Abraham’s actions are explained not only by what is happening to him at the moment, not yet only by his character . . . but by his previous history; he remembers, he is constantly conscious of, what God has promised him and what God has already accomplished for him—his soul is torn between desperate rebellion and hopeful expectation; his silent obedience is multilayered, has background.

Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis*

In Chapter Three I represented God as setting forth a command that is at odds with the promises he has made to Abraham in their earlier engagements. The deity’s words radically alter the divine character zone and raise questions about God’s intentions for Abraham’s future. His command in Gen. 22:2 threatens the blessings, Abraham’s posterity, as well as Isaac’s life. In addition, the narrator situates us to watch Abraham, focusing our attention on how he will respond. In contrast to Auerbach, who pointed to the complexity of characters’ putative inner states, I will concentrate on the authorly/readerly construction of consciousness—as Bakhtin does. In this chapter I will examine Abraham’s near-silent reply to God’s call to sacrifice Isaac in Gen. 22:3-10.

We know from listening to their previous interactions that Abraham’s “silent obedience” should not be equated with absolute agreement with God. In fact, we have observed that Abraham’s verbal responses to God include questions, doubts and, as
Auerbach astutely remarked, conflicting emotions. Various scholars have noted that the narrative encourages the reader to participate in Abraham’s subjectivity. However, as Landy points out, the narrator situates us to observe Abraham “from without” as well; he writes, “we observe Abraham objectively, from without, as he moves unimpeded towards his goal, but also from within, seeing, for example, the mountain through his eyes, and feeling the pain with his heart.”

In this study, my concern will not be Abraham’s subjectivity, for however much the narrator may encourage the reader to “feel” and “see” as and what Abraham sees, Abraham remains an opaque character—his internal thoughts and feelings about sacrificing Isaac remain unexpressed (by him, by any other character, by the narrator). Narrated wordless gestures and actions comprise most of his response (and eleven of the nineteen verses of the narrative); so in this chapter I will attend to what we can see in Abraham’s near-silent narrated actions and gestures in Gen. 22: 3-10. My aim is to demonstrate a way to read Abraham’s response as multilayered and fraught. As I suggested in Chapter One, while Bakhtin concentrates on how language (and culture) reflects the dialogical nature of reality, he appears cognizant of the dialogical nature of silent gestures and actions. My contention is that in his reply to God, Abraham employs a different “language system”: He fashions his answer through silent but purposeful and meaningful actions and gestures. If we read these actions dialogically we can see in

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2. For example, Adele Berlin remarks that we focus on the events of the story “through Abraham,” *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 44. In one section of his essay, “Narrative Techniques,” 130, Landy demonstrates how the text of Genesis 22 concentrates on Abraham’s subjectivity “through an array of subtly poetic factors.” In contradistinction to the reading strategies of Berlin and Landy, a Bakhtinian approach does not attempt to describe a character’s inner state; because its focus is on character and narratorial discourse it attends only to emotions that are verbally expressed.
them obedience, but also a visual argument against sacrificing Isaac, one aimed at persuading God to halt the sacrifice.

I suggest that it is plausible to read Abraham’s response as a series of silent gestures, but I am also aware that it is the narrator’s discourse that describes his actions. So in addition to reading Abraham’s response I will attend to how the narrator’s language constructs that response. I see Genesis 22 as an interpretively told tale, full of moving speeches and vivid images. Therefore, in addition to demonstrating how the narrator’s language can be read dialogically as supporting both Abraham’s obedience and his silent argument, I will also sketch the narrator’s point of view on sacrificing Isaac as a conflict-ridden narrative of a father charged with slaughtering his only son.

My procedure will be to read Gen. 22:3-10 twice. First, I demonstrate how Abraham’s actions can be read as silently obeying God’s command and how the narrator’s language constructs Abraham as obedient. In the second reading I will go through the verses again and show how we can also read Abraham’s actions as a wordless argument against the sacrifice. I will conclude with my construction of the narrator’s ambivalence toward the sacrifice.

Abraham’s Conflicted Response

If we expect to hear Abraham mount a passionate defense on behalf of his son Isaac, as he did for the sake of the innocent of Sodom, we are disappointed. The Abraham who questioned God about the long delay of the promised son (Gen. 15: 2,3), who inwardly laughed at God’s pronouncement that the elderly Sarah will have a child (Gen. 17:17), and who passionately and persistently negotiated for God to spare the city
of Sodom (Gen. 18: 23-32), says nothing in response to the command to sacrifice Isaac. He offers none of the obvious arguments: He does not point out that the order renders God’s words about the promises void. He does not argue that God’s second directive contradicts the initial call. The narrator, too, is silent, offering no comments on Abraham’s feelings as he did in that eerily parallel incident (Gen. 21:11) when God instructed Abraham to surrender Ishmael, Abraham’s only other flesh-and-blood son. The lack of verbalization here, with no protests, questions (from Abraham), or reported information (by the narrator) is made prominent by such having been offered on these previous occasions (Gen. 15: 2, 3, 8; 17:17, 18; 19: 23-32). In particular, Abraham’s reported distress over the loss of Ishmael brings into the foreground his utter silence over the fate of this son, Isaac. From the very first, Abraham shapes his utterance in the language system of silence—wordless actions and gestures; but for one short reply, he does not speak to God (Gen. 22:11). Abraham’s silence means that, as he crafts his response, we have no information about his feelings, his thoughts, or his reaction to the idea of sacrificing Isaac. His use of unverbalized actions and gestures compel God (and the reader) to watch what he does, or to listen in on his conversations with others.

Readers have read various—in fact even opposing—intentions into Abraham’s actions: Levenson sees unwavering and absolute obedience, while Fewell and Gunn

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4Levenson, *Death and Resurrection*, 129, puts forth the view that there is no real difference in Abraham’s response on these two occasions. He contends that Abraham only “expresses” distress over Ishmael in response to Sarah, but (silently) submits to the deity when God issues instructions to expel Ishmael, just as he does in Gen. 22:2 with God’s command to sacrifice Isaac.

5On this point, Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*, 58, writes, “Even when the view is internal in respect to the action, it is external in respect to Abraham, i.e., the psychological level. We do not know what is going on in his mind; we see only his physical movements and hear the words he utters aloud.”

6That Abraham is utterly submissive and obedient to God is the main point of Levenson’s argument in chapter twelve of *Death and Resurrection* (125-142). Obedience is the lens through which he reads Genesis 22.
see selfishness in Abraham’s behavior. It is my choice, using Bakhtin’s reading strategies, to read Abraham’s wordless actions as an utterance that is multilayered and conflicted, and to read his actions dialogically as both obedience and as an argument designed to persuade God to halt the sacrifice.

Abraham’s Near-Silent Obedience

In this section I will first show how we can read Abraham’s near-wordless response in Gen. 22:3-10 to God’s command (Gen. 22:2) as actions of obedience. The sections I will examine are: v. 3, vv. 4-6, vv. 7-8, and vv. 9-10. I then will discuss how the narrator’s language reinforces the idea that Abraham obeys God’s words.

a. Preparations and “Going”: Gen. 22:3.

We can see obedience in Abraham’s unvocalized actions in v. 3 in the following ways: First, his actions in v. 3 repeat the general pattern of obedience that we have seen in his earlier engagements with God: God tells Abraham to do something and we watch Abraham carry out God’s instructions. More importantly, though, Abraham’s actions in v. 3 mirror the first act of obedience in the initial engagement. Abraham not only gathers the requisite people for the journey (i.e., the boys and Isaac) as we see him do in Gen. 12:4-5, but once again heads off to a destination shown to him by God (Gen. 12:1; 22:2).8

7 Fewell and Gunn see a lack of character and a pattern of selfishness in Abraham’s actions (throughout the Abraham narratives) particularly in regard to the women and children in his life. They make this point in “Keeping the Promise,” 39-55, and in “Abraham and Sarah: Genesis 11-22,” 90-100.
8 Levenson Death and Resurrection, 128, sees Abraham’s willingness to embark on these two journeys (Gen. 12:1 and 22:2) without knowing exactly where God is directing him to go as a mark of his extraordinary obedience.
Second, Abraham’s rapid compliance seems to signal his obedience as it did in the past. His early start parallels the alacrity with which he complies with God’s instructions to dismiss Hagar and Ishmael from the household in the ninth engagement. Swift execution was also a mark of his compliance in the sixth engagement, where the narrator emphasizes the speed with which Abraham implements God’s directives about circumcision: he obeyed “that very day” (Gen. 21:23; 26).

Third, his preparations indicate that he takes God’s command seriously and puts it into action. We watch him make the necessary arrangements for the journey: He prepares the means of transportation; he brings the contingent (the servant boys) necessary for the journey; and most importantly, he takes the items for sacrifice—the wood for the ritual and the sacrificial victim (Isaac).

Fourth, Abraham begins the journey. Again, this mirrors his first journey taken in obedience to the deity’s command to “go” (Gen. 12:1).


We continue to see evidence of Abraham’s obedience in his speech and actions in Gen. 22:4. First of all, he both verbally and visually confirms his intentions to obey God’s words by indicating that the “place” (of sacrifice) is his destination. He informs “the boys” that he and Isaac are going “there,” while he also points it out to them. In addition, his speech about worshipping on the mountain fits the previous pattern that we have seen of Abraham who not only does what God verbally commands, but also performs supererogatory acts of devotion never specifically requested by the deity, such

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9The verbs Klv μανακυ, which are literally “he rose and went,” comprise a verbal hendiadys. Thomas Lambdin, in Introduction to Biblical Hebrew (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1971), 239, states that the verb μανακυ in hendiadys indicates that action is about to begin. However, in his commentary Speiser notes that it can also indicate speed of action Genesis, 163.

10The same verb is used here in Gen. 22:3 and in Gen. 21:14.
as building altars (engagements two and three) and invoking the deity’s name (engagement three). His statement that he and Isaac will “go,” “worship,” and “return here” also indicates his obedience.\textsuperscript{11} His use of the first person plural “we” is, of course, problematic for the reader in that we, unlike Isaac or the boys, know that if Abraham “worships” by carrying out the deity’s command, Isaac will \textit{not} be returning. Nonetheless, if we take Abraham’s words at face value, his speech here in v. 5 can be read as expressed intent to obey God’s instructions by completing the journey to the place shown and to worship by means of sacrifice. His next two actions in v. 6: first taking implements necessary for the sacrificial ritual—the wood, the knife, and the fire—and then continuing on the journey, further reinforce the picture of Abraham’s obedience.


The point to note in these verses is Abraham’s steady forward movement. If we “turn off the sound” and ignore the conversation, the visual image we see is one of Abraham and Isaac moving steadily and inexorably closer to the place where Isaac is to be sacrificed. The sense conveyed by the repeated refrain “the two walked on together” (Gen. 22:6-8) is that the conversation between father and son does not interrupt the continual, unbroken progress towards the place. This act of “conversing on the move” reinforces the idea that Abraham obeys God—he does not even stop to talk—as much as his various acts of moving forward after God spoke to him in the first three engagements: We saw him \textit{go} in direct response to God’s initial command (Gen. 12:1);

\textsuperscript{11}I am assuming that if or insofar as child sacrifice is a legitimate (if perhaps rare) form of worship, then Abraham is not dissimulating when he tells them that he and Isaac are leaving to worship.
we watched Abraham move through the land as God first pointed to it in Gen. 12:7 and
when God more dramatically displayed it to him in Gen. 13:14-18.


There are a number of things in these two verses that can be seen as acts of
obedience. First, having watched Abraham’s persistent movement forward, we see that
he completes his journey, a point corroborated by the narrator (v. 9). Second, we
observe him as he carries out the necessary preparations to perform the ritual: he builds
an altar, places the wood on it, binds Isaac, and places him on the altar. We watch
him reach for the knife for the ritual slaughter. Thus we see Abraham following God’s
instructions in v. 2 to “offer him [Isaac] there as a burnt offering on one of the
mountains that I will point out to you.”

The Narrator’s Descriptions/language of Abraham’s Obedience

Since Abraham’s actions are narrated actions I will next approach the text from
a different angle: the narrator’s language. In this section I examine the ways in which
the narrator’s language reinforces the idea that Abraham obeys God’s words.

First, the narrator draws Abraham’s response in vs. 3 to mirror “the utterance
and response pattern” of the original call and response in Gen. 12:1-3 and Gen. 12:4
respectively, thus from the first representing Abraham’s actions here as parallel to his
initial act of obedience in Gen. 12: 4. More specifically, the narrator uses or reuses

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12Sarna, *Genesis*, 153, notes that the verb dq ( is not found anywhere in the ritual vocabulary of
the Hebrew Bible other than in Gen. 22:9.
verbs that indicate obedience: Abraham “takes” (xqâl) Isaac and the servant boys (v. 3), just as he originally “took” (xqâl) his family in Gen. 12: 4; Abraham “went” (Klh) in Gen. 22:3, just as he “went” (Kl-h) in Gen. 12: 4. He further evokes that first act of obedience by reusing God’s phrase from Gen. 22:2, “the place that God had pointed out to him,” that echoes the words of the original call in Gen. 12:1: “the land that I will show you.”

Second, the narrator picks up and repeats God’s phrase, “the place that God had pointed out to him,” and uses it as a refrain at the beginning of Abraham’s journey (v. 3) and at its end (v. 9). By enclosing Abraham’s progressive journeying in this phrase, the narrator creates the impression that Abraham is following the directions God has imparted to him. Because the directions are not mentioned in the text, we are not privy to them; but the narrator’s language (i.e., the refrain) affirms that the communication takes place. This example of hybridized speech—language that the narrator and a character share—verifies that Abraham follows God’s orders because he goes to the place shown (v. 9).

Third, in another example of hybridized speech, the narrator picks up the verb “to take” (xqâl) that God uses to command Abraham and uses it to suggest Abraham follows God’s command throughout his trip, telling us that Abraham “took,” first, the sacrificial victim, i.e., Isaac (v. 3), that he then “took” the implements for the sacrifice (the wood, the fire and the knife, v. 6), and finally that Abraham “takes” the knife for slaughtering (v. 10). Thus the narrator shows Abraham doing what God says.

13Levenson, Death and Resurrection, 127, points to the sacrificial resonances in the verb “take,” remarking that Abraham’s “taking” Isaac “will be a ‘taking’ like that of Exod. 12.3, in which the community of Israel is enjoined to ‘take a lamb to a family, a lamb to a household’ for sacrifice on the first Passover.”
Fourth, the narrator reuses the motif of a journey from the earlier engagements to visually portray Abraham’s obedience. In those other engagements the narrator portrayed Abraham’s movement through the land as an ongoing act of obedience to God’s command in the first engagement. Here he links the motif of Abraham steadily moving towards the place of sacrifice with that of Abraham moving through the land of Canaan in Genesis 12-21. The narrator situates God and the reader to conclude that Abraham obeys God’s command in v. 2 by “journeying” just as he did in Genesis 12-21.

Fifth, in Genesis 22 the narrator uses the verb “to go/walk” (Klish) to equate Abraham’s obedience with his going forth (vv. 3, 5, 6, 8, 13, 19). This verb was used in the first engagement by God to instruct Abraham to “go,” by the narrator to describe Abraham’s obedience to that initial call (Gen. 12: 1, 4, 5), and also by the narrator to show Abraham implementing God’s command by his progressive journeying through the land (Gen. 12: 9, 10; 13:3).

Sixth, the narrator shows us Abraham making the appropriate preparations and performing the rituals necessary to complete the sacrifice. Whether it is the initial preparations for the trip (v. 3), bringing the essential apparatus (vv. 3, 6), or performing the required rituals (vv. 9-10), the narrator’s language consistently draws a picture of Abraham assiduously performing the tasks necessary to obey God’s words.

Seventh, the narrator quotes Abraham’s verbal confirmation of his intention to obey, first in v. 5 where Abraham indicates to the boys that he and Isaac will worship, and in v. 8 as he tells Isaac that God will “see to/provide” what they need for the sacrificial ritual.
Eighth, as Berlin noted, the narrator’s syntax and use of verbs convey a sense of Abraham’s obedience. Regarding Gen. 22:3 and the activities that we watch Abraham perform, she writes: “The string of short clauses of similar syntax, in which the verbs predominate, conveys the feeling that Abraham is deliberately and obediently carrying out his orders.”¹⁴

In summary, through the reuse of language, hybridized speech, and key verbs the narrator reinforces the idea that Abraham’s actions can be read as obedience to God’s command to sacrifice his son.

Abraham’s Wordless Argument Against Sacrificing Isaac

Auerbach’s Abraham is someone who acts, cognizant of his shared history with God. In my construction of the character I assume that Abraham acts, based on what he knows of God and of God’s behavior derived largely from their former interactions. That is, we see Abraham shape his response, calculating how God might respond to what he puts forth. So I construct that Abraham obeys, but at the same time he creates a silent argument designed to persuade God to change his mind and rescind the sacrifice. My aim in this section is to read Abraham’s visual argument. But first I need to set the stage by reviewing the crucial information that we have gleaned from the character and narratorial discourse in the first nine engagements of God and Abraham, as well as from the opening utterances of the narrator and God in the tenth.

¹⁴Adele Berlin, Poetics and Interpretation, 39. Trible, “Sacrifice of Sarah,” 274, in her rhetorical critical analysis, remarks that these six indicative verbs describing Abraham’s meticulous preparations also signal “terrible obedience.” She notes that the phrase “Isaac his son” is framed by the verbs (rose, saddled, took; cut, arose, went) and concludes: “The father’s activity surrounds his son not to protect his life but to prepare him for death” (p. 274).
a. Background between Abraham and God.

There are a number of points that Abraham can draw from the verbal and visual communication that has transpired between him and God so far. First, the preponderance of God’s words to Abraham in their nine engagements has been about the blessings God has promised to bestow on him, in particular, the abundance of land and descendants. From God’s speeches Abraham knows that God considers Isaac’s birth a divine gift (Gen. 17:15) and a demonstration of God’s ability to do the impossible (Gen. 18:14). Also God, twice within the same conversation, has insisted that only Isaac can be considered the covenant son (Gen. 17:19, 21) and that Isaac is to be the son from whom Abraham’s descendants are to come (Gen. 21:12). I assume that in this tenth engagement Abraham weighs the word to sacrifice Isaac against God’s former expressed intention to bless Abraham through Isaac.

Second, in the tenth engagement (in v. 2) Abraham hears God describe Isaac with language imbued with love and a kind of “parental” affection: “your son, your only one, whom you love, Isaac.” Earlier I suggested that as readers we can discern a divine affection for Isaac in this tender description, and here I suggest that Abraham discerns a fondness in God for the boy as well.

Third, Abraham has participated in God’s visual displays and object lessons. He has surveyed the land pointed to and promised by the deity when he first entered the land (Gen. 12:7). He has (presumably) turned in all directions to see the land that is designated for him and his progeny (Gen. 13:14); he has regarded a copious amount of dust (Gen. 13:16) and walked outside to gaze at countless stars (Gen. 15:5), both of which represent his innumerable descendants. Abraham has participated in God’s
covenant ceremony visibly displayed in the cut animals (Gen. 15: 10), and the smoking pot and flaming torch (Gen. 15:17). Abraham has even marked his own flesh, as requested by the deity, so that his adherence to the covenant is visible to God (Gen. 17:11). At times God has used these visual object lessons and displays to persuade Abraham to draw insight from sight, to trust in God’s word, and to encourage Abraham to envision his future in light of the promises. We know that God has been successful on at least one occasion, according to the narrator, in engendering imagination in Abraham (envisioning his descendants as abundant as the stars (Gen. 15:6). As yet, we have not seen Abraham employ sight very extensively in communicating with God, but then again, aside from his extended appeal for Sodom, Abraham’s responses have so far been terse. As we will see, that will change in Genesis 22 as we watch Abraham create a visual display for the deity.

Fourth, Abraham’s attempt to influence God by means of verbal argument has produced uncertain results. After Abraham’s impassioned plea to spare the innocent of Sodom in the eighth engagement, God destroys the city nonetheless (Gen. 19: 24-25). The narrative never really satisfactorily answers the question of why God destroys Sodom, leaving us uncertain whether Abraham’s plea for Sodom was ineffectual. In addition, the devastation of Sodom raises the issue of just how safe it is vocally to challenge God. Can we discern a warning to Abraham in God’s brutal destruction of Sodom? We noted earlier that after viewing the smoldering remains of Sodom (Gen. 21:28) in the eighth engagement, Abraham does not verbally intersect with God again.

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15Humphreys, Character of God, 123, points out that the dialogue between Abraham and God over the fate of Sodom ends with many questions left unanswered. He concludes that God might be satisfied at the end of the discussion, but he is less sure that Abraham’s questions have been answered, and he wonders whether the deity is annoyed because Abraham speaks on behalf of the innocent or secretly pleased that Abraham does so.
In the next encounter in the narrative, the ninth, which is also the engagement immediately prior to Genesis 22, Abraham “rises early” in order to send off Hagar and Ishmael after having been instructed by God to do so (Gen. 21:12). We know that in the past Abraham has not hesitated to question and even laugh at God’s words (Gen. 17:17). But in Genesis 21 Abraham does not verbally respond to the deity even though the narrator has told us (v. 11) and God acknowledges that Abraham is distressed (v. 12). In other words, Abraham does not address the deity although this is the kind of situation in which we have seen him do so. While earlier we read God’s words to Abraham as a reassurance regarding Ishmael (Gen. 21:12-13), it is difficult to discern how Abraham perceives God’s words to expel Hagar and Ishmael.16 Does he hear a guarantee or a threat? After witnessing the results of God’s destructive force applied to Sodom, it is not surprising that when God tells Abraham to sacrifice Isaac (Gen. 22:2) he does not speak out at once or confront the deity; as I see Abraham, it is plausible to suspect that he might explore alternative means of persuasion. Since God has employed visual means to make his points, and sight has figured prominently in their engagements, creating a visual argument for God’s perusal is an obvious avenue for Abraham to pursue.

Fifth, Abraham is well aware that God “watches” him; the deity has regularly “appeared” at key narrative moments in Abraham’s life (Gen. 12:1, 7; 13:14; 15:1; 17:1; 18:1; 21:12; 22:1). That God “listens in” on his conversations is apparent from God’s “breaking in” (Gen. 21:12) in the middle of his conversation with someone else,

16As we noted earlier, for Bakhtin our utterance is shaped in accordance with our evaluation of the other’s perception of our speech.
i.e. in the midst of Abraham’s and Sarah’s “conversation” over the status of Ishmael and Hagar in the ninth engagement.

Considering the information that we have from their nine previous engagements, the Abraham I will sketch will construct his response drawing on his experience in his past interactions with the deity. I see Abraham challenging God as he has in the past, but now nearly wordlessly, by means of visual rather than verbal argument. He will borrow the deity’s tactics of using visual effects and setting forth displays, using aids to create his own visual “display.” His display will consist of a series of scenes designed to be watched by the deity as Abraham and Isaac journey toward the place of sacrifice “pointed out” by God. God’s visual aids are the land, dust and stars. Abraham will use various visuals, including the instruments of death, but his main visual aid will be Isaac, who as yet is the visible sign—in fact the only sign—that God keeps his words of promise. By means of his actions Abraham will constantly keep both Isaac-as-sacrificial victim, and the purpose of the journey, in view. Abraham will mirror back the command to God so that God can look at and contemplate the consequences of sacrificing Isaac. In addition, I am reading Abraham’s speech to others in the narrative as doubled, that is, it is always directed to God as well as to whomever Abraham is speaking with at the moment, whether the two servant boys\(^\text{17}\) or Isaac. I have divided the verses slightly differently in this section to correspond to the scenes as I see Abraham designing them.

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\(^{17}\) Landy, “Narrative Techniques,” 135, remarks that the boys are brought specifically to be left behind. In my reading they serve the crucial role of allowing Abraham to “speak” with the deity indirectly.

We watch Abraham move in silence as he makes the necessary preparations for the journey. Abraham’s actions appear to follow a reasonable sequence (i.e., saddling the donkey first before assembling the personnel) until we come to the action of chopping the wood-of-the-burnt-offering. Logically, this is an activity that should have occurred earlier in the arrangements. There are a number of things to note about this oddly placed activity. First, it is only after Abraham has gathered the retinue together that he prepares the wood, that is, after he has gathered an audience to watch his wood-splitting. Thus, by stopping the journey Abraham creates a little scene within a scene, drawing attention to his actions. Second, Abraham chops the wood himself; the image of Abraham chopping the wood anticipates the sacrifice in a number of ways. It will be Abraham who slaughters Isaac, as it is Abraham who cleaves the wood. Further, Abraham’s motion in chopping the wood anticipates the movement of Abraham stretching out his hand to take the knife in the sacrificial scene (v. 10). In addition, the splitting apart of the wood mirrors the violence that is to be done to Isaac.

We can see that in the midst of obeying God’s command—the early rising, the preparations, the “setting off”—Abraham stops the obedient march toward the “place,” creating a scene and the time for God to observe Abraham raise his axe and lower it and to imagine the impending killing of Isaac. With each blow the imagined sacrifice grows bloodier and more difficult to watch. As a counterpart to the scene, there is an inward emotional intensity engendered here, where “each blow must be felt as compounding

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18 Although it is not Landy’s aim to explore the visuality of Genesis 22, from time to time he offers insightful comments regarding it. On this verse (3) he remarks that each action is perceived both visually and emotionally; see “Narrative Techniques,” 134. Speiser, Genesis, 164, also indirectly refers to narrative’s visuality by referring to the reader of this narrative as a “viewer.”
the murder.” By interrupting the journey by stopping to chop the wood Abraham presents the deity with a preview of the violence that will be done to Isaac if the sacrifice is completed.

b. Abraham’s word to the deity: Gen. 22:4-5.

We next see Abraham looking at “the place.” The image of Abraham looking at the place mirrors Abraham’s previous acts of seeing at the behest of the deity (Gen. 12:7; 13:14; 15:5). In Abraham’s intentional gaze there is a reminder to God of the three times (the first three engagements) when he encouraged Abraham to see and trust in God’s words of promise. Abraham’s gaze evokes the content of God’s words which were about vast tracts of land (shown in Gen. 13:14-15 and reiterated in the Gen. 17:8) but more importantly, uncountable descendants represented in the plentiful quantity of dust (Gen. 13:16) and large number of stars (Gen. 15:5). I inscribe in Abraham’s silent gaze, which directs God’s (and our) attention to the place of sacrifice, a subtle reminder of all those times when God instructed Abraham to see and envision his future. It can also be read as a silent challenge to the deity to remember what has been promised on those occasions.

Abraham next speaks to the servant boys. By employing the adverbs “here” and “there” designating location, Abraham directs our gaze (and God’s) to the place and back, and by doing so keeps the destination, and Isaac’s sacrifice, very much in view. In addition, Abraham’s statement to the boys “I and the boy will go up there” (v. 5) keeps Isaac and the journey’s purpose before God’s eyes as well.

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19 Landy, “Narrative Techniques,” 134.
20 According to Bruce Waltke and M. O’Connor’s categorization, An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax (Eisenbrauns: Winona Lake, Ind., 1990), 657, the two words (hp, hk) are deictics, adverbs of location which “point to a place relative to the situation of the speaking.”
As scholars and commentators have long remarked, Abraham’s speech “we will worship and we will return to you” is ambiguous and can be read variously. The first utterance “we will worship,” imparts simple information to the two youths about why Abraham and Isaac will soon depart from them. There is a certain irony in Abraham’s language as he speaks of Isaac worshipping, as Isaac is the sacrificial victim. So for the reader and for the deity, Abraham’s words here are fraught because the “worship” which God has instructed Abraham to perform involves the death of Isaac (v. 2). If we read the words as also directed to the deity, Abraham provides God another opportunity to ponder the ritual Isaac will undergo and what constitutes worship under the present divine directive.

Abraham’s second utterance, “we will return to you,” is especially problematic because if Abraham obeys God’s order then Isaac will not be returning. In this deeply ambiguous and multilayered utterance readers have variously interpreted Abraham’s words as a statement of faith, prophecy, or a prevarication. We cannot know what Abraham’s intentions are, or what he hopes to convey to the servant boys themselves, because his statement, as is, is too vague. It is also difficult to assess if Abraham vocalizes his trust in God’s promises (i.e., that God will save Isaac in order to ensure the future of land and descendants) because, as we have seen in the past, Abraham has not been entirely confident in God’s intentions. He has both questioned (Gen. 15:2-3), and at the same time, trusted in God’s words (at least according to the narrator (Gen.

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22Levenson, Death and Resurrection, 130, notes that the famous eleventh century Jewish commentator Rashi puts forth the view that in speaking thus Abraham prophesied the return of Isaac as well as himself.
23Levenson, Death and Resurrection, 131. Landy, “Narrative Techniques,” 135, assumes it is a lie with a touch of hope, but notes that we have no clue to Abraham’s tone here.
In addition, immediately after the narrator tells us that Abraham “trusts in God” after viewing the stars, Abraham asks for additional confirmation in regard to the promise of land (Gen. 15:8); the deity provides visible confirmation with cut animals, a smoking pot and torch (Gen. 15: 9-10, 17). Some time after we again hear Abraham express doubt and disbelief when God insists the aged Sarah will bear a son (Gen. 17:17). So it is possible, but by no means certain, that Abraham’s deeply fraught utterance “we will return,” expresses the hope, belief or certainty that God will intervene to save Isaac. However, as we are also assuming that Abraham constructs his utterances with a view to convincing God to halt the sacrifice, his language once again places Isaac and Isaac’s fate center stage. By use of the plural “we” Abraham raises the difficult issue of Isaac’s impending death and imperiled future, reminding the deity that although he will see two travel to the place only one will return. If in the first scene Abraham wordlessly points out to God, by visually acting out, the violence that will befall Isaac in the sacrificial ritual, here by means of a verbal utterance he evokes a time when Isaac is no more. He keeps Isaac ever before God’s eyes, and encourages the deity to consider the future consequences of sacrificing Isaac—and perhaps plays on the deity’s heartstrings here, by alluding to a future without Isaac.


In these verses Abraham creates a cinematic scene, complete with the appropriate visuals, that God (and reader) can view as father and son travel the final leg of the journey. The point here is to see the scenes Abraham arranges.

After speaking to the boys, Abraham silently places the wood-of the-burnt-offering on Isaac. The wood and Isaac are the visual elements Abraham uses to keep
before the deity the image of Isaac as sacrificial victim. The picture before us as the
two walk together is of Isaac, the “burnt offering,” bearing the means of his death. By
placing the wood on Isaac, Abraham shows Isaac as bound to the wood long before the
sacrificial ritual takes place.24 The anticipated sacrificial scene is also ominously
evoked in that the “wood-of-the-burnt-offering” carries the brutality of a violent
preview, imbuing the apparently simple preparatory act here with the emotion and
challenge of what is to come. In addition, the act of placing the wood on his son
anticipates in reverse Abraham’s act as he lays Isaac on the wood in the actual sacrifice
scene in v. 9.25

Abraham himself carries the fire and the knife, fitting implements for an
executioner (v. 7).26 Abraham equips himself and Isaac with the effects appropriate to
the roles the deity has assigned them in the command in v. 2: The sacrificial victim
bears the instruments of his death (the wood), while the executioner carries the deadly
tools (the knife and fire).

Abraham creates a moving image of the son-as-burnt-offering and the father-as-
executioner as each bear their lethal implements. This image is designed for a God who
is in the habit of overseeing Abraham’s activities to contemplate as the two make the
final journey to the place of sacrifice. The image itself is tragic and multilayered. It is
within this setting that the conversation takes place between father and son. Within the
narrative it is not a conversation initiated by Abraham, and therefore cannot be seen as a
part of Abraham’s attempt to change God’s mind: Although he is, ostensibly,

24Landy, “Narrative Techniques,” 136, comments that Isaac is bound to the wood in the act of
Abraham placing it on him.
25Levenson, Death and Resurrection, 136.
26Hugh White, Narration and Discourse, 193, views the absence of any mention of the sheep as
making its absence here more pronounced.
unconscious of their impact, Isaac’s words in v. 7 can be read as influencing both Abraham and God. In the interaction between Abraham and Isaac, we finally hear Abraham claim Isaac as son. I suggest that God, watching and listening in on their conversation, moves one step closer to rescinding the sacrifice.

As the scene begins, Abraham has not yet verbally recognized Isaac as son within the narrative.\(^{27}\) When Abraham refers to Isaac in v. 5 he uses the same word for him (i.e., “boy”) that the narrator employs for the “boys” \((\text{ılla})\).\(^{28}\) That is, he does not employ the language of sonship; his speech about his son does not distinguish Isaac from the servant boys.\(^{29}\) However as the two walk alone together we hear Isaac speak for the first time as he addresses Abraham as “my father.” It is, as Landy remarks, “an unfraught statement of relationship”\(^{30}\) in marked contrast to the ambivalence perceptible in Abraham’s noticeable lack of speech about Isaac. Whether it is the sound of the boy’s voice, or simply the situation, that brings them together, we hear Abraham reply to Isaac in familial language: “my son,” twice (v. 7 and v. 8).\(^{31}\) We note that in calling

\(^{27}\) Davies, “Male Bonding,” 111, advances the view that the deity tests Abraham in Genesis 22 to induce the father to show some sign of affection for his son. Davies, however, draws the deity differently than I have. He portrays God as trying to gain an advantage over Abraham by means of the test: If Abraham has to ask for something from God for Isaac’s sake, then Abraham is admitting defeat and God wins the match point.

\(^{28}\) Hugh White, “The Initiation Legend of Isaac,” ZAW 91 (1997): 1-30, argues that the word \(\text{ılla}\) is a technical term for an initiate and that Genesis 22 is a narrative about Isaac’s initiation into manhood. My point is that all the other characters have referred to Isaac as Abraham’s son except for Abraham. And the first time Abraham mentions Isaac he does not use vocabulary of “sons.”

\(^{29}\) Trible, *Sacrifice of Sarah,* 274, remarks on Abraham’s use of the word \(\text{ılla}\) to describe Isaac, offering the observation that the word “avoids the pain of paternal bonding.”

\(^{30}\) Landy, “Narrative Techniques,” 136.

\(^{31}\) Speiser, *Genesis,* 163, discerns “great tenderness” in Abraham’s words “my son” (vv. 7-8). Tone is difficult to determine in biblical narrative, yet Abraham’s use of the vocative (at least in v. 7), and his acknowledgement of Isaac as *his* son (twice), stands in stark contrast to his silence about Isaac before now.
him “son” Abraham borrows God’s language (originally Sarah’s) about Isaac from v. 2 to express his relationship to Isaac.  

Abraham’s claim of Isaac-as-son also includes a reply to Isaac incorporating the same phrase he has used, and will use, with the deity throughout the tenth engagement: “Here I am” (ynnh). However, the difference in the persons addressed is significant and Abraham’s reuse of the phrase highlights his dilemma for the reader. For Abraham cannot be fully “here,” to both the deity and his son: He cannot fulfill his obligation to both—God’s command to sacrifice Isaac has made that impossible.

Isaac’s second question is more crucial in the interaction between God and Abraham than it might appear at first glance. I suggest the combination of its visual and verbal impact on the deity (and presumably Abraham and the reader as well) helps influence the deity in Isaac’s favor. Isaac names two of the sacrificial implements—he does not mention the knife—directing our attention to both. Our mind’s eye move from the fire and the wood, finally coming to rest on Isaac himself as he asks his father “where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” If we were to stage this as a play this is where I would dim the lights and shine the spotlight on Isaac. For, as all those watching know, Isaac is the lamb, the burnt-offering—all except Isaac whose question is made more poignant by his ostensible ignorance. It is a fitting climactic moment to the scene that Abraham has created, even though Abraham has not contrived this moving speech by Isaac. As God hears Isaac speak, as he sees Isaac standing there burdened by

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32 Gen. 21:10.
33 See Landy, “Narrative Techniques,” 136-137. It is at this point in the narrative that some scholars read Isaac as realizing that he is the “sacrificial lamb.” Levenson, Death and Resurrection, 133-34, remarks that if Isaac realizes his fate then the narrator’s second mention of the father and son walking together (v.8) can be read as indicating Isaac has accepted the mandate. However, we note there is no narratorial or character discourse that confirms what Isaac knows or does not know at this point.
the wood, is God reminded of Ishmael crying in the wilderness (Gen. 21:17)? And how does the deity respond to the tragic sight of the father and son, walking and talking together, each carrying the means of death? We do not know, but one way to construe Abraham’s next utterance is as taking advantage of the opportunity his son’s words provide to verbalize, however indirectly, a challenge to the deity to “see to” the sheep. In other words, Abraham replies to Isaac with a statement that is primarily directed to God. Abraham’s statement to Isaac is ambiguous and most scholarly discussion of it parallels the issues surrounding vs. 5, namely, whether Abraham’s reply is a statement of trust, of faith, or of untruth.\(^3^4\) More specifically, as a statement of God’s provision, it is often read as a declaration/prophecy of God’s provision (“seeing to”) the sheep. If read as a falsehood it is often proffered as an example of his love for his son; he veils the truth (that Isaac is the sacrificial victim) to spare his son.\(^3^5\) The same ambiguity is present if we consider Abraham’s comment addressed to the deity. We can perceive the kind of reported trust apparent when he gazed at the heavens (Gen. 15:6), but we can also discern his myopia, his inability to envision possibilities beyond what he sees in front of his eyes; that is, he sees Isaac as the burnt offering because there is no possible substitute in his line of sight.\(^3^6\)

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\(^3^4\) The issue is whether to read the phrase “my son” as a vocative or in apposition to “burnt offering” in v. 8. That is, whether we should read Abraham as addressing Isaac: “God himself will see to the sheep for the burnt offering, my son;” or to read “burnt offering” and “my son” in apposition so that Abraham is indicating that Isaac is the burnt offering, i.e., he is the “sheep,” the sacrificial victim. Reading the two in apposition, however, overrides the accents in the MT (which point to a division between the word “burnt offering,” and the phrase “my son”).

\(^3^5\) Levenson, *Death and Resurrection*, 136, notes it may be the only explanation the child can grasp and points out how grammar allows certain Jewish commentators to view Abraham’s utterance as reassuring to Isaac but not entirely false.

\(^3^6\) In the same manner, we saw that Abraham assumed Ishmael would be his heir, since Sarah was too old to produce a child (in spite of God’s words promising Isaac’s birth (Gen. 17:17-18)).
I also see in Abraham’s employment of the future tense a challenge to the deity to revisit the issue of Isaac-as-sacrifice. For the deity has already “seen to the sheep” by designating Isaac the sacrificial victim (v. 2). By speaking of the sacrifice as a future event, something that has not yet transpired, Abraham presents the deity with the opportunity to envision a future for Isaac other than as the donated son (v. 2), to change his mind, and to substitute an actual “sheep” in Isaac’s place.


Immediately following this emotional scene between father and son we see Abraham and Isaac arrive at the place pointed out by God. The momentum, which has been relatively steady, slows at this point. Abraham performs actions that take time; for example, he builds an altar. The act of Abraham building this altar mirrors his earlier acts of constructing altars (Gen. 12:7, 8), and resonates with irony because the first altar he built was in response to God’s first “pointing out” the land promised to his descendants. But here in the tenth engagement there is only one (recognized) descendant, and he is about to be sacrificed on an altar. In addition, Abraham’s acts of building altars in the past were his response to God’s gift of land and descendants (Gen. 12:7-8; 13:18); the deity neither demanded nor requested the acts of worship. Abraham’s building of the altar thus serves as a reminder that Abraham has already demonstrated his obedience to God, not only obeying his instructions and commands but going beyond what was required.

The pace of Abraham’s actions grows ever slower with each preparatory motion, giving the eye time to linger over each individual act. He arranges the wood “in order,”

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37We note that in the only sacrifice commanded by God prior to Genesis 22, there is no mention of an altar or the implements of sacrifice, but only the cut animals (Gen. 15:7-11).
piece by piece, slowing the action to a crawl.\textsuperscript{38} We watch him arrange the “split” pieces of wood, the wood cleaved in anticipation of the sacrificial slaughter (Gen. 22:3). Such action can be read as delaying the sacrifice as long as possible, but also as an intentional visual ploy to focus the eye on the activity at hand—giving the deity plenty of time to take in the sacrificial scene.

The act of binding Isaac directs attention away from the preparations at the altar onto Isaac. Abraham will keep Isaac the focal point of vision until he reaches for the knife. Binding is also an activity that requires time. Fresh from the scene where Isaac is spotlighted as the “lamb” and described as the “burnt-offering,” Abraham binds his son for God to see. He places him on the wood, inverting his earlier action of placing the wood on Isaac when they separated from the servant boys in v. 6.\textsuperscript{39} The words of that earlier scene, “we will worship and we will return” (v. 5), are evoked here.

We then watch as Abraham stretches out his hand, and attention shifts to the knife. Scholars read Abraham’s deed of picking up the knife in divergent ways, seeing varied intentions in the action. Levenson sees it as an act of obedience so extraordinary—claiming Abraham’s obedience to God overrides his love for Isaac—that it redefines Abraham’s relationship with God and God’s relationship with Abraham’s descendants for generations to come.\textsuperscript{40} In contrast, Fewell and Gunn see it as a consummate act of self-preservation, for them a classic example of Abraham’s tendency to put himself before the children (and women) in his life.\textsuperscript{41} However, I see

\textsuperscript{38}The verb used here “to lay down in order” is \textit{kr}. The Akkadian cognate “arakum” means to “delay” or “prolong.” See Huehnergard, \textit{Grammar of Akkadian}, 488.

\textsuperscript{39}The same verb (\textit{My#&}) is used in v. 9 and v. 6; Levenson comments on the reversal in \textit{Death and Resurrection}, 136.

\textsuperscript{40}Levenson, \textit{Death and Resurrection}, 140.

\textsuperscript{41}Fewell and Gunn, “Keeping the Promise,” 53-54.
Abraham’s move here as carefully calculated to provoke a response from the deity who Abraham suspects has been watching from the very moment that the command was uttered (v. 2). 42 We see in the narrative that Abraham’s wordless action does elicit the desired response from the deity, for before the knife descends, the narrator reports that divine voice calls out to Abraham (v. 11). 43

To summarize briefly: I have drawn Abraham crafting his response to God wordlessly and visually, fleshing out the command the deity utters in v. 2. By displaying Isaac, always keeping him and his impending sacrifice before the deity’s watchful eye, Abraham gives God the opportunity (and time) to “see” and draw insight, and to envision Abraham’s (and God’s) future without Isaac. Abraham visually mirrors the command in a way that highlights the problematic nature of the sacrifice that God’s own language made salient, that is, the difficulty of slaughtering the yāhūdī who is at the same time beloved.

The Narrator’s Tale

We have seen how Abraham’s utterances and wordless actions are fraught and multilayered. Earlier, while examining the narrator’s discourse, I enumerated the ways in which the narrator’s language draws Abraham obediently responding to God’s command. In this section, I suggest that the narrator is not focused solely on Abraham’s obedience. The narrator also weighs in on the issue of sacrificing Isaac, and

42 Elie Wiesel, “The Sacrifice of Isaac: a Survivor’s Story,” in Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends (New York: Random House, 1976), 80-8, reads Genesis 22 as a double-edged test, in which God tests Abraham but Abraham also pushes God to see if God will remain passive when Isaac’s life is threatened. In a related vein, Davies, “Male Bonding,” 111, reads the interaction as a competitive game between Abraham and the deity, in which each tries to score points.

43 The narrative never hints at what Abraham would have done if God had not intervened.
consequently presents the interaction between Abraham and God as a tale in which a father is “called” upon to donate his “only” son to the deity. Here I identify the means by which the narrator crafts his tale as he reuses language, employs hybridized speech, and paints disturbing verbal images of a father and son caught by the dilemma of donating the “only” son to the deity.

First, the narrator tells the tale using the familial language of “father and son.” The narrator picks up on God’s characterization of Isaac as a loved son, reusing his language from v. 2. So like the deity (and ultimately Abraham), the narrator borrows Sarah’s reinvention of the word “son” to construct the relationship between Abraham and Isaac as one of a parent and beloved child. The narrator, in fact, refers to Abraham and Isaac only by their proper names or with the terms “father” and “son.” Isaac is always described in reference to Abraham; he is called “his son” (vv. 10, 13) or “his son Isaac” (vv. 3, 6, 9). However, this is not true of God or Abraham. God also calls Isaac a “yāḥēḏ” (vv. 2, 12, 15); he continues to refer to Isaac as a “yāḥēḏ” throughout his engagement with Abraham. And Abraham refers to Isaac as “the boy” before ever calling him “son” (v. 5). The narrator’s consistent language about Isaac-as-son highlights the hesitancy with which Abraham comes to name Isaac his son. However, in the hybridized speech of vv. 6-8 the narrator’s language strengthens the bond established by Abraham’s speech as we hear Abraham finally call Isaac “son.”

Thus, although the narrator shares the language of God and Abraham in referring to Isaac (“my/your/his son”), only the narrator speaks of Isaac exclusively as Abraham’s son. As the narrator’s language of familial language intersects his language
of obedience, the issue of sacrificing Isaac becomes more complicated, and the conflict between parental affection and religious obligation becomes salient.

Second, the narrator creates pauses in the narrative for reflection on Isaac’s sacrifice. The narrator accomplishes this by means of verbal images and emotive language that interrupts the steady, obedient march of the father and son toward the place of sacrifice. In v. 3 the narrator’s formula for obedience, Abraham “took” and “went,” is bifurcated by the oddly placed phrase relating the chopping of the wood. Thus placed, the narrator’s image of Abraham splitting the wood stops the momentum of compliance.44

By showing us Abraham gazing toward the place of sacrifice (v. 4), the narrator creates time for the reader to reflect on the contrast between the place before his eyes and the promised land upon which he once gazed. The narrator’s reuse of God’s phrase from the third engagement—when God instructs Abraham (in a literal rendering) “to raise (raise) your eyes” to see the land all around him—reinforces this contrast between what he now looks upon and sights previously seen.

Earlier we discussed how the conversation between father and son in vv. 6-8 does not interrupt the forward movement if we turn the sound off. But if the sound is on, Isaac’s question arrests our attention in virtue of its touching implication. In this scene the narrator combines emotionally charged dialogue with a shocking visual image of a father on the way to sacrifice his only son, the tragic nature of the journey amplified by the deadly implements.

44While source critics view the phrase as an example of poorly joined sources, Landy, “Narrative Techniques,” 134, argues that it is poetically and thematically justified.
In vv. 9-10 the narrator uses language to slow the pace of Abraham’s obedience, employing verbs (such as קָר), and precise description of actions (“he stretched out his hand and took the knife”). In this scene the narrator paints the most moving image of the entire narrative: a father about to slay his only son. By means of these disturbing images and conversations the narrator depicts Abraham’s obedience as more conflicted and raises problematic issues about the sacrifice.

Third, the narrator’s descriptions of Abraham’s actions are doubled in that the actions that demonstrate his obedience are also actions that lead to Isaac’s death. Abraham’s saddling the donkey (v. 3), wielding the axe (v. 3), placing the wood (v. 6), building the altar (v. 9), arranging the wood (v. 9), binding Isaac (v. 9), and placing him on the altar (v. 9) are all acts implicitly done by “Abraham’s hand.” In Abraham’s taking the fire (v. 6) and the knife (v. 6) and then reaching for the knife (v. 10) the narrator explicitly focuses our attention on what Abraham’s hands “do.” Thus the narrator portrays the dilemma of a father whose acts of worship mean the death of his son—by the hand of his father.

Fourth, the narrator uses the verb “to go” to indicate Abraham’s obedience but also to evoke scenes that render that obedience tragic. We noticed earlier that throughout Genesis 22 the narrator uses the verb (יה) to equate Abraham’s “going” with obedience. But there is a tragic and ironic resonance in the word “halak” as he uses it in vv. 6-8 in the phrase “the two of them walked (יה) on together” because it is the verb Abraham employed to remind God in the fourth engagement that he had no children. A very literal translation of Abraham’s comment in that conversation is something like “I am going/walking childless” (Gen. 15: 2). Now the narrator shows us
Abraham walking with his “only” remaining child, knowing that he is commanded to relinquish him at the end of the journey, and return to a state of childlessness.

In sum, the narrator’s language is doubled, and the same fraughtness we saw in Abraham’s actions is perceptible in the language of the narrator who describes them. We can discern conflictedness in his voice as well as he renders Abraham’s actions as both obedient yet poignantly problematic.

**Conclusion**

Reading Abraham’s response dialogically, I have drawn him responding obediently to God’s command, yet at the same time putting forth a near-silent and visual argument that the sacrifice be rescinded. The narrator’s voice is also doubled and fraught; depicting Abraham’s obedience while also raising questions about the problematic nature of donating a beloved child to the deity.

In the next chapter, we hear the divine response to the silent plea that Isaac be spared.