here I can give only the barest of outlines.⁸

It may be difficult for many people to realize that the terms "father" and "mother" are not simply labels hung onto male and female parents, they are meaningful terms that derive from and embody a particular *theory* of procreation.⁹ There are cultures in which there are no equivalents; this is not to deny that people everywhere live in domestic situations and that babies come from

the bodies of women, but notions of how the process comes about and what are the necessary ingredients and actors vary considerably. So do the kinship terms. For the purposes of this discussion however, “father” and “mother” derive from a theory of procreation that I have called a *monogenetic* theory (Delaney, 1986, 1991). It is monogenetic for the principle of creation was believed to come only from one source - the male. In the Bible, men *beget* while women *bear*. Symbolically, the monogenetic theory is the human analogue of divine, monotheistic creation. The life-giving abilities attributed to men allied them with God, while women became associated with what was created by God, namely the earth. The theory is encapsulated by the word *seed*. Men were thought to provide the seed (which was also thought to convey the soul), women, in contrast were imagined as the nurturing medium, like the earth, in which the seed is planted; they foster its growth and bring it forth, but do not provide its essential identity. “Mother” and “father” are **not** co-creators. The child belongs to the father because he *is* his seed. In this theory, paternity has not meant just the recognition of a biological relationship between a man and a specific child - it has meant the *primary, creative, engendering role*. The very notion of paternity, therefore, already embodies *authority*. As God is imagined as author/creator of the world so too were men imagined as authors/creators - with God’s help, of course - of children. At the same time a man does not have to become a father to partake of the power; it is potential in all males, it is part of the definition of what it means to be a man.

The story of Abraham is all about his seed. Commentators discuss *who* is the true seed of Abraham and thus who will inherit the patrimony, the promises. Is it Isaac and thus all Jews, is it Ishmael - the first born - and thus all Muslims? Or is it Jesus and thus all Christians? Some Christian Bibles capitalize the word seed when it is believed to refer to Jesus – but in many

revised editions the word seed is changed to child or progeny. This is one instance where I feel strongly that inclusive language distorts the message. For children and progeny were imagined as the products of seed, and seed was thought to come only from the male. Commentators discuss *who* is seed, but never once, *what* is seed and what are the implications.

In this theory, then, the son does belong to the father in a way he does not belong to the mother; indeed in a very important sense, **father and son are one**¹⁰ - the son is his father's seed, he is of the same essence as his father, thus, he belongs to him. His father has authority over him. Of course, traditionally, he has also had power over daughters but the way it works out in practice is different. In either case, however, what is at stake is the family name, honor or, to put it more crudely -- the purity of the seed-line. It is only sons who can perpetuate it. To be a good son has meant to be an obedient son, to carry out the father's orders or wishes.

Abraham is obedient to God, Isaac is obedient to Abraham; the story sets up a hierarchy of command, a hierarchy of authority. Isaac's thoughts, desires, and will are not considered; indeed, most commentators say his will was identical with the father's - as that of Jesus was supposedly "at-one" with God the Father's. In the Qur'anic version it is notable that Abraham tells his son - who, by the way, is not named - what he is about to do. And the son replies: "O my father! Do that which thou are commanded. God willing, thou shalt find me of the steadfast" (Sura 37:102). Already he has been constructed as the obedient son, the willing victim.

Let me now return to the relation between this story and justifications for war. Some of the stories cited at the beginning perpetuate the idea of fathers wanting their sons to be courageous, to join the military, to fight the nation's wars, to be a hero. Military service has been a major

issue in presidential campaigns and elections - not just the current one. Who is the most heroic, most courageous, most qualified to lead the nation? Who is willing to ask the young people to die for the nation? It is the Fathers of State who make the decisions to go to war - without consulting the very people who will do the fighting and the dying. In sub-state groups such as Al Qaeda or Hamas, it is the older men, the leaders, who recruit the suicide bombers, or “martyrs” as they are known, and the latter obey their decision about when it is their turn to perform a mission. These young people are told they will be transported directly to Paradise where the men will have up to 70 virginal maidens awaiting them. It is not said what awaits the young women who volunteer.

The rhetoric of war is glory, heroism, and sacrifice, yet any soldier who survives knows that war is hell. We have some Presidents who think they can read the will of God, that God is on our side. Some Jews in Israel and Muslims in Iraq and Palestine believe the same thing.

Personally, I think the wars between these groups will be interminable because these *sibling* faiths are like three sons fighting over the patrimony – who has the right to inherit the promises given in the beginning to Abraham? Really, it is about who has the right concept of God, and who has the right understanding of the kind of society He wants. I think the fighting will be interminable because even though these religious traditions share many concepts and stories they are constructed in mutually exclusive worldviews. I think the fighting will continue until there is a widespread critique of the story of Abraham and the kind of faith it extolls and the patriarchal social organization it has spawned.

For note, too, how the story of Abraham and the internecine fighting is all about men – a male imaged God, a father and a son. This is not accidental but an essential feature in the

establishment of a patriarchal *theosocial* order. These religious traditions are, I believe, inherently exclusive, inherently violent, and inherently patriarchal; they haven't even glimpsed the gender violence -- the way in which women were left out of the foundation story and out of the concept of God.

I don't mean to suggest that we need to insert them into it. Instead, we need to change the stories. And we need different notions of the sacred, of faith, of gender, of family, of authority. We need to imagine something beyond, or at least different from, monotheism. Rather than putting love of God first, I think we need to love our children and each other first. Rather than waiting for salvation (for the chosen or the elect) in the next world, I think we need to focus on making this world a haven for everyone. Rather than the focus on authority and obedience, I think we need to think more about responsibility - to and for each other. I think we need to rethink and revalue the emotional ties that link us to each other, that help us realize our common humanity.

Finally, I ask you to consider how our world would look had protection of the child been at the foundation of faith instead of the willingness to sacrifice him.

In closing, let me cite an excerpt from a poem by Elinor Wilner entitled Sarah's Choice. It speaks directly to the situation we find ourselves in today.

The voice of the prophet grows shrill.
 He will read even defeat as a sign
 of distinction, until pain itself
 becomes holy. In that day, how shall we tell
 the victims from the saints,
 the torturers from the agents of God?
 "But mother," said Isaac, "if we were not God's
 chosen people, what then should we be? I am afraid
 of being nothing." And Sarah laughed.

Then she reached out her hand. “Isaac,
I am going now, before Abraham awakes, before
the sun to find Hagar the Egyptian and her son
whom I cast out, drunk on pride,
God’s promises, the seed of Abraham
in my own late-blooming loins.”

“But Ishmael,” said Isaac, “how should I greet him?”
“As you greet yourself,” she said, “when you bend
over the well to draw water and see your image,
not knowing it reversed. You must know your brother
now, or you will see your own face looking back
the day you’re at each other’s throats.”

She wrapped herself in a thick dark cloak
against the desert’s enmity, and tying up
her stylus, bowl, some dates, a gourd
for water – she swung her bundle on her back,
reached out once more toward Isaac.
“It’s time,” she said. “Choose now.”

“But what will happen if we go?” the boy
Isaac asked. “I don’t know,” Sarah said
“But it is written what will happen if you stay.”

1. Alfred Lord Tennyson, 1854, “The Charge of the Light Brigade.”
2. It is unclear to me what “all nations and religions” means since this command is only found in the Abrahamic religions.
3. I might also note that chapter 2 in my book discusses an actual trial of a man who sacrificed his child because God told him to. It took place in the 1990s. I attended the trial and interviewed all the participants; the Abraham story became part of the discussion.
4. In Jewish tradition, Akedah, refers to the story of Abraham in Genesis 22.
5. As a cultural anthropologist I also reject theories that tend to reduce cultural specifics to some human universal propensities, even less to genetics. This kind of approach is taken by Rene Girard in his *Violence and the Sacred*. Nor, in that book, did he account for the differentials in gender in sacrificial rituals; ie, if it is only males who participate in blood sacrifice it cannot be considered a *human* universal or propensity! As will become clear, I think there is nothing natural or inherent in males that promotes their violence, even less a propensity to sacrifice children. Rather, these things come about in relation to definitions of gender and gender roles and numerous other associations in a specific culture.
6. It is my belief that this is the foundational story and that the earlier ones – Cain and Abel, Noah and the Flood, etc. – have been borrowed from the ancient near eastern traditions and reworked within the monotheistic ideology to provide a framework for the story of Abraham.
7. This is from Maimonides’ *Guide to the Perplexed* but is cited in the *Encyclopedia Judaica*.
8. See Delaney, 1986, 1991, 1998 for discussion of anthropological theories of kinship and gender including matriarchy and the non appropriateness of the term and concept. These issues came up during the conference.
9. One can get an understanding of the differences between male and female gender definitions from a comparison of the terms *paternity vs maternity* or *patrimony vs matrimony*.
10. It should be clear that I think the theological concept of God is intimately related to notions of human pro-*creation*. Denaturalized male generativity is used symbolically to describe God’s creativity; conversely, God’s creative power is naturalized in notions of male generativity. In Christianity, not only is God considered Father and Creator, but father and son are one. Mary is merely the vehicle to bring him into the world, to provide human flesh. The theory is portrayed in some paintings where a *whole* baby Jesus is seen descending on heavenly rays and enters Mary’s ear. There is clearly no notion that male and female provide equally to the genetic constitution of a child (and in addition, of course, women also bear).