The Abraham and Isaac Motif in Modern War Poetry

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Abstract:

This essay examines different employments of the Abraham and Isaac motif in modern war poetry. Considering this topic has already received much attention by David C. Jacobson and others as it relates to Israeli protest poetry from the mid-to-late 20th century, I summarize previous findings and compare them with writers outside the Israeli context. In doing so, I explore how poets – across different wars and literary traditions – have subverted traditional interpretations of Genesis 22 in order to "talk back" to certain nationalistic discourses surrounding war. In other words, I examine how positioning God or Abrahan as cruel rather than faithful carries an important level of political critique. Considering each of the poems I analyze were published in different years and with different wars in mind, my goal is to focus heavily on the conversations developing alongside each of these poems in order to uncover the power behind subversive retelling.

Introduction

The story of Abraham and Isaac in Genesis 22 has captivated the attention of many different writers and artists across time. From Rabbinic and Medieval eras to contemporary events today, Abraham's "temptation" (or Isaac's "binding") has served as an outlet for political, societal, and religious meditation. In recent history, some of the most visible retellings of this narrative have occurred in Hebrew literature, especially as it relates to Israel's military conflicts in the mid-to-late 20th century. In the 1970s, many Israeli academics and intellectuals became largely disillusioned with their State after they saw a growing number of Israeli youths "sacrificed" in war. In response, these individuals began to express their dismay by overtly subverting traditional interpretations of biblical stories, including the roles of Abraham, Isaac, and even the Ram in Genesis 22. For instance, Abraham – who had historically been perceived as a man of faith – often became characterized as a representative of an older generation that sends society's youth (i.e., Isaac) to die for their conflicts or beliefs. This approach had a strong effect on Israeli protest culture, and as the country continued to engage in military conflicts during the 1980s, similar retellings would occur.

Considering the established role the Bible has held in Hebrew literature, critics such as David C. Jacobson, Ruth Kartun-Blum, and Yosef Milman have thoroughly analyzed these more controversial anti-war writers strictly within their Israeli context. While this is appropriate and completely justifiable, similar retellings of the Abraham and Isaac narrative have been applied to other wars – including World War I, World War II, and the Vietnam War – making a larger analysis warranted. In this essay, I summarize some of the key insights Jacobson and others have gleaned from Israeli protest literature and compare them with the following three poems/lyrics: "The Parable of the Old Man and the Young" (1920) by Wilfred Owen, "Story of Isaac" (1969) by Leonard Cohen, and "Sacrifice" (2004) by Anthony Hecht. Though each of these three writings exist outside the Hebrew literary scene, they are equally interested in employing the story of Abraham and Isaac within anti-war frameworks. My aim in this essay is to demonstrate how each of these poems uniquely "talk back" to certain nationalistic discourses surrounding war by subverting the "faithfulness" of Abraham and God. This carries a strong level of political reproach, and I seek to show how each writer responds to different conversations promoted during their lives.

Genesis 22 and Israeli Protest Poetry

Traditionally speaking, the story of Abraham and Isaac in Genesis 22 has often been referred to as "The Trial of Abraham" or "The Binding (*Akedah)* of Isaac" depending on which character is the main focus of analysis.[1] The narrative begins with God "testing" or "tempting" Abraham by commanding him to take his son Isaac up to Mount Moriah and offer him as a burnt sacrifice. As Coffin points out, though there is no clear window into Abraham's state-of-mind as it relates to God's demand, literary allusions and techniques denote a special connection Abraham share with his son, making the command all the more conflicting.[2] In spite of this, Abraham remains faithful and demonstrates his willingness to obey God by quickly preparing for the journey to Moriah with Isaac and two servants. Upon reaching Moriah on the third day of their travels, Abraham and Isaac proceed up the mountain to perform the sacrificial ceremony while the servants stay at the mountain's base. Without a ram to offer, Abraham builds an altar and binds Isaac to it, drawing his knife in preparation to kill him. Nevertheless, at the last minute, an Angel of the Lord intervenes and stays Abraham's hand – Abraham has satisfactorily confirmed his fear of the Lord, and a ram found in the thicket nearby can be offered instead. The Angel tells Abraham that God is pleased by his obedience and, as a reward, promises him an abundant offspring that will continue for generations.

In terms of Hebrew literature, the "divine test" Abraham is subjected to – his conflict between faith and fatherhood – has traditionally been seen as the central tension of this story.[3] By "passing" the test, Abraham becomes the ultimate model of what Judaic faith in God should look like: unwavering commitment and obedience. As Yosef Milman notes, because Abraham demonstrates his faith, God too reveals his "unique attitude" for the Jewish people by both stopping the sacrifice of Isaac and establishing his covenant with Abraham and his descendants.[4] Because of this, the story has – especially in religious frameworks – often been presented as a "myth of life."[5]

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[1] Coffin, "The Binding of Isaac," 294.
[2] Ibid., 294. Coffin writes, "The use of apposition, in a progression from the general to the specific, indicates the enormity of the sacrifice asked of Abraham: 'Take your son, your only one, the one you love, Isaac.' Each reference further emphasizes Abraham's special attachment to his son."
[3] Kartun-Blum, "The Binding of Isaac in Modern Hebrew Poetry," 295. See also Milman, "The Sacrifice of Isaac and Its Subversive Variations," 62, for a discussion on the complexities of choosing faith over fatherhood.
[4] Milman, 70.
[5] Milman, 61. Importantly, even the midrashic retellings from Rabbinic and Medieval eras generally did not subvert the revered position of Abraham and his "divine test." As Kartun-Blum notes, subversions of Abraham's venerable position would not happen in Hebrew literature until the 20th century (308). See page 5 for a further discussion on these subversive readings.

Nevertheless, frameworks for viewing the Bible within the Hebrew literary tradition radically changed in the 20th century with the growth of Zionism and the Israeli State. As Jacobson notes, pre-State Zionists generally sought to "return the Jewish people to the glories of [their] ancient biblical past," allowing politics and religious moralism to be overtly conflated.[6] Notably, by the early 1950s (after Israel's 1948 War of Independence or the Palestine War), this attitude persisted and "events of contemporary Israeli history [were seen] as analogous to those of biblical history."[7] This was particularly visible in the way writers, politicians, and military figures discussed Israeli-Arab relationships during this time; biblical allusions to "Joshua, Samson, David, and the struggle between Israel and the descendants of Amalek" were directly used to categorize the "Arab enemies" and endow Israel's military with a sense of moral authority.[8]

In similar ways, Genesis 22 was also "transformed" or "secularized," in the words of Kartun-Blum, as 20th century writers began to pay less attention to the "God who tests" and more attention to "history and the national idea" in their employment of the biblical narrative.[9] In terms of the Israeli wars or conflicts of the late 1940s and 50s, the sacrificial dimension of the story of Abraham and Isaac was often used for two main political purposes: first, to help "bolster morale" as Isaac's alleged "willingness" to be sacrificed on the altar became conflated with the notion that it was honorable to die for the Zionist cause; and second, to glorify the "the heroism" of the soldiers who had died in combat.[10] Alongside this, writers such as Moshe Shamir and Moshe Dayan began to overtly compare the figure of Abraham to Israeli fathers who had sent their sons (i.e., Isaac) off to die in war. Of course, these writers were not yet approaching the biblical narrative from an angle of protest, suggesting instead that "such a comparison could help convey meaning to this sacrifice in life."[11] Nonetheless, by the late 1950s, the dynamics for interpreting this story would go through another stage of "transformation."

As Israel continued to gain a stronger sense of independence as the 20th century advanced, many of Israel's writers and academics began to question the Pre-State and early State praise of "sacrifice," especially as it related to the growing loss of Israeli youths in war. As Jacobson notes, the events of the Sinai War in 1956 served as a key turning point for

[6] Jacobson, *Does David Still Play Before You?*, 18.
[7] Ibid., 19.
[8] Ibid., 92.
[9] Kartun-Blum, 295.
[10] Jacobson, 92.
[11] Ibid., 94.

discussions on Israeli military activities as this marked the first major war with an Arab enemy since the Palestine War of 1948.[12] Following 1956, Israel would establish a growing reputation as a militaristic country by engaging in a number of conflicts including, the Six-Day War, Yom Kippur War, Lebanon War, and more. Considering biblical stories – such as the story of Abraham and Isaac – had directly been used to promote Israeli's miliary, protesting writers and intellectuals looked to directly subvert these narratives.

A prime example of one of these subversive readings is "That Fool Isaac" by Yitzhak Laor.[13] Throughout the poem, an unnamed speaker discusses the events of Genesis 22, rhetorically questioning some of the decisions Isaac makes, including his trust in Abraham ("To rely on such a father?" (79)) who is described as being cruel and mentally unstable. Introducing a new dimension to the story, the speaker tells Isaac to "remember what your father did to Ishmael" (79), Isaac's older stepbrother who was cast out of the family with his mother, Hagar, in Genesis 21. Moreover, while critics such as Millman are directly concerned with the "conspicuous absence of God" in this "secularized" retelling, Jacobson draws an interesting connection between Isaac and Israeli soldiers.[14] He writes, "Isaac […] here represents the Israeli soldier [and, according to the speaker,] is an idiot to go along with the plan of Abraham, who represents the older generation in Israel, to kill him."[15]

Similar dynamics occur in the protest poetry of Yehuda Amichai who actually fought in many Israeli wars including the 1948 Palestine War, Sinai War, and the Yom Kippur War. In his poem "The True Hero of the Akedah,"[16] Amichai completely subverts the biblical narrative of Genesis 22 by having all of the main characters disappear at the end of the poem except for the Ram ("The angel went home. / Isaac went home. / Abraham and God had gone long before" (304)). The Ram – whose slaughter represents the only "real" act in his retelling[17] – becomes the narrative's main "hero," a title that is not meant to glorify its death but rather ironically draw attention to its tragic life. In terms of contemporary wars, the Ram becomes a clear representative of the Israeli soldiers who "didn't know about the collusion between the others" – meaning the older generation who sent them to war – and "[were] volunteered to die" (303). As Jacobson notes, in casting these victims of war as the Ram, Amichai draws attention

[12] Jacobson, 93.
[13] Loar, "Hametumtam haze Yitshak" [That Fool Isaac], 79. All further references to Loar's poem will be included with in-text page number citations.
[14] Milman, 79. See also Jacobson, 95.
[15] Jacobson, 95.
[16] Amichai, "Hagibor ha' amiti shel ha' Aqedah" [The True Hero of the Akedah], 303-304. All further references to Amichai's poem will be included with in-text page number citations.
[17] Kartun-Blum, 304.

to their dehumanization, an idea particularly poignant in the context of the unpopular Lebanon War which occurred only one year before the publication of this poem.[18]

Alongside these poets, Israeli women writers have also used Genesis 22 to confront the "sacrifice" of youths in war. In Aliza Shenhar's "The Binding,"[19] the biblical narrative is transposed onto a modern setting in which a "loudspeaker" screams out the command God gives to Abraham. But here, the "altar is destroyed," and the "burnt offering is scattered," alluding to the way war (and the political or military figures who have exploited it) has redefined this story (122).[20] Isaac is replaced by "the youths," and the angel who is meant to stop the sacrifice "is on leave" (122). Alongside this, Abraham's presence is almost completely absent as war itself seems to replace him, and the sacrificial knife "[that] is shining in the wadi / in the mid-border" (122) becomes a direct representative of Arab-Israeli military conflict. While the common notion of an older-generation sending a younger-generation off to war may not be as present here, the emphasis remains on the young soldiers who are dying on the battlefields.

Having outlined some developments surrounding the reception history of Genesis 22 in the Hebrew literary tradition, it becomes clear that the Israeli protest poetry of the mid-to-late 20th century emphatically acted *in response* to the rhetoric of the previous generation. Considering the pre-State writers conflated the story of Abraham and Isaac with militaristic and nationalistic language, the early State protesters began to directly reinterpret the story in a new, politically confrontational way. Positioning Abraham or even God as a cruel older generation helped these writers voice their urgent concern for the loss of Israeli youths in war. As war persisted, Genesis 22 would continue to be subverted in similar ways. In the next section, I look backwards to World War I and the early 20th century to analyze Wilfred Owen's subversion of the same story.

Wilfred Owen (World War I)

While the Israeli protest writers of the mid-to-late 20th century tended to be noncombatants who advocated on behalf of young soldiers killed in combat, Wilfred Owen represents one of these young soldiers himself, though in Britain roughly fifty years earlier. Having been drafted for World War I in 1914 at the age of 22, Owen experienced the horrors of trench warfare and

[18] Jacobson, 128.
[19] Shenhar, "Ha'agedah" [The Binding], 122. All further references to Shenhar's poem will be included with in-text page number citations.
[20] Jacobson, 122-123.

sought to "truthfully" represent these experiences in tragic and pitiful ways.[21] Though he would serve for a relatively short period of time when compared to some of his fellow soldiers,[22] he was killed in combat at the early age of 25, just one week before the armistice was declared (November 11th). In light of this, many of his war poems were published in the postwar years by his soldier-friend Siegfried Sassoon. This included "The Parable of the Old Man and the Young" (1920),[23] a short poem that retells the story of Abraham and Isaac in striking ways.

"The Parable of the Old Man" closely follows the events of Genesis 22 for the majority of the poem. It begins with "Abram" rising in the morning with "wood," "fire," and "a knife" to travel with Isaac and perform the sacrificial ceremony (though God's initial command is conspicuously absent from the poem). Without describing every detail, the poem focuses its attention on some of the biblical narrative's major events, including Isaac's concern surrounding the whereabouts of the ram (lines 4-6), the building of the altar and binding of Isaac (lines 7-9), the intervention of the Angel (lines 10-12), and the appearance of the ram (lines 13-14). But for all of its adherence to the biblical story, the poem's final two lines drastically differ. As the Angel tells Abram to stop, Abram chooses not to listen and kills Isaac along with "half the seed of Europe, one by one" (lines 16). In other words, the story's traditional tension between faith and fatherhood is completely subverted as Abram chooses neither – he disobeys God by ignoring the Angel but unnecessarily kills instead of protects Isaac.

Just as with many of the Israeli protest poems, "The Parable of the Old Man" is particularly interested in drawing connections between "sacrifice" and the deaths of soldiers in war. For Owen, this is most visible in his direct employment of World War I imagery. For instance, Isaac's binding is described as being done with "belts and straps" and the altar is built on "parapets and trenches" (lines 7-8). As it slowly becomes clear that Isaac represents young British soldiers who are killed in the trenches, Abram simultaneously becomes a representative

[21] Johnson, *English Poetry of the First World* War, 164-165. Wilfred Owen famously wrote as a Preface for his poetry, "This book is not about heroes. English poetry is not yet fit to speak of them. Nor is it about deeds, or lands, nor anything about glory, honour, might, majesty, dominion, or power, except War. Above all I am not concerned with Poetry. My subject is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity" (*Collected Poems*, 31). The relationship between "Truth," "real experience," and its effect on readers would be a major concern for trench poets like Owen. As Johnson notes, Owen positioned himself as a "true Poet" because he wrote on "true" experiences of war derived from his own military service (Johnson, 165). See James Campbell, "Combat Gnosticism: The Ideology of the First War Poetry Criticism" for a more in-depth critique of this discussion.
[22] Johnson writes, "After a three months' period in the trenches in early 1917, Owen was invalided to England for over a year, during which time he had ample opportunity to meditate on his experiences, meet other poets, and perfect himself as a craftsman. He returned to the fighting in September 1918, but his total time in the trenches amounted to only five months" (212).
[23] Owen, *Collected Poems*, 42. All further references to Owen's poem will be included with in-text line number citations.

of the older generation that is responsible for sending youths to war. As Wohl notes, Owen's immediate introduction into "the worst the war had to offer" made such a position easy to hold.[24] In the war's aftermath, a number of British World War I veterans would build off of such a sentiment, emphasizing the total effect this "lost generation" of young men had on Britian's society.[25]

Though British writers did not necessarily employ Genesis 22 in the same way the Zionist State did in the early-to-mid-20th century, the Christian emphasis on Christ's sacrifice – a key dimension in Christian interpretations of the story of Abraham and Isaac[26] – played an important role in British propaganda. As Bryan Rivers notes, biblical images and passages on Christ's crucifixion were regularly used to frame discussions on the deaths of soldiers. He writes,

> The equation of the fallen soldier with the sacrificed Christ was a conveniently emotive analogy for artists and propagandists of the [World War I] period. Probably its most popular and enduring expression was the official British "Cross of Sacrifice" war memorial, mass-produced by the Imperial War Graves Commission in the immediate postwar period, which featured Christ's exhortation: "Greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13) inscribed on the base of an imposing stone cross on which hung a metal sword. The memorials usually featured a plaque with the names of the local enlisted men who had died during the war, and they are still, even today, the focal point of Remembrance Day ceremonies across the country.[27]

Interestingly, Rivers goes on to show how Owen's first draft of "The Parable of the Old Man" sought to utilize much of this imagery. Before there was "the Young" there was "the Son," and before the sacrifice occurred on "parapets and trenches," it occurred on "earth and wood," two clear references to Christ as the Son of God on the cross.[28] Nevertheless, by changing this language for the final draft, Owen's poem stands as a strong rebuke against nationalistic employments of this biblical imagery, challenging the alleged honor in dying on the battlefield.

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[24] Wohl, *The Generation of 1914*, 102.
[25] A major discussion in *The Generation of 1914* is Wohl's deconstruction of the "myth of the missing generation." According to Wohl, the theme of "doomed youth led blindly to the slaughter by cruel age" visible in Owen's poetry would not be "developed in prose in a systematic or sustained fashion" until a decade after the war (105). After this time, writers such as Sassoon and Robert Graves would build heavily off of it.
[26] As Devaney notes, "For Christians, generally, the 'sacrifice' of Isaac is thought to prefigure the Crucifixion, which they believe is the most important event in world history" (137).
[27] Rivers, "'A Parapet of Earth and Wood,'" 123. River also discusses how commonplace it was for poets and writers to equate soldiers with Christ. Owen would not be exempt from this as some of his other poems compare soldiers with Christ. Nevertheless, "The Parable of the Old Man" is still critical of this idea and, by itself, still stands as a strong political and religious critique.
[28] Ibid., 122.

Alongside the poem's challenge to the Christian rhetoric that was used to promote the "honor" of soldiers' deaths, "The Parable of the Old Man" stands in stark opposition to the nationalistic language of earlier war poets. Seen most visibly in poems such as "The Soldier" by Rupert Brooke, poets at the outset of the war sought to glorify the idea of sacrificing one's life for their country. As mentioned, Owen was particularly resistant to such approaches and thought the "real" nature of war – which for him was defined by death and cruelty – should be the focal point of a war poet's work. Another poem of his, "Dulce et Decorum Est," is perhaps even more confrontational than "The Parable of the Old Man," though the latter still counters the narratives promoted by Brooke and others through its subversive approach.

As I have demonstrated, "The Parable of the Old Man and the Young" carries a strong level of cultural critique in its reimagining of Genesis 22. In allowing Abraham to kill Isaac, Owen directly challenges Britain's wartime employment of biblical imagery and the nation's early war poetry. Though rooted in a more Christian context, Owen's poem shares many similarities with the Israeli protest writers of the mid-to-late 20th century, especially in how each respond to prominent discourse on the glorification of young soldiers' deaths in war. In the next section, I turn to Leonard Cohen and discuss the relationship between his song "The Story of Isaac" and the Vietnam War.

Leonard Cohen (Vietnam War)

Recorded for the first time in 1969 when many U.S. citizens were protesting the Vietnam War, "The Story of Isaac" and its retelling of Genesis 22 emerged out of a politically divisive context that was heavily defined by counter-cultural voices.[29] Interestingly, Abraham's "divine test" had already been discussed rather flippantly in Bob Dylan's "Highway 61 Revisited" a few years early (1965) and religiosity was in a state of general decline at this time.[30] This perhaps makes Cohen's lyrics less controversial than the other poems I have discussed thus far, though, as Carol Devaney points out, Genesis 22 was still used to legitimize the "holiness" of the Vietnam war throughout this time, allowing this song to carry an important level of cultural critique.[31]

The song begins in what appears to be a more modern setting and is spoken from the perspective of Isaac. Described as being only nine years old, Isaac is confronted by his "strong

[29] All further references to "Story of Isaac" will be included with in-text verse number citations.
[30] McLeod, "The Religious Crisis of the 1960s," 205.
[31] Devaney, 130. See also pages 248-249 for a short discussion on the role of Vietnam in Robert Herhold's *Who Asked Isaac?* (1995).

and holy" father who has had a "vision" (verse 1). Interestingly, as Harry Freedman points out, though there are clear similarities between Isaac's father in the song and Abraham from the biblical story, the two are not exactly identical. Isaac's father in the song is described as being "a tall, blue-eyed Caucasian [man]"[32] that would overtly distinguishable him from a Middle Eastern man. As the song continues, the father and son climb a mountain together in accordance with the father's "vision." Isaac emphatically does not know what this vision is and expresses tentative feelings of both hope (seeing the eagle) and dread (seeing the vulture) when his father puts his hand on him. Nevertheless, by the end of verse two, Isaac's father builds an altar and turns to Isaac knowing he will not hide from the sacrifice that is about to happen.

Considering verse two implies that the father kills his son (especially since no Angel is mentioned throughout the song), verse three seems to be spoken by Isaac from beyond the grave. Isaac offers a stark warning to other fathers that are like his own: "You who build the altars now / To sacrifice these children / You must not do it anymore" (verse 3)). Isaac specifically calls out his father's "vision" for its fraudulent status ("A scheme is not a vision"), stating his belief that he had never actually been tempted or tested in the first place. But in a rather striking twist, Isaac also acknowledges that this "scheme" his father commits is not exceptional to him; Isaac ends his story by recognizing his own potential to either "kill" or "help."

Being written during the Vietnam War, the song carries a strong critique of sending young men off to die in war. Cohen expresses this rather violently, such as when Isaac discusses the fathers who carry a "hatchet" or "ax" (instead of a knife) that has grown "blunt and "bloody" from all of the children they have sacrificed on "the altar" (verse 3). At the same time, "The Story of Isaac" also seems to challenge certain features of the United States' growing protest culture by complicating the binary between being simply pro- or anti-violent. In the end of the poem, Cohen disallows any "easy" anti-war reading by having Isaac express his own potential to kill. The sacrifice of one generation on behalf of another still remains a central theme to the song, though Cohen understands this "sacrifice" as something which occurs in different forms and by many different individuals.[33] Of this, Cohen says,

> I was careful in that song to try and put it beyond the pure, beyond the simple, anti-war protest … it isn't necessarily for war that we're willing to sacrifice each other. We'll get some idea – some magnificent idea – that we're willing to sacrifice each other for; it doesn't necessarily have to involve an opponent or an ideology, but human beings,

[32] Freedman, *Leonard Cohen: The Mystical Roots of Genius*, 39.
[33] Ibid., 47.

> being what they are, we're always going to set up people to die for some absurd situation that we define as important.[34]

In some respects, this makes Cohen's employment of Genesis 22 the most religiously-oriented of the poems I have looked at thus far. While both the Israeli protest poets of the mid-to-late 20th century and Wilfred Owen sought to subvert the biblical narrative in overtly secular ways, Cohen's poem focuses on high-minded ideas surrounding "human nature" and "the possibility that a murderer lurks within each of us."[35] This is particularly interesting considering Cohen's song was written in an era less defined by religion and, according to Freedman, not necessarily written with any singular religious tradition in mind.[36] Of course, this is not to suggest Cohen's employment of Genesis 22 is politically neutral, but rather demonstrates different frameworks in which Genesis 22 can be subverted under. In the next section, I turn to Anthony Hecht's poem "Sacrifice" and its exploration of war's emotional consequences.

Anthony Hecht (World War II)

Anthony Hecht's use of the Abraham and Isaac motif in his poem "Sacrifice" (2004) is perhaps the most unique of all the poems I have discussed thus far.[37] The "centerpiece" to his last volume of poetry, *The Darkness and the Light*, Hecht overtly connects the story of Abraham and Isaac with World War II through the volume's cover art.[38] The poem is formatted according to three distinct parts: the first, voiced by the biblical Abraham; the second, voiced by the biblical Isaac; and the third, voiced by an unnamed narrator who discusses an event from World War II. Considering the first two parts directly relate to Genesis 22 while the third (and longest) part is centered around World War II, the poem primarily "works as a palimpsest, overlaying the biblical narrative with the modern in a way that sheds light on both."[39] Though the other poems I have analyzed work in similar ways, Hecht's poem distinguishes itself in that the third part does not actively discuss Genesis 22 at all; only by its formal connection to parts one and two is the reader invited to actively read part three as a subversive retelling of the biblical narrative.

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[34] Cohen, interview with John McKenna, quoted in Freedman, 47.
[35] Graff Zivin, "Abraham's Double Bind," 87.
[36] Freedman, 41. Freedman discusses how Jewish and Christian imagery are both used in the song along with other imagery that is more ambiguous (for example, Abraham's "golden ax" in the poem).
[37] All further references to "Sacrifice" (*Collected Later Poems,* 194-199) will be included with in-text page number citations.
[38] Post, *A Thickness of Particulars*, 260. The cover of the work was designed by Chip Kidd and includes an explicit juxtaposition between Tiepolo *Angel Preventing the Sacrifice of Isaac* and modern soldiers at war.
[39] Yezzi, "The Morality of Anthony Hecht," 32.

In parts one and two, Abraham and Isaac are described in fairly traditional ways. Though obedient, Abraham is completely distraught by the "terrible day at dawn" when "the whole of [his] long life / Pivoted" (195). Abraham "wishe[s] to die" on the long journey to Moriah, and it is only in a "spasm of agony" that he can actually bind his son. (196). Similarly, while Isaac struggles with accepting that he has been "elected the shorn stunned lamb of God" about to be sacrificed, he keeps a general level of respect for his father, even praying that peace find the both of them (196). Interestingly, it is God (the "Voice") that is most responsible for the terror of the events. God is presented as rather cruel for "knowing where [Abraham's] heart would break" and leading him into the temptation anyways (194).

In the third part, the voices of Abraham and Isaac completely disappear as the poem shifts to a remote farm in 1945. World War II is still ongoing, but the Germans are in retreat and heading through France. The poem zooms in on a French family who knows that the German soldiers will threaten them and take any accessible valuables. The family is particularly concerned about one of their bicycles and choose to dismantle and hide it. Inevitably, a German soldier comes to the family and is not fooled by their actions; he knows they must have a bicycle somewhere considering the remoteness of where the house is and threaten to kill one of the boys in the family if it is not turned over. The father, however, chooses not to turn over the bike, leaving his son in the hands of the soldier. Nevertheless, the soldier ends up letting the boy live, though this is not out of compassion. As the narrator notes,

> It wasn't charity. Perhaps mere prudence,
> Saving a valuable round of ammunition
> For some more urgent crisis. Whatever it was,
> The soldier reslung his rifle on his shoulder,
> Turned wordlessly and walked on down the road
> The departed German vehicles had taken (199).

With the boy alive, the final stanza remarks on the "agonized, unviolated silence" that follow in the house (199). The father, son, and remainder of the family must live together knowing that the boy was almost sacrificed for the bicycle.

While Yezzi and Post both emphasize how the father "fails" a temptation that is allegedly similar to the "divine test" of the biblical Abraham,[40] I find blaming the father somewhat reductive. Considering parts one and two do not overtly position Abraham in a

[40] Yezzi, 33; Post, 260. Yezzi suggests that the father is the greatest villain because he does not simply hand the bicycle over to the Nazi and lets his son die (33). I argue that, when looking at this poem with parts one and two in mind, the father is not the biggest villain but simply put in a position with no easy or good answer.

negative light and rather focus on how the "Voice" puts Abraham in a terrible situation, it is clear that the father is similarly put in a position with no easy answer – how will the soldier react to a dismantled bike? Will speaking up make the situation worse? Can he let his son die? It is ambiguous exactly how the events could have played out if the father gave up the bicycle. Nevertheless, the family still must face the consequences of the "agonized, unviolated silence" that follow from his inaction.

By framing this third section in a more realistic and contemporary framework, Hecht's poem utilizes the Genesis 22 narrative in a way that highlights the emotional consequences war has on its victims. While this poem may be less explicit in its response to nationalistic discourses surrounding war than the Israeli protest writers, Owen, and Cohen, it does demonstrate the total effect war has on society outside of the traditional battlefield. In one way, this relates to Hecht's confrontations with the "good war myth" in the postwar years. Having suffered from his own emotional disturbances out of the war, Hecht was insistent that World War II was *not* any more morally permissible than the unpopular Vietnam war, though the nation has often said differently.[41] Using Genesis 22 to condemn war in all its forms, Hecht's poem adds a new dimension to this narrative's history of subversive retelling.

Conclusion

In the late 20th century, critics such as David C. Jacobson, Ruth Kartun-Blum, and Yosef Milman looked closely at different uses of Genesis 22 in modern Israeli protest poetry. By focusing on the biblical narrative's reception history, these critics thoroughly revealed a complex relationship between Zionist discourse, war, and subversive retelling. In building off of these insights, I have sought to expand this field of analysis by comparing how Israeli protest writers relate to other poets that similarly utilize this biblical story. In the case of Owen's and Cohen's poems, I emphasized how these writers focused on the "sacrifice" of a younger generation on behalf of an older generation, often responding to nationalistic conversations in the process (just as the Israeli protest writers did with Zionist discourse). While Hecht's poem may be the least explicitly political, it too uses Genesis 22 to discuss the emotional consequences of war and challenge the myth of "the good war." As wars continue, it will be interesting to see if future writers find equal power in subverting Genesis 22.

[41] In an interview with Philip Hoy in 1999, Hecht directly talked about some of his experiences in World War II, including an instance where his comrades shoot unarmed civilians. Hecht discussed this experience in a critique of "the good war myth," saying, "when I hear empty talk about that war having been a 'good war', as contrasted with, say, Vietnam, I maintain a fixed silence" (Hoy, *In Conversation*, 27).

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