

**AN UNDERSTANDING OF ABRAHAM THROUGH HEIDEGGER AND DERRIDA: A
STUDY ON THE ETHICS OF ABRAHAM IN THE QUR'AN.**

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"Happy Winds-day, Piglet," said Pooh as Piglet bumped into his stomach, the small creature blown around by the rather blustery day.

"Well it isn't... very happy... for me!" Piglet exclaimed as he fought the winds.

"Where are you going Piglet?" Pooh asked, as Piglet is again almost swept away by the wind.

"That's what I'm asking myself, Where?!" Piglet cried as he was completely picked up off the ground by the wind. He lunged for one end of his green scarf with Pooh quickly grabbing a hold of the other end.

"And what do you think you will answer yourself?" said Pooh.

The journey for this paper has been longer than I initially thought it would be. But that does not make the journey less sweet as I ask myself where I am going. For I immediately wonder what will I answer myself. There are many people to thank for the poking, prodding, pushing, shoving, cajoling, and patience required to see me through this paper. To my parents, with their unceasing love and support. To all my professors, who probably weren't sure exactly where I was going all the time with my papers but gave me good grades on them anyway. To Jason Bivins of North Carolina State University, my undergraduate mentor and professor who let me take all of his classes and some of them twice. To Richard McGregor, Victor Anderson, and David Wood of Vanderbilt University, who always listened when I tried to muddle through what was in my head even though it never came out quite right. And finally, to the lady who listened to me talk about this paper way too much, a truly wonderful person, Allison. Thank you all, and Mā šā'Allāh.

*Discourse, composed of speaking and silence,
is grounded in hearing.
"Only he who already understands can listen."¹*

¹ Walsh, David. The Modern Philosophical Revolution: The Luminosity of Existence. Cambridge University Press (Cambridge, 2008). Page, 253: quoting Heidegger.

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INTRODUCTION

To be clear, we are here to discuss the story of Abraham, or Ibrahim, as he is known in the Qur'an, and his son. We wish to examine the ethical content of the attempted sacrifice of Abraham's son. To do this we will begin by discussing the story as it appears in the Qur'an. This will be followed by an examination of the differences present in three Shi'ite accounts of the story. This will be followed by a discussion of the story and its interpretation by the Sufi mystic and philosopher, Ibn al-'Arabi and commentaries on his works. Upon which will follow the bulk of the paper, which is the examination of this story in light of the work of Jacques Derrida. This work will be introduced by examining the work of Martin Heidegger and Emmanuel Levinas. We will specifically examine the ideas of decision, hospitality, and the gift as presented by Derrida and as it relates to the story of Abraham. We will show that the philosophy of Derrida provides a new re-interpretation of the story of Abraham and that it does not fall outside the bounds of Islamic ethics. We will show that the story of Abraham benefits from an analysis using the concepts of the gift, decision, and hospitality.

After such a stirring introduction, how could one not be excited to delve further into the mysteries of the Qur'an and explore one of the most famous, most discussed stories of the Hebrew Bible? The story that most people are familiar with concerning the Sacrifice, as it is capitalized and often referred to as, is the story from the Hebrew Bible, specifically the Book of Genesis, where Abraham takes his son

Isaac, his only son [not really his only son], to the top of Mount Moriah and offers him in sacrifice to God. The devil is in the details as they say, and in the commentaries of the Qur'an the devil actually makes an appearance, and it is these details, which we will be examining. The story in the Qur'an has the same basic outline as the one presented in the Hebrew Bible with some stylistic, structural, and procedural differences. Most importantly, and this we will go into in much greater detail later on is the story of the son, Isaac or Ishmael, for the Qur'an is not specific and merely refers to the sacrifice of "his son,"² the sacrifice of "my son,"³ "O my son!"⁴ "my dear son."⁵

Perhaps, to begin with, we should concentrate on the story as it appears in the Qur'an. The original is, of course, in Arabic but there are many beautiful translations into English; the one below is by an early twentieth century Islamic scholar named Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall. The story of the sacrifice of Isaac or Ishmael appears in *Sûrah* 37, entitled *Al-Sāffāt*, which is translated as "The Arrangers" or "The Rangers." The story of the sacrifice is given in ayahs 99 through 113 and is as follows:

And he [Abraham] said:

Lo! I am going unto my Lord Who will guide me.

My Lord! Vouchsafe me of the righteous.

So We gave him tidings of a gentle son.

And when (his son) was old enough to walk with him, (Abraham) said:

O my dear son, I have seen in a dream that I must sacrifice thee. So

look, what thinkest thou? He (the son) said: O my father! Do that

which thou art commanded. Allah willing, thou shalt find me of the

2 Qur'an 37:102 [Pickthall translation] (<http://www.quranbrowser.org/index.html>).

3 Qur'an 37:102 [Khalifa translation] (<http://www.quranbrowser.org/index.html>).

4 Qur'an 37:102 [Yusuf Ali translation] (<http://www.quranbrowser.org/index.html>).

5 Qur'an 37:102 [Pickthall translation].

steadfast.
 Then, when they had both surrendered (to Allah), and he (Abraham)
 had flung him (the son) down upon his face,
 We (Allah) called unto him: O Abraham!
 Thou hast already fulfilled the vision. Lo! thus do We reward the
 good.
 Lo! that verily was a clear test.
 Then We ransomed him with a tremendous victim.
 And We left for him among the later folk (the salutation):
 Peace be unto Abraham!
 Thus do We reward the good.
 Lo! he is one of Our believing slaves.
 And we gave him tidings of the birth of Isaac, a prophet of the
 righteous.
 And We blessed him and Isaac. And of their seed are some who do
 good, and some who plainly wrong themselves.⁶

The tale is situated in a group of stories about the prophets; it is preceded by a story of Noah/Nuh and followed by a story of Moses/Musa and Aaron/Harūn. The echo of this story in the Hebrew Bible appears in Genesis 22:1-19. Perhaps the primary difference between the two stories, as mentioned before, is that in the Hebrew Bible and in the Christian tradition, the son that is to be sacrificed is Isaac where as in the Qur'anic tradition the son to be sacrificed is unnamed. This has provided considerable discussion for the commentators of the Qur'an on which son was to be the object of sacrifice.⁷ A brief summary of the positions taken by early Islamicate scholars is as follows. For, "indeed, [concerning Isaac or Ishmael] people like Jāhiz (d. 255 H.), Ya'qūbī (d. 282 H.), and Tustarī (d. 283 H.) could be distinguished among third century scholars who refrained from taking any definite position on the

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ The most thorough discussion of the sacrifice and the surrounding stories of Abraham/Ibrāhīm is Journeys in Holy Lands: The Evolution of the Abraham-Ishmael Legends in Islamic Exegesis by Reuven Firestone (p. 116ff). Though Suliman Bashear also explored it in an article entitled "Abraham's Sacrifice of his Son and Related Issues." See bibliography for full citation information.

matter. Though it is the early fourth century Zajjaj (d. 311 H.) whose outward refrainment (sic) was noted by later sources as “a third [distinct] view” (*madhhab thālith*), the same can be discerned from the words of Jaṣṣās (d. 370 H.), Tha‘labi (d. 427 H.) and Rāzī. Of those scholars who took a pro-Ishāq [Isaac] position, note must be made of Ṭabarī, Naḥḥās, Qāḍī ‘Iyād, Suhaylī, Ibn al-Jawzī, Qurtūbi, Zurqānī and possibly others too. Suyūṭī, though was noted once as tending to accept this view, seems to have vacillated. The opposite, pro-Ismā‘īl [Ishmael] view was adopted by the early fourth century Jubbā‘ī (d. 303 H.), “most of the traditionists” (though only Ibn Abi Ḥātim was specified by name), [additionally] the two Shī‘ites Ṭūsī and Ṭabarsī and other scholars and commentators like Abū Bakr b. ‘Arabī, Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, Nawawī and Subkī, Nasafi, Naysābūrī, Ibn Kathīr, Bayḍāwī, ‘Imāī, ‘Ālūsī, ‘Aynī and possibly others too.”⁸ The early history of Islam seemed to favor Isaac as the son to be sacrificed but later developmental changes in Islam and an emphasis on the descendance from Ishmael tended to influence later Islamicate scholars to name Ishmael as the son who was sacrificed. While the difference between the sons does not at first seem to have that large of an influence on intellectual debates, the solidifying of support behind Ishmael as the sacrificial son shows a general strengthening of the Islamic identity.

⁸ Bashear, S. "Abraham's sacrifice of his son and related issues". *Der Islam*, 67 (1990). Page, 35.

CHAPTER I

ISLAM

According to Reuven Firestone, there are three coherent versions of the story of the sacrifice that descended through various chains of transmission.⁹ He continues to say that two of the versions, the ones “attributed to al-Suddī or Ibn Ishāq,” are quite similar “and actually represent covariants of the same tradition”, while a third version found “only in Shi‘ite sources” differs substantially, “although it also appears to derive ultimately from the same environment.”¹⁰ According to Firestone, the “fullest rendition of the sacrificial act is found in al-Kisā’ī under the title: ‘The Story of Isaac’,” which is included as Appendix I. The al-Kisā’ī version however does not fall neatly into any of the three categories set out by Firestone in the beginning.¹¹ Of the three versions, the two main versions, attributed to al-Suddī or Ibn Ishāq, “display important differences as well. The Suddī version understands

⁹ Firestone, Reuven. Journeys in Holy Lands: The Evolution of the Abraham-Ishmael Legends in Islamic Exegesis. State University of New York Press (New York, 1990). Page, 116.

¹⁰ Ibid. Page, 116.

¹¹ Ibid. Page, 126. The story contains an interesting addition that is not found in any of the other stories listed. The identity of the ram as the “ram of Abel, son of Adam” is found throughout the traditions but that the ram is speaking is unique. Here is the segment in detail: “He [Abraham] was called: O Abraham, take this ram and redeem your son with it. Sacrifice it as an offering. God has made this day a [holy] festival for you and your children. The ram said: ”O Friend of God, sacrifice me instead of your son, for I am more appropriate for sacrifice than he. I am the ram of Able, son of Adam, who gave me as an offering to his Lord and whose offering was accepted. I have grazed in the meadows of the Garden for forty autumns!”

the intended sacrifice to be Isaac, who must be sacrificed as a result of Abraham's vow. Although the sacrifice takes place in a non-specific location, the narrative assumes that Abraham had not moved since receiving his revelation about Isaac in Syria, therefore placing the action in accordance with Biblicist tradition. But according to the Ibn Ishāq version, Ishmael is the victim of the attempted Sacrifice in Mecca. Abraham spans the distance between his home in Syria and Ishmael in Mecca by riding on the supernatural creature al-Burāq."¹²

In reference to the main trend in the Shi'ite versions, Firestone notes "the various renditions of the Shi'ite version name both Isaac and Ishmael as the intended sacrifice. Only one rendition is repeated, and it is quite striking because it considers Isaac to be the intended sacrifice at the same time that it places the act within the context of the Meccan Hajj."¹³ Firestone translates three different streams of transmission in his discussion on the "Shi'ite" version of the story. Firestone notes that, "the "Shi'ite" version is represented by four traditions found only in Shi'ite sources and without consistent records of authentication."¹⁴ Two of the four chains of transmission are from Radī al-Dīn Abū 'Alī al-Fadl b. al-Ḥasan

¹² Ibid. Page, 119. Firestone expands on his argument later stating, "Although they parallel pre-Islamic Jewish legends and feature biblical (as well as Qur'anic) characters, only the Suddī version remains totally within the biblical chronology and setting. But even the Ibn Ishāq version refrains from straying too far outside of the biblical parameters by providing for Abraham's transportation to Mecca, thus preserving the biblical view of his home in Syria. Since Ishmael is assumed by the Bible to live in an Arab land, the Ibn Ishāq version remains roughly within the Biblicist worldview. The supernatural al-Burāq, of course, points to greater native Arab influence in the Ibn Ishāq version."

¹³ Ibid. Page, 123.

¹⁴ "al-Ya'qūbī 25-6 (anonymous) al-Qummī 2:224-5 (on the authority of Abū 'Abdallāh); al-Ṭabarsī #1, 23:77 (anonymous), and al-Ṭabarsī #2, 23:78-9 (on the authority of Barīd b. Mu'āwiya al-'Ajalī)." Ibid. Page, 229, note 23.

Amīn al-Ṭabarsī¹⁵ (d. 518/1153), with the other two coming from Abū al-Ḥasan ‘Alī b. Ibrāhīm b. Hāshim b. Mūsā b. Bābawayhī¹⁶ (d. 328/939), and Aḥmad b. Abī Ya’qūb b. Wāḍiḥ al-Ya’qūbī¹⁷ (d. 277/891-2). When it comes to the name of the son, Firestone notes that, of the four traditions only one is repeated and the name of the son in question is actually Isaac, which surprised Firestone “because it considers Isaac to be the intended sacrifice at the same time that it places the act within the context of the Meccan Ḥajj. Both renditions connect Isaac to Mecca by having him make the Pilgrimage along with his mother Sarah.”¹⁸ While of the other two renditions, “Al-Ya’qūbī appears almost ambivalent about who the intended sacrifice was, but eventually names him as Ishmael. Only the al-Ṭabarsī #2 rendition provides a context for Ishmael representing the Sacrifice, and does so effectively by transferring Ishmael and Hagar from Syria to Mecca in response to God’s command to Abraham to sacrifice Ishmael during the Pilgrimage. This reasoning is unique

¹⁵ al-Ṭabarsī “was an Imāmī Shi’ite theologian and traditionist. His place of birth is obscure, but it is known that he taught in Mashhad and composed his commentary in Khurasan, where he died. In addition to his commentary, he composed a number of particularistic Shi’ite tracts. His *majma’ al-bayān* is considered a classical Qur’ān *Commentary* because it presents the views of other major commentators. Nevertheless, it gives prominence to Shi’ite exegesis. Because it includes material including even Mu’tazilite and Sunni traditionalist theological comments, it is not generally considered a strictly “Shi’ite” work, as is that of al-Qummī. Nevertheless, al-Ṭabarsī tends to transmit traditions on our subject from very few sources, most of them going back to Ja’far. His work is carefully organized, and every section of commentary includes introductory comments, variant readings of the Qur’ānic verses, philological, lexical and syntactic analysis, traditions, and often his own opinion, including esoteric interpretations.” Ibid. Page, 167.

¹⁶ “Author of a Qur’ān commentary, *Tafsīr al-Qummī*, who hailed originally from Baghdad and died circa 940 CE. According to al-Najāshī, al-Qummī is considered to be one of the most reliable transmitters of *ḥadīth*.” Lowin, Shari L., *The Making of a Forefather: Abraham in Islamic and Jewish Exegetical Narratives*. Brill (Leiden, 2006). Page, 268.

¹⁷ “Arab historian and geographer who died in 897 CE. A Shi’ite of the moderate Mūsawīyya, al-Ya’qūbī wrote a history of the world beginning from creation through the year of the work’s composition in 872 CE. While his work is very detailed, Ya’qūbī hardly ever mentions his sources.” Ibid. Page, 270.

¹⁸ Firestone. Page, 123.

among all the traditions.”¹⁹ Firestone notes further that neither of the other two main streams, the Sunni streams of transmission, the al-Suddī or Ibn Ishāq versions connect the sacrifice with the Pilgrimage “in any way.”²⁰ Firestone concludes with the thought that by connecting the sacrifice to the Pilgrimage. For him, the Shi’ite versions of the story are actually a kind of Islamic commentary “although it offers less commentary than the Suddī and Ibn Ishāq versions but evolved into a legend more closely tied with the Islamic ritual concerns of the Pilgrimage and retaining fewer motifs with direct Biblicist parallels.”²¹

From here we will move on from the source text and the transmitters of the traditions to discuss an influential commentator, Ibn al-‘Arabi, who was a philosopher and grand mystic. He is often referred to, both by himself and by others, as the Seal of the Muhammadan Sainthood.²² After examining his commentary from the *Fusus al-Hikam*, or *Bezels of Wisdom*, we will discuss a commentary on Ibn al-‘Arabi’s commentary by Ismail Hakki Bursevi²³, Both authors

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² McGregor, Richard. *Sanctity and Mysticism in Medieval Egypt*. State University of New York Press (New York, 2004).

²³ “Ismail Hakki Bursevi, who was one of the great teachers of the Jelveti order, now closed, and who translated and commented upon the *Fusûs al-Hikam* of Ibn ‘Arabi in what may be called the definitive commentary on the *Fusûs* up to now, has an inscription on his modest tomb in Bursa which proclaims that only he who has the Love of Tawhid branded upon his heart brings light to the tomb of Ismail Hakki Bursevi.” (From Rauf, Bulent. “Union and Ibn ‘Arabi.” The Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society (http://www.ibnarabisociety.org/articles/union_ibnarabi.html) (Accessed April 20 2008).) On the Jelveti Sufi Order, “Jelveti is the name of a Sufi order that was founded by the Turkish saint Aziz Mahmud Hudayi. It shares the same spiritual chain as the Khalwati order and thus there are many similarities between them. The two orders split however with Sheikh Zahed Gilani, where the Jelveti order then goes on to Hajji Bayram and Aziz Mahmud Hudayi. Aziz Mahmud Hudayi was amongst the most famous of all Ottoman Sufi’s being the Sheikh of Sultan Ahmed I who constructed the famous Blue Mosque. Aziz Mahmud Hudayi read the first Friday prayer in this Mosque on its opening. The Jelveti order was not a very widespread order and did not extend much further than the borders of modern Turkey having a number of Tekke’s in the Balkans. Amongst the most famous

specify Isaac as the son mentioned in the Qur'an. In the Hebrew Bible, Abraham is directly commanded by God to sacrifice his son but in the Qur'an, Abraham has a dream in which he sees that he must sacrifice his son. Abraham interprets this dream, as coming from Allah and the Qur'an seems to support this notion with Allah saying that Abraham has fulfilled the vision. Neither Ibn al-'Arabi or Bursevi discuss any specific ethical content regarding Abraham sacrificing Isaac, however they do create a situation in which much of the ethical problem concerning Allah asking for human sacrifice is sidestepped. Ibn al-'Arabi sidesteps any difficulty by arguing that Abraham misinterpreted the dream, which never called for the sacrifice of his son but rather called for the sacrifice of the Ram that was later sacrificed by Abraham after Allah stopped the sacrifice of the son. Ibn al-'Arabi, in his discussion of the sacrifice argues that when, "Abraham the Intimate said to his son, I saw in sleep that I was killing you for sacrifice. The state of sleep is the plane of the Imagination and Abraham did not interpret [what he saw], for it was a ram that appeared in the form of Abraham's son in the dream, while Abraham believed what he saw [at face value]. So his Lord rescued his son from Abraham's misapprehension by the Great Sacrifice [of the ram], which was the true expression of his vision with God, of which Abraham was unaware."²⁴ Here, Ibn al-'Arabi's argument allows for the idea that Allah is not responsible for Abraham's misunderstanding in interpreting the ram as his son. This argument dissolves the moral outrage that confronts the God of

of Jelveti Sheikhs are Ismail Hakki Bursevi of Bursa and Sheikh Musafa Devati." (From Wikipedia contributors, "Jelveti," Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Jelveti&oldid=89237090> (accessed April 20, 2008).)

²⁴ al-'Arabi, Ibn. Translated by R.W.J. Austin. Ibn al-'Arabi: The Bezels of Wisdom. Paulist Press, Inc. (New Jersey, 1980). Page, 99.

Genesis commanding the sacrifice of Isaac. Ibn al-‘Arabi’s argument is that Allah did not ask for the sacrifice of a son but rather the sacrifice of a ram²⁵, which Abraham misinterpreted. Ibn al-‘Arabi’s argues later, reinforcing his earlier idea, “God says to Abraham, calling him *O Abraham, you believed what you saw*, and He did not say, “You were right concerning what you saw,” namely [in seeing] your son, because he did not interpret what he saw, but took it at its face value, although visions require interpretation. Thus, Joseph’s master says, *If you will interpret the vision*.

Interpretation means to pass from the form of what one sees to something beyond it.”²⁶

Ibn al-‘Arabi’s idea of interpretation is given more weight and addressed repeatedly, in a commentary on the *Fusus al-Hikam* written by Ismail Hakki Bursevi. The commentary, covering three volumes, discusses and expands on almost the entirety of the *Fusus*. While the style of the commentary is somewhat rambling and

²⁵ In his article, “Abraham’s Sacrifice of his Son and Related Issues, Bashear says that, “Concerning the kind of the ransom beast, there is the widely circulated tradition of Ḥasan al-Baṣrī on the authority of Ibn Ishḥāq → ‘Amr b. ‘Ubayd, which says that Ismā‘īl/Ishmael was ransomed with a billy goat (*tays*) which descended from Thabīr. An interesting variant adds that what was meant by Qur’an 37/107 was not only the ransom on that specific occasion “. . . but sacrifice according to his [i.e. Ibrāhīm’s] religion, which is the *sunna* until the day of resurrection” (. . . *wa-lākinnaḥu al-dhabḥu ‘alā dīnihi, fatilka al-sunna ilā yawm al-qiyāma* . . .). Hence, this variant ends with a sentence urging the believers to sacrifice following such *sunna*. (Lit.: . . . *fa-ḍaḥḥū ‘ibāda l-lāh*.)” (Page 27-28).

²⁶ al-‘Arabi, Ibn. Page, 99. This thought is continued in the next paragraph which reads: “Thus were the cattle [symbols] for years of scarcity and plenty. Had he been true to the vision he would have killed his son, for he believed that it was his son he saw, although with God it was nothing other than the Great Sacrifice in the form of his son. Because of this He saved him, because of the mistaken notion that had entered Abraham’s mind. In reality it was not a ransom in God’s sight [but the sacrifice itself]. The senses formulated the sacrifice and the Imagination produced the form of Abraham’s son. Had it been a ram he saw in his Imagination he would have interpreted it as his son or as something else. Then God says, *This is indeed a clear test*, that is, a test of his knowledge, whether he knew what interpretation was necessary in the context of vision or not. Abraham knew that the perspective of the Imagination required interpretation, but was heedless [on this occasion] and did not deal with the perspective in the proper way. Thus, he believed the vision as he saw it.” Bursevi, Ismail Hakki. Translated by Bulent Rauf. Ismail Hakki Bursevi’s translation of and commentary on ‘Fusus al-Hikam’ b Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi. Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society (Oxford, 1987). Page, 424.

the translation could have suffered from some editing, the roughness of the translation from Turkish to English allows the reader to stay focused on what the author is trying to communicate. Of particular interest to this paper is Bursevi's expansion of the above quoted sections in which he discusses how the sacrifice of Isaac was not necessary because it was not asked for. The mistake of Abraham was in the interpretation of the dream.

Interestingly, Bursevi implies that the reason that Abraham did not interpret the dream correctly was because he did not have the type of knowledge required to interpret dreams. Following is a quote that illustrates Bursevi's interpretation of the sacrificial scene. "Now let it be known like this, that in the words of God the High: 'And We have redeemed it with a grand sacrifice', the fact that He sacrificed the grand immolation for the son of Abraham is because in the mind of Abraham it was his son, but what he really saw was the ram, which was apparent in the dream in the image of the son. Thus the appearance of the ram in the dream of the Caliph of the Most Compassionate (*rahmân*) (which was Abraham), and because of its relationship of being sacrificed for it, as has already been mentioned before this, the words: 'And We redeemed it with a grand sacrifice' descended because of what was there was in the mind of Abraham, because of all this the Shaykh [Ibn al-'Arabi'] in these stanzas questions by way of delving deep into the matter that it was the ram that Abraham saw in his imagination in the image of his son, and thereby he points at the fact that its sensory image of being a ram was sacrificed in his dream to the

image of his imagination which was seen in the appearance of a man in his dream.”²⁷

The following quote also seems to suggest that while Abraham misunderstood the nature of the dream, it was not entirely the fault of Abraham. The quote seems to suggest that the *rahmân*²⁸ of Allah interfered with the heart of Abraham, which in turn allowed him to only access the literal sense in his heart rather than the interpretive sense. For “Abraham did not interpret the dream because he was accustomed to taking form the universe of representation (*mithâl*), and when the High God elevated the heart of Abraham from the universe of representation to extend over it His *rahmân*, and left him without it, his *khayâl*²⁹, took the meaning from his abstracted heart, and his power of imaging dispensing from the meaning of the image had imaged the ram in the form of Isaac due to the establishment of the established relationship in submission and concordance between Isaac and the ram. Thus the dream of Abraham necessitated interpretation but he did not interpret it.”³⁰ Now, whether or not Bursevi was attempting to shift some of the blame to Allah in extending his *rahmân* over the heart of Abraham or whether Bursevi is simply looking for another avenue of explanation to detail why Abraham misunderstood the dream is up for debate, though almost certainly he was not shifting the blame to Allah. The rest of the text would seem to suggest that it was

²⁷ Bursevi, Ismail Hakki. Translated by Bulent Rauf. [Ismail Hakki Bursevi's translation of and commentary on 'Fusus al-Hikam' b Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi](#). Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society (Oxford, 1987). Page, 424.

²⁸ A difficult word to translate in Arabic because it has such a wide field of meaning. *Rahmân* is considered to be one of the “99 Names of God” and is often translated as “The All Beneficent, The Most Merciful in Essence.” The name *Rahmân* appears at least 114 times in the Qur’an as it is part of the *basmala* which introduces most chapters of the Qur’an and reads *bismi-llâhi ar-rahmâni ar-rahîmi*, which is translated as “In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful.”

²⁹ Loosely translated as “imagination.”

³⁰ Bursevi. Page, 425.

Abraham's fault because Bursevi later implies that the misinterpretation of the dream was the fault of Abraham because he “was not mindful.”³¹ Bursevi, in attempting to cover all the possible facets of the discussion, also seems to suggest that it could have been a test by Allah to see if Abraham had “appertained” “the knowledge of interpretation” but that Abraham “contrary to his usage (habit, custom)” “interpreted the image of Isaac with that of the ram.”³² However, and this is often the conclusion of the interpretations concerning this story in Islamic work, “what became manifest in this is the completion and perfection of Abraham’s and Isaac’s submission to and belief in God.”³³

While Ibn al-‘Arabi and Bursevi have made an effort to absolve Allah from the ethical implications of human sacrifice, there remains some question as to the ethical content of Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son. In his article entitled, “Ambiguities about Abraham,” Thomas McDaniel argues that Abraham in the Qur’an, being aware of the covenant of Noah, detailed in the Hebrew Bible, would have known that human sacrifice had been abolished. His argument is detailed as follows. “Genesis 9:6 is where God told Noah “*Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for God made man in his own image.*” With this stipulation, capital punishment was introduced to Noah and his progeny as the deterrent against humans killing fellow human beings. It was a succinct prohibition against (1) human sacrifice, (2) against murder, and (3) against warfare. If Abraham

³¹ Ibid. Page, 429. The quote goes on to say that “Abraham (S.A) was not mindful, did not know of what was required of interpretation in the realm of dreams, and did not allocate the portion necessary to the realm of dreams, and Abraham attested to the dream because of unawareness of this.”

³² Ibid. Page, 430.

³³ Ibid.

was, as stated in the *Qur'an*, in “Noah’s party” and was Noah’s “follower” (*šî'at*) he would surely have been aware of God’s prohibition *of* and penalty *for* any human sacrifice. Thus, when Abraham was tested by God’s call in a dream for him to sacrifice Ishmael (according to the *Qur'an*, *Sûrah* 37:101-110), or in real life for him to sacrifice Isaac (according to Genesis 22), two lives were at risk -- Abraham’s own life, as well as his son’s. Not only were Isaac and Ishmael, according to the different traditions, willing to cooperate with their father and be obedient unto death, but Abraham, too, was willing to die -- for the covenant with Noah was in force and Abraham was no exception: “Abraham, if you slaughter/sacrifice a human being you die also.” It was just that simple. The truth revealed was that God did not want the blood of Isaac, or of Ishmael, or of Abraham. The covenant with Noah remained sacrosanct. Human sacrifices had become a sacrilege.”³⁴

This is an interesting perspective on the scene of the sacrifice. Rarely is it suggested that Ibrāhīm’s life would be forfeit if he sacrificed his son. This particular argument does not seem to be well supported by the *Qur'an* which makes no mention of Allah taking Ibrāhīm’s life for submitting to Allah’s will. However, it does provide a possible avenue for dealing with the ethical repercussions if Abraham had actually sacrificed Isaac/Ishmael. The idea put forth by McDaniel argues that Abraham would have, in effect been committing two sacrifices, two murders, or two suicides, a murder-suicide. To my knowledge, this has not been suggested by any of the commentators on this story.

³⁴ McDaniel, Thomas. “Ambiguities About Abraham”
(http://tmdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/CMBBP3-6x9_Article.pdf) Page, 2.

CHAPTER II

HEIDEGGER AND LEVINAS

“The sacrifice of Isaac is an abomination in the eyes of all, and it should continue to be seen for what it is -- atrocious, criminal, unforgivable; Kierkegaard insists on that. The ethical point of view must remain valid: Abraham is a murderer. However, is not the spectacle of this murder, which seems untenable in the dense and rhythmic briefness of its theatrical moment, at the same time the most common event in the world? Is it not inscribed in the structure of our existence to the extent of no longer even constituting an event?”³⁵ With this quote we will begin the shift from Islamic interpretations to a study of the story using continental philosophy. Often when we attempt to discuss philosophy or anything in the social sciences we attempt to begin at the beginning, an obvious place to start for sure, but a deceptively difficult one to identify. Even more difficult is overcoming the idea that there is a beginning, often we must simply plunk ourselves down in a place, in a time, in a spot, under a tree perhaps, and begin the work that plagues the beginning. Wherever we begin will be insufficient, so we began with a quote, from someone far more familiar with beginnings, a philosopher by the name of Jacques Derrida. The

³⁵ Derrida, Jacques. Translated by David Wills. The Gift of Death. Second Edition. University of Chicago Press (Chicago, 2008). Page, 85-86.

above quote will be the revolving thought that is the focus for the remainder of this paper: the repeatability of the sacrifice of Abraham's son, the repeated sacrifice of Abraham's son. However, we must move back in philosophical thought through philosophical history to see how Derrida comes to this conclusion.

To retrace the philosophical history of Derrida we will begin with Heidegger. Martin Heidegger was a German philosopher around the time of World War II and he was a member of the Nazi Party. His political affiliations are important to the extent that they shape both Heidegger's thought and the thought of his followers and critics, Derrida included. Heidegger's philosophical positions are incredibly important for European philosophy, if only as an attempt by philosophers to try to reject them, work around them, incorporate parts, or incorporate the whole of Heidegger's thought. The main philosophers we will be discussing, Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida are both products of an engagement with Heidegger's thought. Heidegger's first book *Being and Time* is probably his most read work. David Walsh argues that Heidegger's "place in the history of philosophy is still rooted in this one book, *Sein und Zeit* (1927), and there is considerable basis for this perception since it was there that he demonstrated the power of existence over thought. From that point on thought would have to move within the movement of existence."³⁶

For more on this idea, we must quickly circle back to Heidegger's teacher, Edmund Husserl, who was also a tremendously influential philosopher. Husserl is

³⁶ Walsh, David. [The Modern Philosophical Revolution: The Luminosity of Existence](#). Cambridge University Press (Cambridge, 2008). Page, 237.

best known for, “showing that the phenomenon is always an appearance of something, which it shows and conceals at the same time.”³⁷ For example, and this may seem simple but it was a revolutionary important thought, when you see an object, you do not see its entirety. You see parts of it, the front, or the back, maybe the sides, but you do not see it in its whole. A part of the object is always concealed from you. This is at the simple level of appearance; there was also the thought that each object had an essence, a being. This thought stretches back to Plato and his Forms. Therefore, it was understood that you could see the appearance of something but that appearance may not be its reality. Heidegger, however, “was the one who grasped the ontological significance of the achievement, for he saw that it was now possible to contemplate being in a far more fundamental way than the juxtaposition of appearance and reality had permitted. There is no being behind appearance because appearance is itself a mode of being.”³⁸ That is to say that there is no split between appearance and reality, between appearance and being. For appearance is a function of our being and not something separate. “Phenomenology is our way of access to what is to be the theme of ontology, and it is our way of giving it demonstrative precision. *Only as phenomenology, is ontology possible.*”³⁹ Here we have introduced two new words, ontology and phenomenology.

Ontology is simply the study of the nature of being, it deals with questions concerning what things exist, and phenomenology is a branch of philosophy primarily developed by Husserl. Phenomenology works with the understanding

³⁷ Ibid. Page, 245.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

that the objects and events that we perceive and understand are in our consciousness rather than outside of our consciousness.⁴⁰ Phenomenological reduction is, "as Hegel suggested, the truth of perception. From this exciting discovery in the immediate dynamics of perception, it did not take Heidegger long to apply it within the larger dynamics of existence as a whole."⁴¹ For Heidegger, "definitively locates the subject, existence or Dasein, within the realm of truth. Human existence not only carries within it the capacity for truth, but also is already a mode of openness toward it. With Heidegger, the shift toward existence [from essence] was completed, and he had the capacity to demonstrate its explication as the implication of the Western philosophical tradition. Nowhere is his significance better attested to than by the fact that his critics, many of whom offer indispensable correctives, must now do so within the mode of philosophizing he established.⁴² To put his more simply, we never simply encounter objects, people, or entities within the world because the world is already filled with things of significance. For example, you will never simply see a tree. The tree may be surrounded by other trees, it is in the ground, it is covered in leaves, and it may have animals on it. You can never encounter simply a tree, for it would have no significance to you. Some philosophers argue that if we were presented with something to which we had no reference, there is a possibility that we would not even acknowledge it; we would be unable to see it. Everything in the world is recognizable because of its relation to

⁴⁰ "Phenomenology was based on the awareness by which consciousness, in being aware of objects, is also aware of itself and its relationship to them. By turning toward the process of perception, it is possible, therefore, to gain an awareness of the primordial relationship between subject and object that makes perception possible." Ibid. Page, 236.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid. Page, 243.

other things. It is only the relationships to other things, the differences between things, which allow us to recognize an object– to look at a tree and see that it is a tree. For the tree is “always within an already constituted world of significance. The brilliance of the phenomenological analyses on which Heidegger embarks is often so mesmerizing that one can readily understand why many readers, and even the author himself, could tend to overlook the primacy of the connection with being; for he makes it clear that our capacity to perceive anything, from equipment to signs, is possible only because we already inhabit a world disposed to such perceptions. The availability of things as ready-to-hand is possible only because of the presence of a world of the ready-to-hand that is not itself ready-to-hand.”⁴³

Heidegger, not comfortable with simply referring to people or humans as Beings in his works opts to coin a term with no baggage. He calls this term Dasein or Da-sein. In colloquial German, this term means existence but Heidegger was very specific in his usage of the term, he did not want to indicate that the term had a subject. For, Heidegger the term was used to uncover the primal nature of Being (Sein), he did not want it to be associated with substance. As we saw earlier, Heidegger believed that we were already always a being engaged with the world and there is never a way to not be engaged with the world, you can never be separate from the world, you can never not be being-in-the-world. One of the fundamental characteristics of Dasein for Heidegger was the concept of care

⁴³ Ibid. Page, 247.

(Sorge).⁴⁴ “We might say that it is because Dasein carries the question of its being within itself that it is capable of projecting that question on all others and therefore of understanding them as such, in relation to their being. The primordially of care that Heidegger announces [...] is not just some generic care, but the care about being that is at the core of Dasein. This is the very movement of its existence and what it can bring in advance to all things as disclosure. [...] Dasein can disclose being because it carries the question of being within it as its deepest care.”⁴⁵ With this foundation of Dasein, of being, of personhood, as care we move closer to our concern(s), to our thoughts, regarding Abraham and his son(s).

Which begs the question, how do we have thoughts, what are thoughts, how do we think? If care is the foundation of our being, of our Sein, then what? What is next is to understand understanding and to do that we must first consider thinking, hearing, and knowledge itself. For Heidegger, “thought is itself an event within being. This is why it can never be fully penetrated, even by itself. For the thinker on the path of the primordial, the transcendental can hardly suffice. [...] No theory of meaning can include its own existential horizon, nor, Heidegger understood, can it

⁴⁴ The primary mode of Dasein is what Heidegger calls being-towards-death, not death in some morbid sense but in the idea that we are always already moving towards our death, death which can not be know. This is not an annihilatistic, or fatalistic idea but rather an acceptance that every moment is one more moment closer to death, which is the possibility that is an absolute impossibility for Dasein because it cannot be known. One cannot know ones own death and the recognition of the death of others is nothing, for ones death is not an empirical event, it is our ownmost possibility, and it is this possibility which makes an individual.

⁴⁵ Ibid. Page, 252. “Dasein's facticity is such that its Being-in-the-world has always dispersed itself or even split itself up into definite ways of Being-in. The multiplicity of these is indicated by the following examples: having to do with something, producing something, attending to something and looking after it, making use of something, giving something up and letting it go, undertaking, accomplishing, evincing, interrogating, considering, discussing, determining. . . . All these ways of Being-in have concern (Fürsorge, care) as their kind of Being.” Martin Heidegger, Being and Time, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. New York, (Harper & Row, 1962). H.56

really say anything about itself.”⁴⁶ This idea applies to all theories and structures of meaning. The theory of evolution cannot say anything about the theory itself, it argues for a way that life has evolved. The theory of the creation of the universe has nothing to say about the theory itself, but rather about how particles smashed together after that first instant. Even a theory of theories, how they are formed, what they are, what a proper theory is made up of, can not contain the idea of a theory but can only describe it, and at this it always, inevitably fails. A theory of meaning cannot include the theory of meaning for even if one were to try you would have failed before you even got started. Walsh argues that, “the truth of being is accessible to Dasein because it is itself the struggle for the truth of being. The long modern preoccupation with epistemology is now concluded in Heidegger’s recognition that it has been largely an exercise in futility. How can knowledge of the world be grounded in the being of a subject that has not itself been grounded?”⁴⁷ And further, “Being is prior to knowing because knowing is itself a mode of being. [...] Neither a method nor a technique of confirmation is available because we cannot step outside the vantage point of truth that constitutes the being of knowledge. All we can do is accept the uncertainty of the quest for knowledge that makes it possible, while recognizing that the quest in uncertainty is not incidental but constitutive of our existence.”⁴⁸ The search for knowledge is not a result of our being but rather what makes our being. Finally, with Heidegger, “the unity of theoretical and practical reason occurs not as a theoretical synthesis but as the pre-

⁴⁶ Ibid. Page, 252, note 26.

⁴⁷ Ibid. Page, 253.

⁴⁸ Ibid. Page, 254.

existential unity whose unfolding constitutes existence. Neither in contemplating nor in acting can we step outside of the existential preconditions, but we must recognize that it is who we are that is implicated in each case. What varies is the degree. Once Dasein is understood as Dasein, as existence, there can be no way of getting at what it is as an essence or an entity. Existence is that which is never present or is present only as it exists. The only access we have to Dasein as a whole is glimpsed from within its movement. No vantage point is superior to that in which Dasein puts its own existence as a whole into question.”⁴⁹

Heidegger, throughout his work, is in the search for an authentic self. The authentic self, for Heidegger, begins with a recognition that we will all die. As morbid as this thought sounds, Heidegger believes that the aversion to this recognition is the first barrier towards authenticity. He calls the recognition of this mode of being, being-towards-death, in that we are all always already being-towards death, but this recognition must be recognized and internalized. Being-towards-death is the recognition that you will eventually die, that there is no going backwards in time, that everyday you are moving towards death, and that at the moment of your death you will reach your utmost potential as a Being, as Dasein. You will however not experience your death because death cannot be experienced; it is the end of experience. Being-towards-death, care, and recognizing that knowledge is constitutive is moving towards authenticity. However, “authenticity is ever the drawing away from inauthenticity. Guilt is the recognition that Dasein never has control over its own basis of its being, inasmuch as this basis first arises

⁴⁹ Ibid. Page, 255.

from its own projection; rather, as being-its-self, it is the *being* of its basis. It is because Dasein never achieves what it is but is always on the way to it, through the exercise of its freedom, that "*Dasein as such is guilty.*" This primordially of guilt that Heidegger develops must be understood in a fully existential sense as a condition that can never be known because we already live within it."⁵⁰ This originary guilt would not be guilt as typically understood rather this is a fundamental guilt, that is unknown, and unrecognized. It is not a negative condition, but rather arises from the fact that we cannot be fully authentic and can never become fully authentic. However, this guilt also has an ordinary sense, which is revealed from the primordially of guilt. We not only experience guilt existentially, that is we experience guilt primordially and thus without recognizing it, but we also mirror that primordially in our everyday selves. This drawing away from authenticity, from an understanding of ourselves as Dasein, is the everyday guilt, and as such is the recognition that with every choice we deny other choices, other possibilities. We sacrifice other choice, other possibilities. This idea is the beginning to understanding the repeatability of Abraham's sacrifice. With the choice of a bag of chips for lunch we recognize, mostly unconsciously, that we might have opted for the fruit, for the baggie of vegetables, for the yogurt, really for anything that was not that specific bag of chips. For in picking that bag of chips you also denied yourself steak, chicken, or flamingo. The guilt is not recognition of what you should have done, but rather a recognition of what could have been, in all its myriad infinity. Using this understanding of authenticity, we are able to begin poking at the figure of

⁵⁰ Ibid. Page, 257.

Abraham and his God. We might start to imagine a new interpretation, a new sense of the situation, where perhaps Abraham acknowledged feeling guilty, even though he told his son his plans and his son agreed to the course of action. One wonders what the mood of the son was after hearing that his father had a dream, sent from God, in which he was to be sacrificed. Did the son accept the news cheerfully and go to his end with a smile and wave? Was he pensive and withdrawn? Did he flinch when he heard the news? Did he recognize that this would be the end of his young life, for the Qur'an tells us that he had just learned to walk. If he was indeed only just walking, was he old enough to recognize the decision? Was he old enough to appreciate the impact of it? Does it make a difference how he accepted his fate, or does it only matter that he accepted it? The narrative, if that is the proper descriptor, is silent about the tone of the son's acceptance, indeed it is silent about a great many details, including the time lines involved. Did the son accept the news right away and offer himself up on the spot? Did he spend some time mulling over the situation and weighing the pros and cons? Did he make a list, so that he could view his decision graphically? The story is unclear and is thus open to many, varied, and perhaps wildly different interpretations. How to proceed? One could ask, what difference does any of this make?

Our quest, our searching, our hope is that we can find some way to answer at least some of these questions, maybe more. For Heidegger, "what we call laws of thought, the principles of identity and sufficient reason, are not simply the regulative principles of our thinking but the primordial self-disclosure of being. We do not impose them but are ourselves imposed upon by them as the very possibility

of our thinking at all. Thinking and being are the same in the sense that it is only by standing in the light of being that we can perceive what is. This is an insight discovered not by a method available to us in advance but by submitting to the movement of being which discloses it. Truth is irreducibly poetic, for it is not we who possess it but it that possesses us. Our task is only to give expression as art, in which alone the sameness of thinking and being is unfolded.”⁵¹ Once we recognize that thinking and being are the same, that there is no being without thinking we move another small step towards understanding, critiquing, or arguing with Abraham. We learn that at every minute, at every decision, we in some small or large way repeat the sacrifice of Abraham. As we quoted Derrida earlier, and through the thoughts of Heidegger we understand that each decision, if such a thing exists, is merely, a repeat of the sacrifice of Abraham. Each decision is a decision to sacrifice everything for one thing, to sacrifice the son for everything, to sacrifice everything for the son.

Among the many philosophers who took up the gauntlet of Heideggerian philosophy, we will discuss two of the most prominent, Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida. Chronologically Levinas appeared first so we will begin by discussing his take on the work of Heidegger, in which he expanded turned Heidegger’s focus on the individual into a focus on that which is outside the individual, the Other. The axis of Levinas’ thought is the idea that “ethics” as such, precedes the “ontology” of Heidegger. Before we proceed, perhaps we should discuss what Levinas means by ethics. Bergo argues, “if ethics means rationalist

⁵¹ Ibid. Page, 282.

self-legislation and freedom (deontology), the calculation of happiness (utilitarianism), or the cultivation of virtues (virtue ethics), then Levinas's philosophy is not an ethics. Levinas claimed, in 1961, that he was developing a "first philosophy." This first philosophy is neither traditional logic nor metaphysics. It is an interpretive, phenomenological description of the rise and repetition of the face-to-face encounter, or the intersubjective relation at its precognitive core; viz., being called by another and responding to that other. If precognitive experience, that is, human sensibility, can be characterized conceptually, then it must be described in what is most characteristic to it: a continuum of sensibility and affectivity, in other words, sentience and emotion in their interconnection."⁵² Which is a long way of saying that Levinas' focus is on the ethics of interpersonal and inter-Other relationships. Levinas "is very much aware of the questionableness of the identifications of "ethics" and "ontology," as if they could be treated as self-contained entities apart from the movement by which they emerge. [...] He intends to show that the prioritizing movement by which philosophy lives in the unconcealment of being contains the crucial implication of unreachability as such. It is not that ethics precedes ontology, but that ethics itself is never reached because it is always "before." The prioritizing movement, if it is taken seriously, means that even the philosophical appropriations can never be appropriated."⁵³

For Heidegger, existence began out of a void, out of nothingness, and it is to nothingness that we return after the event of death, the event that we cannot

⁵² Bergho, Bettina, "Emmanuel Levinas", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2008 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/levinas/>>.

⁵³ Walsh. Page, 292.

experience. However, Levinas "does not begin with nothingness, from which Heidegger never fully separates his reflection, but rather sees the superabundance of being as the beginning within which a nothingness can arise. He begins where Heidegger strains to reach in his movement from Dasein to the unconcealment of being. For Levinas being is already in unconcealment."⁵⁴ Levinas believes that rather than coming from nothingness, being comes from a superabundance, an overflowing, and it is in this overflowing that pockets of nothingness appear. This abundance also is present in how Levinas conceives of time, in which instants are an important part. Like the instant in which the dagger was stopped short of the son's throat, or the instant in which Abraham decided to commit to the sacrifice of his son. For Levinas, "the present brings about the exceptional situation where we can give an instant a name, and conceive of it as a substantive."⁵⁵ For existence, "is no longer synonymous with the duration but rather with the interruption of duration by which the eternity of substance is effected. "A beginning does not start out of the instant that precedes the beginning; its point of departure is contained in its point of arrival, like a rebound movement." Every instant is the instant of creation. [...]

"The freedom of the present finds a limit in the responsibility for which it is the condition. This is the most profound paradox in the concept of freedom: its synthetic bond with its own negation. A free being alone is responsible, that is, already not free."⁵⁶ Freedom is not free, is often a phrase bandied about when discussing civil rights and the limits to those rights. How true the phrase rings now,

⁵⁴ Ibid. Page, 293.

⁵⁵ Ibid. Page, 296.

⁵⁶ Ibid. Page, 296-297.

for what Levinas is arguing is that from the moment of our being, from our emergence from the void, from the nothingness, from the superabundance, from the overflowing we have a responsibility to the Other. We have a freedom granted to us as being but in that freedom lays an inherent responsibility, unavoidable, and often unrecognized but still persistent and originary, to the Other, to the Other Others, to the Others Other. In other words, “the subject, [...], is not free, or more accurately, he is free only because he is not free.”⁵⁷ This idea begs the question of Abraham’s responsibility. Was he free, and in being free was he responsible? Was he commanded by God to offer up the sacrifice and does that take away his freedom, his responsibility? Could Abraham be free and irresponsible, irresponsible? Could he be responsible for his actions, his thoughts, and be unfree? Who is accountable? We will explore this concept further when we come to Derrida and his notions of freedom as they relate to Abraham of the Hebrew Bible, which of course we will redirect to Abraham of the Qur’an.

Walsh argues that, “both ancient and modern had struggled to conceive of the relationship between the subject and the infinite. Now Levinas was able to show that the infinite is neither a presence nor an absence but the priority by which the subject is constituted.”⁵⁸ Or more simply, “fullness, not poverty, is what draws existence from beyond being.”⁵⁹ In the end, “Levinas may not always have found the most perspicuous formulation for the existential eschatology he glimpsed, but he marked out the meaning of the philosophical revolution through the prioritization

⁵⁷ Ibid. Page, 321.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid. Page, 332.

of ethics.”⁶⁰ In addition, “Levinas completed the prioritization of practical reason that began with Kant, but it was Derrida who unfolded the profusion of theoretical consequences. It was Derrida who saw the full significance of the philosophical revolution that Levinas had made irreversible.”⁶¹ Derrida argues that “signification is possible, [...] not because of an original to which we might make recourse, but because even the original is in the position of a signified to us. We do not ground signification; it is what grounds us. The Heideggerian opening or uncovering of being has become what opens us, not what is opened before us. As with Levinas’s prioritizing of the other, Derrida locates us in relation to signification rather than the other way around.”⁶²

⁶⁰ Ibid. Page, 333.

⁶¹ Ibid. Page, 335.

⁶² Ibid.

CHAPTER III

DERRIDA

To aid in our discussion of Derrida and the openings that his philosophical insights provide we will turn to some of the recent work of Hent de Vries. De Vries's analysis focuses on the work of Kierkegaard and Derrida and their ideas concerning the scene of sacrifice in Genesis. Søren Kierkegaard, a famous 19th century Danish philosopher and theologian, treated the story of the sacrifice of Isaac extensively in his work entitled, *Fear and Trembling*. Jacques Derrida addressed the story of the sacrifice many times but most famously in his book *The Gift of Death*, or in French, *Donner la mort*. Derrida, "reads the story of the sacrifice of Isaac as the narrative ellipsis of the paradoxical logic of obligation, absolute responsibility, duty, and decision [if such a thing exists] that marks the ethical -- and, perhaps, more than simply ethical -- relation with the absolute Other, for which "God" is the singular and most proper name."⁶³ De Vries writes, "according to Kierkegaard, as Derrida elaborates in *The Gift of Death*, the testimony of obligation entails an anxiety in the face of a given death or of a giving of death, of a *donner la mort*, which is also a monstrosity: the necessity of choosing between one's love and the sacrifice of this

⁶³ De Vries, Hent. *Religion and Violence: Philosophical Perspectives from Kant to Derrida*. Johns Hopkins University Press (Baltimore, 2002). Page, 151.

love. Abraham transgresses the order of the ethical, in Kierkegaard's eyes the validity of and respect for a universal law or generality, Kantian morality (*Moralität*), Hegelian ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*), and even simple common sense: in short, what ties us not only to formal or abstract rules but also to be God's command to sacrifice his beloved son, and by keeping his intentions secret, by speaking, of necessity, to no one, Abraham violates -- indeed, sacrifices -- the basic principles that govern every human community. Ethically speaking, Kierkegaard insists, *Abraham commits a criminal act, and his sacrifice is nothing but murder.* [Emphasis mine]"⁶⁴ That Abraham committed murder is a conclusion reached by all three writers but was a thesis initially offered by Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard argues that even though God averted the sacrifice, Abraham fully intended to kill Isaac and was only stopped by God.⁶⁵ The important distinction to be made between the Hebrew Bible version and the Qur'anic version, as we've noted before, is that in Genesis Abraham did not speak to anyone about what he was going to do, about what he was told to do. He did not tell Sarah, he did not tell Isaac, he told no one. In the Qur'an

⁶⁴ Ibid. Page, 152.

⁶⁵ Kierkegaard, Søren. Translated by Howard Hong and Edna Hong. *Fear and Trembling / Repetition*. Princeton University Press (Princeton, 1983). If faith cannot make it a holy act to be willing to murder his son, then let the same judgment be passed on Abraham as on everyone else. If a person lacks the courage to think his thought all the way through and say that Abraham was a murder, then it is certainly better to attain this courage than to waste time on unmerited eulogies. The ethical expression for what Abraham did is that he meant to murder Isaac; the religious expression is that he meant to sacrifice Isaac -- but precisely in this contradiction is the anxiety that can make a person sleepless." (Page, 30). And again, "But Hegel is wrong in speaking about faith; he is wrong in not protesting loudly and clearly against Abraham's enjoying honor and glory as a father of faith when he ought to be sent back to a lower court and show up as a murderer." (Page, 55). Finally, "The story of Abraham contains just such a teleological suspension of the ethical. [...] if it is certain that Abraham represents faith and that it is manifested normatively in him, whose life not only is the most paradoxical that can be thought but is also so paradoxical that it simply cannot be thought. [...] Therefore, Abraham is at no time a tragic hero but something entirely different, either a murderer or a man of faith. Abraham does not have the third term that saves the tragic hero. This is why I can understand a tragic hero but cannot understand Abraham, even though in a certain demented sense I admire him more than all others." (Page, 57).

however, as we read, Abraham discussed his dream with his son and his son consented to the dream. There are stories surrounding the scene in the Qur'an where Abraham not only tells his son but is also confronted by Satan. In the stories, the figure of Satan plays an arguably ethical role by telling everyone involved that the sacrifice of Abraham's son is wrong. Satan confronts Sarah/Hagar and warns her about what Abraham is going to do, Satan confronts Isaac/Ishmael, and finally Satan confronts Abraham himself but all three rebuke Satan and say that if God wills the sacrifice than it must be done. De Vries continues his analysis by saying that according to Kierkegaard, the faith of Abraham was faith of the absurd, that Abraham had faith that God would demand the sacrifice of Isaac but was willing to do it anyway.⁶⁶ For, "in suspending the ethical in favor of a purportedly religious obligation, Abraham demonstrates what it takes to assume responsibility for an absolute command. His passion when faced with the sacrifice of his son, his anxiety at having to sacrifice his love, is the example set for every decision -- once and for all. It is the example of all exemplarity. Every ethical decision that deserves the name takes place as the similar pronunciation of a singular shibboleth and thus retains a certain idiosyncrasy or secrecy. As soon as it enters language and becomes part of discourse or even the subject of discussion, not to mention a Diskurs, an ethical decision loses its distinctive character, its significance or, rather, significance,

⁶⁶ De Vries. Page, 156. "Let us return to the structure of the sacrifice or the gift, to the giving of death said to figure this structure of the excess of a beyond of duty, an *over-duty*." Abraham, Kierkegaard writes, "had faith that God would not demand Isaac of him, and yet he was willing to sacrifice him if it was demanded. He had faith by virtue of the absurd, for human calculation was out of the question; it was certainly absurd that God, who required it of him, should in the next moment rescind the requirement. He climbed the mountain, and even in the moment when the knife gleamed he had faith -- that God would not require Isaac." Abraham had faith "by virtue of the absurd, by virtue of the fact that for God all things are possible."

to use the formulation Levinas employs to indicate how the absolute relation with the absolute [God] manifests itself without appearing, presenting, revealing, or even being “itself.” [emphasis mine]”⁶⁷

The idea that as soon as an ethical decision enters language, as soon as it is considered, it loses its status as an ethical decision is an argument put forward by Derrida that mirrors many of his other concepts, notably the gift and hospitality. Each of these concepts is wrapped in the other for each idea is a different name for the same concept. The decision loses its status as a decision because decisions once considered become programs. There must be an impossible moment, a moment of impossibility, for a decision to truly be a decision for Derrida. It is not unlike the concept of the gift. For Derrida argues that there can be no such thing as a pure gift because as soon as a gift is given it enters into an economy of exchange in which either another “gift” is given in return, satisfaction for the gift is expressed, or the giver for giving the gift feels satisfaction, the gift is annulled. Derrida argues that a pure gift cannot exist but that if it did, the giver would have to give the gift without knowing that they gave it, and the receiver would have to receive the gift without knowing that they received it. This impossible moment is also reflected in hospitality, in the gift of hospitality, in the decision of hospitality, in the hospitality of the gift and decision. A gift and hospitality, if such a thing exists, begins with a decision, works through a decision, and exists through a decision. Derrida says the following, concerning decision, “far from opposing undecidability to decision, I would argue that there would be no decision, in the strong sense of the word, in

⁶⁷ Ibid. Page, 158.

ethics, in politics, no decision, and thus no responsibility, without the experience of some undecidability." Concerning this undecidability, he says, "if you don't experience some undecidability, then the decision would simply be the application of a programme, the consequence of a premiss or of a matrix."⁶⁸ From my understanding, the impossibility concerning the decision must exist in time. Though Derrida seems to argue that it must exist outside of time, in an impossible instant. But every decision is a moment, a second, a minute, an hour, a length of time in which a person must work through the decision. But Derrida argues that, "if the decision is simply the final moment of a knowing process, it is not a decision. So the decision first of all has to go through a terrible process of undecidability, otherwise it would not be a decision, and it has to be heterogenous to the space of knowledge. If there is a decision it has to go through undecidability and make a leap beyond the field of theoretical knowledge. So when I say 'I don't know what to do', this is not the negative condition of decision. It is rather the possibility of a decision."⁶⁹ The question for us then becomes, what of Abraham's decision? Was it a decision, or the consequences of a preprogrammed matrix? Where did the decision take place? Were there multiple decisions? The decision to tell his son, the decision to walk to Mount Moriah, the decision to rebuke Satan, the decision to take the knife, the decision to strike and what of gifts and hospitality? Was it hospitable to perform these acts? Was the sacrifice really a gift? Must a sacrifice be a gift? If so, a gift to whom?

⁶⁸ Kearney, Richard and Mark Dooley (Ed.) Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy. Routledge (London, 1999). Page, 66.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

To answer some of these questions, we must learn more of hospitality and the gift. We have learned briefly of decisions but we must delve deeper into the idea of hospitality and the gift. However, before launching into a discussion of the concept of hospitality we will briefly discuss the concept of the concept. Derrida argues that, "if every concept shelters or lets itself be haunted by another concept, by an other than itself that is no longer even its other, then no concept remains in place any longer [emphasis mine]." This is to suggest that idea of a concept cannot stand on its own, that concepts, like language, like cultures, are always interwoven with other concepts, that you need certain concepts to discuss other concepts. Derrida continues his line of thought saying, "this is about the concept of concept, and this is why I suggested earlier that hospitality, the experience, the apprehension, the exercise of impossible hospitality, of hospitality as the possibility of impossibility (to receive another guest whom I am incapable of welcoming, to become capable of that which I am incapable of) -- this is the exemplary experience of deconstruction itself, when it is or does what it has to do or to be, that is, the experience of the impossible."⁷⁰

Derrida goes on to say that, "hospitality -- this is a name or an example of deconstruction. Of the deconstruction of the concept, of the concept of concept, as well as of its construction, its home, its "at-home" [*son chez-soi*]. Hospitality is the deconstruction of the at-home; deconstruction is hospitality to the other, to the other than oneself, the other than "its other," to an other who is beyond any "its

⁷⁰ Caputo, John. Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida. Fordham University Press (New York, 1996). Page, 111.

other.”⁷¹ To further this concept, we would argue that the concept of hospitality is simply another name for the gift and the concept of the gift is simply another name for hospitality. The gift requires the hospitality of the other and for pure hospitality to be conceived requires the gift. Derrida argues that for hospitality to be pure, one must be ready to not be ready. That pure hospitality can, must, will be able occur at any time, on any horizon, that there must be the possibility that it will never occur. However, these hospitalities, these possibilities, these hosp-ossibilities, are all situated in time. Does hospitality than exist in time but also out of time? If we must be ready to not be ready for something that may never come, then we will have to be ready to never make a decision. Perhaps hospitality and gift “exists” in the undecidability of the decision. Because it seems that surrounding the moments of pure hospitality or the pure gift, there will be decisions. You have to decide to be ready for the impossible. You have to be prepared for the possibility of the impossible. Derrida says that, “unconditional hospitality implies that you don’t ask the other, the newcomer, the guest, to give anything back, or even to identify himself or herself. Even if the other deprives you of your master or your home, you have to accept this. It is terrible to accept this, but that is the condition of unconditional hospitality: that you give up the mastery of your space, your home, your nation. It is unbearable. If, however, there is pure hospitality it should be pushed to this extreme.”⁷² Perhaps pure hospitality is possible but not a pure gift. Derrida goes on to say, “If you are the guest and I invite you, if I am expecting you and am prepared

⁷¹ Derrida, Jacques. Edited by Gil Anidjar. Acts of Religion. Routledge (London, 2002). Page, 364.

⁷² Kearney, Page, 70.

to meet you, then this implies that there is no surprise, everything is in order. For pure hospitality or a pure gift to occur, however, there must be absolute surprise.”⁷³ Up to the moment of the gift, or up to the moment of hospitality, decisions would have to be made. For hospitality and the gift to be realized requires beings which will have made decisions before and will make decisions after.

John Caputo argues that, “for hospitality to occur, it is necessary for hospitality to go beyond hospitality. That requires that the host must, in a moment of madness, tear up the understanding between him and the guest, act with “excess.” make an absolute gift of his property, which is of course impossible. But that is the only way the guest can go away feeling as if he was really made at home.”⁷⁴ Caputo further argues that, “the *hospes* is someone who has the power to host someone, so that neither the alterity (*hostis*) of the stranger nor the power (*potentia*) of the host is annulled by the hospitality. There is an essential “self-limitation” built right into the idea of hospitality, which preserves the distance between one’s own and the stranger, between owning one’s own property and inviting the other into one’s home. So, there is always a little hostility in all hosting and hospitality, constituting a certain ‘hostil/pitality.’”⁷⁵ For Derrida, “the other, like the Messiah, must arrive whenever he or she wants. If I am unconditionally hospitable I should welcome the visitation, not the invited guest, but the visitor. I must be unprepared, or prepared to be unprepared, for the unexpected arrival of *any* other.”⁷⁶ Derrida discusses the difference between a visitation and an invitation arguing that there is an implicit

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Caputo, Page, 111.

⁷⁵ Ibid. Page, 110.

⁷⁶ Kearney, Page, 70.

difference between the two concepts, he says that “it is as if there were a competition or a contradiction between two neighboring but incompatible views: *visitation and invitation*, and, more gravely, it is as if there were a hidden contradiction between hospitality and invitation.”⁷⁷ Derrida argues the idea of hospitality in a different vein saying that, “to be hospitable is to let oneself be overtaken [*surprendre*], *to be ready to not be ready*, if such is possible, to let oneself be overtaken, to not even *let* oneself be overtaken, to be surprised, in a fashion almost violent, violated and raped [*violée*], stolen [*volée*] precisely where one is not ready to receive -- and not only *not yet ready* but *not ready, unprepared* in a mode that is not even that of the “not yet.”⁷⁸

Was there some hostility in Abraham’s response to the Other of Allah’s request? Was the gift given in hospitality or in hostility? What was the response of the son, the response of Abraham, and was there a response from God? For the response we turn to Derrida, who argues, “I can respond to the one (or to the One), that is to say to the other, only by sacrificing to that one the other. I am responsible to any one (that is to say to the other) only by failing in my responsibilities to all the others, to the ethical or political generality. And I can

⁷⁷ Derrida, *Acts of Religion*. Page, 360-361, and he continues to say “Or, more precisely, between hospitality as it exposes itself to the visit, to the visitation, and the hospitality that adorns and prepares itself [*se pare et se prépare*] in invitation. These two hôtes that the visitor and the invited are, these two faces of hospitality, visitation and invitation, are not moments of hospitality, dialectical phases of the same process, the same phenomenon. Visitor and invited, visitation and invitation, are simultaneously in competition and incompatible; they figure the non-dialectizable [*non-dialectisable*] tension, even the always imminent implosion, in fact, the continuously occurring implosion in its imminence, unceasing, at once active and deferred, of the concept of hospitably, even of the *concept* in *hospitality*. To wait without waiting, awaiting absolute surprise, the unexpected visitor, awaited without a horizon of expectation: this is indeed about the Messiah as hôte, about the messianic as hospitality, the messianic that introduces deconstructive disruption or madness in the concept of hospitality, the madness of hospitality, even the madness of the *concept* of hospitality.

⁷⁸ Ibid. Page, 361.

never justify this sacrifice; I must always hold my peace about it. Whether I want to or not, I will never be able to justify the fact that I prefer or sacrifice any one (any other) to the other. I will always be in secret, held to secrecy in respect of this, for nothing can be said about it. What binds me to singularities, to this one or that one, male or female, rather than that one or this one, remains finally unjustifiable (this is Abraham's hyperethical sacrifice), as unjustifiable as the infinite sacrifice I make at each moment. These singularities represent others, a wholly other form of alterity: one other or some others, but also places, animals, languages. How would you ever justify the fact that you sacrifice all the cats in the world to the cat that you feed at home every day for years, whereas other cats die of hunger at every instant? Not to mention other people. How would you justify your presence here speaking one particular language, rather than speaking to others in another language? And yet we also do our duty by behaving thus. There is no language, no reason, no generality or mediation to justify this ultimate responsibility which leads us to absolute sacrifice; absolute sacrifice that is not the sacrifice of irresponsibility on the altar of responsibility, but the sacrifice of the most imperative duty (that which binds me to the other as a singularity in general) in favor of another absolutely imperative duty binding me to the wholly other."⁷⁹ Was a gift given in the sacrifice? Did Abraham decide to offer up his son simply because he was asked? Was it a command, a request, a dream, a misunderstanding, would it make a difference?

These questions look into the center of the vortex regarding the responsibility of Abraham. The final question in particular is critical for our

⁷⁹ Derrida, The Gift of Death. Page, 71-72.

understanding of the ethical responsibility of Abraham. The differences between a command, a request, a dream, or a misunderstanding are irrelevant. It is what is done with the information. The differences only denote different tones of asking or different consequences if the bearer fails the action. For Ibrahim, the differences are even less relevant, for Ibrahim was an obedient servant and any hint of a directive would be held as the highest duty. Whether the sacrifice was a gift is perhaps a better question for Derrida holds that the gift giver can not know he is giving a gift and Abraham certainly knew he was going to sacrifice his son, for he kept his silence in the Hebrew Bible for that reason, and in the Qur'an he tells his son. So for Derrida, the sacrifice of the son was not a true gift, it entered into an economy of exchange, which some Islamic commentators specifically mention. The sacrifice of the son was in payment for past blessings from Allah. Though the sacrifice was not a gift it certainly seems to be of some hospitality.

In regards to Abraham and his sacrifice, Derrida, speaking for God, about God, to Abraham, says, "the command is requesting, like a prayer from God, a declaration of love that implores: tell me that you love me, tell me that you turn toward me, toward the unique one, toward the other as unique and, above all, over everything else, unconditionally: and in order to do that, make a gift of death, give death to your only son and give me the death that I as for, that I give to you by asking for it. In short God says to Abraham: I can see right away that you have understood what absolute duty toward the unique one means, that it means responding where there is no reason to be asked for or given; I see that not only have you understood that as an idea, but that – and here lies responsibility – you

have acted on it, you have put it into effect, you were ready to carry it out at this very instant (God stops him at the instant when there is no more time, where time is no more given, as if Abraham has already killed Isaac: the concept of the instant is always indispensable): thus you had already acted on it, you are absolute responsibility, you had the courage to behave like a murderer in the eyes of the world and of your loved ones, in the eyes of morality, politics, and of the generality of the general or of your kind. And you had even renounced hope [emphasis original].”⁸⁰ And so, “Abraham is thus at the same time the most moral and the most immoral, the most responsible and the most irresponsible of men, absolutely irresponsible because he is absolutely responsible, absolutely irresponsible in the face of men and his family, and in the face of the ethical, because he responds absolutely to absolute duty, disinterestedly and without hoping for a reward, without knowing why yet keeping it secret; answering to God and before God. He recognizes neither debt nor duty to his fellows because he is in a relationship with God – a relationship without relation because God is absolutely transcendent, hidden, and secret, not giving any reason he can share in exchange for this doubly given death, not sharing anything in this dissymmetrical covenant.”⁸¹

The secret that Derrida references is the axis around which he and Kierkegaard interprets the Abraham of the Hebrew Bible. As mentioned before, in the Hebrew Bible, Abraham does not tell his son that he is going to sacrifice him. He does not tell him anything. It is this silence that Derrida and Kierkegaard hold so

⁸⁰ Ibid. Page, 73.

⁸¹ Ibid.

abhorrent. What we are searching for is whether, Abraham of the Qur'an is still responsible for his actions because he does not keep silent. On the Abraham of the Hebrew Bible, Derrida continues to say, "in this way, he doesn't speak, Abraham transgresses the ethical order. According to Kierkegaard, the highest expression of the ethical is in terms of what binds us to our own and to our fellows (that can be the family but also the actual community of friends or the nation). By keeping secret, Abraham betrays ethics. His silence, or at least the fact that he doesn't divulge the secret of the sacrifice, he has been asked to make, is certainly not designed to save Isaac."⁸² And yet, Derrida argues, "of course, in some respects Abraham does speak. He says a lot. But even if he says everything, he need only keep silent on one single thing for it to be concluded that he hasn't spoken. Such a silence takes over his whole discourse. So he speaks and doesn't speak. He responds without responding. He responds and doesn't respond. He responds indirectly. He speaks in order not to say anything about the essential thing that he must keep secret. Speaking in order to not say anything is always the best technique for keeping a secret. Still, Abraham doesn't just speak in order to not say anything when he replies to Isaac. He says something that is not nothing and that is not false. He says something that is not a nontruth, something moreover that, although *he doesn't know it yet* [emphasis original], will turn out to be true."⁸³ And here, we come to the Abraham of the Qur'an, for even in speaking, even in telling his son that he had a dream, and in that dream the son was to be sacrificed, we are not sure he

⁸² Derrida, Jacques. Translated by David Wills. *The Gift of Death*. Second Edition. University of Chicago Press (Chicago, 2008). Page, 60.

⁸³ Derrida, Jacques. Translated by David Wills. *The Gift of Death*. Second Edition. University of Chicago Press (Chicago, 2008). Page, 60.

told him everything. The story is littered with holes and in this we can only conjecture. Perhaps he did not tell him the method in which he dreamed he was going to kill him. Regardless, for Derrida and Kierkegaard before him, the silence between the truths or the half-truths overwhelms the ethical. And wherefore responsibility? Who is responsible? Is it the responsibility of Allah? Is it Abraham's responsibility? Isaac or Ishmael's?

Responsibility is the final question we will address, is Ibrahim of the Qur'an a murder like his counterpart in the Hebrew Bible? Is Abraham of the Hebrew Bible a murder as he is accused? Is it an either/or situation? Are we being hospitable to Abraham and Ibrahim by making these judgments? We will listen to Derrida's arguments and then perhaps boldly make a decision, through a moment of impossibility, through a moment of hosp-ossibility. Derrida asks and answers, "On what condition is responsibility possible? On the condition that the Good no longer be a transcendental objective, a relation between objective things, but the relation to the other, a response to the other; an experience of personal goodness, and a movement of intention."⁸⁴ But also according to Derrida, "we all, as individuals, are defined by the uniqueness of our individual placement in the universality of sin."⁸⁵ This harkens back to earlier when we were discussing the figure of Heidegger and his ideas of guilt as an originary and foundational condition of human existence. Derrida echoes these thoughts by arguing that the conflict, the pull between being a responsible mortal being and the figure, the idea, the possibility of the goodness of

⁸⁴ Ibid. Page, 52.

⁸⁵ Ibid. Page, 53.

the infinite gift is the source of the guilt. For, the pull between the two and the decisions that must be made, “inevitably transforms the experience of responsibility into one of guilt,” he goes on further to say that, “I have never been and never will be up to the level of this infinite goodness nor up to the immensity of the gift, the frameless immensity that must in general define a gift as such. This guilt is ordinary, like original sin. [...] Guilt is inherent in responsibility because responsibility is always unequal to itself: one is never responsible enough. One is never responsible enough because one is finite, but also because responsibility requires two contradictory movements. It requires one to respond as oneself and as irreplaceable singularity, to answer for what one does, says, gives; but it also requires that, being good and through goodness, one forgets or efface the origin of what one gives.”⁸⁶ From this we could almost certainly conclude that Abraham did feel guilt, that Ibrahim was wracked with guilt, for who would not be? Certainly, either one of his children were a blessing given his advanced age and neither the Qur’an or the Hebrew Bible argue that he was a psychopath without feeling, nor do they argue that he was uncaring or did not love his children. For in trying to live up to this infinite responsibility he must have certainly felt that he would fail. Even were he to be successful, Derrida argues that he would have failed still, for the gift that he was giving, would not have been pure, could not have been pure, for he did the act knowingly and fully aware of what he was giving up, what he was sacrificing. And so we come to his decision, for Derrida, “[Abraham] decides, but his absolute decision is neither guided nor controlled by knowledge. Such, in fact, is the

⁸⁶ Ibid. Page, 52.

paradoxical condition of every decision: it cannot be deduced from a form of knowledge of which it would simply be the effect, its conclusion or explication. It structurally breaches knowledge and is thus destined to nonmanifestation; a decision is, in the end, always secret. It remains secret in the very instant of its performance, and how can the concept of decision be dissociated from this figure of the instant? from the stigma of its punctuality?"⁸⁷ And further, "Abraham's decision is absolutely responsible because it answers for itself before the absolute other. Paradoxically, it is also irresponsible because it is guided neither by reason nor by an ethics justifiable because it is guided neither by reason nor by an ethics justifiable before men or before the law of some universal tribunal."⁸⁸ For, "Kierkegaard would have to admit, as Levinas recalls, that ethics is also the order of and respect for absolute singularity, and not only that of the generality or of the repetition of the same. He can therefore no longer distinguish so conveniently between the ethical and the religious. But for his part, in taking into account absolute singularity, that is to say the absolute alterity obtaining in relations with another human, Levinas is no longer able to distinguish between the infinite alterity of God and that of every human: his ethics is already a religion. In both cases the border between the ethical and the religious becomes more than problematic, as do all discourses referring to it."⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Ibid. Page, 78.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid. Page, 84.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps, we should blur the lines between "ethics" and religion" as done by Levinas, Derrida, and Abraham. This blurring seems to happen entirely on its own and would be difficult to challenge either from ethicists or religious figures, as each would inevitably be drawn into the other, or perhaps the Other. "This is all the more so for political or legal matters. The general concept of responsibility, like that of decision, would thus be found to lack coherence or consequence, and even to lack identity with respect to itself, paralyzed by what can be called an aporia or an antinomy. That has never stopped it from "functioning," as one says, on the contrary. It operates so much better to the extent that it serves to obscure the abyss or fill in its absence of foundation, stabilizing a chaotic becoming in what are called conventions."⁹⁰ It seems the more we follow the decision of Abraham, indeed us all, to sacrifice, in our repeated sacrifices, in the repeatability of sacrifice, we draw closer and closer to this aporia of Derrida's. This aporia around which revolves the concepts of decision, hospitality, the gift, and responsibility draws us down like a black hole. Paralyzed but functioning these concepts restrain and free us at the same time. Again, Derrida argues, "Everything is organized to insure that this man would be condemned by any civilized society. On the other hand, the smooth function of such a society, the monotonous complacency of its discourses on morality, politics, and the law, and the very exercise of its right (whether public,

⁹⁰ Ibid.

private, national, or international), are in no way perturbed by the fact that, because of the structure of the laws of the market that society has instituted and controls, because of the mechanisms of external debt and other comparable inequities, that same "society" *puts to death* or (but failing to help someone in distress accounts for only a minor difference) *allows to die* of hunger and disease tens of millions of children (those relatives or fellow humans that ethics or the discourse of the rights of man refer to) without any moral or legal tribunal ever being competent to judge such a sacrifice, the sacrifice of the other to avoid being sacrificed oneself. Not only does such a society participate in this incalculable sacrifice, it actually organizes it. The smooth functioning of its economic, political, and legal order, the smooth functioning of its moral discourse and good conscience, presuppose the permanent operation of this sacrifice."⁹¹

The above quote reveals how all that this paper has discussed relates to today's world and reveals the importance of the repeatability of sacrifice. How is it that society can legislate against individuals for murder when by its very nature it countenance the murder, or sacrifice, of millions of others including men, women, children, and infants around the world and here at home, regardless of where home is. So what is our decision regarding the sacrifice of Abraham's son? Do we hold him responsible as an individual acting alone, acting on orders of God, the Almighty, the Merciful, the Compassionate? Does his society play a role? We have heard from the early Muslim thinkers who see no difficulty in the acts of Ibrahim who argue that he was the perfect Muslim, he was hanif, he was absolute in his submission to Allah.

⁹¹ Ibid. Page, 85-86.

We have heard from the Muslim mystics and philosophers who argue that Ibrahim misunderstood, he misinterpreted, he was confused and was never called to sacrifice his son but rather the ram. We have heard from Kierkegaard who calls Abraham a murderer for whether or not he killed his son, he intended to, and was stopped only by an act of God. We have heard from Derrida who finds the act of sacrifice to be the most responsible act and the most irresponsible act. Derrida has placed himself in the midst of the aporia to explore the effects of this contradiction. Where will we place our judgment? As we began with Muslim thought, and as this paper was geared towards understanding the Muslim point of view through the lens of continental philosophy, and as the Qur'an can neither argue back nor provide more details, we conclude that Abraham did intend to sacrifice his son and he is responsible for his actions but is no murderer. For nowhere in their literature do the Muslims believe that the act of sacrifice was murder and while there are indications from the later mystics that there were concerns, the Qur'an did not name it murder and therefore it is not murder. Ultimately the decision of judgment is left to the individual reader and while I do not deem it murder based on the traditions of Islam, I do find the act abhorrent as all people do when they consider it. However, as Derrida argues, each of us sacrifice, each of us murder each and every decision so before we act in outrage at the decision of Abraham, we should consider our own actions more carefully. For, "God sees in secret, he knows. But it is as if he didn't know what Abraham was going to do, or decide, or decide to do. He gives him back his son after assuring himself that Abraham has trembled, renounced all hope, and irrevocably decides to sacrifice his beloved son to him. Abraham had consented to

suffer death or worse, and that without calculating, without investing, beyond any perspective of reappropriation; hence, it seems beyond recompense or retribution, beyond economy, without any hope of remuneration. The sacrifice of economy, that without which there is no responsibility that is free and relative to decision (a decision always takes place beyond calculation), is indeed in this case the sacrifice of the *oikonomia*, namely of the law of the home (*oikos*), of the hearth, of what is one's own or proper, of the private, of the love and affection of one's kin. This is the moment when Abraham gives the sign of absolute sacrifice, namely by putting to death or giving death to his own, putting to death his absolute love for what is dearest, his only son; this is the instant in which the sacrifice is all but consummated -- for no more than an instant, a *no-time-lapse*, separates the raised arm of the murder from murder itself -- the impossible-to-grasp instant of absolute imminence in which Abraham can no longer go back on his decision, nor even suspend it. *In this instant*, therefore, in the imminence that no longer even separates the decision from the act, God gives him back his son and decides by sovereign decision, by an absolute gift, to reinscribe sacrifice within an economy by means of what thenceforth resembles a reward."⁹²

⁹² Ibid. Page, 95.

APPENDIX I

“Finally, the fullest rendition of the sacrificial act is found in al-Kisā’ī⁹³ under the title: “The Story of Isaac”:

Ka’b al-Aḥbār said: Sarah conceived Isaac on the night that God destroyed the people of Lot. After a full term of pregnancy, she gave birth to him on the Friday evening of the tenth day of the month of Muḥarram. A light shone from his face that illuminated what was around him. [The moment] he touched the ground, he fell prostrate in prayer to God. He then raised up his hands to heaven in a motion [signifying] the Unity of God. Abraham praised his Lord and called the poor and unfortunate. He fed them and gave them drink in thanks to God.

When Isaac reached the age of seven years, he went out with his father to Jerusalem. Abraham slept for an hour [there], and a visitor came [in a dream] and said: “O Abraham, God commands you to make an offering to Him.” When he awoke, he took a fat bull, slaughtered it, and divided it among the unfortunate. On the second night, the voice came to him and said: “O Abraham, God commands you to make a greater offering than that bull.” When he awoke, he slaughtered a camel and

⁹³ Source is Muḥammad b. ‘Abdallāh al-Kisā’ī. Ed. Isaac Eisenberg and titled, *Vita Prophetarum*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1922. Page, 150-152. Firestone, Page, 229. “Attributed author of a very colorful *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā’* dating to the 11th century CE. The overall impression suggests that al-Kisā’ī relied to a great extent on his memory rather than on written sources. His work appears intended for a popular, not scholarly, audience. In many cases, he adopted stories of Jewish origin which other authors did not know of or accept. Because of his rampant use of Jewish or *isrā’īlī* sources, normative Muslim scholars often look askance at al-Kisā’ī’s work. Scholarship on al-Kisā’ī’s dating and first name is divided. The prevailing opinion agrees with Eisenberg, the editor of the Arabic text, that the man was Muḥammad ibn ‘Abdallāh and that the text dates to around the 11th century CE, although the earliest manuscript remaining dates to the 13th century.” Lowin, Page, 266-267.

divided it among the poor. On the third night, the voice came to him and said: "God commands you to make a greater offering to Him than that camel." He said: "What is greater than that?" It pointed to Isaac, and he woke up in fright.

He said to Isaac, "O my son, are you not obedient to me?" He answered: "Certainly, O father. If you desired to sacrifice me, I would not [try to] prevent you from it." So Abraham went to his home and took a knife and rope. He said to Isaac: "O my son, come with me to the mountains!"

When the two of them left, the Devil approached Sarah and said to her: "Abraham has resolved to sacrifice your son, Isaac! Catch up with him and stop him!" But she recognized him and said: "Away, O cursed of God! They have set out to please God!" So he left her caught up with Isaac. He said to him: "Your father wants to sacrifice you!" But Abraham said to him: "O my son, come on. Do not pay attention to him, for he is the devil."

When they arrived at the mountain, Abraham said: "O MY SON, I SEE IN A VISION THAT I WILL SACRIFICE YOU." HE SAID: "O MY FATHER DO AS YOU ARE COMMANDED. IF GOD WILLS, YOU WILL FIND ME MOST STEADFAST!" (Q.37:102). He said: "O father, if you want to sacrifice me, take my shirt off my back so that my mother will not see it [bloodied] and cry a long time over me. Tie up my shoulders lest I squirm between your hands and it cause you pain. When you place the knife on my throat turn your face from me lest compassion for me overcome you and you fail [to carry out your task]. Seek help in God for your bereavement over me. And when you return [home], bring my shirt to my mother so that she may find some comfort in it over me. Give her greetings from me, but do not tell her how you

slaughtered me, nor how you took off my shirt, nor how you bound me up with rope so that she will not be sorrowful over me. And when you see a young boy like me, do not look at him, so that your heart will not grieve on my account.”

The voice from heaven called him: “O Friend of God, how can you not be compassionate for this small child who speaks to you with such words?” Abraham thought that it was the mountain who spoke to him, so he said: “O Mountain, God has commanded this of me! Do not distract me with your words!” Abraham then took off Isaac’s shirt, bound him with the rope, and said: “In the name of God the Powerful and the Excellent!” He put the knife on his throat. He raised up his hand [with the knife] and brought it down again. But the knife turned over and said: “There is no might nor power save with God the Most High and Magnificent!” He sharpened the knife on a stone until he made it as hot as fire. Then, he returned to Isaac with it. But it turned over [again] and spoke with God’s permission, saying: “Do not blame me, O prophet of God, for I have been commanded to do this!” At that, Abraham heard a voice calling: “O ABRAHAM, YOU HAVE [ALREADY] FULFILLED THE VISION! (Q.37:105). And God said: AND WE REDEEMED HIM WITH A MAGNIFICENT SACRIFICE (Q.37:107). That is, with a magnificent ram.

He was called: “O Abraham, take this ram and redeem your son with it. Sacrifice it as an offering. God has made this day a [holy] festival for you and your children. The ram said: “O Friend of God, sacrifice me instead of your son, for I am more appropriate for sacrifice than he. I am the ram of Abel, son of Adam, who gave me as an offering to his Lord and whose offering was accepted. I have grazed in the meadows of the Garden for forty autumns!”

Abraham praised his Lord for delivering Isaac. He went to untie him from [his] bonds, but he was already free. He said: "O my son, who united you?" He answered him: "The one who brought the sacrificial ram." Then Abraham went to the ram and sacrificed it. A white smokeless fire from heaven came, burned up the ram and consumed it so that the only thing that remained was its head.

Abraham departed with the ram's head and told Sarah about [all that happened]. She fell down prostrate in thanks to God."⁹⁴

⁹⁴ Firestone, Page, 124-126.

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