CHAPTER 22

1 And it happened after these things that God tested Abraham. And
2 He said to him, "Abraham!" and he said, "Here I am." And He said, "Take, pray, your son, your only one, whom you love, Isaac, and go forth to the land of Moriah and offer him up as a burnt offering
3 on one of the mountains which I shall say to you." And Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey and took his two lads with

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1. The abrupt beginning and stark, emotion-fraught development of this troubling story have led many critics to celebrate it as one of the peaks of ancient narrative. Among modern commentators, Gerhard von Rad, Claus Westermann, and E. A. Speiser have all offered sensitive observations on the details of the story, and the luminous first chapter of Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis,* which compares this passage with one from the *Odyssey*, remains a landmark of twentieth-century criticism.

2. *your son, your only one, whom you love, Isaac*. The Hebrew syntactic chain is exquisitely forged to carry a dramatic burden, and the sundry attempts of English translators from the King James Version to the present to rearrange it are misguided. The classical Midrash, followed by Rashi, beautifully catches the resonance of the order of terms. Rashi's concise version is as follows: *"Your son*. He said to Him, 'I have two sons.' He said to him, *'Your only one.'* He said, 'This one is an only one to his mother and this one is an only one to his mother.' He said to him, *'Whom you love.'* He said to him, 'I love both of them.' He said to him, *'Isaac.'"* Although the human object of God's terrible imperative does not actually speak in the biblical text, this midrashic dialogue demonstrates a fine responsiveness to how the tense stance of the addressee is intimated through the words of the addresser in a one-sided dialogue.

your only one. Some scholars, bothered by the technical inaccuracy of the term, have followed an ancient reading of *yadid,* "favored one," instead of the Masoretic *yaḥid*. This seriously misses the point that in regard to Abraham's

him, and Isaac his son, and he split wood for the offering, and rose and went to the place that God had said to him. On the third day Abraham 4
raised his eyes and saw the place from afar. And Abraham said to his 5
lads, "Sit you here with the donkey and let me and the lad walk ahead and let us worship and return to you." And Abraham took the wood for 6
the offering and put it on Isaac his son and he took in his hand the fire and the cleaver, and the two of them went together. And Isaac said to 7
Abraham his father, "Father!" and he said, "Here I am, my son." And he

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feelings, Isaac, this sole son by his legitimate wife, is his only one. The phrase "your son, your only one," will return as a thematic refrain at the end of the story (verses 12, 16).

Moriah. Though traditional exegesis, supported by the reference to the Mount of the LORD at the end of the tale, identifies this with Jerusalem, the actual location remains in doubt. In any case, there is an assonance between "Moriah" and *yir'eh,* "he sees," the thematic key word of the resolution of the story.

3. *and Isaac his son*. The crucial item is left to the very end. The narrator does not miss a chance in the story to refer to Isaac as "his son" and Abraham as "his father," thus sharpening the edge of anguish that runs through the tale.

and he split wood. In a narrative famous for its rigorous economy in reporting physical details, this act of Abraham, wielding an axe and cutting things apart, is ominously singled out for attention.

5. *said to his lads . . . let me and the lad*. An identity of terms, an ironic divergence of meanings—the young men who are his servants (in fact, his slaves) and the boy to whom he fondly refers, whom he thinks he is going to kill.

let me. The Hebrew uses a jussive form for the three verbs, a gentler mode of speech than a flat declarative about future actions.

6. *the cleaver*. E. A. Speiser notes, quite rightly, that the Hebrew term here is not the usual biblical term for knife, and makes a good argument that it is a cleaver. Other terms from butchering, rather than sacrifice, are used: to slaughter (verse 10) and to bind (verse 9—a verb occurring only here but used in rabbinic Hebrew for trussing up the legs of animals).

7. *Father!* The Hebrew is literally "My father," but that noun with the possessive ending is the form of intimate address in biblical Hebrew, like *Abba* in postbiblical Hebrew.

said, "Here is the fire and the wood but where is the sheep for the offer-
8 ing?" And Abraham said, "God will see to the sheep for the offering, my
9 son." And the two of them went together. And they came to the place
that God had said to him, and Abraham built there an altar and laid out
the wood and bound Isaac his son and placed him on the altar on top
10 of the wood. And Abraham reached out his hand and took the cleaver
11 to slaughter his son. And the LORD's messenger called out to him from
the heavens and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" and he said, "Here I am."

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the fire and the wood. A moment earlier, we saw the boy loaded with the firewood, the father carrying the fire and the butcher knife. As Gerhard von Rad aptly remarks, "He himself carries the dangerous objects with which the boy could hurt himself, the torch and the knife." But now, as Isaac questions his father, he passes in silence over the one object that would have seemed scariest to him, however unwitting he may have been of his father's intention—the sharp-edged butcher knife.

8. *God will see to*. Literally, "see for himself." The idiomatic force is "provide," but God's seeing lines up with Abraham's seeing the place from afar, his seeing the ram, and the seeing on the Mount of the LORD. Beyond the tunnel vision of a trajectory toward child slaughter is a promise of true vision.

And the two of them went together. The impassive economy of this refrain-like repeated clause is haunting: two people, father and son, together for what threatens to be the last time, together "in one purpose" (Rashi), the father to sacrifice the son.

9–10. In contrast to the breathless pace of the narrative as a whole, this sequence inscribes a kind of slow motion: building the altar, laying out the wood, binding the child on top of the wood, reaching out the hand with the butcher knife—until the voice calls out from the heavens.

11. *and the LORD's messenger called out to him from the heavens*. This is nearly identical with the calling-out to Hagar in 21:17. In fact, a whole configuration of parallels between the two stories is invoked. Each of Abraham's sons is threatened with death in the wilderness, one in the presence of his mother, the other in the presence (and by the hand) of his father. In each case the angel intervenes at the critical moment, referring to the son fondly as *naʿar*, "lad." At the center of the story, Abraham's hand holds the knife, Hagar is enjoined to "hold her hand" (the literal meaning of the Hebrew) on the lad. In

And he said, "Do not reach out your hand against the lad, and do noth- 12
ing to him, for now I know that you fear God and you have not held
back your son, your only one, from Me." And Abraham raised his eyes 13
and saw and, look, a ram was caught in the thicket by its horns, and
Abraham went and took the ram and offered him up as a burnt offer-
ing instead of his son. And Abraham called the name of that place 14
YHWH-Yireh, as is said to this day, "On the mount of the LORD there
is sight." And the LORD's messenger called out to Abraham once again 15
from the heavens, and He said, "By My own Self I swear, declares the 16
LORD, that because you have done this thing and have not held back
your son, your only one, I will greatly bless you and will greatly multi- 17
ply your seed, as the stars in the heavens and as the sand on the shore
of the sea, and your seed shall take hold of its enemies' gate. And all the 18
nations of the earth will be blessed through your seed because you have
listened to my voice." And Abraham returned to his lads, and they rose 19
and went together to Beersheba, and Abraham dwelled in Beersheba.

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the end, each of the sons is promised to become progenitor of a great people, the threat to Abraham's continuity having been averted.

Here I am. The third time Abraham pronounces this word—*hineni*—of readiness: first to God, then to Isaac, now to the divine messenger.

13. *a ram*. The Masoretic Text reads "a ram behind [*aḥar*]," but scholarship is virtually unanimous in following numerous ancient versions in reading *eḥad*, "one," a very similar grapheme in the Hebrew.

14. *sight*. The place-name means "the LORD sees." The phrase at the end means literally either "he sees" or "he will be seen," depending on how the verb is vocalized, and this translation uses a noun instead to preserve the ambiguity. It is also not clear whether it is God or the person who comes to the Mount who sees/is seen.

16. *because you have done this thing*. The LORD's invocation of causation thickens the ambiguities of the story. Abraham has already been promised an innumerable posterity (chapters 15, 17). Perhaps now he has proved himself fully worthy of the promise. One might note that here for the first time a future of military triumph is added to the promise.

20 And it happened after these things that it was told to Abraham, saying,
21 "Look, Milcah, too, has born sons to Nahor your brother. Uz, his first-
22 born, and Buz his brother, and Kemuel the father of Aram. And Chesed
23 and Hazo and Pildash and Jidlaph, and Bethuel. And Bethuel begot
24 Rebekah. These eight Milcah bore to Nahor, Abraham's brother. And his concubine, whose name was Reumah, she, too, gave birth—to Tebah, and to Gaham, and to Tahash, and to Maacah."

20–24. The genealogical list inserted here, which reflects a Mesopotamian confederation of twelve tribes akin to the twelve tribes of Abraham's descendants, is directed toward the introduction of Rebekah (verse 23), soon to join the Patriarchal narrative as a principal figure. The genealogy marks a kind of boundary in the larger narrative. Abraham has accomplished his chief actions; all that is really left to him is to acquire a suitable burial plot for Sarah, which will be his final gesture in laying claim to the land. At that point, even before Abraham's death, the concerns of the next generation will take center stage (chapter 24).