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## **“You Have Not Withheld Your Son, Your Only One from Me”. Some Arguments for the Consummated Sacrifice of Abraham<sup>1</sup>**

### ABSTRACT

Both traditional and academic interpreters have already acknowledged the hints present in Genesis 22 which suggest that Abraham had executed the sacrifice of his son. Still, there are several aspects of *'aqedah* supporting this reading that so far have been hardly noticed. Accordingly, the main purpose of this study is to support additional arguments for the consummated sacrifice of the patriarch's son who – what will become apparent – was not necessarily Isaac. The task shall be achieved by means of scrupulous analysis of the source text in its original language, as much of its nuances are apparent only in Hebrew. This will allow to discern and collect the hints supporting the alternative reading, *inter alia*: the anonymity of Abraham's son presented as a sacrificial object rather than a literary protagonist, the logic of sacrificial economy underlying the offering and the names listed in the genealogical addendum (v. 24) which may contain a “coded” explanation to the rest of the pericope.

### KEY WORDS

Isaac, Abraham, *aqedah*, *aqedat Yitzhaq*, human sacrifice

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is a summary of considerations inspired and sustained by the students participating in my classes conducted in the academic year 2012/2013 at the Institute for Religious Studies and the Chair for Comparative Studies of Civilizations at the Jagiellonian University. Were it not for my adepts' insightful remarks, witty inquiries and – *o tempora, o mores* – mischievous challenges, the present paper would not have been written.

Chapter 22 of the Book of Genesis conveys a well known story in which God orders Abraham to sacrifice his only and beloved son. The obedient patriarch brings Isaac to Mount Moriah, binds him and as he is just about to fulfil the commandment, the angel of the Lord stops him from committing an act of filicide. A ram is slaughtered instead; Abraham proves his commitment and Isaac becomes an accomplished patriarch. The narrative is usually placed within the hermeneutical framework of a test of faith. The zeal of Abraham and the obedience of Isaac have been praised by theologians and philosophers alike as models of pious behaviour, whereas God has been acknowledged as ultimately loving and just. The *'aqedah*<sup>2</sup> is therefore a prime example of a biblical story that everybody knows well while few strive to read it directly and look beyond its traditional and most widespread expositions.<sup>3</sup>

First and foremost, the text of Genesis 22 is ambiguous on a basic linguistic level and as such allows for various and equally justified readings. Secondly, given the broader image of the capricious deities of the Hebrew Bible [HB] and their particular interest in human blood, Elohim's demand for Isaac's death seems to be fully legitimised. Thirdly, according to some of the earliest rabbinic interpretations of the pericope, Isaac had been slaughtered by Abraham and only later returned to life. As a matter of fact, all these factors have already been acknowledged by both traditional and academic interpreters and currently there are no doubts that the understanding of Genesis 22 as a test of faith is not the only one in existence. Still, there are several important aspects of the *'aqedah* and its interpretations that, as far as the author is aware, have remained unnoticed. Subsequently, the main purpose of this study is to support additional arguments for the consummated sacrifice of the patriarch's son who – as will become apparent – is not necessarily Isaac. This task shall be achieved by means of a scrupulous analysis of the source text in its original language, as much of its nuances are apparent only in Hebrew. Such an approach will enable the discerning and collection of various linguistic clues spread throughout the pericope that support this alternative reading.

Before proceeding further, three additional methodological remarks have

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<sup>2</sup> For the arguments on why to use the term *'aqedah* in the scholarly writing see: L. A. Huizenga, *The Battle for Isaac: Exploring the Composition and Function of the Aqedah in the Book of Jubilees*, "Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha" 2002, Vol. 13, p. 35, footnote number 6.

<sup>3</sup> For a comprehensive survey of both exegetical and scholarly analyses of the passage see: J. T. Butcher, *Unbinding Traditions: Rhetoric, Hermeneutics and the Aqedah*, unpublished MA thesis, Texas A&M University 2006, p. 60–79, [online], <https://repository.tamu.edu/bitstream/handle/1969.1/ETD-TAMU-1197/BUTCHER-THESIS.pdf?sequence=1> [18.10.2013].

to be made. First and foremost, the subject of this study is the textual reality of Genesis 22 and the question whether Isaac had "really" been sacrificed or not remains beyond the scope of the analysis. Secondly, the *'aqedah* has to be treated as an amalgamate of lesser traditions which have been carefully composed so as to give an impression of one coherent unit.<sup>4</sup> As a result however, it is the final, received composition itself which is more "real" than its hypothetical "primeval" elements. Accordingly, instead of searching for the exact "original" version or its "appropriate" reading, we are simply going to point out the clues which serve as the basis for a certain interpretation. Last but not least, the interpretative traditions of the HB have extended for over two thousand years by now and their main value is diversity and innovation rather than "veracity".<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> There are several markers of the complex character of Genesis 22, *inter alia*: various divine names, vivid changes in vocabulary and grammatical inconsistencies. Accordingly, the story can be divided into several sections: (1) Elohim's order to sacrifice Isaac (vv. 1-10), (2) two speeches of the angel of Yahveh (vv. 11-18), (3) the lone return of Abraham (v. 19), (4) the progeny of Nahor and Milkah (vv. 20-23) and (5) the progeny of Nahor and Re'umah (v. 24). The literary qualities of Genesis 22 witnessing its composite structure have been addressed by numerous studies, e.g. Y. Ben-Nun, *'Aqedat Yitzhaq – 'Onesh 'o Nisayon*, [online], <http://www.ybn.co.il/mamrim/m10.htm> [08.07.2013]; R. D. Bergen, *The Role of Genesis 22:1-19 in the Abraham Cycle: a Computer-Assisted Textual Interpretation*, "Criswell Theological Review" 1990, Vol. 4 No. 2, p. 322–324; O. Boehm, *The Binding of Isaac: An Inner-Biblical Polemic on the Question of "Disobeying" a Manifestly Illegal Order*, "Vetus Testamentum" 2002, Vol. 52, Fasc. 1, p. 2; R. E. Friedman, *The Bible with the Sources Revealed*, New York 2009, p. 64–66; K. S. Hong, *An Exegetical Reading of the Abraham Narrative in Genesis. Semantic, Textuality and Theology*, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Pretoria 2007, p. 56–58; R. W. L. Moberly, *The Earliest Commentary on the Akedah*, "Vetus Testamentum" 1988, Vol. 38, Fasc. 3, p. 307–308; E. Noort, *Genesis 22: Human Sacrifice and Theology in the Hebrew Bible*, [in:] *The Sacrifice of Isaac: The Aqedah (Genesis 22) and Its Interpretations*, eds. E. Noort, E. J. C. Tigchelaar, Brill 2002, p. 3; J. H. Sailhamer, *Expositor's Bible Commentary: Genesis*, Zondervan 2002–2004 (CD-ROM); K. Schmid, *Abraham's Sacrifice: Gerhard von Rad's Interpretation of Genesis 22*, "Interpretation" 2008, Vol. 62, p. 272–275; G. J. Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 16-50*, Vol. 2, Word Books 1994 (CD-ROM). The work of R. D. Bergen, who has utilised methods of statistical linguistics in Biblical Studies, is worth highlighting here. The said author argues that Genesis 22 constitutes the thematic peak of the whole Abraham cycle. Linguistic and literary markers supporting his thesis include high density of protagonists' and divine names, central location of chapter 22 and an extensive use of dialogues. These findings have been collected by means of the Discourse Critical Text Analysis Program developed by the author himself.

<sup>5</sup> For a similar methodological approach see: A. Shinan, Y. Zakovitch, *From Gods to God. How the Bible Debunked, Suppressed, or Changed Ancient Myths and Legends*, Lincoln 2012, p. 14–15.

## WHICH GOD?

The most generally accepted assumption and at the same time – the most misleading one – concerns the singularity of the God of the HB. Genesis 22 is a magnificent example of this problem as it contains two Hebrew words denoting distinct divine names: *'Elohim* and *Yahveh*. Even within the sphere of Biblical Studies it is customary to implicitly assume that these are two appellations of the same deity. In fact, however, the HB should be primarily perceived in its Near Eastern polytheistic literary entourage and accordingly, it may be more appropriate to speak of not only different divine names but also of different deities engaged in the events. Thus, if to abandon the “default” monotheistic interpretation, one faces completely new hermeneutical advantages.<sup>6</sup> In this particular instance it is possible to say that Elohim orders Abraham to slaughter Isaac whereas it is Yahveh who stops him mid-step. The patriarch encounters opposite biddings coming from two different deities which seem to combat each other in order to attain the patriarch’s support.<sup>7</sup>

This divine duel becomes even more pronounced after unmasking the identity of the angel of Yahveh (Heb. *mal'akh Yahveh*), who emerges in the second part of the pericope (vv. 11-18). Whereas the post-biblical expositions utilise extensively the presence of lesser demonic beings,<sup>8</sup> the angelophany of Genesis 22:11-18 seems to be best explained by means of S.A. Meier’s interpolation theory. Accordingly, the word *mal'akh* denoting “messenger” or “angel” is considered to be an addendum preceding the divine name and thus acting as a theological tool for enhancing its transcendence. The “default” form would be that of the Near Eastern literary standards; whereas the func-

<sup>6</sup> One very insightful remark illustrating this problem has been made by B. Jacob. Based on a comparison with Job 1-2, he claimed that the voice of Elohim in Genesis 22 belongs to one of the *bney 'elohim* – namely, to Satan. After: E. Noort, *ibidem*, p. 2. For the review of attempts at explaining the presence of various divine names in Genesis 22 see: G. J. Wenham, *op. cit.*

<sup>7</sup> Of somewhat similar nature is the account of the flood in Genesis 6. Vv. 5-8 describes the anger of Yahveh and his will to annihilate humanity whereas vv. 11-22 recount how Elohim did in fact warn Noah to seek refuge in the ark. If to focus on chapter 6 exclusively, then it recalls the Akkadian variant in *Atrahasis*. Enlil decides to wipe out the entire population (v. 35) while Enki reveals the god’s secret to Atrahasis (vv. 15-24) and thus saves humanity. See: *ATRA-HASIS (1.130)*, trans. B. R. Foster, [in:] *The Context of Scripture*, Vol. I, ed. W. W. Hallo, Brill 2003, p. 450-452.

<sup>8</sup> This notion is also present in Aramaic translations of Pentateuch. For the illustration of this process see: S. Lasair, *Theorizing in the Absence of a Theory: the Case of the Aramaic Targums to the Pentateuch*, “TranscUltrAI” 2009, Vol. 1, 2, p. 88.

tion of the messenger deities was known, the preference was for an unmediated theophany.<sup>9</sup> On a grammatical level, this augmentation resulted in forming the genitive construction which was characterised by an exceptional ease of use deriving from two facts. (1) Both *mal’akh* and a divine name, be it *Yahveh* or *Elohim*, are of masculine grammatical gender and (2) the introduction of the modifier noun neither affects the modified noun on the consonantal level nor does it require any change in the form of the verbs connected to it, whereas the latter simply change their subject or object.<sup>10</sup> As a result, the “angel of Yahveh” of Genesis 22 should rather be understood as “Yahveh himself” – although presented here in a literary disguise, which allows to shy him away from the theologically troublesome passages.<sup>11</sup>

## WAS IT A TEST?

The first sentence of Genesis 22 reads “and it was [so that] after these things the Elohim tested (*nissah*)<sup>12</sup> Abraham”<sup>13</sup> and accordingly sets up the interpretation of the following verses as a test of faith. However, there are several

<sup>9</sup> L. K. Handy, *Among the Host of Heaven: the Syro-Palestinian Pantheon as Bureaucracy*, Winona Lake 1994, p. 152–153. Cf.: C. H. Gordon, G. A. Rendsburg, *The Bible and the Ancient Near East*, Winona Lake 2002, p. 51.

<sup>10</sup> S. A. Meier, *Angel of Yahveh*, [in:] *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, 2nd edition, eds. K. van der Toorn, B. Becking, P. W. van der Hoorst. Brill 1999 [DDD], p. 53–59; idem, *Angel I*, [w:] DDD, p. 45–50. See also: W. Kosior, *The Angel in the Hebrew Bible from the Statistic and Hermeneutic Perspectives. Some Remarks on the Interpolation Theory*, “Polish Journal of Biblical Research” 2013, Vol. 23, No. 1, p. 125–139.

<sup>11</sup> Some scholars suggest the emendation of *mal’akh* to *molokh* or *melekh* and accordingly suggest that the pericope refers to the cult of Molokh. A. Michel, after: F. Stavrakopoulou, *King Manasseh and Child Sacrifice: Biblical Distortions of Historical Realities*, Berlin 2004, p. 194, footnote number 214. On the *Molokh/melekh* as one of the appellatives with time attributed to Yahveh see: T. Miller, *Parashat Vayir’a*, [online], [http://www.hofesh.org.il/freeclass/parashat\\_hashavua/01/02\\_vayar/vayar](http://www.hofesh.org.il/freeclass/parashat_hashavua/01/02_vayar/vayar) [08.07.2013].

<sup>12</sup> F. Brown, S. R. Driver, C. A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Oxford 1907 [BDB], 6160; *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, eds. L. Koehler, W. Baumgartner, Brill 2000 [HALOT], 5570; *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Vol. 1 & 2, eds. R. Laird Harris, G. L. Archer, B. K. Waltke, Chicago 1980 [TWOT], 1373.0, 13713a; G. J. Wenham, op. cit.

<sup>13</sup> All citations from the source texts are presented in author’s own translation, unless stated otherwise. The square brackets indicate the words absent in the original, the curly brackets – the words translated freely, whereas the soft brackets – additional remarks. The priority of the translations was to sustain the inherent ambiguity of the text.

arguments that the opening phrase is only loosely connected with the rest of the chapter. First, apart from v. 1 the verb *lenasot* appears neither in the pericope in question nor in the Book of Genesis in total and have only two other occurrences in the Torah (Deuteronomy 4:34; 13:4).<sup>14</sup> Secondly, it is usually applied in the context of the whole nation, e.g. in Deuteronomy 7:19 or Judges 2:22 whereas there are only two other instances in the HB with Elohim or Yahveh as the subject and an individual as an object of testing: 2 Chronicles 32:31 and Psalm 26:2.<sup>15</sup> Thirdly, the HB lacks any account which would be immediately parallel to this aspect of Genesis 22. The closest one, both content- and vocabulary-wise is present in Job 1-2.<sup>16</sup> However, even if to agree for the validity of Job's parallel then it is important to notice that the narration contains neither *lenasot* nor any of its synonyms which might suggest that Yahveh would want to "test" Job. Given these factors, the interpretative phrase of Genesis 22:1 could be considered a later addition introduced so as to repel any suspicions that Elohim had wanted to have Isaac sacrificed.<sup>17</sup> And if the initial words are not likely to be the integral part of the story, we have to read it as if it had not been a test at all.

## WHICH SON?

The next set of peculiarities refers to Elohim's command directed at the patriarch. The verse itself is syntactically unusual: "please,<sup>18</sup> take your son, your only one, whom you loved – Isaac – and go to the land of Moriah and bring him up there for {a burnt offering} on one of the mountains about which I will tell you". The traditional exegesis has seen here either an em-

<sup>14</sup> R. D. Bergen, op. cit., p. 322; J. H. Sailhamer, op. cit.

<sup>15</sup> E. Noort, op. cit., p. 15–16. See also: O. Goldberg's assertion that *lenasot* refers to the testing of the divine presence. O. Goldberg, *Rzeczywistość Hebrajczyków*, trans. T. Sikora, Kraków 2012, p. 104–105.

<sup>16</sup> This is also suggested by various traditional interpretations, e.g. Bereshit Rabbah 57:4. For the discussion of the problem see *inter alia*: R. M. Green, *Abraham, Isaac, and The Jewish Tradition: An Ethical Reappraisal*, "The Journal of Religious Ethics" 1982, Vol. 10, No. 1, p. 5; D. Miller, *Parashat Va-Yira*, [online], [http://www.hofesh.org.il/freclass/parashat\\_hashavua/99/9903\\_vayera/va](http://www.hofesh.org.il/freclass/parashat_hashavua/99/9903_vayera/va) [08.07.2013].

<sup>17</sup> T. Miller, op. cit.; G. J. Wenham, op. cit.

<sup>18</sup> The enclitic *na'* ("please") is atypical in the context and would fit a polite request rather than obligation to perform infanticide. G. J. Wenham, op. cit.; Z. Pawłowski, *The Test of Abraham. The Narrative Reading of Genesis 22 (Próba Abrahama. Lektura narracyjna Rdz 22)*, "Biblica et Patristica Thoruniensia" 2011, Vol. 4, p. 44.

phasis put on the intimate relation between the patriarch and his son or a bargain between Abraham and Elohim.<sup>19</sup> From the linguistic perspective however the construction would be far more natural, had the word *Yitzhaq* been at the beginning of the phrase or even absent altogether. The latter option is of particular interest here – if to assume that Isaac’s name is redundant then it might have been introduced secondarily to the text so as not to leave any doubts as to the son’s identity.<sup>20</sup> An additional argument for this hypothesis comes from the uneven distribution of the word in question throughout the rest of the pericope. *Yitzhaq* appears 5 times and only in the first part of the chapter (vv. 1-10), whereas *Avraham* – 15 times plus 3 times in an appellative in most of the pericope (vv. 1-20). Besides, in 3 out of 5 cases, *Yitzhaq* appears in juxtaposition with *beno* (“his son”) while the latter expression is present 7 times in vv. 1-19 plus 3 times as *binkha* (“your son”). In other words, the text is very ambiguous as to which of Abraham’s progeny is the object of Elohim’s command. In addition, Abraham’s son, be it Isaac or not, remains silent throughout the most of the chapter thus precluding the possibility of unriddling his status. His only utterance (v. 7) suggests nothing but his young age.<sup>21</sup>

This problem of identity is apparent on a more general level as well. The amount of biblical data concerning Isaac is extremely sparse: very little is said about his childhood and early age apart from the weaning episode in Genesis 21 and ‘*aqedah*. His figure is rather dull, especially when perceived against the backdrop of other patriarchs and in fact the life events of

<sup>19</sup> These are particularly pronounced in Bereshit Rabbah 55:7. For additional examples see: W. J. Bekkum, *The Aqedah and Its Interpretations in Midrash and Piyut*, [in:] *The Sacrifice of Isaac: The Aqedah (Genesis 22) and Its Interpretations*, eds. E. Noort, E. J. C. Tigchelaar, Brill 2002, p. 87.

<sup>20</sup> Besides, if to read Genesis 22 in the context of ch. 21 and the expulsion of Ishmael, then Isaac cannot be considered “the only one”.

<sup>21</sup> Notwithstanding the naivety of this utterance it has been used in various expositions of the passage as witnessing Isaac’s consciousness, maturity and willingness in performing the divine order. This was the case especially during the medieval persecutions of the European Jewry when the figure of Isaac has been turned into the symbol of *qiddush ha-Shem*. M. Giv’ati, ‘*Oqed ve-Na’aqed – Miqra’ u-Midrash*, [in:] *Sefer Mosheh Gutentag: Mehaqrim be-Miqra’ u-be-Mahshavat Yisra’el*, Ha-Hevrah le-Heqer ha-Miqra’ be-Yisra’el 1986, [online], <http://mikranet.cet.ac.il/pages/sub.asp?author=1762> [08.07.2013]; R. A. Rosenberg, *Jesus, Isaac, and the “Suffering Servant”*, “*Journal of Biblical Literature*” 1965, Vol. 84, No. 4, p. 385–387; T. Shashon, ‘*Aqedat Yitzhaq ke-Nisayono shel Yitzhaq*, “*Taleley ’Orot*” 2000, Vol. 9, [online], <http://www.daat.ac.il/daat/kitveyet/taleley/akedat-2.htm> [08.07.2013].

Isaac seem to be modelled after his father's.<sup>22</sup> In the context of Genesis 22, it is thus much more cautious to speak about "Abraham's son" rather than "Isaac".<sup>23</sup> Paradoxically, this also makes far more sense from a confessional perspective, given the strong suggestions of the consummated sacrifice and the undeniable presence of Isaac, however blurry he is, in the rest of the HB.

## SACRIFICED?

The elaborate sacrificial vocabulary along with the precise ritual protocol looks indeed surprising in the story which, according to biblical chronology, precedes the development of a temple cult. Abraham equips himself with the ritual paraphernalia (vv. 3, 6-7), builds an altar (v. 9) and performs the sacrifice (v. 10) without either hesitation or a request for any additional instructions. Among the items gathered by the patriarch in vv. 6 and 10 is *ma'akhelet*, a very rare word which apart from 2 occurrences in the *'aqedah* appears in singular only in Judges 19:29. In these passages it is traditionally rendered as "sacrificial knife", along with the early Greek (*mahaira*) and Aramaic (*sakin*) translations.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, from the morphological perspective, the structure of the word allows to advance a different reading: "[she is] devouring."<sup>25</sup> The juxtaposition of *ma'akhelet* with fire (Heb. *'esh*, also feminine in gender) is also significant, as the latter appears in the context of the "consuming fire" from heaven. This is the case in Leviticus 6:3, Numbers 11:1 or Deuteronomy 4:24. It often marks the divine approval of the offering

<sup>22</sup> N. M. Sarna, S. D. Sperling, A. Rothkoff, H. Z. Hirschberg, *Isaac*, [in:] *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Vol. 10, 2nd edition, eds. F. Skolnik, M. Berenbaum, Detroit–New York–New Haven–Waterville–London 2007 [EJ], p. 32–33; A. Shinan, Y. Zakovitch, op. cit., p. 224–225; M. Shir, *Le-She'elat Retzef Hayav u-Dmuto shel Yitzhaq 'Aveynu*, unpublished term paper, [online], [http://www.academia.edu/1821716/\\_/\\_/\\_](http://www.academia.edu/1821716/_/_/_) [08.07.2013], p. 25. Moreover, the later Jewish tradition (Tanhuma Toldot 1) stresses that Isaac bore an exceptional facial resemblance to Abraham. This assertion most probably originated from the will to repel the surmise of the sexual relations of Rebekah with the Pharaoh or Abimelekh. The source suggested by: A. Shinan, Y. Zakovitch, op. cit., p. 228–229.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. the anonymity of Jephthah's daughter in Judges 11.

<sup>24</sup> BDB, 455; HALOT, 4197; TWOT, 85e.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Bereshit Rabbah 56:3 which elaborates on the root כָּלַף of the word: the knife consumes flesh and renders meat kosher for eating. Besides, the people of Israel are said to be still eating from the reward given to them for the sake of Abraham's commitment. However, despite the support coming from the later rabbinic sources, it is important to note that the *pi'el* of this root is extremely rare in the HB. HALOT, 420.

and as such may be present also in Genesis 22. On the other hand, however, the consonantal form of the word allows for a more “innocent” reading as *ma’akholet* (*’esh*) meaning “fuel” – analogically to the instances in Isaiah 9:4,18.<sup>26</sup> As such this would be just one more sacrificial item carried by the patriarch in v. 6.

Startling is also the way in which Abraham’s son is depicted throughout the pericope. First, although the term “the only one” (Heb. *yehidkha*, vv. 2, 12, 16) is traditionally interpreted as marking the special relation between Abraham and Isaac, the matter is far more complicated. The word *yahid* occurs 12 times in the HB. 4 times it is applied as a reference to a specific individual: Isaac and Jephthah’s daughter in Judges 11 – both of whom become involved in human sacrifice.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, the word appears thrice in the context of mourning the deceased offspring (Jeremiah 6:26; Amos 8:10; Zechariah 12:10) and twice in lamenting one’s desolation (Psalm 25:16; 68:7). To sum up, *yahid* emphasises the specific ritual condition of a person rather than his relational or familial status. Secondly, Abraham’s answer in v. 8b to his son’s question about the object to be sacrificed is at least ambiguous and can be rendered as a nominal sentence: “the lamb for {the burnt offering} is my son”. Although this does not determine, which son would be forfeit, the infanticide itself is acknowledged. Thirdly, v. 12 which reads “do not do to him {anything}” conveys the Hebrew word *me’umah* – usually translated as “nothing” or “anything”, but at the same time very similar to *mum* or *mumah* denoting “blemish” or “flaw” in the ritualistic context. Although the direct etymological relation between the two seems to be absent,<sup>28</sup> the paronymasia has been utilised in later rabbinic expositions.<sup>29</sup> All these expressions describe Abraham’s son in terms of an irrelevant sacrificial object, devoid of individuality and personality.

<sup>26</sup> BDB, 456; HALOT, 4198; TWOT, 85f. This reading is less probable in v. 10 which suggests the slaughtering (Heb. *lishhot*) by means of *ma’akhelet*.

<sup>27</sup> The sources suggested by: M. Shir, *Aqedat Yitzhaq – ‘Avraham ve-’Elohav be-Tahlikh Hibridizatzyah be-’Eminah*, unpublished term paper, [online], [http://www.academia.edu/1760077/\\_-\\_-](http://www.academia.edu/1760077/_-_-) [08.07.2013], p. 27; F. Stavrakopoulou, op. cit., p. 196.

<sup>28</sup> BDB, 4981–4982; HALOT, 4188–4189, 4358; Cf. TWOT, 1136–1137 which suggests some linguistic affinity between the two.

<sup>29</sup> In Bereshit Rabbah 56:8 Isaac is said to fear that Abraham’s trembling hands will render the slaughtering non-kosher, whereas 56:9 tells of Isaac’s ashes spread all over the mountain for the purpose of atonement. Similarly, in Tanhuma Shelah 14 Abraham demands his deed to be regarded “as if having been performed”. The sources suggested by: F. Stavrakopoulou, op. cit., p. 200.

Arguable is also the substitutive character of the ram offered to Yahveh (v. 13).<sup>30</sup> In question is the Hebrew preposition *tahat*, which appears almost 250 times in the HB<sup>31</sup> and usually denotes “underneath”, “afterwards”, or “instead of”.<sup>32</sup> The latter meaning underlies the most widespread rendition of the phrase *tahat beno* (v. 13) as “instead of his son”.<sup>33</sup> The problem with such translation is however twofold. First, even a quick comparison between the translations of the HB shows that the substitutive meaning of *tahat* constitutes approximately 25% of the instances whereas the rest conveys the idea of “under” and “after”. Accordingly, it is grammatically probable that the ram had been sacrificed not instead of Abraham’s son but afterwards.<sup>34</sup> This should not be that surprising, given the covenantal atmosphere of Genesis 22 and the custom to “seal” contracts with blood, witnessed by other accounts within the Abraham cycle (chapters 15 and 17). Secondly, if to agree for the substitutive meaning of *tahat*, one still has to keep in mind the specific semantic flavour of this preposition: the object which is substituted not seldom becomes non-existent afterwards. The most vivid example of this nuance comes in the form of *lex talionis* described in Exodus 21:24 and Leviticus 24:20.<sup>35</sup>

The crucial moment of the first part of *‘aqedah* is v. 10: “Abraham {reached out} his hand and took the *ma’akhelet* to slaughter his son”. Due to the specific location of v. 10 between two larger parts of the pericope, the traditional interpretation sees here a moment of exceptional suspension. Abraham is just about to perform his gruesome task and only in the last

<sup>30</sup> Worth noting is the fact that according to the text the offering of the ram had been commanded by neither Elohim nor Yahveh. Besides, there are no traces suggesting that it had come from the Abraham’s flock – and as such it presented little sacrificial value. Z. Pawłowski, op. cit., p. 58.

<sup>31</sup> The number of occurrences exceeds 500 times when to include the conjunction of the preposition with other suffixes.

<sup>32</sup> BDB, 10492. P. Joüon, T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, Roma 2006, p. 318–319. HALOT, 9085.

<sup>33</sup> Targum Onqelos [TO] and Targum Pseudo-Yonatan [TPY] render תחת as תחת and thus witness to the “substitutive” meaning of the preposition. The same word is also applied in v. 16 when both targums say that the blessing of Abraham is given in exchange for offerings thus emphasising the consummated status of the sacrifice.

<sup>34</sup> See an analogical usage in Genesis 4:25 where it is said that Seth comes “after” or “instead of” Abel. Cf. S. Spiegel, after: A. J. Band, *Scholarship as Lamentation: Shalom Spiegel on “The Binding of Isaac”*, “Jewish Social Studies”, New Series, 1998–1999, Vol. 5, No. 1/2, p. 85–87.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. the later reiteration in Deuteronomy 19:21 which drops *tahat* and utilises a different grammatical structure: *‘ayin be-‘ayin, shen be-shen, yad be-yad, regel be-regel*.

moment is halted by the angel of Yahveh. From a grammatical perspective, however, the phrase “and Abraham {reached out} his hand” (Heb. *va-yishlah 'Avraham 'et-yado*) conveys the idea of an accomplished action. First, the verb itself is in the vav-consecutive perfect tense. Accordingly, Abraham’s hand has already been sent forth, the *ma'akhelet* grasped and child’s throat sliced open. Moreover, the very phrase *lishloah yad* or *lishloah yemino* is applied in other places as an indication of the action which had already been executed.<sup>36</sup> The idea of the accomplishment of Abraham’s actions is present also in v. 12 which applies the perfect tense: “you have not {withheld} your son, your only one from me”. When read on its own behalf it suggests the performed status of the sacrifice and accordingly means that Abraham is praised for not sparing his child.<sup>37</sup> Finally, v. 19 which concludes the fragment, employs the singular form and conveys no trace of the patriarch’s son: “and Abraham returned (*vayashav*) to his lads and they arose and walked together to Beersheba and Abraham {dwelt} (*vayeshv*) in Beersheba”. The story ends with the issue of Isaac completely unresolved.

## WAS IT WORTH IT?

Surprisingly enough, Abraham remains silent and follows Elohim’s orders without asking twice.<sup>38</sup> The lack of any verbal response has been addressed

<sup>36</sup> E.g. in Genesis 48:14; BDB, 9972; HALOT, 8630; P. Joüon, T. Muraoka, op. cit., p. 325–330; E. Kautzsch, *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*, Oxford 1910, p. 326–330; TWOT, 2940. Cf. 2 Samuel 24:16 where the angel of Yahveh is said to reach out and to strike Jerusalem. See also: 1 Chronicles 21:15 which reads “angel” instead of a “hand”.

<sup>37</sup> In this respect see the series of papers of T. Yoreh at: <http://www.biblecriticism.com/> [08.07.2013]. For a very straightforward summary of Yoreh’s innovative and inspiring hypotheses see: H. Rettig Gur, *When Abraham Murdered Isaac*, [online], <http://www.timesofisrael.com/when-abraham-murdered-isaac/> [08.07.2013].

<sup>38</sup> This is even more startling given Abraham’s emotional unrest after Ishmael’s leaving in ch. 21 or the fierce bargain with Yahveh about the men of Sodom and Gomorra in ch. 18. M. A. Lackowski, *Sons of Promise, Sons of Sacrifice: A Dialogical Midrash of Genesis 21 and 22*, [online], [http://www.academia.edu/1777008/Sons\\_of\\_Promise\\_Sons\\_of\\_Sacrifice\\_A\\_Dialogical\\_Midrash\\_of\\_Genesis\\_21\\_and\\_22](http://www.academia.edu/1777008/Sons_of_Promise_Sons_of_Sacrifice_A_Dialogical_Midrash_of_Genesis_21_and_22) [08.07.2013], p. 3, footnote number 7. The eagerness of Abraham has also been noted by the rabbis in Bereshit Rabbah 56:7-8. Abraham demands to extract some blood from Isaac and when refused to inflict ritual blemish on his son, he commiserates about the apparent discrepancy in the divine commands. The last part of the midrash contains an explanation which is based on the ambiguity of the verb *leha'alot*: Abraham was supposed to bring Isaac, but not to

in numerous hermeneutical proposals: some have argued that the patriarch was in a kind of religious trance and did not see things clearly, whereas others have insisted on the mundanity of Elohim's order who had the full right to demand human life. Moreover, some traditional exegetes emphasised the prophetic skills of Abraham who had to know that God would sustain Isaac as he had promised him the progeny beforehand.<sup>39</sup> A completely different interpretation comes from the pragmatic-economic approach combined with the ethnographic methods utilised by R. Willerslev in his insightful intercultural study of sacrificial customs.<sup>40</sup> This author convincingly argues that in fact, sacrificing the first-born is an act of trickery. Analogically to R. Willerslev's interpretation, it can be stated that such a child has not taken much of a pedagogical investment yet whereas bringing up the other one to the status of the deceased is just a matter of time. Sacrifice may be thus perceived as an "utilitarian act, aimed at giving up something relatively insignificant to gain something of much greater worth". According to this reading and in the context of the bargain over the men of Sodom, Abraham is a "knight of poker" rather than "knight of faith".<sup>41</sup>

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offer him. On the one hand, the incoherence seems to be compromised, but on the other, Isaac is still described in terms of an offering, which has to remain kosher.

<sup>39</sup> The latter interpretation bases on the phrases *ne'um Yahveh* ("Yahveh's {oracle}") and *bi nishba'ti* ("{on myself} I have sworn") in v. 16 which are extremely rare in Pentateuch but popular in the prophetic literature, e.g. in Isaiah 45:23 or Jeremiah 22:5. For the review of interpretations see: D. Albo, *Mivhano shel 'Eloqim be-Parashat ha-'Aqedah*, "Daf Shavu'i" 2013, No. 990, p. 1–3, [online], <http://www.kolech.com/show.asp?id=55405> [08.07.2013]; R. D. Bergen, op. cit., p. 319; B. D. Lerner, *Saving the Akedah from the Philosophers*, "The Jewish Bible Quarterly" 1999, Vol. 27, p. 170–171; R. W. L. Moberly, op. cit., p. 308, 315–316; G. J. Wenham, op. cit.; P. Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster?*, Grand Rapids 2011, p. 49–50; A. Zorenberg, *Ha-'Obsesyah shel 'Avraham Aveynu*, [online], <http://news.nana10.co.il/Article/?ArticleID=397181&pid=48&Action=Print> [08.07.2013].

<sup>40</sup> Cf. the brilliant psychoanalytic reading of *'aqedah* in: I. Benyamini, *The Akeda-s Complex. The Akeda and its Counter-Narrative in Judaism. Analyzing with Lacan*, "Almanac of Psychoanalysis" (Names of the Father in Religions and Cultures) 2006, Vol. 5, p. 112–119.

<sup>41</sup> R. Willerslev, *God on trial. Human sacrifice, trickery, and faith*, "HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory" 2013, Vol. 3, No. 1, p. 145–150. This interpretation of Abraham finds some support in the traditional rabbinic exegesis. The patriarch's trickery is hinted at in BT Sanhedrin 89b and Bereshit Rabbah 39:9; 55:7 describing typical rabbinic *masa' u-matan* similar to the negotiations over the inhabitants of Sodom. The sources suggested by: O. Boehm, *ibidem*, p. 11–12. B. D. Lerner, op. cit., p. 171.

There are numerous passages in the HB which present more or less explicitly the connection between human sacrifices or ritual killings<sup>42</sup> and the profits attained from the particular deity worshipped by the Hebrews. For example, Leviticus 16-17 speaks of animal and human blood which belongs exclusively to the deity. Exodus 13:1-2; 22:28-29 mentions the commandment to sacrifice firstborns and Exodus 23:10-14 obliges the offering of the first fruits using very suggestive vocabulary.<sup>43</sup> Besides, some allusions are present that human sacrifice played crucial role in times of crises as in the story of Jephthah's daughter in Judges 11:31-40,<sup>44</sup> Jonah at the sea in Jonah 1:7-16 or Zipporah circumcising Moses' son in Exodus 4:24-26. Not seldom is human sacrifice utilised as a kind of “black PR” – as is the case with the Canaanites in Leviticus 18, the actions of king Menasseh which precede the fall of the southern kingdom in 2 Kings 17:17; 21:6 or with the repression of such an aspect in the cult of Yahveh in Jeremiah 7:30-31.<sup>45</sup> In other words, within the sphere of the biblical sacrificial economy “there ain't no such thing as a free lunch”.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>42</sup> On the difference between these two concepts see: B. Pongratz-Leisten, *Ritual Killing and Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East*, [in:] *Human Sacrifice in Jewish and Christian Tradition*, eds. K. Finsterbusch, A. Lange, K. F. Diethard Roemheld, L. Lazar, Brill 2007, p. 5.

<sup>43</sup> Y. 'Amit, *Ha-Pulmos ha-'Aqif be-Nose' He'elet Qorban 'Adam: Parashat ha-'Aqedah (Bereshit 22:1-19)*, [in:] *Galuy ve-Nistar be-Miqra': Pulmosim Galuyim, 'Aqifim u-be-'Iqar Samuyim, Yedi'yot Ahronot* 2003, [online], <http://mikranet.cet.ac.il/pages/printitem.asp?item=8272> [08.07.2013]; R. W. L. Moberly, op. cit., p. 305–306; F. Stavrakopoulou, op. cit., p. 191; Y. Zakovitch, *Ha-Masorot ba-Miqra' 'al Roshit Hitqadshutah shel Yerushalaym*, [in:] *Yerushalaym be-Yamey Beyt Rishon: Meqorot, Sikumim, Parashiyot Nivharot ve-Homer 'Ezer*, eds. D. 'Amit, R. Gonen, Yad Yitzhaq ben-Tzvi 1990, [online], <http://mikranet.cet.ac.il/pages/printitem.asp?item=12989> [08.07.2013].

<sup>44</sup> For the parallels between Genesis 22 and Judges 11 including similar vocabulary, intimate dialogues and sacrificial entourage see: L. Mazor, *Yitzhaq u-Bat Yefthah*, [in:] *Neharde'a – Dapey Parashat ha-Shavu'a shel ha-'Universitah ha-'Ivrit be-Yerushalaym*, eds. A. Shinan, Y. Zakovitch, Va-yira' 2000, [online], [http://mikrarevivim.blogspot.com/2010/11/blog-post\\_7189.html](http://mikrarevivim.blogspot.com/2010/11/blog-post_7189.html) [08.07.2013].

<sup>45</sup> Y. Amit, op. cit.; E. Noort, *Genesis 22: Human Sacrifice and Theology in the Hebrew Bible*, [in:] *The Sacrifice of Isaac: The Aqedah (Genesis 22) and Its Interpretations*, eds. E. Noort, E. J. C. Tigchelaar, Brill 2002, p. 6–14; K. Schmid, op. cit., p. 274; G. J. Wenham, op. cit. It is possible that the strong opposition to the human sacrifices might be a marker of the factual presence of such laws at a certain moment in history.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. the traditional interpretations which perceive the *'aqedah* as either an etiology of a “new” kind of substitutive offerings or a protest against human offerings, e.g.: Y. Ben-Nun, op. cit.; U. Dasberg, “*Tzidduq ha-Din*” *be-'Aqedah – ha-Yitakhen?*, “*Tlaley 'Orot*” 1994, Vol. 5, [online], <http://www.daat.ac.il/daat/kitveyet/taleley/tsiduk-2.htm> [08.07.2013]. M. Giv'ati, op. cit.; L. Jacobs, A. Sagi, *Akedah*, [in:] EJ, Vol. 1, p. 555.

This interpretation finds additional support in the description of a rash of newborns in vv. 20-24. The localisation of those verses right after the Moriah-incident suggests the existence of some direct cause-effect connection between the two: from the perspective of a sacrificial economy, such a numerous progeny could not have been conceived without the preceding payment in an appropriate “currency”. Moreover, Abraham learns about the whole progeny instantly (v. 20): “and it was [so that] after these things [that] {it was told} to Abraham: behold, Milkah bore, also she, sons to Nahor your brother”. Given the geographical proximity of the families’ habitations, the way in which the offspring is introduced is at least surprising. The reader is left with an impression that these were either multiple births or exceptionally rapid subsequent deliveries – both being rather unusual phenomena.

## ONOMASTIC CODE

Not only is the genealogical snippet of Genesis 22 suspicious from the structural perspective but also due to its content. Vv. 20-23 list the progeny of Nahor and Milkah while v. 24 adds the offspring conceived with Re’umah, said to be his concubine. However, whereas vv. 20-23 have some significant links with other parts of the HB as well as with the historical and cultural entourage of the ancient Near East,<sup>47</sup> such connections are absent in v. 24. The very name of Nahor’s concubine appears here exclusively and in no other place in the HB is Re’umah mentioned. The same applies to her children’s names with the exception of Ma’akah which is sometimes utilised in the so-called historical books of the HB.

The extreme rarity of these names along with the structural awkwardness of v. 24 demands some alternative interpretation with regards to its purpose. Accordingly, the personal list may contain some “coded” explanation concerning the rest of the story. If to allow a certain degree of hermeneutical liberty, it is very insightful to search for an analogy, outside the HB in the apocryphal Book of Tobit 5:12-13. Raphael the angel, after being asked about his generations, replies (v. 12): “I am Azarias, the son of Ananias the great, and of thy brethren”.<sup>48</sup> Additional information is provided by Tobit the Elder who after acknowledging the “honest and good stock” says (v. 13): “I know

<sup>47</sup> Worth noting is that among the offspring is Isaac’s future wife, Rebekah. The compositional structure of Genesis 22 therefore suggests that she is born at the moment Isaac is (nearly) sacrificed.

<sup>48</sup> Book of Tobit (ESV).

Ananias and Jonathas, sons of that great Samaias, as we went together to Jerusalem to worship, and offered the firstborn”. Raphael presents himself as Azarias, the son of Ananias, the son of Samaias and thus “uncovers” his heavenly commissionaire(s) and earthly mission: Raphael – *rafa’ ’El* (“El healed”), Azarias – *’azar Yah* (“Yah helped”), Ananias – *hanan Yah* (“Yah had compassion”), Samaias – *shama’ Yah* (“Yah heard”). The reconstructed story previously “coded” within the names would be therefore: Yah has heard, Yah has had compassion, Yah has helped and finally – ’El has healed.<sup>49</sup> Accordingly, if to analyse the names of Nahor’s progeny along with this hermeneutical key, some interesting results emerge, especially if to include the vocalic variants transmitted in LXX:<sup>50</sup> *Re’umah* (רֵמוּאָה/Ρεημμα) – “see what”; *Tevah* or *Tabek* (טבֵּחַ/Ταβεκ) – “slaughtering” or “slaughtered”; *Gaham* (גָּהָם/Γααμ) – “flame” or “burning”;<sup>51</sup> *Tahash* or *Tohos* (תַּחַשׁ/Τοχος) – “skin” often used to cover the tabernacle;<sup>52</sup> *Ma’akah* or *Moka* (מַעֲכָה/Μωκα) – “blown” or “crushed”.<sup>53</sup> V. 24 begins with an interpretational invitation and continues with the names which seem to explain the cause of the rash of newborns present at the conclusion of the pericope: somebody had been blown, slaughtered, put on the tabernacle and burned.

## SEALED IN BLOOD

In v. 12, after being praised for his obedience, Abraham is addressed as “Elohim-fearing”.<sup>54</sup> The phrase is definitely ambiguous as “fear” has a wide

<sup>49</sup> For a similar approach towards the names as transmitting some theological remarks see e.g. Hosea 1:4-8: *lo’ ruhamah* negates the name given in Exodus 33:19; 34:5-7 whereas *lo’ ’ami* is a reference to the divine name given in Exodus 3:14.

<sup>50</sup> Neither of the targums strives to explain the names and transmits them verbatim.

<sup>51</sup> The word has most probably Arabic origins. BDB, 1774; HALOT, 1774.

<sup>52</sup> BDB, 10489–10490; HALOT, 9083–9084; TWOT, 2503. Also: a derivate of the verb *lahush* (“to haste”) and an anagram of the root שחט (“to slaughter”).

<sup>53</sup> HALOT, 4859. Although the rabbis have spotted the structurally atypical character of the passage and the peculiarity of onomastics, they have explained it in a completely different manner. See: Bereshit Rabbah 57:4 which reads: “R. Isaac said: All these names signify chastisement: *Tevah* means they slaughter (*tabhin*): *Gaham*, they burn (*gamhin*): *Tahash*, they silence (*tahshin*), *Maacah*, they crush (*ma’akin*).” (Soncino Midrash Rabbah). The destructive semantic feel of the names is acknowledged, yet the midrash does not draw a connection with the rest of the *’aqedah*.

<sup>54</sup> Worth noting is the fact that the phrase is uttered by Yahveh who thus seems to acknowledge *’elohim* as a distinct deity or deities. V. 12 is therefore one of the prime

semantic range from “crippling terror” up to “reverential respect” what is witnessed by the covenantal passages like Deuteronomy 6 or 11.<sup>55</sup> In v. 12 this phrase is juxtaposed with the acknowledgement of Abraham’s obedience in performing the sacrificial act. Thus, his submission is approved and future successes are promised: the patriarch is said to father the multitudes who in turn shall achieve military supremacy over the nations.<sup>56</sup> Now, if Yahveh’s speech bears the mark of the covenantal phraseology and if Abraham seems to be directly engaged, then it becomes apparent that the contract had to be sealed by some kind of offering – the more serious the agreement, the graver the sacrifice. If so, then Abraham’s son seems to be a perfect object for the ritual – especially since the altar had already been prepared.<sup>57</sup>

The phraseology of fear finds additional expression in the double vocative by which Abraham is addressed in v. 11. It is usually interpreted as an affected and urgent call or as an indication of the patriarch’s internal split.<sup>58</sup> However, the careful analysis of the passage as well as comparison with other instances of repeated address, reveal that in each of these cases the addressee is described as experiencing a ritually evoked anxiety and, as such, unable to respond at once.<sup>59</sup> What is even more important, the double address might also be an indication of a first encounter with a particular deity<sup>60</sup> – in

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examples of discreet yet extremely compelling redactional endeavour of interweaving different traditions and thus creating an impression of one God. More about this aspect of the “hybridity” of biblical faith in: M. Shir, *‘Aqedat Yitzhaq – ‘Avraham ve-‘Elohav be-Tahlikh Hibridizatzyah be-‘Eemunah*, op. cit.

<sup>55</sup> N. Lohfink, after: B. T. Arnold, *The Love-Fear Antinomy in Deuteronomy 5-11*, “Vetus Testamentum” 2011, Vol. 61, p. 551–558, 562–564.

<sup>56</sup> As is indicated by the phrase “your seed will inherit the gates of their enemies”. Cf. analogical usage in Genesis 24:60. R. W. L. Moberly, op. cit., p. 317. Both TO and TPY introduce “the cities of {those hating you}”.

<sup>57</sup> Worth noting is the addition conveyed by TPY to Genesis 22:9 that *‘aqedah* took place on the mountain where all the previous and would-be covenants had been made.

<sup>58</sup> A. Zorenberg, op. cit.

<sup>59</sup> E.g.: Genesis 46:2, Exodus 3:5 and 1 Samuel 3:10. S. Joo, “*Abraham! Abraham!*”: *Re-Analysis of Gen. 22:11*, “Korea Presbyterian Journal of Theology” 2011, Vol. 42, p. 66–68. This interpretation seems to be in line with traditional kabalistic expositions which argue that Abraham was well trained in the quality of love, which manifested in his familiarity with Elohim, but still had to develop his *gevurah* competences, i.e. learn how to fear Yahveh. For the elaboration of this notion see: B. Pfeffer Billauer-Bailey, *Message from Mt. Moriah: Part III, The Trial of Abraham: The Lonely Man of Love*, [online], [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2197286](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2197286) [08.07.2013].

<sup>60</sup> S. Joo, op. cit., p. 73.

this instance this would mean that Abraham, after becoming “familiar” with Elohim, sees Yahveh for the first time and reacts with crippling terror.

To sum up, the arguments for the consummated sacrifice of Abraham can be divided into three main sections. First, both the HB and its ancient Near Eastern literary entourage supply numerous examples for the presence and factual effectiveness of the human sacrifices within the ritualistic framework of the Hebrews. This attitude is sustained, even when such practices are attributed towards other nations as well as infamous fellow kinsmen. The second group of reasons comprises veiled suggestions concerning Isaac’s death and resurrection present in the rabbinic expositions of the *‘aqedah* account. The sacrificial feel of the source text has definitely been apparent for the early Jewish exegetes who have been struggling with its inconsistencies and theological awkwardness. The third section includes the arguments from the biblical text itself: the richness of ritualistic vocabulary, the passivity of Abraham’s son, the perfect tense of the verbs describing Abraham’s carrying out the commandment, the abundance of the newborn and the patriarch’s lone return from the mountain. These are additionally supported by numerous lesser linguistic clues scattered throughout the pericope – most notably by the names present in the genealogical addendum which constitute a “coded” explanation of the rest of the story.

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