The Exposure of Violence: A Performative Reading of Sacrifice in Genesis 22 with Judith Butler and Giorgio Agamben

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Abstract

The sacrificial story in Genesis 22:1–19, the Aqeda or “Binding of Isaac,” has generated a large body of research literature. This is due to its irresolvable ambiguity: God commands the sacrifice of Isaac and stops it. The reader is not informed about reasons or intentions of the characters involved. After analyzing some possible approaches to the text's ambiguity, I offer a new performative reading of the passage with Giorgio Agamben's and Judith Butler's theories of gesture. I argue that this approach effectively deals with ambiguity, because it neither erases violence nor justifies it. It rather exposes violence by interrupting and redirecting it. Abraham’s raised hand with the knife thus becomes an interrupted gesture. It makes the text a monument to violence that teaches to see the same situation in a different light and to interrupt the continuous repetition of violent behaviour.

Keywords


1 Introduction

The sacrificial story in Genesis 22:1–19, the Aqeda or “Binding of Isaac,” is a hard nut to crack. In fact, it is impossible to crack if cracking it means to fully
understand or to resolve its ambiguity. Although there is no end to “all the mountains of books that have piled up around Mount Moriah,” ambiguity remains in the story of the Binding of Isaac, or Aqeda: When the angel of JHWH interrupts Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac in verses 11 and 12, they contradict God’s previous exhortation in verse 2. Yvonne Sherwood tellingly describes the dilemma in her playful article on the would-, could- and should-haves of the text and its receptions: “You can hear the text as saying that this is something Abraham would have done (and it’s very good that he would have), and at the same time that this is not something that he actually did (and it’s also very good that he did not […].)” The sacrifice is happening and not happening at the same time. It is likewise commanded and interrupted. This ambiguity cannot be resolved, which is why any interpretation that aims to suspend ambiguity in favor of an understandable explanation has to fail. As in the famous rabbit-duck illusion, a picture that contains both animals depending on how you look at it, (at least) two layers of meaning are on equal footing.

The passage therefore shakes images of God to their cores. Even if the sacrifice is aborted, the experience of God-induced violence of a father against his son remains. The passage is so difficult to understand, because reasons, explanations and thoughts are left out of the narration. The text’s ambiguity makes its relation to the violence it does not fully portray unclear. Previous interpretations have approached this problem in a variety of ways, for example, by seeing the text as a reflection of the problem of theodicy (see the section 2.1), by assigning blame to Abraham (2.2), or by countering ambiguity with humor (2.3). Most prominent is the interpretation that sees in the passage

1 Trible, Sacrifice, p. 191: “To be faithful to the story no interpretation can become an idol […] Take your interpretation of this story, your only interpretation, the one which you love, and sacrifice it on the mount of hermeneutics.”
2 Sherwood, Grammars of Sacrifice, p. 35. For lists of references on the passage, see Steins, Bindung, pp. 239–302 and Popović, Bibliography. For an overview of previous approaches to the passage, see Michel, Gott, pp. 248–255.
3 Sherwood, Grammars of Sacrifice, p. 36; emphasis original; see also Schorn, Genesis 22, p. 102: “Statt der Gehorsamsprobe begegnet hier das Problem des uneigentlichen Gotteswillens, da erst in der Lösung des Konflikts (V. 12) der wirkliche Gotteswille sichtbar wird, der im Widerspruch zum Opferauftrag (V. 2) stehen würde, falls dieser das eigentliche Gottesgebot wäre.”
4 The connection between sacrifice and violence has been contested; see McClymond, Sacred Violence, esp. p. 62: “Sacrificial death is generally intended to be nonviolent.” Nonetheless, contemporary readers will not deny that it is an experience of violence to face an outstretched hand with a knife. Coakley, Defense, develops the notion of a feminist non-violent sacrifice that is based on interruption.
5 See Westermann, Genesis 12–50, p. 44; Naumann, Preisgabe, p. 25; see also René Girard’s evaluation of the passage, in: Haven, Conversations, p. 116 et seq.: “It’s the only text in the world that
the abolition of child or human sacrifice and thus applies a positive twist to
the violence of the scene. However, this interpretation has been repeatedly
criticized in recent research (2.4).

In this paper, I offer a performative reading of the passage with Judith
Butler’s and Giorgio Agamben’s theories of gesture. This reading conceives of
the text as a monument to interrupted violence. It does not imply exegesis in
the sense of leading out meaning; it does not resolve ambiguity unilaterally or
turn violence into something positive by recourse to unexpressed intentions.
I argue that violence is not abolished in the *Aqeda*, but exposed and thereby
questioned. The interrupted action exposes violence in the name of God and
thus offers a way out of its continuous repetition. The episode proceeds after
the interruption of violence to redirect it.

The paper will progress in three steps: In a first section, previous approaches
to the *Aqeda* will be presented with a focus on how they address its ambiguity
and violent implications. I then turn to a performative reading of the passage
that looks at Abraham's interrupted gesture of the outstretched hand through
the lens of Butler's and Agamben's theories of gesture. In the final part of this
paper, I pursue this performative reading further by juxtaposing it with the
*Aqeda’s* context in the book of Genesis.

2 Exegetical Approaches to the *Aqeda* or How to Deal
with Ambiguity

The text's ambiguity creates a tension that is not easy to bear. Exegetical and
literary texts therefore offer different possibilities to release the tension. For
instance, they (1.) differentiate between two divine voices and point to the
problem of theodicy; they (2.) make Abraham take the blame to discharge God
from the monstrous aspect of this passage; they (3.) turn to humor and dissolve
the scene in laughter or they (4.) read the story as the abolishment of human

documents the shift from human sacrifice of the first-born to animal sacrifice. Isaac is finally
replaced, and this is presented as a divine action”; explicit against this interpretation is von
Rad, 1. Buch Mose, p. 194.
6 See Dinkler, *Intention*, pp. 73 and 76 et seq.: “The exegesis/eisegesis binary assumes that texts
function as ontological repositories into which authors deposit their communicative inten-
tion. Authorial intention, synonymous with textual meaning, then sits unchanged ‘in’ the
text until its recipient(s) ‘discover(s)’ it [...]. Exegesis, traditionally understood, provides the
navigational tools necessary for the exegete to overcome these considerable obstacles [i.e.
condition of manuscripts, translation, time gap,...], find the author's intended meaning and
‘lead it out’ of the text.”
sacrifices. These are only some of the possible ways to deal with the passage. I chose them because they effectively deal with ambiguity. This does not mean, however, that there are not even more possible interpretations which could be mentioned here.

2.1 Two Divine Voices
A theological reading of the Aqeda is of high value, because it integrates difference in the here depicted picture of God. Many have detected two divine voices within the Aqeda, one of them commanding the sacrifice, the other interrupting it. The divine voice is designated as Elohim in the verses 1, 3, 8, 9 and 12 and as (the angel of) JHWH in the verses 11 and 14–16. God, who commands the sacrifice is called Elohim, God who interrupts the sacrifice is called JHWH.

These observations have led some scholars to dissolve ambiguity and others to integrate it into their theological interpretation. Those who dissolved ambiguity interpreted the change of names as a trace of the seam that combines two sources. Thus, they differentiated between an (earlier) text that commands the sacrifice and a (later) addition that interrupts it. This source-critical interpretation divides one text with (at least) two meanings into two texts with one meaning. Those who kept the ambiguous message of the text changed the source critical argument into a theological one, making the two names an important feature of the text’s theological message. The two voices were then interpreted as two different perceptions of God. A hidden God is contrasted with a saving God and still both are combined in one person under the premise of monotheism. This approach integrates ambivalence into a double-faced image of God. The post-exilic period, the book of Job and the experience of insecurity regarding God’s promise to Israel are possible historical contexts of such an interpretation.

2.2 Abraham Is Guilty
Another approach to the text relies not so much on a reconstruction of the historical context as on its context within the book of Genesis. It questions

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7 See Schorn, Genesis 22, p. 94; Boehm, Genesis 22, p. 4.
8 See Jacob, Genesis, pp. 985 et seq.: “Der Wechsel des Gottesnamens ist nicht nur beabsichtigt, sondern die Hauptsache”; see also Ebach, Gott, pp. 7–9.
9 Hartenstein, Verborgenheit, p. 7: “In der Erzählung werden zwei Gotteserfahrungen bzw. Wahrnehmungen Gottes einander gegenübergestellt: die des abgründig verborgenen und die des rettenden Gottes”; emphasis original; see also Naumann, Preisgabe, p. 35; Ebach, Theodizee.
10 See Naumann, Preisgabe, p. 27; Hartenstein, Verborgenheit, p. 15; Veijola, Opfer, p. 155.
the certainty about the content of God’s test for Abraham. In the book of Genesis, Abraham proves that he is willing to sacrifice Sara (see chapters 12 and 20), Hagar and Ishmael (see 16 and 21): “With this sort of track record, can God really doubt that Abraham will be willing to sacrifice Isaac [...]?”

God thus does not need to test Abraham with respect to his willingness to sacrifice members of his family. Some scholars therefore argue that the real test is to see if Abraham would refuse to sacrifice his son. The positive evaluation of Abraham not having “withheld” (verses 12 and 16) his own son can be interpreted as not withholding “Isaac from use by God as a bearer of God’s covenant with Abraham” by not killing him. This approach keeps the ambiguity by differentiating between two ways of praise for not withholding Isaac: In verse 12 God’s angel connects the idea that Abraham would have sacrificed his son with his fear of God. In verse 16 the assessment that Abraham did not sacrifice his son entails a blessing and a promise of offspring. Two layers of meaning are thus preserved, but Abraham has to take the blame for a sacrificial story gone bad, because he does not understand the clues God gives him. From the beginning, God wants Abraham to abort the sacrifice, but Abraham believes “that God’s mind is already made up [...]. Thus Yahweh must intervene to restrain Abraham from sacrificing Isaac.” In this approach, ambiguity in God is seemingly resolved and Abraham is pronounced guilty. All this happens at the expanse of Isaac, who is the victim of a weird game “of bluff going on between two old tricksters.” The question as to why God tests Abraham remains unanswered. Neither the image of God, nor the image of Abraham is positive in this reading: “The story says to them [the readers]: do not trust a deity. He or she or it almost certainly does not trust you, and has no reason to tell you the truth.” This approach is not only problematic, it also claims hidden intentions on God’s part (he wants to test if Abraham will go through with the sacrifice – but why?) and on the part of Abraham (e.g., that he does not love Isaac as much as Ishmael).

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11 Heard, *Dynamics*, p. 91.
13 Heard, *Dynamics*, p. 93.
14 See Heard, *Dynamics*, p. 94.
15 Heard, *Dynamics*, p. 95.
16 Davies, *Bible*, p. 111. Philip Davies understands the story like a contest about which of the characters will blink first: God waits for Abraham to stop the process, because he cannot believe that God wants him to kill his son. Abraham waits for God to stop the process, because he believes that God does not want him to kill Isaac.
17 Davies, *Bible*, p. 113.
18 See Genesis 17:18 and Heard, *Dynamics*, p. 93.
2.3 **Just Kidding**
In the history of reception, some interpreters have turned to humor to deal with the passage's ambiguity.\(^9\) They suggest that the whole story is a "splendid joke of God,"\(^\) which Abraham failed to understand from the start: "‘I jokingly suggest thou sacrifice Isaac and thou immediately runs out to do it.’ And Abraham fell to his knees, ‘See, I never know when you're kidding.’ And the Lord thundered, ‘No sense of humor, I can’t believe it.’"\(^2\) This explanation evokes candid camera situations, where clueless persons are victims of an unsolvable scene. They are finally released by the disclosure that everything has been staged. The turn to humor is a way to deal with ambiguity, but not to dissolve it. In this scenario, God’s joke is neither apparent, nor very funny, but a “laughter that hurts.”\(^\) As far-fetched as it might sound that God was simply joking from an exegetical perspective, the turn to humor of literary receptions nonetheless carries an important insight, inasmuch as it points to the unreliability of a God who puts his clueless servant to a test (see Gen. 22:1).\(^3\)

2.4 **A Human Sacrifice against Human Sacrifice**
The last interpretative option I want to outline here is the discernment of Genesis 22 as a cult etiology. It explains the relation between command and interruption by suggesting that the command to sacrifice Isaac actually aims at a replacement of human sacrifices with animal sacrifices. This way of interpreting the *Aqeda* can take different forms. Some state, for instance, that it opposes Canaanite traditions of child sacrifice,\(^4\) others that it opposes practices of human sacrifice within the JHWH cult.\(^5\) Anyway, this interpretation is highly contested, for instance by Jon D. Levenson: “nothing [...] suggests

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19 See Kaminsky, *Humor*, p. 367 et seq.
21 See Allen, *Feathers*, p. 36.
22 Good, *Irony*, p. 24; Exum/Whedbee, *Isaac*, p. 15 call the *Aqeda* a “comedy in the shadow of threatened death”; see also von Rad, *1. Buch Mose*, p. 189: “Nur um eine Versuchung durch Gott hat es sich gehandelt, um eine Zumutung, mit der Gott nicht Ernst machen wollte. Für Abraham aber hatte der an ihn ergangene Befehl einen tödlichen Ernst.” It has been suggested that also the name Isaac (“he will laugh”) plays an important role here Lorberbaum, *Yitshak*, however, states that laughter in the context of Isaac’s birth and life means mockery; see also Strobach, *Laughter*.
23 It is consistent that the reception of the passage in the book of *Jubilees* claims that the angel Mastema, not God, initiates the test-situation (see Jub. 17:16 et seq.). Immanuel Kant even questioned the assumption that Abraham is actually hearing God’s voice; see Kant, *Conflict*, p. 283.
that God’s command to immolate Isaac was improper, Abraham is commended and rewarded for obeying it, and the text lacks any formal indicators of an etiological motive regarding the nature of sacrificial offerings.”26 Yvonne Sherwood also contests the interpretation of the passage as an indication of the abolition of child sacrifice: “The canonical modern reading weights the original double-handed gesture as if it were ironic, as if this text were now all for and only for the negation or subversion of human sacrifice. When God said ‘Sacrifice your son,’ he really meant the opposite.”27 Although I think that a certain definition of irony allows an ironic reading of the passage,28 I share Sherwood’s reservation against the inference of a hidden intention to God or the text resulting in the idea that God/the text wants to abolish human sacrifices and therefore commands one and aborts it. This approach creates the image of an unreliable God and claims a single meaning for the ambiguous text. It dissolves its ambiguity into one direction. The positive twist of the scene’s violent implications thus comes with a high cost.

To summarize previous ways to deal with the text’s ambiguity, they all lead to the question as to how serious God’s words can be taken given the fact that they consist of difference within themselves. Some of them resort to the inference of hidden intentions and thus widen the gap between what is said in the text and what remains unsaid. We have seen that especially an interpretation of the Ḥiq’a that proposes the substitution of human sacrifice through animal sacrifice resolves the ambiguous tension of two contradictory signifiers into one direction valuing the voice from heaven higher than the command to sacrifice. It gives the story a (single) meaning by inferring that God really means “sacrifice an animal” when he says “sacrifice your son”. However, it deals productively with the scene’s violence.

26 Levenson, Death, p. 113 et seq.; see also Naumann, Preisgabe, p. 25. There is a tradition that suggests, given that Isaac is not mentioned on Abraham’s way back, that Abraham sacrificed Isaac; see Zuidema, Isaak, pp. 21–25; Brumlik, Aufhebung, p. 55.

27 Sherwood, Grammars of Sacrifice, p. 37.

28 God’s test as such is ironic, if we understand irony as “incongruity between what is and what will be” (Good, Irony, p. 97): God promised to make Abraham the father of many through Isaac, whom Abraham is supposed to kill. According to Paul de Man, irony questions the possibility of representation and understanding itself (see de Man, Concept, p. 166; see also Dooley: Murder, p. 78): “Abraham’s action is one that acknowledges the silent call of the unrepresentable.” It functions like a trope (trope means “to turn”), because it “turns away meaning” (de Man, Concept, p. 164). It thus “very clearly has a performative function” (de Man, Concept, p. 165). Irony is performative in Genesis 22, inasmuch as it obscures any all-encompassing explanation of the characters’ actions or the text’s meaning, but – as we will see later – it makes Abraham see the same situation in a different light. It shows something without resolving ambiguity into single meaning.
3 Genesis 22 and the Exposure of Violence

In the following, I will offer a performative reading that provides another possibility to deal productively with the violent implications of this passage. Central to my reading is Abraham's outstretched hand and the pivotal moment of interruption: “he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son” (Gen. 22:10). The outstretched hand and its interruption are a gesture according to Judith Butler's and Giorgio Agamben's theories, because, in their views, a gesture is “a truncated form of action.”

Butler illustrates her theory with a scene alluded to by Walter Benjamin in his discussion of Berthold Brecht’s epic theater: While a mother is about to throw a bronze bust at her daughter, the father is about to open the window to call the police. A stranger steps into the room and thereby interrupts the scene. Butler calls this an “astonishing scene of violence” that “emerges within and from the traditional family.” The violent family scene between Abraham and Isaac is suddenly stopped by God’s angel and also “Benjamin stops the scene quite suddenly, giving us only the gesture, the frozen image, but not the completed act of violence. There is no textual basis on which to conclude that the act of violence will or did take place [...].” The interruption of the scene mimics the interruption of violent actions without suppressing them. The scene attests that violence within families exists, but its depiction as part of an interrupted scene does not authorize it. Violence is repeated and interrupted with the implication that its repetition is not compulsory:

Perhaps this kind of stalling, cutting, and stopping establishes an intervention into violence, an unexpected non-violence through an indefinite stall, one produced by interruption and citation alike. In other words, the multiplication of gestures makes the violent act citable, brings it into relief as the structure of what people sometimes do, but does not quite do it – relinquishing the satisfaction of the complete act in a textual break which produces an ethos of restraint.

Hence, the depiction of violence points to the fact that violence exists. It repeats violence not to authorize it, but to question it, to denaturalize its progress by interruption, suspense and restraint. The depiction of violence as

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29 See Butler, Gesture, p. 182.
30 Butler, Gesture, p. 187.
31 Butler, Gesture, p. 189.
32 Butler, Gesture, p. 189.
33 See Butler, Gesture, p. 190.
34 Butler, Gesture, p. 190.
an interrupted process can thus offer a way out of everyday violence.\textsuperscript{35} Such a reading of violent gesture does not resort to hidden intentions of those involved. The performative scene works without information about the mother’s plans: Does she aim at killing her daughter, hurting or threatening her? Would she have gone through with throwing the bust? Would Abraham have gone through with the sacrifice?

“The act is not completed, but nor is it negated. It hangs eternally in conflicted middle space.”\textsuperscript{36} This assertion about the \textit{Aqeda} by Sherwood could also be taken from Butler’s text on gesture. Butler offers a possible way to deal with the fact that the sacrifice is not completed nor negated. The sacrifice’s position in conflicted middle space, its interruption, opens up possibilities of breaking up the normalization of violence by enacting violence.

Giorgio Agamben’s theory of gesture further elaborates on the detachment from intention and the interpretation of gestures as truncated forms of actions. He describes a gap between an action and its goal (\textit{telos}). The means does not equate the aim of an action. In contrast to actions, gestures are cut loose from a goal. They are pure means without end. In them, the “means shows itself because it interrupts its relation to the end.”\textsuperscript{37} Gestures are performative and not purposive. Persons who perform gestures stop what they carry out, “expose it, and hold it at a distance from themselves.”\textsuperscript{38} Gestures as pure means remain unjudgeable mysteries.\textsuperscript{39} They are not expressions of a subject, but detached from the person who enacts them. Gestures show possibilities of what human bodies are capable of.\textsuperscript{40} A gesture loses its individuality and becomes repeatable, that is, Abraham’s gesture can be detected in comparable situations, which is why Jacques Derrida can write that “Isaac’s sacrifice continues every day” or that “this land of Moriah [...] is our habitat every second of every day,”\textsuperscript{41} because “I am betraying at every moment all my other obligations: my obligations to the other others [...].”\textsuperscript{42}

The violent gesture that is interrupted is detached from its supposed goal. It is exposed as violence that becomes a pure means without purpose. Applied

\begin{thebibliography}{10}
\bibitem{Butler1990} Butler, \textit{Gesture}, p. 19: “In the best of circumstances, such disconcerting moments of citation, these incomplete performances, can bring to a halt what has become both very usual and utterly wrong.”
\bibitem{Sherwood2004} Sherwood, \textit{Grammars of Sacrifice}, p. 35.
\bibitem{Agamben2000} Agamben, \textit{Karman}, p. 82.
\bibitem{Agamben2000a} Agamben, \textit{Karman}, p. 84.
\bibitem{Agamben2000b} Agamben, \textit{Karman}, p. 83.
\bibitem{Derrida2001} See Agamben, \textit{Karman}, p. 82.
\bibitem{Schoeningh2004} Derrida, \textit{Gift}, p. 70.
\bibitem{Zuidema2005} Derrida, \textit{Gift}, p. 71; see also Zuidema, Isaak, p. 15: “[...] die Bindung Isaaks schließt ganz klar und deutlich die gesamte jüdische Geschichte ein, sie umfaßt sie. Immer, wenn man Juden verfolgte, weil sie Juden waren, verlor Abraham seine Kinder.”
\end{thebibliography}
to Genesis 22, this implies that the execution of violence is detached from the *telos* to gain God's blessing or obedience to fear of God. The passage exposes violence, that is, by holding it at a distance from Abraham as its executioner and God as its commander, it performs or visualizes what human bodies are capable of and encourages the search for other possibilities. In this reading of Abraham's gesture with Butler and Agamben, it is not important what God or Abraham intend, but what they perform. They perform the exposure and interruption of violence and thus break the cycle of violence. This is a mechanism René Girard also described:

The children repeat the crimes of their fathers precisely because they believe they are morally superior to them. This false difference is already the mimetic illusion of modern individualism, which represents the greatest resistance to the mimetic truth that is reenacted again and again in human relations. The paradox is that the resistance itself brings about the reenactment.43

A performative reading of the *Aqeda* shifts focus from the involved characters and their intentions, or a moral judgment about their decisions, to what the text does. It does so by fading out other aspects and by leaving some (unanswerable?) questions unanswered, especially as to God's and Abraham's reasons. I therefore do not suggest that such a reading is the best way to deal with ambiguity in Genesis 22. However, it has the advantage of integrating difference: in a performative reading, the passage remains violent. Violence is not dissolved into one of God's voices, Abraham's guilt, a joke or the intended abolition of human sacrifice. It remains there, exposed like a reminder of what humans are capable of. Precisely because it is not dissolved, it nonetheless questions violence as the means to fulfill a divine command. The text is a monument of interrupted violence.

Although a comparison between the scene Butler quotes from Benjamin and the Binding of Isaac is based on a similar ambiguous structure, a significant difference also distinguishes them: Butler's scene is without context. Neither does Benjamin add any context to the gesture. The context of Genesis 22:1–19, however, suggests not only the interruption of violence and possible ways out of it, but it also depicts such a way. Violence is eternally *suspended*44 in the scene between the mother and her daughter. It is *redirected* in Genesis.45

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44 See Butler, *Gesture*, p. 190: “indefinite stall”.
45 It is redirected towards an animal. Posthumanist theories have questioned this human/animal divide; see Sherwood, *Cutting Up Life*. 
When looking at the picture that is simultaneously a rabbit and a duck, the inexperienced spectators have to train their eyes in order to see both pictures in one. I argue in this final section of my paper that the exposure of violence and its context in Genesis 22 is an eye training that turns the eye to a different aspect of the same situation and thus to a redirection of violence.

Two layers of meaning are present from the very beginning of the scene and the information that it is a test. In verse 7 Isaac asks his father where the lamb for their offering is. This either reveals his ignorance or a presentiment of his father’s plans. Abraham replies in verse 8: “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” This sentence is ironic, because it “says something that is not a nontruth, something moreover that, although he doesn’t know it yet, will turn out to be true.” If they do not resort to the reconstruction of unmentioned intentions, the readers do not know whether Abraham deceives Isaac, or if his answer is the expression of what he really hopes. Read again after the end of the story, Abraham’s answer becomes obviously true. It is pivotal like the picture of the rabbit and duck. Then, the way Abraham organizes the sacrifice suggests that this is not going to be a sacrifice according to usual expectations. Normally, the “animal” would first be slaughtered and then put onto the wood to be burnt. Abraham does not conform to usual procedures as he does not mention the deity this sacrifice is dedicated to. The angel of God, however, interrupts the sacrificial act: “But the angel of JHWH called out to him from heaven” (Gen. 22:11). Butler’s analysis of the gesture would end here. In Genesis 22, the story continues after the interruption. The voice from heaven leads Abraham to see the situation from a different angle: “Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns” (Gen. 22:13). The stress on seeing (ראה) creates an intertextual link to the passage’s context within the book of Genesis. In Genesis 21, Hagar does not want to watch her son die in the desert (see Gen 21:16). God’s angel interrupts the situation with similar words as the angel in Genesis 22 interrupts Abraham: “the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her” (Gen. 21:17). The angel leads
her to a way out of the dreadful situation: “Then God opened her eyes and she
saw a well of water” (Gen. 21:19). In Genesis 16:13 she says: “You are the God
who sees me”; “I have now seen the One who sees me.” Like Hagar, Abraham
connects God to his seeing: “So Abraham called that place ‘יהוה will provide’
(יִרְאֶה). And to this day it is said, ‘On the mountain of יהוה it will be provided
(יֵרָאֶה)’” (Gen 22:14). “Providing” is expressed with the same root as “seeing”
that can designate God’s saving activity.51 God’s interruption in Genesis 21 and
22 leads Hagar and Abraham to see a different ending to a seemingly insoluble
situation. He opens Hagar’s eyes and makes Abraham look up.52 She sees the
well; he sees the sacrificial animal Isaac has been asking for and maybe he is
reminded of God’s words he heard before: “Do not be so distressed about the
boy and your slave woman. Listen to whatever Sarah tells you, because it is
through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned” (Gen 21:12 et seq.; NIV).

Derrida states that, in this passage, God is tout autre, the wholly Other,
because he sees without being seen.53 Abraham and Hagar have to act although
they do not see God, whose intentions cannot be fully disclosed. They can only
rely on the idea that God sees them and provides for them.

5 Conclusions

The performative reading of Genesis 22 I offer in this paper connects exegetical
texts with cultural analysis. It applies Judith Butler’s and Giorgio Agamben’s
theories of gesture to the much-discussed Aqeda by focusing on Abraham’s
gesture of the outstretched hand with the knife and its interruption. The pre-

cence of both, the command and the interruption of sacrifice, challenges an

interpretation of the text that resorts to the disclosure of intentions or one

single meaning. I argue that Butler’s and Agamben’s theories offer a way to
deal productively with ambiguity, violence and difference within God’s voice.
A performative interpretation does not try to find an interpretation that keeps
God’s and Abraham’s integrity or resolves ambiguity into one single meaning.
The reading I offer in this paper states that the simultaneity of the depiction
and interruption of violence shows the repeatable character of this scene and
likewise a way out of it. The Aqeda is an example of a restrained violent act that
is first interrupted and then redirected. Violence is exposed; it is not dissolved,

51  Naumann, Preisgabe, p. 39.
52  Michel, Gott, p. 305 underlines the link to Genesis 13:14, where God promises Abraham,
who has to “look up,” land and offspring.
53  Derrida, Gift, pp. 5, 56, 91.
but interrupted. As a monument of human violence, the *Aqeda* attests to the reality of violence without authorizing it.

**Biography**


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