

## RECONSTRUCTION AND RETRIEVAL: ON HISTORICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL INTERPRETATIONS OF SCRIPTURE

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Several years ago, I hosted Prof. Lenn Goodman at the Jewish Theological Seminary, where he gave a lecture on biblical conceptions of holiness. Goodman, as a leading rationalist philosopher of Judaism, construed holiness in an ethical way. He downplayed supernatural or ontological (that is, reified) features of holiness and also purged it of any amoral elements such as Rudolf Otto made famous in his characterization of the holy as the *mysterium, tremendum et fascinans* (i.e., ‘the mystery before which humanity trembles and is fascinated’), a primordial, dangerous force.<sup>1</sup> My colleague, Prof. Benjamin Sommer, a biblical scholar oriented toward biblical theology, challenged Goodman. He disagreed with the overtly ethical thrust of Goodman’s interpretation, preferring to focus on the nexus of divine presence, in embodied, tangible form and on the conditions of purity or impurity that enable or impede the divine epiphany—in short, on precisely those mythic dimensions, inherent in the text as it was originally conceived or transmitted, which Goodman wanted to marginalize. As I heard this exchange develop, my first thought was that this was a typical contretemps between a certified member of the guild of historical critical biblical scholars and a philosopher, who was viewed by the former as an interloper. I soon realized, however, that the dialogue was more complicated than that. Both of these interpreters cared about historical context as well as ideas. Goodman’s philosophizing tried to take historical research, such as the work of Jacob Milgrom, into account. And Sommer’s critique advanced his own theological

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<sup>1</sup> Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John Harvey (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973 [1923]), pp. 12–13.

ideas about what the text can say to us about God. Neither party scanted the motivating concerns of the other. Yet something important divided them, and it was not just specific to the particular interpretive issue at hand; it was systemic.

I would frame the systemic problem as one of relative weighting between reconstruction and retrieval. By “reconstruction,” I mean the project of historical critical scholars of the biblical literature to understand what the text meant to its earliest hearers or readers (as well, of course, of how the text came into existence). These scholars seek to reconstruct the relevant historical context of the text and to order the meaning of the text to the possibilities afforded by its original temporal setting. Jon Levenson describes such scholars as those who “are prepared to interpret the text against their own preferences and traditions, in the interest of intellectual honesty.”<sup>2</sup> This implies that one’s own theological or philosophical “preferences” and traditions cut against intellectual honesty—that the historical critical or reconstructive project vouchsafes scholarly objectivity. Perhaps the rigor of such historical investigation rises to Max Weber’s mandated freedom from “value judgments” (*Wertfreiheit*); the scholar does not allow her own commitments, most likely here to be religious commitments, to deflect or to direct the trail of evidence. On the other hand, as Weber was aware, the antecedent choice of a research topic is ineluctably value-laden. What one finds important, consequential, significant, or urgent very much refracts one’s own axiological commitments. That is especially the case in a field such as biblical studies. So—although they practice a methodology that aspires to scientific dispassion—historical-critical scholars such as Levenson or Sommer begin with Jewish commitment and, in the end, want to retrieve religious claims that can be brought, in some highly mediated way, into contemporary theological concern. Accordingly, these scholars seek to ‘bracket’ out the most insistent demands of those concerns while in the process of “value-free” investigation. Thus, in the relative weighting of reconstruction and retrieval, reconstruction plays the leading role.

What of the project of retrieval? By “retrieval” I mean what philosophically-minded interpreters have always done: find evidence in the text for the best and highest views to which they, from their cur-

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<sup>2</sup> Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 3.

rent perspectives, on rational grounds, are committed and to portray that evidence in a compelling way. Retrieval entails that not all elements of the text have equal value (which is not to say that any element wholly lacks value)—the ‘best’ teachings of the text, from a contemporary viewpoint, should be lifted up. That which is conceptually necessary should be sorted from what is merely adventitious, contingent. If there is a work of reconstruction here, it is to reassemble the valued elements in a more systematic or perspicuous form than the purely literary one in which they inhere. An early text, such as Genesis chapter 1, reflects mythological elements—allusions to a primordial *Chaoskampf*, for example—but these features of its original setting pale in comparison to its enduring philosophical core: that the ordered, living world is suffused with goodness, with the goodness of being, or so one might argue. The philosophical interpreter, seeking to retrieve the deep and abiding truth of the text, need not scant the work of historical critical scholars. He or she sees, rather, a horizon of meaning for the text which outstrips its original temporal setting. In this, the philosophical interpreter resembles the traditional exegete.

But how does this interpreter avoid what Quentin Skinner calls the “mythology of doctrines?” How does he or she avoid confining the significance of the text to the possibilities inherent in the interpreter's *own* temporal setting?<sup>3</sup> The basic move of the philosophical interpreter is to claim that the truth of the text is deep and abiding because the fundamental existential problems and possibilities are enduring; the authors of the text strove to address these problems within their own culturally available medium.<sup>4</sup> We can decode their language and symbolism and find structures of thought commensurable to our own. In this way, the work of historical critical scholars in reconstructing the cultural world of the text can scaffold the retrieval of its highest meaning. Reconstruction is ordered to retrieval; the latter value subordinates the former.

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<sup>3</sup> Quentin Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas” *History and Theory*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (1969), pp. 3-53.

<sup>4</sup> Skinner doubts that there are such deep enduring considerations that can be retrieved, translated, and brought into a meta-cultural coherent conversation. To attempt to discern them abuses the intentions of the authors of the text, on Skinner's (highly historicist) view. The approach Skinner opposes is that of Leo Strauss. See *ibid.*, p. 12.

In what follows, I would like to show some examples of these relative weightings and to try to defend the philosophical ones, especially against the criticism that they impose (alien) meaning upon the text.<sup>5</sup>

## Edward Greenstein

To begin, consider the opposing views of the biblical scholar Edward Greenstein and myself on the meaning of the repeated divine affirmation that creation “is good” (*ki tov*) in Genesis chapter 1. I see in this text a literary scaffolding for our intuition that being is good: that being is better than nothing. That implies, in my view, that goodness characterizes existence as such; existence is a fundamental good. However much suffering any individual existent experiences needs to be weighed against the basal goodness of existence per se. One of the ramifications of this view is that tragedy is balanced or checked by goodness. To claim that existence is fundamentally tragic, absurd, or valueless is wrong. Existence may be painful, perplexing, or recondite, but it is so (when it is so) only because a background of positive value allows us to take the measure of disvalue. Plato's view that the supreme form of the Good, *i.e.*, the form of forms, orders being and renders it intelligible is another, more overtly philosophical way of expressing this intuition of basal goodness. The midrash, remarking on God's final affirmation that creation is “very good” (*tov meod* in Gen-

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<sup>5</sup> The categories of “reconstruction” and “retrieval” are not exclusive. An intermediate case is presented by David Frankel, “Divergent Biblical Views About the Content of Revelation and their Relevance for Contemporary Jewish Theology,” in this issue. Frankel wants both to reconstruct the plurality and polyphony of sources with their implicit theological views *and* retrieve them for contemporary Jewish theology. He is committed to an open-ended pluralism of discrepant views, which he finds was productive for subsequent Judaism and can be heuristic for contemporary Judaism, as well. His reluctance to rank and order views as ethically better and worse distinguishes his project from much contemporary Jewish philosophy, even philosophy that finds irreducible strangeness in scripture. See, *e.g.*, Samuel Fleischacker, *The Good and the Good Book* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

esis 1:31) and that the “very” (*meod*) includes death (*mavet*) is yet another way of attesting to the underlying positivity of being.<sup>6</sup>

By contrast, Greenstein proposes that creation is not good *at all*.<sup>7</sup> Greenstein argues, based on texts that reflect the primordial *Chaoskampf*, as well as Genesis 6:1–4, that God is actually rather malevolent. The repeated use of “good” in Genesis 1 signifies only “pleasing to the tastes” of God (*Elohim*, which he ominously translates as “the Powers” to distance a biblical understanding of divinity from ours, where “God” inevitably triggers association with its etymological cousin, “good”).<sup>8</sup> But divine taste “does not mean that it was all good, or good at all, in the moral sense.”<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, “God may be pleased with creation, and it may for some reason need to be the way it is – but that does not in and of itself mean that creation is good or makes for goodness.”<sup>10</sup> Finally, “[I]t has not been made essentially, inalterably good; it already contains the elements of its own corruption. And these, of course, have been made or left there by God.”<sup>11</sup>

Greenstein severs the good of Genesis chapter 1 from moral goodness (and perhaps, by implication, from any goodness, whether aesthetic or epistemic) and reduces it to arbitrary divine preference, thus introducing irrationality, unintelligibility, and caprice into the concept of God. He sets up a full-blown ‘Euthyphro problem.’<sup>12</sup> He

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<sup>6</sup> These views are developed and argued for at length in Alan Mittleman, “The Durability of Goodness,” in Jonathan A. Jacobs (ed.), *Judaic Sources & Western Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); for the midrashic source, see *Bereshit Rabbah* (Vilna) 9:5 (paralleled in the Theodor-Albeck edition at 9).

<sup>7</sup> See Edward Greenstein, “Presenting Genesis 1, Constructively and Deconstructively,” *Prooftexts* 21 (2001), p. 14. Some of my treatment of Greenstein is taken from my article noted *supra* at fn. 6.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* p. 13

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*.

<sup>12</sup> Plato’s Euthyphro considers the relationship between holiness and goodness and thereby the relationship between God and morality. The critical question is whether God wills something because it is good – and that therefore God is beholden to external standards of goodness – or whether good things are good just because God wills them, thus making all value depend on divine fiat or command.

then impugns the perfection of God, or at least of God's handiwork, by portraying the world as intentionally flawed, unstable, and prone to self-generated corruption. Why God would create such a world is left undeveloped. It is just the kind of thing that the blatantly mythological deity of Genesis chapter 1, on his interpretation, does. The story of God and creation is a just-so story, a bit of local wisdom devised by a late Bronze Age culture. The text does not point toward a higher teaching or synthesis about value, God, being, or the grounds of normativity. Its wisdom seems to be that human suffering is ineluctable and unsurprising given the character of the created world in which humans find themselves.

Whatever merit this highly provocative reading has as historical critical biblical exegesis, I think it fails philosophically. Greenstein claims that

it makes no sense to interpret the term "good" in Genesis 1 valuatively [*sic*], because "good" can only mean good in contrast to bad, just as darkness can be recognized only in contrast to light.<sup>13</sup>

He overlooks two complications. The first is that to claim that good implies pleasing to God's tastes is precisely a "valuative" claim. "Pleasing to tastes" assumes a contrast with "displeasing to tastes" and asserts the superior value of the former. God judges, just as we do, between objects of higher and lower value. What is left unclear is God's standard of judgment. Greenstein implies that it is radically different from ours. But what evidence is there, taking into account the larger biblical context, that God's "tastes" are wholly disjointed from God's moral attributes, from everything that we believe we know, on the basis of Scripture and reason, about God's nature? Greenstein claims that the view that portrays an essentially arbitrary and violent God better captures the tragedy of "our experience of reality." I would say, by contrast, that it privileges a tragic reading of our experience by ignoring the deeper implications of the claim that creation is good.

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

Greenstein's position rests content with an essentially mythological god by arresting philosophical inquiry.<sup>14</sup>

There is a second complication besetting Greenstein's view that "good" cannot refer to a recognizable or humanly cognizable value insofar as it is a contrast term and the contrast is lacking. The contrast is not lacking. The goodness of being contrasts with the welter and waste, the *tohu vavohu* of the primordial chaos (*i.e.*, in Genesis 1:2). The goodness of ordered, created being is evident against the contrastive background of disordered, formless potentiality. Granted that "good" is a contrast term—that is precisely why it makes logical sense for the biblical author to use it to judge the value of the world in whose midst we find ourselves by contrast with its presumptive alternative. The goodness of being, clarified against the putative conceptual backdrop of sheer nothingness, ramifies into divine and human projects to secure, to advance, and to further it. Naming the animals, tending the garden, procreating, cultivating and civilizing the world, as well as the divine grant of normative orientation (*i.e.*, the Torah), serve the cause of a goodness established in creation. The meanings of *tov* are disclosed performatively by the ontic project of realizing it. Far from being contained in the arbitrary preferences of a quixotic creator demi-god, the *tov* of creation means what we ordinarily recognize it to mean and suggests an understanding of divine action that is intelligible to us and consonant with our highest beliefs.

I don't wish to disparage historical critical readings such as Greenstein's, let alone more extensive essays such as Levenson's *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*.<sup>15</sup> Nor do I mean to imply that only rather metaphysical readings can do justice to the biblical text. I argue, rather, that attention to philosophical matters would assist historically minded critics and that, *ceteris paribus*, neglect of historical-critical

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<sup>14</sup> That arrest is legitimated by his argument on behalf of deconstruction, to wit, that all assertions of truth are framework-relative and perspective-dependent. (Except, one supposes, that one truth.) The very assertion that one truth—*i.e.*, the truth of framework relativism—is transcendent shows, however, the incoherence of this view and calls for a deeper, more philosophical inquiry.

<sup>15</sup> *I.e.*, Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

study can lead to scholarly irresponsibility on the part of philosophers.

### Jon Levenson and Benjamin Sommer

Let us now consider two historical critical works, both of very high scholarly quality, both highly provocative in an intellectual sense: Jon Levenson's understanding of the *akedah* (i.e., the 'Binding' of Isaac in Genesis ch. 22) in *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son* and Benjamin Sommer's understanding of the divine in *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel*.<sup>16</sup> These books pose an acute challenge to the philosophical reader or interpreter. Levenson reconstructs an archaic milieu in which child sacrifice is an appropriate, even virtuous, response to the claims of divinity. He thus presents an early version of the God of Israel as one with a right, so to speak, to possession, through sacrifice, of the firstborn son. Far from intending the *akedah* to end once and for all the horror of child sacrifice—the God who presides over the *akedah* upholds the essential meaning and purpose of it, indeed, the normativity of it (i.e., in Genesis 22:16–18). The event does not forever purge violence from the monotheistic concept of God, as Lenn Goodman would have it; rather, the *akedah* underwrites violence of a very specific type. Levenson opposes all of those apologetic readings that see in the *akedah* a mighty protest against child sacrifice. Although the later prophets condemned the practice, Genesis chapter 22 does not. On Levenson's reading, the morality of the early biblical God becomes quite alien to us.

Sommer, in his reconstruction of the ancient Israelite thought-world, also fixes upon a most strange and philosophically opaque understanding of God, in a way almost designed to give a provocation to the philosophically-minded reader. For Sommer, the biblical God, far from being incorporeal, is an embodied being. Sommer discerns two schools, one in which God takes on many different bodies and selves simultaneously and another in which God is embodied in one body, in one place, at one time. But on either account, God is embo-

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<sup>16</sup> Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (see above, at fn. 2) and Benjamin D. Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).



died, which is to say, physical, limited, space-occupying, partite, and time-bound. The spiritual, incorporeal God of Maimonides, ontologically unique and linguistically indescribable, is simply “un-Jewish,” an alien (Greek) import in Sommer’s view.<sup>17</sup> Sommer reconstructs an intramural debate in biblical Israel, not just to engage in historical research for its own sake, but to provide inspiration for contemporary Jewish theology; to enable Jewish theology to overcome its philosophical, rationalist captivity and to return to a more “authentic” matrix.

Both of these works reconstruct early strata of the biblical world in order to retrieve sets of ideas. These ideas directly challenge our ordinary, inherited intellectual traditions of a God whose “ways are entirely just” (*kol derakhav mishpat* as per Deuteronomy 32:4) and whose being is categorically, absolutely distinct from all forms of being known to us (*lemi tedammeyuni* – “to whom can you compare Me or declare Me similar?” [Isaiah 46:5]). As such, these scholars raise questions as to the nature of the God in which ancient Israel trusted and in whom contemporary Jews are supposed to believe. These questions are at the heart of what divides the philosophical from the historical-critical interpreter.

## I. Levenson

Levenson’s book is rich and complex; I will only give a very selective summary of one of its relevant analytic threads here. As is typical of his writing, Levenson sets out to upend the received wisdom, which is expressed by the late Judah Goldin in the epigraph of the

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<sup>17</sup> Thus:

[M]any a modern Jew recognizes the extraordinarily strained nature of the hermeneutic through which Maimonides attempts to deny the corporeality of the biblical and rabbinic God. For such a Jew, Maimonides’ rejection would also compel a rejection of most of the Written and Oral Torahs. It would entail, in other words, the creation of a new religion whose earliest sacred document would be found in the tenth-century C.E. philosophical writings of Maimonides’ predecessor, Saadia Gaon. (Sommer, p. 136.)

book: "As everyone knows, nothing could be more repugnant to the God of Israel than human sacrifice."<sup>18</sup> Levenson's opening gambit is to take Exodus 22:28 at its (literal) word: "You shall not put off the skimming of the first yield of your vats. You shall give Me the firstborn among your sons." The next verse prescribes: "you shall do the same with your cattle and your flocks: seven days it shall remain with its mother; on the eighth day you shall give it to Me." Thus, 'doing the same' (*ken ta'aseh*) is taken quite literally: one is to sacrifice both the firstborn human son and the firstborn of cattle, sheep, *etc.*. Both traditional exegetes and modern biblical scholars read this provision in light of Exodus 34:19–20, where a procedure for redeeming the firstborn son provides the particular remedy for the general claim that God makes in Exodus 22:28. But Levenson chooses to distinguish the two texts in which these verses inhere as separate law codes, asserting that the former knows nothing of the latter. Indeed, Levenson asserts, numerous ancient Israelites took them to be separate, if they even knew about the latter text with its provision for redemption.

Moreover, Levenson argues that the condemnations of child sacrifice by the seventh and early sixth century prophets imply that it was still current practice among some Israelites. Jeremiah condemns it by associating it with idolatry; the God of Israel never wanted God's people to do this (as per Jeremiah 19:5–6: by doing this, one worships another god). Ezekiel accepts that God once ordered child sacrifice but ascribes that command to a divinely intended punishment of Israel whereby God gave them laws that were not good (Ezekiel 20:25–26). On either account, child sacrifice is presented as deeply offensive to God. However, according to Levenson, it was not always so. God "once commanded the sacrifice of the first born but now opposes it," as the prophets see it.<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, although the actual practice lapses, the ideal of total surrender of what is most beloved to God—who has a right to demand such surrender—remains in force.

Levenson qualifies the blunt assertion of divine right by characterizing the commandment as an *ideal* rather than a straightforward *rule*. Thus, in his words:

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<sup>18</sup> See Levenson, *Death and Resurrection*, p. 1 — without citation for source of Goldin's quote.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

[Exodus 22:28] articulates a theological ideal about the special place of the first-born son, an ideal whose realization could range from literal to non-literal implementation, that is, from sacrifice to redemption, or even to mere intellectual assent without any cultic act whatsoever.<sup>20</sup>

Viewed in this wide way, the sacrifice of the first-born represents the pinnacle of piety, rather than a horrible deformation of religious devotion. One could redeem one's son or dedicate one's son to divine service, as Hannah did with Samuel (in I Samuel 1:11); nevertheless, actually *sacrificing* one's son was the highest expression of love and obedience to God. Levenson reads the famous section of Micah 6:6-8, which progresses from burnt offerings to giving the firstborn son, to doing justice, loving goodness, and walking modestly with God, not as a replacement of one act by another, but as an ascent from good to better to best. It is good to sacrifice year-old calves (as per 6:6), still better to "give my first-born for my transgression, the fruit of my body for my sins" (6:7), but best to walk modestly with God (6:8). The text projects "an ideal of sacrifice, the Israelite father's offering to God of what is most beloved to him, his first-born son, the first fruit of his body presented lovingly to his lord."<sup>21</sup> The *akedah* represents precisely this ideal of piety: "any construal of the text that minimizes that willingness [of Abraham to sacrifice Isaac] misses the point."<sup>22</sup> Abraham is the hero of biblical piety precisely because he responds wholeheartedly to God's justified claim to Isaac.

The archaeological evidence from Carthage, where child sacrifice was central to the Phoenician cultus, reveals thousands of urns with the remains of young children and infants, as well as other urns with the remains of sacrificed animals. This suggests that the animals were intended as substitute sacrifices, by some Punic parents, for actual children. Either animal or child was permissible; children were likely most desirable. Levenson reads the *akedah* in light of this cognate cultural background. "Abraham is *allowed* to sacrifice the ram instead of Isaac, but never *commanded* to do so."<sup>23</sup> The text most emphatically

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

does not teach a substitution of animal for child; it teaches the necessity and virtue of surrendering to God what is most beloved in an act of ultimate obedience. Levenson rejects any interpretation that posits an evolutionary view: that humans (or God) progress beyond the desire to give the most precious gift, the child, and realize that the substitution of an animal accomplishes the same purpose. In the case of Carthage, the evidence shows that child sacrifice actually increased (and animal substitution decreased) as the city became more powerful and urbane in the fourth and third centuries B.C.E.. In the case of the *akedah*, the story does not ground the practice of animal sacrifice as substitution; it reveals Abraham's absolute obedience to and love for God precisely through his willingness to slaughter his son. Thus, although substitution is a possibility, the sacrifice of the first-born son remains the ideal. It becomes, however, an ideal transformed. Through the waning of the actual practice and a narrative framing, of which the *akedah* story itself is a founding moment, the desuetude of the practice becomes justified.

In sum, for Levenson, the *akedah* qua narrative shows that the firstborn son, or a substitute for the firstborn son (here, Isaac instead of Ishmael; the best son rather than the chronologically prior one) is given to (or taken by) God and experiences near-death (or actual death, in the case of Jesus) and rebirth. The trial of the *akedah* is not only for Abraham; it is an "initiation ritual" for Isaac, which enables him through near-death and virtual resurrection to assume his exalted place in the divine plan. *The best must die, virtually or actually, and will, through God's grace be reborn.* Faith is trust in God's grace. This pattern plays out in the life of the Jewish people as such, God's firstborn, who sees itself as perpetually at risk of death in God's service, and often, through God's grace, brought back into life. The vast expansion of the story in midrash, both ancient and medieval, attests to the enduring value that Jews found in the willingness to sacrifice the beloved son in the faithful hope that he will be reborn.<sup>24</sup> In some *midrashim*, Isaac becomes a willing martyr who actually does die and is resurrected. In some, Abraham is upset that he cannot go through with the sacrifice and must substitute the ram. In many, Isaac's near-sacrifice is associated with the paschal lamb, the blood of which saves the Israelite

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<sup>24</sup> See Shalom Spiegel, *The Last Trial* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1993), pp. 18–21.

firstborn from the divine destroyer in Exodus 12:7. In all of these, piety understands the claim of God on the firstborn to be absolute.

The elements of obedience, surrender, and gracious treatment are morally intelligible. So is the idea that living in service to God is a risky business. But much less clear is the idea that service to God is risky *because of* God, not because of the hatred of God's enemies directed toward his servants. That is morally troubling. On Levenson's account, to be beloved of God is the most dangerous status imaginable. Innocent children, who, one would believe, are entitled to the protection of God, are the most exposed to God's possessive designs. They are his potential victims.

The *akedah* becomes foundational for Israel insofar as Abraham, who had been chosen without apparent reason by God in Genesis chapter 12, now vindicates or earns God's choice. By trusting in God's grace, Abraham becomes worthy of it, as do his descendants by associating themselves with his pious obedience. There is rationality here; a surmise is confirmed by evidence, as it were. What is absent from Levenson's portrayal is moral exemplarity, either on the part of God or on the part of Abraham. Unless, of course, moral exemplarity is disconnected from our common view of what constitutes justice, love, compassion or caring. Within a moral framework in which it is normative for fathers to ritually slaughter their firstborn as an expression of their ultimate obedience to a God who wants such devotion, it is highly exemplary. But what kind of framework is that?

Lenn Goodman's philosophical reading of the *akedah* provides a stark contrast to Levenson's historical-critical valorization of a God who shows his grace toward those who surrender themselves to (what we take to be) the unconscionable. Goodman is not insensitive to historical context. He also adverts to the Phoenician evidence, exploring the meaning of the archaeological data. His conclusion, however, does not shrink from sharp moral judgment:

The Phoenicians did not sacrifice their children because they were barbarous. Rather, they were barbarous because they sacrificed their children. The motive was not cruelty but piety. This is what the Phoenicians thought their gods desired and demanded. For horror was fused with divinity in their ritual structure. Violation of the

deepest bonds of human caring merged with reverence of the most awesome deity.<sup>25</sup>

He contrasts the *akedah* with this “ritual structure,” interpreting it as a radical break with Phoenician “ideals.” Where Levenson finds a qualified continuity, Goodman finds a volte-face.

In context, Abraham’s obedience to God’s grisly command was not surprising. The biblical world – and in this Goodman agrees with Levenson – knew of child sacrifice. But the *akedah*, for Goodman, reverses its valence. The climax of the story is Abraham’s radical decision to listen to the angelic address: “Abraham, Abraham... do not raise your hand against the boy” (Genesis 22:11–12). Goodman presents this as a moment of crisis and decision. The clear command from God had earlier been to offer up Isaac. Faced with this new address, Abraham had to decide whether it overrode the previous imperative. There was no tradition to fall back on, no revelation – for both moments had that status. Which voice to trust? Abraham’s choice to stay his hand and to seize the ram in place of Isaac was how, for Goodman, Abraham passed the test. Not piety qua blind obedience but piety as “conscious and increasingly confident loyalty to the inner logic of God, now confirmed by Abraham’s trial and forged into a principle of character.”<sup>26</sup>

God’s rewarding Abraham with blessed descendants follows from, and is realized in, Abraham’s “moral insight.” The insight he gained through the *akedah* is the discovery “of an Absolute that brooks no evil.”

Thus the angel’s promise, in God’s name and God’s oath: Since you made no exception of your son to the command of goodness, and did not accept the ghastly but ready notion that the gravest enormity would be the greatest gift, for that reason you are blessed; and your successors, through the understanding that you communicate to them, will be a blessing to the peoples of the world, witnessing their own mastery even of their ene-

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<sup>25</sup> Lenn E. Goodman, *God of Abraham* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 20.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

mies – not by conquest but by the shared recognition that goodness is greater than violence and the only source of authentic power.<sup>27</sup>

In this way, Goodman reads the *akedah* as exemplifying our highest moral convictions. The moral world of Genesis chapter 22 does not constitute a strange ethical counter-cosmos; it founds the one that many of us believe we inhabit.<sup>28</sup>

As a first approximation then we might say that what is at stake between historical-critical scholars and philosophers is the character of the God who is portrayed in the text or retrieved from the text. Benjamin Sommer's work puts this issue squarely before us.

## II. Sommer

The central fact of which Sommer's book takes account is that "the Hebrew Bible contains not a single verse denying that God has a body."<sup>29</sup> The entire effort, from the Targumim forward, to depreciate the corporeality of God, cuts against the plain sense of Scripture. Among the numerous portrayals of an anthropomorphic, corporeal God, Sommer finds two main competing traditions: the "fluidity model" and the "anti-fluidity model." The fluidity model, based on Mesopotamian sources and favored by the J and E sources, has one God, YHWH, taking on corporeal form in multiple bodies, either simultaneously or successively, in one place or another. God is very

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>28</sup> There is a similar debate, this one actual rather than notional, between Jon Levenson and Kenneth Seeskin over the appropriateness of philosophical readings of the *akedah*. Levenson critiques Seeskin's philosophical/ethical interpretation in Kenneth Seeskin, *Thinking about the Torah: A Philosopher Reads the Bible* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2016), pp. 51–70. For Levenson's review and Seeskin's reply, see Jon Levenson, "Is the Torah a Work of Philosophy?" *Mosaic Magazine*, January 3, 2017 and Kenneth Seeskin, "Response to 'Is the Torah a Work of Philosophy?'" accessed at: <https://mosaicmagazine.com/essay/history-ideas/2017/01/is-the-torah-a-work-of-philosophy/> on May 18, 2019.

<sup>29</sup> Sommer, p. 5.

much like humans insofar as He has a man-like form. But God is also very much unlike humans in that He can be simultaneously here and there, in this body and in that one all at once; God is ontically fluid. The three ostensibly human visitors who greet Abraham in Genesis chapter 18 are either all embodiments of God, or only one is an embodiment while the other two are angelic servants. Of the one that remains, Sommer explains: "This visitor clearly is and is not identical with Yhwh; rather He is an avatar, a 'descent' of the heavenly God who does not encompass all of that God's substance."<sup>30</sup> Nonetheless, he encompasses some of God's substance. There is an ambiguity or "fluidity" about divine corporeality and divine selfhood. YHWH "fragments" into "local manifestations."<sup>31</sup>

The counter-model, the "anti-fluidity" tradition, holds that God only occupies *one* corporeal form at one time and in one place. This is the dominant view of P, the Priestly source, of Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic writings, and of Ezekiel. For P, God comes from heaven and takes up residence in the *mishkan* (Tabernacle) or in the Temple. God's embodiment takes the form of *kavod*, a "stunningly bright" presence "surrounded by an extraordinary radiance."<sup>32</sup> God's *kavod* is a "substantial blazing thing," as in I Kings 8:11-12 ("The priests could not stand to serve because of the cloud, for Yhwh's *kavod* had filled Yhwh's house."<sup>33</sup>).

D—that is, the Deuteronomist—by contrast, keeps God in heaven but allows for a quasi-manifestation of God in the form of his *shem* ("name"). *Shem* can either be taken in the linguistic sense of the "word" (in which, however, a name signifies the essence of a being) or as something more reified and hypostatic. Thus, Isaiah 30:27's "The *shem* of Yhwh comes from afar, burning in anger, with a weighty load"<sup>34</sup> is an example of a reified usage. The *shem* is a real divine manifestation, but the full divine self remains above and beyond its transient embodiment. Although "philosophically minded commentators" use Deuteronomy's relatively more abstract, less anthropomorphic understanding of God to bolster their anti-corporeal interpretation, Sommer contends that no "verses in Deuteronomy claim

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>33</sup> Translation adapted from *ibid.*.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.



that God is invisible or lacks a body." Rather, in Deuteronomy's transcendent theology, "God's body cannot be seen by humans because the latter are on earth while God's body is in heaven."<sup>35</sup> The anti-fluidity model rejects the "multiplicity of divine embodiment" as well as "the fluidity of divine identity" in favor of an integrated divine selfhood. The declaration of Deuteronomy 6:4, known to Jews as the *Shema*, means "Yhwh our God is one Yhwh." This is to say, in the ancient Israelite context, "Yhwh's self is not fluid."<sup>36</sup>

Accordingly, for Sommer, there was an intramural argument in ancient Israel between these traditions. The fluidity model had proponents not only among the great literary artists who created the sources that biblical scholars designate as J and E but also among the common people, who worshipped a YHWH embodied in cultic pillars and stelae, in wood and stone. P and D, the latter especially, carried the day in terms of the perspectives that shaped and dominated the canon. But the fluidity model of corporeality persisted in rabbinic anthropomorphism, in rabbinic conceptions of the *shekhinah* (God's indwelling presence), in early *Merkavah* (i.e., Ezekiel-based 'Chariot'-vision-focused) mysticism, and in the kabbalah. Sommer argues that we should retrieve the trope of an embodied, fluid divinity and restore it to a central place in contemporary Jewish theology.

Sommer is not alone in rejecting a "spiritual" incorporeal divinity in favor of a corporeal, multiply-incarnate God. The Jewish theologian Michael Wyschogrod, to whom Sommer makes appreciative reference, precedes him. For both, affirmation of such a God promises greater authenticity and a greater fidelity to the God of the Bible than what they take to be an inauthentic, Hellenic import. Sommer is especially scathing in his claim that Maimonides, the leading exponent of a philosophically pure concept of divinity, founds a new religion with Saadiah Gaon's philosophical text as its scripture.<sup>37</sup>

What theological benefit does Sommer believe the return to faith in an embodied God would bring? The fluidity model was suppressed in ancient Israel because of its polytheistic implications. Worries such as these motivated its marginalization:

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

If Samaria had its own Yhwh just as Tyre had its own Baal, then these gods must be similar. Could one not worship both? If Yhwh could fragment and overlap with an angel, then why could Yhwh not overlap with Marduk as well?<sup>38</sup>

But polytheism, at least in such a bald form, is not a temptation for modern Jews. Sommer wants his readers to reexamine the fluidity model to “help, or force, modern Jews to see” latent theological possibilities in it. The first possibility he believes that the fluidity model unveils is a way of taking law—surely a central category of ancient, classical, and normative Judaism—seriously. The second is taking sacred space and land seriously. If we believe in an embodied God, then, when Genesis 2:2–3 tells us that God *rested* on the seventh day, we can actually take this claim at full force. God’s body did not work upon other bodies on Shabbat. For Sommer, following Wyschogrod, this takes Shabbat-observance out of the realm of the symbolic or “spiritual” and gives it a highly concrete setting. The main upshot is that Jewish law has little to do with “ethical but less tangible suggestions from a spiritual deity” and more to do with concrete demands from a “concrete God.”<sup>39</sup> *Imitatio dei* is no longer merely notional.

The second possibility, the question of holy or sacred land and place, is complex. The two models identified by Sommer implied different ontologies with respect to divine presence at various cultic sites, Jerusalem, the Temple and so on, in antiquity. Collectively, they asserted that sacred status entailed divine presence full-stop, whether that presence was thought permanent, ephemeral, exclusive or shared. But real—*i.e.*, concrete—divine presence does not seem to be possible today, so “the holiness of land is always either a *potential holiness* or a *conditional holiness*. This sort of holiness may be the only holiness possible in Judaism.”<sup>40</sup> Nonetheless, understanding that holiness means that the presence of God in some embodied or quasi-physical way can fill out an understanding of the sacred that moves it from the symbolic to the experiential. Accordingly, for Sommer, since we today

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140. Italics in the original.

generally accept an absence of a fully available experience, we can exercise a certain critical caution toward claims about the holiness of space and place (in the politics of the Middle East, *e.g.*).

Sommer acknowledges that the multiply-embodied God of the fluidity tradition, in contrast with the single-embodied, Temple-dwelling God of P (that is, the Hebrew Bible's Priestly authorship) or the heavenly God of D, seems to flirt with paganism. The fluid God seems to lack the differentiation from nature that a transcendent, monotheistic God requires. This is just, according to Sommer, an illusion, however. First, the fluid God is not a pantheistic God, for He is not diffused throughout the world. He is, when embodied, in distinct forms in distinct locations.

The conception of God as multiply embodied allows for the possibility that God can be anthropomorphically involved in the world even as God is not identified with the world, because this God is bound to no one place.<sup>41</sup>

God is not bound to the *physis* of the world, as in pantheism. Rather, God chooses to be among His worshippers in a discrete, embodied manner. If God were only one transcendent person, then His becoming immanent in a natural manifestation would be an ontological scandal. But if God's selfhood as such is fluid and infinitely capable of immanent instantiation, then there is no scandal of transcendence and immanence; this is just what God is and does.

God's radical differentiation from human beings, on this account—what remains of his transcendence—lies in the fact that human beings cannot do such things. Our embodiment entails our particular existence in time and space; God's embodiment is compatible with infinite existentiations in time and space. This difference is so categorical that it amounts to a difference in kind, not degree, the shared phenomenon of embodiment notwithstanding. And yet the shared fact of embodiment is crucial, for only an embodied God can know pathos:

a God who can change is a God who can experience joy and pain, loneliness and love. And that physical God of

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

pathos, with one body or many, can seek out humanity. But only the God with many bodies can rise above God's own physicality. The God with many bodies remains wounded and alterable, but this deity can nevertheless be omnipotent.<sup>42</sup>

Sommer presents us with a deity we can recognize or at least recover, on a highly literal interpretation, from some of the biblical texts. It is also a deity very far from the God of classical, philosophical theism. Claims to omnipotence notwithstanding, it is a mythological God who has no necessary existence, no perfection, no absoluteness, no ultimacy – it is a God who just happens to exist and in whom we ought to trust based on a series of contingent encounters with him. How is such a God with a “body of intense light or energy, which can inhabit many places at once” different from an occult or science-fiction entity?<sup>43</sup> If such a being is more than notional – if such a being has empirical reality – what would entitle us to call it God? Why wouldn't it be just another, albeit highly interesting, contingent entity? Once we diminish God's absoluteness, we invite a *reductio ad absurdum* that runs as far as our imaginations will carry us.

Perhaps Sommer, by sharply separating the God of classical theism from the God of anthropopathic piety – and cashiering Him, renders a service by dispensing with an austere philosophical God and leading us back to an “authentic” Jewish God. But authenticity is a morally dubious ideal. It can cash out at fervid tribalism. Whatever warmth the God of classical or even Kantian theism lacks, He makes up for in His power to integrate our value concepts and wisely order our souls. The God of classical theism (or even the Kantian Unconditioned) underwrites and consummates our practices of seeking intelligibility, of pointing toward an ultimate explanation of being and value, of grounding a good that we intuit in thought and deed. It is unclear how the multiply embodied God of luminous manifestation, a Judaic Phoebus Apollo, could contribute to those conceptual and ethical tasks.

We are being asked, I suppose, only to trust that such a god is God. Of course, trust – *bittahon* or *emunah* – is of the essence of Jewish

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.

faith; and, at some level, trust or the ability to trust is pre-conceptual. It is a disposition formed by upbringing, particularly by the emotional and cognitive scaffolding of parents and caregivers. But to say that trust has pre-cognitive roots does not entail that it is an irrational phenomenon. The trust of a mature person, who has a choice whether to trust in someone or to rely on something, such as an institution, practice, or belief, rests on a process of justification. One must give reasons to oneself (and sometimes to others) for why one trusts. Trust rises to its full stature when it is *incorporated* into agency, which requires reason-giving. Why should one choose to trust the biblical God, on Sommer's account? Why should one trust the biblical accounts of God, if the God who guarantees them is a Jewish Apollo and not the name we give to the Highest Good? We can only secure for ourselves a trust in Sommer's God as God if we have some prior, relatively well-formed conception by which to test the candidate divinity against an absolute standard. Kant said that even the holy one of the Gospel must be proofed against our rational conception of the moral law. The same applies here, except in this case our sense of the absoluteness and ultimacy of God has been nourished by the tradition of classical theism, which is rooted in the very texts from which Sommer would banish it. Yes, language and method have been learned from the Greeks, but the synthesis of Plato and Moses, of Torah and Sophia, is the work of countless generations of Jews. They have not been misguided, nor has their struggle been "inauthentic."

## Conclusion

The philosophical interpreter can learn from the historical-critical scholar. The work of retrieving and forming beliefs that are compelling should be disciplined by reference to ancient frameworks of meaning. I am not suggesting that Levenson and Sommer are wrong in their interpretations or in the pursuit of their projects. I am suggesting that historical critical reconstruction, when it aspires to theological articulacy, should be disciplined by keeping a high, philosophical purpose in mind. The Babylonian Talmud puts it vividly: "The seal of the Holy One, Blessed be He, is truth" (Shabbat 55a). We should seek to tell the highest truth of which we are capable

and should believe that, changes in idiom notwithstanding, the biblical authors aim at telling it too.

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