PERIL AND DELIVERANCE
AND THE AKEDAH-SINAI NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

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One of the key approaches to understanding the Bible fully is delineating the essential unitary structure of the text. This means identifying the structural devices used by the text, such as allusions, patterns, and other techniques which strategically convey a theological message.

In this essay, I intend to show how a well-defined literary structure can be discerned connecting the narrative of the *Akedah* to the Revelation at Sinai. Linguistic and thematic parallels emerge when these biblical narratives are compared. While the manifold relationships and connections between these narratives may be widely observed in popular Biblical interpretation, I will trace a distinct literary unit by systematically mapping the points of connectivity between the texts. Furthermore, I will argue that these parallels establish not merely the presence of a pattern, but a cohesive literary structure.

Repeatedly in these narratives, man finds himself in some imminent danger (perceived or real) which is averted. This pattern of danger and deliverance is a natural part of the religious encounter with God, which man may perceive as perilous by virtue of the ample opportunity for transgressing God's directives and contravening His plans. However, God reassures His adherents that He does not seek human sacrifice, victims, or anyone's harm. Rather, He wishes to benefit mankind through the acceptance of His will and the fulfillment of His designs. As the theme of peril and deliverance recurs, the bounds of the literary unit will be readily discerned.

PARALLELS: AKEDAH AND SINAI

The connection between the *Akedah* and Sinai is already proposed in the midrashic literature (*Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* 31): "Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa said: From that ram [of Abraham] which was created at twilight, nothing came forth that was useless...The horn of the ram of the left side was the one which He blew on Mount Sinai, as it is said: *And it shall come to pass that when the ram's horn sounds long* (Josh. 6:5)."[1]

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As this midrash suggests, there is a link between the two stories: the *shofar* blasts which announced the Revelation at Sinai were blown using the horns of the ram sacrificed in place of Isaac at the *Akedah*. The seemingly different themes of the *Akedah* and the Sinaitic Revelation, the midrash implies, are actually related.

Let me collect the similarities. To begin with, the *Akedah* takes place on the third day of Abraham's journey. After God instructs Abraham to travel to Mount Moriah and bring Isaac as an offering, the passage states: *Then on the third day* [ba-yom ha-shelishi] *Abraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place afar off* (Gen. 22:4). The Revelation at Sinai similarly unfolds on the third day following a period of special preparation: *And it came to pass on the third day* [va-yehi va-yom ha-shelishi] *in the morning, there was thunder and lightning* (Ex. 19:16). On the face of it, the Biblical convention of *three days* is not atypical – the phrase *yom ha-shelishi* appears five times in Genesis alone. However, the Midrash (Genesis Rabbah 56:1) demonstrates that *three days* is a scriptural device which often foreshadows a Divine deliverance.[2]

Next, both the *Akedah* and Sinai take place in exclusion, on a mountain of God's choosing, and in each case the onlookers are purposely kept at a distance, which the texts describe with corresponding terminology. In the *Akedah* narrative, the verse says, *Then on the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place afar off* [me-rahok] (Gen. 22:4). The subsequent verse continues, *And Abraham said to his young men: "Stay here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and prostrate ourselves, and come back to you"* (Gen. 22:5). Similarly, at Sinai, when Moses descends from the mountain and transmits the Decalogue, the text states, *And all the people perceived the thunder and the lightning, and the sound of the shofar, and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they were shaken and stood afar off* [me-rahok] (Ex. 20:15). The term *me-rahok* appears twice more related to the Sinai narrative, in Exodus 20:18 and 24:1.

The repeated term *me-rahok* highlights the distinction between the *Akedah* and Sinai. For Abraham and Isaac, their observation of Moriah in its isolation from afar conveys their sense of anticipation and willingness to persist in their ascent. For the Israelites at Sinai, their withdrawal from the mountain conveys their extreme anxiety about approaching any closer to God. *Me-rahok* is the point at which they advance no further.

The most significant parallel of all, however, is this. At the beginning of the *Akedah* episode, the text states, *And it came to pass after these things, that God did test* [nissah] *Abraham* (Gen. 22:1). While the exegetes suggest different explanations for the expression *nissah*, the term is found in the Pentateuch principally in the context of God challenging man.[3] Toward the conclusion of the narrative, Abraham is instructed to withdraw his hand from Isaac, abandoning the original directive to slaughter his son. *And he said: "Lay not thy hand upon the lad, neither do anything to him: for now I know that thou fearest God"* (Gen. 22:12). Abraham prevails in his trial and Isaac is spared.

A similar pattern can be detected in the Sinai narrative. Following the Decalogue in Exodus, the text states: *And they said to Moses: "Speak thou with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die." And Moses said to the people: "Fear not, for God has come to test* [nassot] *you and that his fear may be before your faces, that you sin not"* (Ex. 20:16-17).

The people expressed a fear that they would perish as a result of the theophany. In response, Moses explained that the reason for the thunder and lightning was a *trial*, implying that no harm was intended. The pattern that emerges here follows the *Akedah* formulation: first there is an expectation of imminent danger, the "test" or "trial", followed by a rescue in which the anticipated harm does not come about. In fact, the Sinai verse replicates the *Akedah* terminology with the verb *nassot.*[4]

To sum up, the key connections between the narratives are as follows. On the third day [*yom ha-shelishi*], at an isolated [*me-rahok*] mountain location, people are tested [*nassot*], at which time they sense a danger which is really not present. The multiple common verbal elements, combined with the parallel framework of danger and deliverance, result in a compelling interdependency between the texts. The Sages were sensitive to the peril of the encounter between Israel and God at Sinai. Thus, we have the following Talmudic commentary on the words, *As they stood at the foot of the mountain* (Ex. 19:17): "This teaches that the Holy One overturned the mountain upon them like a cask, and said to them: 'If you accept the Torah, it is well; if not, this will be your burial'" (TB *Shabbat* 88a).

Linking Sinai to the *Akedah* reveals an underlying motif in the narratives. Although Abraham is willing to sacrifice Isaac, no such sacrifice occurs in the end, because Abraham is warned against inflicting *any harm* [me'umah]

(Gen. 22:12). By the same measure, the awesome events experienced by the Israelites at Sinai were to awaken the Torah's adherents to their additional accountability and responsibility; at the same time, however, God *does not* intend the experience to be harmful. The connection to the *Akedah*, in which God tests Abraham and then rescues Isaac from harm, serves to emphasize a fundamental premise of the Torah's acceptance: it demands unconditional ratification, under ominous and frightening conditions, but most importantly, *without* human sacrifice – or even physical harm.[5]

THE WATERS OF MARAH

Additional evidence that the danger-salvation framework underlies the two narratives can be found in the Biblical account of Marah. In Exodus 15, following the Song of the Sea, the Israelites long for water after a three-day march. God reveals a tree that Moses casts into bitter waters, turning them sweet. The narrative is followed by the verse: *There He made for them a statute and an ordinance, and there He tested them* [nissahu] (Ex. 15:25). Once again, the parallels of the three-day journey, the expression of *trial*, and the danger-rescue formula (in this case, from lack of water) are all present. All that is missing is the isolated location conveyed by the term *me-rahok*. Establishing this pattern at Marah should not be considered incidental. The verse apparently indicates that certain laws were transmitted at this time. The words *statute* and *ordinance* are understood by the Talmud (TB *Sanhedrin* 56b) as referring to some portion of the Decalogue. We now have two occasions when laws are conveyed to the Israelites, and in each instance much of the same textual pattern occurs.

In the case of Marah, the purpose of the message underlying the "trial" is explicitly stated. The episode concludes: *And He said: "If thou wilt diligently hearken to the voice of the Lord thy God, and wilt do that which is right in His eyes, and wilt give ear to His commandments, and keep all His statutes, I will put none of the diseases upon thee which I have put upon the Egyptians; for I am the Lord that healeth thee"* (Ex. 15:26). God's message is clear: the commandments are specifically devised to safeguard human life.

CONCLUSION

The separate narratives of the *Akedah*, and of giving laws at Marah and Sinai, are different components of a coherently unified whole. The narratives have central elements in common, both textually and conceptually, and most significantly they are underpinned by the theme of perceived danger and Divine rescue. Although God may challenge mankind through Divine precepts which intimidate, distress and seemingly imperil even the most upstanding character, observance of the precepts is not intended to cause suffering or failure.

An extension of this idea is presented by Nahmanides in his Bible commentary.[6] The justification for God's trial of Abraham – or any test of man for that matter – is that it is for the benefit of the one being tested. God devises tests because He wishes the righteous to actualize their virtue through performing good deeds, not simply through having good intentions. Being examined in this manner, Nahmanides argues, is a privilege afforded only to the righteous. Not only is devotion to the word of God no detriment, it is demonstrably advantageous.

This perspective is best summed up perhaps by the Mishnah, which states: "Rabbi Hananya ben Akashya taught that God wished to reward Israel and He therefore gave them Torah and commandments in abundance" (*Makkot* 3:16). Simply stated, full acceptance of the Torah in this view is a net positive, despite its difficulties and deprivations.

NOTES

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1. See also Rashi's commentary to Exodus 19:13.

2. See also *Genesis Rabbah* 91:7, which comments on the verse *And he* [Joseph] *put them* [his brothers] *all together into custody for three days* (Gen. 42:17) — that God does not leave the righteous in danger for as long as three full days.

3. The root *n-s-h* is often translated as "test." I prefer the more general translation "trial." As discussed below, this root appears in reference to the Sinaitic Revelation (Ex. 20:17) and Marah (Ex. 15:25). In addition, it appears in reference to the manna (Ex. 16:4 and Deut. 8:16) and, more generally, regarding the wilderness (Deut. 8:2). Rabbinic commentators point out that the term has different implications based on context. See, for example, Nahmanides' and Rashi's respective commentaries to Genesis 22:1 and Exodus 20:17. For an alternative view of the role of God's "trial", see Maimonides, *Moreh Nevukhim* 3:24. Conversely, the term *n-s-h* is used in reference to Israel challenging God, as in the incident at Massah (Ex. 17:2, 17:7 and Deut. 6:16, 33:8) and separately (Num. 14:22 and Deut. 4:34). The term *n-s-h* also appears without regard to a particular incident (Deut. 13:4 and 28:56).

4. As shown above in note 3, some rabbinic commentators derived alternative explanations for the term *n-s-h* in both the *Akedah* and Sinai. Notwithstanding these differences, the selection of the term in both narratives provides a basis to identify meaningful relationships between the texts.

5. Reading the Revelation at Sinai through the lens of the *Akedah* narrative, it is similarly suggestive that when Abraham is warned against inflicting "any harm" [*me'umah*] (Gen. 22:12), the warning should be taken at face value. This approach serves to validate the interpretation that the ram was intended as a substitute for Isaac, not supplemental to blood drawn from Isaac. While rabbinic interpretation generally accepts the plain reading of the text, which states that Abraham was prevented from harming Isaac to any degree, opposing rabbinic approaches involve the wounding or even death and revival of Isaac before Abraham's release. See, for example, *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* 31. See also S. Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, trans. J. Goldin (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1967) ch. 7, for a discussion of the allusions to "the blood of Isaac" in rabbinic literature. This approach is also found in non-Jewish sources, where the *Akedah* narrative and Isaac's blood are used as a paradigm for the Passion sacrifice and atonement. See C. T. R. Hayward, "The Sacrifice of Isaac and Jewish Polemic Against Christianity," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 52 (1990) pp. 292-306, for a discussion of the relationship between Jewish and non-Jewish interpretation. For a survey comparing the Jewish and non-Jewish traditions, see Edward Kessler, *Bound by the Bible: Jews, Christians and the Sacrifice of Isaac* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

6. Commentary of Nahmanides, Genesis 22:1.