“All the Rest Is Commentary ...”: Being for the Other as the Way to Break the Sacrificial Logic

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Abstract

Feminist criticism recognises two rival sacrifices in the Western philosophical-theological tradition: the motherly sacrifice of childbirth and the near-sacrifice of Isaac (the so-called Akeda; Gen 22). In this paper, I investigate both sacrifices as a self-emptying and transformative process that aims to offer oneself in the place of the other. The argument proceeds in three steps: first, I present the self-sacrifice of childbirth as the moment of identity split and the “being for the other”; second, I interpret Gen 22 as a self-sacrifice (“Here I am”; Gen 22:1c) which calls to responsibility as a possible route to non-sacrificial relations; finally, I question the essentialism that accompanies the Akedah and childbirth in order to liberate both from gender stereotypes and to present them as two different forms of self-sacrifice which seek to break the sacrificial logic of our Western society.

Keywords

childbirth – self-sacrifice – sacrifice – Akedah (Gen 22) – identity – gender

1 Introduction

The term “sacrifice” is used across numerous disciplines (philosophy, theology, sociology, ethnology, anthropology, etc.) and has as a result lost a clear set of contours. Despite different views regarding the intention, form, context, matter
and function of sacrifice, most theorists agree that sacrifice is a medium of communication between people and their deity based on the principle of *do ut des* (I give something up to receive something else back). Sacrifice has its origins in the religious cultic context and although it became in most cases fully secularised, the principle of the economy of exchange remains the same. The only difference is that we no longer “trade” with a deity. Here, however, I will offer a different perspective on sacrifice. Drawing on the work of Søren Kierkegaard, Jacques Derrida, Yvonne Sherwood and Sarah Coakley, I will approach the subject from the existential-phenomenological angle (the individual’s experience of sacrifice).

The story of the near sacrifice of Isaac (Gen 22), the so-called Akedah, has become the paradigmatic sacrificial story of the Western philosophical-theological tradition. The feminist theologian Yvonne Sherwood suggests that the Akedah is a patriarchal type story about sacrifice which is meant to supplant the primary and “natural” sacrifice of childbirth. Nancy Jay, an expert in the sociology of religion, recognises sacrifice (the Akedah included) as “birth done better”, and develops a sharp dialectic between the motherly “sacrifice” of childbirth, which is alien to the patriarchal socio-religious order in which we live and which in our context is portrayed as a pollution, and sacrifice as a purification. Patriarchal religions (the Abrahamic religions arising from the Hebrew Bible) require sacrifice in order to conquer matrilineal (natural) descent. Jay concludes: “The patriarchal narratives tell the story of the resolution of this descent conflict, a resolution in which sacrifice plays a crucial role.” However, as I will put forward in this paper, we can interpret both the self-sacrifice of childbirth and the kind of sacrifice we encounter in stories

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1 For this reason, some scholars refuse to use the term sacrifice altogether. See, for example, Watt, *Ritual and Rhetoric in Leviticus*, p. 174.
2 Robertson Smith contends that sacrifice is a re-affirmation of the union between the social community and its deity; Gladigow focuses on the complexity of sacrificial rituals and describes the variety of intentions, contexts, motives and forms. For a comprehensive overview of the forms and functions of sacrifice and the historical development of research into the issue, see Pongratz-Leisten, *Ritual Killing*.
such as the Akedah as a self-emptying and transformative process of “being for the other”. From such a perspective the two phenomena could come surprisingly close to one another.

I will open the paper by distinguishing the “natural/motherly” sacrifice (self-sacrifice) of childbirth, the sacrifice of women as a social phenomenon that arises from the former, and “sacrificing women” who in response to long-term oppression tend to end up on the side of the oppressor. I will go on to interpret the Akedah not as a patriarchal/phallic sacrifice but as a self-sacrifice which, based on the “Here I am” of Gen 22:1c, calls to responsibility and identity division as a possible route to non-sacrificial relations. The final part will be devoted to gender aspects of sacrifice and questions of gender essentialism. Is the Akedah necessarily a patriarchal, oppressive, phallic sacrifice? Could we not consider both the self-sacrifice of childbirth and Akedah-type sacrifice in the same sense of a self-emptying being for the other, as different forms of the same phenomenon of sacrifice, that is, sacrifice which seeks to break the sacrificial logic on which our society is built?

2 Motherly Self-Sacrifice, the Sacrifice of Women, and “Sacrificing Women”

Childbirth seen as the (ideally) voluntary loss of autonomy and psycho-social and physical comfort on the part of the mother in exchange for the new life to come can to a certain extent be considered the “natural” form of sacrifice, or to be more precise, of self-sacrifice. Kristeva calls the gestation process – which includes conception, pregnancy, childbirth and nursing6 and which affects only women – a radical form of autonomy loss and identity split, a process of self-emptying and self-alienation: in a word, “sacrifice”.7 The mother experiences a loss of autonomy because of the new life developing in her uterus; she experiences an identity split because of the countless moments when she finds herself with a conflict of interest between her own well-being and the well-being of the foetus/child. At a later stage, the mother is “abjected” by the self-emancipating individual, and the emotional bond that co-constituted the newly defined divided identity of the mother is brutally violated. She is, in fact, sacrificed by the newly defined individual, the body from/of/through her body who becomes alien, hostile to her. This experience is extreme and unique in its quality and intensity. It is an example of self-sacrifice and sacrifice par

6 From here onwards, “gestation process”.
7 For more detail, see: Kristeva, Stabat Mater, pp. 180–185.
excellence. It presents sacrifice as a self-emptying and identity-dividing moment which makes the individual both an extremely fragile subject of oppression and a subject who is attentive to the suffering of others and has, therefore, the potential to work against the logic of sacrifice.

However, this “motherly” self-sacrifice is followed by socio-cultural and religious-political consequences which result in the oppression of women. This oppression happens, Kristeva believes, in the realm of language. She conceives two modalities of interpersonal communication: the symbolic and the semiotic. The symbolic stands for firm structures and syntax, typically attributed to paternal structures; the semiotic for the pre-linguistic (e.g., art or poetry), typically attributed to maternal structures. However, every individual (man, woman, or diverse) finds itself in both semiotic and symbolic realms and chooses to communicate through both symbolic and semiotic means. The problem arises, Kristeva continues, with the development of linguistics in a patriarchal society that privileges the symbolic over the semiotic and undermines the importance of semiotic maternal structures for the early developmental stages of the individual before he or she is introduced to the symbolic.

In Kristeva’s view, the main culprits in the disproportion between the symbolic and the semiotic are the monotheistic religions, which encrypted the exclusion of women from the symbolic into their founding myths: “The economy of this system requires that women be excluded from the single true and legislating principle, namely the Word, as well as from the (always paternal) element that gives procreation a social value: they are excluded from knowledge and power.”

This social setting results in the simple fact that the processes of gestation, typical for women, function as deviations – violations – of the social (male) order which make women the primary victims of oppression, or in Kristeva’s terms, of sacrifice. This is no longer the “motherly” self-sacrifice of childbirth but rather the sacrifice of women who are in one way or another alien to the patriarchal social structures and strive daily to adjust to them. Kristeva is convinced that every woman is indebted (pathologically dependent) on the

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9 For more on the semiotic and the symbolic, such as their influence on the development of the individual and their impact on women and sacrifice, see Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, pp. 89–136.
“archaic mother”,\textsuperscript{11} who is a “full, total, englobing mother with no frustration, no separation, with no break-producing symbolism (with no castration, in other words)\textsuperscript{12} This figure is a myth, however. There has never been such a creature. She is merely a fantasy born out of frustration, out of a goal which may never be achieved.

Long-term oppression leads its subjects to overreactions. Kristeva suggests that the “eternal debt to the woman-mother [makes] a woman more vulnerable within the symbolic order, more fragile when she suffers within it, more virulent when she protects herself from it.”\textsuperscript{13} Based on such logic, Kristeva is convinced that women in power are in danger of carrying out their roles in an aggressive manner, whereas women under oppression tend to sacrifice themselves. It is an extremely important observation that ultimately deconstructs gender stereotypes by attributing oppression and patriarchy to anyone in power, whether they be men or women.

Kristeva’s analysis suggests what the empirical observations reveal: that women tend to be victims of oppression and sacrifice more often than are men. Although she speaks about the uniqueness of the gestation processes in relation to the experience of self-emptying and identity split, even Kristeva does not confine the self-emptying experience to women, nor does she exclude men from the experience of a divided identity. Identity discourse is not peculiar to feminism or feminist discourse. In Kristeva’s understanding, sacrifice is a radical self-denying and self-emptying moment which is represented not only by gestation processes but also by many other moments that lead to divisions of identity.

3 Hyphenated Identity and “Being for the Other”

Although Jacques Derrida does not address feminism or gender issues directly,\textsuperscript{14} he became, for his lengthy discussions on identity and responsibility, one of

\textsuperscript{11} Kristeva, \textit{Women’s Time}, p. 29.
\textsuperscript{12} Kristeva, \textit{Women’s Time}, p. 29.
\textsuperscript{13} Kristeva, \textit{Women’s Time}, p. 29; Kristeva identifies the archaic mother with Virgin Mary in \textit{Stabat Mater}, pp. 177–185.
\textsuperscript{14} Derrida’s life-long interpreter Yvonne Sherwood confesses that she is “disappointed with the suspension of the question of ‘the sacrifice of Sarah’ – a suspension in danger of leaving women feeling like an Isaac eternally poised (stuck) between their ‘redeeming angel’ and their ‘knife’; between a sense that the figure of the sacrificed-sacrificing mother might lie at the very heart of all that \textit{The Gift of Death} wants to say about secrets, substitutions, and sacrifice, and (but) that ‘she’ is also just a footnote, a mere paragraph/addendum to
the key sources for various streams of feminist scholarship from Julia Kristeva to Judith Butler and beyond. According to Derrida, the sacrificial character of modern-day society stems from the singular (hegemonic) identities of people who neither admit nor respect otherness. People with singular identities tend to overlook, disrespect, and therefore sacrifice others. This is the sacrificial logic on which our Western society is built.

In his later autobiographical essays on ethics and religion, Derrida is concerned to shatter hegemonic identities and achieve divided (plural/multiple) identities that are ready to embrace otherness and help to work against the sacrificial order. Derrida offers the example of his own life and speaks about a *hyphenated* identity, a term that stems from his experience as a French-speaking Algerian Jew who never felt completely “at home” anywhere: “Arab-Jew, French-Algerian, the Marrano.” The term *hyphenated* is something of a double-edged sword, however, as it increases the attentiveness of its bearer and therefore also the chances of self-sacrifice. According to Derrida, the principal hyphen in our Western society is between Judaism and Islam because of Ishmael and Isaac, the two sons of Abraham, the forefather of all Abrahamic religions. Arab Jews, who include “both brothers” in their bodies, souls and intellects, are literally cut in half; they are *hyphenated*. This hyphen does not, however, leave us empty, deprived of any identity whatsoever. It gives us, on the contrary, the opportunity to assess problems from different points

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15 Interestingly enough, Kristeva rejects Derrida's approach for not acknowledging any sort of constructive aspect to the concept of identity (Kristeva, *Language*, pp. 141–143). Butler on the other hand, follows his lead specifically for this in refusing the “metaphysics of substance” (Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 20 et seq.). Cf. In my own understanding, both Kristeva and Butler overlook the fact that although Derrida indeed talks about the divided (hyphenated) identity and warns against the danger of singular identities, he nevertheless does not conclude (which both Kristeva and Butler assume) that we should give up on any sort of identity. Later on, in this paper, I will argue that Derrida's and Kristeva's (although specifically woman's) divided identities are actually quite close to one another.

16 Derrida, *Gift of Death*, p. 69 et seq.

17 Some Derridean scholars, especially philosophers of religion, argue that Derrida already had ethical aspects in mind in his early writings. See, for example, Newheiser, *Hope in a Secular Age*.


19 Derrida observes: “Exposure to the other can only take the form of powerlessness. The other is he or she before whom I am vulnerable, whom I can not even deny. I can not access the alterity of the other, who will always remain on the other side nor can I deny his or her alterity. I can not say that I open the doors, that I invite the other: the other is already there.” Anonymous, *From the Word to Life: A Dialogue between Jacques Derrida and Hélène Cixous*, p. 10.
of view and therefore to understand better the consequences of our decisions and actions. David Newheiser deflects criticism of Derrida’s deconstruction and negativity and puts forward “the ethical” which presumes some sort of divided identity (rather than no identity): “Derrida’s deconstructive negativity functions as an ethical practice of persistence in the face of vulnerability. In this way [...] Derrida’s negativity is inseparable from an affirmation that resists false assurance.”

As an author and philosopher, Derrida is highly valued by both decisive critics of and circumspect defenders of religion or the religious. Religion plays a distinctive yet important role in Derrida’s work. This role is above all ethical, but to a certain extent Derrida also values the role of religious tradition, which he nonetheless acknowledges as having a double-edged function. Religion has the potential to call to responsibility: “Religion is responsibility, or it is nothing at all”, believes Derrida. Responsibility (in French, responsabilité = responsabilité) is even clearer when we consider the meaning of the word: that we are able to respond. And it is exactly our divided identity, an identity which includes more than one self (Arab-Jew-French; or Christian-Academic-Mother), which is able to divine the different results of our various decisions and actions and makes us responsible (responsible).

When referring to responsibility but also to sacrifice (the entry point of this paper), Derrida continually returns to Abraham, or more particularly to Kierkegaard’s “interpretation of Abraham” (or the Akedah, which according to Jay and Sherwood is meant to replace childbirth) in Fear and Trembling. In The Gift of Death (but not only there), Derrida picks up the “Here I am” of Genesis 22:1. In the logic of The Gift of Death as a systematic exposition of “responsibility as self-sacrifice in place of the other”, the cry supposedly means that Abraham is ready to respond. God calls and Abraham responds, “Here I am” (I am ready, I will do whatever you say). However, if we take a closer look at the biblical text, things become less clear. To whom is Abraham responsible at the moment he cries out? He is supposed to be responsible to himself, his wife Sarah, his son Isaac, his broader family, the people of Israel in spé, and to

20 Newheiser, Hope in a Secular Age, p. 8.
21 Derrida has in mind specifically the Abrahamic religions – Judaism, Christianity, Islam – religions to which he personally feels to be an heir.
22 For more, see Derrida’s life-long friendship with Hélène Cixous, which is intellectually reflected in their respective monographs: Cixous, Jacques Derrida: Portrait of Jacques Derrida as a Young Jewish Saint and Derrida, H. C. For Life, That Is To Say ...
24 Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling.
God.\textsuperscript{25} It appears, however, that Abraham is \textit{able to respond} to God – “Here I am” – but is not responsible to anyone else: in response to Sarah, Isaac and the others, he falls silent.\textsuperscript{26} From all his identities – Abraham the husband, the father,\textsuperscript{27} the protector, the forefather, and many others that arise from his being in the world – Abraham chooses only one: “Abraham the believer”. He is deaf, non-responsive to the others. Is this what God wants from him? Some kind of proof of his unconditional obedience? An obedience that does not consider familial bonds?

The Akedah is certainly a scandalous story. According to the Gadamerian principle of horizons of expectation,\textsuperscript{28} we understand that at the time of composition, the story aroused in its readers and hearers a different understanding from that evoked in us. Israel, a small young nation living under constant threat of attack, needed a leader who would be a strong believer in the cultic God Yhwh. The early Christian church found itself in a similar situation. On closer inspection, however, Søren Kierkegaard, a member of the majority

\begin{itemize}
\item This list begins in the inner circle and expands to broader spheres, but it could start with God. In Abraham's list of preferences, it would presumably do so.
\item In \textit{Fear and Trembling}, silence is one of the leitmotifs of Kierkegaard's interpretation of the binding of Isaac. Even the pseudonym "Johannes de Silentio" was clearly chosen in order to reflect this. Kierkegaard and Sherwood open different scenarios in which they play with the \textit{noticeable absence} of Sarah in the Akedah and Abraham's inability to talk to her, in other words, his \textit{silence}. This is, as Kierkegaard observes, the quality that establishes Abraham as the \textit{knight of faith}. See Kierkegaard, \textit{Fear and Trembling}, p. 71 et seq. Sherwood, on the other hand, argues that the same sort of silence makes Abraham an outcast: he finds himself outside of language, outside of the society. Sherwood, \textit{Harmonies and Discords in Fear and Trembling}, p. 4 et seq.
\item Abraham's fatherhood is one of the key aspects in Gen 12–23. In Gen 15:2–3, we read: “But Abram said, 'O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?' And Abram said, 'You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.'” Nothing that God has already given or promised to Abraham (for example the promise of the land in Gen 12:7) compensates for Abraham's desire to have an heir of his own blood. Moreover, all the promises to Abraham (Gen 12:1–3, 7; 15:4–5, 17:8) include the promise of an heir. The stories of Genesis 18 and 21 are devoted to the miraculous birth of Isaac as Abraham's only (sic!) son whom he loved (Gen 22:2). Abraham's role as a loving father is ambiguous, however, because he arguably had more children (not only Ishmael, about whom he cares little; see Gen 21) but also sons from his wife Keturah to whom he pays little (if any) attention.
\item The horizon of expectation “mediates between the private inception and public reception”. Inception takes place in the here and now and is oriented synchronically: “[I]t is an entirely contingent and syntagmatic relationship between two elements that happen to coincide in time but are otherwise entirely alien to each other.” Reception, on the other hand, is a relationship between the work and its historical setting and is oriented diachronically. Cf. de Man, \textit{Introduction}, p. xiii et seq; see also Gadamer, \textit{Truth and Method}, pp. 301–306.
\end{itemize}
Danish Lutheran church, found the story scandalous. *Fear and Trembling* presents the authentic struggle of a young thinker to find a way through the text in faith and without despair. Kierkegaard reads the story through the lens of faith and the eschatological hope that God will ultimately spare Isaac's life and that Abraham himself will receive his place in the kingdom of heaven.\(^{29}\) The title of Kierkegaard's book alludes to our need to “work out [our] salvation in *fear and trembling*” (Phil 2:12).

How can we read such a problematic text with the eyes of the twenty-first-century reader? If we want to follow the reasonings concerning sacrifice provided by Kierkegaard and Derrida, we are bound to admit that what is at stake is the sacrifice of Abraham, that is, Abraham's self-sacrifice, not the sacrifice of Isaac. Although Derrida recognises multiple sacrifices taking place in the Akedah,\(^{30}\) like Kierkegaard he ultimately interprets only that of Abraham's self-sacrifice.\(^{31}\) Thus Derrida chooses Abraham's sacrificial identity. If, despite all the problems rightly pointed out by feminist scholarship,\(^{32}\) we admit that the Akedah is about Abraham's self-sacrifice, does Derrida's interpretation of the “Here I am” carry any meaning for our discussion of identity?

In the biblical text, Abraham's call to sacrifice Isaac comes from God. Kierkegaard, a child of his times, does not dispute this assumption, but Derrida does not take it for granted. For Derrida, the call to which we are to respond with “Here I am” comes not from God but from our neighbour.\(^{33}\) In *Faith and Knowledge*, Derrida affirms that God is witness to our response when someone calls us by name and that we should be ready to answer “Here I am” (Gen 22:1c). This is what it means to be responsive and responsible. And this is one of Derrida's definitions of religion – one that calls our identity into question and reminds us of the voices calling for our response; one that divides our identity

\(^{29}\) According to the Kierkegaardian scholarship, Abraham already had, through his faith, hope that his son would be spared. Krishek, *Kierkegaard on Faith and Love*, p. 97; see also Marion, *Reason of the Gift*, pp. 69–93. Derrida, on the contrary, argues that Abraham had given up all hope that his son would survive: “[God] gives [Abraham] back his son after assuring himself that Abraham has trembled, renounced all hope, and irrevocably decided to sacrifice his beloved son to him”. Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, p. 95.


\(^{31}\) Feminist scholars such as Sarah Coakley and Yvonne Sherwood criticise Derrida (but also Kierkegaard) for forgetting that it is primarily Isaac's life and Abraham's faith that is at stake.

\(^{32}\) See, for example, Yvonne Sherwood, who interprets the Akedah as the sacrifice of Sarah; or Sarah Coakley, who points towards the fact that Western philosophy, specifically Kierkegaard and Derrida, forget that it was Isaac who was supposed to be sacrificed and that we should therefore talk about him.

\(^{33}\) This is the point where Derrida comes very close to Emmanuel Levinas.
and makes us responsible. This “Here I am” of Gen 22:1c where Abraham offers up the future of his son, the whole of Israel, but most importantly (following Derrida) himself, makes us attentive to the needs of others to the point of offering ourselves in the place of others, and this makes us non-sacrificial beings.

God is there as witness to the call but also as witness to our response. It is the Abrahamic “Here I am” which prevents the sacrifice of my neighbour but which also, inevitably, brings with it the sacrifice of myself, my self-sacrifice.34 Even if we decide not to respond, that is itself a response:

Even if, during the response, in the determined content of a reply, I were to say “no”; even if I were to declare “no, no and no. I am not there, I will not come, I am leaving, I withdraw, I desert, I’m going to the desert, I am not one of your own nor am I facing you,” [...] well then, this “no” will have said “yes,” “yes, I am here to speak to you,” I am addressing you in order to answer “no, here I am to deny, disavow, or refuse”.35

Derrida insists that a call to responsibility is a personal call which cannot be picked up or transferred to anyone else. Heidegger’s concept of being towards death,36 in other words, human finitude, is Derrida’s cornerstone for the formulation of our unique personal responsibility. Derrida believes that it is “from the site of death as the place of my irreplaceability, that is, of my singularity, that I feel called to responsibility. [...] No one can die for me if ‘for me’

34 In Abraham, the Other, Derrida plays with the possibility that we answer even though we may not be the addressees of the call; or there may be no call at all. (This is indeed a question that is highly appropriate to our secular age, but not one addressed by this paper.) See: “This other other Abraham was ready to respond and answer the call, or to answer to the test of the election, but he was not sure of having been called, not sure that it was he himself and not another. [...] He was afraid of being ridiculous, like someone who, hard of hearing, would come to answer ‘yes,’ ‘here I am,’ without having been called himself, without having been designated; or who would rush to answer the call addressed to another, like a bad student, for example, who from the back of the class, Kafka says, would think that he heard his own name, whereas the teacher had honoured another, having meant to reward only the very best student of the class.” Derrida, Abraham, the Other, p. 312.

35 Derrida, Abraham, the Other, p. 313. A counter narrative to the Akedah as interpreted by Derrida, in other words, as a story about being responsive to the call, would be the story of the prophet Jonah, who flees from God and does the complete opposite of what he is instructed to do. However, even with this example, we can see that a non-response is in fact a certain and very concrete response. Cf. J. Richard Middleton who plays with the idea that the counter-story to Abraham’s silence in Genesis 22 is the book of Job. Middleton suggests that Job in his opposition to God presents the desirable dynamics between God and humans. Middleton, Abraham’s Silence, pp. 167, 188–190.

36 Heidegger, Being and Time.
means instead of me, in my place.”37 Emmanuel Levinas presents a similar idea to Derrida’s notion of the irreplaceability of one’s own death and one’s own responsibility. Levinas suggests that the call to responsibility is unique to us:

The word responsible is but another way of expressing what I call being for the other […]. It is as if it were a priori and consequently as if I were not free to divest myself of that responsibility, as if I were atoning, behaving as a hostage. […] What is important to me is that behind each individual, who is just anyone within their genes, I am the only one who can do it. All the rest is commentary. The freedom of free choice is not, in my view, the first human event. […] Here freedom means doing something that no one else can do in my place.38

For Levinas, it is our neighbour who is the middle term between us and God:39 it is the neighbour who calls us to responsibility even if there were no God or if God were to stay silent.

Most intriguingly, Derrida clarifies the relationship between religion and sacrifice through responsibility and the dividing of one’s identity. Although the following quotation comes from Faith and Knowledge, it could be a summary of The Gift of Death. Derrida observes: “Religion, as a response that is both ambiguous and ambivalent … is thus an ellipsis: the ellipsis of sacrifice,”40 whereby sacrifice means “the gift of one’s own death for the other – standing out for the other” and religion embraces the experience of belief and the experience of sacredness.41 In the words of Levinas, it is the programme of “Thou shalt make me live”.42 And thus we return to where we began this section, to responsibility and what it (at least in Derrida) inevitably brings, namely self-sacrifice.43

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38  Levinas/Guwy, What No One Else Can Do in My Place, p. 300 et seq.
39  Westphal, Levinas and Kierkegaard in Dialogue, p. 70 et seq.
40  Derrida, Faith and Knowledge, p. 88.
41  “[…] the experience of belief (trust, trustworthiness, confidence, faith, the credit accorded the good faith of the utterly other in the experience of witnessing) and, on the other, the experience of sacredness, even holiness, of the unscathed that is safe and sound (heilig, holy).” Derrida, Faith and Knowledge, p. 72.
42  Levinas/Guwy, What No One Else Can Do in My Place, p. 300.
43  “Hence: autoimmunization and the sacrifice of sacrifice. The latter always represents the same movement, the price to pay for not injuring or wrongdoing the absolute other. Violence of sacrifice in the name of non-violence. Absolute respect enjoins first and foremost sacrifice of self, of one’s most precious interest. […] Self-sacrifice thus sacrifices the most proper in the service of the most proper.” Derrida, Faith and Knowledge, p. 88.
Derrida, sadly, does not focus on questions of gender. However, he makes a noteworthy point when he speaks about the phallus and its connection to violence and sacrifice. He insists that the phallus is not the domain of men only and raises the subject of pregnancy. Although, as pointed out above, pregnancy represents an unstable cocktail of emotions and states of the self, one of these being the division of identity and the loss of autonomy, one such emotion, an aggressive, overprotective and self-centred counter-reaction, could be called simply “phallic”. Derrida observes:

One could, without being arbitrary, read, select, connect everything in the semantic genealogy of the unscathed – ‘saintly, sacred, safe and sound, *heilig*, holy’ – that speaks of force, life-force, fertility, growth, augmentation, and above all *swelling*, in the spontaneity of erection or of pregnancy.

This observation includes another potential two-edged sword in relation to pregnancy, and that is its “patriarchal” character and a superior, arrogant, and aggressive behaviour towards the other. However, while drawing together his thoughts on the phallus – the phallus that earlier he claimed was gender-neutral – Derrida nevertheless concludes:

And this would perhaps be the place to enquire why, in the most lethal explosions of violence that is inevitably ethnic-religious – why, on all sides, women in particular are singled out as victims (not “only” of murders, but also of the rapes and mutilations that precede and accompany them).

For some reason perhaps known only to himself, Derrida chooses to leave the question of gender floating in the air.

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44 I addressed these two extreme reactions to long-term oppression while discussing the primary sacrifice of women in the first part of this paper.


Gendered Sacrifice: Sacrifice as Battle or Reconciliation?

Sherwood picks up the question of gender and sacrifice right where Derrida decides to drop it. Unlike Derrida, Sherwood is convinced that this question is of central importance. For her – a biblical scholar by training – the Akedah, chosen by her teacher Derrida as the entry point to the sacrificial discourse, functions very well. Her interest, nonetheless, has always been questions of gender rather than Derrida’s notion of personal universal responsibility. Although Sherwood continually builds on Derrida’s analysis, her interpretation of the Akedah acquires a different shape from Derrida’s. From the beginning she refuses to adopt Derrida’s premise that it is Abraham’s self-sacrifice that is at stake and shines the light rather on Isaac and Sarah. From her perspective, the Akedah is a patriarchal sacrifice which is meant to replace the “natural” motherly self-sacrifice of childbirth. Rather than Derrida’s universal idea of responsibility, of the “Here I am” for the other, it is Jay’s gender dialectics that is in Sherwood’s mind when she observes: “As a ‘sacrificial’ scene, where a burst of future sons is generated through an almost cut in Isaac’s body, Genesis 22 can be seen as a perverse displacement of birth.” It is a story about patrilineal descent which is necessary to maintain, or rather introduce, the patriarchy of the newly arising cult of the God Yhwh and which was not inherent to ancient Canaan. “Why,” asks Sherwood, “are women excluded from sacrifice? Why is sacrifice seen as more important than reproduction?” Answering her own question, she continues: “By being prepared to offer up one son, Abraham received a nation/cosmos full of sons.” Sherwood’s criticism does not end with the Akedah; she also criticises Abraham himself. He is not a knight of faith, as he is for Kierkegaard, but an isolated antihero who condemned himself to exclusion from the community because he does not use the universal means of communication, that is, language. Abraham is scandalous. But not only him. The whole Akedah is scandalous because it opens up a fatal wound, a separation, between religion and ethics (even if the

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47 Sherwood, And Sarah Died, p. 267.
48 Sherwood, Passion – Binding – Passion, p. 211. See also: “At the last minute, Abraham’s hand was stayed, and he offered a ram in place of Isaac. By this act, Isaac, on the edge of death, received his life not by birth from his mother but from the hand of his father as directed by God (Elohim); and the granting of life was a deliberate, purposeful act rather than a mere natural process, a special ‘birth’ accomplished without female assistance.” Jay, Throughout Your Generations Forever, p. 102.
49 Jay, Throughout Your Generations Forever, pp. 94–111.
50 Sherwood, Harmonies and Discords in Fear and Trembling, p. 5.
51 “The scandal of Abraham is that he sacrifices the particular good, which is Isaac, and the universal good, which is Isaac, because the universal (that is Israel) as yet only exists
sacrifice was not executed). It is still more scandalous because it is one of the founding narratives of the world’s three great monotheistic religions.52

Sherwood is certainly onto something when she offers her interpretation of the Akedah as the sacrifice of Sarah and her body.53 To make her case clearer, Sherwood introduces a wordplay between Akedah (binding) and Akerah (barrenness): “Sacrifice is ‘birth done better’ when birth cannot happen; binding is necessary because the body of the mother does not work.”54 Birth brings to life one individual (Isaac), whereas binding brings billions of believers (from all of the three global monotheistic religions).55

My own analysis is indebted to Kristeva’s premise of conceiving a feminist discourse which overcomes both the battle of the sexes (first generation feminism) and women escaping into their own world of maternal jouissance (second generation feminism).56 In my view, Sherwood's analysis is too deeply rooted in the dialectics of Abraham as the oppressive patriarch and Sarah as the oppressed victim, and is therefore unable to reveal the latter’s numerous “phallic/patriarchal” actions in the stories surrounding the Akedah.57 Abraham is not in fact some kind of macho man who bosses everyone around and as a final act of patriarchy eagerly complies with God’s command to sacrifice his son Isaac.58 If we look at him as he is described in the patriarchal narratives

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‘in Isaac’s loins’ [...] as Isaac’s seed.” Sherwood, *Harmonies and Discords in Fear and Trembling*, p. 4.


55 Both Derrida and Sherwood acknowledge the share of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in this sacrificial story.

56 Kristeva, *Women’s Time*.

57 Sherwood makes a special case out of the story of Sarah’s burial in Gen 23, arguing that Abraham repeatedly insisted on paying for Sarah’s burial place (in fact overpaying for it) in order to being done with Sarah (sacrificing her). Sherwood, *And Sarah Died*, pp. 267–269. This is indeed an interesting point, which also arises largely from Derrida’s analysis. However, the extent to which it really condemns Abraham for his irredeemable patriarchy will probably always remain a question.

58 Christopher Heard offers an interesting view when he plays with the idea of the “sacrifice of Ishmael” in Gen 21 being a parallel to Gen 22. Heard suggests that Abraham might not have loved Isaac better than Ishmael as he did not even try to protest against the command to harm him, as he did in the case of Lot (Gen 14), Sodom (Gen 18), and Ishmael (Gen 21). Heard, *Triangulating Responsibility*, p. 157; Middleton’s observation: “[...] we should note that this reference to Abraham’s love for Isaac is not actually stated as a fact by the narrator (as is typically assumed by commentators) but occurs as what is effectively a parenthetical description of Isaac in God’s instructions to Abraham. [...] Could it be that Abraham’s actions are meant to reveal whether or not he loves Isaac”? Middleton, *Abraham’s Silence*, p. 172 et seq.
(Gen 12–23), he is perhaps more of a weak and indecisive “non-patriarchal” character who does what he is told by God (Gen 12:1–7; 22:1–19) and Sarah (Gen 16:2–6; 21:6–10), and who sometimes acts out of fear (Gen 12:13); exceptions to this image can be found in Gen 14:14–22 and Gen 18:16–33 where Abraham shows bravery, courage and determination. Abraham is clearly far from being a simple and straightforward fellow. He is rather, as Oona Eisenstadt argues, an indecisive (perhaps weak or “torn”) “Bartleby character”. Eisenstadt suggests we “liberate” Abraham from having to be the knight of faith and prototype of patriarchy. Can we rather think of him as an example of a “torn/divided” identity? Perhaps so. Let us consider Sarah from a similar point of view. What is the image of Sarah in the patriarchal narrative? Chapters 16 and 21 of Genesis narrate Sarah’s plan to conceive a child through her handmaid Hagar. In these narratives, Sarah’s behaviour towards Hagar is aggressive, oppressive, patriarchal one may say, and the phallic drive appears clear. Sarah is a problematic character to say the least. Although subjected to the oppression of the patriarchal structures, she nonetheless decides to reinforce these hostile structures and oppress those who are subjected to her (Hagar and her son Ishmael). Kristeva warns that women who find themselves in power in highly patriarchal structures tend to show less compassion to their subjects than do their male counterparts. And thus Sarah, within the same logic, rather than further divide her naturally divided motherly identity, she decides, in the same over-reaction to long-term oppression described by Kristeva, to unify it into a hegemonic, oppressive, sacrificial identity.

The feminist theologian Sarah Coakley enters the fray when she seeks to pursue sacrifice (including the Akedah) as a legitimate expression of the Christian life. She is convinced, moreover, that women, with their life experience – and historical experience – can help to redirect the patriarchal and oppressive form of sacrifice towards a more desirable, non-oppressive form (the “Here I am”) and to open up a form of “being for the other” to the whole of society that afflicts men and women in more equal measure. She argues that sacrifice “rightly understood” is the proper means for a feminist transformation that has its source in God. I will now seek to unravel this enigmatic construction (or “bold assertion” as Coakley herself puts it).

59 See also the parallel stories in Gen 15 and 17.
60 Eisenstadt observes: “So maybe, just maybe, we are being led to look at Abraham from a different perspective, to look for an Abraham who is less preferential, and more torn.” Eisenstadt, Preferring or not Preferring, p. 175.
61 Kristeva, Women’s Time, p. 29.
With numerous references to Kierkegaard and Derrida, Coakley chooses the binding of Isaac as the point of departure for her discussion of sacrifice, and on her journey, she seeks to overcome both of these masters of the Western philosophical tradition by emphasising the aspect of gender. Coakley skilfully balances the gender-biased legacy of the Akedah – which in our context calls for a decisive rebuttal – and the possibility of moving beyond this pernicious legacy and explores fresh ways to interpret this foundational story. She agrees that the Akedah can be interpreted as a paradigmatic exposition of male supremacy but argues that the feminine is nonetheless powerfully present in the figure of Isaac. It is Isaac to whom we should (re)direct our attention when searching for gendered aspects of sacrifice: he is, after all, the one to be sacrificed. Coakley, in short, interprets Isaac as a feminine figure. Examples of this interpretation in the history of the reception of the Akedah in art and iconography can be seen in, for example, Rembrandt’s painting “Abraham’s Sacrifice” and certain images at the Monastery of St. Anthony in the Sinai.

Coakley is convinced that the only way to conquer patriarchal violence is sacrifice rightly understood. As becomes clear from Coakley’s exposition, this rightly understood refers to Derrida’s understanding of the “Here I am”, of the “being for the other” through self-emptying. Coakley is equally convinced that to conquer sacrifice through self-sacrifice, we must understand this sacrifice as the essentially self-giving, self-emptying moment. In religious discourse this is known as kenosis, which Coakley insists is feminine in nature: “I seek to demonstrate that only sacrifice, rightly understood, can account for a feminist transformation of the self that is radically ‘theonomous,’ rooted and sustained in God.” In Coakley’s system, rightly understood means the self-giving and self-emptying (kenotic) sacrifice-for-God which “interrupts the fixed repressive gender binary of patriarchy” as opposed to the self-assertive sacrifice-for-the-world which “re-establishes the violence of mandatory ‘heteronormativity’

62  “[…] is not the akedah the archetypal male myth, the utter inverse of anything feminist? Is it not, after all, precisely the exclusion of the ‘feminine’ that is the distinctive characteristic of the cultic act of sacrifice, an intentional supplanting, perhaps, of the primal ‘feminine’ sacrificial power of childbirth? Is it not the necessary violence of such sacrifice that condones, justifies, and even glorifies the abuse of the powerless (including, of course, women and children)? Is it not precisely the establishment of “patriarchal” religion that is the telos of this story, with its adulation of unthinking male obedience, even unto death, and its promise thereby of future generations of sons as yet unborn? My answer to these classic feminist charges will be both Yes and No.” Coakley, In Defense of Sacrifice, p. 18. I discuss the “classic feminist charges” above in the work of Jay and Sherwood.
64  Doerfler, Echoes of the Akedah: Jephthah’s Daughter and the Maccabean Mother.
and male dominance.” In this sense, Coakley sees Isaac as the ideal of the feminist sacrifice for God: “Isaac, in short, is the type of the one who triumphs over human powerlessness, not by a false, compensatory will-to-power and further patriarchal violence, but through the subtler power of a transformative divine interruption.”

This is a key and brilliant observation, but my first concern is whether femininity is really the key aspect of the kenotic sacrifice for God. To seek a more equal distribution of the sacrificial “Here I am”, must we really base our gender analysis on dichotomy and essentialism?

The Oxford theologian Simon Podmore could be of help here. Podmore navigates his interpretation of the binding of Isaac in a similar direction, looking for the kenotic moment in the Akedah. His focus nonetheless remains on Abraham. In an original but plausible explanation of Abraham’s famous evasion in Gen 22:8b (“God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.”), Podmore argues that this may not after all be a way to escape his responsibility for the sacrifice of his son but a clever way to pass this responsibility back onto God where it belongs (it was God who asked for it in the first place). And thus, Podmore believes, it was Abraham who conquered God through the same “subtler power of transformative divine interruption” that Coakley attributes to Isaac. Podmore argues:

In the radically Lutheran terms, Abraham “overcomes God by his powerlessness,” expressing faith’s secret and the link between sacrifice and silence through the word that “God will provide for himself.” [...] Abraham concedes that he will not oppose God but will instead, like Job, embrace powerlessness in the face of his ordeal [Prøvelse], placing his faith in the unchanging love of God.

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66 Coakley, In Defense of Sacrifice, p. 31. However, even this formulation creates space for gender stereotypes. Annie Selak observes: “Perhaps no phrase better captures the misguided sentiment of instructing women to endure abuse than kenosis or ‘self-emptying.’” Selak, Orthodoxy, Orthopraxis, and Orthopathy, p. 529.

67 Coakley, In Defense of Sacrifice, p. 18. See also: “Here, if I am right, is ‘power-in-vulnerability’, the willed effacement to a gentle omnipotence which, far from ‘contemplating’ masculinism, acts as its undoing.” Coakley, Powers and Submissions, p. 37.

68 “My son” in Abraham’s response may refer to two grammatic features: firstly, to the vocative; secondly, to the apposition which would be written without the comma and would identify Isaac with the sacrificial animal. Whereas the first possibility allows for Podmore’s interpretation, the second one clearly excludes it. See Trible, Genesis 22, p. 176.

69 Podmore, The Sacrifice of Silence, p. 90. There are some phenomena, such as the fact that Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled the donkey, and cut the wood (Gen 22:3) and left the servants behind (Gen 22:4), that trouble biblical critics both Jewish and Christian
In similar vein, Ronald Krebs suggests that “power structures are most certainly skewed when it comes to God and man, and overt resistance is impossible when God issues a direct command. [...] Adopting a posture of stoical silence is what the powerless have learned to do [...].” The idea that the archetypal patriarch conquers patriarchy by a self-emptying move is a brilliant insight.

The question remains: What do we do with Isaac? Although I agree with Coakley that we should include him in the story, I would issue a warning before we hasten to attribute feminine features and qualities to him. The submissiveness depicted in the story and reflected in the body language captured in art and iconography has served to suppress women for centuries. I find it strange, therefore, to rejoice in his “feminine” sacrifice. The gender stereotyping of the submissive and silent Isaac as a woman-like figure with womanly features is as old as the first attempts to crystallise the binding of Isaac in an image, but building on such stereotyping is far from helpful. Pamela Sue Anderson warns against the danger of applying such notions of submission to women alone, especially within the religious discourse in which Coakley also operates:

Female autonomy tends to be obscured and/or destroyed by the compulsory norms of sensitivity and attentiveness to the suffering of others under conditions of oppression, precisely when the sensitive and attentive woman herself is already suffering her own religious form of gender oppression.

In other words, Anderson rejects the lauding of feminine submission within the religious-social (or any other) context.

Coakley does not of course laud female submission or the oppression of women per se. In Powers and Submissions, she warns against the post-war Christian theology which seeks to discover a weak God (as opposed to a sovereign God) and to present this weak God as the ideal. From the feminist point of view, however, this weakness, which appears to equate to the submission...
typically attributed to women, is hardly a step forward on the journey to empowering women.73 Daphne Hampson adds: “The gospel of powerlessness has been appropriated by those to whom it should never have been directed.”74 Nevertheless, I fear that Coakley’s interpretation of the divine interruption from the side of the feminine Isaac argues in similar vein.

5 Conclusion

I do not believe that ponderings such as Derrida’s into the “lethal explosions of violence” to which women are subjected can be solved on the basis of gender essentialism and dichotomy. In these pages, we have explored two potentially self-emptying and transformative but certainly radical and life-changing moments: childbirth and sacrifice. It is childbirth that lies behind the fact that women are “singled out as victims” as Kristeva contends. The other sacrifice, the Akedah, is singled out by feminist scholars as patriarchal, oppressive, and phallic. Derrida does not conceive the Akedah as gendered; Jay, Sherwood and Coakley insist on its essentially gendered character. My own view is that although there are clear marks of a phallic and aggressive will to power, we cannot simply distribute this quality and its opposite among the respective male and “female”75 characters. Thus, for the reasons I have explored, my answer to Coakley’s question “Is the Akedah the patriarchal sacrifice which should substitute the womanly sacrifice of childbirth?” would be “no”. We could, should, on the contrary, think of the Akedah as a self-emptying, identity-dividing and transforming process which has the potential to break the logic of sacrifice. Interestingly, from this perspective the Akedah comes close to the motherly self-sacrifice of childbirth.

The problem is that even though we could think of the Akedah (as the archetypal type-story) as a universal call to the responsibility of the “Here I am” for the other, the motherly self-sacrifice of childbirth will always remain gendered. Kristeva looks for a way out of this impasse by searching for the “pre-oedipal” (pre-sexual) self-less and hyphenated imaginary “father”, a “Third Party” who secures the necessary conditions for the healthy psychic development of the child.76 She also assumes in this Third Party (or simply the third) a “pre-oedipal” mother whose (sexual) desire is beyond the child:

73 Coakley, Powers and Submissions, p. xv.
74 Hampson, On Power and Gender, p. 239.
75 If we agree to call Isaac feminine, as suggested by Coakley.
76 Kristeva, Freud and Love, p. 250 et seq.
The loving mother [...] is someone who has an object of desire; beyond that, she has an Other with relation to whom the child will serve as go-between. She will love her child with respect to that other, and it is through a discourse aimed at that Third Party that the child will be set up as 'loved' for the mother:77

The mother who desires beyond her child and to be loved through her child does not become an abject sacrificed by her child and the patriarchal society and her shattered identity is given space to heal. To achieve this goal (rather than engaging oneself in the battle of the sexes or escaping into maternal jouissance), Kristeva calls for “acknowledgement of what is irreducible [...] in the quest of each one – and of women, after all – for an appropriate fulfilment.”78

Derrida and Levinas speak about God who serves as the third who witnesses the self-emptying moment of self-sacrifice, the “Here I am for the other”, in the Akedah. Similarly, Kristeva comes close to the idea of the witness when she theorises: “It is in the eyes of a Third Party that the baby the mother speaks to becomes a he, it is with respect to others that ‘I am proud of you,’ and so forth.”79

I therefore suggest that we could think the metaphor of childbirth, in which a father, a friend, or a partner – male or female – is the object of the mother’s desire as the third who would be drafted in and transformed by this radical self-emptying and identity-dividing event and who would, in response, offer the mother their “Here I am”. Such a “Here I am” would testify to the divided identity of the third (the witness) and implicitly also help to piece together the shattered identity of the mother. It could serve as the divine unspoken promise or as an expression of Abraham’s hope in the Akedah (as interpreted by Sharon Krishek or Jean-Luc Marion)80 that in the end, everything will turn out well. Thus, even the utterly womanly/motherly self-sacrifice of childbirth could be less essentialist and dichotomic (mother-child against the rest of the world),81 a more open event, an invitation, in the metaphorical sense, to transformation and identity division which may ultimately help to break the sacrificial (patriarchal) logic.

77 Kristeva, *Freud and Love*, p. 250 et seq.
81 Kristeva suggests that “clinical experience has led us to ascertain that the advent of the Vater der persönlichen Vorzeit [the pre-oedipal father] takes place thanks to the assistance of the so-called pre-Oedipal mother, to the extent that she can indicate to her child that her desire is not limited to responding to her offspring’s request [...].” Kristeva, *Freud and Love*, p. 256.
Biography

Katerina Koci is a post-doctoral researcher at the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna, Austria, and a laureate of the Lise Meitner Fellowship funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) for the project entitled *Woman without a Name: Gender Identity in Sacrificial Stories* (M2947-G). After defending her doctoral dissertation from KU Leuven, Belgium, in 2017, Katerina held a fellowship at Charles University, Prague. She has recently completed the project *The Land without Promise: The Roots and Afterlife of One Biblical Allusion*, which resulted in a monograph of the same title (published by Bloomsbury, August 2021). Katerina’s research focus is biblical, feminist and philosophical-theological hermeneutics, the afterlife of biblical motifs in Christian culture, and the existentialism and phenomenology of sacrificial experience.

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