

ABRAHAM'S EMPTY ALTARS

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Abstract. In this paper I examine the ritual life of Abraham as it is presented in the book of Genesis. Paying close attention to the language of the narrative, I try to reconstruct the evolving philosophical theology that seems to underlie the modes of worship that Abraham develops over time. Read in this light, the life of Abraham can help us to rethink the extent to which theistic religiosity requires a personal God, and the extent to which it can survive in the face of a more austere impersonal theology.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik describes a transition in the theology of Abraham:

Abraham, the knight of faith, according to our tradition, sought and discovered God in the starlit heavens of Mesopotamia. Yet, he felt an intense loneliness and could not find solace in the silent companionship of God, whose image was reflected in the boundless stretches of the cosmos. Only when he met God on earth as Father, Brother, Friend — not only along the uncharted astral routes — did he feel redeemed. Our sages said that before Abraham appeared *majestas dei* was reflected only by the distant heavens, and it was a mute nature which “spoke” of the glory of God. It was Abraham who “crowned” Him the God of earth, *i.e.*, the God of men.¹

In this paper, focusing almost exclusively on the Biblical data, I explore the ritual life of Abraham. In so doing, I hope to vindicate Rabbi Soloveitchik's observation. Abraham started out with a very impersonal picture of God, whose majesty was reflected in the distant heavens. As time went by, he moved towards a much more personal and passionate theology. Abraham's example will also be instructive for thinking about the challenge of translating an abstract theology into religiously compelling ritual.

I. THE EMPTY ALTARS

In the early days of Abraham's recorded religious life, he developed a peculiar ritual. First, he would build an empty altar. There's no hint in the text that he would then sacrifice an animal upon it.² Abraham would then invoke the name of God, but, as far as a simple reading of the text is concerned, he wouldn't say anything *other* than God's name. He just stands there, in front of an empty altar, and says one word: God's name.

This ceremony occurs twice: Genesis 12:8 and Genesis 13:3 (other variations of the ceremony, as we shall see later, appear elsewhere). Is this really what Abraham did, and if so, why?

Perhaps I'm being overly literal. If Abraham built an altar, then surely, we're invited to assume that he offered a sacrifice upon it. That's what altars are for. The text doesn't have to spell everything out.³ For example: we're told that Abraham pitches a tent (*e.g.*, Genesis 12:8), and we automatically assume that he

1 Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith* (Jason Aronson Press, 1997), 50.

2 That this is the simplest reading of the text was first pointed out to me by Rabbi Chanoch Waxman.

3 See Nachmanides's Commentary to the Pentateuch: Genesis 12:8, *s.v.*, “וַיִּטַּעֵם”. Nachmanides assumes, perhaps on etymological grounds, that if there's a מזבח, there must have been a תודה; which is to say, if there's an *altar*, then there must have been a *sacrifice*.

slept in it, even if the text doesn't make that explicit. Perhaps we should likewise assume that the building of the altar was for the purpose of animal sacrifice, even if the text leaves that detail out.⁴

But the pitching of a tent, in the ancient near east, one might assume, was a significant act; the laying down of roots; staking a claim to a patch of territory. Sleeping in the tent, by contrast, was incidental to the narrative. The building of an altar, unlike the pitching of a tent, is devoid of meaning if the altar isn't to service a sacrifice. So why not report the sacrifice?

Admittedly, the building of altars, in this particular context, like the pitching of tents, *might* carry a territorial significance. Building altars might symbolize Abraham's desire to spread his new religion into his newfound territory. The building of the altar might therefore have been more significant to mention than the fact that he also used it to sacrifice upon. But notice a few striking details:

1. When Noah built an altar, chapters before Abraham, we're explicitly told that he brought a sacrifice upon it (Genesis 8:20).
2. When Abel, generations before Noah, brought an animal sacrifice, the altar isn't even mentioned, but the sacrifice *is* (Genesis 4:4).
3. The non-Jewish prophet, Balaam, builds multiple altars, explicitly to sacrifice upon (Numbers 23).

Accordingly, the general rule is that the Bible tells us about the building of altars only in the context of explicitly reporting a sacrifice. This rule admittedly has some exceptions,⁵ but none prior to the story of Abraham. Moreover:

4. The text *does* mention Abraham's ritualistic invocation of God's name in the presence of his altars. This implies that the narrative isn't uninterested in Abraham's altar-adjacent ritual.
5. The first time that Abraham *explicitly* brings an animal sacrifice (Genesis 22:13), as we shall see, marks a pointed change in Abraham's relationship to God. This implies that animal sacrifice, in Abraham's later religious life, was an *innovation*.

These considerations speak in favour of the simple reading of the text. Abraham built altars, but he *didn't* sacrifice animals upon them.

Having built an altar, Abraham would then call out in the name of God. It's not abundantly clear what "calling out in the name of God" means, or whether this is even an accurate translation of the end of Genesis 12:8, but, we *do* know that it was some sort of speech-act that centrally involved God's name, and perhaps, very little else.⁶

What was the significance of this ritual, with its empty altar and its invocation of God's name?

To build an altar without sacrificing upon it, must have been as counter-cultural, in the ancient near-east, as cooking a three-course meal, setting the table, and presenting the food beautifully, only to throw it all into the garbage without eating any of it, or feeding it to anyone else. The act of building an altar without then sacrificing an animal upon it looks something like a ritual rejection of the notion of animal sacrifice.

Merely to have refrained from sacrificing would not have been regarded, by others, as a *statement*. If Abraham simply refrained from sacrificing animals, it may have gone unnoticed. He may have been regarded an atheist—or a person of little religious conviction. The best way of making a theological statement out of the decision not to sacrifice was to go to the trouble of building an altar, to pique people's interest, and *then* to refrain from sacrificing.

⁴ This counterargument, based upon the pitching of Abraham's tent, was put to me by Rabbi Jeremiah Unterman (in conversation).

⁵ See footnote 30 for examples.

⁶ On a close reading of these rituals, it appears that Abraham *does* sometimes use adjectives. But further inspection reveals that these adjectives are always in the voice of the narrator. Abraham merely invokes the *name* of God in his rituals, a God that is sometimes *described* by the narrator (see Genesis 12:7–8 and Genesis 21:33).

The empty altar, I would argue, was a critique of sacrificial cults. It said: God doesn't want or need your sacrifices.

The second stage of the ritual was likewise a statement, or at least a manifestation, of Abraham's new theology. Abraham, at this stage in his development, was willing to refer to God by name, but not to *describe* Him, to talk discursively about Him, nor even to request things from Him. His earliest religious ritual consisted, bizarrely, of the utterance of God's name, and nothing more.

Names are distinctive, at least on some accounts of the nature of reference, for their lack of descriptive content. When I use a name to refer to something, I point to it, so to speak, but I don't describe it. Of course, a name, besides its denotation, can also have a connotation, but that connotation is wholly irrelevant to its function as a name. The famous example of this, first offered by John Stuart Mill, concentrates on the town of Dartmouth (not the American college town, but the original English town in the South of Devon).⁷ The name of that town was not randomly selected. It has a connotation. It connotes the fact that Dartmouth lies at the mouth of the river Dart. And yet, this connotation is irrelevant to the continued use of the word "Dartmouth."

A series of geological, seismological and/or meteorological events, could change the course of the river. Its mouth could conceivably move hundreds of miles to the East or West. And yet Dartmouth, if anything remained of it, would still be called "Dartmouth."

Likewise, if you had a dog that you called Snowy because of its beautiful white coat, you would still be within your rights to call it Snowy after the horrible incident at the dye shop that left it green. The only essential feature of a name is that it names something. It points to something. This insight is encoded into the Hebrew language by the fact that the word for *name*, "שם" (pronounced *shem*), is homographic with the word for *there*, "שם" (pronounced *sham*). The word "there" is a demonstrative — it helps the speaker point to some thing or place. That's what names do too. They point.

Abraham felt compelled to point to God — to call out His name. But, in this early ritual, he didn't do anything else. He didn't say anything else. It seems to me that there are two explanations that could do justice to Abraham's peculiar name-calling ritual, with its attendant verbal hesitancy.

II. EXPLANATION 1: CALLING OUT FOR MORE

In order to explain peculiarities in the orbit of Mercury, Le Verrier was forced to posit the existence of a small planet, between the sun and Mercury. It would have had the effect of pushing Mercury off the course otherwise predicted for it by Newton's theory of gravity, and thereby reconciling the theory with our observations of Mercury. He called the posited planet, "Vulcan". Unfortunately for the residents of Vulcan, it turns out that Vulcan doesn't exist. But this wasn't bad science. Only with Einstein's theory of general relativity could the orbit of Mercury be adequately explained without recourse to such a posit.

Good science forces us to posit things that we have no direct perceptual contact with. The oxygen atom is just such a posit. Nobody has ever seen one. Transmission electron microscopy only allows you to "see" an atom if you already accept the theory that atoms exist, which in turn is used to explain what goes on when one uses a transmission electron microscope. The oxygen atom is *just* a posit. But it's a sensationally good posit. It explains so much data. It rarely causes us theoretical headaches. We're more than justified in believing that oxygen atoms exist.

One suggestion, to explain Abraham's peculiar ritual, is that, at this stage in Abraham's religious evolution, God was just a posit for him. The text indicates that Abraham had had some sort of religious experience: a calling that caused him to leave Haran and to continue upon his late father's aborted gargantuan trek to the land of Canaan (Genesis 12:1). In order to explain this data, this compelling religious experience, Abraham was forced to posit the existence of some entity that he called "God" (which I use here as an English translation of the *tetragrammaton*).

7 John S. Mill, *System of Logic: Ratiocinative and Inductive* (Univ. Press of the Pacific, 2002), Book 1, Chapter 1, §5.

It appears as if God spoke directly to Abraham (e.g., Genesis 12:1). This might lead you to think that Abraham was directly acquainted with God. But, elsewhere, we're taught that no prophet hears directly from God other than Moses. All other prophets receive their prophecy in visions, or dreams (see Numbers 12:6–8). And thus, it might have been an especially salient question for Abraham whether he had heard directly from God, or whether he had merely had an experience whose ultimate cause was God.⁸ Either way, at this stage, Abraham knows very little about the nature or cause of his religious experiences. As far as he was concerned, God was known as the partially, indirectly, or hazily observed cause of this *calling*. God was little more than a posit.

Religious experience plays a primary role here. It leads Abraham to *know* that God exists, but whether this God could really be trusted as a true judge, and whether His promises could really be relied upon, are still open to question in darker moments of Abraham's life.⁹

In the light of such a backstory, we could attempt to make sense of Abraham's ritual in the following way. Abraham had posited the existence of God. Sure that his posit was justified, he knew that God exists. But he knew very little else about Him. Is He good? Can He be trusted? Nevertheless, the experiences were compelling, and even intoxicating; they led him to engage upon a gargantuan trek with his wife and dependents (Genesis 12:1–9), they caused him to circumcise his own flesh (Genesis 17:24), and even, later on, to submit to the commandment to sacrifice his son (Genesis 22).

Abraham wants to draw close to this God. He wants to experience Him more. He calls out His name in the hope of another encounter. But he says nothing else. In his moments of religious ritual, he dares not describe this God with any adjectives, for he doesn't want to presume that he knows anything all that substantive about Him.

Of two things Abraham seems sure: (1) God exists and (2) God doesn't need Abraham. The words that Abraham associated with his first prophecy—the words he heard God “speak”—were, “Go, for yourself [to the land that I will show you],”¹⁰ as if to say, “but don't go for me. I don't need anything from you.” God, as He appeared to Abraham, seemed to bear no lacking, nor to stand in any need.¹¹ The pagan desire to satiate their gods with the burning flesh of meat seemed absurd to Abraham in the face of his majestic religious experiences.

The reference of the name of God was fixed, in Abraham's mouth, by the description, “whatever it was that appeared to me in my religious experience.” This is indicated by the text's description of Abraham's first ever enactment of his ritual: “And there he built an altar to the Lord that had appeared to him.”¹² On the basis of this description—*He that appeared to me*—Abraham was able to attach a name to God (which he does in the next verse), and to reach out to Him with it. All of this was possible without Abraham wanting to attach any discursive description to the bearer of that name.¹³

8 Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2010), 272, suggests that God's first promises to Abraham are deliberately vague, and only become more precise later, because God is trying to choreograph, in His interactions with Abraham, the blossoming of a relationship built upon trust. Be that as it may, Abraham could be forgiven, on the basis of the vagueness of these promises, for coming to believe that God is so beyond our comprehension that even the images that He communicates to His prophets are hazy.

9 See, for example, Genesis 15:2–3 and Genesis 18:25. See also Stump's discussion of the extent to which Abraham may have manifested some degree of skepticism—or double-mindedness—regarding God's goodness; Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, 265–69, and 279–86.

10 Genesis 12:1

11 I am following Rashi in translating “לך לך” as “Go for yourself.” Nachmanides argues, by contrast, that the second “לך” is merely an emphatic. I would argue that every instance that Nachmanides brings to bolster his claim could also be read in the light of Rashi's insistence that “לך” after a commandment always means “not for my benefit.”

12 Genesis 12:7

13 The description of God as “the cause of my religious experience” allows Abraham rigidly to fix the reference of “God,” even though he might not have been directly acquainted with God. Bertrand Russell, who first distinguished between knowledge by description and knowledge by acquaintance, also demanded that you can't refer to something if you're not acquainted with it (see Bertrand Russell, *Problems of Philosophy* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1998), chapter 5). But experiencing something isn't necessarily sufficient for being acquainted with it (either because experience is generally mediated by sense-data, as Russell thought, or because, even on a directly realist account of perception, acquaintance is often partial and hard to come by (see John Campbell, “Consciousness and Reference”, in *The Oxford handbook of philosophy of mind*, ed. Brian P. McLaughlin, Ansgar Beckermann

The verbal element of the ritual, understood in this light, amounts to the call of an intoxicated worshipper to find out more about a God of whom very little was known; a prayer for greater access to an all too hidden God. This reading sits well with those commentators who translate the end of Genesis 12:8 as follows: “and he *prayed* in the name of God.”¹⁴

III. EXPLANATION 2: ACCEPTING/DECLARING THE INEFFABILITY OF GOD

There is a common theme, known to scholars of religious studies, that seems to permeate religious experience, across all theistic traditions and times; namely, that to have an experience of the Divine is to have an experience of something that cannot be discursively described. Indeed, Hilary Putnam goes so far as to say that “it is part of almost all religious forms of life to say that God ... is not properly conceptualizable by us.”¹⁵

This apophatic sensibility has Biblical warrant. God’s ways and thoughts are beyond us.¹⁶ He is incomparable to any other being.¹⁷ He tends to appear to the Children of Israel amidst a cloud, as if to signify that our grasp of Him can only ever be hazy and tenuous.¹⁸ Perhaps this sensibility lies at the heart of Abraham’s ritual.

The first explanation has Abraham calling out God’s name in the hope of a response; in the hope of further revelation; as an act of prayer. The second explanation has Abraham calling God’s name out of a realisation that he can do nothing more with language than to point towards the indescribable, with a connotation-less act of *naming*.

The first explanation assumes that there’s something more to know. The second explanation assumes that nothing more *can* be known. The first explanation explains the verbal ritual as an act of *prayer*, the second explanation interprets it as a *statement*: a statement that nothing more can possibly be said or known.

This second explanation resonates with those classical commentators who translate the end of Genesis 12:8 along the following lines: “and Abraham called upon the local population in order to teach them the name of God.”¹⁹ He taught them only a name because there was nothing else to teach. He taught them in the presence of an empty altar to declare that God stands in no need of sacrifices.

Interestingly, these two conflicting impulses — the impulse to know more about God and the impulse to eschew any sort of description — are often found simultaneously in the heart of a person of faith. She wants to know more, even if she recognises that she can’t. In this way, perhaps both explanations touch upon some part of Abraham’s motivation.

IV. ABRAHAM’S MAIMONIDEAN PHASE

Having started out by fixing the reference of God’s name as *the cause of Abraham’s religious experience*, Abraham begins to hang more and more theoretical roles upon the posit that he has called God. Having heard Melchizedek describe God as “the maker of the heavens and the earth”, Abraham decides to echo

and Sven Walter (Oxford Univ. Press, 2009)). Contra Russellian orthodoxy, I want to argue that Abraham might not have been directly acquainted with God (at least, not yet). Rather, he had had some sort of experience that he knew to be *caused* by God (whether directly, or somehow indirectly). Despite this (possible) lack of acquaintance, Abraham *was* able to refer to God. He was able to do so, using a description to fix rigid reference, a procedure outlined by Saul Kripke in Lecture I of Saul A. Kripke, *Naming and necessity* (Basil Blackwell, 1980), 55.

14 This follows the translation of Onkelos and is one of the options suggested by Ibn Ezra in his commentary to the verse. Rashi’s comment is homiletical but also seems to rely upon the same basic translation of “ויקרא”, in terms of Abraham praying.

15 Hilary Putnam, “On Negative Theology”, *Faith and Philosophy* 14, no. 4 (1997): 410.

16 Isaiah 55:8–9.

17 Exodus 15:11; I Kings 8:23; Psalms 35:10; 86:8.

18 Exodus 13:21–22; 16:10; Numbers 16:42; Leviticus 16:2; Deuteronomy 4:11; I Kings 8:10–12; Psalms 97:2.

19 This reading, one of the options presented by Ibn Ezra, and the reading of Nachmanides, focuses on the connotation of the Hebrew word “ויקרא” for *calling* an assembly and its nuance of proclamation.

him and to co-opt this description into his own religious lexicon (see, Genesis 14:18–24). God is no longer just the cause of Abraham's religious experience; He is also appealed to in order to explain the existence of everything else: God made it all. God has become the unmoved mover of Aristotelian theology.

Indeed, just as the narrator indicates that Abraham had used the description — “the cause of my religious experience” — in order to fix his first reference to God, the narrator later replaces this description with “אל עולם”²⁰ which is at least suggestive of something akin to Aristotle's unmoved mover, as another, and later, Abrahamic reference-fixing-description (Genesis 21:33).

Maimonides writes a short biography of Abraham's religious journey from pagan youth to the founder of monotheism.²¹ At first glance, his account seems to be highly anachronistic. He seems to transform Abraham into a proto-Aristotelian. According to Maimonides, Abraham sees the regularity of the night and the day and assumes that there must be something in charge of this regularity; some power turning the cogs, so to speak; that there must be an unmoved mover.

Maimonides's speculative biography of Abraham could be treated as an echo of the Midrashic tradition that imagines Abraham in conversation with the pagan King, Nimrod. Nimrod asks Abraham to worship fire, but Abraham complains that fire isn't worthy of worship since it can be extinguished by water. Nimrod thereupon asks Abraham to worship water, but Abraham complains that water isn't worthy of worship since it can be absorbed by the clouds which are, in turn, pushed about by the wind. The pattern continues. Abraham seems to be hinting towards the following punchline: there must be a power that stands behind all other powers; the prime mover of the Aristotelian cosmological argument. Only *that* God would be worthy of worship.²²

As we have seen, following a close reading of the Biblical narrative, and contra Maimonides, it isn't true to say that Abraham came to God first and foremost as a metaphysician in search of an explanation of the regularity of the cosmos. Instead, the Bible presents Abraham as a person drawn to a God that he comes to know, at first, through religious experience. Abraham first directs his worships to the God that *had appeared to him* (Genesis 12:7). Having said that, it turns out that Abraham's early theology really was pre-empting the scholastics in a number of ways.

Firstly, Abraham seems quite plausibly to have shared the distinctively medieval conflict between wanting to know and say more about God, whilst realising that no more can be known or said — just think of all of the scholastics who describe God as the first cause, and the unmoved mover, before concluding that, as the first cause, God must be beyond all species and genera, and therefore beyond all description; even the descriptions that we're using to come to this conclusion, such as God's being the first cause and the unmoved mover.

Secondly, the adjectives that begin to accumulate in Abraham's religious lexicon, despite his verbal hesitancy in his rituals, sound very Aristotelian/Scholastic. This isn't a personal God. This is an unmoved mover without needs or desires. This isn't a father in heaven, but an “אל עולם” — an eternal power.

Having said that, we should be sensitive to the differences between Abraham's theology and that of the scholastics. One episode in particular demands our attention. God commands Abraham to slaughter a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a pigeon (Genesis 15:9). Interestingly, He doesn't command Abraham to divide their carcasses, but Abraham does so anyway, except for the carcasses of the birds (Genesis 15:10). This might look like a sacrificial rite, but that would be too hasty an interpretation.²³ These carcasses are not offered upon altars, nor are they a *gift* from Abraham. In slaughtering them, Abraham is merely doing what he's been told to do.

20 Generally translated as “eternal God.” The narrator uses this description, seemingly in order to explain how Abraham fixed the reference of God's name.

21 Maimonides, *Mishna Torah*, Laws of Idolatry, 1:2–3.

22 *Bereshit Rabba* 38:13. The other Midrash that famously makes Abraham look like a medieval theologian is *Bereshit Rabba* 39:1, which *could* be read as Abraham coming up with the teleological argument for God's existence.

23 Nahum Sarna agrees: “Clearly no sacrifice is involved, for there is no altar, no mention of the sprinkling of blood as in Exodus 24:8, and no suggestion that the animals are either eaten or burnt. The meaning of the ceremonials is to be sought elsewhere.” Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (JPS, 1989), 114.

Rather, it seems that God and Abraham are making some sort of *treaty*. In Jeremiah 34, the same sort of treaty ceremony, involving cutting animals in two and walking between them, appears again. Nahum Sarna notes that the Hebrew term for covenant-making literally translates as “cutting a covenant.” He notes also that cognate phrases are very widely used for the same purposes in the ancient world: “All these analogues [which he lists] demonstrate that the cutting up of the animal was a crucial element in the treaty-making procedure.”²⁴ This treaty between God, as sovereign, and Abraham, is a fitting ceremony for solemnising God’s promises to Abraham (and his descendants), which are reiterated in a prophetic vision that accompanies the ceremony, and Abraham’s commitment to be a loyal servant to God.

As Sarna concludes: “For the first time in the history of religions, God becomes the contracting party, promising a national territory to a people yet unborn.”²⁵ Unlike Aristotle’s God, Abraham’s God is going to have a particular relationship with a particular people. And yet, God here still appears to Abraham as Sovereign of the world; a deity to make pacts with — yet another *role* for his God-posit to play. The relationship isn’t yet felt as personal. It’s functional. This God is a king, but not a father.

Abraham also veers away from Aristotle in his hope that God’s will is mutable. Take the story of Sodom and Gomorra. God reports to Abraham that He has chosen to destroy the towns, and Abraham asks Him to desist in the name of justice (Genesis 18:24). Here the God-posit is given another impersonal role to play: God as magistrate. And more importantly perhaps, Abraham assumes that if God is the one who has chosen to destroy the towns, He is also able to desist. This implies that God has a certain freedom and mutability of will. For the scholastics, on the other hand, God’s will was immutable.

Despite the slight differences, we have arrived at an account of Abraham’s theology that makes him sound strikingly like a proto-medieval theologian. On the one hand, you have God as an Aristotelian posit, appealed to as an unmoved mover, or as the highest good (“judge of all the earth” — Genesis 18:24). This God comes complete with, if not Aristotelian perfection, then at least the property of not *needing* or wanting anything, such as sacrifices. This God is highly impersonal. And, on the other hand, you have the sense that everything that we can possibly say about God, even the forgoing description of Him as an unmoved mover, is somehow linguistically deficient.

There is certainty that God exists — albeit a certainty grounded in experience of Him rather than in logic alone — and a temptation to say all sorts of things about Him, combined with a reticence to say anything at all about Him in moments of ritualistic worship. In turning Abraham into a proto-Maimonidean, Maimonides may have engaged in a closer reading of the Abrahamic narrative than he is generally given credit for.

Worryingly for Maimonides, it is only Abraham’s *early* theology that seems to have had this medieval taste. Abraham’s theology continues to evolve, in tandem with his evolving rituals. It is this evolution that forms the topic of the next section of this paper.

V. THE BINDING OF ISAAC

It was the episode of the binding of Isaac that seems to have ushered in a distinctively new approach to both ritual and theology in the life of Abraham. Before that time, Abraham’s mode of ritual was to build altars and to invoke God’s name. Often, this was a two-part ritual, but sometimes he merely built the altar without calling out God’s name (Genesis 12:7; 13:18),²⁶ and sometimes he merely called out God’s name without building any altars (Genesis 21:33).²⁷

24 Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary*, 114. Thanks to R. Waxman for pointing me in the direction of Sarna.

25 Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary*, 114.

26 In Genesis 12, Abraham performs his ritual twice in the space of two verses. The first time, Genesis 12:7, he doesn’t invoke God’s name. The second time, Genesis 12:8, he does.

27 Whether or not Abraham’s planting the tamarisk in Genesis 21:33 was supposed to be part of a larger religious ritual of planting and calling out in God’s name, or whether he planted the tamarisk for secular reasons, so to speak, before engaging in the distinctly religious ritual of calling out in God’s name is not clear to me from the text. For the meantime, I ignore the tamarisk, despite the multiple interpretive options it possesses.

After giving God certain theoretical roles to play, Abraham *does* make requests of God. He prays, so to speak. But these requests can barely be called acts of worship. His requests do not involve praise or thanks. What does he ask of God? He asks Him for a son and heir (Genesis 15:3). He asks Him to accept Ishmael to be his heir (Genesis 17:18). He asks Him to act justly in His treatment of Sodom and Gomorra (Genesis 18:24). And he asks God to heal the court of Avimelech (Genesis 20:17). We should note that Abraham only begins to make material requests from God *after* he has given God the theoretical role of creator of the world in Genesis 14:22.

Abraham's acts of worship, on the other hand, involve altars and names, but no *requests*. Despite appealing to more and more adjectives in his descriptions of God, as the narrative goes on, his rituals remain adjective and animal free (see Genesis 21:33). Fundamentally, Abraham knew his God to be above description.

One night everything changes. God appeared to Abraham saying, "Take now your son, Isaac, whom you love, and go for yourself, to the land of Moriya, and offer him up there as an ascension offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell you of."²⁸ It is traditionally noted how shocking this commandment must have seemed morally. But, of course, it was also theologically shocking. It completely flies in the face of the theology that Abraham had developed. We see this more starkly when we pay attention to the ritual that Abraham had pioneered. Not only does God *not* want his altars to be empty, as Abraham had assumed; not only does God desire, or even need, the smell of burning flesh; He desires, or even needs, the smell of burning *human* flesh; the flesh of Abraham's son.

As Abraham and Isaac climb the mountain together, Isaac asks his father, "Here are the firestone and the wood; but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?"²⁹ On my reading, this question is very precisely worded. Isaac wouldn't expect his father to sacrifice an animal at all. Abrahamic altars had, until this point, been empty. What prompts Isaac to ask the question is that Abraham is coming prepared for some sort of barbecue. The wording of the question emphasizes that Isaac's curiosity (and fear, perhaps) was only aroused by the fact that Abraham was uncharacteristically carrying the paraphernalia of animal sacrifice — the firestone and the wood. Only because of this new detail does Isaac ask where the animal is.

As Isaac lies bound to Abraham's altar, and as the knife hovers perilously above, an angel reveals to Abraham that the whole episode had been nothing more than a test. God didn't really want Abraham to sacrifice his son. Immediately following this fortunate revelation, Abraham saw a ram caught by its horns in the thicket. Abraham decided to offer that ram up as a burnt offering to God, upon the altar that had been built for Isaac (Genesis 22:13). This is Abraham's first recorded animal sacrifice. This is the point where animal sacrifice enters into the Jewish religion; at this point, Jewish ritual becomes carnivorous.³⁰

What is it about the episode of the binding that causes Abraham to rethink his primary mode of ritual? Instead of sacrificing that ram, why didn't he revert to type and invoke God's name over the empty altar? Now that it had been revealed to be a test, why not return to the theological scruples that insist that God bears no lacking and therefore has no desires; to the scruples that insist that God *doesn't* want our sacrifices?

28 Genesis 22:2.

29 Genesis 22:7.

30 Although, not exclusively carnivorous! The Tabernacle of Leviticus had vegetarian offerings as well as animal sacrifices. Moreover, various characters seem to reinstitute Abraham's bizarre sacrifice-free altar building ritual at various points in Jewish history. This is consistent with what I will eventually argue. Fundamentally, the Hebrew prophets never really gave up upon the idea that God doesn't need our sacrifices. This continuing ritual signifies that fact. For post-Abrahamic sacrifice-free altars, see: Genesis 26:25 and 35:7; Moses gets in on the act in Exodus 17:15; in Joshua 20:10, the Jewish Tribes of the Transjordan build an altar, not for sacrificing upon, but for looking at, as if to say, "Look at our empty altar!" And, in the continuation of that chapter, they go to great lengths to demonstrate that the altar is *not* for sacrificing upon; it is a commemoration of the altar in the tabernacle. Imagine the multi-layered symbolism of a big empty altar never for using, but only for gazing upon. Gideon goes through a similar story to Abraham in Judges 6. His theology undergoes a similar evolution. He starts by building an altar without sacrificing any animals, which may be theologically sound, but for reasons yet to be investigated in this paper, God comes to him, as He did to Abraham, to demand a new altar specifically for sacrifices. Samuel and Saul both build sacrifice-free altars (Samuel I 7:17; 14:35). Moreover, a great number of the Hebrew prophets explicitly tell us that God doesn't want our sacrifices (at least as they were being brought): see, for example, Isaiah 1:11–15; Jeremiah 6:20; and Hosea 6:6. This footnote owes its existence to a conversation with Iddo Winter.

One interpretation seems eminently plausible. Abraham had just endured a three-day trek under a false impression; under the false impression that God desired the sacrifice of his son. God, it seems, had *wanted* Abraham to languish under this false impression. That God could want a person to assent to a false belief, however briefly, must have been an astonishing revelation for Abraham. So, perhaps Abraham came to the following conclusion: whilst it would be an ethical abomination to engage in human sacrifice, and whilst it remains the case that God doesn't need, or even desire such acts, there is still something appropriate about the *feeling* that one should give everything that one has, and everything that one holds dear. From now on, his altars wouldn't be empty. He would sacrifice animals upon them. For though it isn't true that God needs, wants, or demands your sacrifices, there is something appropriate about relating to Him *as if He did*.

Abraham rejects the pagan claim that God desires the flesh of burning carcasses. But he adopts the image, as somehow appropriate. The false but appropriate image isn't that God desires the flesh of burning carcasses; it is the image that God wants you to give of yourself to Him; that God wants your devotional acts of *giving*; a lamb in the place of your son, or perhaps, in the place of yourself.

Indeed, witness how Nachmanides explains the basic idea of animal sacrifice in his commentary to the book of Leviticus:

Since the deeds of man are completed in thought, word, and action, God commanded that when they sin they should bring a sacrifice, place their hands upon it, in place of the action, verbally confess in place of the word, and burn in fire the intestines and the kidneys [of the animal], which are the seat of thought and desire, and its legs, in place of the hands and legs of a person, that performs all actions, and to sprinkle the blood over the altar, in place of the blood of the person's soul, so that the person should think, in his doing all of this, that he has sinned to his God with his body and his soul, and it would be fitting to spill his [own] blood, and burn his [own] body, were it not for the lovingkindness of the creator, who takes our offerings from us, and the sacrifice atones such that its blood should be in place of the person's blood, its soul in place of the person's soul, and the extremities of the sacrifice in place of the extremities of the person...³¹

For Nachmanides, the sin offering seems to function as the paradigm for all other animal sacrifices — all of them, despite their various other functions, facilitate atonement for sin. His use of the phrase-structure “x in place of y” conjures up Abraham's sacrifice of an animal *in place of his son*. The idea seems to be this: Human sacrifice is surely horrific; God wants no part in that abominable practice; He wants that institution revoked for all time; but there is a kernel of truth in the midst of this dark and evil practice. In some sense or other, it would be fitting, to echo Nachmanides's words, to spill one's own blood before God.

What can we give to God that would suffice, short of our very *lives*? We should be willing to spill our very guts upon the altar of the Lord. Thankfully, other virtues, such as the imperative to choose life, outweigh any such consideration. God doesn't want us to volunteer our lives, or God forbid, the lives of others. But we sacrifice animals *in place of ourselves* out of recognition of that limited kernel of truth; in recognition of the limited sense in which it's true to say that we *should* be sacrificing ourselves, and sacrificing everything that's dear to us.

It is not my contention that the binding of Isaac was commanded purely so as to lead Abraham to this realisation about animal sacrifice. Indeed, I think it clear that the “test” of the binding of Isaac had many overlapping objectives. One objective was to repudiate, once and for all, the disturbingly common notion that God requires human sacrifice.³² Eleonore Stump argues that another primary function of the binding of Isaac can only really be grasped in the context of Abraham's treatment of his other son, Ishmael, and in the wider context of Abraham's developing relationship with God.³³ I don't come to argue against

31 Nachmanides on Leviticus 1:9.

32 See Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant & Conversation: A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible: Genesis: The Book of Beginnings* (Maggid Books & The Orthodox Union, 2009), 117–19. Although, if this were the only objective of the binding of Isaac, one could ask why God had to let Abraham believe that God wanted human sacrifice only to teach him that He didn't. That seems like peculiar pedagogy. But if the repudiation of human sacrifice was *also* supposed to teach about the desirability, in some sense or other, of *animal* sacrifice, then the position makes more sense.

33 Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, chapter 11.

these other readings. I merely suggest that one *additional* dimension of the binding of Isaac was its role in causing Abraham to embrace animal sacrifice as a mode of worship.

That animal sacrifice is intended as a replacement for self-sacrifice is perhaps what lies behind the ancient Rabbinic tradition that Abraham wasn't merely commanded, nor merely willing, to sacrifice his son, but was actually commanded, and was actually willing, to sacrifice *himself*. In the words of the Sifre to Deuteronomy §313:

Even had the Holy One, blessed be He, asked Abraham to gouge out his own eye, he would have given it to Him, and he wouldn't merely have gouged out his eye, but even his soul, which was more dear to him than anything, as it says, (Genesis 22:2), "take now your son, your only one; Isaac." And don't we know who his only son is? Rather [the phrase "your only one"] refers to [Abraham's] soul, which is called "only one", as it says, "You saved my soul from the sword; from the dog, my only one."³⁴

What really stands behind the sacrifice of an animal is the symbolic sacrifice of the person who brings the animal. Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son. Isaac, who was surely strong enough to fight off his elderly father, but instead submitted to being tied down, was willing to be sacrificed. God doesn't want such acts, of course, but He does want a kernel from them; He wants the willingness; the willingness, and the desire to give everything to Him. Not, surely, because He's actually hungry, or in need of such sacrifices, but because He wants us to be completely devoted to the one ideal that transcends all other concerns.

Of course, another interpretation would have it that the feelings that God wanted to invoke in Abraham were not false at all. On this reading, the binding of Isaac constitutes a partly veridical revelation to Abraham, teaching him that his former theology had been false. God himself actually wants a personal relationship and therefore *desires* personal sacrifice.

I would argue that the text undermines this reading. It is Abraham who needs a personal relationship with God, not the other way round. For some reason or other, Abraham has to relate to God as personal, even if (underneath it all) He isn't. And thus, at the beginning of the whole ordeal of the binding (Genesis 22:2), God says to Abraham, "Go for yourself," in order to bind Isaac, as if to say, *I don't need you to go through this transformation; you're the one who needs it. I don't need you to view me as if I'm a personal and demanding God, but you need to view me that way: Go for yourself.*³⁵

Furthermore, the ritual of sacrifice-free altars, with all that it symbolises, doesn't completely disappear from Jewish ritual in the wake of Isaac's binding.³⁶ This provides a hint that, in the wake of Isaac's binding, we don't move unquestioningly to a theology in which God is really thought to desire our acts of sacrifice. The picture is more complicated than that.

VI. IS GOD A PERSON?

Elsewhere I have argued that Jewish theology is torn in two directions.³⁷ On the one hand, there are compelling reasons to deny that God is a person. Persons have to be open to interact with other persons, since persons are inherently social beings. But God must be above any causal interaction in order to function as the foundation of all being. This seems to rule out Divine personhood.³⁸ On the other hand, without per-

34 Though I believe that this Rabbinic homily uncovers a deep truth about Abraham and the institution of animal sacrifice, I also think that Eleonore Stump's understanding of the puzzling clause, "your only one", is revelatory and — of course — much closer to the surface meaning of the Biblical text (Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, 296–97).

35 Once again, I'm relying upon Rashi's translation of "ךך לך", see footnote 11 above.

36 See footnote 30 above.

37 Samuel Lebens, "Is God a person? Maimonides, Crescas, and beyond", *Religious Studies* (2021).

38 Eleonore Stump goes some way towards reconciling the tension between the transcendent and unmoved "God of the philosophers", and the personal "God of the Bible" (Eleonore Stump, *The God of the Philosophers and the God of the Bible* (Marquette Univ. Press, 2016)). But much of her reconciliation focuses on the ways in which an unchanging being outside of time can be truly present for joint-attention, and for an unfolding relationship, with beings within time. And yet, even if I came to think that her notion of ET-simultaneity (developed alongside Norman Kretzmann) allows for an unchanging eternal God

sonhood there are serious worries attaching to the claim that God could be omniscient,³⁹ not to mention the worries that arise when one tries to make sense of an *impersonal* covenantal relationship between God and His people. What is a covenant if it isn't personal?

Abraham's theological evolution is, I think, suggestive of two solutions to this problem. The first is consistent with an impersonal theology. The second is consistent with my own preferred, Hassidic-inspired theology.

According to the first solution, God is not at all a person, but we nevertheless need to relate to Him *as if* He were. And indeed, I have argued elsewhere that it can sometimes be rational, and that Judaism itself sometimes *mandates*, that we engage in forms of make-belief; trying to view the world through the prism of certain narratives even if we know that they're not — strictly speaking — true. Make-belief, I have argued, can sometimes have corrective effects.⁴⁰

If God isn't a person, then Abraham's pre-binding theology might have been philosophically sound. But the God that Abraham discovered was hardly religiously compelling. Little was known of Him. He was abstract. He filled certain theoretical roles, like a scientific posit. To have had religious experiences of Him, as Abraham had done, must have been intoxicating, but not all human beings can be expected to ascend to the heights of prophecy. This God's covenants were more like the agreements between a distant monarch and His subjects, than the covenant between a husband and a wife. And so, without the ingredient of Abraham's own personal religious experience, his theology was abstract and dry. Knowing what he knows about God, the episode of the binding of Isaac became an invitation for Abraham to relate to God in ways that *aren't* true, because of the corrective effects of their make-belief.

According to this make-belief, God is a demanding God; God wants you to give everything to Him; God seeks a personal relationship with you. It might not be literally true but pretending it to be literally true might invoke truly appropriate sorts of religious attitudes on the part of the pretender; attitudes that might soften a person's defences and thereby make room for vivid and veridical religious experiences that are otherwise closed off to her.

But then again, as I've already noted, impersonal theology faces various concerns. It's not at all clear than an impersonal God could be omniscient.⁴¹ Moreover, is the covenant between God and Israel (at least in the passionate terms that the Bible often paints it) merely a pretence that we're supposed to play along with? Is that not an overly reductive account of the Jewish encounter with God?

Accordingly, I have elsewhere defended a Hassidic theology according to which God is a mind (but not quite a person) that has dreamt this world into being.⁴² When discussing reality, we have to distinguish between what's true beyond God's dream — *i.e.*, what's true from God's transcendent perspective — and what's true relative to the dream that God's dreaming — *i.e.*, what's true from the perspective of the layer of reality in which we live.

On this two-tiered view, Abraham's earlier theology was a pretty accurate picture of how God is in His transcendence — an immutable, fundamental, impersonal, ground of being. But God also appears as

to be present, in different ways, at each and every moment of my temporal life, I still fear that we won't have gone far enough. Joint-attention requires not just simultaneity, but that two phenomenological states of two minds should be constitutively interdependent one upon the other. But the God of the philosophers is not merely beyond time, He is also beyond causal interaction. Nothing can act *upon* Him if He is to function as the ultimate explanation of the cosmos, with all of its causal interactions. Consequently, since nothing can act upon the God of the philosophers, He cannot engage in fully-fledged joint-attention with any being external to Himself.

39 See Lebens, "Is God a person? Maimonides, Crescas, and beyond"; Ryan T. Mullins, *God and Emotion* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2020); and Anastasia Scrutton, *Thinking Through Feeling: God, Emotion and Passibility* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2011).

40 Samuel Lebens, *The Principles of Judaism* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2020), §9.4.

41 See Lebens, "Is God a person? Maimonides, Crescas, and beyond"; Mullins, *God and Emotion*, and Scrutton, *Thinking Through Feeling*.

42 In Lebens, *The Principles of Judaism*, I argue that God *is* a person, but that was only because I was operating with an extremely liberal conception of what personhood is, such that any sufficiently intelligent mind is a person. In "Is God a Person?"; by contrast, I argue for a more restrictive conception of personhood, under which it's clear that God, beyond the story — *i.e.*, God in His transcendence — is *not* a person. My theology didn't change between these two publications, but my conception of personhood did.

a character in His own dream, and God — as He appears to us in this dream, and therefore as He really is, on our layer of reality — is a person who loves us with a tremendous passion and wants us to reciprocate His love with a passion all of our own. And thus, Abraham wasn't being invited to make-believe something *false*. That's too simplistic a description of what's going on. Rather, he was being invited, for his own good, and not for the good of God in His transcendence, to relate to God, not just as God is in His transcendence, but *also* to relate to God as God really is within His creation; God as a person — a person who desires union with us. Even so, empty altars don't disappear entirely from the tradition because, while it's important for us to relate to God (perhaps even primarily) as a character in His own story alongside us, we should never forget that God, in His transcendence, is also the impassable and impersonal author of our reality.⁴³

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