11

The Story of Abraham: The Desires of the Heart

Formattato: Interlinea doppia

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion.

We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof.

For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song, and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion.

How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?

If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning.

If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy.*

Commento [h1]: Set as note, foot of first page of chapter.

Formattato: Tipo di carattere: 12 pt

*Ps. 137: 1–6.

Formattato: Tipo di carattere: 12 pt

Introduction

Both Job and Samson endure frightful suffering. Job is an innocent victim of catastrophic occurrences that overwhelm him and devastate his life. Samson ruins his own life, as well as that of others, through his reprehensible acts. But not all suffering is like the suffering of either Job or Samson. Even when suffering does not irrevocably wreck their whole lives, people who are somewhere on the continuum between perfectly innocent and morally monstrous endure heartbreak at the loss of things on which, for one reason or another, they have set their hearts.

Sometimes these are things we expect all people to care about, such as life and health, which are part of objective human well-being. But sometimes they are particular projects to which an individual is specially committed. In his diaries, Victor Klemperer records his bitter grief at being prevented by Nazi depredations from writing the great book he had hoped would be the flower of his life's work.[1] One can set one's heart on particular persons, too. Even in an otherwise easy life, the loss of one much-prized person—in the ending of a marriage, for example, or in the death of a child—can produce terrible suffering. So a person can have his heart set on a particular person or project whose value for him stems at least in part from his own commitment to it. As I explained in the first chapter, appropriating an expression from the Psalms, I will refer to these sorts of commitments as the desires of the heart.[2]

In this chapter I want to explore a story in which suffering connected to the desires of the heart is central—namely, the story of Abraham's binding of Isaac.[3] That story elucidates

the connection of the desires of the heart to the problem of suffering as well. Job and Samson are similar in that each of them emerges from his suffering as glorious in one respect or another. Their stories can therefore appear to confirm the strategy of those theodicies that try to justify divine permission of suffering by showing that suffering contributes (somehow, paradoxically) to the flourishing of the sufferer or of human beings generally. In the contemporary literature, such attempted theodicies include those which argue that suffering can be redeemed by contributing to the virtue of the sufferer or to the sufferer's usefulness to others.[4] The story of Abraham and Isaac, however, highlights the insufficiency of such a strategy for theodicy. It therefore also helps to confirm the view I argued for in Chapter 1—namely, that, in addition to the flourishing of a sufferer, the desires of a sufferer's heart need to be considered in any attempted theodicy or defense that is to have a hope of being satisfactory.[5]

The story of Abraham and Isaac is an especially good one for my purposes, not only for what it shows about the desires of the heart, but also for another reason connected to the problem of suffering, though in a different way. One traditional religious reaction to the problem of suffering has been to recommend that religious believers respond with faith to their own suffering as well as that of others. This recommendation has been made so often, in such varying circumstances, that it has become practically meaningless; and it is bound to strike many reflective people as deeply disappointing. Abraham, however, is traditionally considered the father of faith,[6] and on that view he becomes the father of faith because of his willingness to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac at God's command. So if faith is the recommended religious response to suffering, we can consider in some

detail what that response is meant to be by looking carefully at Abraham's actions as he becomes the father of faith in the story of the binding of Isaac.

As I will show in this chapter, the response of faith is not an attempt to evade wrestling with the problem of suffering but, on the contrary, a challenge for those working to construct a defense or theodicy, because it sets a high standard for success at the endeavor. On my reading, the narrative makes the recommended response of faith not disappointing or vague but clear and demanding. I will argue that faith of the sort exemplified by Abraham consists not in detachment[7] from the desires of one's heart, as is often enough supposed, but rather in trust in the goodness of God to fulfill those desires.

In order to understand the nature of the faith being attributed to Abraham in the binding of Isaac and its relationship to the desires of the heart, however, we need to look carefully at the details of the whole narrative of Abraham's life, within which the story of the binding of Isaac is set. The narrative has neutron-star density, and it is not possible to do justice to all its artistry in one chapter. With regret, I will have to leave many details of the narrative unremarked in order to concentrate on just those features of it that are specially germane to my purposes. In what follows, I will examine the narrative of Abraham's life to bring out a view of the binding of Isaac that is different from some well-known and commonly accepted interpretations of that story. When I have made clear the interpretation I think is preferable, I will return to the problem of suffering, to consider what light the story of Abraham and Isaac sheds on faith as a response to suffering.

Kierkegaard's interpretation: Caveats

The story of the binding of Isaac has figured prominently in all three major monotheisms; in Judaism[8] and Christianity,[9] the story has been the source of endless discussion and commentary.[10] In the Christian tradition, which is the one I know best, there are insightful interpretations of it by Origen, Augustine, Jerome, Chrysostom, Aquinas, Nicholas of Lyra, Luther, Calvin, Kierkegaard, and hosts of others.[11] It is not hard to see why the story commands this attention. The story itself is poignant: Abraham obediently going to sacrifice at God's command the beloved, long-awaited child of his old age. And the story raises puzzling philosophical and theological questions. Why should God ask this sacrifice of Abraham? Why should he try Abraham as he does? And what is laudatory about Abraham's willingness to kill his own child? Why should Abraham's consent to destroy his son make him the father of faith?

Because Kierkegaard's reading of the story is as compelling as it is well known, I will begin with a rough summary of Kierkegaard's interpretation, as I see it. Although this is in fact my reading of Kierkegaard, I make no pretensions to Kierkegaard scholarship, which is as contentious as the scholarship on any major figure in the history of philosophy. I am not attempting to contribute to that scholarship here, and I do not mean to adjudicate among competing views regarding Kierkegaard's interpretation of this biblical narrative. But I can show more easily the interpretation of the story I want to offer if I take Kierkegaard's interpretation as a foil. Kierkegaard's interpretation is important for my purposes therefore, only insofar as it helps me bring out the salient

features of the differing interpretation I mean to advocate. The reader who is primarily interested in the work of Kierkegaard himself and who dissents from the interpretation of Kierkegaard given in this chapter should feel free to take the section of this chapter on Kierkegaard's reading of the story as only a *Kierkegaard-like* interpretation.[12]

In general, as I understand him, Kierkegaard takes Abraham to be caught in a dilemma; but he thinks that that dilemma is resoluble, because he supposes that God's command produces a "teleological suspension of the ethical" for Abraham. The ethical prohibition against the killing of an innocent child is overridden by God's command to sacrifice Isaac. That Abraham understands and accepts this feature of his situation is part of what makes him a hero of faith for Kierkegaard. Interpreting the story as an instance of a moral or religious dilemma, whether resoluble or not, is a natural way of reading it. I am convinced, however, that this way of looking at the narrative is mistaken. To me, it seems blind to an important side of the story.

To show this side, it is important to place the episode of the binding of Isaac in the context of the whole narrative of Abraham's life, including especially the episodes involving Hagar and Keturah, Abraham's *other* wives or concubines,[13] and the children of these women. When the story of the binding of Isaac is read in this context, God's command to sacrifice Isaac cannot be understood as Kierkegaard does. God's command does not put Abraham in a dilemma where ordinary morality conflicts with obedience to God. Rather, it constitutes a test of Abraham's character that he passes precisely by committing himself to the belief that morality and obedience to God are on the same side.

When we see the story of the binding of Isaac in this way, we will be in a position to appreciate why in the narrative[14] a good God would test Abraham as he does. So understood, the narrative also gives us insight into Abraham's status as the father of faith, and, consequently, into one part of the nature of faith itself. Most importantly for my purposes, the narrative illumines the importance of the notion of the desires of the heart for the problem of suffering.

Kierkegaard's interpretation: Abraham's binding of Isaac

Kierkegaard calls Abraham a "knight of faith," and he explains this designation by comparing Abraham with a person whose life consists of "infinite resignation." Consider, says Kierkegaard, a young man who is hopelessly in love with a princess but who understands perfectly that there is no chance whatsoever of his winning her. He lets his love for the princess take over his life, but he gives up the princess. Such a man, Kierkegaard says, would no longer take "a finite interest in what the princess is doing,"[15] although he would preserve his love for her just as it was at the beginning. Like Dante in his love for Beatrice after her death, then, this lover would maintain his passion but without any practical or earthly interest in the human woman who prompted it. The life of such a lover is a life of infinite resignation, in Kierkegaard's view.

The knight of faith is different from such a lover, Kierkegaard explains, just because of the difference in his attitude toward the beloved. Someone who is a knight of faith and hopelessly in love with a princess also gives up the woman he loves and makes no effort

to woo her. He, too, knows clearly that there is no chance of his winning her. So he "infinitely renounces claim to the love which is the content of his life, he is reconciled in pain."[16] But, says Kierkegaard, what makes him the knight of faith is that he simultaneously says sincerely to himself, "I believe nevertheless that I shall get her." This sincere belief is "absurd," although it is not strictly speaking crazy or incoherent, since "with God all things are possible."[17]

Kierkegaard's position is not entirely clear here. The knight of faith does sincerely renounce his beloved; like the person of infinite resignation who gives up the princess he loves because he knows he cannot win her, the knight of faith also makes an act of resignation. But, in a psychological movement that at first glance does seem to merit Kierkegaard's appellation 'absurd,' the knight of faith believes at the same time *also* that he will get the woman he loves. However we understand the simultaneous belief and disbelief at issue here, what makes the knight of faith such a prodigy, on Kierkegaard's view, is just that he manages to give up what he loves and at the same time to trust that he will have it.

Abraham is a knight of faith of this sort, in Kierkegaard’s view. In an act of "infinite resignation," Abraham gives up his beloved son Isaac; but, because he is a knight of faith, he also expects to have Isaac, somehow. In this part of his interpretation, Kierkegaard is being true to a Christian tradition that is at least as old as the book of Hebrews. The author of Hebrews says that, when he was tested, Abraham offered Isaac in faith, with the belief that God could even raise the dead.[18] The implication of this text in Hebrews is,

apparently, that Abraham believed he would not be losing Isaac even as he was going to sacrifice him.

What Kierkegaard's interpretation of the story adds to the tradition exemplified by the text in Hebrews is his explanation of the nature of Abraham's test when God commands him to sacrifice Isaac and his understanding of the conditions for Abraham's passing that test. According to Kierkegaard, when he was tested, Abraham was not a tragic hero as, for example, Agamemnon was. Rather, unlike Agamemnon, Abraham "overstepped the ethical entirely."[19] For Kierkegaard, a tragic hero such as Agamemnon "remains within the ethical."[20] When Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter Iphigenia to the gods at Aulis so that his fleet of ships could sail to Troy, Agamemnon was within the bounds of the ethical, because he resigned his own dearest desires in order to promote the well-being of the whole people for whom he was responsible. Agamemnon, then, is faced with a difficult moral dilemma, but it is difficult for him just because it pits his personal desires against his public duty. When Agamemnon picks his duty over his daughter, Kierkegaard thinks, Agamemnon has chosen the lesser of two moral evils. But, for Kierkegaard, Abraham is a different case. There is no ethical principle that overrides Abraham's duty to his son, Kierkegaard thinks. Instead, there is only the "teleological suspension of the ethical." Abraham was prepared to sacrifice Isaac "for God's sake, because God required this proof of his faith."[21] On Kierkegaard's views, what is higher than ethical principles is Abraham's obedience to God; and the demands of that obedience take precedence over morality. That is why, Kierkegaard thinks, there is a teleological suspension of the ethical in Abraham's case.

It looks, therefore, as if Kierkegaard understands the nature of Abraham's test and the conditions for passing the test like this. Morality imposes a requirement on Abraham—namely, that he not kill his son Isaac. But God's command also imposes a requirement. This is not a moral requirement; if it were, Abraham's case would be like Agamemnon's. Abraham would be subject to two conflicting moral requirements, of which one—namely, the one imposed by God's command—clearly took precedence over the other. But Abraham's case is significantly different from Agamemnon's in Kierkegaard's view, and the difference comes to this, that the requirement imposed on Abraham by God's command is not itself a moral requirement. So Abraham is faced with two requirements, one moral and the other religious. Since the requirement imposed by God's command cannot be overridden by anything and can itself override other obligations, what Abraham must do is sacrifice his son. For Kierkegaard, when Abraham assents to offering Isaac, Abraham's greatness is far beyond that of a tragic hero such as Agamemnon. It consists in his willingness to suspend the ethical for the sake of obedience to God's command.

Kierkegaard's interpretation of Abraham as in a dilemma where religion and morality conflict and religion overrides morality raises some perplexing questions. Why would a good God want to set his authority *against* morality, rather than with it? [22] Given the constant emphasis of the biblical texts on the sinfulness of human beings, surely we are not meant to suppose that Abraham needed no encouragement on the score of morality but could instead go on to something greater than moral goodness. And why is Abraham's

act supposed to make him the father of faith? In his willingness to submit the concerns of ordinary morality to religious requirements Abraham is not unique; in fact, he is even superseded. Jephthah was not only willing to abrogate the prohibition against killing one's child; for the sake of his relationship to God, he actually did it[23]—unlike Abraham, who only got as far as raising the knife.[24] If the willingness to suspend the ethical in the interest of obedience to God is what makes a person the father of faith, why would that title not have been given to Jephthah rather than Abraham? Finally, what is the relation between Abraham's test, on this reading of it, and Abraham's conviction (as Kierkegaard sees it) that he will have the very thing he has resigned as lost to him? If willingness to subordinate morality to religious demands is success in passing the test, why suppose that the success would have been somehow lessened or undermined if Abraham had rejected the belief that he also would have the son he was resigning to God?

Abraham's offspring

With this much attention to Kierkegaard's reading of the story and the questions it raises, I want now to turn to the whole narrative of Abraham's life.

It will be helpful to begin by noticing the way in which that narrative is bounded by and focused on a concern with children. Among the first things we learn about Abraham is that he is married to a woman who cannot bear him children,[25] and among the last things we learn about him is that his children[26]—Isaac and Ishmael—have come together in order to bury him.[27] God's first recorded speech to Abraham occurs when Abraham is 75 years old,[28] and the last one takes place when Abraham is around 115.[29] In the forty-year

interval, there are eight recorded occasions on which God visits Abraham to speak with him,[30] and every one of them has as its partial or total concern some issue involving Abraham's children or his descendants, the children of his children. In fact, every episode in which God visits Abraham includes at least one divine speech in which God makes promises to Abraham implying or stating explicitly that Abraham will have offspring.[31]

In the first of these eight visitations, God promises to make Abraham into a great nation and a source of blessing for all the families of the earth. In the second visitation, God's speech adds to the promise of the first visitation an additional promise to give to Abraham's seed the land in which Abraham finds himself—although this speech leaves open the way in which the notion of seed is to be construed. The divine speech in the third visitation repeats the divine promise made in the second visitation and elaborates on it by adding the promise that Abraham's seed will be very numerous. The fourth visitation is somewhat more complex. In it, God enters into a covenant with Abraham, and he makes prophecies about Abraham and Abraham's offspring. On this fourth visitation, God also reiterates the preceding promises but disambiguates them by adding the promise that Abraham will be the *biological* father of offspring. Finally, the remaining four divine visitations to Abraham, which are too complicated to summarize succinctly here, also each include promises about Abraham's children.

As the subsequent examination of the narrative confirms, God's promises in these visitations offer Abraham the reward of offspring because offspring is what Abraham

wants most dearly. Being the father of children, the patriarch of a clan, the ancestor of a people is Abraham's heart's desire.

Promises

It will expedite the subsequent exposition of the narrative if we digress here briefly to reflect on the nature of a promise.[32] A promise is a performative utterance that expresses a speaker's commitment to a specific course of action in the future[33] (as, for example, "I promise I will return the axe to you tomorrow") or to a future state of affairs over which the speaker has some degree of control (as, for example, "I promise I will always love you"[34]) and that obligates her to perform that action or see to it that that state of affairs obtains.[35]

Correlative with a promise is an implicit future contingent proposition, a prediction in effect, which is, in general, true just to the extent to which the promise-maker is reliable as regards promise-keeping: Paula (the maker of the promise) will return the axe to Jerome (the recipient of the promise) tomorrow; Paula will always love Jerome.[36] I say 'in general,' because sometimes, although the promise-maker is completely reliable, circumstances external to the will of the promise-maker bring it about that the correlative prediction is false, contrary to the resolution of the promise-maker. Paula promised to return the axe to Jerome tomorrow, but the ice storm that descended without warning confined the whole community to their own homes and kept Paula from returning the axe to Jerome. Or Paula died suddenly of a heart attack today and so did not live to return the axe tomorrow. Or events occurred that made Paula's breaking her promise the lesser of

two evils for Paula: she promised to return the axe to Jerome tomorrow; but since Jerome is in a homicidal rage against his wife when he requests the axe, Paula breaks her promise and does not give it to him. Circumstances that render false the predictions correlative with the promises of reliable promise-makers are unpredictable, but also uncommon; and so, *in general*, the implicit prediction correlative with a promise is true if the promise-maker is reliable.

Since this is so and also generally understood to be so, the attitude of a promise-recipient toward the reliability of a promise-maker can (also *in general*) be ascertained on the basis of the recipient's tacit or occurrent belief in the truth of the prediction correlative with the promise. If Jerome responds to Paula's promise about returning the axe tomorrow by going to the store today to buy a new axe, we are within our rights to suppose that Jerome does not have much confidence in the reliability of Paula as a promise-keeper.[37] Furthermore, because keeping promises is morally obligatory, a lack of confidence on Jerome's part in Paula's reliability as a promise-keeper implies on Jerome's part a lack of belief, to one extent or another, in Paula's goodness. That is why Paula would feel insulted if, after hearing her promise to return the axe tomorrow, Jerome went to the store today to buy another axe.

In the narrative, it is evident that there is little or no likelihood that external circumstances will impede God's ability to fulfill his promises; and, in one place after another, the narrative makes clear that Abraham understands this fact about God. Abraham repeatedly shows that he believes in God's great power over nature and human

affairs. He has no doubt, for example, that God can suddenly destroy Sodom and Gomorrah and everyone in those cities. Even when Abraham laughs at God's statement that Sarah will give birth to Abraham's child when he and Sarah are old, it is obvious that, although Abraham finds that statement funny, he does not think that what it foretells is impossible. And so we can take it that, where *God's* promises are concerned, Abraham understands that there is a strong connection between a promise and its correlative prediction. In the narrative, the likelihood that the prediction correlative with a divine promise is true depends entirely on the reliability of the promise-maker, not on that reliability together with the likelihood of external circumstances undermining the fulfillment of the divine promises; and Abraham recognizes that this is so.

For this reason, Abraham's attitude toward the predictions correlative with the divine promises is revelatory of Abraham's view of God's reliability as a promise-maker and consequently of Abraham's underlying attitude toward God's goodness as well. I am not suggesting that in the narrative Abraham deliberates about whether or not God is reliable as a promise-keeper or that Abraham consciously wonders about God's goodness or about how much trust to place in God's goodness. I mean only that, however unreflective Abraham may be about his attitudes toward God's goodness and God's promises and however tacit those attitudes might be, we can garner information about his attitudes toward God's goodness and reliability as a promise-keeper from Abraham's stance with regard to the predictions correlative with God's promises. To the extent to which Abraham does not believe those predictions, to that extent Abraham is also skeptical

about God's goodness, even if his doubts are hidden from his own awareness and buried within his consciousness.

Because it is clumsy to talk about predictions correlative with promises, in what follows I will forgo this more careful locution and instead talk about the truth of a divine promise or Abraham's belief in the truth of a divine promise. But it should be clear that what is at issue in these locutions, strictly speaking, is just the prediction correlative with the promise.

In the narrative, what is striking is the double-mindedness of Abraham's attitudes toward God's promises.

The first divine promise

Consider, to begin with, God's first recorded speech to Abraham in the narrative in which God promises to make of Abraham[38] a great nation. Even with respect to this first promise, there is something odd about Abraham's response.

In this first speech to Abraham, God commands Abraham to leave his land, his family,[39] and his father's house. But this command comes to Abraham at a time when Abraham is already away from the land of his origins and from virtually all of his family. That is because by this time, after the death of Abraham's brother Haran, Abraham's father Terah has moved away from the family's homeland, taking with him Haran's son Lot and Abraham and Abraham's wife Sarah, and leaving the rest of whatever family he has

behind. So when God tells Abraham to leave his country and his family and his father's house, there is less for Abraham to do to fulfill that command than there might otherwise have been. Abraham is already away from his home country; and, besides his wife Sarah, the only family of Abraham's (or the only family that the narrative mentions as with Abraham[40]) is his father Terah and his nephew Lot. To fulfill this command of God's, then, Abraham has only to leave his father and his nephew and their current dwelling place.

It is clear that on this occasion Abraham is ready to obey God's command, and it is equally evident that Abraham desires to have the promised divine reward. The narrative says that, in response to God's command, Abraham went out from his father's house and from the land where his father had settled. But the narrative *also* says that Abraham took Lot with him when he went.[41] Lot is part of Abraham's family and part of the house of Abraham's father Terah, since Terah took Lot in after the death of Lot's father. So, manifestly, Lot belongs to those whom God's command requires Abraham to leave behind.[42] Since Abraham takes action that is plainly intended to count as obeying God's command, why does Abraham take Lot with him when he leaves his father's house?

One obvious possibility worth considering here, and one which turns out to be amply confirmed by subsequent episodes in the narrative, is that Abraham is trying to help bring about the fulfillment of God's promise. He is trying to mitigate dependence on God for making the divine promise about his posterity true by arranging to make it true himself. In the narrative, at this period of his life, Abraham has been childless for a long time,

long enough for him reasonably to suppose that he and Sarah will never have children of their own. And so, when Abraham sets out from his father's house in response to God's command, he takes his nephew Lot with him, contrary to God's command, as a kind of surety for the children Abraham does not have. If all else fails, Abraham seems to be thinking, God's promise to make of him a great nation could perhaps be made true through a foster son.

If this interpretation of Abraham's action is right,[43] as I think subsequent episodes in the narrative show that it is, how should we understand Abraham's attitude toward God as a promise-maker? On the one hand, it appears that Abraham believes in the truth of God's promise and trusts God as a reliable promise-maker. That is because Abraham does act on God's command, and with dispatch. On the other hand, however, Abraham's taking Lot with him in contravention of God's command indicates that Abraham thinks the divine promise will not come true unless, by bringing Lot into his household, he himself provides the offspring necessary to make the promise true. To this extent, Abraham does not believe God's promise that *God* will make him a great nation. And, to that extent, Abraham also does not trust God's goodness as a promise-maker.

Someone might suppose here that Abraham is simply trying to fulfill conditions on God's promise that are unstated but nonetheless implied. But why think so? There are indeed conditions conjoined to God's promise to make Abraham a great nation, but they are explicitly stated. They have to do with Abraham's leaving his family and land. Why suppose that there are further conditions that are unstated and that require Abraham to

find somebody to serve as his heir? Furthermore, if it were up to Abraham to arrange descendants for himself, then, when Abraham did have descendants, in what sense would God be fulfilling his promise that *he, God*, would make of Abraham a great nation? So the supposition that, in taking Lot with him, Abraham is just trying to cooperate with God seems to me mistaken.[44]

Or consider the issue this way. On the one hand, if Abraham thought that God were good and could be trusted to keep his promises, Abraham would also believe that, as long as he fulfilled God's explicit commands,[45] the fulfillment of the promise God made him could safely be left to God. Abraham would not be trying to make that promise true himself by bringing his nephew into his household. On the other hand, of course, if Abraham thought God were not good and could not be trusted to keep his promises, then there would be no reason why he would leave his father to go wandering in foreign territory.

Consequently, when Abraham takes Lot with him, there is a certain double-mindedness in Abraham's attitude toward God.[46] Somehow, Abraham believes and also does not believe that God's promise is true. He therefore also believes and does not believe that God is a reliable promise-keeper. To this extent, therefore, Abraham is double-minded about God's goodness as well.

The fourth divine promise

By the time of God's fourth visitation to Abraham, in spite of the preceding three divine promises about his posterity, Abraham has remained childless. By this point in the story,

the only thing that has changed as regards descendants for Abraham is that Abraham has adopted his steward Eliezer as his heir. That adoption seems to have occurred just because Abraham's nephew, Lot, who might have served as Abraham's foster son and heir, has ceased to be part of Abraham's household. Lot has left Abraham's household because of strife between the servants of Lot and those of Abraham. It is difficult to graze as many animals as Lot and Abraham have when the herds are being pastured together; and so their servants have quarreled. As a result, Lot and Abraham have agreed to put distance between them, so that the herds can be pastured without dissension. With Lot gone, Abraham has adopted as his heir his steward Eliezer.

Here we can ask a question analogous to the preceding question about Lot: why does Abraham adopt an heir? God's promises in all three of his earlier speeches to Abraham have specifically included promises about Abraham's seed. Even if the notion of seed could be construed broadly enough to include Lot, the notion of seed can hardly be extended far enough to include servants, as Abraham himself is aware. When God comes the fourth time to make promises about offspring to Abraham, Abraham complains that God has given him no seed, so that his heir has to be his steward Eliezer.[47]

If Abraham were to have seed, as God has promised he would, then Abraham would also have an heir. So if, in Abraham's eyes, God is good and his promises are trustworthy, why would Abraham adopt Eliezer as his heir instead of waiting for the promised seed? Adopting an heir in the face of God's promise about Abraham's seed argues a decided lack of confidence in the promise and consequently also in the goodness of God, the

promise-maker. On the other hand, Abraham's willingness to complain to God is evidence of some trust on Abraham's part in God's goodness. Unless God is good and God's promises are trustworthy, what is the point of complaining to God that he has not yet made good on his promises? Why complain to God that God has not given Abraham seed unless God is good at least to the extent of caring about whether or not he keeps his promises? So, in Abraham's adopting Eliezer as his heir and then complaining to God, there is further evidence of Abraham's double-minded attitude toward God's promises and God's goodness.

In response to Abraham's complaint that God has given him no seed, God reiterates his promises and elaborates on them. Your descendants, he tells Abraham, will be as numerous as the stars. But this time God also disambiguates the preceding promises: biological offspring, not foster sons or adopted heirs, will be Abraham's promised seed. "He that will come from your own bowels," God tells Abraham, "will be your heir" (Gen. 15: 4). The narrative comments that Abraham believed this newly clarified promise of God's and that God counted Abraham's believing God as Abraham's righteousness.[48]

And yet, even if, at this moment in the development of Abraham's relations with God, Abraham did whole-heartedly believe in God's promises and thus also in the goodness of God as a promise-maker, this moment is followed almost immediately by the expression of a serious doubt on Abraham's part. When God goes on to repeat one of his promises, that he will give the land to Abraham, Abraham responds with a request for confirmation

of the promise. How do I *know* that I will inherit the land? he asks God. Here belief in God's reliability as a promise-maker is definitely not to the fore.[49]

Abraham's request for confirmation: A perplexity

Abraham's request for confirmation of God's promise to give him the land should remind us that Abraham has been hearing God's promises for a long time without seeing any sign of their fulfillment; and it is no doubt understandable that he would want reassurance about them. On the other hand, if one friend makes a promise to another and is rewarded with the question "How do I know this is true?," the promise-maker will be within his rights to be offended or to feel bad in some other way. If Paula asks to borrow some CDs from her friend Jerome and promises to return them, and Jerome responds by saying, "how do I know you will return them?," Paula will justifiably feel insulted. If Paula is still speaking to Jerome after that, she will say something like this: "because I promised I would, and my promise ought to be sufficient for you." And so one might be forgiven for supposing that the only right answer for God to give in reply to Abraham's "How do I know" question is an indignant "because I promised."

But in the narrative God does not respond with indignation. In fact, God's response is apparently to honor Abraham's request by giving Abraham the confirmation he wants that the divine promise is true.

I say 'apparently' because of the nature of that confirmation.

The confirmation has three parts. First, God comes to Abraham in a vision when Abraham is asleep. The vision seems to have something of the nature of a nightmare for Abraham, or at any rate to be accompanied by dread. In the vision, God predicts that at some future time Abraham's descendants will suffer dreadfully for 400 years, but that God will punish their oppressors and bring Abraham's descendants back to the land God is giving Abraham. Secondly, after this, there is a further vision, either when Abraham is asleep or after he wakes, in which Abraham sees smoke and fire passing between the halves of the bodies of animals that Abraham has divided and positioned in a ritual action of covenant-making. Finally, the confirmation finishes with God's explicitly making a covenant with Abraham to give him the land. So God's confirmation of the truth of his promises consists in divine predictions, delivered in visions, and more divine promises, this time made with the solemnity of a covenant.

It is obvious that this confirmation, including the ritual covenant, is worth only as much as the original promises. Someone who distrusted the original promise would not be helped much toward more trust by this kind of confirmation, would he? How could he possibly be? If Jerome says to Paula, "how do I know that you are trustworthy as regards your promises?," and Paula responds by saying warmly, "I promise you that I am!," Jerome would have to be benighted to suppose he had been given evidence warranting his trust in Paula's original promise or any real help with his doubt in that promise. Even if we suppose that Paula confirms her promise with a ritual act of impressive religious significance—swearing on a Bible, say—the ritual act will be worthless unless Paula is a trustworthy maker of promises and vows.

Analogously, the confirmation God gives to Abraham in the vision and covenant is only a more powerful variation on the original divine promise-making, and *it* is worth trusting only in case the original promises were, that is, only in case God is good and a reliable keeper of promises and covenants. At any rate, if this divine confirmation, in visions and covenant, of the original divine promises demonstrates anything not evident to Abraham earlier, it is only God's power—to produce visions, for example—and not anything about God's reliability as a keeper of promises and covenants or God's trustworthiness and goodness in general.

Why, then, does God respond in this way to Abraham's request for confirmation? Why should God offer what purports to be confirmation, rather than the rebuke that Abraham's request for confirmation appears to deserve? On the other hand, if confirmation rather than rebuke is the right divine response, why should God make the confirmation consist just in things that require the very same sort of trust as the promise for which Abraham wanted confirmation in the first place?

These questions should prompt us to ask the question that all the divine visitations and promises in the narrative so far cry out to have answered: why does God take such a circuitous route toward the end he promises Abraham? There are twenty-five years between God's first promise to Abraham and the birth of the promised heir Isaac. Why should God keep Abraham waiting such a long time, so that the much-desired son comes only in Abraham's old age? Why does not God simply remove Sarah's barrenness

immediately after the first promise? In fact, why should God make any promises at all? If God wants Abraham to have a large posterity, why does not God simply ensure at the outset that Sarah is not barren?

Developing trust

The answer to these questions is implicit in the questions themselves, when we line them up in this way. That God is willing to respond to Abraham's request for confirmation by honoring it in any way, rather than rebuking it, is evidence of a surprising patience with Abraham on God's part. The point of that patience is hinted at by the nature of the confirmation God provides.

God's confirmation does indeed require the same kind of trust on Abraham's part as the original divine promise. But this response of God's to Abraham makes sense if God's aim in his dealings with Abraham—including his making promises to Abraham and then postponing the outcome Abraham so greatly desires—is not just the production of posterity for Abraham but also, and more importantly, the eliciting of a relationship of trust between himself and Abraham.

The story makes it clear that this kind of trust is hard for Abraham. That is why he takes Lot with him, adopts Eliezer as his heir, and asks for confirmation of God's promise—among many other things still to emerge in the story.

If God were to respond to Abraham's request for reassurance by giving Abraham real evidence (whatever real evidence might be in this context) that did actually constitute confirmation of the truth of the divine promises, God would be asking little of Abraham by way of belief in God's promises and even less by way of trust in God. As it is, the way in which God responds to Abraham's request for confirmation is reminiscent of the way a riding instructor will take a student who has pulled up short at a fence back around the riding ring again, faster and with more urging, for another try at that same fence. The vision and the ritual of covenant-making will confirm the divine promises for Abraham only if Abraham is willing to believe in God's trustworthiness and goodness.

The long process of God's repeatedly promising Abraham his heart's desire and then repeatedly delaying the fulfillment of those promises is thus not a peculiar way of producing offspring for Abraham but rather a taxing way of producing a relationship of trust between Abraham and God. It asks a considerable amount from God, as well as from Abraham, insofar as it requires divine ingenuity at the building of personal relations with human beings and divine patience with Abraham, to whom trust does not come easily. It is worth noticing that it also requires of God trust in Abraham[50]—trust that Abraham will not give up during the waiting period and turn irrevocably away from God in distrust and disbelief.

Midrashic commentators suppose that God will deal in this sort of way only with the spiritually strong, and so they see the ordeals God prepares for Abraham as evidence of Abraham's greatness.[51] However that may be, for Abraham, the process is not only

challenging but also filled with pain. The pain that comes with waiting, interspersed with disappointment, and further externally imposed waiting, succeeded by reiterated disappointment, in apparently endless cycles, grinds the will down into misery. Pain of that sort wears away the heart. The anguish generated in Abraham by his assent to the sacrifice of Isaac captures the imagination of those who know the story, but we must not for that reason be oblivious to the suffering of Abraham's long wait for the children he so desires.

Seeing God's interactions with Abraham in this way—as a patient, trusting willingness on God's part to use his promises and Abraham's waiting to try to elicit a relationship of trust between himself and Abraham—helps to explain another, otherwise perplexing feature of God's promises.

In the first divine promise, God tells Abraham that Abraham will be the source of a great nation. In the second promise, God says that Abraham's seed will inherit the land. The second promise therefore disambiguates the first. Abraham will be the source of a great nation because he will have seed, and it is that seed that will become a nation and inherit the land. In the third promise, which comes after Lot has been separated from Abraham, so that Abraham has to understand God's promises will not be fulfilled through Lot, God implies that the seed in question is not some member of Abraham's extended family, but rather some more direct descendant of Abraham's. In the fourth promise, God makes this element of that third promise explicit by promising Abraham that he will be the biological father of the offspring who will count as Abraham's seed. But in this fourth

promise God still leaves notably vague the identity of the *mother* of the promised biological offspring. The fourth promise is disambiguated only in the fifth promise, when God makes clear that the promised seed will come to Abraham through Sarah.

Why is God's first promise characterized by an opaque vagueness, and why is that vagueness only slowly dispelled in the progression of promises? Clearly, God could have divulged to Abraham the full and complete promise, as it stands in its final unfolding, on the first occasion of his interaction with Abraham. On the first occasion of making a promise to Abraham, God could have explained to Abraham that Abraham would have a biological son by Sarah. For that matter, God could have specified the time at which this son would be born and all the other details of all his later elaborations on the original promise. That is, on the occasion of his first visitation to Abraham, God could have said to him: "Twenty-five years from now, you will have a son; the mother of this son will be Sarah; the son's name will be 'Isaac'; through him you will become the ancestor of a great people; these people will inherit the land"—and so on. God could have made his promise this way. Why did he not do so?

And here is the evident answer: because, if God had done so, then, for Abraham, there would not have been anything like the same process of growth in trust in God. The series of promises, with their increasing disambiguation, is clearly a kind of psychological or spiritual stretching for Abraham.

Abraham's reactions to the progression of promises show that, on the one hand, in some sense or to some degree, he does believe God's promises and does trust God to ensure their truth. And yet, on the other hand, in trying to make the promises true himself rather than waiting for God to fulfill them, he also shows that he does not entirely trust God as a promise-keeper. By starting with a vague promise that is gradually disambiguated and made more specific, God engages Abraham in a process that requires Abraham to grow in trust of God's promises and God's goodness. Each occasion on which Abraham tries himself to make the divine promises true is followed by God's reiterating and clarifying the promises. Each reiteration and clarification show Abraham both the futility of his own attempts to bring about the fulfillment of the promises and the rightness of waiting for God to fulfill them. And so through this demanding process Abraham is increasingly brought to trust in God. And there is also this: each time God returns to reiterate and elaborate the original promise, Abraham also sees that God does not give up on him or on his promises to him, even when Abraham has in effect been unwilling to wait in trust for God. For this reason, Abraham also gains a deeper insight into God's goodness and a greater appreciation of it. To this extent, as the relationship between God and Abraham deepens, the story shows that Abraham transfers to God some of the personal commitment that in the beginning Abraham seemed to reserve only for having offspring and being the progenitor of a people. The desires of Abraham's heart widen to include God as well as children and patriarchal status.

Abraham's first child: Ishmael

This way of interpreting God's interactions with Abraham and Abraham's reactions to God's promises is only confirmed by the fourth occasion on which God visits Abraham and makes promises to him.

This is the occasion on which God makes plain that Abraham will be the biological father of children—but leaves unspecified the identity of the mother of these children. In response to God's promise on this fourth occasion, Sarah proposes to Abraham that he take her maid Hagar to bed.[52] Since she herself cannot have children, she tells Abraham, perhaps he should try with Hagar. And Abraham agrees, thereby engaging in another attempt to contribute to making the divine promises true. It is notable that Abraham, who has the courage to ask God to confirm his promises and who (later in the story) is not afraid to cross-question God about the punishment for Sodom and Gomorrah, never thinks to ask God whether having sex with Hagar to try to produce offspring would be a good idea.

As could perhaps have been foreseen, this attempt of Abraham's to bring about the fulfillment of the divine promise initiates a new order of suffering—for Hagar most obviously, but also for Abraham and Sarah. Previously, the most evident pain for Abraham was the misery of the recurrent disappointment of reawakened hope that he might have his heart's desire. In having sex with Hagar, Abraham's double-minded response to God's promise sets in motion a train of events that eventuates in the distress of broken relationships, for Abraham and the rest of his small family too.

Sarah's stratagem for bringing about the fulfillment of the divine promise is successful, at least in the sense that Hagar quickly becomes pregnant. But Hagar's pregnancy almost immediately becomes the source of bitter discord between Hagar and Sarah. Given the wretchedness and injustice of a situation in which one woman offers another woman in her power to her husband for sex in order to make up for her own inability to produce an heir, *and* her husband accepts that abominable offer, it is not surprising that in this story there is discord between the two women when Hagar becomes pregnant.[53] According to the narrative, Hagar responds to her pregnancy by despising Sarah, who is her mistress and was her superior but who has now become her rival for Abraham's attentions; and Sarah is correspondingly furious. She complains vehemently to Abraham, and Abraham gives her permission to do whatever she likes to Hagar. Apparently, whatever she likes is bad enough to send Hagar out into the wilderness by herself, preferring the dangers of being alone in the desert to the perils of being left in Sarah's hands. It takes an angel of the Lord to send Hagar back.

As Hagar flees into the desert, an angel of the Lord appears to Hagar and tells her to return, to submit herself to Sarah, as Hagar will certainly have to do if she does return. But the angel also makes promises to Hagar, and it is worth noticing that these promises sound very much like God's promises to Abraham. Hagar will bear Abraham a son, the angel tells her, and he will be the progenitor of innumerable descendants. The angel's appearance obviously gives Hagar consolation. In fact, the name the angel assigns the coming child preserves this consolation in perpetuity. You will have a son, the angel says, and you are to call him Ishmael ("God heard"), because God has heard you in your

time of affliction. It may be that Sarah and Abraham are willing to use Hagar just as a pawn in the pursuit of their own aims, but God is not. Although, as it turns out in the narrative, Hagar's child is not the promised heir, nonetheless God blesses her child too, to make this child as well the object of the very sort of promise that has captured Abraham's attention and desire. If Abraham is patriarch in consequence, then Hagar is the matriarch of the people that result from the birth of her son.[54]

Both the angel's appearance and the angel's promise give Hagar protection from Sarah. Although the text does not say so explicitly, it makes clear that Hagar told the story to Abraham, and by that means, at least, to Sarah, too.[55] At any rate, the narrative implies not only that Abraham was told Hagar's story but also that he believed what he was told. When Hagar's child is born, Abraham names him; and the name Abraham gives him is 'Ishmael.'[56] Plainly, once the story of the angel's appearance and the angel's promise, so like God's promise to Abraham, is known to Abraham and Sarah, it gives Hagar some status in that household. So far in the narrative, *only* Abraham has had divine visitations. But now Hagar—*not* Sarah, but *Hagar*—has been visited by an angel, who has spoken to her and made her promises. Furthermore, the content of the angelic promises will also add greatly to Hagar's standing in this family. Abraham will indeed be the father of many descendants, and the *mother* of these descendants will be Hagar. The increased stature given Hagar by the angel's appearance and promise thus protects Hagar, at least to some degree, from Sarah. Hagar is now not just Sarah's pregnant maid. She is the matriarch-to-be of the nation whose ancestor is *her* child and Abraham's.

With the comfort and protection provided by the angel's appearance and promise, Hagar does go back to Sarah and Abraham. The text records no further active discord between the two women, so that Hagar's new status seems to have been effectual in protecting her from further maltreatment at Sarah's hands. Apparently, at least for a while, this peculiar family group can now function with some semblance of peace. It is noteworthy, however, that the text also records no further offspring for Hagar by Abraham.

Hagar's pregnancy: A perplexity

At this point in the story, it could look as if the disambiguated divine promise of God's fourth visitation will be fulfilled through Hagar. The angel's promise to Hagar, that the son she will bear to Abraham will be the ancestor of a great nation, seems to recapitulate God's promise to Abraham, that he will be the biological father of seed that will become a great nation. And so it can look as if Abraham (and Sarah) had interpreted the fourth version of the divine promise correctly when Sarah offered Hagar to Abraham, to try to make the divine promise true.

But, of course, as the narrative makes clear and as we who know the story recognize, in this story Ishmael will not be the child of promise. Only the child born to Abraham by Sarah will have that status. And so it is worth wondering here why God would allow Hagar to become pregnant. Since God means his promises to be fulfilled only through offspring from Sarah, why does he allow Abraham to have a son by Hagar? If God can make a barren woman pregnant, surely he can also make a fertile woman barren, or at least prevent her from conceiving a child with Abraham.

Furthermore, in the narrative, it is clear that Hagar's bearing Abraham a child causes considerable suffering for all the people centrally involved in the story. The wretchedness of Hagar's forced surrogate motherhood has to be listed as the first of these sufferings, in a class by itself. But there is also noteworthy suffering for Sarah, as well as for Abraham, in the resulting tangle of relationships. And then there is the suffering of Ishmael, whose childhood takes place in Sarah's shadow, and who is subsequently expelled from home. Considering all the misery that arises from Abraham's having a son by Hagar, why does not God bring it about that Hagar is unable to conceive? Why does God let Sarah's misapprehension about the fourth version of the divine promises result in a living child born to Abraham by Hagar?

This question should not be interpreted as asking for a moral justification of God's action in allowing Hagar's conception. For the reasons I have given before, I am postponing questions pertinent to theodicy until all the narratives have been examined. The question I am asking here is looking not for theodicy as an answer but rather only for elucidation of God's motives in the story.

In considering the question so understood, it is hard not to think first of Hagar. Both Sarah and Abraham are willing to use Hagar in an inhuman way, as breeding stock. What redeems the situation for Hagar, if anything could, is precisely her pregnancy. It gives her status, which she evidently needs badly in that household; and it also gives her a son, who values her and loves her as his own, in a way that neither Sarah nor Abraham do.[57] And

so thinking about Hagar sheds some light on the right answer to the question. If Abraham had accepted Sarah's offer of Hagar and Hagar had been barren, Hagar would have been used and then discarded, with no protective status and no love or family of her own afterwards. Insofar as in the story God has an interest in Hagar and a care for her, God's allowing her conception makes some sense as regards Hagar.[58]

But what about Abraham, whose story this is? Is there a reason relevant to Abraham for God's allowing Hagar to conceive?

It is worth noticing in this regard that God does not step in at any other point when, in a spirit of double-mindedness, Abraham tries to make the divine promises true. When Abraham takes Lot with him as he leaves his father's house or when Abraham adopts Eliezer as his heir, God does not do anything to stop Abraham from acting as he does or to prevent the natural consequences of his actions. God does not intervene to forbid what Abraham is doing, for example, or to coerce him into acting differently. God's pattern of action is to teach Abraham to trust in God's promises and God's goodness, but not to try to compel him into that state by any kind of threat or force.[59]

Seeing this pattern of divine action points us in the right direction for understanding why God's purposes as regards Abraham are also furthered by Hagar's becoming pregnant. The proper manifestation of the trust God is working to foster in Abraham would be Abraham's waiting in hope for the fulfillment of God's promises. There *is* trust of that sort in Abraham, but it competes in him with a strong desire to try to bring about the

fulfillment of the divine promises by himself. God can thwart such moves on Abraham's part and compel him to wait for God to fulfill his promises. Alternatively, God can allow Abraham to try to take control of the fulfillment of the promises, and then let him discover that, after all, God will fulfill them himself. The first method is more likely to produce despair or fearful resignation than trust. The second method is the way in which one person Paula does often enough learn trust in another person Jerome—by being inadequately trusting in Jerome and then finding that Jerome is still there, still faithful to the relationship and to his commitment to Paula.

If God had kept Hagar from becoming pregnant, he would have been thwarting Abraham's attempt to bring about the fulfillment of the divine promises. And Hagar's consequent barrenness would have left Abraham with no options other than enforced waiting for God, with or without hope. In allowing Hagar to conceive, God first lets Abraham suppose Abraham has been successful in his stratagem for bringing about the fulfillment of the divine promise and then surprises Abraham with the news that, after all, the divine promises are still to be fulfilled, but by God and not by Abraham.[60] To me, it seems that real trust in God's goodness, as distinct from pained resignation or despair, is more likely to be generated in Abraham on *this* system.[61]

Hagar's return to Sarah: Another perplexity

There is one other perplexity regarding Hagar that is worth considering here. When Hagar flees from Sarah, an angel of the Lord sends her back into Abraham's household. But why? It is one thing to let Hagar conceive and bear a son. It is another thing to let her

bear that son and nurture him in Abraham's household. In sixteen years (more or less), God will authorize Abraham to throw Hagar and Ishmael out. Then it will take a second angelic visitation to keep Hagar and her son from dying in the wilderness. Why, in the narrative, does not God simply let Hagar flee while she is pregnant, so that she can find a place and a community in which to stay, where she can raise her son in peace? Why send her back to Sarah and Abraham? Hagar's going back sets her up for the pain and the dangers of expulsion, and it inflicts that pain and those dangers on her child as well.

It is clear that there are some goods for Hagar and Ishmael that come to them from having their departure from Abraham's household occur when Ishmael is a teenager rather than when Hagar is pregnant with Ishmael. Wandering in the desert in the company of one's teenaged son is different from wandering as a single, pregnant woman. Giving birth alone in the wilderness or in a strange community and trying to care for a newborn in such circumstances is difficult, too. Furthermore, if Hagar had left Abraham's household while she was pregnant, never to return, Ishmael would not have known his father. Whatever there is to be said about Ishmael's relations with Abraham, they are at least important enough and good enough *for Ishmael* that Ishmael is willing to join Isaac in burying Abraham after Abraham's death. But I want to leave considerations of Hagar and Ishmael to one side in order to focus the question on Abraham, as I did with the analogous question in the immediately preceding section. This is not the story of Hagar or Ishmael, but the story of Abraham; and the focus of this chapter is on Abraham, too. So, what difference does it make to Abraham that Hagar returns to his household when

she is pregnant? What difference would it have made to Abraham if Hagar had fled and not returned instead of returning only to be expelled when Ishmael is adolescent?[62]

The answer is implicit in the question, I think. God's plan is to produce the promised seed from Abraham *and Sarah*, and in the process to elicit from Abraham trust in God's goodness. Forcing Abraham to lose the child he supposes to be the promised seed will grieve him, but it will teach him nothing about God's goodness. Abraham needs to learn that God can be trusted to fulfill the promises he makes. He needs to recognize that the seed of the divine promises is not the child resulting from his own stratagem for fulfilling God's promises but is instead a child given by God in a way and at a time Abraham did not choose. When Abraham comes to the point of being willing to let Ishmael go, he is acknowledging that the longed-for promised seed is the son God gave him, and not the son Hagar conceived because Abraham was trying to make the divine promises true himself. In that acknowledgment, made when Isaac is just weaned, in a culture that no doubt has a high infant mortality rate, Abraham is granting that a good God can be trusted to fulfill his promises.

And so in the narrative God allows Abraham to have and raise Ishmael, the son who results naturally enough from Abraham's attempts to make God's promises true. But, as the narrative goes on, God also brings Abraham to the point where he is willing to give Ishmael up, in recognition that God can be trusted to fulfill his promises himself.

The fifth divine promise: Abraham's second son

Ishmael is born when Abraham is 86 years old, eleven years after God's first promise to make of Abraham a great nation. When Abraham is 99 years old, and Ishmael is 13, almost a quarter of a century after that first promise, God returns to talk to Abraham, in the fifth divine visitation recorded in the narrative. On this fifth occasion, the divine speech does not begin with a promise, but with a command. "I am God Almighty," God says to Abraham, "walk before me and be perfect." And in the course of this divine visitation, God makes another covenant with Abraham, one instituted and signified by circumcision.[63] Abraham, Ishmael, and all the males in Abraham's household are bound by this covenant and thus obligated to undergo its identifying rite. All Abraham's promised posterity is included in this covenant and its ritual, too. It is on this occasion also that God changes the original names of the patriarch and his wife, from 'Abram' and 'Sarai' to 'Abraham' (which some interpreters take to mean 'Father of very many')[64] and 'Sarah'.

In the midst of this divine visitation, God repeats his earlier promises: Abraham will have innumerable descendants, and they will inherit the land in which Abraham has been living. But, for my purposes, what is especially noteworthy about this divine visitation is that God now makes the final clarification of his promises about Abraham's posterity: Abraham's posterity will be his biological offspring, *and* they will come from Sarah, not Hagar.

Abraham laughs[65] in response to God's promise that at his age he will have a child by Sarah, who is old too, as well as barren.[66] In response to this promise of God's, he makes

a plea to God for Ishmael: may Ishmael live before you! From Abraham's point of view, whatever the truth of the divine promise about Sarah's having a child may be, in Ishmael he already has a seed (as the divine promises put it). Furthermore, the angelic speech to Hagar, when she was pregnant, contained a promise which seemed to be about that much-anticipated and hoped for seed: *Ishmael* will be the ancestor of a great posterity. What Abraham now asks for from God is in effect a confirmation of that angelic promise to Hagar; he wants God to bless *Ishmael*. And the blessing God does in fact give Ishmael in answer to Abraham's plea to God shows the desire behind that plea. God will multiply Ishmael exceedingly, he tells Abraham, so that through Ishmael Abraham will be the progenitor of a great nation.

Abraham's reaction to the fifth version of God's promise thus shows the same double-mindedness as Abraham's other responses to God's promises. Abraham's laughter at God's promise about Sarah's conceiving and Abraham's plea for Ishmael as the seed suitable for divine blessing stem from the same inner complexity as Abraham's earlier responses to God's promises. On the one hand, Abraham does believe God's promise that Sarah will conceive. Although Abraham laughs when he hears it, he does not dispute anything in God's promise that Sarah will have a son, nor does he ask for any confirmation of *this* promise. On the other hand, Abraham's petition for Ishmael also shows a certain unease about the divine promise regarding Sarah. If the coming child will be the child through whom Abraham has a notable posterity, why the special petition for *Ishmael* as the response to the promise about the son to come from Sarah?[67]

Although God blesses Ishmael as Abraham asks him to, God also answers Abraham by confirming and elaborating his promise about the child Sarah will bear. God tells Abraham that he will make his covenant with *Sarah's* son; the descendants of the divine promises to Abraham will trace their ancestry to Abraham *only* through Sarah's son.

The reason for God's taking this position is clear in the narrative. If God did not restrict the promises to Isaac and his descendants, then God would be supporting Abraham's attempts to fulfill the divine promises himself. By insisting that the only one who counts as the seed of the divine promises is Isaac—the heir produced by God's power and not by some stratagem of Abraham's designed to bypass Sarah's barrenness—God requires Abraham to see and accept that God can be trusted to keep his promises.

On the other hand, Ishmael is in fact now in existence and is also a beloved child of Abraham's; and God's protection has already been extended to him and his mother, beginning from the time when Ishmael was in the womb.[68] And so, in response to Abraham's plea for Ishmael, God reiterates and elaborates to Abraham the promise the angel had previously made to Hagar about Ishmael: "I have blessed [Ishmael] and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him greatly; he will beget twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation . . . "[69]

Abraham's double-mindedness and desire for descendants: The sons of Keturah

Because the next divine visitations are much more complicated than those examined so far and raise new issues, it is actually more efficient at this point to interrupt the natural

progression of episodes in the narrative and jump ahead, for a moment, to the events involving Abraham and Keturah. People generally think only of Sarah's son when they think of a child of Abraham's, or perhaps they also remember Ishmael. But in fact the biblical narrative mentions *eight* sons of Abraham: Ishmael, Isaac, and *six* more sons by Keturah.

Sarah's reactions to Hagar, both when Hagar is pregnant and later, after Isaac's birth, are explosive and vindictive. And so it is not surprising that, in the sixteen years or so that Hagar lives with Abraham after Ishmael's birth, Hagar has no more children by Abraham. While Sarah lives, Abraham does not make the mistake of having more children by Hagar or of taking any other woman into his family. But once Sarah has died, Abraham does add another woman to his household; he takes a woman named Keturah as his wife or concubine. At that point in the story, Abraham is more than 137 years old,[70] but Keturah bears him one son after another.

Why does Abraham take another woman and start a new, large family?

There is a tradition in Rabbinic commentary that 'Keturah' is another name for Hagar.[71] On this tradition, the narrative is interpreted to mean that Abraham brought Hagar back into his household once Sarah was dead. The main evidence for this tradition seems to be only a sense of what Abraham *should* have done. By the time Sarah dies, however, it has been roughly thirty-five years (give or take a few) since Abraham expelled Hagar.[72] Even if at that point Abraham still remembered Hagar, still wanted her, and still knew where to

find her, there is nonetheless some question whether after all those years Hagar would have wanted to return to the man who used his power over her to have sex with her and then threw her out to wander in the wilderness with the child he had fathered by her. If a sense of what ought to have happened can be the determiner of an interpretation of a story, as the tradition in this case appears to suppose, then in my view Hagar is *not* Keturah.[73] But, in any case, the text gives no indication that Keturah is not simply one more wife or concubine of Abraham's, and the list of the children Keturah bears Abraham does not include Ishmael. So it seems more reasonable to take the story at face value and assume that Keturah is not Hagar under another name, but just a new woman whom Abraham brings into his household when Sarah is dead.

Reasons of loyalty to Hagar can, therefore, not explain Abraham's taking Keturah into his household.

It might, of course, be the case that the narrative wants us to believe that Abraham was a virile old man who could not cope unless he had a woman living with him. But if that were the picture of Abraham the narrative was trying to present, then, we might reasonably enough suppose, the narrative would not have had *Sarah* laugh when she heard God tell Abraham that he would have a child when he was 100 years old.[74] If it was funny to Sarah to think that Abraham might father a child at *that* age, we could presumably expect that, in the world of the narrative, Abraham at almost 140 might have managed to live celibately without a struggle.

More importantly, by the time Abraham adds Keturah to his family, the divine promises have been fulfilled, at least in the sense that Abraham has the promised seed, Isaac, not to mention his *other* son, Ishmael, who is also destined to be the progenitor of a people. What, then, is the point of taking yet another wife or concubine and having so many more children by her?

It is helpful here to do the arithmetic of the story.

Abraham is 140 years old when Isaac marries Rebecca. (Isaac is 40 years old at this stage, and Sarah has been dead for three years.) Abraham is 175 years old when he dies. (He lives thirty-eight years after Sarah's death, and so thirty-five years after Isaac's marriage to Rebecca.) In the thirty-eight-year interval of time between Sarah's death and his own, Abraham has six sons by Keturah; and, in Abraham's lifetime, these sons grow old enough to be given gifts and sent away from home.

So when did Abraham add Keturah to his household? There is no evidence in the text beyond the facts in the preceding paragraph; and, on those facts, there is more than one option for the answer to the question.

Suppose that Keturah began to produce sons[75] in the first year of her life with Abraham. Presumably, there are at least seven years in age between the first of Keturah's sons and the sixth. In addition, it seems right to think that a son needs to be at least well into his teens in order to be sent away with gifts. And so we can reckon that there have to be *at*

least twenty-five years between the time Keturah joins Abraham's household and the time the last of Keturah's sons leaves home (that is, seven years for the last son to be born, and another eighteen for that last son to be old enough to be sent away with gifts). There might be more, but it is hard to see how there could be much less.

So, if Keturah's sons started coming early and came in quick succession, and if Abraham sent them away in the last year of his life, then Abraham could have been as much as 150 years old when he began to have children by Keturah. (In that case, Abraham would have begun having children by Keturah when Isaac had been married to Rebecca for ten years.)

Alternatively, suppose that Keturah's sons came at three-year intervals, a common enough interval between children in cultures that breast-feed babies on demand. Then, on the supposition that the last of these sons was sent away at the end of Abraham's life and that he was teenaged when he went, Abraham could have been as young as 145 when he had his first son by Keturah. (In that case, Abraham would have begun having children by Keturah when Isaac had been married to Rebecca for five years.)

Finally, suppose that Abraham takes Keturah soon after Sarah dies and that Keturah becomes pregnant fairly quickly after joining Abraham's household. In that case, Abraham could have begun having children by Keturah when he was 140 years old. (In that case, Abraham would have had his children by Keturah throughout the first six or seven years of Isaac's marriage to Rebecca.)

Those are the basic options, if we do the arithmetic on the story. What does the arithmetic show us?

Abraham's longing to be a father and the ancestor of a people is plainly his heart's desire, and his whole relationship with God is shaped by it.[76] The first five encounters between God and Abraham are concentrated on Abraham's desire for descendants and God's promises to provide progeny for him. The double-mindedness of Abraham's belief in the divine promises and in God's goodness is equally evident, as I have been at pains to show. Abraham tries to bring about the fulfillment of the divine promises by devices of his own, all of which are predicated on an acceptance of Sarah's barrenness together with some stratagem for circumventing it. Abraham ceases trying to find some device that will make God's promises true in spite of Sarah's barrenness only when God makes clear that the seed of the promise will come from Sarah—and even then, in response to God's explanation that Abraham is about to have a child by *Sarah*, Abraham asks God to bless *Ishmael* and make *Ishmael* a great nation. The subsequent birth of Isaac does give Abraham what his heart had been set on—but *only* part of it, not the whole of it. That is because what Abraham has set his heart on is a posterity, not just a son. Abraham wants to be not merely a father but a patriarch. And so it is important in this connection to note that, in the narrative, when Isaac marries, Isaac's wife Rebecca is barren for the first *nineteen* years of her marriage. Isaac marries Rebecca when he is 40, but he does not become the father of Esau and Jacob until he is 60. At the point when Isaac's twin sons are born, Abraham is 160 years old. (The twins are 15 years old when Abraham dies.)

Given the arithmetic, on one set of suppositions or another, in the period when Abraham is having children by Keturah, Isaac and Rebecca are childless; in fact, it is possible that they have been childless for as much as a decade by the time the first of Keturah's sons is born. And so this is one plausible answer to the question regarding the time when Abraham adds Keturah to his household: Abraham is having children by Keturah at a time when it could look to a reasonable observer as if Isaac, the child through whom Abraham was going to become the progenitor of a great posterity, will not have children of his own.[77]

One explanation for Abraham's having children by Keturah is, therefore, that Abraham is continuing the pattern of his earlier responses to the divine promises.[78] When he takes Keturah, Ishmael is lost to him, wandering God-knows-where in the wilderness; and Isaac's wife seems to be barren.[79] In having children with Keturah in these circumstances, Abraham is making sure that there are children of his who *could* serve as the source of posterity for him in case his line through Isaac does not continue.

In fact, if Abraham takes Keturah as his concubine roughly a decade after Isaac marries Rebecca, which is also a decade before Rebecca has children of her own, and if there is a twenty-five-year interval between the time of Keturah's arrival and Abraham's sending away his sons by Keturah, then Abraham sends those sons off at a time when *Isaac's* twin children are in their teens—old enough for Abraham to feel reasonably sure that those twins will live into adulthood and be able to have children of their own. The

narrative makes explicit that the point of Abraham's sending Keturah's sons away[80] is precisely to ensure that the offspring of the concubine do not inherit with the legitimate heir.[81] Perhaps the point at which Abraham decides he no longer wants the sons he produced with Keturah to be part of his legacy is the time when he is finally convinced that Isaac will have offspring of his own and that Isaac's offspring will survive to reproduce.[82]

Even by the end of his life, then, when he has Isaac and when Isaac himself is grown and married, the narrative suggests that Abraham is still double-minded about the fulfillment of God's promises, at least to the extent of providing a back-up plan for God, in case the original plan fails. Abraham's desire for progeny is great, and it never cohabits entirely easily in him with trust in God's promises and God's goodness. On the one hand, Abraham does indeed believe the divine promises and God's disambiguations of them, including the explanation that the only child of promise is Isaac, so that Abraham's status as patriarch of a divinely appointed people depends on Isaac alone. He does send Keturah's sons away just with gifts, rather than with a real share of his inheritance, which he saves altogether for Isaac.[83] And yet, on the other hand, Abraham's desire to be the father of a great posterity is so strong that he is still unwilling to risk it entirely on Isaac (or on Isaac and Ishmael). The sons of Keturah are there, too, just in case.[84]

And so the pattern of Abraham's being double-minded about God's promises to give him his heart's desire, which is evident in the narrative in the first five divine visitations to Abraham, is a pattern that characterizes all of Abraham's life. That pattern is interspersed

with episodes in which Abraham's trust in God's goodness is whole-hearted, most notably in the binding of Isaac. But the overall pattern is only highlighted by the few notable exceptions to it.

The sixth divine speech: Sodom and Gomorrah

On the sixth occasion God comes to talk to Abraham, God's speech includes another reiteration, this time without elaboration, of his promises to Abraham about offspring. But after this part of the divine speech, the pattern of God's exchanges with Abraham established in the previous divine visitations alters. By the time of the sixth divine speech, the long crescendo in which God reveals increasingly more of his plan for making Abraham the patriarch of a great nation has finally come to an end; all the details are now known to Abraham, and to the audience of the narrative, too. Abraham will have numerous descendants, who will inherit the land of Canaan; these will be biological descendants; the line will go through Sarah, not Hagar; Sarah will begin the generation of that posterity by having a son in the coming year, and the son's name will be Isaac. From here on, God's exchanges with Abraham, including the rest of the interaction between God and Abraham on this occasion, are different from those in the preceding divine visitations. They are no longer concentrated on increasing specification of the divine promises of posterity for Abraham. Although they do still have to do with Abraham's children and also contain promises about Abraham's descendants, the focus of the remaining three divine visitations is more complicated than that of the first five. Their center of attention is elsewhere.

The sixth divine visitation comes hard on the heels of the fifth. On this sixth occasion, when God reiterates his promise that Abraham will have a son by Sarah, there is also some recorded interaction between God and Sarah. By overhearing the conversation between God and Abraham, Sarah now hears the divine promise for herself, as is appropriate since it involves her in an essential way. When she hears that promise, she laughs to herself not just at the thought that she will have a child at the age of 90 but also at the notion that she should "have pleasure," given Abraham's age. God reports her thought and her laughter to Abraham but diplomatically leaves out the part about Abraham; and when God confronts her for laughing, Sarah undiplomatically lies to God, denying that she laughed. God makes clear that he knows she has lied; but he does not scold her for lying to him. To Abraham, in Sarah's hearing, God responds to her laughter by saying "Is anything too difficult for God?,"[85] thereby commenting effectively on *all* the things prompting Sarah's wifely laughter. This incident in the story of the sixth encounter between God and Abraham is complicated and full of wonderful touches, which I pass over with regret, in order to concentrate solely on the part most directly of concern for my purposes.

That part of the sixth encounter is the conversation between God and Abraham about Sodom and Gomorrah.[86] It is the only recorded exchange between Abraham and God in the narrative that has as its entire ostensible object of interest something other than Abraham's desire for descendants—although, as we shall see, the tacit focus of this exchange may be nearer Abraham's customary concerns than first appears to be the case.

In this part of the sixth encounter, God begins by saying (or by reflecting to himself[87]) that it would be good for him to reveal to Abraham what he is about to do. Connected with this thought is a second divine assertion—namely, that Abraham needs to command his children (including the children Abraham does not yet have) to do justice and to keep God's ways, so that God can fulfill for them the covenant he has made with Abraham. This is the first explicit indication that there is anything conditional about God's covenant with Abraham, and it raises a great many questions, which cannot be dealt with in passing here. But it also reminds us that covenants are generally premised on the goodness of the covenant-makers. At any rate, those who are not good are also not trustworthy keepers of covenants. God's statement implies that the goodness of Abraham's descendants is a necessary prerequisite for God's electing to fulfill his part of the covenant. But, of course, it is also true that the covenant will be fulfilled only if there is goodness on God's side as well. That this is something Abraham must feel is made clear by the way this part of the story unrolls.

With so much clarification of his reasons for his revelation to Abraham, God goes on to tell Abraham that Sodom and Gomorrah are wicked cities and that he is about to visit them to determine the depth of their wickedness. Although nothing in this statement of God's asserts or even directly implies that God will somehow punish these cities, Abraham takes God's statement to mean that God intends to destroy both cities; and Abraham is greatly concerned at that implication. Would you really cut off the righteous with the wicked?, Abraham asks God. What if there were fifty righteous people in one of those cities? Would you not spare the whole city for their sake? Because, if you did not

spare it, Abraham tells God, then the lot of the righteous would be the same as the lot of the wicked, and that would most certainly be unfair. “Far be it from you!” Abraham says; “Should not the judge of all the earth do righteously?!”[88] And Abraham goes on to work his way slowly from fifty innocents to ten. “If there were only ten righteous in the city,” he finally asks God, “would you not spare the city for their sake?”

Abraham is assuming that in the destruction of a city all its citizens will also be destroyed; and he thinks that the injustice of God's killing ten innocent people would be terrible enough to warrant letting all the guilty of the city off their well-deserved punishment in order to protect the ten righteous. When God agrees that, if there are ten innocents, he will protect the city for their sake, even at the cost of forgoing the justly deserved punishment of all the many guilty, Abraham's concerns are finally allayed. When it turns out that God will not inflict on the innocent the punishment deserved by the guilty as long as the innocent number at least ten, then Abraham is satisfied that God has been bargained into justice.[89]

Although Abraham is usually praised for his concern with justice and for his courage in confronting God in this exchange,[90] the first thing to see here is in fact Abraham’s double-mindedness about God’s goodness. The double-mindedness that is evident in Abraham's reactions to God's promises about his descendants is even more pronounced and overt here. On the one hand, Abraham believes that God is the "judge of all the earth"; on the other hand, he feels that he needs to talk the judge of all the earth into acting justly.

The presumptuousness of Abraham's attempt to wrangle God, the judge of all the earth, into justice lies, of course, in Abraham's apparent presupposition that this wrangling is necessary in order to get God to act with justice. In fact, Abraham's bargaining with God is not only presumptuous but veers dangerously toward the comic. Abraham is supposing that the judge of all the earth would be willing to condemn the innocent with the guilty, and he is hoping to persuade that just judge God to act more justly than that—as long as there are a reasonable number of innocents affected.

The folly of Abraham's presupposition is pointed out in the very next episode of the narrative, in which God takes care to make sure that the *four* righteous people in Sodom are spared in the city's destruction. Abraham was willing to give up on the righteous if they were fewer in number than ten; but God, who (on Abraham's view) had to be bargained into protecting *ten* righteous people, actually spares the four righteous people living in Sodom. Without any arguing or bargaining by Abraham, God goes significantly further in the direction Abraham thought he needed to push God: God makes sure that *none* of the innocent is punished with the wicked.[91] And when Lot wants to escape Sodom and flee to Zoar, a little city that had been slated for destruction with Sodom and Gomorrah, God spares Zoar for the sake of Lot and the women (three, or two, depending on how one counts[92]) in his family.[93]

On the one hand, then, Abraham apparently believes that God is capable of unjustly causing the death of innocent people, so that God has to be bargained out of killing the

righteous with the wicked. To this extent, Abraham plainly is not giving full assent to the belief that God is good. And yet, on the other hand, when God accedes to Abraham's pleas that he spare the guilty for the sake of the innocent, Abraham trusts that God will keep his word. Abraham asks for no confirmation or covenant to guarantee that God will do as he says. Abraham apparently thinks, then, that God's word alone is entirely trustworthy. To this extent, Abraham clearly relies on the goodness of God. And so, in his bargaining with God, Abraham is double-minded; he both believes and does not believe that God is good and worthy of trust.

The object of Abraham's concern in the exchange over Sodom and Gomorrah is also worth noticing. Contrary to common interpretations of this story, Abraham is not here manifesting some general concern with justice. To begin with, it is not at all obvious that there is more injustice in destroying ten righteous people in the process of punishing a city in which everyone else—*everyone else*—is worthy of death than there is in letting many people who are so evil go entirely unpunished for their crimes in order to protect ten righteous people.[94] As far as that goes, it is not at all clear why Abraham supposes the judge of all the earth could not manage to punish the wicked and preserve the innocent at the same time—as the narrative subsequently shows God can and does do. As the later episodes of the narrative make clear, it is not hard for God to do so; it does not even take a miracle. God simply tells innocent Lot and his family to leave the city, in order to avoid sharing in its punishment. So, if justice in general had been Abraham's concern, he might have tried to make sure that God would both spare the innocent and also punish the guilty. But this is not at all what Abraham does. It is evident, then, that the focus of

Abraham's bargaining with God is not abstract justice.[95] Rather, the aim of Abraham's bargaining is only to ensure that God will not deprive righteous people of what they are in justice entitled to.

This concern of Abraham's reveals something else about Abraham's attitude toward God and about Abraham's anxieties where God's promises are concerned.

As I explained earlier, this divine visitation, in which God reveals his plans for Sodom and Gomorrah, begins with God's reiteration of his previous promise to Abraham about the descendants who will be the biological offspring of Abraham *and Sarah*. At this point in the narrative, childless Sarah is well past child-bearing age. This time, there is no stratagem of Abraham's that can make God's promise true; this time, only God can fulfill his promise. God's *power* to make it true—God's power to do whatever God says he will do—never seems in doubt for Abraham. At any rate, Abraham shows no surprise when he is told that God is able to destroy whole cities, or when he hears that nothing is too difficult for God. What Abraham is evidently not easy about, then, is the nature of the goodness which is yoked to that power.

The recipient of a promise is in justice entitled to the fulfillment of that promise. But, if God is willing to forget about what is owed in justice to the righteous for the sake of punishing others, then how safe is the hope and trust Abraham has put in God's promises? If God is not a perfectly trustworthy rewarder of the righteous, then what becomes of his promises to obedient, righteous Abraham?

So the double-minded conversation about Sodom and Gomorrah, in which Abraham tries to negotiate the judge of all the earth into justice, has behind it Abraham's own concerns about God's goodness and the trustworthiness of God's promises. In the initial divine speech or reflection that begins this episode, God implies that Abraham and his descendants need to be righteous in order for the covenant between God and Abraham to be effective. But, then, God needs to be a righteous rewarder of the righteous, too. Otherwise the covenant is worthless, even if Abraham and his children are righteous. A covenant can be rendered ineffectual by the failure of either party to it to be righteous.

The other noteworthy thing about this episode is God's great patience with Abraham's attempt to negotiate God into justice. Any human being who was addressed by someone close to him in the way Abraham addresses God would surely feel hurt and insulted. If the wife of an even ordinarily decent government official were to ask her husband whether he meant to kill innocent people in his next official action, or (worse yet!) if she showed that she was trying to talk him into a promise not to kill the innocent if there were at least ten of them, he would certainly be aggrieved and would let her know it. God's answers to Abraham's reiterated bargaining questions are eloquently brief, but nonetheless God does not rebuke Abraham for those questions. Why, in the narrative, is God patient in this way? As far as that goes, why does God explain to Abraham anything about God's intentions as regards Sodom and Gomorrah?

Here, as elsewhere in this chapter, it seems to me that the answer to the questions is evident, once the questions are plainly raised. There is love and care for Abraham in God's way of dealing with him. Given Abraham's uneasy attitude about God's goodness, his double-mindedness about God's trustworthiness with regard to God's promises to Abraham, there is wisdom in God's explaining to Abraham in advance divine punishment inflicted on others in Abraham's sight. And there is a parental patience and care in God's putting up with Abraham's questions to God about God's justice and the self-concerned anxiety underlying those questions.

The seventh divine promise: Hagar and Ishmael

God's goodness is also at issue, although in a different way, on the seventh occasion on which God comes to talk to Abraham. The conversation between God and Abraham then is no exception to the general rule: Abraham's children form the subject, or the partial subject, of the conversation, as they have on all the previous occasions on which God has come to speak with Abraham. But this time the children in question are not the prophetically foreseen but not-yet-existent children of promise. This time they are real boys, Ishmael and Isaac. To understand the conversation between God and Abraham on this occasion, we have to be clear first about its context.

God's promise that Sarah would have a son has been fulfilled. When Abraham is a 100 years old, Sarah gives birth to a boy, whom Abraham names Isaac.[96] Ishmael is 14 at the time of Isaac's birth. He has been Abraham's only child for all these years; now he has a brother.

The story skips over Isaac's infancy and focuses directly on his weaning. When Isaac is weaned, Abraham makes a great feast, the story says. It is not clear how old Isaac is at the time of weaning; at least 2 or 3 years old is not an unreasonable estimate. So Ishmael must then have been at least 16 or 17. During the feast Ishmael does *something*—the Hebrew can be translated variously[97] but has sometimes been understood to mean that Ishmael was mocking Isaac. Whatever it is Ishmael is doing, Sarah sees him and blows up. She has been violent toward her rival Hagar in the past. Given her history, the wonder is not so much that she blows up now as that with a son of her own she has tolerated Abraham's other son for so long.

What would be appropriate punishment for a teenage boy who mocked a younger brother, if in fact the reading that assigns this much culpability to Ishmael is right? Take his car privileges away for a week, we might say—but then we are a soft-hearted, child-centered culture. Nineteenth-century British educators, made of sterner stuff, might have prescribed a beating. What does Sarah want? She wants to have Ishmael, together with his mother, thrown out of the family, never to return. There is no suggestion whatsoever that Hagar has been in any way unkind to Isaac, but the punishment Sarah envisages for Ishmael encompasses Hagar, too. In the previous episode when God came to talk to Abraham, Abraham was concerned that the innocent not be included in the punishment of the wicked. Here Sarah is concerned that the punishment of the malefactor (if in fact Ishmael is a malefactor of any sort) not exclude his innocent mother.

If the punishment Sarah had in mind for Hagar and Ishmael were just banishment from the family, it would still be a terrible evil. Ishmael is Abraham's son, and Hagar, his mother, has been a part of this complicated family for almost two decades (or more). For years, before he heard God's promise about offspring by Sarah, Abraham no doubt thought *this* boy would be his only child. *Ishmael* was his son, his only son, the son of his old age, for fourteen years before Isaac came. The bonds of trust and love between Abraham and the boy must have been powerful. For Abraham to throw Ishmael out is a terrible betrayal of the boy's trust toward his father, and it can hardly be justified by whatever Sarah saw in Ishmael's relations with Isaac during the feast. There is no justification at all for the expulsion of Hagar.

But what Sarah wants is considerably worse than the mere expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael. In nineteenth-century Britain, sons thrown out by stern fathers were thrown into city life, where they might try to get their own living or sponge off friends or at nightmarish worst beg on street corners. But, if Hagar and Ishmael are thrown out, they will be expelled into the desert with all its perils. Being taken as slaves or chattel is the best that is likely to happen to them. If they are not found and preyed on by others, their chance of surviving alone in the wilderness is small. In fact, as the story develops, it takes divine intervention just to keep them from dying of thirst. Throwing a woman and her child out into the desert without protection is the analogue of exposing unwanted infants. Perhaps it is not identical to murder, but the difference does not seem to have much moral significance. If anything, what Sarah wants is worse than infanticide. At least, an infant

has not built up trust in his father; a father's leaving his infant to die of exposure does not betray years of love and intimacy.

Clearly, Sarah is not interested simply in removing Hagar and Ishmael from the family. What Sarah wants is not just the absence of her rival's son but revenge on him, and on his mother, too. Her anger is murderous, and the depth of her passion is shown by that fact that she expresses it in a direct command to her husband: "cast out the bondwoman and her son." This is not the direction the order of command usually flows in this patriarchal society.

On the previous occasion when Sarah blew up over Hagar, Abraham acceded to her wishes; but then she just wanted to attack Hagar herself. Now, she wants the vengeance to be meted out by Abraham; she wants him to expel the son whom he loves and Hagar, the mother of that son, into the desert alone, in a way that puts their lives at risk. What Sarah wants is a heartbreaking wrong.[98]

That Abraham is willing to contemplate going along with Sarah at all is testimony to the implacability of her wrath; but, even so, he cannot bring himself to accede to her wishes. The narrative says: "The thing was very bad in Abraham's eyes on account of his son."[99] And so Abraham is caught between two options for action, neither of which he can find in himself the resources to do: on the one hand, to reject resolutely the command of his angry wife Sarah; on the other hand, to capitulate entirely to her demand for the expulsion of his son and the mother of his son. It should be clear that, although Abraham

may be torn between these options, they do not constitute a moral dilemma for him. All morality is on one side. What the other side has to recommend it is just self-interested prudence and domestic peace.

This is the context for the seventh occasion on which God visits Abraham.

The seventh divine promise: God's concurring with Sarah

On this seventh occasion, God comes to talk to Abraham to guide the course of Abraham's action.[100]

Speaking of Abraham's reflection on Sarah's demanded expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael, the narrative says only that the thing was bad in Abraham's eyes because of his son. When God raises Sarah's demand with Abraham, God also takes note of Hagar and adds her to the list. God says to Abraham: "Let it not be bad in your eyes because of the lad and because of your bondwoman." And then God goes on to tell Abraham: "In all that Sarah says to you, listen to her voice."[101] So on this seventh occasion, God comes to talk to Abraham in order to break the deadlock in Abraham; and he breaks it, very surprisingly, by siding with murderously angry Sarah.

How can God tell Abraham to listen to his wife when what she wants is so evil? The answer to this question has two parts.

On the one hand, although Sarah's intentions are evil, the result she wants, that only Isaac should count as Abraham's heir, is the result God has foreordained all along. If, from the beginning, Abraham had been willing to trust whole-heartedly in the divine promises, Ishmael would not have come into being. If Ishmael were to remain in the household and be raised with Isaac, the two sons and their descendants would mingle and form one family. To that extent, Isaac and his descendants would not be singled out as the posterity of the promise that God originally made to Abraham and then reiterated for a quarter of a century. If God were now to allow Ishmael a status equal to that of Isaac's, so that Ishmael's offspring and Isaac's became one posterity of Abraham's, then God would be accepting and validating Abraham's previous failure of trust. And so, although with very different motivation, God sides with Sarah.

On the other hand, Ishmael *does* now exist, and he *is* a child of Abraham's, too. He, as well as Isaac, has a claim to be taken care of not only by his father Abraham, but also by God, whose complex dealings with Abraham have had a role in bringing about Ishmael's birth and his raising in Abraham's household.[102] And so God himself also undertakes to guarantee Ishmael's safety and his flourishing—only now away from Abraham's household.[103] In a reiteration of the promise the angel made to Hagar, God promises Abraham: "Of the son of the bondwoman I will make a nation."[104] If God promises to make Ishmael a nation in the wilderness, then God is promising that Ishmael will not die when he and his mother are expelled into the desert. On the contrary, God is promising that, in the wilderness, Ishmael, too, will live and have the status of progenitor of a people.

It is evident that God's message to Abraham makes all the difference to Abraham's decision about what to do. Without God's promise (or, more accurately, his confirmation of the angel's earlier promise), the action Sarah wants Abraham to engage in is manifestly immoral. For that matter, it goes directly contrary to the strong moral concerns Abraham evinced even for total strangers in Sodom and Gomorrah, where he worried about the injustice of condemning and punishing the righteous. Whatever can be said about Ishmael, Hagar is innocent; nothing in the text even hints that she is implicated in any activity worthy of banishment. God's promise to make of Ishmael a great nation enables Abraham to go along with Sarah without being guilty of injustice against Ishmael and his mother. It is as if the place where the stepmother wanted the father's son to be abandoned to his peril should turn out, unbeknownst to her, to be the boarding school from which the society's leaders and rulers come. God's promise to Abraham about Ishmael transforms Sarah's plan for abandoning Hagar and Ishmael and exposing them to the perils of the desert into a plan for Ishmael's flourishing—and Hagar's too, insofar as she is Ishmael's mother. To the extent to which Abraham wants what Sarah wants, but for a different motive, whose source is God's promise about Ishmael, not only Abraham's action but also his intention in that action are saved from being morally reprehensible.[105]

God's promise also relieves Abraham, at least to a considerable extent,[106] of the evil of betraying his son's trust—because Abraham can tell Ishmael what God has said. He can explain that he is not acting in such a way as to bring about Ishmael's death (or even to wreck Ishmael's life), because God is guaranteeing Ishmael's flowering into a patriarch in

his own right.[107] As far as that goes, because in the past Hagar has had her own experience of God's care for her and God's ability to protect her in the wilderness, Abraham's story will have a plausibility for her that it would not have for others without a similar experience. So Abraham's explaining to Hagar what God has promised will also save Abraham from betraying whatever trust in him Hagar might have.

As it stands, the narrative tells us nothing one way or another about what Abraham told Hagar and Ishmael, but it does give us one small clue about whether Abraham communicated to Ishmael this promise of God's about him. When Abraham dies, Ishmael comes to help his brother Isaac bury him. If all Ishmael knew is that, in response to Sarah's wrath, Abraham expelled him and his mother from the family to wander at risk of his life in the desert, is it believable that, after many years, Ishmael would return with filial piety to bury what would have to seem to him to be such a monstrous and unnatural father?

And so, because of God's promise, Abraham can acquiesce in Sarah's demands without thereby betraying either his moral convictions or his son and Hagar.

The expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael

In the narrative, on the strength of God's promise, Abraham sends Ishmael and Hagar off to walk into the desert. But it is instructive to contrast the way in which Abraham does so with Abraham's actions in other episodes where he is pursuing what he cares about.

When God made Abraham a promise that he would have biological offspring who would inherit the land, Abraham asked for some divine confirmation of the truth of God's promise. How shall I know this is true?, he asked. Here, where the life of his son (and his son's mother) is at stake, he asks for no sign.

When the issue was the lives of strangers in Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham was willing to confront God and bargain with him. But here, where what is at issue is the expulsion of the child who has been a part of his life for sixteen years or more (and the expulsion of Hagar too), Abraham attempts no negotiations with God. He might have pleaded with God to let him keep Ishmael and Hagar with him. He might have tried to bargain God into letting him send Ishmael and Hagar back to his father's family at Haran, to be sheltered there; or he might have negotiated with God to be allowed to provide some other friendly community for Ishmael and Hagar. But he does not intercede for Hagar and Ishmael in any way. He just expels them into the wilderness alone, without any help of this sort.

And there are many other episodes relevant in this connection. When Lot was kidnapped by hostile warriors, in an episode of the narrative left to one side in this chapter, Abraham gathers an army and gets him back. Later in the narrative, when Abraham wants a wife for Isaac, Abraham puts together an enticing array of jewelry and other gifts, and he sends a servant and animals to his brother's household in Haran to bring back a woman for Isaac. When he sends Keturah's sons away, he sends them away with gifts. But Hagar and Ishmael get none of these things—no protective army, no servants, no gifts.

After all their years in Abraham's household, Hagar and Ishmael are sent away alone, with virtually nothing. The text says that Abraham rises up early in the morning, hands Hagar and Ishmael a bottle of water and a loaf of bread, and sends them off to walk into the desert—without any request for a confirmation of the truth of the promise, without any negotiations, without any gifts, without any entourage, without any supplies worth mentioning. Even given the reassurance of God's promise to Abraham about Ishmael, there is something distressing about the manner in which Abraham expels Hagar and Ishmael.

We could suppose that the distressing features of Abraham's action are Sarah's fault.[108] That is, we could chalk Abraham's action up to his acquiescing with Sarah, and we could see the treatment of Hagar and Ishmael as an expression of Sarah's anger against them. No doubt, Sarah's anger does contribute to some of the apparently punitive features of Abraham's action. But supposing that Sarah is solely responsible for the way in which Abraham turns Hagar and Ishmael out is an implausible explanation. Many things in the narrative suggest that Abraham dominates his household, and nothing indicates that he leaves major decisions to Sarah alone.

The other possible explanation is that there is more at stake for Abraham in the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael than placating Sarah.

Throughout the narrative, God's promises to Abraham have reflected Abraham's heart's desire for patriarchal status. But, in the narrative, God does not promise Abraham just an end to his own childlessness, as if Abraham were pining for a baby. Rather, God promises Abraham *innumerable* descendants, as innumerable as the dust of the earth or the stars in the sky. And God promises that these descendants will hold a special place in the whole history of the world. But the fulfillment of these promises and the realization of Abraham's heart's desire will come to Abraham only through the child born by *God's* fulfilling the promises God has made—through Isaac, that is, not through Ishmael. Once Isaac has been born, Abraham finally understands this point and accepts it. To the extent to which he does, then, once Isaac is in existence, Ishmael is *de trop*, unnecessary for the thing Abraham wants so dearly.

Not only is Ishmael unnecessary, but in fact it is clear that Ishmael is in some sense even a threat to Abraham's having what he so desires. Ishmael is the first-born of Abraham's sons, in a society in which first-born status is of paramount importance (as the later story of Isaac and his sons Jacob and Esau highlights). Ishmael's status alone is, therefore, a threat to Isaac. In addition, there is a suggestion in the narrative's description of Ishmael's behavior at the feast celebrating Isaac's weaning that Ishmael feels a rivalry with Isaac. So Abraham might well feel that Ishmael could take action to undermine Isaac as Abraham's heir. To the extent to which Ishmael is separated from Isaac, Abraham might suppose, Isaac and his line are protected from Ishmael and his progeny.

And so Abraham's sending Ishmael away is, in a sense, Abraham's attempting to undo the past, the past in which, by getting Hagar pregnant, Abraham tried to bring about by himself the fulfillment of God's promise. For Abraham, the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael is thus not just a matter of placating Sarah. Rather, their expulsion safeguards Abraham's self-interest in more than one way. By disinheriting Ishmael and his descendants, Abraham promotes Isaac and his descendants. He thereby protects his heart's desire, to be the patriarch of a great people—as God promised him he would be, only through Isaac. The story of Keturah's sons also confirms this interpretation of Abraham's motives. In that story, without any urging from Sarah, who is long since dead, Abraham sends the concubine's sons away at the end of his life so that they will not inherit with his son Isaac.

So when God tells Abraham to do what Sarah wants and expel Hagar and Ishmael, Abraham's self-interest is on the side of obedience to God. And the lack of care for Hagar and Ishmael evinced in the manner in which Abraham sends them away is troubling.[109]

The indiscernibility of mixed motives

Given the way they are expelled, things go for Hagar and Ishmael pretty much as one might have predicted: they wander aimlessly in the wilderness until the water in their water bottle is spent, without finding any shelter or protection, without finding any wells. After a while, Hagar is sure they will die of thirst; and she goes some distance from her son, weeping as she goes, in order not to be a witness to his death. At that point, God

intervenes.[110] God sends an angel of the Lord to help Hagar find water, and the angel comforts her by repeating to her God's promise: "I will make [Ishmael] a great nation."[111] The narrative closes this episode by saying that God was with the boy in the wilderness as he grew. In other words, in the story God keeps his promise about Ishmael.

It is important to see here that God's promise to Abraham about Ishmael on the occasion of the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael enables Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away without being guilty of a great moral wrong only if God's promises are trustworthy, and in two senses. In order for God's promise to Abraham about Ishmael in the desert to serve its morally beneficial functions, it must, first, be true that God does keep his promises. God must be good, unwilling to concur in the unjust punishment of the righteous, unwilling to accept or connive at the killing of an innocent child. As the story of Hagar and Ishmael in the wilderness makes plain, God's promise is trustworthy in this sense. But, secondly, it must also be the case that Abraham believes God is good in these ways. If God's promises were trustworthy in the first sense but Abraham did not believe that they were, then Abraham would be guilty of a great evil in agreeing to Sarah's plan, even if (contrary to what Abraham believed) God did in fact keep his promise to preserve Ishmael and make him flourish.

Furthermore, when Abraham was double-minded about God's goodness in connection with Sodom and Gomorrah, he was being presumptuous, but still fundamentally good-hearted. If Abraham is so much as double-minded about God's promise in this case, where the lives of Hagar and Ishmael are at stake, there will be nothing benevolent about

Abraham. He will just be using God as an excuse to betray the trust of his son and to do a dreadful injustice to an innocent child and his mother. And that is not all. If Abraham is not whole-hearted in believing God's promise about Ishmael when he expels Hagar and Ishmael, he will be double-minded about God's goodness, too. To act on God's promise without wholly believing it would be to assume that God does not care much either about Abraham's trust in God as Abraham expels Ishmael or about Ishmael's safety in the desert. In effect, it would be to suppose that God would not much mind being used as an accessory to serious evil. A person who took this attitude toward God would be seriously alienated from God, as the focus on God's goodness and justice in the whole narrative makes plain.

So it makes a great deal of difference what we suppose Abraham's psychological state was when he expelled Hagar and Ishmael on the basis of God's promise about Ishmael. But what are we to say about Abraham's attitude toward God's promises in the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael? Has Abraham's previous double-mindedness about the promises been resolved? Is Abraham now become whole-heartedly persuaded of God's goodness, convinced that the judge of all the earth would never do an injustice, would never destroy the innocent with the wicked, would always give the righteous their reward? Or is Abraham here simply grasping a face-saving excuse for getting rid of Hagar and Ishmael, without looking too closely at the nature of that excuse?

In difficult and complicated cases, where morality and self-interest are obviously on the same side, the problem is that there may not be a fact of the matter about the main

motivator for the action.[112] When God tells Abraham to do what Sarah wants, what God decrees in effect enables Abraham to take an easy way out of the inner conflict in which Abraham was caught. When Abraham expels Hagar and Ishmael, is he doing what he does because he believes God is good and will keep his promises, or is he doing it because he wants to guard his heart's desire and his domestic well-being? Because in this case morality and self-interest converge, it seems likely that no clear and determinate answer can be given. To answer the question, we would have to know what Abraham *would* do if morality and self-interest were on opposite sides.[113]

God's command to sacrifice Isaac

The last recorded occasion on which God comes to talk to Abraham is the episode when, as the narrative says, God tests Abraham. This is the episode of the binding of Isaac.

On this occasion, God's speech to Abraham begins in a way dramatically different from that in the earlier divine visitations. In the narrative, on all the other occasions on which God comes to talk with Abraham, God begins straightway with the content of what he has to say. On this occasion, God begins just by uttering Abraham's name.

When God speaks Abraham's name, it is clear that Abraham recognizes God at once. Even with the long space of time since God's last speech to Abraham, Abraham (as it were) instantly knows the sound of God's voice, or is instantly cognizant of God in some other way in God's utterance of Abraham's name. In response to God's utterance of Abraham's name, Abraham responds: "Here I am."[114]

So God waits to convey his message to Abraham until Abraham has acknowledged that he recognizes God. First, God establishes Abraham's recognition of God and Abraham's shared attention with God. Only then does God communicate the content of his message. Once we grasp the content, it is not hard to understand the point of the deviation from past procedure on God's part. Given the content, it is crucial for Abraham that he have acknowledged, to God and to himself, that the speaker of that content is God. Without this preliminary step, it might have been possible for Abraham, once he heard the content of the message, to say to himself that he was not really sure about the identity of the speaker or about the veridicality of his apparent perception that he was being addressed by God. This initial step, in which God says Abraham's name and Abraham responds with immediate recognition and shared attention, makes subsequent doubt on Abraham's part much harder and less plausible.[115]

The content of God's message on this occasion is also dramatically at variance with that of all the preceding divine speeches. On all the earlier times of God's talking to Abraham, the content of the divine speeches has been or has at least included great promises about Abraham's offspring and their descendants. On this occasion, without explanation, God abruptly demands that Abraham sacrifice his son to him.

Abraham's silence

What shall we say about this demand of God's? For that matter, what should Abraham say to himself about it? Here is one possibility:

> Everything in twenty-five years of building relationship between God and me is hereby overturned. Everything I thought God was communicating to me is hereby shown to be a mistake or a delusion. Everything I believed would come to me because of my obedience to God is hereby destroyed. Everything I thought I knew about God is hereby shown to be illusory. Every preceding promise of God's to me is hereby falsified, and all the trust I placed in those promises is hereby shown to be betrayed. The judge of all the earth is a promise-breaker who desires the death of an innocent child in ritual sacrifice. And nothing is what it seemed to me to be.

Is not this the import for Abraham of God's demand? How else would any ordinary human being, in Abraham's shoes, understand it? How else would any ordinary human being react?

Time stops in the trauma of such total disconnection between what was believed to be and what now has to be accepted as reality. Lesser souls have nervous breakdowns. If nothing is what it seemed to be, then, one asks oneself fearfully, is there anything at all that can be trusted? Greater souls are rebellious. Job attacks God himself and demands redress when he thinks the God whom he loved and served has unjustly overwhelmed him with catastrophe. Job demands God's reasons for his suffering; he calls God to account for the injustice of what has happened to him. In circumstances such as these, a great soul will be defiant, not fearful.

But what is Abraham's reaction? It is neither collapse nor revolt. As dramatic as God's command is in the narrative, there is equal drama in Abraham's reaction. He is simply silent. He says nothing to God, or to anyone else either. He simply prepares to obey.

How are we to understand this? Abraham's history shows that he is a man of energy and power, a warrior even; he and his servants pursue a marauding army and beat them in order to rescue his nephew Lot.[116] When he deals with kings, Abraham is authoritative; and when he has conflict with them, he wins.[117] Even more significantly, the exchange between God and Abraham over Sodom and Gomorrah shows decisively that Abraham is not afraid to stand up to God himself when it looks to Abraham as if God might be contemplating an injustice.[118] What is the bare possibility of injustice toward the complete strangers of Sodom and Gomorrah by comparison with this command of God's for the sacrifice of Abraham's son! And yet, in this case, Abraham opposes God in no way at all. He is silent in response to God's demand, and in silence he obeys God. Why does Abraham do this?[119]

And why does God issue this command? Why does he do this to Abraham?

In a sense, the answer to these questions lies in the whole narrative of Abraham's life, but it emerges especially from comparison of the details of the story of Isaac and the story of Ishmael.

Isaac and Ishmael

It is helpful to begin by noticing the timing of the episode in which God demands the sacrifice of Isaac; in fact, the episode begins by remarking on the time. It says, "it came to pass after these things" or "some time afterwards."[120] How much time afterwards? The only way to mark the time is by the description of Isaac. He is still young enough to be diffident and deferential toward his father. On the other hand, he is old enough to carry some distance up a mountain a load of wood big enough for him to lie down on. So it is not implausible to suppose that, when God commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, Isaac is somewhere in his adolescence, reasonably close, in other words, to the age Ishmael had been when his father turned him out into the desert.[121]

As virtually all commentators have noted, God's command begins with an elaborate identification of Isaac: "your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love." But few commentators notice the striking character of the phrase 'your *only* son.'[122] If you had abandoned one of your two boys in the desert, would you be able to hear that phrase "only son" without wincing? If the phrase came from the person who told you to go ahead and abandon that son, wouldn't you wince all the more? And, if the person who guaranteed the safety of your abandoned son now uses the locution "only son" of the other boy, wouldn't you immediately think of that abandoned child and wonder in what sense Isaac is an only son?

So the trial of Abraham comes at a time when Isaac is about the age Ishmael was when Abraham turned him out, and it begins by calling Ishmael to the attention of Abraham (and the audience of the narrative) in virtue of referring to Isaac as Abraham's only son.

The content of God's message is enough to turn a father's heart to stone: take the only son you have—that is, the only son you have left—and offer him up to me as a burnt offering. But here we should again be brought to think of the expulsion of Ishmael.[123] Then God told Abraham to act in a way which, without divine intervention, seemed likely to bring about Ishmael's death. What made it morally permissible for Abraham to give in to Sarah and expel Ishmael was God's promise as regards Ishmael. To send Ishmael away without incurring serious moral culpability, Abraham had to rely on God's promise that God would make Ishmael a great nation. That promise entails not only that Ishmael survive but also that he flourish. So, if God's promise is trustworthy, Abraham can send Ishmael out into the wilderness without fear of harm coming to him, however reasonable it would otherwise be to believe that Ishmael would die in that place in consequence of being abandoned there. When Abraham expelled Ishmael, only a belief in God's goodness and in the trustworthiness of God's promises could keep that action on Abraham's part from constituting a terrible wrong against his own child.

Now God himself requires the death of Isaac. But, of course, as Abraham knows (and as the audience of the narrative knows), Abraham also has promises from God about Isaac. Isaac is the seed God has promised Abraham, the child with whom God will establish his covenant; through Isaac and Isaac's offspring Abraham will become the father of a great people. So the divine promises made about Isaac are equivalent to the divine promises made about Ishmael, at least in this respect: God has promised to make each of them a great nation. In that case, of course, each of them will have children before he dies. So, if

God is good and does not break his promises, then Isaac (like Ishmael) will have children.[124] But when God tells Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, Isaac is still unmarried and without children of his own.

So here is where matters stand. If Abraham ends Isaac's life *now*, God's promises about Isaac will have been false, and God will not be trustworthy or good. Conversely, if God is good and his promises are trustworthy, then Isaac's life will not end now, however reasonable it seems from the human point of view to believe that sacrificing him will terminate his existence.

What should Abraham think?

The options for Abraham

The long process of the developing relationship of trust between God and Abraham comes to a head here, with no room left for ambiguity. Abraham now has to face up to all his previous double-mindedness about the truth of God's promises; he has to choose either trust in God's goodness or disbelief and rejection. And he has to confront in deadly earnest the fact that he was willing to expel his first-born son into the desert on the strength of God's promise to make of him a great nation. From a human point of view, abandoning a child in the desert is very likely to kill him. But if God is good and keeps his promises, then Ishmael will not only live but even prosper in the desert. How God can bring that about is not clear in advance; but, as God says to Abraham and as Abraham himself learns by experience in the conception and birth of Isaac, lots of things that look

impossible turn out to be not too difficult for God. And so Abraham sent Ishmael out to wander in the wilderness, believing of himself that he was doing nothing wrong in the process. But that was then, when his self-interest was strongly on the side of supposing that God would keep his promises. Now things are different.

Doing what looks certain to bring about the death of Isaac is as strongly opposed to Abraham's self-interest as it could possibly be. Isaac, and the promise of posterity through Isaac, is Abraham's heart's desire. If Abraham now demurs, if he now finds that it is unreasonable to believe both that he could act in a way extremely likely to bring about a child's death and yet the child could live, or if he now conceives a great doubt whether he can trust the promises of God, what will we think, looking back, on the way he dealt with Ishmael? Will we not think that his apparent trust in God then was a mere excuse for doing a great moral wrong out of self-interest? Will we not suppose that Abraham in effect used God's promise to rationalize his own actions when it suited what he wanted and that Abraham is now doubting God and hanging back because his heart's desire is at stake and his self-regarding interests point the other way? If Abraham refuses to entrust Isaac to God's promises now, will we not be inclined to see his willingness to cast Ishmael out as a monstrous act toward his own son, rendered all the more sleazy by being cloaked in the hypocrisy of religion?[125]

In asking Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, God is asking Abraham what he would have done in the case of Ishmael if self-interest and trust in God had been on opposite sides, instead of converging. In effect, God's command to sacrifice Isaac asks Abraham to decide what

he would have done on that earlier occasion if Isaac, not Ishmael, had been at risk, if morality and his heart's desire had come apart. Would Abraham have believed God's promises in *that* case, or did it make a difference that the child whose life was at risk was Ishmael? If Abraham really believed that God could be trusted to make Ishmael survive and flourish when Abraham sent Ishmael to walk into the desert with a bottle of water and a loaf of bread, does he not also have to trust God's promises with regard to Isaac? The moment of truth for the long process of Abraham's developing trust in God's goodness is here.

And perhaps because Abraham was so ready to obey God's command to give in to Sarah, perhaps because he expelled Hagar and Ishmael in the way he did, without any bargaining, without any attempt to help them in any way, the trial here is particularly difficult for Abraham. It is one thing to believe that God can make Ishmael (and Hagar) survive in the desert. It is another thing to believe that God can make Isaac the progenitor of a great people if he is sacrificed as a burnt offering before he has children of his own. The pain of this trial is also intense. In the case of Ishmael, Abraham exposed his son to the perils of the wilderness. In the case of Isaac, God is asking Abraham to do the sacrificing himself.

The testing of Abraham

If we look at Abraham's trial from Ishmael's point of view, with a certain interest in retribution, it might seem like punishment for Abraham. Looking at it from God's point of view makes it seem like a refining fire for Abraham. In the expulsion of Ishmael,

Abraham's motives were mixed, so that there was perhaps no fact of the matter about whether Abraham acted out of trust in God's goodness or out of self-interest to protect his heart's desire. The command to sacrifice Isaac pulls apart self-interest and trust in God's goodness. Abraham must now place his hopes on God's goodness, or he must make clear that in the expulsion of Ishmael he was just using God as a means to a seriously wrong act, without supposing that God cared much or took much notice of that wrongness. So this trial refines Abraham. Whichever way he acts, he will act out of unmixed motives this time. He will act either out of self-interest with distrust of God, or out of belief in God's goodness but in a way that appears to jeopardize what he loves best.

And so this is indeed a test of Abraham, as the narrative says. God's command to sacrifice Isaac tries the measure of Abraham's commitment to the goodness of God. The way in which Abraham dealt with Ishmael makes the form of this test the right one for him, too. For Abraham to treat Isaac in the same way as he treated Ishmael is for Abraham to commit himself whole-heartedly to the belief that God is good. Furthermore, given Abraham's history with God, it is not unreasonable for God in the narrative, or for the audience of the narrative, to think that the previous episodes have made Abraham ready for this trial. It is not unreasonable to believe that Abraham can come through this test successfully.

Like some tests in quantum physics, this test also significantly affects what it measures. Whether or not Abraham passes the test by staking his son on God's goodness, the test is good for Abraham; and there is something right and loving about God's giving it to him.

If the stories about Abraham had stopped with his turning Ishmael out, we would surely have been left with moral unease about him. The trial of the binding of Isaac requires Abraham to take an unambiguous stand, and so it also resolves what was ambiguous in the earlier expulsion of Ishmael. If Abraham passes this test, the test will constitute the refining of his character. On the other hand, if Abraham fails this test, the test will precipitate the morally troubling side of his dealings with Ishmael out of the murky mix of motives in which it was originally, and that clarification with its consequent self-knowledge will itself be a benefit to Abraham. This test alters Abraham's relationship with God, too. Either Abraham will now finally give whole-hearted commitment to God and the goodness of God, or he will have to take a stand at some distance from God and confront that alienation openly. It is worth noticing in this connection that God tells Abraham to sacrifice Isaac in a place three days' journey away from where Abraham is.[126] The long journey guarantees that Abraham will act only after ample reflection.

The poignancy of Abraham's predicament should also be clear. Even whole-hearted belief in God's goodness is not incompatible with great suffering regarding the outcome staked on God's goodness. (Think only of a parent's belief in the competence and truthfulness of the surgeon who tells her that her child will certainly come through the surgery beautifully and of her anxiety and misery while she waits for the end of the operation.) Even whole-hearted belief in God's goodness can coexist with anguish for Abraham, because it is Isaac's life that is at risk. Abraham's affliction is also compounded by the way God sets up the trial. If Abraham is wrong in trusting God's promises, then not only will Isaac be dead, but he will be dead by Abraham's hand.

Abraham's silence revisited

In these circumstances, Abraham's silence after God's demanding the sacrifice of Isaac is eloquent. To me, it seems to make clear that Abraham understood the nature of the test God was setting him and the reasons for that test. That is why Abraham does not ask for any explanation of God's command or any confirmation that God's earlier promises are true. That is why Abraham does not try to talk God out of his command or try to bargain with him for Isaac's life, as he bargained in the case of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Furthermore, Abraham's silence also shows us how painful the ordeal is for Abraham. Not only does Abraham not object to God; he does not complain to anyone else either. His silence extends to the servants and even to Sarah. If Abraham were to complain to any of those around him, those others (and what should one say about Sarah here!) might well try to dissuade him. Or the very act of complaining might dissipate his own willingness to act. And so he is silent both as regards God and as regards the human persons around him, because he understands, and because he is holding his breath in the struggle with himself to trust Isaac to God.

Abraham's response to God's testing

In the circumstances, Abraham chooses to do what God has asked of him. Just as in the case of the expulsion of Ishmael, the narrative says that, in response to God's command, Abraham rises up early in the morning to do what he was commanded.[127]

But, of course, this information alone does not tell us whether Abraham passes the test God has set him.[128] Abraham might have been willing to sacrifice Isaac but in a spirit that would sour his relations with God ever after.[129] For example, Abraham might have found himself unable to trust God with Isaac but nonetheless have feared God's power; in that case, he would have obeyed God only to avoid God's wrath and punishment. And then he would not have passed the test.

To see whether Abraham passes the test, we need to be clear about what would constitute failing it. Abraham will fail this test if he does not treat Isaac in the same way in which he treated Ishmael. In the case of Ishmael, he was willing to act in ways that looked likely to kill his son, because he believed that God would keep his promises and God's promises entailed that Ishmael live and flourish. Abraham has similar promises about Isaac, and here, too, he is being asked to act in ways that seem sure to destroy the child. To treat the two cases in the same way, then, requires believing that, even if he sacrifices Isaac, Isaac will live and flourish. Is there anything too difficult for God?

So Abraham passes this test not in case he is willing to give up Isaac, as most commentators assume,[130] but just in case he believes that, if he obeys God's command to sacrifice Isaac, he will not be ending Isaac's life. He passes the test only if he believes that in obeying God he is *not* giving up Isaac.[131]

Not only that, but Abraham also has to believe that in sacrificing Isaac he will do Isaac no harm. Even if Abraham thought that sacrificing Isaac would not end Isaac's life—perhaps

because God would resurrect Isaac or perhaps because God would somehow miraculously keep Isaac from death—Abraham might (reasonably enough, it seems) suppose that the process of sacrificing Isaac would cause psychological and physical suffering to Isaac. Such suffering on Isaac's part is obviously a significant harm to Isaac. If Abraham believed that in sacrificing Isaac he would not end Isaac's life but that he would nonetheless cause his son serious harm, then Abraham would also believe that God had commanded the harm of an innocent child. In that case, Abraham would not believe that God is good. It might be true that Abraham believed God could undo whatever physical damage God's command caused Abraham to inflict on Isaac, but the ability to undo evil caused is not at all the same thing as moral goodness.

It is, of course, hard to see how anyone could believe that sacrificing Isaac would not result in harm to Isaac. On the other hand, however, Abraham has already seen manifestations of God's great power, including the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah and the pregnancy of his barren 90-year-old wife. When God says to him, "Is there anything too difficult for God?,"[132] it is meant to be a rhetorical question. Furthermore, a little reflection shows that God *can* protect Isaac not only from death but even from harm in the process of sacrifice. That is, God can protect not only Isaac's life but also his psychological and physical well-being, even if Abraham were to plunge a knife into him. Contemporary surgeons can protect their patients in this way, first by explaining to them the point of the surgery and then by rendering them unconscious during the process. There seems no reason to suppose that God (and Abraham) could not do at least as well by Isaac.[133]

At any rate, what is clear is that Abraham cannot believe in the moral goodness of God and also believe that God is commanding him to harm an innocent child.[134]

So for Abraham to treat Isaac as he treated Ishmael earlier, Abraham needs to believe that, in this case, too, God is good and that following God's command will not result in the death of his son or in harm to him.

On this way of seeing the story, Abraham's line to the servants is not a polite fib. Abraham tells the servants: "You stay here with the donkey, and the lad and I will go over there, and we will worship, and we will come back to you."[135] On the interpretation I am arguing for here, in his line to the servants Abraham is not saying something he believes to be false in order to keep the servants from growing suspicious. Rather, he believes what he says. Similarly, when he tells Isaac, "God Himself will provide the lamb for a burnt-offering, my son,"[136] he is not engaging in tender deception or unconsciously cruel irony, as he would have to be doing if he thought he were about to kill Isaac. Abraham believes what he says to Isaac as well as what he says to the servants.

There is agony, though, if not irony, in these lines to the servants and to Isaac, because of what it takes to believe them. Think about a man mountain-climbing with his son, who finds that the only way to safety lies across a large crevasse. If he did not believe his son could make it, he would not ask him to leap. But he may be bathed in sweat, with years taken off his life, by the time the boy makes it over.

Abraham's lines to the servants and to Isaac are our main indication of whether or not Abraham passes the test, until God intervenes, dramatically halting the sacrifice at the point at which Abraham has raised the knife over Isaac. The angel of the Lord, speaking for God, says to Abraham: "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, *your only son*, from me." And this line seems right. If Abraham had refused to trust Isaac to God after having been willing to expel Ishmael on God's promise, he would have been mocking rather than fearing God, acting as if God did not matter much or did not care much about the death of innocent children. But until Abraham had to choose whether to trust Isaac to God or not, perhaps no one, not even God, could have known whether Abraham feared God, because Abraham's motives in the case of Ishmael were mixed and confused. God knows now, because the trial over Isaac has refined Abraham.[137] Abraham has been willing to trust his son, his *only* son, to God. And so God says to Abraham at the end: "because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, *your only son*, I will bless you and multiply your seed as the stars of heaven and as the sand on the sea shore; and your seed shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice."[138]

The impression given by Abraham's lines to the servants and to Isaac is thus confirmed when God comes to deliver his verdict: Abraham passes the test. The long process of God's patient attempt to develop a relationship of trust with Abraham and Abraham's

double-minded finding his way into that trust has its flowering here, when Abraham is willing to sacrifice the son of the promise with faith in God and God's promise intact.

Abraham as the father of faith

If we read the story of the binding of Isaac in this way, in the context of the whole narrative about God's promises and Abraham's heart's desire for offspring, but especially in connection with the expulsion of Ishmael, we will be able to answer the questions that posed serious difficulties for Kierkegaard's view. The narrative makes it clear that there is a morally acceptable answer to the question why God should try Abraham and why the test should take the form it does. What is at issue is whether Abraham will believe in the goodness of God, in Isaac's case as well as in Ishmael's, and not whether Abraham will sacrifice absolutely anything to God if God commands him to do so.

Furthermore, what is praiseworthy about Abraham is not his readiness to kill his son in obedience to God. As I argued at the outset of this chapter, if that were what was supposed to make Abraham specially admirable, he would have to take second place to Jephthah, who not only raised the knife over his child but brought it down as well. Jephthah supposed that God and morality could be on opposite sides. But, in Abraham's case, it is precisely Abraham's willingness to believe in God's goodness, even against strong temptations to the contrary, that makes him the father of faith. When Abraham passes the test, he passes it just because he believes that God is good and will not betray his promises, so that sacrificing Isaac will not end Isaac's life. While Abraham goes to

sacrifice his son, he believes that the God in whose goodness he has trusted will give him his heart's desire.

In one way, then, Kierkegaard's reading of the story of the binding of Isaac is right in its description of the knight of faith. Abraham does accept God's command to sacrifice his son, an acceptance that seems sure to result in Isaac's death; and, apparently absurdly, as Kierkegaard says, Abraham simultaneously believes that he will have his son. But Kierkegaard is mistaken in his understanding of God's test of Abraham and of Abraham's mental state as he endures it. On the interpretation of the story I have argued for, when God demands the sacrifice of Isaac, Abraham's options are to refuse to participate in what he believes will bring about the death of his son, because he does not after all trust God's promises to give him his heart's desire, or to be willing to obey God's command, believing that in so doing he will not be bringing about the death of his son because a trustworthy God has promised that Isaac will be the progenitor of a great nation. It is important to see that, contrary to Kierkegaard's view, on neither option is Abraham willing to kill his son,[139] although on the second option he is doing what, humanly speaking, *would* end the child's life save for the power and promise of God.

Furthermore, and also contrary to Kierkegaard's reading, there is no dilemma for Abraham here. No religious or moral obligation attends the first of Abraham's options. That is, there is no obligation for Abraham to believe that God breaks his promises or that God is not good; but, unless Abraham held such a belief, he would not think that, in sacrificing Isaac, he would be ending Isaac's life. On the contrary, Abraham has a moral

obligation to reject that first option. Abraham ought to trust God with Isaac, not only because Abraham's long history of relationship with God makes it clear for Abraham that this is the right attitude to take toward God, but also because Abraham has already staked the life of one son on God's goodness. Consequently, Abraham is not caught in a moral or a religious dilemma between the two options open to him. The only option that is obligatory for him to take is the second one, to do as God has commanded him, and that option is both morally right and religiously good.[140]

If we read the episode of the binding of Isaac in the context of the whole narrative of Abraham's life, in which Abraham's double-mindedness about God's goodness is manifest, and especially if we see that episode against the backdrop of the expulsion of Ishmael, then it is clear that God is not pitting his authority against morality in asking Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, as Kierkegaard apparently supposed. The truly immoral response on Abraham's part would be to appear to trust God's promise to preserve Ishmael but then to act as if God could not be entrusted with Isaac. God's demand for Isaac and the requirements of morality are on the same side in this story, and the only obedience to God's command that will count as passing the test is the obedience which comes with a belief that by that obedience Abraham is not ending Isaac's life. There is, consequently, no teleological suspension of the ethical here.[141]

Reading the story of the binding of Isaac in this way also makes sense of the subsequent life of Isaac. As the biblical narratives go on to describe, Isaac retains the close relationship he had to his father after the episode of his binding, and his own commitment

to God stays strong and deep. If what Isaac had seen and believed in consequence of his father's binding of him is just that God's commands abrogate morality, that God sometimes commands the killing of innocent children, and that in such cases his father is willing to obey, it is hard to know how Isaac could be anything but deeply angry at or deeply frightened of both God and his father. It is difficult to see how one could have a loving relationship with a father, human or heavenly, if one thought that father was willing to kill him.

So Isaac's own subsequent personal commitment to God and to Abraham supports the interpretation of Abraham's trial that I have been developing, and it also suggests that Isaac himself understood Abraham's test in the same way. Just as it seemed reasonable to believe that Abraham told Ishmael why he was turning him out into the desert, so it seems plausible to hold that at some point between the time they left the servants to go to the place of sacrifice and the time Abraham bound Isaac, Abraham gave Isaac Abraham's view of what Abraham was doing. At any rate, Isaac's subsequent history seems to require that he had some explanation that gave him a way of seeing his father holding the knife above him which let him believe that both God and Abraham loved him and would never do him any harm.[142]

Finally, it is also worth remembering here the story of Keturah. The narrative highlights Abraham's whole-hearted trust in God's promises in the binding of Isaac. But the story of Keturah makes evident, I think, that Abraham's double-mindedness recurs throughout his life. His status as the father of faith does not require, then, that he is always characterized

by whole-heartedness. His having achieved it in his severe test is enough. In my view, there is a certain humanity about the narrative's ending not with the binding of Isaac but with the story of Keturah's sons.

Faith and the goodness of God

Interpreted in the way I have argued for in this chapter, the story of Abraham and Isaac gives us insight into the nature of faith, in the tradition that affirms Abraham as the father of all the faithful. Abraham's faith is not a faith in the existence of God, or in the power of the being who commands the sacrifice of Isaac, or in a duty to obey God's commands, no matter what. Plainly, Abraham has a belief in God's existence and power and in his own obligation to obey God, even before he decides what to do about God's command to sacrifice Isaac. But Abraham becomes the father of faith only with his willingness to sacrifice Isaac. No amount of evidence of the existence and power of God could have produced faith of this sort in Abraham. It required a particular state of will and character. Or, to put the point more accurately, it required Abraham to be willing to relate to God in a certain way. The faith that makes Abraham the father of faith has its root in Abraham's acceptance of the goodness of God, Abraham's belief that God will keep his promises, and Abraham's willingness to stake his heart's desire on that belief. In this state, Abraham is surrendering to God, letting go of his self-protective efforts to get what he wants for himself and committing himself in trust to God's goodness.

It is important to belabor this point a little, because the claim that God is good is often eviscerated of content, just as the notion of faith itself is. Sometimes when some suffering

soul is told that God is good, the line seems to mean just that God is indeed hurting her but that, unlike Job, she must not complain about it. Not just any way of believing that God is good counts as Abraham's sort of faith, however. Job's comforters also insisted to Job that God is good, and they thought Job should take whatever happened to him as good and right because God did it. But it is noteworthy that, when God adjudicates the dispute between Job and the comforters, God comes down squarely on Job's side. It takes sacrifices and Job's prayers to keep the comforters from the wrath of God. How, then, does the position of the comforters differ from the position I am ascribing to Abraham as the basis for his status as the father of faith?

It is as if Job's comforters and Abraham came down on opposite sides of the Euthyphro dilemma.[143] "Do the gods will what they will because it is good," Socrates asks Euthyphro, "or is what the gods will good because they will it?" For Job's comforters, whatever God wills is good just because it is God who wills it. In deciding whether something that happens is good, on the comforters' view of it, we need only to consider the agency. If God is the agent of what happens, then that is sufficient for its being good; *any* other facts of the case are irrelevant to a moral evaluation of it. But, if Abraham took *this* attitude, he would be failing the test that the command to sacrifice Isaac sets him. He passes the test only in case he believes that God's promise regarding Isaac is trustworthy and that, contrary to all reasonable expectation, he will not end Isaac's life in obeying God's command to sacrifice him. For Abraham, then, there is an objective standard of goodness that includes the obligation to keep promises, and God does what he does because it is really, truly, objectively good.

So Abraham manages to believe that God is good and will keep his promises to Abraham, even while Abraham goes to sacrifice the son God promised at God's command, but to say this is not to say that Abraham is willing to call 'good' anything commanded by God. On the contrary, God promised Abraham that he would have descendants through Isaac; and, if what God wills is objectively good, God cannot be a promise-breaker. Abraham becomes the father of faith when he comes to believe that God is good in *this* sense and is willing to commit himself to God in consequence. Although Abraham clearly understands what it is to sacrifice a child, he nonetheless believes that, if he obeys God's command to sacrifice Isaac, Isaac will go on to live, to flourish, and to have descendants. And so he wills to stake his son on God's goodness. Abraham trusts that, if he consents to sacrifice at God's command his heart's desire—his son and through his son the office of patriarch of a people—he will still have his heart's desire, because God is good. The relationship Abraham comes to have to God is, therefore, what makes him the father of faith.

Abraham's attitude looks paradoxical or worse, of course; but it is important to see that, as the story itself shows, it is not contradictory. This paradoxical-looking attitude on Abraham's part turns out in the story to be entirely correct.

In fact, even this way of putting the outcome of the story is not quite right. With the begetting of Isaac but without the suffering of God's test, Abraham would have had the seed whose own progeny would eventually have made Abraham the patriarch of a tribe—

an extensive tribe, but, still, just a tribe. In suffering and passing the test imposed by God's command to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham becomes the patriarch of the whole family of faith. So, in suffering the test and being willing to give up his heart's desire, Abraham receives it in a much more powerful form than he would otherwise have had.

Faith and the problem of suffering

At the outset of this chapter, I said that one traditional religious reaction to the problem of suffering has been to recommend that believers respond with faith, but that this reaction strikes many people as deeply disappointing. The story of Abraham's binding of Isaac gives us a second-person account of the nature of faith which makes that traditional reaction considerably less bland and not at all disappointing, in my view.

The unreflective inclination of many people, whether they are religious believers or not, is to understand the traditional recommendation of faith in this way. A sufferer who has faith is someone who is inclined to believe that God exists, that God is powerful, that God can arrange human lives as he likes, that God does not arrange them as the sufferer would like, but that the sufferer has to accept suffering at God's hand, because God is the all-powerful ruler of the universe. This may look like faith to many religious believers and non-believers, but it is not, as the story of Abraham makes clear. The faith of Abraham is a personal commitment to God, as someone who is really good and so keeps his promises, in a relationship of love.

To begin to see the point of the thrust of the story on this understanding of it, think of the promises of God, not just those directly attributed to God in the biblical texts but also those that the biblical texts make on behalf of God. Consider, for example, this one, important in my attempt to delineate the nature of suffering in the first chapter: "Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart" (Ps. 37: 4). What difference would it make to a sufferer if, with Abraham-like faith, he managed in his suffering to believe that God could be trusted to keep this promise? It is important here not to empty the phrase 'the desires of your heart' of its meaning. It does not mean some great abstract good that a person ought to want but does not. It means what it says: "the desires of *your* heart"—and some general good a person does not want is not a desire of her heart.

If a sufferer managed in the midst of his suffering to hold the belief that God would give him the desires of his heart, it would not take away the pain of the suffering. How could it possibly? Nonetheless, the belief would radically alter his experience of that suffering. There is an appropriate analogy here to the suffering a woman goes through in childbirth. Although it does not take anything away from her pain, it makes all the difference in the world to a woman in the throes of the pain of childbirth to feel the presence of someone who loves her and to believe that her pain will eventuate in a baby who is the desire of her heart.

But, we might think, it is impossible even for an omnipotent God to give a heartbroken person the desires of her heart; for someone to be heartbroken is just for her to have lost

the desires of her heart. I grant it looks this way—but then it must also have looked impossible for God to fulfill his promise to Abraham if Abraham sacrificed his son. And so it must also have been difficult for Abraham in his anguish as he was going to sacrifice Isaac to believe that God would give him the desires of his heart. Difficult to believe is not the same as irrational, however, as the narrative shows.

Abraham's willingness to trust God to keep Isaac safe even as he is going to sacrifice Isaac makes Abraham into something glorious. It moves him from being a prosperous nomad with powerful religious experiences to being the father of faith, and so it brings Abraham to the flowering of his life. But, paradoxically enough, that same trust and surrender to God also give Abraham the desire of his heart. In fact, somehow, it gives Abraham exactly what he wanted but in a form better than he would have known how to want it: both his son Isaac and the unique status of paterfamilias to the vast community of the faithful among all the nations of the earth.[144]

Conclusion

The story of the binding of Isaac thus illuminates the nature of faith as a response to the problem of suffering, and it sets a very high standard for acceptable solutions to the problem. I argued in Chapter 9 that Job's reaction to God after God's speeches is best understood as Job's having come to an assurance that God is good and loving, and that this attitude has implicit in it the conviction that God allows suffering only for the sake of an outweighing good that comes primarily to the sufferer. In the light of this chapter, we

can add that, at the end of the book of Job, Job's attitude toward God in the face of his own suffering is faith of Abraham's sort.

But the narrative of the binding of Isaac adds an element not addressed in the earlier chapter's interpretation of the story of Job.[145] Abraham's belief in God's goodness is centered on a trust in the promises of God. Central among God's promises to Abraham, however, is the promise of Isaac and the posterity that comes to Abraham through Isaac; and precisely this is what Abraham has his heart set on. It is important to see that, in the story, the suffering of Abraham's trial is redeemed not only in his flourishing through the suffering of his trial, but also in his receiving the desires of his heart. It is hard to imagine a satisfactory conclusion to the narrative of Abraham's life that ends with Abraham being deprived of Isaac.

The story of Abraham's life illuminates, then, the claim I argued for in Chapter 1—namely, that two things need to be considered when it comes to the benefits that could justify God in allowing suffering. One is the flourishing of the sufferer. But the other is what the sufferer himself has his heart fixed on, however that might relate to the sufferer's flourishing. There is something incomplete about any putative solution to the problem of suffering that neglects a consideration of the things the sufferer himself has set his heart on.[146]

This desideratum for solutions to the problem of suffering will, of course, strike most people as utopian, if not lunatic, because in our world the heartbrokenness caused by

suffering is only slightly less obvious than suffering itself. In Chapter 14, I will return to this issue, not only to reflect further on the notion of the desires of the heart but also to examine in detail, in the light of all the narratives considered, the role of the desires of the heart in the problem of suffering.

1. Victor Klemperer, *I Will Bear Witness: A Diary of the Nazi Years. 1942–1945*, trans. Martin Chalmers (New York: The Modern Library, 2001); see esp. p. 286 and p. 313. See Chapters 1, 14, and 15 for other discussion of Klemperer.
2. In Chapter 14, I try to give some precision to the notion of the desires of the heart; here, as before, I will rely just on an intuitive understanding of the idea.
3. Norman Kretzmann's insightful analysis of the binding of Isaac can be found in his "Abraham, Isaac, and Euthyphro: God and the Basis of Morality," in Donald Stump et al. (eds.), *Hamartia: The Concept of Error in the Western Tradition: Essays in Honor of John Crossett* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1983), 27–50. I am indebted to this article of his and to him.
4. See John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966). For Hick's defense of his solutions against objections, see, e.g., "God, Evil and Mystery," *Religious Studies*, 3 (1968), 539–46; and "The Problem of Evil in the First and Last Things," *Journal of Theological Studies*, 19 (1968), 591–602. See

also Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

5. In Chapter 14, I will show that the desires of the heart in fact do figure in the stories of Job and Samson, and I will say something further about this feature of both stories.

6. See Rom. 4: 11 and Gal. 3: 7; but cf. also Acts 3: 25, Heb. 6: 13–19, and Jas. 2: 20–23. Cf. also certain parts of the Gospel of Luke that take on an independent life in liturgy and music—the Magnificat (Luke 1: 55) and the Benedictus (Luke 1: 73)—and that refer to God's promises to Abraham as being fulfilled in salvation for Israel in those times.

7, In certain Christian traditions, 'detachment' is the name given to a particular theological or spiritual excellence consisting in ordering one's desires for the good correctly, so that one loves everything one loves for the sake of love of God. This is not the sense of 'detachment' at issue here. (In Chapter 14, I discuss an ordering of the desires of the heart that has at least a family resemblance to this sense of 'detachment.') Rather, in this connection, by 'detachment' I mean an alienation, or an attempt at alienation, of oneself from one's own desires of the heart for the good or for what one believes to be the good for oneself.

8. For a recent book that helps orient readers to the Jewish tradition, see Jerome (Yehuda) Gellman, *The Fear, the Trembling, and the Fire: Kierkegaard and Hasidic Masters on the Binding of Isaac* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1994); see also his *Abraham! Abraham! Kierkegaard and the Hasidim on the Binding of Isaac* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Co.,2003).

9. I say nothing here about Islamic commentary on the story only because my own expertise does not cover the Islamic tradition of commentary on biblical stories or themes.
10. It continues to be the subject of insightful commentary today, too. A rich, sophisticated commentary, with much reference to the Jewish commentary tradition, can be found in Jon Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993). There is a sensitive literary study of the text in Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York and London: Norton and Norton, 1996). Besides these, there are many other helpful contemporary studies of the story, too numerous to be listed individually here; I will cite some of them subsequently in this chapter.
11. A helpful survey of ancient Jewish and Christian commentary on the story is included in Edward Kessler, *Bound by the Bible: Jews, Christians, and the Sacrifice of Isaac* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
12. I am grateful to Stephen Evans for showing me the care needed in the interpretation of Kierkegaard's views on this subject and for correcting my first attempts to summarize Kierkegaard's views.
13. Commentators differ in the status they attribute to Hagar and Keturah. Midrashic commentary takes Hagar, for example, to be a wife of Abraham, not a concubine. (See *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, trans. H. Freedman, i (London and New York: Soncino Press, 1983), 381.) My own sense of the text is that Hagar and Keturah were each a concubine, not a wife, and I will refer to them as concubines in what follows.

14. Continual insertion of the qualifier ‘in the story’ would render the prose clumsy, and so I am in general omitting it after this point. But readers should take it as understood that what is being assessed here are the actions, motivations, and relationships of characters in the narrative.
15. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 55.
16. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 57.
17.. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 57.
18. Heb. 11: 17–19.
19. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 69.
20. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 69.
21. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 70.
22. In recent years, philosophers have become interested in the story of the binding of Isaac as an example of a tragic dilemma. On this way of reading the story, which Philip Quinn tentatively considers Kierkegaard's real view, God's command to Abraham to sacrifice his son puts Abraham in a tragic dilemma, between the religious requirement to obey God's command, on the one hand, and the moral prohibition against murder, on the other. Quinn argues that this dilemma is irresoluble and that that fact constitutes a reason for rejecting the veridicality of the story, because it is incompatible with the goodness of God to force anyone into an irresoluble dilemma. See Philip Quinn, "Moral Obligation, Religious Demand, and Practical Conflict," in Robert Audi and William Wainwright (eds.), *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press,

1986), 194–212, and "Agamemnon and Abraham: The Tragic Dilemma of Kierkegaard's Knight of Faith," *Journal of Literature and Theology*, 4 (1990), 181–93. It is not clear how plausible Quinn's line is as a reading of Kierkegaard. On Quinn's interpretation of Kierkegaard, as far as I can see, the special characteristics of Kierkegaard's knight of faith and the absurdity that characterizes his beliefs are not found in the Abraham of the story.

23. At any rate, the biblical text (Judg. 11: 39) says that Jephthah fulfilled his vow, and the tradition commonly (but not invariably) supposes that he fulfilled his vow by sacrificing his daughter.

24. It is not clear to me how Kierkegaard's explanation of the story in terms of the teleological suspension of the ethical is supposed to cohere with what he says about Abraham as a knight of faith. The Abraham of the teleological suspension looks unlike the knight of faith and more like someone engaged only in infinite resignation. He recognizes and accepts that his religious requirements override his moral obligations, and so he prepares to kill his son. The element of the absurd that characterized the knight of faith seems to have dropped out.

25. Gen. 11: 30.

26. Not all his children, of course. By his last wife or concubine, Keturah, he has six other sons.

27. Gen. 25: 8–9.

28. See Gen. 12: 1–4. I say “first recorded speech” because the text can seem to imply that there was in fact an earlier, unrecorded speech of God to Abraham. The recorded speech of God to Abraham comes when Abraham is in Haran; in that

speech, God tells Abraham to go to the land of Canaan. But Abraham is in Haran precisely because he and his whole family had left their home in Chaldean Ur in order to travel to Canaan (Gen. 11: 31). They get as far as Haran, when Abraham's father Terah decides to end the journey and stay there, in Haran. So it is possible that God spoke to Abraham (or to Terah) when Abraham was still in Ur and that the divine command to go to Canaan came on that occasion. If so, then that implied part of the story helps to explain why the divine command that comes to Abraham in *Haran* includes the command to leave his father's house. It may be that, although Terah's original purpose in leaving Ur was to get to Canaan because God had commanded him to do so, by the time Terah has reached Haran he is unwilling to go any further. The interpretation of the narrative given by Stephen in the book of Acts (Acts 7: 2–8) reads the story of Abraham in this way, except that in Acts a different reason is assigned for Abraham's leaving Haran.

29. The estimate of Abraham's age at the time of God's last visitation to him is based on the estimate of Isaac's age at that time. For reasons that Isaac was probably adolescent then, see below.

30. The eight are: (1) Gen. 12: 1; (2) Gen. 12: 7; (3) Gen. 13: 14–17; (4) Gen. 15: 1–16; (5) Gen. 17: 1–21; (6) Gen. 18: 10–32; (7) Gen. 21: 12–13; (8) Gen. 22: 1–18.

31. Although the divine speeches are not made by using illocutionary verbs of promising, the context makes it plain that God is promising. For some basic discussion of the nature of promising and the linguistic forms of promising, see the entries "Promising" and "Performatives" in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

32. For a helpful summary of the contemporary philosophical literature on promising and a useful corrective to the prevailing accounts of the normativity of promises, see Seana Valentine Shiffrin, "Promising, Intimate Relationships, and Conventionalism," *Philosophical Review*, 117 (2008), 481–524. Among other things, Shiffrin is concerned to undermine the claim that the normativity of promises has to do with the expectation of the person to whom the promise is made that the promise will be fulfilled. I share Shiffrin's position on this score. My point in the text here does not have to do with the normativity of promises, but only with the customary reactions of the person to whom the promise is made. My point has to do with ordinary psychology, not with the normativity of promises.
33. Of course, there are also promises that have to do with the present rather than the future, as in 'I promise you I am telling you the truth.' Here the promise functions as an oath confirming the truth of the utterance in doubt for someone else. Promises as oaths are outside the scope of the discussion here. I am grateful to John Foley for calling my attention to the need to address this issue.
34. Some people will take objection to this example on the grounds that one cannot be obligated to love someone, either because love is not the sort of thing that can be obligatory or because love is not the sort of thing over which one has control and one cannot be obligated to do something if that something is not under one's voluntary control. This objection may apply to conditions on being in love, but they do not apply to love on the Thomistic conception of love defended in Chapter 5. As presented there, the two desires of love are within the power of the will, *ceteris*

paribus; and, at least in some circumstances, they are also obligatory, as the discussion of offices of love in that chapter makes clear.

35. I am leaving to one side here complications having to do with the defeasibility of obligations engendered by promises.

36. For an excellent discussion of the difference between a person's first-person and third-person expressions of his intentions, that is to say, between promises and self-predictions, see Richard Moran, *Authority and Estrangement: An Essay on Self-Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

37. It is immaterial to my point to consider why anyone would lend on the promise of swift return when he is unwilling or unable to trust the promise or the promise-keeper, but it is very easy to imagine circumstances that make such action understandable. Imagine, for example, that Paula is Jerome's boss and that Jerome is very worried about his job.

38. The story includes a name change for Abraham and for Sarah midway through the events leading to Isaac's birth; but I will refer to both of Isaac's parents with the names that are familiar to us: 'Abraham' and 'Sarah.'

39. Robert Alter argues that the Hebrew word translated 'family' here is better translated as 'birthplace,' but I am not persuaded by the arguments he gives for this reason. (See *Genesis*, 50.) If, however, his translation is the better one, it would not undermine the interpretation of the passage I am concerned to bring out here.

40. It is possible that Terah also took with him Nahor and Nahor's family. The text that mentions those Terah took with him omit Nahor from the list, but there is some indication in other texts that the audience is meant to suppose that Nahor's family

was in Haran. Isaac's wife Rebecca is a member of Nahor's family and seems to come from Haran; at any rate, her brother Laban is in Haran (cf. Gen. 27: 43). It is possible, then, that the group Abraham leaves behind includes Nahor's household as well as Terah.

41. Gen. 12: 5.

42. Midrashic commentary makes a related point: "R. Nehemiah said: There was anger [in heaven] against the Patriarch Abraham when Lot his brother's son *went* with him. 'I promised him, *Unto thy seed have I given this land*'. . . said God, 'yet he attaches Lot to himself' " (*Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, i. 338).

43. It is in fact not an uncommon way of understanding Abraham's attitude. So, for example, the edition of the Pentateuch by J. H. Hertz (in *The Soncino Edition of the Pentateuch and Haftorahs* (2nd edn.; London: Soncino Press, 1967)) comments on God's coming to talk to Abraham after Lot departed from him this way: "God chose that moment to renew His assurance to Abram, because he may then have been depressed by the departure of his nephew, whom, in default of a son, he had regarded as his probable heir, through whom the Divine promise was to be fulfilled" (p. 49).

44. Of course, there are some things that Abraham does have to do to cooperate with the divine promises, on any ordinary understanding of them. So, for example, when God tells Abraham that the promised child will be the child of Abraham's own loins, then presumably sexual intercourse on Abraham's part is necessary for the fulfillment of the promise. The difference between that sort of cooperation on Abraham's part and the other things Abraham does to try to make the promises true

is that the other things, unlike sexual activity on Abraham's part, are not necessary if the divine promises are to be fulfilled, including the promise that the child in question will come from Abraham's loins.

45. And whatever is necessary for their fulfillment. Cf. n. 44.

46. Double-mindedness is one sort of division in the self, and there are others as well. For a discussion of divisions in the self, see Chapters 6 and 7.

47. Robert Alter points out that, on the preceding occasions when God has come to Abraham, Abraham has said nothing; Abraham's first speech to God in the narrative is one expressing doubt about God's promises (*Genesis*, 63).

48. The Hebrew word used to describe Abraham's righteousness (*tsedaqah*) is derived from the same root as the word *tsadiq*, which Abraham uses to designate the righteous in Sodom and Gomorrah, when he urges God not to destroy the righteous with the wicked. The narrative's comment implies that, in virtue of believing in God's reliability as a promise-keeper and thus in God's goodness, Abraham becomes good or righteous himself, at least in God's eyes. Exploring the complicated implications of this comment would require more analysis than is possible in passing in a note. For discussion of some of the issues involved, see Chapter 8.

49. Of course, reiteration of a promise or other expression of commitment can serve multiple functions. The tone with which the promise is reiterated, for example, can convey useful or comforting information about the current state of the person making the promise. And yet it remains the case that, if the recipient of the promise were fully persuaded of the truth of the promise and thus entirely trusting of the

promise-maker, he would not have a desire for the reiteration of the promise. The request for the reiteration or confirmation of a promise betrays some anxiety on the part of the person making that request.

50. For a discussion of the appropriateness of attributing trust to God, see Ch. 9, nn. 65, 66, and 67.

51. *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, i. 482–3. The Rabbis are here commenting on the text that says that God tried Abraham, but the point is applicable in general.

52. It is not possible to do justice to the whole narrative of Abraham's life in one chapter, even a very long chapter, and so many details relevant to a full consideration of the points of the narrative at interest in this chapter have had to be left out. The details of the story of Hagar are one such case. Hagar is identified as an Egyptian (Gen. 16: 1). Shortly before the part of the narrative in which Hagar appears for the first time, there is an episode detailing Abraham's journeying into Egypt. That episode involves Sarah centrally, because she draws the desire of the Egyptian ruler. By the end of the episode, the Egyptian ruler has loaded Abraham with many costly presents, including maid servants (Gen. 12: 16). So it may be that Hagar is introduced into Abraham's family on this occasion. If so, then the details of Abraham's dealings with the Egyptian ruler are significant for the events that result in the birth of Ishmael and all the rest of Abraham's story. With reluctance, for reasons of space, I am leaving these details unremarked.

53. Besides the gender issues raised by the treatment of Hagar, there are also issues of race, since Hagar is an Egyptian. Some readers of the story of Hagar and Ishmael suppose that Abraham treats Hagar and Ishmael differently from the way he treats

Isaac because Hagar is an Egyptian. I have some sympathy with this point of view, but I would add that, if this interpretation of Abraham's conduct is right, then God has yet another reason for disliking Abraham's attitude toward the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael.

54. To say this is not, of course, to give a theodicy or defense for Hagar's suffering or even to suggest a benefit that might redeem that suffering for Hagar. There is no indication in the story that Hagar has a heart's desire for matriarchal status; in this narrative, we are given too little information about Hagar to have any clear idea about what the desires of her heart are. This narrative is Abraham's story, not Hagar's. On the other hand, of course, given the nature of this society and Abraham's hunger for descendants, it clearly conduces to Hagar's objective well-being to have an angel of the Lord promise that Hagar will be the mother of descendants by Abraham.

55. It is noteworthy that Hagar's story is believed without question or doubt. Perhaps Hagar's willingness to return to Sarah in the circumstances is, at least for Abraham, powerful confirmation of the truth of Hagar's story about the angel.

56. Gen. 16: 15.

57. There is evidence of a maternal and filial bond between Hagar and her son not only in her great grief for *him* when she thinks that they will both die in the wilderness but also in his acceptance of the wife that she finds for him.

58. I am keenly aware of the fact that in the narrative God has allowed Hagar to suffer the evils of being enslaved and taken as concubine. If this chapter were exploring Hagar's story rather than Abraham's, then this suffering of Hagar's would be its

chief concern. Since, however, this chapter is about Abraham, as he is presented in the narrative in which he is the main character, Hagar's story and Hagar's suffering have to be left to one side. In this connection, though, it is worth noticing that the only character other than Abraham with whom God talks and to whom God gives promises and consolation is Hagar. Although the person doing the talking to Hagar is, in the narrative, an angel of the Lord, when the angel speaks to Hagar, the angel says God's lines to her; the first-person pronoun in the promise to make of Ishmael a great nation refers to God, not to the angel. In this respect, Hagar's contact with God is different from that of Lot or from that of Sarah. The angels visiting Lot speak to him only in their own voices, not in God's. And, although God does make a remark concerned about Sarah in a context in which God and Sarah are listening to each other, God's remark is not addressed directly to Sarah; and its point is only to let Sarah know that God knows she has lied about her laughing when she overheard God's conversation with Abraham.

59. Many details of the narrative have implications relevant for understanding why God does not prevent Abraham's errors in interpreting the divine promises. So, for example, if Abraham had not taken Lot with him when he left his home at God's command, Lot would never have been in Sodom. And, if Lot had not settled in Sodom, he would not have fled to the hills after the destruction of Sodom. In that case, his daughters would not have committed incest with him, and their children by Lot would not have been born. But, then, as the narrative tells the story, there would not have been the nation of Moab, which is descended from Lot by one of his daughters. Without Moab, there would not have been Ruth the Moabitess, who

is the mother of Obed, the grandfather of David. Midrashic commentary also makes this point: "R. Isaac commented: *I have found David My servant* (Px. LXXXIX, 21): where did I find him? In Sodom" (*Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, i. 335). By taking Lot with him, contrary to God's directive, Abraham thus starts a chain of events that leads to suffering, since Moab is one of the enemies of Israel, but that also results in the birth of David, the great king of Israel and the founder of the Davidic line of kings. In this case, as in many others, the details of the narrative have ramifications worth further reflection and analysis. But I point this case out only to leave it to one side, with regret, in the interest of concentrating on the main threads of the story.

60. This interpretation is therefore also an answer to a question that might occur to someone: why does God not allow his promises to be fulfilled through Hagar? If Abraham could suppose that the divine promises have their fulfillment in Ishmael, why doesn't God give up his original plan to produce children for Abraham through Sarah and let Ishmael be the appointed and promised seed? The answer to these questions is that doing so will not contribute to producing in Abraham that trust in God and in God's goodness that God has been laboring to bring about.

61. There is much more to be said on the subject of Hagar's pregnancy than I can address in passing here, but it is important to see that God's allowing Hagar to conceive has long-term implications in the narrative, many of which will result in suffering for Abraham's descendants, as the genealogy of Ishmael (Gen. 25: 13–15) and the subsequent history of the Ishmaelites make clear (cf., e.g., Judg. 8: 22, 24).

62. It can seem as if Hagar has to return. On the interpretation I have been developing, Abraham supposes that the child Hagar is carrying is the promised seed from which his posterity will grow into a great nation. The narrative makes clear that Abraham has his heart fixed on having posterity and being the patriarch of a people; and the story makes it equally evident that Abraham is a man of determination and daring, as witness, for example, the story of Abraham's recovery of the people taken from him in tribal warfare. It seems highly likely, therefore, that Abraham would have found Hagar and brought her back to his tent in case there had not been an angel to send her back. But this consideration is not decisive. The angel that sent Hagar back could presumably also have hidden her from Abraham if Abraham had sought her.

63. Robert Alter points out that "a covenant sealed on the organ of generation may connect circumcision with fertility—and the threat against fertility—which is repeatedly stressed in the immediately preceding and following passages" (*Genesis*, 73).

64. See, e.g., Hertz (ed.), *The Soncino Edition of the Pentateuch and Haftorahs*, 58.

65. Abraham's laughter is recorded in Gen. 17: 17 in connection with the divine visitation when God institutes a covenant with Abraham. Sarah's laughter is mentioned in Gen. 18: 12 in connection with the three angelic visitors before the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

66. As commentators are quick to point out, the Hebrew word transliterated 'Isaac' is cognate with the Hebrew word for laughter. It is worth considering why this promised and much desired child should take his name from the skeptical laughter

that greets the announcement of his conception and birth. To me, the name seems to enshrine the problem with trust that is one of the dominant themes of the story.

67. It is good to highlight the fact that the petition for Ishmael is Abraham's response to the expression of the divine promise, and that the petition is not so much for Ishmael as for Abraham: Abraham is asking to be patriarch through Ishmael's line. If Abraham had somewhat later in this episode tried to make sure that God gave good gifts to Ishmael as well as to the child to come, then this episode in the story would look different to us.

68. It is noteworthy in this connection that God does not bring about the conception of Isaac until Ishmael is a teenager, although, obviously, the entire story surrounding the conception and birth of Isaac could have taken place while Ishmael was still a baby. The delay in the birth of Isaac allows Ishmael to be Abraham's son, his only son, the son whom he loves, for years. The delay in the birth of Isaac allows Ishmael to grow through his most formative years without having to compete with Sarah's son. It is at least worth wondering whether Abraham would have had to wait so long for Isaac if there had not been Ishmael in his life. At any rate, there is certainly some good for Ishmael in the delay in the birth of Isaac, and so some divine care also.

69. Gen. 17: 20

70. Sarah dies when Abraham is 137 years old, and the narrative specifies that Abraham takes Keturah as his wife or concubine after Sarah dies.

71. Cf. *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis,* i. 400.

72. Sarah dies when Isaac is 37 years old, and Hagar was expelled in the aftermath of the feast celebrating the weaning of Isaac.

73. There is, of course, also the question whether at this time Hagar would have been fertile enough to bear six more sons. But, since this is a narrative in which the ordinary expectations about the age of fertility for women are completely overthrown, this consideration alone is not sufficient to rule out the possibility that Keturah is Hagar.

74. Commentators have regularly noted that Abraham's age and the implications of Abraham's age are one of the reasons Sarah laughs. Part of the evidence cited by these commentators is the fact that, in the narrative when God repeats to Abraham what Sarah said to herself when she laughed, God omits the part of Sarah's line that has to do with Abraham.

75. We might wonder whether Keturah did not have daughters also, who are left unmentioned by the narrative. But, since these narratives care enough about daughters to mention the one daughter Jacob had, it seems not unreasonable to suppose that this narrative would have mentioned daughters of Abraham's, too, if there had been any.

76. There is, therefore, a certain appropriateness in Abraham's coming to be considered in Christian tradition the *father* of faith and the ancestor of all those who believe. Later in the chapter, this issue will arise again.

77. Commentators sometimes remark on the inappropriate placement in the narrative of the story of Keturah here in the middle of the story about Isaac and Rebecca. (See Alter, *Genesis*, 124.) But, to me, the story of Keturah in fact coheres remarkably

well with the story of Isaac's marriage to Rebecca, once we reflect on Abraham's stake in that marriage.

78. Some people will find this part of the narrative disappointing; they would prefer that the high point of the story of Abraham's life, the binding of Isaac, is also the point at which Abraham's double-mindedness ends. But to me the narrative seems better as it stands. Abraham does not become a fairy-tale hero after the binding of Isaac. He stays human. He is the father of faith as the human being he is, with all his struggles for trust and double-minded attitude toward the divine promises. His exemplary faith is embedded in his very real human character.

79. She does, in fact, have only one conception, resulting in the birth of the twins.

80. Obviously, the expulsion of Keturah's sons has a strong resonance with the expulsion of Ishmael, as well as some significant differences. It is noteworthy, for example, that there is no mention of sending Keturah away. But I simply note this connection between the two episodes in the narrative and add it, reluctantly, to the heap of things that have to be left to one side in this chapter.

81. As Sarah puts it when she explains why she wants Ishmael and Hagar to be expelled. Like Abraham's other attempts to guarantee the fulfillment of the divine promises, his having sons by Keturah has significant ramifications for the subsequent history of Abraham's descendants, as the narrative makes clear in the genealogy of these sons (Gen. 25: 2–4). (In this connection, see also n. 84.) It is not possible to explore this side of the story in passing here, but it is noteworthy that the narrative does not record the presence of any of Keturah's sons at Abraham's burial.

82. In fact, if Abraham's taking Keturah as his concubine occurs as late as a decade into Isaac's marriage to Rebecca, then there is a second explanation of Abraham's sending Keturah's sons away when he does. If Abraham supposed that his death was near, then he might well have made sure to send Keturah's sons away from home to protect Isaac's position. If the question of inheritance seemed imminent to Abraham, then it makes sense to suppose he acted as he did in order to give all he had to his son Isaac (as the text says). (For other Genesis narratives in which the protagonist has a sense of his impending death, cf. Gen. 48: 21 and 29, where Jacob expresses his awareness that he will die shortly, and Gen. 50: 24, where Joseph expresses his recognition that his death is imminent.)
83. Gen. 25: 5.
84. The narrative of Abraham's life is embedded in a much larger narrative, and in that larger narrative Abraham's sons by women other than Sarah play a great role. So, for example, one of the sons of Keturah is Midian, the father of a tribe that is often at war with Israel; but it is also part of the larger narrative that Moses flees into Midian, marries a daughter of a priest of Midian, and has children by her, so that the descendants of Keturah and the descendants of Sarah are rejoined in Moses's children. The larger narrative might be thought of as the story of peoples, in which the stories of individuals are embedded. It would undoubtedly be profitable for considerations of the problem of suffering as regards whole communities and nations to examine that larger narrative with the methodology I am employing here on the smaller-scale narrative, but doing so is outside the scope of this book.
85. Gen. 18: 14.

86. In summarizing the nature of the encounter and the nature of the part on which I mean to concentrate in the way I have just done, I am already passing over complications well worth careful attention, because Abraham's interlocutor in this encounter is, by turns, three human or angelic visitors and God himself. For the sake of brevity, I am leaving this complication and many others to one side; and so in what follows I will simply concentrate on the part of the conversation between God and Abraham about the impending destruction of the two cities. It is not possible in one chapter, even one long chapter, to attend adequately to everything that is worth consideration in this dense narrative.

87. See, e.g., Robert Alter's gloss on this passage (*Genesis*, 80).

88. Gen. 18: 25.

89. Midrashic commentary records the opinion that Abraham stopped at ten righteous people, because he remembered that there were eight righteous people in Noah's ark, but that that number had not been sufficient to keep God from destroying everything with a flood. Cf. *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, i. 432.

90. So, for example, Robert Alter says that Abraham is "surprisingly audacious in the cause of justice" (*Genesis*, 81). For an interesting interpretation of this episode different from my own, see Jon Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988). Although I have learned a great deal from Levenson's interpretations of the story of Abraham in this and in other works, in the end I read the story differently from the way in which he does. Nonetheless, my interpretation shares some things at the heart of Levenson's own views, including, not least, an emphasis on

relationship as central to an acceptable account of God and the suffering of human beings.

91. Those saved are Lot, his wife, and his daughters; and, although the text does not explicitly identify them as righteous or innocent, it does make plain that Lot and his family do not share the prevailing sinful customs of their adopted city.

92. Lot, Lot's wife, and Lot's two daughters set out for Zoar, which God has agreed to spare for their sake; but only Lot and his two daughters make it there.

93. Gen. 19: 18–21.

94. Those who suppose that it is ever acceptable for non-combatants to be exposed to the perils of war presumably think that it is at least sometimes acceptable for the innocent to perish with the guilty.

95. It is not the preservation of particular righteous people beloved by Abraham either. I am thinking here of Lot and his family, of course, but there is no indication at all in the narrative that Lot and his family are uppermost in Abraham's mind as he bargains with God.

96. In the interest of brevity, I have omitted the intervening episode involving Abimelech and Sarah, although that episode is not irrelevant to my central purposes here, involving, as it does, the possibility of someone else's impregnating Sarah, so that the son Sarah gives birth to is not Abraham's. Miraculous intervention by God, recognized by Abraham, keeps Sarah chaste in Abimelech's household. Clearly, this episode is also important in the tale of Abraham's developing trust in God to keep his promises, and I omit consideration of it here with regret.

97. At this point the Anchor Bible abandons the Masoretic text and reads with the Septuagint; on that reading Ishmael is playing with Isaac.

98. I am aware, of course, that this is not the usual interpretation of Sarah's stance in this part of the story. Chrysostom, for example, thinks that Sarah's stance is not only right and appropriate but even rational, and he cites as evidence for this evaluation the fact that God himself agrees with Sarah. It is puzzling to me that a theologian of Chrysostom's stature would have supposed that there is a valid inference from God's concurring with a human person's action to the goodness of that action. Certainly, Chrysostom must have known that the same act can be done out of very different motives for very different ends, as witness his different moral evaluation of the human and the divine intention to put Christ to death. For the discussion of Sarah, see John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis*, trans. Robert C. Hill (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1992), homily 46, 3–13.

99. Gen. 21: 11. (In this chapter, I have sometimes, as here, used the translation of Genesis in Hertz (ed.), *The Soncino Edition of the Pentateuch and Haftorahs,* but I have modernized the English slightly.) The omissions in the line about Abraham here are noteworthy. The narrative does not include Hagar in the reasons for Abraham's distress over the contemplated expulsion. And, even when it comes to Ishmael, the line 'on account of his son' does not make clear what Abraham was worrying about with regard to Ishmael. Was it Ishmael's safety in the wilderness? Was it the pain or the moral wrong of acting in such a way as to betray Ishmael's trust in his father? Or was it jeopardizing his connection to the posterity promised him through Ishmael, his son?

100. It is notable that there are other occasions on which God does *not* come to guide Abraham's action when God's guidance would have made a difference to the unfolding events. For example, God does not come to talk to Abraham to tell him not to listen to Sarah's plan for Abraham to have sex with Hagar. What makes this occasion different from the other occasions on which God does not guide Abraham has to do with the nature of the divisions in Abraham. On this occasion, and only on this occasion, if Abraham acts on his better self, he will be acting in opposition to God's plans. That is, if in the goodness of his heart Abraham cannot bring himself to expel Hagar and Ishmael, then the result will not be in accordance with God's plan that Isaac have a special status in Abraham's lineage. When God intervenes on this occasion to add his moral authority to Sarah's demands, God brings it about that Abraham can accede to Sarah and still be acting in accordance with his better self. What God's guidance to Abraham on this occasion brings about, then, is that Abraham can further God's plan without thereby incurring serious moral failure. So God does not intervene to keep Abraham from moral failure. But he *does* intervene to keep Abraham from helping to bring about God's ends through moral failure. It is helpful to see this point by contrast with Kierkegaard's interpretation of the binding of Isaac, on which God seems to be requiring Abraham to disdain morality in the interests of furthering God's purposes.
101. Gen. 21: 12.
102. To be clear about this claim, one has only to notice that God could have come to talk to Abraham to prohibit his having sexual relations with Hagar. Insofar as God could have prevented Ishmael's birth in this way (or in any of a number of other

ways including rendering Hagar infertile) but did not do so, God has a share of responsibility for the birth of Ishmael.

103. There is also the question, of course, about God's relations to Sarah. Insofar as he sides with Sarah when she is so thoroughly in the wrong, it might seem that God is failing her. Would it not have been better for Sarah if God had opposed her, rebuked her, or commanded her to do better? God's relations with Sarah, however, and the details of Sarah's role in the story of Abraham and Isaac are outside the scope of this chapter. It is certainly worthwhile considering Sarah's acts, Sarah's beliefs and emotions, and Sarah's responses in the stories of Ishmael and of the binding of Isaac; but it is not possible to examine everything in this short space. What is at issue in this chapter is just Abraham's story, not Sarah's.

104. Gen. 21: 13; see also 17: 20 and 21: 18, where the promise is to make of Ishmael a great nation.

105. Of course, there is also the injustice of the entire institution of slavery, which enables Hagar's fate to be decided entirely without her input or consent. But what is at issue here is only Abraham's expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael within the cultural context in which slavery is accepted.

106. I qualify the point in this way because there is also the issue of Ishmael's living with his father. No matter what good comes to Ishmael in consequence of God's promise, the plan still deprives Ishmael of the company of his father. If this chapter were examining Ishmael's story rather than Abraham's, I would focus on this point and examine it in detail. As it is, I leave it to one side. The best that can be said about it as a part of Abraham's story is that perhaps Abraham feels the loss of his

son's company as a great pain, which he can communicate to Ishmael to mitigate at least a little Ishmael's (quite correct) sense of abandonment.

107. For the sake of brevity, I am leaving the dreadful injustice to Hagar to one side; but this much should probably be said. Given the nature of the society in the narrative, insofar as God guarantees Ishmael's safety and flourishing, much of what constitutes Hagar's well-being is also safeguarded.

108. Chrysostom seems to think that Sarah mandated this harsh treatment for Hagar and Ishmael and that Abraham executed her mandate because God had told him to do everything Sarah said in this regard. Consequently, Chrysostom thinks, the moral appropriateness of Abraham's failure to provide adequately for his concubine and his son demonstrates Abraham's moral and religious virtuousness in this case. (See John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis*, homily 46.) I myself would take as true the denial of Chrysostom's conclusion and use it to support the denial of his premiss.

109. I hope that it goes without saying that it is especially distressing given Hagar's powerless condition in this story. She is used to breed a child; and when that child ceases to occupy the role of heir, she is, in effect, thrown away.

110. There is, of course, an obvious question here: why does God not intervene earlier? Why, for example, does God not send his angel to Hagar as soon as she is out of Abraham's house, in order to guide her to just the right place for her to live and to raise Ishmael to adulthood? For the reasons I made clear in Chapter 9 on Job, I do not think that this text gives us evidence on which to begin trying to answer this question. This narrative is the story of Abraham; but to answer the question, we would need the narrative of Hagar, and that we do not get here. I would say,

however, that the narrative makes clear that God is aware of Hagar and attentive to her throughout the story.

111. Gen. 21: 18.

112. For more discussion of this sort of case, see Chapter 9 and the discussion of the analogous problem as regards Job.

113. And, *pace* the Molinists, this is something not even God can know if the separation of morality and self-interest remains a permanently unactualized possibility. For a more positive appraisal of Molinism, see, e.g., Thomas Flint, *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998). For further discussion of Molinism, see Chapter 13.

114. Walter Brueggeman points out that Abraham says "Behold, here I am" three times in this narrative. In addition to this passage in 22: 1, there is the place in 22: 7 where Abraham responds to Isaac's address to him, and the place in 22: 11, where Abraham responds to the angel's call to him not to slay Isaac. (See Walter Brueggeman, *Genesis*, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 187.) My own interpretation of the narrative of Abraham is different from Brueggeman's, but I have found his interpretation helpful nonetheless.

115. It is worth noting that the same thing happens at the crucial point in the binding of Isaac (Gen. 22: 11), and perhaps for similar reasons. The angel of the Lord prevents Abraham from bringing the knife down on Isaac just by uttering his name. Only when Abraham has responded with recognition of the messenger of the Lord does the angel of the Lord deliver God's message halting the sacrifice. In that case, too, it is essential that Abraham know that it is God who is halting the sacrifice.

Presumably, when the angel is speaking as a mouthpiece of God's, Abraham recognizes the voice of God, as it were, in the voice of the angel.

116. Gen. 14: 1–16.

117. See Gen. 14: 21–4, 20: 9–14.

118. It has, in fact, occurred to me to wonder whether the episode of Abraham's bargaining with Sodom and Gomorrah has as one of its main purposes in the narrative making this very point clear. Abraham is not afraid of standing up to God and talking back to God.

119. Kierkegaard devotes considerable attention to this question and focuses on Abraham's inability to make his action intelligible or rationally understandable (*Fear and Trembling*, 124).

120. Gen. 22: 1. "These things" includes more than just the expulsion of Ishmael, but I am leaving the others to one side to focus on Ishmael.

121. There is a rabbinic tradition that Sarah died when she learned of Abraham's binding of Isaac. Cf. *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, i. 497, where the commentators derive Isaac's age at the time of the binding from Sarah's age at her death. This is a very human interpretation of a mother's reaction to learning that her husband set off to sacrifice her only child; but there is no tangible evidence for it, and in my view it assigns an age to Isaac at the time of the binding that is improbable as the narrative portrays him in that episode.

122. Many commentators have remarked on the way in which God's identification of Isaac heightens the pathos for Abraham, but they have generally failed to notice the way in which God's identification of Isaac calls Ishmael to mind. The *Midrash*

Rabbah, for example, takes the point of this complicated identification of Isaac just as a way of highlighting in Abraham's own mind how much he loves Isaac. (See *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, i. 486–7.)

123. I am not forgetting that Hagar was also sent away. But this part of the narrative is not about her, and so I am leaving comment on Hagar to one side here. But we should also remember that, at least to some extent, what protects Ishmael and conduces to his survival is also a protection for Hagar.

124. Cf. Gen. 15: 4–5, 15: 18, 17: 4–16.

125. It is, of course, possible to interpret God's identification of Isaac as Abraham's only son as God's acknowledgment that he has failed to keep his promise regarding Ishmael, so that Ishmael is no longer living. But to interpret God's words in that way in the narrative is to fail totally in trust of God; and the narrative gives no indication that we should ascribe such a total failure to Abraham.

126. Cf. Gen. 22: 4.

127. There are many other textual resonances between the episode of the expulsion of Ishmael and the binding of Isaac. Cf. Alter, *Genesis*, 107.

128. It is worth asking what the rewards and punishments are where this test is concerned. The promises God makes to Abraham after the binding of Isaac are very similar to God's previous promises, except that God adds a promise that Abraham's seed will triumph over their enemies. And, in the visitation involving the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, God makes plain that his fulfillment of his promises to Abraham is contingent on righteousness on Abraham's side. So perhaps Abraham's passing of this test was requisite for the fulfillment of the

divine promises. But it is not possible to do justice to these issues in passing here; I raise them only to set them aside in the interest of brevity.

129. Kierkegaard himself canvasses the ways in which damage to the relationship between God and Abraham or God and Isaac could occur in consequence of a wrong attitude on Abraham's part in connection with his acceptance of God's demand to sacrifice Isaac.

130. I include Kierkegaard in this group. Kierkegaard thinks that the knight of faith, such as Abraham, has a "double movement" in his soul (*Fear and Trembling*, 128). That is because Abraham "did not renounce his claim upon Isaac" (p. 59) but was "willing nevertheless to sacrifice [Isaac] if it was required" (p. 46). For Kierkegaard, Abraham was willing to kill his son if God required him to do so as a proof of his faith.

131. For an apparently similar interpretation, see Heb. 11: 17–19.

132. Gen. 18: 14.

133. It is worth pointing out in this connection that Abraham binds Isaac. If Isaac had not willingly cooperated in that process, how would Abraham have done so? At this point in the story, he is an old man, and Isaac is strong enough to carry up a mountain a very big load of wood. If Isaac had been terrified at what Abraham was trying to do to him, or if Isaac had found it evil, would he have tamely submitted to being bound by Abraham?

134. I am grateful to Philip Quinn for having helped me to sort out this point.

135. Gen. 22: 5.

136. Gen. 22: 8.

137. Chrysostom supposes that he has to read God's claim to know now as a figurative way of claiming that God has succeeded in revealing Abraham's faith to all people who will hear the story about the binding of Isaac. Chrysostom distorts the text in this way because he thinks he has to do so in order to avoid impugning God's omniscience. He fails to see that there is no impugning of omniscience if God fails to know what is not there to be known. See John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis*, homily 47.
138. Gen. 22: 15–18.
139. For the same reasons, it is also true, on the interpretation I am arguing for here, that God is not asking him to kill his son.
140. In fact, the Abraham who accepts the teleological suspension of the ethical is hard to square with Kierkegaard's own interpretation of Abraham as the knight of faith. If Abraham is willing to let God suspend the ordinary rules of morality, so that killing his son becomes acceptable, in what sense is he believing something absurd or expecting to have the very thing he gives up? He seems rather just to be resigning himself to losing Isaac at God's command. Furthermore, the moral prohibition against a father's killing his own child is morally indefeasible, as Kierkegaard recognizes, so that, if Abraham were willing to murder Isaac at God's command, he would be doing a grave moral evil. A God who would require a person to contravene an indefeasible moral obligation would be immoral himself, and it is hard to see why Abraham would be admirable for engaging in the teleological suspension of the ethical to obey him.

141. Kierkegaard makes much of the idea that a pedestrian reader of the story could confuse himself into thinking that he too could be an Abraham, a hero of faith, if he would only kill his own child as an offering to God. As should be clear, on the interpretation of the story I have argued for here, a person who sacrificed his child in hopes of winning favor with God would be the anti-type of Abraham.

142. One could wonder if Sarah, too, at some point knew the story of the binding of Isaac. There are some slight suggestions in the story that the reader is to suppose she did. Isaac knows that they are on their way to make a burnt offering to God. If Isaac knows that, surely Sarah does also. Furthermore, although it takes Isaac some time to get up his courage to ask where the lamb for the offering is, astute and bold Sarah surely would have noticed and asked immediately. What would Abraham have done if she had asked? Tried to fob her off with the line he gives his son? Would that line have had any chance of satisfying Sarah? These are just speculations, of course. But it seems hard to believe that at some point Sarah did not know the whole story. I prefer to think that she knew it before they set out for Mount Moriah. There is a Jewish tradition that Sarah knew it and the knowledge killed her (see n. 121 above), but that is going further in search of hermeneutical satisfaction than I am willing to go myself.

143. For a discussion of the story of the binding of Isaac in connection with the Euthyphro dilemma, see Kretzmann, "Abraham, Isaac, and Euthyphro."

144. It is true that Abraham does not live long enough to see the growth of his biological family, or his family of faith, beyond his grandchildren. In this respect, Abraham is analogous to Moses, who sees the promised land in the distance but dies without

entering it. But Abraham must himself understand that his desire for the status of patriarch can be fulfilled only partially while he lives. The status of patriarch requires many more generations of descendants than could be crowded into the lifetime even of the long-lived characters of the narrative. I am grateful to Scott MacDonald for calling to my attention the need to make this point explicit.

145. Or at least not obviously present. In Chapter 14, I examine the last part of the book of Job in which Job's wealth and community status are restored, to show that there is a way in which the book of Job does raise the issue of the desires of the heart for Job.

146. In Chapter 14, I will have much more to say about the way in which the desires of a person's heart are to be valued and weighed against that person's flourishing; I also consider in detail the way in which a theodicy or defense needs to take the desires of the heart into consideration.