Performing the Covenant: Akedah and the Origins of Masculinity

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Abstract:
Following Derrida's open-ended question why woman is excluded from the biblical covenant, I suggest that the feminine ethics of self-sacrifice evolved from the Judeo-Christian discourse of the sacred: the contract between man and God is grounded in the economy of sacrifice. In fact, woman's self-sacrifice, though irrelevant for the sacrificial economy, is the satellite around which the performative language of ethics and theology could revolve.

I started by reading the banner headline
The way you read the big print at the eye doctor's.
It said I AM THE LORD GOD
ALMIGHTY AND I LOVE YOU ESPECIALLY.
No problem. Very Good.
One line down it said, PACK UP, I'M SENDING YOU
OVERSEAS. It said
YOU WILL HAVE AS MANY CHILDREN AS
THERE ARE SANDS IN THE SEA AND STARS IN THE SKY.
THEY WILL POSSESS THE LAND AND
I AM PERSONALLY GOING TO BLESS THEM.
The smaller print said: I am going
To bless them as long as they obey me.
Otherwise there may be
Certain repercussions. The even smaller
Print explained how we needed
A memorable logo for our organization
And he had just the ticket, a mark of absolute
Distinction, it would only hurt for a minute.
The print kept getting smaller and blurrier,
The instructions more bizarre.
Hold on, I interrupted. I'd like to check
Some of this out with my wife.
NO WAY. THIS IS BETWEEN US MEN.
AND IF YOU HAPPEN TO BE THINKING
ABOUT LOOPHOLES
FORGET IT, MAN. It said they preferred
Not to use strong arm techniques. It said
I am already signed on.

The Story of Abraham
Alicia Suskin Ostriker

The Sacrifice of Isaac and the Religious Foundations of Patriarchy

1 The story of Abraham and Isaac, the "double gift of death" between Abraham/Isaac and God/Jesus, is crucial to an understanding of the patriarchal nature of the sacred and the role that death came to play in defining Western masculinity. Abraham is symbolically the

first father; his name means “father of nations” and “father of all people.”<fn>See also Hunter, A. "Father Abraham". JSOT 35 (1986): 3–27.</fn> His story begins what are aptly called “patriarchal narratives.” It is a foundational story of the world’s three dominant monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Delaney calls it appropriately “the center of gravity, the pivotal story” (21). It is through Abraham that the divine enters human society. Delaney continues: “Abraham is imagined as the vehicle for revealing God’s splendor to the world” (21). It is with him that God makes covenant, “a sign of which is engraved on the male flesh: circumcision.” “Although the Bible begins with Creation, the narrative of Western cultural origins begins with Abraham” (Delaney 21). He is the first patriarch in a social sense as well, and his story is the first narrative to connect death with the language of the sacred in a larger socio-political context: it creates the fraternity of faith that demands and gives death as a price of belonging. Abraham’s story provides a framework for the Western understanding of the sacred, but also the performative establishment of patriarchy as a vehicle for the divine: “The story is performative, for it is Abraham’s action that gave shape and substantive reality to the God to whom the action was directed” (Delaney 21).

2 The point of the story is, on the one hand, to validate the existence of God with the gift of death (the ethical responsibility and faith interchange in the image of God who demands and man who obeys) and, on the other hand, to define an ethics that relies on the logic of sacrifice to maintain the secrecy of its sacred (and gendered) dimension. The sense of the communal is structured around the patriarchal axis—man, his son, and his male god. “Is their gender merely accidental, or is it precisely the point?,” Delaney asks (19).

3 The woman (Sarah, the mother) is absent; God speaks to Abraham alone. Since no ethical demands are made of her, she is not defined as an ethical subject. She is that which is not. Her death cements the patriarchal contract (the covenant) that marks Abraham as the one who hears the voice of God and executes God’s will. Sarah’s body, hidden “out of sight,” is the secret that binds the sacred to the language of death. The story creates God, whose laws then create human community. The familiar story, from Genesis 22, goes as follows:

After these things God tested Abraham, and said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here am I.” He said, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering upon one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.” So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; and he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place afar off. Then Abraham said to his young men, “Stay here with the ass; I and the lad

will go yonder and worship, and come again to you." And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it on Isaac his son; and he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. And Isaac said to his father Abraham. "My father!" And he said, "Here am I, my son." He said, "Behold, the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Abraham said, "God will provide himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So they went both of them together. When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar, upon the wood. Then Abraham put forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here am I." He said, "Do not lay your hand on the lad or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns; and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called the name of that place, The-LORD-Will-Provide; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided." (*Genesis* 12–50: Genesis 22, line 1–14: 101)

4 In the Jewish conception of guilt and punishment, no one can be the sin offering of another, nor provide absolution for the other. To wipe out sin there is no go-between, forgiveness does not come via agencies" (Spiegel 86). Wiesel summarizes this view: "Had he killed his son, Abraham would have become forefather of a people—but not the Jewish people. In Jewish tradition [. . .] every man is an end unto himself, a living eternity" (qtd. in Berman 76). No person can mediate between God and the other; thus, Isaac's death cannot be a source of redemption for all Israel. Some scholars who argue *against* the theme of redemption do suggest that even though Isaac does not represent all of Israel, he is a substitute *for* Abraham. This patriarchal interpretation assumes that the child is a mini-version of the father. Landy writes: "Abraham is sacrificed in Isaac, who transmits his seed; he is identified with God, the created image with its source, through dissolution in the flame at the sacred place" (29). Sacrificing his son, Abraham is sacrificing himself, his immortality, and his future. He is also sacrificing God's promise that "through Isaac shall his descendants be named."[1]

5 The religious traditions of all three monotheistic religions ask one to love God more than anything else and to sacrifice, if God asks, whatever one loves most. Delaney notices that "that idea is at the heart of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It is the standard of faith" (59).

[1] Many scholars point out that the discrepancy between God's promise to make Isaac the son of a future Jewish nation and God's demand to sacrifice him is the first paradox that Abraham must face.

Faith, obedience, law, and responsibility converge under the umbrella of a sacred exchange: God exists insofar as he is obeyed. Thus, one thing that most religious scholars agree on is that the purpose of the Akedah is a declaration of faith, "sanctification of the divine name (Kiddush Ha-Shem)," through absolute obedience (Jacobs). Jewish scholars argue that Abraham's actions are incomparable with previous human sacrifices (such as those described in Greek mythology) because the latter were performed either "for the good of their nation, or to appease the gods, or in times of wars, of draughts and flood and pestilences, to make atonement for their countries" (Spiegel 9), whereas "Abraham did what he did not out of conformity to ancestral practice, or under some pressure to relieve public distress, or out of running after glory [. . .]. No, Abraham served his Creator out of love, with his whole heart, not with part of it—not as though in part his heart went to Isaac and in part yielded only out of fear of Heaven" (Spiegel 12). Because it was done out of free will, and for no other ulterior motive but love of God, these scholars believe, the binding of Isaac is the ultimate, the purest, and the original declaration of man's faith: it is an account of unrelenting obedience and "implicit faith, of a test in submissiveness to God" (Polish, "Akedat" 21). In Talmud, "like fear, love is defined not as a spontaneous emotional expression, but as a moral obligation that leads to worship and keeping of the commandments" (Berman 29). The fear and love of God manifests itself in obedience. "[O]bedience to God's commandments [. . .] is an expression of faith" (Berman 115). It is his unquestionable obedience that marks Abraham as an ethical person, and it is his unquestionable obedience that shows God he can enter into covenant with Abraham and bestow his laws and blessings upon him. As Westermann (1981) notices, "It is only in Gen 12–25, [. . .] and so only with Abraham that God 'concludes a covenant'" (204).

"Fear and Trembling": The Ethical Paradox of the Ethical Subject

6 Modern philosophy adopted Abraham as a synonym of "fear and trembling." Kierkegaard sees the Akedah as the "teleological suspension of the ethical." God tests Abraham by asking him to sacrifice his son and, thus, to transgress his own commandment: "thou shall not kill," yet thou must kill. (It is actually Satan who appears to Abraham while he is on his way to sacrifice Isaac to remind him that "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed.") Between his ethical allegiance to his son and his teleological allegiance to God, who simultaneously asks him to kill and not to kill, Abraham, according to Kierkegaard, experiences the horror of moral aporia that can be transcended either by the complete rejection of God or by a leap of faith. Kierkegaard writes that in ascending Mount Moriah, Abraham "left one thing behind, took one thing with him: he left his earthly

understanding behind him and took his faith with him — otherwise he would have wandered forth but would have thought this unreasonable" (31). Abraham leaps and never vacillates.[2]

7 Many Jewish scholars have argued that Kierkegaard's interpretation of Akedah as a choice between human and divine law is a strictly Christian (or post-Greek) interpretation. They specifically object to Kierkegaard's suggestion that by his willingness to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham was ready to "abandon every principle of morality." Such an interpretation suggests that to obey God means to be immoral. "Rabbi Joseph Gumbiner has asserted that Kierkegaard used the Akedah story to portray the essence of Christian faith as rising above logic and reason and perhaps calling for the suspension of the ethical" (Berman 148). L. A. Berman represents one viewpoint on the argument, suggesting that the title of Kierkegaard's book *Fear and Trembling* "conveys the author's conviction that Abraham must have had a truly dreadful experience. Kierkegaard writes: 'When I have to think of Abraham, I am as though annihilated. [. . .] I am paralyzed'" (Berman 21). Such an emotion, Berman believes, is inconceivable because being spoken to by God cannot arouse dread.[3] God's command cannot arouse "fear and trembling," and submitting to it cannot mean sacrificing the ethical. God cannot ask one to commit the unethical because God is the ethical.[4]

8 Berman further points out that in Talmud, there is an idea of "sinning for the sake of God." "This is a concept, translated from Hebrew *averah lishmah*, made explicit in Talmud. There it is written: 'A sin for the sake of Heaven is greater that a commandment done not for the sake of Heaven'" (50). God is the supreme good, and one may transgress his own commandment for his own sake. Berman elaborates:

> Just as secular lore includes the contradictory proverbs "The end justifies the means" and "The end does not justify the means," rabbinical lore includes a rule that says the opposite of "one may sin for the sake of God." The rule, *mitzvah ha-baa b-avera* means "it is forbidden to commit a sin in order to perform a mitzvah." An example given by Maimonides is that one may not steal a *lulav* in order to properly celebrate Succoth. That is to say, the sin cannot be greater than (or even as great as) the mitzvah it permits. (50)

Though there is also a rule that forbids one to commit one sin to avoid another, God as supreme value justifies all action performed for his sake. One cannot sin for the sake of something or someone other than God. God is the end that justifies all means. Even if God's

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[2] See also Davidson, R. "The Courage to Doubt". London: SCM, 1983.

[3] Some Jewish thinkers do follow Kierkegaard's interpretation of Abraham's emotions as "fear and trembling." For example, "Elie Wiesel describes the episode as 'terrifying in content.' Similarly, David Polish describes Abraham after he has heard God's command that he offer up his son: 'He is a shattered man, going almost trancelike toward a deadly act that he must carry out but with less than perfect faith. God commands, Abraham submits. There is no conversation, only the sentence of doom and the silent response'" (Berman 39–40).

[4] See also Gellman, J. I. *The Fear, the Trembling, and the Fire: Kierkegaard and the Hasidic Masters on the Binding of Isaac*. Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1994.

will remains unknown, or *especially* when his will remains unknown, to submit to him means to "express the highest ethical values." As Berman puts it: "Even in matters that are not understood [. . .] the conduct of a God-fearing person will express the highest ethical values, and eventually in God's own time, may know the reasons for each and every commandment" (115). God's way may be mysterious and his commands may be paradoxical, but one who trusts him cannot feel the horror of moral aporia. God himself precludes such an emotion. Berman continues:

> The Bible presents a point of view that God cannot be understood, that God is unknowable, a mystery [. . .]. The Akedah stands on the monumental paradox that God ordered Abraham to commit the gravest of sins, the sacrificial slaughter of a human being. The narrative opens with the words "God tested Abraham" as if to reassure the reader in advance: it was never intended that Isaac actually be slaughtered; this was only a test. Still, it is a paradox that God should ask for the sacrifice of Isaac, and that Abraham—who had argued with God over the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah—should carry it out without a word of protest. (45–49)

9 Though God's commandments may not be immediately clear, one who trusts him does not need to leap *into* this trust, as Kierkegaard framed it. To trust means to *be beyond* leaping, not having to leap because one never did question what one was supposed to leap into. Reik elaborates on this point: "The prevailing difference between the world of the Old Testament and that of the New lies in the distinction between trust and faith. Kierkegaard regards faith as an 'action.' Trust is, in contrast to faith, an attitude and has no aim. Abraham, who trusts, does not need to make need to make those 'movements upward' nor 'the leap' of which Kierkegaard speaks. The patriarch walks humbly before his God" (63). Humility before God makes any "fear and trembling" incomprehensible. There is one school of interpretation of Abraham's story according to which Abraham sacrifices Isaac out of his love for his son: if at the instant he were to choose Isaac over God, he would idolize his son, thus bringing upon him God's wrath. This interpretation, however, *presupposes* Abraham's faith in God *a priori*. Thus, whether out of love for God or for Isaac, Akedah is an ultimate fulfillment of Abraham's sacred responsibility—a validation of God's very being. Trust is the highest expression of faith that one does not need to leap into. Since Abraham trusts God, he does not choose between God and Isaac: he has chosen Isaac by choosing God.

"Dying for Another": Reciprocity and Rhetoric of the Gift of Death

10 For Derrida (1995), Abraham's story is also a story of origins. (The cover illustration of the English edition of *The Gift of Death* is Rembrandt's rendition of *Akedah*). Derrida sees Abraham's story in the light of both traditions, Christian and Jewish, as both a

mystery, *mysterium tremendum*, and as an ethical paradox. What connects the two interpretations is the economy of the sacrificial exchange: death functions as an axis around which the mechanism of faith, responsibility, and ethics fashions Abraham as an ethical subject. Moreover, Derrida interprets the story as it came to stand in the popular Western tradition, that is, in connection with the crucifixion of Christ. Reading the two stories together, Derrida draws a parallel between the two sacrificial contracts: both God and Man sacrifice their sons for each other; man to prove his devotion to God, and God to save man from eternal damnation. In seeing the two stories as connected through the cognitive link, rather than through any temporal or causal relationship, Derrida is close to Auerbach's interpretation. Derrida suggests that because it reciprocates the gift of death, Abraham's story lays the foundation of Western Judeo-Christian ethics of faith and responsibility: it links the two in the image of the sacred. It is the double gift of death between God and Abraham, the nature of the double sacrificial contract that adds a divine aspect to the Platonic mystery. Without Abraham's sacrifice, there is no sacrificial responsibility, no economy of the gift of death that binds man and God through faith and responsibility; in fact, without the sacrifice, there is no God. Akedah, the binding of Isaac, has a double meaning: literally, it represents the binding of Isaac to the altar; symbolically, it operates within the sacrificial economy of the gift of death that binds man and God. Man's devotion is rewarded by eternal salvation: Christ dies *for* mankind.

11 In his analysis, Derrida's discussion of the "gift" follows from a reading of Mauss' theory of the potlatch: the gift-giving always functions under the assumption of reciprocity: "the potlatch must be returned with interests like all other gifts [. . .]. The sanction for the obligation to repay is enslavement for debt" (Mauss 42–43). According to Mauss, there is no gift as such in itself: there is only the meaning of the gift, its symbolic function that binds the giver and the receiver in the bonds of reciprocity. The gift is what the gift does; it is the impossible, "the secret [. . .] that there is no Secret" (Caputo 19). A gift veils its own negativity in the rhetoric of mutuality. In the economy of self-sacrifice, the symbolic enslavement to the terms of reciprocity of these *for* whom the suicide dies is the measure of the power of his death: the degree of his posthumous veneration.[5] The gift of death is given with the presumption that the recipient will be forced to accept it and, thus, will be forced to repay it.

[5] Alvarez suggests that in some primitive societies, the idea of self-sacrifice itself has a kind of magical quality: "it is as though [the suicide] were committed in the certain belief that the suicide himself would not really die. Instead, he is performing a magical act which will initiate a complex but equally magic ritual ending in the death of his enemy" (67)

12 Owing his death, Jesus offers himself *for* others; his death saves mankind, and the salvation requires reciprocity (similarly, as Isaac dies *for* Abraham). However, like other gifts, Derrida points out, the gift of death functions only on a rhetorical level; it is an impossible. One cannot die in anyone's place, one cannot die *for* anyone, and God cannot die *for* man, in his place. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger defines being as foremost being-towards-death, one's own:

> *No one can take the other's dying away from him*. Someone can go "to his death for an other." However, that always means to sacrifice oneself for the other "*in a definite matter*." Such dying for [. . .] can never, however, mean that the other has thus had his death in the least taken away. Every Da-sein must itself actually take dying upon itself. Insofar as it "is," death is always essentially my own. (§47, 223)

13 To be authentically means to be in preparation for one's death, to take one's dying upon *oneself*. Death is what brings Da-sein to its wholeness. Heidegger asks "*in what sense, if any, death must be grasped as the ending of Da-sein?"* (227). Grasping death as the ending of one's being means coming to terms with its certainty: "As a potentiality of being, Da-sein is unable to bypass the possibility of death. This *death* reveals itself as the *'ownmost nonrelational possibility not to be bypassed"*" (223). Every Da-sein has to take his dying upon himself. One cannot die for another. In this sense, death marks man's "singularity." In The *Gift of Death*, Derrida elaborates on this Heideggerian theme:

> Death is very much that which nobody else can undergo or confront in my place. My irreplaceability is therefore conferred, delivered, "given," one can say by death [. . .]. I can give the other everything except immortality, except thus dying for her to the extend of dying in place of her and so freeing her from her own death. I can die for the other in a situation where my death gives him a little longer to live, I can save someone by throwing myself in the water or fire in order to temporarily snatch him from the jaws of death, I can give her my heart in the literal or figurative sense in order to assure her of a certain longevity. But I cannot die in her place, I cannot give her my life in exchange for her death. Only a mortal can give [. . .] to what is mortal since he can give everything except immortality, everything except salvation as immortality. (41–43)

14 To die *for* someone would mean to make him immortal. And indeed, with the death of his son who dies *for* man, God grants man the eternal immortality of his soul, the post-mortal salvation. But this immortality, like Socrates' deathbed discourse of the eternal soul, is rhetorical. Death, because it is man's own affair, marks man's ethical singularity; thus, the gift of death (dying for someone or something) has only symbolic significance. It functions only on the level of signifiers. One cannot go through the experience of death, as one cannot die for anyone else. The gift of death, thus, the impossibility of death as a possibility, signifies the paradoxical nature of language (and ethics) that signifies nothing beyond itself, nothing

beyond the self *in-itself*. The Western ethics of faith and responsibility are founded on the rhetoric of the eternal soul and mortal body because only through the rhetoric of the eternal soul can the economy of the gift of death fulfill its symbolic function. The discourse of the immortal soul marks the sacrifice as the breaking point between humanity and godliness. The sacred is the function of the gift of death.

"Woman's Sacrifice": Undoing the Patriarchal "Logic of Sacrificial Responsibility"

15 The sacrificial contract between God and Abraham, the paradox of the gift of death that structures the impossible of Western ethics, presumes that "no trial could be greater than that endured by the Patriarchs," "no experience surpasses that one in sanctity" (Spiegel 25, 24). Since the sacred is a function of faith and responsibility that is embedded in the nature of the gift of death, given between God and man, literally, the language of both Western ethics and religion is necessarily patriarchal. "[T]he relationship of the patriarchs to God became the exemplar [. . .]. Only that could become the exemplar which appeared as such to the later generation from the perspective of its own religious concepts" (Westermann 119). Since Akedah is incomparable with anything else performed for the sake of God, it became an exemplar of an ethical action, with Abraham becoming an exemplar of an ethical subject. Hence, automatically, the double gift of death is a contract between the male and the divine, and only the male gains the status of an ethical subject. The covenant is structured around the patriarchal axis—man, his son, and his male god. What is then the place of the feminine in the economy of the sacred? What is the place of the feminine in the aporia of faith and responsibility? What is the place of the feminine in the gift of death? And finally, what is the place of the feminine in the structure of ethics?

16 In Abraham's story, Derrida points out, there is no mention of women:

> It is difficult not to be struck by the absence of woman in [this] monstrous yet banal story [of Abraham]. It is a story of father and son, of masculine figures, of hierarchies among men [. . .]. Would the logic of sacrificial responsibility within the implacable universality of the law, of its law, be altered, inflected, attenuated, or displaced, if a woman were to intervene in some consequential manner? Does the system of this sacrificial responsibility and of the double "gift of death" imply at its very basis an exclusion of woman or sacrifice of woman? A woman's sacrifice or a sacrifice of woman, according to one sense of the genitive or the other? (75–76)

Derrida does not answer himself, leaving this "question in suspense," but it is this question that demands to be answered if we are to understand the ethics of the economy of the sacrificial exchange that defines the relationship between femininity and the sacred: How would "the logic of sacrificial responsibility within the implacable universality of the law" be

"altered, inflected, attenuated, or displaced" if woman were asked to perform her sacrificial duty? What is the relationship between the woman's sacrifice and the sacrifice of a woman?

Sarah's Silence: The Narrative Logic of Exclusion

17 Abraham's unquestioning response to God's demand is both a declaration of love toward God and also a declaration of self-worth. The fact that Abraham does not offer himself in lieu of Isaac implies that his life is worth as much as Isaac's, and hence it does not matter who dies; the judgment between the two belongs ultimately to God. Man has no power or right to judge his own life as less or more worthy than another man's. Woman, on the contrary, does so, and by doing so, she undoes herself. Not only does she take upon herself the judgment that belongs to God, but her declaration is a declaration of her inferiority. The purpose of the binding of Isaac appears therefore twofold: it binds man to God, but it also takes away man's right to judge his own worth *vis-à-vis* other men. Not being able to judge himself, man always remains as value in-itself in the face of God, the supreme value *in*-itself. In Abraham's story, Sarah knows nothing about the sacrifice, and as Berman notices, "there does not seem to be a single known midrash that suggests Abraham consulted her or had advised her of his momentous journey" (65). Would the Western ethics of sacrificial responsibility and its gender relations be different if Sarah were asked directly by God to perform *her* sacrificial responsibility? Berman suggests that it is narrative necessity that excludes Sarah from the sacrificial exchange: "Perhaps Sarah's innocence of Abraham's intent, as well as Isaac's innocence until the last moment, adds to the suspense and mystery and are therefore necessary ingredients of the story as a suspenseful, compelling story" (72). To maintain the narrative suspense, Isaac must be ignorant of his fate, and for Isaac to be ignorant, Sarah also must be in the dark: "If Sarah knew about Abraham's momentous decision [. . .] how could her response to this truly terrible news, whether it took the form of support or protest, keep the goal of Abraham's journey a secret from Isaac?" (72). For Berman, the narrative structure alone warrants Sarah's exclusion.

18 However, I suggest that aside from the narrative structure, the story also has a performative quality; it establishes the ethical relationship between man and God, the covenant from which Sarah is excluded.[6] The narrative structure that establishes the relationship of power between Abraham and God also establishes the relationship of power between Abraham and Sarah. Thus, one can ask whether the exclusion of Sarah is necessary to retain the narrative suspense, or whether the narrative suspense is necessary to exclude

[6] See also Alter, R. *The Art of Biblical Narrative*. New York: Basic Books, 1981.

Sarah. Would it be possible to maintain the same narrative suspense if Sarah were spoken to by God, and Abraham remained ignorant? The lack of knowledge precludes the access to the divine that bestows the laws, the blessings, and the guidance. As Trible put it, "Patriarchy has denied Sarah her story, the opportunity for freedom and blessing. It has excluded her and glorified Abraham" (189). God does not address those whom he does not wish to test, and he does not test those on whom he has placed no stakes, those whose responses are either predictable or irrelevant.

19 In the patriarchal structure of the sacred, it appears, woman cannot be asked by God to participate in the sacrificial contract because if she did as Abraham and sacrificed Isaac without a shadow of doubt, like Abraham she would declare her love of God, thus cementing her position as an ethical subject capable of facing and transcending the moral aporia of faith and responsibility. Instead, Sarah "does not share in her husband's glory. She has no chance here or anywhere else in her story to prove herself a woman of conspicuous faith and obedience; god has made no demands of *her*, just as he has never given her any promises [. . .]. [T]he issue of *her* faith, *her* obedience, *her* righteousness has never once been raised. In these ancestral narratives she is an abused woman" (Dennis 60–61). She is asked nothing and promised nothing. Sarah's participation in the economy of the gift would make her equal to man "within the implacable universality of the law."

20 If, however, she were to doubt God's voice and refuse to sacrifice Isaac, faced with her doubt, Abraham's action would seem "unreasonable." Choosing between the ethical and the teleological, she would choose the ethical, and without *her* leap of faith, or without her trust, God would cease to be. Indeed, Delaney aptly asks: "Why is the willingness to sacrifice the child, rather than the passionate protection of the child, at the foundation of faith? [. . .] How our society would have evolved if protection of the child had been the model of faith" (252–253). Can one believe in God and not obey him, or is obedience a necessary part of faith? There is no God without obedience, Derrida suggests. Would, then, the ethics structured around the protection of a child be necessarily atheist? For God to exist and for man to maintain his patriarchal superiority over woman in relationship with God, Sarah must necessarily be excluded from the sacrificial exchange. God's and man's sacrificial contract binds them together in the sacred letter of the law, privileging man as having both the access to the divine and the right—by virtue of his faith, which he professes through his willingness to sacrifice his son—to act on God's behalf to bestow divine laws, including those that regulate gender relations. The exclusion of woman from the sacred economy creates a condition of sacred imperialism, whereas woman's agency as an ethical subject *vis à vis* the

divine is erased. Man allows God to rule him; in exchange, God gives man the right to rule her.

"Hearing the Voice of God": The Power of the Sacred Absence

21 Some religious scholars (Westermann) have pointed out that one common and fundamental characteristic of most patriarchal religions is "the personal relationship to God." The father figure in patriarchal stories is also a religious figure. He addresses God directly without any mediators: "The patriarchal stories know no priest (apart from Gen. 14), and the father of the household carries out the priestly function. He imparts the blessing and offers the sacrifice. Above all, the father receives the word of God directly, in particular the word that shows the group the way. There is no mediator of cult or word. Everything that happens between God and man happens directly, without any mediator" (Westermann 203). Only the male knows what God says, and his wife and his family (and later the community at large) learn from him what God wants. The blessings and the sacrifices are determined by the patriarch based on the divine commands that he alone receives. The patriarch asks no one to verify the voice that he hears, and there is no one to doubt his relationship with God as the law giver. In Abraham's story, God addresses Abraham directly, and only Abraham knows what he says; God's words cannot be verified by anyone but Abraham alone. Sacred power and the divine voice are channeled through Abraham alone.[7]

22 In fact, Landy (1989) points out that in Genesis, God is not an anthropomorphized, visible figure who speaks from above, but rather is an internal voice that only appears as coming from outside, a spirit that speaks to Abraham alone and only in his consciousness. Landy writes:

> The voice is experienced externally, as the voice of God, and yet it is an inner voice, since the narrative has hypostatized in it its creative and questioning drive, and since every outer voice, especially a disembodied one, corresponds to some inner reality. Otherwise it could not be heard. [. . .] The voice has special authority here, in Gen 22:1, since it has guided Abraham throughout his life. It represents, in narrative terms, the deepest part of his consciousness, since he only exists in the narrative insofar as he responds to that voice. (2)

23 Performatively speaking, Abraham exists only as a recipient of his inner voice. Like Abraham, God's voice is a rhetorical device: the voice is both Abraham and God. God exists

[7] In Islam, Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son is commemorated on the day of Haji, Islam's holiest day. A male member of the household slaughters a ram to reenact Abraham's story and to re-perform his obedience to God's request. Substituting the ram for the child is seen as a sign of God's mercy: without it, men would still be slaughtering their sons. By reenacting the story, the patriarch is channeling the divine words, thus reinforcing his patriarchal power (Delaney 181). Similarly, in Christianity, transmission of the divine word could only be performed by men (that is why only they could be priests).

insofar as his voice speaks to Abraham, in the same way that Abraham exists only insofar as he is spoken to. Thus, God is a rhetorical device that sanctifies Abraham's decisions. The performativity of the story consists of the interaction between Abraham and God: Abraham's responses, his actions, are what perform God's very existence. God is Abraham, and Abraham is God. They are both what Lacan called "nothing other than the condition *sine qua non* of speech" (69). It is by his actions (readiness to sacrifice Isaac) that Abraham sanctions the voice of God, and thus God comes into being at the moment when man is willing to kill in his name. God, who exists only as Abraham's inner voice, is a rhetorical instrument of power.[8] Entering with the omnipotent and omnipresent Being into the covenant, passing the laws which the Being has asked him to pass, Abraham himself becomes powerful, one who speaks and executes the will of someone more powerful than he is himself. In such an arrangement, the woman, who is not spoken to by voice, whom voice does not test in order to make her its spokesperson, is naturally subjugated for as long as she accepts God's order and God's word as binding.

The Law of the Father

24 It is the father's personal relationship with God that makes the patriarchal family what it is: "It is characterized by a personal relationship to God which corresponds in every single detail with the life-style of the patriarchs as they move to and from and live together as members of a family" (Berman xii). God's word imbues family relations and guides family

[8] In Judaism, the four-letter word for God's name, Tetragrammaton, is ineffable. The word consists only of consonants, without any vowels. Since it is considered sacrilegious to pronounce it, the pronunciation has been forgotten (or perhaps was never there in the first place). The first letter of one of God's pronounceable names, *Adonai*, is a letter that has no sound. What is pronounced is the vowel under the letter. The first, silent letter veils the existence of God in the absence of language that would name it. The other name of God, *Elohim*, is purposely mispronounced, *Elokim*, so as not to say it in vain. Because they are mispronounced or impossible to pronounce, the different names of God represent different aspects of the sacred while simultaneously concealing the true name of God, which is unknown. In other words, the sacred is above the language because only there can it conceal its secret. The absence of the signifier conceals the very absence of the signified it is meant to denote. Similarly, in Islam, neither the image of the Prophet nor that of God can be represented for fear of idolatry (to avoid praying to the image instead of to God), but also because their greatness is beyond representation. The precept veils the existence of God in the absence of an image. What is not shown becomes powerful precisely because it is not seen. Representation threatens secrecy and, thus, the very essence of the sacred. Likewise, in Christian liturgy, during the mass, what is worshipped is not the body of Christ (which is not there) but the piece of communion wafer that represents it. There is no body of Christ *per se*; it exists only through the symbolic and performative gestures that define the space of the sacred and the profane. The priest has to pronounce it "the body of Christ" ("Corpus Christi") in order for the wafer to become the body of Christ (as he has to pronounce the wine to be the blood of the Christ for it to be consecrated as such). The secret is that what is worshipped is not the body of Christ, but his death symbolized by the absence of his body replaced by the wafer. The sacred is structured around the mystery of this symbolic replacement that reenacts Christ's "gift of death" via weekly liturgy. What is reenacted is the tremor in the face of the self-sacrifice, the mystery of death voluntarily taken. The economy of this gift veils the absence of God, for whom the sacrifice was made. The liturgy reenacts the absence via the performative gestures, which reenact the sacrifice.

decisions, a format that is also transferred into the community. Westermann describes the phenomena:

> The patriarchal story speaks of these basic forms of human community theologically, i.e., they cannot be spoken of without at the same time speaking of God. There is neither a vertical succession of generations down the years nor the horizontal dimension of communal family life without God acting and talking. [. . .] It follows from the talk about God in patriarchal story that the foundation of all subsequent religion is the simple, unencumbered relationship to God, just as it is the natural requirement for the small community. (116)

25 Abraham as a father figure has an almost god-like status. His position as a father, the maker and the creator, passes from generation to generation creating a patriarchal lineage, which makes the presence of a son the most sought-after blessing.[9] The father becomes one from who everyone and everything originates. Since he is the one who speaks to God, he establishes the laws that his sons have to follow, and he bestows blessings from which they benefit. The patriarchal economy thus is structured on the relationship between the father and God; it is imbued with the letter of the sacred, binding by faith and manifested through acts of supreme obedience. Westermann describes the role of father in the patriarchal stories:

> What is peculiar to this extended idea of father is that it is irreplaceable: no one in the long series of generations that begins with Abraham can be father as he was. Paradoxically, Abraham remains father from generation to generation [. . .] the ancestor takes on the character of one who is unique, of the father par excellence; he remains, nevertheless, a man without the slightest trace of divinization or ancestor worship [. . .]. [Abraham] is the real, unique father of the people. (117–118)

The father becomes a law giver through the economy of the gift of death and the rhetoric of the divine voice that speaks to him alone. Thus, faith is the glue that cements the ideology of oppression: the patriarch's unquestionable faith and unquestionable obedience validate the word of the divine, which in turn validates the word of the patriarch.

[9] "The plight of a barren woman, and God's promise that she will conceive, is another repeated biblical theme (e.g., Sarah, Hannah, the wife of Manoah, the Shunammite woman)" (Berman 44). In Abraham's story, the promise of a son and annunciation is a focal point of the dramatic structure. Westermann notices: "The promise of the son is an essential part of the sequence of motifs which lead from Sarah's barrenness to the fulfillment in birth and marriage. It occurs only in the Abraham cycle, where it is of crucial importance for the whole. . . it is an inseparable element of a self-contained narrative. The promise of the son is the starting point and center of the promise motif in the patriarchal stories." (217) The dramatic conflict usually ensues because "typically, the favored wife is barren, while the other wife bears children" (Berman 1997: 44). The annunciation and promise of a son from the favorite wife solves the dramatic tension, reinstating the patriarchal economy of reproduction as narratively logical and just. Fuchs (1985) points out that woman becomes a heroine only in those annunciation scenes when she is promised to give birth to a son: "The biblical annunciation type-scene consists of three major thematic components: the initial barrenness of the wife, a divine promise of future conception, and the birth of a son. . . [T]he most significant variations pertain to the role of the potential mother in the annunciation type-scene; these variations, . . . constitute a consistently increasing emphasis on the potential mother as the true heroine of the annunciation type-scene." ("Literary Characterization" 119)

26 Representing the most common interpretation of the story, Berman stresses that the point of Akedah is reenactment of the direct relationship between Abraham and God. Sacrificing Isaac, Abraham is asked to give up his last human connection and to sustain himself, psychologically, emotionally, and so forth only through his unencumbered relationship to God. Berman writes:

> In the Akedah, God tests Abraham's willingness to separate himself—painfully and irreversibly from his son Isaac, as he had commanded Abraham to separate himself from his country, his kindred, and his father's house. Later he separated himself from Lot. At Sarah's insistence and with God's support, Abraham had separated himself from his son Ishmael. Separation is a recurring theme of the Abraham cycle, and the Akedah narrative is only one of many instances in which Abraham confronts the questions: "Can I give up every human connection—social and blood ties—and survive? Is my connection with God really strong enough to sustain me?" (44)

27 Following the same line of argument, Davidson points out that what God asks from Abraham is to separate himself even from God: "Abraham is being tested to the point of seeing whether he is prepared to live with God-given hope and faith destroyed, self-destroyed at God's command" (52). Trible notices that the nature of faith is to put one's entire trust in the hands of the divine, the inner voice that guides him, above any family or love relations: "To attach is to practice idolatry. In adoring Isaac, Abraham turns from God. The test, then, is an opportunity for understanding and healing. To relinquish attachment is to discover freedom. To give up human anxiety is to receive divine assurance. To disavow idolatry is to find God [. . .]. Abraham, man of faith, has learned the lesson of nonattachment" (179–181). One might argue that by attaching himself to his inner voice as the only source of self-sustenance, Abraham is, in fact, attaching himself to himself; thus what Akedah also reenacts is a masculine solipsism: Abraham's inner voice is the only voice to which he is willing to listen. Faith means foremost faith in one's own infallibility; having faith means that one has chosen oneself only as a valid and authoritative source for divine authority. Yet, "How do you presume to know the mind of God?" To choose God means foremost to choose oneself as the one who chooses God. Abraham, who presumes to know the mind of God, "was before, and therefore above the law" (Delaney 68). By presuming himself to know the mind of God, Abraham made himself into the law. The Law of the Father, thus, is self-evident.

The Law of the Mother? Maternal Instinct and Divine Command

28 Abraham's leap of faith is the tipping point of female subjection; it is an anamorphic shift that excludes the feminine from the contract with the sacred and from the discourse of the law and ethical agency that the sacred structures. Woman's responsibility as an ethical

subject is erased by her non-participation in the sacrificial exchange between man and divine, which cements man's subject position toward God as a law giver. Ostriker argues that the Akedah describes the change of the regime from matriarchy to patriarchy, from the primordial Mother-Goddess figure to that of the Father-God, who promotes and advances the cause of patriarchy and who is protected by it. Ostriker also suggests that the purpose of the biblical story was to make it explicit that Abraham could dispose of Isaac in whatever way he wished without Sarah knowing or having any power to influence his decision. The Akedah is a "men's affair" between the two fathers. The conversation between God and Abraham alone emphasizes the fact that Isaac's life belongs only to Abraham; Isaac, who is Sarah's son also, is exclusively a property of the patriarch (41). Thus, the hidden motive of Akedah is to perform the "silencing of a woman," who has no say about the future and life of her offspring but functions merely as a incubator for the patriarchal lineage. Ostriker summarizes the point:

The biblical story of monotheism and covenant is, to use the language of politics, a cover up [. . .] [to neutralize] female power. Biblical patriarchy [. . .] [commits] repeated acts of literal murder and oppression [. . .]. [F]or its triumph. [. . .] [T]he canonization process throughout history has rested, not accidentally but essentially, on the silencing of women. (30–31)

29 Many feminist scholars point out that the ethical contract between God and Abraham, while based on Abraham's willingness to detach himself from human emotions, assumes that a) Sarah is incapable of such detachment, and b) her ability to detach herself should not be tested. For Trible (1991), the Akedah represents glorification of the male as a free, detached individual, an ethical subject *par excellence*. However, Trible points out, the narrative structure of the Bible prior to Genesis 22 suggests that it is Sarah, not Abraham, who should be asked to detach herself from her son. Just as Hagar had to face the possibility of losing Ishmael in Genesis 21, in Genesis 22 it should be Sarah facing the possibility of losing Isaac. Narratively speaking, the stories pair them: Sarah/Hagar and Isaac/Ishmael. Abraham himself never makes his attachment to Isaac explicit prior to Genesis 22, so it is difficult to believe that Isaac's sacrifice would be a genuine loss for him and not merely a selfish and vain fear of not having a descendant who would pass on his name. Trible continues:

> [N]owhere prior to Genesis 22 does Abraham emerge as a man of attachment. That is not his problem. How ill-fitted he is, then, for a narrative of testing and sacrifice [. . .]. In view of the unique status of Sarah and her exclusive relationship to Isaac, she, not Abraham, ought to be tested. The dynamic of the entire saga, from its genealogical preface on, requires that Sarah be featured in the climactic scene, that she learn the meaning of obedience to God, that she find liberation from possessiveness, that she free Isaac from maternal ties, and that she emerge a solitary individual, nonattached, the model of faithfulness. In making Abraham the object of the divine test, the story violates its own rhythm and movement. (189)

30 Other feminist scholars (Fuchs, "Deceptive Women," "Literary Characterization") have also pointed out that not asking the mother to sacrifice her son presupposes that she would not be able to do so: her commitment to patriarchy and to her male child is taken for granted and requires no testing. Maternal instinct is presumed to be above and beyond divine demands; though covertly, the assumption serves the same function: never to question the possibility that a mother might not be committed to propagating the patriarchal lineage. If she is presented as being able to dispose of her male child (such as Hannah), her motives are then interpreted as vicious and selfish (Hannah sacrifices her sons out of vanity, in order to match Abraham's sacrifice in God's eyes). Esther Fuchs summarizes the point:

> To acknowledge woman's disinterest in children would undermine one of the major premises of patriarchal thought: that woman always desires to be a mother [. . .] . Only father figures are presented as capable of sacrificing the lives of their children. There is no female counterpart to Abraham and Jepthah, except the mother who sacrifices her son to save her life (2Kgs 6:29), [and thus for her own benefit]. ("Literary Characterization" 133–134)

31 However, maternal love is a double bind. One the one hand, when a mother sacrifices her child, she is never viewed in the same way as Abraham, as a free individual, able to detach herself from human relations, but as selfishly focused on her own needs. Fuchs continues: "On the other hand, the 'maternal instinct' is [also] portrayed as a highly selfish and confined inclination, mostly focused on one's own child. Sarah's concern for her son Isaac is presented as her primary motivation for driving Hagar and Ishmael out" (133–134). Gellman describes Sarah's request to oust Hagar and Ishmael as a "vicious demand to usurpation and murder" (40). Thus, woman's commitment to her male child, as well as the relinquishing of such a commitment, appears always as self-motivated and malicious.[10] It seems that no matter what a biblical female does with her male child, whether she chooses to protect it or to offer it on the divine altar, her actions can always interpreted as self-seeking. She seeks either salvation, or self-validation; but essentially, she is never described as capable of acts of pure love toward God. In other words, woman can not, should not, must not, either rhetorically or performatively, enter into the covenant with the divine/the law.[11]

"Out of My Sight": Disposing of Sarah's Body

32 Because woman is excluded from the sacrificial exchange and the rhetoric of law that this exchange structures, her access to the divine can be achieved only through the economy

[10] Following Levinas, Katz points out that "had Sarah been asked, she would not have agreed to sacrifice Isaac, and second, that this response would have earned her passing marks on the test! [. . .] Thus, one's relationship to a child is still the paradigm for the ethical" (127).

[11] See also Dennis, T. *Sarah Laughed: Women's Voices in the Old Testament*. Nashville: Albingdon Press, 1994.

of her self-sacrifice. When Satan failed to persuade Abraham not to sacrifice Isaac, he "fell into a fury when he saw that his passionate wish to thwart Abraham's sacrifice was powerless. What did he do? He went and told Sarah" (Spiegel 105). In the guise of an old man, he told her that Abraham killed Isaac, to which she replied:

> O my son, Isaac, my son, O that I had this day died instead of thee. [. . .] But I console myself, it being the word of God, and thou didst perform the command of thy God, for who can transgress the word of our God, in whose hands is the soul of every living creature? Thou art just, O Lord our God, for all Thy works are good and righteous, for I also rejoice with the word which Thou didst command, and while mine eye weepeth bitterly, my heart rejoiceth. (*Book of Jasher 23* 79–82)[12]

Afterward she became "still as a stone." When she rose up, she went to the land of Hebron to look for Isaac. There, Satan appeared to her once again, telling her that Isaac was not dead after all. After hearing the news, "her joy was so exceedingly violent that her soul went out through joy; she died and was gathered to her people" (*Book of Jasher 23* 86). When Abraham found her dead, he tried to buy a piece of land to bury her body: "I pray you now, give me a burying-place with you, not as a gift, but for money." Ephron, the chief of the children of Heth, offered him, as a gift, the field to bury Sarah. Abraham paid for the land, and she was buried and mourned for seven days.

33 To Ostriker, there is significance in Abraham's twice-repeated comments to the Hittite land-sellers; he was looking for a burial site where he could "bury my dead out of my sight." According to Ostriker, Sarah's influence had to be disposed of in order for the male covenant to take place; that is the meaning of the Akedah:

> Whereas the Hittite elders twice offer the patriarch a sepulcher to "bury thy dead," he twice declares his intention to "bury my dead out of my sight" [. . .]. This interesting phrase, usually erased in modern translations, firmly emphasizes Sarah's disappearance. The Hebrew mi-l'fanai literally means "from my face," or "from before my face," and idiomatically means "away from my presence" [. . .]. Thus the narrative of Abraham's succession records a triple triumph of the Father over the Mother. First the power of the womb to generate life is appropriated by the Holy One, then the connective and sustaining power of the umbilical cord becomes the controlling power of the dead rope that binds Isaac, and thirdly Sarah herself must not merely die and be buried but must be eliminated from presence, that is from consciousness. Sarah's burial signals that the defeat of maternal power is the condition/consequence of the male covenant. (42)

34 The story of Sarah's death is poignant because it suggests that the space left by a woman as a subject of the sacrificial exchange creates a sacrificial crisis that is solved by reconfiguration of the woman as an object of the sacrifice. Someone had to die for the

[12] *The Book of Jasher* was added in the 16th Century, so its relationship to Genesis 22 is purely cognitive. Most feminist scholars treat the two stories as one, but it is important to keep in mind that although both stories are products of the same patriarchal apparatus, they have very different historical origins.

sacrificial contract to take place. Since Isaac survives, the gift of death is cemented with the death of Sarah, who cannot bear the joy of his survival. Isaac's survival, literally, kills her. Symbolically, she replaces him as a sacrificial object. The logic of the sacrificial responsibility demands that she pay for her exclusion from the sacrificial contract by being the sacrifice herself. She is the embodied gift of death that is exchanged between man and God. Abraham's first resolve, to buy the land for her burial and not to accept it as a gift, is once again a reiteration of the economy of the gift. Herself a gift of death, she is buried in a would-be gift. As Trible put it: "From exclusion to elimination, denial to death, the attachment of Genesis 22 to patriarchy has given us not the sacrifice of Isaac (that that we are grateful) but the sacrifice of Sarah (for whom we mourn). By her absence from the narrative and her subsequent death, Sarah has been sacrificed by patriarchy to patriarchy" (190). In this biblical story, as anywhere else, Levi-Strauss noticed, "the essential gift is always a woman."

35 "A woman's sacrifice or a sacrifice of a woman, according to one sense of the genitive or the other?" — Derrida asks ("Gift" 75). In French, *sacrifice d'une femme* has an ambiguous meaning: woman can be both a subject and an object of the sacrifice. What's the difference? Does asking such a question imply that the rhetorical difference between a woman's sacrifice and a sacrifice of a woman can be erased? Paul de Man writes an account of Derrida's famous philosophical/grammatological question:

> Jacques Derrida — who asks the question "What is the difference"—and we cannot even tell from his grammar whether he "really" wants to know "what" difference is or is just telling us that we shouldn't even try to find out. Confronted with the question of the difference between grammar and rhetoric, grammar allows us to ask the question, but the sentence by means of which we ask it may deny the very possibility of asking. (29)

Following de Man's separation of grammar and rhetoric, can we ask whether the difference between a woman's sacrifice and the sacrifice of a woman is, like a gift of death, purely rhetorical? Does the difference between a woman's sacrifice and the sacrifice of a woman collapse into the empty space of woman's absence? Does the difference signify the collapse of the economy of the death-gift exchange, which is solved by being displaced onto the body of a dead female? Is the female the proof of the impossibility of the gift, filling out the operational space of the gift that is not given (Isaac who is not killed)? Buried in the gift, is she the gift she (who?) gives? A woman's sacrifice or the sacrifice of a woman? The difference between one and the other is the space of female agency from which she can speak as an ethical subject. To see the difference and to deny it marks the moment of the surrender of the feminine subject attempting to reclaim her right to the sacrificial exchange.

"The Gift of Death," Masculinity, and the Covenant of Circumcision

36 The Western ethics of faith and responsibility warranted by the covenant between God and Abraham is founded on the rhetoric of the gift of death. It is a masculine affair, finalized by the covenant of circumcision: "Obedience to God over-rides paternal affection. As a result Abraham not only receives his son but he also merits the divine ratification of the earlier promised covenant of circumcision" (Alexander 21). The act of circumcision, the physical inscription of the divine power on the male body, finalizes the bond between the men: the phallic experience of shed blood becomes a symbolic act of patriarchal unity.[13] Eilberg-Schwartz wonders why the covenant is signed on the penis. If blood is crucial, why not another part of the body?[14] And why, by the same token, is women's blood "filthy, socially disruptive, and contaminating"? (Delaney 99).

37 Faith and responsibility, reenacted by the rhetoric of the gift of death, find their locus in the bleeding phallus. The blood of the phallus becomes the symbol of the sacred. Delaney argues that Abraham's "penis is the site and guarantee of the covenant [. . .]. It was the sign of the covenant God made with Abraham, a promise—engraved on the flesh of the male sexual organ—that he would be a father of nations" (96). In Biblical Hebrew, there is no word for "penis"; the word used to designate it is "basar," which also means "flesh." Circumcision becomes a condition of the sacred, performed through the rhetoric of death and sacrifice. It is in the penis that man finds the inner voice of God: he speaks to God through and from his penis. "The rite of circumcision appears to recognize the power of the father as it is transmitted from God by means of the male organ" (Delaney 100). Boyarin, on the other hand suggests that the covenant of circumcision is actually symbolic feminization /demasculininzation of the male child. Boyarin writes: "The East European Jewish ideal of [feminized male] does have origins that are very deeply rooted in traditional Jewish culture, going back at least in part to the Babylonian Talmud [. . .]. The Jewish ideal male as countertype to 'manliness' is an assertive historical product of Jewish culture" (2-4). As outsiders, Jewish males defined themselves against the hypermasculinity of the repressive culture, and circumcision was a symbolic act redefining that self-definition.

38 Eilberg-Schwartz points out that the feminization of the Jewish male has a larger context: "Marriage and sexuality are frequent biblical metaphors for describing God's relation with Israel. God is imagined as the husband to Israel the wife; espousal and even sexual

[13] See also Alexander, T. D. (). "Genesis 22 and the Covenant of Circumcision". *JSOT* 25 (1983): 17–22; and Erling, B. "Firstborn and Firstlings in the Covenant Code." *SBL Seminar*, (1986): 470–478.

[14] According to Islam, Muhammad was born without a foreskin (a condition medically known as aposthia), and Muslims practice circumcision in order to be like him.

intercourse are metaphors for the covenant. Thus when Israel follows other god's, 'she' is seen to be whoring" (3). Eilberg-Schwartz continues:

> By imagining men as wives of God, Israelite religion was partially able to preserve the heterosexual complementarity that helped to define the culture. But this also undermined accepted notions of masculinity [. . .]. The feminization of men also disrupted what the tradition posits as a natural complementarity between a divine male and human women. When male-female complementarity is the structure of religious imagery, human women are the natural partners of a divine male, but this connection also renders human males superfluous in the divine-human relationship [. . .]. [T]he potential superfluousness of human masculinity may offer additional insights into the misogynist tendencies of ancient Judaism: women were deemed impure and men were feminized in contradiction to what in this religious culture was a natural complementarity between the divine male and human females. (3-4)

Symbolically then, the circumcision binds men to each other, and Abraham to God. The sacred resides on the crossroads between rhetoric and performative: it represents the nonrepresentable of power and agency. The phallus stands in for the performative and rhetorical that exists nowhere but in language. The rhetoric of the sacrificial logic, thus, signifies nothing beyond itself. Placed outside of the economy of the sacred, femininity exposes its fundamental impossibility: the secret that there is no secret, the gift which is not.

39 Since woman's sacrifice (woman as a subject of the sacrifice) is inscribed within the sacrifice of a woman (woman as an object of the sacrifice), her death is intrinsic to her very being, and thus can never really gain the status of a gift: it is a gift that is a mimesis of a gift. It functions as a gift between men and God, but it can never function as *her* gift. Because woman functions as a gift (in Levi-Strauss' sense as well), her position as an agent of her own sacrifice is necessarily erased. As Rubin pointed out:

> If it is women who are being transacted, then it is the men who give and take them who are linked, the woman being a conduit of a relationship rather than a partner to it [. . .]. To enter into a gift exchange as a partner, one must have something to give. If women are for men to dispose of, they are in no position to give themselves away. (174–175)

Woman can never "give herself" without fulfilling her feminine in-itself of the gift. She cannot transcend her *being* a gift by *turning* herself into a gift. Because she is always already *a priori* an object of the gift, her gift is not an act of will, and hence it is not a gift that would structure her position as an ethical subject. In an interview with Christie McDonald, Derrida (1997) once asked: "What kind of ethics would there be if belonging to one sex or another became its law or privilege? What if the universality of moral laws were modeled on or limited according to the sexes? What if their universality were not unconditional, without sexual condition in particular?" (35). What if. . . ?

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