CHAPTER SIX
FLESHING OUT THE SACRIFICE OF ISAAC:
REMBRANDT, CARAVAGGIO AND CHAGALL

In the preceding chapter we examined God’s response to the dramatic and disturbing image of Abraham, knife in hand, about to slaughter his son Isaac.

In this chapter we explore that stark image by turning to a different medium and inviting three great artists into conversation with Genesis 22. My aim here is to make audible the “voices” of the artists in their visual arguments presented in line and color in their masterful, and recognizable, styles. We will see that Rembrandt, Caravaggio and Chagall reintoned this climactic image in very different ways, reaccenting it as each puts forth his own commentary on Genesis 22.

My procedure will be to read the paintings as utterances in Bakhtin’s sense of the term. In order to read these “visual” utterances, I will use two concepts from Mieke Bal, “visual textuality,” and the “navel.” To review quickly the methodology I set out in the first chapter: My strategy will be to construct a narrative by reading the visual

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1 Reproductions of the paintings are found at the end of this chapter.
2 Edward Kessler argues that artworks should be regarded as interpretations of biblical narratives. He surveys a number of ancient artistic interpretations of Genesis 22 in “The Sacrifice of Isaac (The Akedah) in Christian and Jewish Tradition: Artistic Representations” in Borders, Boundaries and the Bible, Martin O’Kane, ed. JSOTSup 313 (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 74-98. Although his stated aim is to examine “the artist’s perspective on the story,” the methodology he pursues differs from this study’s Bakhtinian approach.
3 I have already used Bakhtin’s concepts of “reintonation” and “reaccentuation” in discussing character and narratorial discourse in the biblical text. Obviously there is no “intonation” in paintings; however, I suggest that we can fruitfully extend these Bakhtinian concepts to visual texts. For example, as Sarah reintones the phrase “my son” to mean a “beloved son” rather than simply an “heir,” I suggest we can analogously read Rembrandt’s depiction of the figure of Isaac as reintoning “Isaac” from the sacrificial son of Abraham in Genesis 22 to the sacrificial son of God (i.e., Christ) in the New Testament. By reintoning the figure of Isaac as Christ, Rembrandt additionally reaccents Genesis 22, as I will demonstrate in this study.
elements of the paintings—from what we see on the canvas—rather than reading the painting through a verbal text, in this case, Genesis 22. I will identify a “navel,” which Bal describes as that detail that does not accord with the “official” interpretation. However, since my goal is not simply to read the paintings but to draw the artist’s “response” to Genesis 22, I will expand on Bal’s methodology by using the navel as a starting point as I coauthor the painting (and) each artist’s viewpoint.5

I will begin with Rembrandt and Caravaggio, because they flesh out the climactic verbal image in contrasting ways. I then turn to Chagall, who reads the climactic image by starting from the end of the narrative, addressing the question of what happened to Isaac and of how to view God’s reissued promises of vv. 16-18 in light of the suffering of the Jewish people. My goal here is not to demonstrate how the paintings adhere to or diverge from the details of the biblical text; rather the focus will

4For Bal the “official interpretation” is one that is based on reading “iconographically.” On page 177 of Reading Rembrandt, Bal describes what she means by “reading iconographically” by saying the following:

Put simply, an iconographic approach proposes that we read art, make sense out of what the image is not rather than viewing it. Reading iconographically is interpreting visual representation by placing its elements in a tradition that gives them a meaning other than their “immediate” visual appearance suggests. A vase of flowers is not merely a vase of flowers; the little insects on the flowers, not merely insects. Instead, they become signs. Those insects, for example, are the minuscule but undeniable symptoms of decay. As such they are indices, metonymies; and as metonymies they become the master trope that takes over the entire image. By virtue of the convention through which we allow such colonizing of the image, the motivated signs become symbols. Instead of “seeing” the motivated sign, we “read” the conventional sign “automatically.”

In regard to the works in this study, reading iconographically would mean reading the visually represented scene by means of the canonical story of Genesis 22 rather than constructing a narrative from what we “see” on the canvas. The canonical story is that God tests Abraham, Abraham proves his obedience by his willingness to sacrifice Isaac, and therefore Isaac is spared. Bal proposes a way of “seeing” visual texts rather than imposing the canonically accepted story upon the scene on the canvas.

5I am assuming here, following Bakhtin, that there is consciousness whose utterances (in this case the paintings) we engage, a designing author behind the text whose trace we can, in some sense, perceive, although not retrieve. That is, we can construct an “artist’s” voice. However, the consequent interpretation of that “voice” is a readerly construction, and derives from a reader’s “surplus of vision” and unique position of “outsidedness.

In this context I see the difference between Bakhtin’s and Bal’s reading strategies as a matter of emphasis. Bal’s concerns are more clearly readerly, whereas Bakhtin’s are partly readerly yet also focused on the artist/author.
be on sketching out what the artists pick up on, agree on, or argue with as they respond to the views put forth in Genesis 22.

The scene depicting the climactic moment has been consistently represented in generally the same manner for nearly two millennia. That is, although the three artists portray the subject differently—in their uniquely recognizable styles—they all employ the familiar iconography of Genesis 22: Abraham, Isaac, an angel, the knife, and the ram. The image that the artists begin with is the striking depiction of Abraham, knife in hand, standing over Isaac the sacrificial victim. The moment they render is the divine response; however, they reach beyond this definitive moment as they comment on, reintoné, and reaccent Genesis 22. The titles I have given the section headings give a preview of my readerly construction of the artist’s viewpoints: “Rembrandt: Sacrifice Glorified,” “Caravaggio: The Horror of Sacrifice,” and “Chagall: God Will Provide?”

**Rembrandt: Sacrifice Glorified**

This depiction of *The Sacrifice of Isaac* (figure 1) by Rembrandt van Rijn is neither the first nor the last time he painted the subject of Genesis 22. He produced this work at the height of his career in 1635, when he was an acclaimed and highly

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6 Osborne notes how this scene is “consistently represented in the same way” in art ranging from the fourth century to the nineteenth century. The twentieth century painting by Chagall that is under consideration in this study continues this tradition. See Harold Osborne, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Art* (Oxford: University Press, 1970), 2.

7 Rembrandt van Rijn, *Sacrifice of Isaac*, Oil on canvas: 193x 133cm. Signed and dated. Rembrandt, 1635. St. Petersburg, Hermitage. There is also a studio/student copy (Munich). Gerhard von Rad, the Old Testament scholar, produced a small monograph on Genesis 22 in 1971, and one of the paintings he writes about is the Munich 1636 copy of this 1635 painting done apparently by Rembrandt’s studio school (in the copy, there is a ram; also, the angel is drawn very differently). He remarks that the school painting is more dramatic, but notes the similarities, the falling knife pointed at Isaac’s throat, and Abraham’s firm grasp of Isaac’s head, in Gerhard von Rad, *Das Opfer des Abraham* (Munich, Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1971), 90.
respected artist, having recently, and permanently, settled in Calvinist Amsterdam after moving from Leiden (his birthplace and hometown). In this particular painting we see Rembrandt’s masterful style: his exquisite use of chiaroscuro,\(^8\) the famous brown-tint, and his “speaking hands.”\(^9\) Rembrandt employs the recognizable iconography for Genesis 22: an angel, Abraham, Isaac, the knife. But we should take note—no ram is visible in this painting.

I will read the visual elements of Rembrandt’s painting as representing a moment of epiphany: Abraham “sees” that God “provides.” As I depict Rembrandt’s view, I see it as largely in agreement with the views available from the narrator in the biblical text.\(^10\) At the same time, by employing Bal’s concept of the navel, I will read these visual elements as telling a narrative in which the figure of Isaac is doubled and reintoned to be the figure of Christ: Isaac is represented as both Abraham’s son and as the Christ of the New Testament. I am reading Rembrandt as reaccenting Genesis 22, so God’s “provision” can now be read not only as the mercy shown to Isaac, the sacrificial victim of Genesis 22, but also as the glorification of Christ as the sacrificial victim who was not spared, but “given.” In this section I will first demonstrate how

\(^8\)The Italian word “chiaroscuro” means “bright-dark.” The term is used to describe tonal monochrome paintings depending for their effect on gradations of light and dark. Osborne, *The Oxford Companion to Art*, 221-222, quotes De Piles definition in his *Cours de Peinture* (1708) “Claro implies not only anything exposed to a direct light, but also all such colours as are luminous in their natures; and obscuro . . . all the colours which are naturally brown . . . deep velvets, brown stuffs, a black horse, polished armour, and the like, which preserve their natural or apparent obscurity in any light whatever.” Osborne notes that Rembrandt was the recognized master of the technique (222).


\(^10\)As we noted in the previous chapter, Abraham declares that God will see/provide (v. 14), although it is the narrator who situates and describes Abraham’s insight, his “epiphany,” more fully (vv. 13-14). For the sake of simplicity and clarity, in this chapter I will refer to this as the “narrator’s view.”
Rembrandt portrays this epiphany, reusing the narrator’s words and images and rendering them in his own vocabulary of light and dark and speaking hands.

Epiphany Made Manifest

We note initially that Rembrandt, like the biblical narrator, does not depict the general setting in any detail, but instead fills the canvas with the sacrificial scene. Also, as the narrator does, the artist situates us very close to the figures. Rembrandt paints Abraham as an elderly man in keeping with the narrator’s statement in Gen. 21:5 that Abraham is one hundred years of age at Isaac’s birth. His face is lined and haggard, his hair wispy and thinning, both hair and beard gray. Abraham’s advanced age reminds the viewer that the young Isaac is a miraculous divine gift.

The artist echoes in paint the narrator’s emphasis on Abraham’s hands as the agency of death. In the painting Abraham’s hands are large, sculpted against the dark tones of the background, their activity highlighted by the light. In the biblical narrative the narrator focuses our attention on Abraham taking the knife (vv. 6, 10), but in Rembrandt’s representation, it is not the hand bearing the knife, but the other hand, that still threatens Isaac’s life. Rembrandt paints it menacingly large; the smothering hand covers Isaac’s entire face, tilting the boy’s head back, exposing the white neck.

Rembrandt depicts the divine messenger with power and heavenly authority. He paints the messenger as a clear representative of the divine, an “angel” plainly identifiable by his location in the heavens and his elaborately detailed wings. He places the divine messenger in the uppermost left-hand corner, highlighting him from behind.
with a golden, luminous light; the angel calls from “heaven” in the artist’s portrayal as in the biblical narrative (Gen. 22:11, 15).

The artist translates the divine halt to the sacrifice in Gen. 22:11-12 into the visual vocabulary of “speaking hands.” In the biblical text the authority of the divine is represented in speech (Gen. 22:11-12), in the Rembrandt divine power is visualized through the “speaking hands” of the angel: One is raised to stop the command, the other rests on Abraham’s wrist. The hand on the wrist shows neither strain nor force; only the slightest touch suffices to cause Abraham to release the knife. Rembrandt’s depiction of the falling knife also beautifully expresses the abruptness and urgency of the divine command reported in Gen. 22:11-12. We can count the moments until it hits the ground, breaking the silence and the tension that surrounds the sacrificial ritual.

The moment of epiphany is powerfully rendered in the masterful fashioning of Abraham’s facial expression. Rembrandt skillfully captures the moment when Abraham moves from startled bewilderment to the realization that God has called off the sacrifice.\(^{11}\) So much is expressed by Abraham’s face as he stares up at the angel, in the intensity of his eyes, in the upward tilt of the head. Anguish is turning to confusion on the verge of inexpressible joy at the thought that Isaac is spared. This complexity of expression is related mostly by the eyes, for Abraham’s mouth is covered by his beard (although the way Rembrandt has drawn his jaw suggests that his mouth is open).\(^ {12}\) In Rembrandt’s elegant use of light and dark he further reveals Abraham’s response;

\(^{11}\)Schama, *Rembrandt’s Eyes*, 411, insightfully remarks that the artist “gives Abraham’s wrathful, anguished face the look of a madman unexpectedly paroled from hell.” Though I do not see “wrath” in Abraham’s face, Schama captures the complexity of emotions, and the shift from anguish to amazement.

\(^{12}\)A. Kibedi Varga, “Stories Told by Pictures,” *Style* 22, no. 2 (Summer, 1988), 202, discussing how a fixed image can be read discursively, writes that a painter can tell a whole tale by skillfully representing in a single face contrary emotions experienced in a moment of crisis or tension.
although he has obscured much of Abraham’s body in the dark background, by lighting his shoulder and in the ever so faint gradations of dark, we can discern the outline of Abraham’s posture, as he crouches in fear, pulls back, yet looks up, dazzled by the angel’s appearance. It is a moment of epiphany exquisitely portrayed.

The Navel: The “Useless” Knife

For Bal, the “navel” is the disconcerting detail in a painting that serves as the starting point from which to build an alternative narrative that diverges from the “official” interpretation; or in this case, a view that diverges from those put forth in the biblical text. My choice is to read the knife as the navel in this painting. We note that Rembrandt has taken care to embellish the knife elaborately (and even more so, its sheath, attached at Abraham’s side). The knife points threateningly at Isaac’s exposed neck, yet the light reveals it as a strange knife for a sacrifice. Although it is ornately decorated, its blade is chipped and dull, rounded and hardly up to the task of cutting flesh. It appears more suited to be displayed as a trophy than brought into service as a sacrificial blade. It seems an unlikely candidate for the job at hand, yet Rembrandt sets it at eye level and in the center of the canvas. His strategic placement of the knife—centrally located and highlighted by light—directs our attention to Isaac.

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13Rembrandt owned and was fond of elaborate costumes and decorative props which he incorporated into his paintings. Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing*, 225, writes that “Rembrandt shared the Dutch artist’s avid taste for finery; every viewer can recall the glimmer of his helmets and swords, the glow of jewels, the density of robes woven, it would seem, with threads of gold. In his art, as in his life, Rembrandt was a proud possessor.” In this case, I would suggest that the decoration on the knife serves to draw our attention to it, and encourages further reflection on its location and position.
Reintoning Isaac: Isaac-as-Christ

In Rembrandt’s depiction of Isaac we can begin to delineate the artist’s reintonation and reaccentuation of Genesis 22 in terms of Christian mysteries. Isaac commands a prominent place; his body is foregrounded and fills the lower third of the painting. As Rembrandt has tenderly portrayed him, Isaac looks to be a youth who is perhaps ten or twelve years old. He appears serene, lying passively on the wood, arms folded behind his back. We cannot see whether he is bound, however, he lies there so calmly the binding appears unnecessary.

As we look more closely at Rembrandt’s Isaac there are seven points to observe. First, Rembrandt paints Isaac’s body as unblemished and perfect. If we look at the flesh of Isaac, we see it is youthful, even-toned, supple and flawless; the body is beautifully wrought, almost as though sculpted from stone. Rembrandt shows a sacrificial victim who appears to meet the standards for ritual victims stipulated by Jewish law, and evokes the New Testament descriptions of Christ as the perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world.¹⁴

Second, the artist represents the boy as virtually dead. Isaac’s body is motionless. Like a stone statue it is utterly still. The flesh has the color of life, but not a muscle moves, we see little, if any, sign of strain, and the smoothly rendered throat lacks evidence of a frantic struggle to breath under the heavy hand of the father. When the angel appears, Rembrandt’s Isaac shows no sign that he is aware of what has transpired; the knees are still, there is no twist of the head; in fact, we see no signs that

¹⁴That the animal offered for sacrifice is to be unblemished is reiterated in biblical texts on sacrificial rituals (for a sampling see Ex. 12:5, Lev. 1:13, 3:1, 4:3, Num. 6:14, 28:19, Deut. 15:21). In I Peter 1:19 Christ is described as the lamb without blemish. See also Heb. 7:28; 9:11-14.
his other senses register any change. Isaac’s passivity allows us to read him as eerily unresponsive to the events underway. The stillness of the body is more apparent when contrasted to a painting by Rubens (figure 2) on this motif, a painting with which Rembrandt most likely was familiar. In the Rubens, Isaac shifts his head, the blindfold slips, and he sees the angel entangled with his father. Rubens’ Isaac, who is very much alive, makes salient the utter motionlessness of Rembrandt’s Isaac.

Third, the body of Rembrandt’s Isaac is splayed, evoking the motif of a pietà (the motif in which the dead body of Christ is draped over his mother’s lap); the loincloth wrapped around Isaac’s body also calls this theme to mind. Further, the loincloth, while recalling crucifixion scenes where Christ’s body is shown as bruised and bloody, draws attention to Isaac’s unmarked body.

Fourth, Rembrandt paints Isaac as a faceless body. We cannot see Isaac’s face, because Abraham’s entire hand occludes our view. By concealing Isaac’s face, where response and emotion might be revealed, Isaac becomes a type, rather than an actual participant in the scene. Moreover, the identity of a faceless body can be easily usurped. It is because Isaac is represented as a type rather than an individual that he can be read as representing Isaac, the “given” son of Abraham in the Genesis 22, and at the same time as Christ-as-sacrificial victim.

Fifth, Rembrandt’s use of light highlights Isaac and at the same time imbues him with a heavenly luminosity, depicting a body that is glorified. The path of light directs us through the events of the narrative, and comes to rest on Isaac. Beginning with the

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15Rubens Sacrifice of Isaac, 1620, Panel, 49.5 x 64.6 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre (see Schama, Rembrandt’s Eyes, 410). Schama (p. 410) notes the similarities between Pieter Lastman and Rubens’ painting and Rembrandt’s, but also discusses what he calls Rembrandt’s “alterations” as a “stroke of pure theatrical genius.” We can see the similarity between the two Isaacs in the bent knee and the position of the bodies (although in the Rembrandt he is turned 90 degrees).
highlighted upraised arm of the angel, which relates the news that the sacrifice is to be
stopped, it continues with the illumination of the hands, both Abraham’s and the
angel’s, which shows that the sacrifice is terminated. It then draws our attention to the
falling knife, which points to Isaac’s throat. Finally, the light lands on Isaac himself,
illuminating his neck, chest, groin, and folded legs. The light, however, does not simply
focus the viewer’s attention on Isaac. It is also divine, emanating from the golden patch
of sky behind the angel. As the divine light falls on Isaac, it not only directs our gaze to
his body, but also seems to infuse him with a divine radiance. This is a picture of
 glorification, even of deification.\footnote{To note that readers approach the visual elements differently: Jo Milgrom, \textit{The Akedah: The Binding of Isaac: The ‘Akedah’—A Primary Symbol in Jewish Thought and Art} (Berkeley, Calif.: Bibal Press, 1988), 232, light effects in Baroque style, follows the trajectory of light from the bottom of the painting to the top.}

Sixth, all the key visual elements—the light, the knife (and its sheath) and the
gaze of the angel—direct us to Isaac; whether we look at the light, the knife, or the
characters our eyes are guided to him. The light rests on him, and the knife points to
him. Even though Abraham does not look at his son, his gaze directs us to the angel,
whose gaze points us to Isaac.

Seventh, in Rembrandt’s representation Isaac \textit{is} the lamb.\footnote{We note that in the studio/student copy of this painting there is a ram. I mention this because the paintings are otherwise very similar. Milgrom discusses the two, the student copy and the 1635 painting of our study in \textit{Akedah in Jewish Thought and Art}, 233.} Diverging from the
biblical narrative, where the ram is substituted for Isaac (v. 13), the painting presents
Isaac as the sacrificial victim. Rembrandt reuses a vocabulary borrowed from the New
Testament in which Christ is represented as the sacrificial lamb (e.g., Rev. 5:6)
Reaccenting Genesis 22: Isaac as Christ glorified

As we look at the visual elements that Rembrandt employs to depict Isaac we can see that even as he evokes the biblical narrative of Genesis 22 he reintones it by means of Christian motifs. In the reuse of the visual elements of the pietà and the crucifixion motifs (the loincloth and evocatively splayed body), in the erasure of identity (the covered face), in imbuing the body with a kind of heavenly glow, in the deadly stillness of the body, and perhaps most pointedly, in portraying Isaac as the sacrificial victim, we can see the figure of Isaac as doubled. It contains not only the narrative of Isaac’s reprieve, but also discourse of Christ’s passion and death. This in itself is not surprising, given that Rembrandt lived within western Christendom and would have been familiar with the widespread Christian tradition that viewed the narrative of Isaac’s sacrifice as a prefiguration of Christ’s crucifixion.

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18 Although I think it is plausible to read New Testament ideas in Rembrandt’s painting (and I have offered only one possible reading), it is also possible to construct a narrative from the visual elements reading from the stance of Judaism, and see reuses or reinocations of rabbinic midrashic or haggada narratives, or to read from within Islam and construct a narrative in which the Qur’an, the various traditions (hadith or ‘tales’), are evoked. For example, Milgrom discusses this painting (and Rembrandt’s other paintings on this theme) within the broader context of rabbinic midrash in Akedah in Jewish Thought and Art, 232-236.

19 This typological link between Isaac (and, at times, the ram) and Christ can be seen in the Biblia Pauperum [The Bible of the Poor], a visual compendium of typology and iconography referenced from medieval times to the seventeenth century (8). On the page entitled “Christ is Crucified” the scene of Isaac’s impending sacrifice occupies the left panel, and borders the center panel containing the scene of Christ’s crucifixion (39). The page numbers referred to are from Albert C. Labriola and John W. Smeltz, trans., The Bible of the Poor [Biblia Pauperum]: A Facsimile and Edition of the British Library Blockbook C.9 d.2 (Pittsburg, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 1990). De Jong, though, argues that during the 1400-1600’s, in addition to its religious significance, the theme of Isaac’s sacrifice was popular with artists because it afforded them an opportunity to display their talent in portraying “passions and emotions,” important subjects in art at the time. See his article “Three Italian Sacrifices: Ghiberti, Sarto, Caravaggio,” in The Sacrifice of Isaac: the Aqedah (Genesis 22) and its Interpretations, ed. Ed Noort and Eibert Tigchelaar, (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 165. In a different vein, we note that Schama Rembrandt’s Eyes, 410, sees Rembrandt’s concerns here as more parental than theological. He comments that Rembrandt had recently lost a child and “wants to believe in God’s compassion.”
that many paintings on Genesis 22 from this period would carry the narrative of Christ’s crucifixion as a subtext.\textsuperscript{20}

Reading the painting discursively we can perceive how Rembrandt (in my co-authoring) reaccents the narrative to be about Christ’s death and exaltation. The divine act of grace in sparing Isaac is reintoned so that God’s provision, of “seeing to” to the sacrifice, now refers to God’s act of “giving” his son (Jesus) as the sacrificial victim. Rembrandt’s painting evokes the language of the apostle Paul in Rom. 8:32 who reaccents the divine words in Gen. 22: 12,16 to describe the gracious divine act. Paul writes of a God who “did not withhold his own Son,” but “gave him up” for us.\textsuperscript{21} As this work was most likely commissioned by someone as a devotional piece, God’s glorification of Isaac-as-Christ holds out the same promises of glorification for the viewer.\textsuperscript{22}

Yet here is where I draw Rembrandt’s views diverging from those of the biblical narrator. In this glorification of Isaac/Christ, Rembrandt’s point of view on sacrifice is far more idealistic (and less realistic) than that of the narrator of Genesis 22, whose portrayal is at best ambivalent; I have read the narrator’s discourse (and Abraham’s) as evoking the blood and violence inherent in the sacrificial act. The narrator’s representation of the sacrifice contains the constant reminder that in reality sacrifice is

\textsuperscript{20}Rembrandt may have intentionally painted Isaac as a Christ-type; but here, as I follow Bakhtin and Bal, I am concentrating on the artist’s expressed point of view (i.e., what can be read from the canvas) rather than attempting to determine the factors that gave rise to its contents.

\textsuperscript{21}The NRSV translates Rom. 8:32: “He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us will he not with him also give us everything else?” (emphasis added). We should note that Paul writes these words in the context of “present” sufferings, which he describes as incomparable to future glory (Rom. 8:18). Levenson, 

\textit{Death and Resurrection}, 222, comments on what he calls Paul’s “reworking” of the language of Genesis 22 in Rom. 8:32 and notes that the word Paul uses for “spare” is the same Greek verb (\textit{pheidomai}) that the Septuagint uses for “withhold” in Gen. 22:12, 16.

\textsuperscript{22}Schama, \textit{Rembrandt’s Eyes}, 410, suggests that the subtext of Christ’s crucifixion most likely enhanced the painting’s devotional appeal.
violent and bloody. Further, the knife is a menacing object in the narrator’s story (Isaac does not even mention it when addressing his father (Gen. 22:7)), while in Rembrandt’s depiction it is essentially harmless and ceremonial, more an object of beauty than a deadly weapon. Rembrandt uses the knife as a pointer (to Isaac), since in his reintonation of Isaac, the sacrificial victim is Christ, the knife is irrelevant as an actual implement of death. By and large, Rembrandt ignores the dreadful aspects of sacrificial slaughter, and the conflicting emotions the narrator works so assiduously to evoke in us, and instead directs our attention to the ultimate religious goal of glorification. Next, we will see how differently Caravaggio fleshes out the iconographic details of Gen. 22.

**Caravaggio: The Horror of Sacrifice**

Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, controversial in both life and in his work, like Rembrandt, was situated in the Christian West; he was born in Catholic northern Italy and worked, as did Rembrandt, within the Baroque style. His *Sacrifice of Isaac* (figure 3), painted around 1603, is an unusual portrayal of the theme. As already observed, although Rembrandt reintones the act of divine agency in Christian terms, his view is in accord with the views as I have constructed them from the character and narrator discourse in Genesis 22: Abraham sees/recognizes that God provides.

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23 Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Sacrifice of Isaac*, around 1603, Florence, Uffizi, No. 4659, 104 x 135 cm. Cat. 1926. For the Cardinal Maffeo Barberini (later Pope Urban VIII). Considered a copy by some—but Friedlaender identifies it as a *pasticcio*, i.e. a hodge-podge of styles, often a conscious imitation of another artist’s style. (Scholars find the landscape—and especially its light sky—untypical of Caravaggio’s style.) See Walter Friedlaender, *Caravaggio Studies* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969) 160. Scholars variously date this painting; their dating ranges from the 1590’s to early in the first decade of the 1600’s. I am using the date (1603) suggested more recently by Gilles Lambert in *Caravaggio: 1571-1610*, ed. Gilles Neret (New York: Taschen, 2000).
Caravaggio raises questions about this, reintoning the divine-human relationship more ambivalently, even skeptically.

This painting by Caravaggio, which is a darker depiction than the Rembrandt, will benefit from being compared with it; Rembrandt’s representation of the subject, while distinctive is, in some ways, a more familiar rendering. In Caravaggio’s hands, the iconographic elements are identifiable—Abraham, the angel, Isaac, the ram and the knife are all in his picture—yet there is a measure of ambivalence and foreboding. Unlike Rembrandt’s presentation (and the biblical narrator’s), the angel is not in heaven but on the ground; further, the light source is ambiguous. We note also that, unlike the Rembrandt, here the ram is present and the knife is sharp. The position of the figures is tense: The angel grabs Abraham’s arm, Abraham retains his grip on Isaac, the boy screams. Like Rembrandt (and the biblical narrator) Caravaggio places us very close to the scene; yet while Rembrandt’s painting is serene, Caravaggio’s seems disconcerting. The most disturbing visual element of the Caravaggio is the depiction of Isaac. The screaming Isaac is the navel through which I will read the painting’s visual elements.

The Navel: The “Screaming” Isaac

Isaac’s “scream” is the first indication that we can discern in the visual elements a narrative that is at odds with the views put forth in the biblical text. 24 Isaac’s disturbingly vivid face registers the horror of the ordeal and sets the tone for viewing

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24 Milgrom, who discusses a number of paintings on this theme in Akedah in Jewish Thought and Art, 223, remarks on Caravaggio’s portrayal of this motif: “The harshest of them all however, is the cruel Akedah of Caravaggio.” She sees the painting as a “profane parody on the Akedah.”
the actions of the other characters. Isaac’s face is the most arresting visual feature in the picture: his mouth agape in a scream, the facial muscles taut, the skin blotched and red, and most of all, his eyes, terrified and beseeching, look straight at us. Isaac is the only figure who engages the viewer, inviting us to read the sacrificial scene through his eyes. It is not simply Isaac’s distorted face that signals that Caravaggio views the sacrificial scene more ominously than does Rembrandt. Rembrandt’s Isaac lies serenely on the altar; Caravaggio’s Isaac is pinned down, his father’s weight holding him in place. His body is contorted and only half visible, his arm painfully bent behind him, his head pressed into the wood. Isaac’s body language reveals that he is an unwilling participant in the sacrifice.

Furthermore, Caravaggio presents the figure of Abraham ambiguously. Abraham registers no response to his son’s struggle. He continues to hold him in place as the angel speaks. In contrast to Rembrandt’s Abraham, in whose visage it is possible to read a multitude of feelings, it is not easy to read Abraham’s face here. He appears to be listening to the angel, but is he convinced by what the angel says? It is not clear. Caravaggio has shaded his eyes so they remain unreadable. Unlike Rembrandt’s Abraham, Caravaggio’s does not appear relieved to see the angel. Is patience, or annoyance, to be read in Abraham’s crinkled brow? This is not the portrayal of epiphany but has the look of a person with work to do who has been needlessly interrupted. We can perhaps imagine him patiently waiting for the angel to finish his speech before returning to the task at hand.

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25Friedlaender, *Caravaggio Studies*, 160, remarks that the face of Isaac resembles Caravaggio’s “automorphic” images (*St. John’s* in the Doria, and the *Medusa* in the Uffizi).
In the Caravaggio, Abraham’s body language is not only ambiguously rendered but troubling: Caravaggio paints Abraham positioned to carry out the sacrifice—his shoulder tilted forward, his feet firmly placed, his weight shifted toward Isaac, giving him the force to make the fatal cut. More ominously, as one hand grips the knife tightly (even as the angel speaks)—it is clenched, and the skin is stretched tight over the knuckles—Abraham bears down on Isaac’s neck with the other, as he holds the squirming, crying boy securely in place. He has not released his grip even though the angel points to the ram.

The artist also depicts the divine messenger ambiguously, raising issues about the deity and the efficacy of divine power. The angel does not descend from above, but enters at ground level, on the same plane as Abraham. There are no distinguishing marks of the divine, no heavenly light, just a hint of wing at the edge of the canvas. The angel can easily be confused with another human being. Also, the angel is small, no match for the much larger Abraham, who with one hand restrains the screaming boy. Moreover, as the angel grips Abraham’s arm, Abraham does not drop the knife; in fact Abraham’s hold on the knife seems as tight as ever. Unlike Rembrandt’s angel, at whose touch Abraham releases the knife, Caravaggio’s representation creates questions about whether the angel has the power to stop Abraham by force.

26Caravaggio’s naturalistic and unorthodox depiction of biblical subjects tended to shock viewers of his own day. In fact Caravaggio’s first version of St. Matthew and the Angel (destroyed, formerly Berlin, Kaiser Friedrich Museum) was rejected as the altarpiece for the Contarelli Chapel in the Church of San Luigi dei Francesi in Rome. Both the angel in the St. Matthew and the Sacrifice of Isaac that we are considering, are stationed on the ground, not in heaven, and are both very human looking although in the St. Matthew Caravaggio has drawn the figure, in Friedlaender’s words, as “a young girl of charming and rather sensuous vitality” and she has very sumptuous wings (see Caravaggio Studies, 100).
The knife, in contrast to Rembrandt’s decorative blade, is menacing and deadly. Caravaggio makes visible the threatening quality implied by the biblical narrator. The artist highlights the knife by a harsh light, its central placement in the picture, and by the whiteness of Isaac’s shoulder. The sharpness of the blade and its finely honed tip are outlined by the stark light. The knife, pressed up against Isaac’s flesh, is positioned to draw blood at the slightest movement; it provocatively evokes the sacrificial cut. Another visual element works with the knife to suggest a bloody ritual: the folds of Abraham’s bright red garment evoke a cascade of blood. Like the “violent preview” in the biblical narrative these two elements—the knife and the red drapery—suggest the violence and gore of slaughter and contribute to a sense of foreboding.

Caravaggio provides a ram, yet a small detail (figure 3, detail) makes its role as a substitute less than certain. Caravaggio paints the head immediately above Isaac’s. Yet above the ram’s head, in a sliver of light, there is a detail—two figures barely visible in the landscape—which I read as the two servant boys Abraham left behind in Gen. 22:5. The image of the two boys evokes the two conflicting utterances in the biblical narrative concerning Isaac’s fate. The two boys were told by Abraham in v. 5 that both he and Isaac would return after worshipping, yet in v. 19 the narrator reports that Abraham alone comes back to the boys—the verb is in singular and Isaac is not mentioned. The visual juxtaposition of these two figures with the heads of the two potential sacrificial victims increases the anxiety about Isaac’s fate, which is

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27 One way to see this juxtaposition of heads is that Caravaggio has situated the ram’s head to fall neatly into place once Isaac’s head is withdrawn. I read this as a kind of visual “word play” on the narrator’s utterance in Gen. 22:13, that is, the ram is offered up instead of Isaac. Yet at the same time Caravaggio leaves the actual completion of the substitution in some doubt; that is, he leaves open the possibility that violence will not be “diverted,” to use Girard’s term; see René Girard, Violence and the Sacred, trans. by Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1977), 4.
compounded by uncertainty about the angel’s success in convincing Abraham to sacrifice the ram instead of his son.

Finally, Caravaggio’s painting crafts an ominous foreboding through the play of light and shadow. The light, which is so clearly heavenly in the Rembrandt, has an uncertain origin in the Caravaggio. The light exacerbates the tension in the scene: It falls on the angel’s shoulders, illuminating his pointing and exposing the tautness in his muscles and fingers as he grips Abraham’s arm. It then highlights the knuckles and creases in Abraham’s hand, making visible how tightly he clutches the knife. The light shines most brightly on the knife itself, outlining its cutting edge, before partially illuminating the boy’s face, revealing his terrified expression. At the same time, the artist casts the eyes of his figures in shadow, making them difficult to read. Caravaggio’s most masterful use of tone, however, is in sculpting Isaac’s terror: The contrast of the harsh bright light against deep shadows makes visible his utter fear.

In my readerly narrative of the visual elements in Caravaggio’s representation of Genesis 22, we are left wondering if Abraham will listen to the angel and spare his son’s life. Unlike the Rembrandt portrayal, the presence of the divine does not ensure a happy outcome; the threat of the impending sacrifice still looms. There is no epiphany, no insight, as in the Rembrandt. Abraham does not “see” the ram, the substitute—he does not even turn to look in its direction, even though the angel directs him to do so. Caravaggio, having depicted the angel like an ordinary human being, and apparently weaker than Abraham, also leaves it to the reader to decide whether this very human-looking angel has the power to stop Abraham. More telling is Caravaggio’s Isaac. Isaac continues to scream, taking no comfort from the angel’s words. He makes his
appeals not to those within the scene upon whom his life depends—the angel and his father—but to the viewer who is powerless to intervene.

Reintoning the Divine-Human Relationship

Having read the visual elements through the navel of the “screaming Isaac,” we can begin to sketch out Caravaggio’s point of view on Genesis 22, as well as certain questions he poses about it. Caravaggio presents a dark and skeptical picture of the father-son relations in Genesis 22. In my reading of the biblical text, I have represented Abraham as a man who is ambivalent towards Isaac, yet who ultimately comes to claim the boy as his son. In the painting, however, Abraham ignores the boy’s screams, exhibits no fatherly concern, and makes no attempt to comfort the terrified child.

In addition, Caravaggio depicts the divine power in an equivocal fashion, raising questions about its efficacy. By portraying the angel as a human being, and placing him on the same plane as Abraham, Caravaggio diminishes the divine authority. By drawing the angel as smaller than Abraham, Caravaggio insinuates that the divine may be powerless against human obduracy or evil.

Finally, by means of these portrayals, Caravaggio reintones the divine relationship in Genesis 22 from one in which Abraham sees/recognizes that God provides to one in which Abraham does not see/acknowledge God’s provision. He also

28We note that while Caravaggio draws Abraham’s intentions darkly, but ambiguously, scholars such as Fewell and Gunn, “Keeping the Promises,” 54, read Abraham as clearly dangerous; they remark that but for the divine intervention Abraham would have sacrificed Isaac. Isaac’s face may recall Tertullian’s description, Apology, ed. T.R. Glover and W.C.A. Kerr (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977), 47, IX: 2-4, of parents “fondling their children that they might not be sacrificed in tears,” although in Caravaggio’s depiction the father seems oblivious to the child’s distress.
ignores the religious context of the ritual and presents the sacrifice as something horrific: In addition to the fact that it involves the death of a child, the artist depicts it as the victimization of a vulnerable innocent by those (father and deity) responsible to ensure his care.

At this point we can contrast the divergent views put forth by Rembrandt and Caravaggio as I have read them. Both Rembrandt and Caravaggio encourage us to see the narrator’s climactic image in the biblical text in a certain way. Rembrandt’s visual image encourages us to see a picture in which God intervenes, Abraham gains insight, and Isaac is spared. Rembrandt reintones the sacrificial scene, expunging the underlying violence implied by the character and narrator’s discourse in the biblical text. Caravaggio does the opposite, highlighting those aspects that make palpable the threat of blood and violence. So while both artists use the familiar iconography associated with Genesis 22 and thus evoke the biblical narrative, their view on what conclusions can be drawn about the divine-human relationship differ: Rembrandt’s utterance expresses closer agreement with the view put forth by the biblical narrator that Abraham sees and God provides, whereas Caravaggio’s utterance, reflecting his typical confrontational style, more markedly contends with this view, posing difficult questions. Rembrandt adopts and fleshes out the main points of the narrator’s view, whereas Caravaggio seems to respond to issues not explained and to questions left unanswered.

For example, in vv. 11-12, because the divine voice breaks in and the sacrifice is stopped, we are prevented from knowing whether Abraham would have sacrificed Isaac. Caravaggio provocatively suggests that an Abraham insensitive to the cries of
the boy is capable of killing his son even after the angel intervenes. Also, Caravaggio refers to Isaac’s unexplained absence at the end of the narrative (v. 19) playing out the ambiguity visually by juxtaposing the two heads (Isaac’s and the ram’s) and the two figures. Further, with his most visually disturbing image, the “screaming Isaac,” the artist responds to the issue left unexplained by the text—why God orders this sacrifice in the first place (v. 2). As we have seen, in the biblical narrative Abraham displayed Isaac-as-sacrificial victim so effectively that God rescinded the command.

Caravaggio’s Isaac, however, invites us to contemplate the very idea of child sacrifice, as the terrified and terrorized child appeals for our help. The horrific side of the religious ritual of child sacrifice is emphasized, and the issue of power relations between adults and children is introduced for our response.

Caravaggio’s portrayal raises the possibility of reading Genesis 22 through the narrator’s last utterance in v. 19—where Isaac is unaccounted for—rather than by means of the optimistic ending voiced in v. 14—“God will see and provide.” Chagall will address the ambiguity of these two endings more straightforwardly as he takes on the issue of divine responsibility and fleshes out the hints of conflict in the ambiguous reissued promises of vv. 15-18.

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29 Yvonne Sherwood, “Binding—Unbinding: Divided Responses of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam to the ‘Sacrifice’ of Abraham’s Beloved son,” Journal of the American Academy of Religion 72, no. 4 (December, 2004): 847, remarks that some of the ancient interpreters were more willing to take on the ethical dimensions of the sacrifice, and so described Isaac’s “wounding” as not necessarily “productive” (i.e., redemptive), but as traumatizing. She sees in Caravaggio’s depiction of the “screaming Isaac” a Christian “pictorial” interpretation of Isaac’s negative and messy “wound.”

30 Carol Delaney, Abraham on Trial, 5, broaches a similar question in her book on Genesis 22. She provocatively asks why “the willingness to sacrifice one’s child [is] the quintessential model of faith” for three of the world’s great religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam).
Chagall: “God will provide?”

Marc Chagall returned to the motif of *The Sacrifice of Isaac* a number of times over several decades in his long life. Chagall was born into a Hasidic community of the Jewish ghetto in Vitebsk, Russia on July 7, 1887. Although he lived much of his life in France, his works reflect the Jewish mysticism, the familiar images of ghetto life, and the ubiquitous Byzantine art and architecture of his childhood. As a youth he heard the Bible read aloud in his religiously observant family and, unlike many contemporary artists, he commonly incorporates biblical themes into his works. Chagall settled in Gordes in Provence in 1940, but moved to the United States the following year at the invitation of the New York Museum of Modern Art. In this way, he escaped probable deportation to the gas chambers. He returned to France in 1948 after the war and died there in 1985.

This particular painting is one of a collection of seventeen paintings entitled, “The Biblical Message.” The painting (figure 4), entitled *The Sacrifice of Isaac,* painted sometime between 1960-1966, is sketched in thick dark lines and awash with

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31 In their book *Mikhail Bakhtin*, Clark and Holquist discuss the vibrant intellectual life of Vitebsk on pages 45-49. Both Bakhtin and Chagall lived in Vitebsk and apparently their time in the town overlapped: Chagall returned to Vitebsk in 1918 (p. 46) but left for Moscow in late 1919 (p. 47). Bakhtin moved to Vitebsk in 1920, but probably gave lectures there in late 1919 (p. 45). According to Clark and Holquist, Bakhtin “liked Chagall personally” although he preferred the Symbolists to the avant garde art practiced and encouraged by Chagall (p. 48).


34 Provoyeur, *Marc Chagall*, 252.

35 The works in the collection have themes taken from the books of Genesis and Exodus, and the Song of Songs, and are now permanently housed at the *Musée National Message Biblique Marc Chagall* in Nice. The paintings were originally designed for a Calvary chapel, but when the building proved unsuitable, a museum was especially designed for them by the architect Andre Hermant (with Chagall’s collaboration) under the direction of the French government. See Jean-Michel Foray and Francoise Rossini-Paquet, *National Museum Message Biblique Marc Chagall*, 10.

36 Marc Chagall, “The Sacrifice of Isaac,” 1960-66, Oil on canvas, H. 230.5; L235 cm.
primary colors: reds, yellows, and Chagall’s trademark color, blue.\(^{37}\) The flatness of the figures and the use of color give the painting the appearance of a stained-glass window, a medium for which Chagall is also famous. It has been suggested that in this work Chagall “takes up” the painting by Rembrandt—the one we have viewed in this study.\(^{38}\)

Like the paintings by Rembrandt and Caravaggio, the motif of *The Sacrifice of Isaac* is recognizable: Abraham holds the knife, Isaac lies on the wood, and the ram—although rendered small and inconspicuous—is present. However, there are not one but two angels—which I will read as visual representations of the two times the angel speaks in the biblical narrative (vv. 11, 15). Chagall has bordered this main motif with extra figures: In addition to the angel there is a pleading woman, whom I will read as Sarah, visible behind the tree to which the ram is tied. In the upper right hand corner (as we face the canvas) we see a crucifixion scene. Chagall has spatially arranged these extra figures and additional scenes around the central narrative of the sacrifice of Isaac, much as columns of commentary surround the Mishnah in the Talmud with which Chagall would have been familiar.\(^{39}\)

\(^{37}\) Rembrandt was a favorite artist of Chagall’s; when asked, while standing in front of the stained-glass window of the *Biblical Message*, why blue figured so prominently in his works, he responded, “Why blue? Because I am blue, just like Rembrandt was brown.” See Provoyeur, *Marc Chagall*, 36.

\(^{38}\) Foray and Rossini-Paquet, *National Museum Message Biblique Marc Chagall*, 51, suggest that in this painting Chagall “takes up Rembrandt’s composition,” i.e., the *Sacrifice of Isaac* that we have been discussing. Chagall, though, also quotes himself, and we can see similarities between this portrayal of the scene and his earlier ones. It is beyond the scope of this work to compare and contrast this work with the others (either the Rembrandt or Chagall’s earlier representations of the scene) on composition or style but I will mention such similarities as are relevant to the discussion.

\(^{39}\) Foray, *National Museum Message Biblique Marc Chagall*, 23, sees the entire series of seventeen paintings that comprise the *Biblical Message* as comprising a commentary in the Talmudic tradition, that is, the figures in each painting are a commentary on the episode they illustrate. Leslie Ross (private correspondence) points out that such an arrangement (additional figures arranged around a central scene) is also typical of medieval art and Byzantine icons. Provoyeur, *Biblical Interpretations*, 29, comments that Chagall’s exposure to Byzantine influence (and icons) was reinforced by his visits to Moscow and the St. Petersburg collections.
With its extra scenes and figures Chagall’s painting offers more opportunity for readerly engagement than the Baroque paintings we have just examined. Also, there are a number of unusual details that make it possible to craft a number of different narratives from the painting’s visual elements. For the sake of clarity I will approach the work as if it is divided into a “text” and a “commentary.” As one does in reading the commentaries in the Chumash or the Talmud, I will read the supplemental scenes and figures as a “commentary” on the main scene. I will first read the visual narrative of Genesis 22 in which Chagall employs the standard iconographic elements. I will then read the “commentary” on that text, that is, the crucifixion scene in the upper right hand corner. I will read each of these separate sections, the “text” and “commentary,” by means of its own “navel.” For the “text” section, the navel will be the “winking Isaac.” In the “commentary” section, the navel will be what I am calling the “Jewish crucifixion.” I will use the figure of “Sarah,” however, as the “main” navel through which to view the whole work. Sarah is the one figure who engages the viewer by pleading for a response to the entire painting. More importantly, her “voice” in the painting echoes the trace of her voice as I have read it in the biblical narrative, that of maternal concern for a beloved child. In a painting so rich in figures there are a number of narratives that could be constructed from the visual elements; by choosing Sarah as the navel I will of necessity leave certain avenues unexplored.

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40 In the Talmud the Gemara and other commentaries, typically Rashi’s, elaborate the main text, the Mishnah. A chumash consists of the five books of Moses together with commentaries.
The “Text”: Two Different Endings

When we view the central narrative, the sacrificial scene, we see a rather typical rendering of the theme, one consistent with the view expressed in the biblical text that Isaac is not killed (v. 11-14). Abraham, interrupted by the angel, looks up.\(^{41}\) He appears to listen to the angel, and the knife tip, pointed up and away from Isaac, suggests that Abraham has terminated the ritual. In Chagall’s depiction of Abraham we see him reinforce the view the narrator put forth not only in Genesis 22, but in Genesis 12-21: Abraham obeys God’s directives. Chagall presents Abraham obediently following God’s words: first, by preparing to perform the ritual on God’s command and then in halting it on the angel’s intervention. In addition, in Chagall’s painting we see another sign of Abraham’s obedience: but for the wood the scene could be read as a circumcision ceremony (Gen. 17:10): Abraham’s hand rests on the thigh of the uncircumcised Isaac, in the other hand he holds the knife, the young man’s groin area is painted red, the color of blood.

Although the figure of Abraham is typically depicted, the figures of Isaac and the angel are strangely wrought. Isaac lies serenely on the wood; his visible arm is unbound.\(^{42}\) This is not the boy of the Caravaggio or Rembrandt, but a young man.\(^{43}\) What is unusual about Chagall’s portrayal of Isaac is that he has painted the figure with

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\(^{41}\)In Chagall’s portrayal of Abraham’s face we can see how he borrows from Rembrandt, in the upward gaze, the shape of the eyes, the mouth open (only suggested by Rembrandt).

\(^{42}\)This representation of the figure of Isaac is very similar to an earlier etching of the motif where Isaac’s body is similarly drawn: his curved body is stretched out over the wood, his arms are behind his back, and his head is similarly bent downward. However, the Isaac in the etching bears a mournful expression and look of resignation. The etching (Marc Chagall, \textit{The Sacrifice of Isaac}, etching, 1931-36) is in Jean Bloch Rosensaat, \textit{Chagall and The Bible} (New York: Universe Books, 1987), 130.

\(^{43}\)In painting Isaac as a young man Chagall recalls those midrashic traditions in which Isaac is old enough willingly to consent to be the sacrificial victim. See Louis Ginzberg, \textit{The Legends of the Bible} (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1992 (1909), 131-132.
one eye open and the other closed as if Isaac is winking at us. I read the wink as indicating something like, “Things may not be the way they appear.” The wink invites us to examine more carefully the way Chagall has presented the familiar iconographic elements in paint.

We first note that the angel (blue) is also rather oddly represented. (I am reading the blue angel as representing the divine command to halt the sacrifice in vv. 11-12 of Genesis 22). As in Rembrandt’s painting he calls from heaven—Chagall places him in the blue “sky.” But he is not easily seen. The angel blends into the blue background and must be searched for in the surrounding group of figures. To find him we follow Abraham’s upward gaze. Not easily seen, the angel also does not see: Chagall has painted his eyes closed. We note that the angel reaches toward Abraham, yet his arms are too short. In addition, the angel is separated from the human beings by the boundary that forms where the white color meets the blue. The ram is present, but very tiny and not attracting notice: Abraham does not see/look at it. The bush, mentioned in v. 13, is represented as a tree that visually overpowers Isaac’s substitute, the ram.

Chagall has also included a second—white—angel. I am interpreting this figure as representing the second time the divine voice addresses Abraham and reissues the promises (vv. 15-18). The white angel is directly behind the blue angel and hence in Abraham’s line of sight. The white angel points to the scene of crucifixion, but Abraham cannot see it; it is above his head and out of his range of vision.

If we look further at Chagall’s representation of the central narrative of the biblical text we see that his utterance is doubled. Chagall offers two contending stories:
the discourse of the lines conflicts with that offered in color. The narrative drawn in the thick lines indicates that the sacrifice does not go through: Abraham hears the angel, lifts his head, tips the knife up, and Isaac is spared. If, however, we look at Chagall’s use of color another, less optimistic, ending comes into view. Isaac is engulfed in yellows and red, the colors of fire; a bright red-orange plume rises from the wood pyre; billows of white, like smoke, surround him. In the story told by color, Isaac is consumed in the flames—he is the “burnt offering.”

There are a number of observations to make about Chagall’s portrayal of the motif of *The Sacrifice of Isaac* in these two conflicting utterances as he takes up and responds to various views voiced in the biblical narrative. First, where Caravaggio in his painting hinted at the uncertainty of Isaac’s fate, the ambiguity of the conflicting utterances of the narrator becomes the lens through which Chagall reads the biblical narrative. Second, Chagall picks up on and responds to Abraham’s utterance, “God will see/provide.” He depicts Abraham as having limited vision; Abraham can see that God promises him a future (he sees the white angel), but he cannot see what that future holds. The implication is that Abraham’s words about God’s provision need to be qualified, and perhaps reconsidered, in light of current—or perhaps future—events. Third, the blue angel in the painting does not—and perhaps cannot—see. Rembrandt presents a God who provides not only for Abraham in the present, but in the future and on a global scale (i.e., redeeming the world through Christ). Caravaggio questions the deity’s ability to offset human evil. Chagall raises questions about God’s ability or

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44Marc Chagall, in his address at the opening of the *Musée National Message Biblique Marc Chagall*, remarked: “It is not up to me to comment on them [the Biblical Message]. Works of art should be able to speak for themselves. . . . The color and its lines contain your characters and your message.” See Benjamin Harshav, ed., *Marc Chagall: On Art and Culture*, trans. Barbara and Benjamin Harshav (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003), 173.
willingness to see; he depicts the divine messenger as present but blind to what is happening. In addition, in the Chagall the angel’s arms are not long enough to reach down into Abraham’s space—his arms are “too short to save” as it were.\textsuperscript{45} We will return to this theme of the blindness of God in the next section on the “commentary;” Chagall will flesh out the future in a way that contends with Abraham’s statement about God’s provision, as well as with the deity’s own promises to bless the descendants.

The “Commentary”: Blessings for the Descendants?

An odd detail appears in the scene in the brown peak at the painting’s top right-hand corner, which I will call the “Jewish crucifixion.” This is the navel I will use for reading the visual elements in the “commentary.” It is noticeable because the motif of the cross evokes Christ’s crucifixion, but Chagall has dressed the figure bearing the cross in the garb of the Jewish ghetto.\textsuperscript{46} The scene contains images reminiscent of Chagall’s youth. A bearded man wearing a long black coat and carrying a book can be read as an observant Jew. Above him, there is a figure of a woman, her hands raised, and her knees bent; we can read in her expressive posture two possible opposite responses: fear and joy. Above the woman Chagall has sketched in small wraith-like figures, rising out of the ashen brown and disappearing into the blue sky.\textsuperscript{47}

\textsuperscript{45}God’s salvation and power is often spoken of in terms of his “outstretched arm” (see, for example Deut. 4:34, 5:15, 7:19, 9:29, 11:2, 26:8, 33:20, Ps.126:12, Jer. 27:5, 32:17, Ezek. 20:33,34.) In Num. 11:23 YHWH asks Moses if YHWH’s hand is shortened, meaning is God’s power insufficient. Here Chagall draws the angel with arms that cannot reach Abraham.

\textsuperscript{46}There is a photograph, in Harshav, \textit{Marc Chagall and His Times}, 49, of the neighbors of the family in the Chagall courtyard in Vitebsk wearing clothing similar to that in the painting.

\textsuperscript{47}In a stanza of a poem that Chagall wrote in remembrance of artists who had been gassed in the Holocaust, he says: “I see the fire, the smoke and the gas/rising to the blue cloud/turning it black.” The poem is untitled but appeared in an album entitled “Undzere Farpaynikte Kinstler” (“Our Martyred
In this “Jewish Crucifixion” scene the figure dressed in ghetto clothing can be read as doubled, evoking Christ’s passion, yet also representing the suffering of the Jewish people. Chagall presents the image of the sufferings of the Jews in a devotional context in which Christians gather to consider the sufferings of Christ. I suspect Chagall hopes to engage Christians, Abraham’s descendants by “adoption,” provocatively beginning a dialogue about Jewish-Christian relations, invoking a common “heritage,” but also a dark past of pogroms and the Holocaust.

The Navel: Sarah’s Plea to Spare the “Sons”

The navel I have chosen for the entire painting is “Sarah.” Sarah is not actually present as a character in the biblical narrative of Genesis 22, but in my reading of the interaction between God and Abraham I put forth the view that her words are reused by the three males—God, Abraham and the narrator—so her re-intonation of sonship becomes the heart of the conversation about Isaac. Chagall includes Sarah in his painting, not as a participant in the sacrifice—she is cut off from the central scene and placed beyond the boundary of white/blue—but as a commentator and as a figure who addresses the viewer. Chagall depicts her plea through the tilt of the head, the intense

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48 Since the nineteenth century, Jewish artists have used the motif of the crucifixion to express Jewish suffering; see Catherine Quehl-Engel, “Modern Jewish Art and the Crucifixion,” Soundings 80.1 (Spring 1997): 133-134. In a speech for the Jewish Writers Committee on July-August 1947 quoted in Harshav, Marc Chagall on Art and Culture, 112, Chagall said, “Thus their fathers and brothers fought in the ghettos of Warsaw and other cities. And the ‘crucifixions’ in the streets of Vitebsk and other cities take on the tragic look of the crucified Christ himself.”

49 It was designed for the Calvary Chapel in Vence, France, a chapel devoted to the Stations of the Cross. See Foray, National Museum Message Biblique Marc Chagall, 10.
eyes and, most of all, her hands, lifted high in petition. She implores us to regard and respond to the scene before our eyes.\(^{50}\)

In that scene Chagall’s “text” and “commentary” become one picture, an image of conflagration. The body of Isaac, painted in yellows and reds, and the folds of Abraham’s garment, sculpted like red flames, are enveloped by an inferno of color completely engulfing the father and son. In the “commentary” that rises above the fire that consumes Abraham and Isaac the ghetto figures are also consumed, their figures in faint outline rising with the ashen smoke, evoking those burnt whole in the ovens of the Holocaust.

In this visual image of an inferno Chagall picks up on and fleshes out the troubled future ahead for Abraham’s descendants only hinted at in the divine words of Genesis 22. Yet we can also delineate Chagall’s response to these words (vv. 16-18) as he pictures not only the descendants but also Abraham engulfed in flames. This is a picture in which not only the promised descendants, but God’s promises, appear to turn to ashes. In the portrayal of the divine (the blue and white angels) we can also read a range of emotions, not unlike those we read in Abraham’s utterance addressed to God in Gen. 15:3, “You have given me no descendants.” In his rendering the blue angel as “blind” we can perhaps hear a note of accusation: The deity has fallen asleep, a charge made by some survivors of the Holocaust. By depicting the deity as not able or refusing to see—and more significantly, as refusing or powerless to stop evil—the artist contends with the narrator’s view throughout Genesis 12-22 that God is a God who

\(^{50}\)In some midrashic traditions Sarah is considered the real victim; her death is reported in the chapter immediately following the narrative of Isaac’s near-sacrifice (chapter 23). Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Beginning of Desire: Reflections on Genesis* (New York: Image Books/Doubleday, 1995), 123, writes, “Sarah is the true victim of the Akedah, her death is its unexplicated, inexplicable cost.”
watches over Abraham and his descendants. In addition, I see in Chagall’s painting an argument directed at God. Like Abraham, whose utterances were always directed to the deity, as well as to whatever character he happened to be speaking to at the moment, Chagall’s image of consuming flames is a protest, a complaint, directed at the deity—that while God was not watching the “descendants” were almost exterminated.51

Yet, by reading the painting through the navel of Sarah’s plea, I have drawn a greater degree of complexity in Chagall’s response. If we look again at the scenes of the “text” and “commentary” we note that Chagall has included women who can be read as the mothers of the sacrificial victims. In the “text” it is the woman behind the tree who I am reading as Sarah. In the “commentary” there is a small figure of a woman (above the blue angel) who kneels at the foot of the cross. The woman kneeling (and the woman standing beside her) evoke the scenes of women at the Crucifixion from the gospels (particularly John 19:25 where the mother of Jesus is present). These women “see” and respond to the fate of their sons: Sarah by imploring us, and “Mary” by kneeling.52 In addition Chagall has placed another woman at the edge of the “Jewish Crucifixion.” The artist has placed her outside the scene and made her larger than the figures in it; the “mother” holds an infant as she observes the crucifixion.

By reading the painting by means of these three pairs of mothers and sons, our focus now shifts from the events themselves to the perspective of the women, to see the

51Catherine Quehl-Engel, “Modern Jewish Art and the Crucifixion,” 145-147, sees Chagall mounting such a protest, but within the confines of faith, in his painting The Crucified, which he painted upon hearing of the liquidation of the Warsaw ghetto in 1944. She suggests that in this painting Chagall inverts the Passover imagery. She writes, “In this work, five crucified figures line the street of a ghetto. Chagall places these bodies in front of door steps, thereby inverting the imagery of the Passover: The angel of death did not pass over these households, nor were they freed from captivity.”

52Chagall has portrayed the blue angel and the figure of “Mary” in a similar manner; their faces share common features and their arms are extended outward (but to no avail).
fate of the sons through the eyes of their mothers. Chagall takes up the main question posed in Genesis 22, a question to which, as we observed, God and Abraham (and the reader) found they must respond: how is Isaac to be viewed—as a beloved son or someone to be sacrificed? The Sarah figure, in Chagall’s rendering and as I have read her, implores us to see the sacrificial victims—whether Isaac, or Christ, or the Jewish victims of pogroms and the Holocaust—as beloved children, cherished by their mothers (even if seemingly abandoned by God.)

The artist, like the narrator, and like Abraham, places the children, the innocent victims in our view (and God’s view); more poignantly, we see the sacrificial victims through the eyes of their mothers. It is the mothers who plead with the viewer, and with God, to stop the bloodshed. In this sense, Chagall’s painting, although employing images of his own history (pogroms and the Holocaust), can be read more broadly as conveying an appeal from all mothers whose sons (and daughters) are sacrificed to conflict and war among Abraham’s descendants. Read as such it remains a timely appeal.\textsuperscript{53}

\textbf{Conclusion}

Genesis 22 is a narrative in which different voices contend for a hearing. The narrator’s description of Abraham as unquestioningly obedient stands in tension with

\textsuperscript{53}In light of current events in the Middle East, the conversation could be expanded to include Muslims, who are Abraham’s descendants through Ishmael. And given the situation in Israel/Palestine, the mothers could be viewed as Palestinians and Israelis who plead for their children.
what we see in Abraham’s silent actions. There is a dissonance between what is uttered and what is shown, a distance between Abraham’s overtly obedient actions and his silent argument intended to persuade God to rescind the command, to preserve the divine promises, and to save the life of the boy he only now comes to acknowledge as a beloved son. For centuries the “official” interpretation has been endorsed, but in this chapter I have shown how artistic utterances of this highly visual narrative can make audible voices that simplistic interpretation silences, and make available the rich ambiguities of the biblical text.
Figure 1. Rembrandt, *The Sacrifice of Isaac*
Figure 2. Rubens, *The Sacrifice of Isaac*
Figure 3. Caravaggio, *The Sacrifice of Isaac*
Figure 3A. Detail. Caravaggio, *The Sacrifice of Isaac*
Figure 4. Chagall, *The Sacrifice of Isaac*