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Perhaps

*Reclaiming the Space Between
Doubt and Dogmatism*



InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

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Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.
www.ivpress.com



What Abraham Discovered

Faith Seeking Imagination

*God reveals himself by an appeal
to our capacity for imagination.*

TREVOR HART

THE AIM OF THIS CHAPTER is to explore whether my attempt to reclaim perhaps as a middle ground between doubt and dogmatism is supported by a careful reading of the Scriptures. To do so, I will repeat a question posed by the apostle Paul: “What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather . . . , discovered in this matter?” (Rom 4:1). By focusing on the *Aqedah* (or “binding” of Isaac in Gen 22), I will note how Abraham ventured forth in faithful speculation when it mattered most. By faith, Abraham learned how and when to say perhaps. Yet, before I argue this conclusion, I must first frame what was at stake in Abraham’s story by looking at the faith narrative that is the *Aqedah*’s dark doppelgänger.

THE HOMECOMING

As the bedraggled warrior crested the hill outside Mizpah, he could see the thin trail of smoke streaking down the sky toward his beloved home. *They must be cooking dinner now*, he thought. He had doubted that he would see this place again. Thankfully, the god to whom he had prayed had proven faithful to their bargain. Enemies had fallen by the warrior's hand, and he had felt a strange strength coursing through him. It was the only explanation for how his band of ruffians had sacked those twenty towns. *I guess some gods can be trusted*, he thought; *I must remember this one*. The victory had been a sign that the warrior must keep his promise. This was the reason he was squinting at the trail of smoke that led down toward the open doorway of his house.

Who was that standing there? He knew before he asked the question. The asking was a weak attempt at denial—an effort to delay the images that flooded his imagination: the altar and the blood. Every father knows his child from a distance. There is something unmistakable in the gait and posture—a mark of Cain now terribly inverted.

Through tears, the warrior saw her racing toward him, dancing, ecstatic, her curls bouncing. She looked like her mother. In one hand she held a tambourine, and with the other she girded up her garments so to speed her coming. She cried with joy as she embraced him. And he wished for all the world that he had died in battle.

Father Jephthah

It is an offense that Jephthah has the gall to appear alongside the likes of Abraham in faith's "hall of fame" (Heb 11). But we cannot understand one man without the other. Jephthah is what happens if Abraham stops listening upon Moriah. He is Abraham with wires crossed. Jephthah is a cautionary tale of what happens when zealous devotion coincides with frightful theological ignorance.¹ In our day, Jephthah is jihad. He is the faith healer who turns down medicine for his sick child. He is the

¹The most influential account of Jephthah's story, in my own life, came from a sermon by the late Haddon Robinson. Given Jephthah's unsettling appearance in Hebrews 11, Robinson preached (in his inimitable fashion) about the danger of a strong faith and bad theology.

militant fringe of the religious Right (or Left). Or more likely, in an age of biblical illiteracy, Jephthah is the church at large.

Born (most likely) to a Hebrew father, Jephthah should have learned the Mosaic prohibitions against human sacrifice. But the period of judges was not a time of much inductive Bible study within Israel's history. Not much Deuteronomy, we may guess, was recited around the table in Jephthah's broken home, much less fastened to the doorposts. His mother was a prostitute. His brothers drove him out to live among the pagans. His father did not stop them. How much, then, could Jephthah have known of Yahweh living with the bandits in the land of Tob? He returned, years later, because his kin needed "muscle" to defeat their enemies. And after haggling, they were willing to make him leader in exchange for his unique skill set (Judg 11:8-10). Jephthah had a knack for bargaining. And like some other sons of prostitutes, he turned youthful scorn into a frightful male aggression. Such was Jephthah's "gift."

But even tough guys say Hail Marys in a pinch. So when Jephthah sought the help of Israel's God before his mercenary fighting, he did it in the only way he knew: he bargained like a pagan. He haggled with God just as he had with his brothers:

If you give the Ammonites into my hands, whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the LORD's, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering. (Judg 11:30-31)

Apparently, he never expected that his little girl would be the one to greet him. What was he hoping for? A slave? A goat? Regardless, if there was one thing he had learned in Tobite Sunday school, it was that warrior-gods hate nothing more than those who renege on promises. Jephthah was a man of his word. And besides, if he broke his vow, would his brothers still keep theirs? It would set a precedent. And Jephthah did not have that much faith. So the book of Judges ends his tale with a sad post-script: "He did to her as he had vowed. And she was a virgin" (Judg 11:39).

Between Mizpah and Moriah

What does Jephthah have to do with Abraham? According to the Torah, what Jephthah did in slaughtering his child was “detestable” (e.g., Deut 12:31; 18:9-10). It was abominable and ignorant. He is a cautionary tale. Yet Hebrews lists him as a man of faith.² After all, Abraham too was willing to sacrifice his child out of obedience to God. So how exactly are the two men different?

The most obvious answer is that God actually commanded Abraham to kill his child while Jephthah only thought this action was required. The trouble for Jephthah was that he had misunderstood Yahweh; the trouble for Abraham was that he understood perfectly. Yet, a further difference is that Abraham had more time and opportunity to get to know this God of promises and high demands. While neither man had (much) access to the Torah to provide an anti-Molech memory verse, Abraham had experienced a longer history with Yahweh. And Abraham remained open to a last-minute course correction.³ Alongside these differences, however, I will now move to a point that is often missed: Abraham had learned how to say perhaps.



In Genesis 22, we are presented with the *Aqedah*—a Hebrew word that refers to the “binding” of Isaac upon an altar of burnt offering. Like the later narrative of Jephthah, this tale seems ghastly to modern readers. What kind of deity demands a child’s murder, regardless of an eventual reprieve? The late atheist Christopher Hitchens implied (perhaps rightly) that if the story were to happen today, we would chalk it up to schizophrenia, or worse: “All three monotheisms . . . praise Abraham for being willing to hear voices and then to take his son Isaac for a long and gloomy

²One way around the conundrum is to claim that Hebrews mentions Jephthah merely for his military exploits (alongside those of Gideon, Barak, and Samson) and not for his fateful vow and follow-through. Still, child sacrifice would seem to be an apparent disqualifier, rising above even the sins of men like Samson.

³Did the Spirit ever whisper stop within the soul of Jephthah? After all, this same Spirit had quite recently come upon him (Judg 11:29). Did Jephthah quell the still, small voice with a masculine assumption that a man must always keep his vows? One might find both cultural and biblical justifications for such logic (Deut 23:21; cf. Num 30:2).

walk. And then the caprice by which his murderous hand is finally stayed is written down as divine mercy.”⁴

Despite the force of Hitchens’s claim, there are certain points that he gets wrong. In the Bible, they are not voices heard by Abraham but a voice (singular)—and its accent belongs to the same promise-keeping, womb-reviving God that Abraham had come to know as powerful and trustworthy. Abraham, we might say, had a history with this voice. So when the angel halts the hand of sacrifice, the point is not capriciousness (“*See how nice I am, old man!?! I didn’t make you do it!*”) but a “severe mercy.”⁵ The test is God wringing the incipient idolatry from Abraham’s heart for the good of future generations. Despite its horror, the trial is teaching him to value the Giver over even his most precious gifts.⁶

But these points hardly trim the *Aqedah* of its rough edges. The tale resists our taming—and especially when we place ourselves in Abraham’s position. Generations of readers have wondered what went through the old man’s mind as he ascended Mount Moriah. In most cases, the attempts to psychologize such ancient persons yield dubious results.⁷ “The past is a foreign country,” says the adage. “They do things differently there.”

Genesis 22 is also rather sparse for conversation. There are clues to Abraham’s thoughts, but only that. With Moriah looming in the distance, the old man tells the servants that both he and the boy will return after having worshiped (Gen 22:5). And in response to Isaac’s question regarding their lack of animal accompaniment, Abraham assures him, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering” (Gen 22:8). Are these words polite deceptions or prophetic hope? Either way, it is Isaac wriggling on the altar just one verse later. What did Abraham expect to happen next?

⁴Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: The Case Against Religion* (London: Atlantic Books, 2007), 53.

⁵The phrase comes from C. S. Lewis, spoken to Sheldon Vanauken, and inspiring the title of his memoir. See Sheldon Vanauken, *A Severe Mercy: A Story of Faith, Tragedy, and Triumph* (New York: HarperCollins, 1980).

⁶For its intended audience, the *Aqedah* served as a protective reminder that while the gods of other nations might take one’s child in human sacrifice, the God of Israel was not like this.

⁷A reality that, of course, problematizes even our earlier account of Jephthah.

Only the book of Hebrews tells us. In Hebrews 11, just prior to the awkward nod to Jephthah, the inspired author gives a window into Abraham's inner world. "By faith," it says, he was willing to kill Isaac. Yet he did not do so in despair. According to the text, the patriarch held fast to Yahweh's prior promise that "it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned" (Heb 11:18; cf. Gen 21:12). How could this be? The unnamed author offers this interpretation:

By faith . . . Abraham *reckoned* that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death. (Heb 11:17, 19, emphasis added)⁸

In the NIV translation, Abraham "reasoned" (*logisamenos*) to this bold conclusion. Yet in other English versions, the word is less certain and cerebral. We are told that he merely "considered" that the Lord was able to raise Isaac from the dead (ESV, NASB, and NRSV). Regardless of translation, my claim is that Abraham's *logisamenos*—his ability to "consider" a strange possibility—serves as a model for what this book proposes. The *logisamenos* points to his ability to say perhaps.

Faith Seeking Imagination

My thesis is that between *certainty* and *skepticism* resides *perhaps*—and the reclaiming of this little word is crucial to the life of faith. Speculation is not always unwarranted in theology. Nor is it always useless. Moriah proves this.

For Abraham, the process of hopeful imagining rested on the foundation of his prior faith in God. Hence, the ability to say perhaps does not supplant faith; it builds on it. By faith Abraham "considered" the possibility that God could raise the dead. By faith he "reasoned" that even a bloody death would not keep Isaac from fathering descendants. Another astonishing point is that Abraham's "reckoning" required a resurrection from the ash heap underneath the altar! This raises a serious question. Wounds can be sutured, and CPR may start a heart, but how does one heal ash?

⁸The language of "having reckoned" is used by Gareth Lee Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 556.

Whatever the answer, it bears noting that this same God had already twice conquered death in Isaac's conception. This point must not be missed. We learn elsewhere that both (1) Abram's flesh and (2) Sarai's womb were "as good as dead" prior to Yahweh's intervention (Heb 11:12; Rom 4:19). Hence, Abraham's thinking, according to Hebrews, seems to be that if God had twice overcome death in the boy's conception, why not again? After all, the best predictor of future capability is past action. The ability to conquer death was already on God's résumé. There was a certain logic to Abraham's apparently ridiculous deduction. Still, the words "as good as" would cast a pall over even the most trusting parent. A barren womb is different from a burned-up body.

For Abraham, this speculative venturing forth from faith's foundation gave him the courage to obey. In other words, saying perhaps changed how he lived. It was not the equivalent of irrelevant speculation about how many angels may dance on the head of the pin. Abraham's *logisamenos* mattered. Yet it also stands distinct from completely unfounded or unbridled speculation (what I have previously dubbed "what-iffery").

Though later theological tradition would rightly make much of "faith seeking understanding" (*fides quaerens intellectum*), my own project involves "faith seeking [a redeemed] imagination"—*fides quaerens imaginationem*.⁹ I am interested in a faith that learns how and when and why to say perhaps.¹⁰

While Abraham's consideration stands apart from skepticism, it also stands distinct from certainty. Unlike a presumptuous façade ("Don't worry Isaac; I know how this will all play out!"), *logisamenos* only ventures one possible way in which the promise may hold true. And, indeed, the story plays out differently than Abraham had reasoned. In the end,

⁹This idea connects to a question by James K. A. Smith: "What if the primary work of [Christian] education was the transforming of our imagination rather than the saturation of our intellect?" Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 18.

¹⁰Hence the epigraph that frames this chapter: "God reveals himself by an appeal to our capacity for imagination." Trevor A. Hart, "Imagination," in *T&T Clark Companion to Atonement*, ed. Adam J. Johnson (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 551.

God does not allow the killing of the boy; hence, Isaac was received back from the dead only “figuratively speaking” (Heb 11:19 ESV). Yet from another angle, Abraham’s reckoning toward resurrection is absolutely right. As Christ reveals, Yahweh *did* one day keep his promise through the death and raising of the beloved Son.

For these reasons, Abraham is the model for my remaining chapters. Given my view of Scripture, it matters not whether a concept like perhaps can help us steer a middle course between the poles of doubt and dogmatism if indeed the Bible contradicts it. Middle is not always most in line with truth. And even an elegant metaphor is baseless without biblical roots. With my reading of the *Aqedah* now briefly outlined, I must now consider an objection to it.

The Kierkegaard Contention

The most famous alternative to my account of Abraham’s *logisamenos* comes from the “melancholy Dane”—the Christian existentialist, poet, and social critic—Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855). His great work on Abraham and Isaac is *Fear and Trembling* (1843).¹¹ The haunting pathos of the book remains palpable. And it is a stinging indictment of a cultural Christianity that sees faith as either a naive preoccupation to be moved past in one’s maturity or a concept that must be redefined to fit the ruling form of modern reason. In the view of Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous alter ego, John of Silence,¹² Abraham knew better.

Fear and Trembling throws down the gauntlet before those who would dismiss the faith of the ancients without understanding its true depth and difficulty. In those olden days,

¹¹Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling: A Dialectical Lyric and The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. with introduction and notes by Walter Lowrie, rev. ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1945), 12. Subsequent citations are from the Lowrie translation unless otherwise noted.

¹²There is debate over the extent to which such pseudonyms may be said to speak for Kierkegaard. Still, the practice fits his method of “indirect communication”—a technique by which he communicates ideas without directly arguing for them. This approach allows the audience to embrace truth on its own merits, rather than accepting or rejecting it based on Kierkegaard’s authorial testimony. See Kenneth D. Boa and Robert M. Bowman Jr., *Faith Has Its Reasons: Integrative Approaches to Defending the Christian Faith*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 347. For ease of reference, I sometimes speak of Kierkegaard as the author of the work, yet with the caveat that the voice of John of Silence may not always be synonymous with his own.

faith was a task for a whole lifetime, not a skill thought to be acquired in either days or weeks. When the old campaigner approached the end, had fought the good fight, and kept his faith, his heart was still young enough not to have forgotten the fear and trembling that disciplined his youth. . . . Where these venerable figures arrived our own age begins, in order to go further.¹³

In the cross hairs was the Christendom of nineteenth-century Denmark, where one's status as a believer was assumed by birth and breeding.

Fear and Trembling also levels a denunciation of the modern myth that one can find a harmony between religion and human-centered reason. The chief foil here is Georg W. F. Hegel (1770–1831). In spectacular fashion, Hegel had constructed a vast and abstract system in which the ugly ditch between reason and revelation was to be bridged by virtue of his own brilliance.¹⁴ In response to Hegel's hubris, John of Silence makes clear that his own account will be different. "This is not the System," he shouts. "It has nothing whatever to do with the System"—which he likens to a tower that has the marks of Babel's shaky bricks.¹⁵ While Kierkegaard took issue with many parts of Hegelian philosophy, the crucial point has to do with Hegel's confidence that he had reduced faith to an abstract system of rational philosophy now explicated exclusively by him. In contrast, Kierkegaard viewed faith as a form of "divine madness" that "begins precisely where thinking leaves off."¹⁶

For this reason, Kierkegaard is often set forth as the prime example of fideism—the idea that faith and rationality are mortal enemies. But the charge that Kierkegaard is a full-fledged fideist is controversial.¹⁷ What

¹³This passage is from the Alastair Hannay translation of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* (London: Penguin Books, 1985), 42. As Ronald M. Green notes, "To go further" was a jab at the Hegelians of the day, who had adopted the motto "one must go further" as a way of presenting faith as an early phase of intellectual development that must now be transcended. See Green, "'Developing' *Fear and Trembling*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon Daniel Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 260.

¹⁴For the proverbial "ugly, broad ditch" between reason and the revealed truths of history, see G. E. Lessing (1729–1781), "On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power," in *Lessing's Theological Writings*, ed. Henry Chadwick (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1956), 53–55.

¹⁵Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 24–25.

¹⁶Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 37.

¹⁷Along these lines, Myron Penner argues that Kierkegaard is rejecting not reason per se but rather the modern conception of reason. Myron Bradley Penner, *The End of Apologetics: Christian Witness in a Postmodern Context* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 11. Beyond this, Boa

matters for my investigation, however, is only Kierkegaard's treatment of Abraham and the *Aqedah*.

"Though Abraham arouses my admiration," says John of Silence, "he at the same time appalls me."¹⁸ The reason for the shock involves the patriarch's willingness to suspend the ethical mandate against slaughtering one's child.¹⁹ And yet, says John of Silence, this is precisely what makes Abraham a man of faith. True faith involves the "teleological suspension of the ethical."²⁰ For Abraham, the priority is the command of God, a word that seems utterly irrational and even diabolical in light of prior promises and moral prohibitions. In the *Aqedah*, Abraham leaped past the ethical into the paradox of the absurd, albeit with fear and trembling. Kierkegaard's takeaway is that sin's opposite "is not virtue but faith."²¹

To its credit, *Fear and Trembling* is well aware that Abraham was hardly the only one to believe he must sacrifice his child. History gives examples like Agamemnon (from Greek mythology) and, yes, Jephthah, who did likewise. The difference, says Kierkegaard, is that these men were not truly "knights of faith." They were merely "tragic heroes" or "knights of infinite resignation." They stayed within the realm of the ethical whereas Abraham transgressed this border. While stranded by the sea, Agamemnon learned that the gods had been offended and that unless he offered up his daughter, everyone would die. His choice was excruciating, but it was both rational and ethical by a certain standard of ancient judgment. Like a pagan Caiaphas, Agamemnon's conclusion was a simple calculation of the greater good: it is better that one girl should die than for the whole boatload to perish (cf. Jn 11:50).²²

and Bowman note that Kierkegaard still employs reason in the form of *indirect* arguments for the gospel's truth; this includes the argument that the gospel must be true because no one would make up such an absurd set of claims. See again, Boa and Bowman, *Faith Has Its Reasons*, 347.

¹⁸Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 71.

¹⁹"He did it for God's sake because God required this proof of his faith; for his own sake he did it in order that he might furnish the proof." *Fear and Trembling*, 70.

²⁰See esp. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 64-65.

²¹Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 213.

²²Slightly different versions of the tale exist in the Greek tragedians, Sophocles and Aeschylus.

So too with Jephthah. As some ancient proof-texter might have argued, the Torah is clear that vows to God must always be kept (Deut 23:21; cf. Num 30:2)! And Jephthah's failure to maintain a solemn bargain might have set a dangerous precedent for him if his brothers chose to follow suit. In these ways, both the pagan Agamemnon and the Hebrew Jephthah remain (however tenuously by modern standards) within the realm of the ethical. Oh, and one more thing: Jephthah and Agamemnon killed their girls. In a deeply patriarchal setting, this detail might also add a note of sinful rationality to their actions.

Yet *Fear and Trembling* also sees a final difference between Abraham, the knight of faith, and these tragic figures: Abraham never relinquished hope in God's prior promise that it would be through Isaac that his offspring would be numbered.²³ Of course, these two statements from the Lord appear to stand in utter contradiction:

1. Isaac will one day father offspring.
2. Kill Isaac.

Somehow, Abraham held to both ideas. In the words of *Fear and Trembling*, he weathered the "concussions of existence" and leaped into the void.²⁴ Kierkegaard saw such faith as "the paradox that does not permit of mediation." It is a "miracle"²⁵ and "madness."²⁶

"If Only I Knew Hebrew[s]!"—A Response to Kierkegaard

I disagree with one aspect of this powerful interpretation. The difference between Kierkegaard's reading and my own has to do with the extent to which Abraham had reasonable warrant for "considering" that God might keep his promise. Kierkegaard says that he had none. I say that he had a certain (speculative) logic—rooted in evidence but still falling far short of certainty. Now to explain.

In the prelude to *Fear and Trembling*, we hear of a man from Denmark who has always been captivated by the story of Abraham and Isaac

²³See Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 46-47.

²⁴Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 73.

²⁵Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 77.

²⁶Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 37.

though he admits being “less and less able to understand it.” Pseudonyms aside, the man bears an unmistakable resemblance to Kierkegaard. And in the prelude’s closing line, we read, “That man . . . didn’t know Hebrew, if he had known Hebrew, he perhaps would easily have understood the story [of the *Aqedah*] and Abraham.”²⁷

I would add only a single letter (*s*) to that final line. While the Hebrew language may not have done much to aid Kierkegaard’s understanding, Hebrews (the New Testament book) could have changed key aspects of his exegesis. After all, it is in Hebrews that we gain the crucial insight into Abraham’s resurrected rationality. By faith, Abraham “reasoned” that God could even raise the dead (Heb 11:19).

The closest Kierkegaard comes to grappling with the *logisamenos* of Hebrews is in the following passage, which must be quoted at length:

All that time [Abraham] believed—he believed that God would not require Isaac of him, whereas he was willing nevertheless to sacrifice him if it was required. He believed by virtue of the absurd; . . . even at the instant when the knife glittered he believed . . . that God would not require Isaac. . . . He did not believe that some day he would be blessed in the beyond, but that he would be happy here in the world. God could give him a new Isaac, could recall to life him who had been sacrificed. He believed by virtue of the absurd; for all human reckoning had long since ceased to function.²⁸

The passage gets some things right: Abraham’s hope was not for some heavenly reunion with Isaac’s ghost but for blessed happiness in this world.

But *Fear and Trembling* misses two key points: First, it assumes too much continuity between the ethics of modern Denmark and the ethics of the ancient Near East. Second, it fails to grapple with my point regarding God’s long track record of overcoming death in Abram’s story. When taken together, these two insights move Abraham away from a fideism that embraces faith’s utter irrationality and toward a middle ground in which *perhaps* is the result of faith seeking (a redeemed) imagination: *fides quaerens imaginationem*.

Now to illustrate these two points.

²⁷Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 26.

²⁸Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 46-47.

First, in contrast to Kierkegaard's description of the *Aqedah* as "the teleological suspension of the ethical," John Walton argues that, in the culture of the day, it would hardly have been viewed as absurd or unethical to claim that a god might demand so costly a sacrifice:

The command to sacrifice his son would not have been as shocking to Abraham as it is to us. In the Canaanite worldview, the god who provided fertility (El) was also entitled to demand a portion of what had been produced. This was expressed in sacrifice of animals and grain and in the sacrifice of children. . . . Abraham's compliant acquiescence, as much as it reflects the power of his faith, also suggests that human sacrifice is familiar to his conceptual worldview. However saddened he may have been, he is not dumbfounded by the macabre or peculiar nature of Yahweh's demand. It was culturally logical, despite being emotionally harsh, and only baffling in light of the covenant promises.²⁹

The story of Jephthah proves this point.³⁰ The past, once more, is a foreign country.

Second, Abraham's experience with Yahweh as a God who conquered death—both in Sarai's womb and in his withered body—gave birth to a certain kind of reasoned speculation that God might keep his promise regarding Isaac's offspring. In this way, his faith did not begin "where thinking leaves off." The great gift of Kierkegaard is to show the massive gulf between Christianity and a rational pursuit of certainty. By modern standards, Abraham's actions do seem like a divine madness. (Just ask Hitchens.) Still, Kierkegaard's failure—like that of many others in our polarized and fragmented culture—was to miss the possibility of a middle ground between rational certainty and the absurd.

²⁹John H. Walton, *Genesis*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 511. Walton never mentions Kierkegaard and does not seem to be explicitly responding to his position.

³⁰What's more, because Abraham lived long before the reception of the Mosaic law (not to mention the ethical assumptions of modern Denmark), it is anachronistic to say that God's command required him to ponder the teleological suspension of "the ethical" as a universally acknowledged boundary. Jerome Van Kuiken suggests that it would be better to view the *Aqedah* in terms of the "teleological *permission* of the ethical" (emphasis added). Van Kuiken, "Why Protestant Christians Should Not Believe in Mary's Immaculate Conception: Response to Mulder," *Christian Scholars Review* 46, no. 3 (2017): 238n26.

In this no man's land resides the *logisamenos* of the book of Hebrews. It is a baptized form of reasoning that allowed Abraham to say perhaps in a way that motivates hopeful obedience. If only Jephthah had been able to engage in such a Spirit-guided form of thoughtful speculation. How might his story have been different? Now for a final (speculative) word on that.

A BETTER SACRIFICE

As the warrior crested the hill outside Mizpah, he could again see a trail of smoke as it streaked down toward his beloved home. Thankfully, the God to whom he had prayed had once more proven faithful. The girl was beside him. But, unlike her father, she did not glance back to see the burning home.

So much for brothers, thought the warrior. This was the second time his siblings had driven him away while citing “legal” reasons. Still this was a better sacrifice than the one he had narrowly averted.

How had he averted it? The swirl of events was fuzzy. It had been an unquestioned assumption, in his time, that one must always pay one's vows. After all, if one should break a bargain, what motive would others have to keep theirs? The system would collapse they told him. *Well, this is not the system!* It felt like a leap into the void.

They would say that Jephthah had grown soft, that he had given over to emotion like a woman. But that was not quite right. He had intended to fulfill his vow, until the voice had stayed his hand: “‘Grant me this one request’ it said. ‘Give me two months to roam the hills and weep with my friends because I will never marry.’” A lot can happen in two months. The words tugged at his mind like a ram caught in a thicket. They gave time for the Spirit to work—the Spirit that still clung to Jephthah like a scent slowly evaporating. And while it did not overpower his ability to resist, it did make him capable of contemplating new ideas about the ethical and God's will. On some nights, during that two-month stay of execution, he could almost hear a child's voice: “Take up and read.”

And so he did. Jephthah may have lived in Tob, but he was not completely oblivious to Torah. He had referenced parts of it when haggling with the king of Ammon. Anyone can be an expert when one wants to

justify something. But this was different. The motive now was something more than power. For the first time, he was listening more than bargaining. At least he thought so. It was impossible to know. Yet, in the morning he heeded the voice; he sent for the one old man in all of Gilead who was said to have memorized the words of the great book.

When the old scribe finally arrived, Jephthah didn't haggle. He just listened—to Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and so on. There were passages on keeping vows. But there were other passages too—about the “detestable” practice of human sacrifice and about an angel who had stayed the hand of Abraham. How should one make sense of seemingly opposing commands?

Always keep your vows. Never sacrifice your child.

Even with the Spirit heavy on him, certainty was absent.

Perhaps, thought Jephthah, there is a sin worse than the breaking of one's vow. Perhaps the request of two months to mourn virginity was the angel moving in to stay his hand. There was no proof. There rarely is. Nevertheless, after days of listening, Jephthah went—up from his country, from his people, and from his father's household. He went up to the mountains, where she had gone to weep and wander.

And on the way, the warrior could not resist one final bargain. “If you let me find her, Lord, among the rocky crags and greening valleys, I will break my prior promise and throw myself upon your mercy.” It took four days. But he found her. And this time it was the warrior who was running. In this way, the Scripture was fulfilled in a way that few expected.

She returned to her father, and he did to her as he had vowed. And she was a virgin.

From this comes the Israelite tradition that each year the young women of Israel go out for four days to commemorate the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite.³¹

³¹For biblical citations and allusions, see Judges 11.

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