A Text That Binds: The Akedah in Jewish History and Thought

The biblical narrative of Abraham’s near-sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22 is without question one of the most powerful, compelling, and yet troubling passages of the Pentateuch. This narrative, referred to in Hebrew literature as the Akedah (lit: the binding), is a text that Jews have returned to time and again, with reverberations across Jewish history and through two millennia of Jewish thought and literature. In this course, we will trace the manifold ways in which this text was read, interpreted, and appropriated. The goal of the course is not only a cross-cultural literary history of the Jews, but an exercise in reading that allows us to appreciate the intellectual and religious forces shaping Jewish societies throughout the ages.

The focus of the classroom sessions will be the primary sources, divided into twelve sections. With the exception of one text, these sources will be made available to you in advance of the course through Schoology. The sources are challenging and complex, and students need to make every effort to read and digest them in advance of the seminar. Please also note that since these texts will be the mainstay of our study and class discussion, it is imperative that students have the sources with them at all class sessions. You may wish to print them before your departure for Hebrew College.

On the syllabus, you will also find some secondary sources which serve as a kind of modest bibliography for the course. These are recommended, but will not serve as the focus of our class time. They represent some of the best of the vast literature on our subject, and are intended to supplement and complement classroom discussion. These secondary sources will either be available via the library’s e-journal database, as PDF files attached to the online course shell (marked as Sch in the syllabus), or on reserve in the Gann library.

Students will need to obtain or purchase three books (all are readily available via online booksellers such as Amazon.com):


Course evaluation will be based on a research paper, due on August 22, 2014. The subject of this paper will be determined in consultation with the instructor and will take into consideration the academic and intellectual interests of the individual student.
Part I: From Ancient Tales to Monotheistic Faiths

§ One  The Abraham Narratives and the Enigma of the Akedah

Genesis 12:1 - 23:2  
Isaiah 51:1-2  Nehemiah 9:6-11

Secondary Sources


§ Two  Abraham Hellenized

Philo, On Abraham, sections 32-36  
Josephus, Jewish Antiquities, I, 218-239

Secondary Sources

Aharon Agus, The Binding of Isaac and Messiah (1988) [Ch. 1, “The Mother of the Sons,”] pp. 11-32 [Gann]  

§ Three  Isaac/Jesus Sacrificed/Crucified

John 3:16, 18:12-19:18  Romans 8:26-32  
James 2:14-24

Origen, Homilies on Genesis and Exodus [On the fact that Abraham offered his son Isaac]  
St. Augustine, Sermons, [Abraham, Tested by God]

Secondary Sources

§ Four  Un-Bound by Rabbinic Imagination

The Book of Jubilees 17:15 – 18:16
Targum Onkelos to Gen 22
Targum Jonathan to Gen 22
Targum Neofiti to Gen 22
Midrash Rabbah to Genesis, Chs. 55-56
Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Gittin, p. 57b
Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer, Ch. 31

Secondary Sources


§ Five  Isaac, Ishmael, and Quranic Ambiguities

Quran, Sura 37: 83-113

Secondary Sources


Part II: Medieval Jewish Adaptations

§ Six  Reenacting the Akedah on the Rhine

Solomon b. Samson, *Hebrew First-Crusade Chronicle*
David b. Meshullam of Speyer, *God, Do Not Let My Blood Rest*
Ephraim b. Jacob of Bonn, *The Slaughter of Isaac*

Secondary Sources

§ Seven The Akedah and the Cultural Prism of Medieval Jewish Exegesis

R. Solomon b. Isaac (Rashi)   }
R. Samuel b. Meir   }      commentaries to Gen 22
Abraham ibn Ezra   }
R. Moses b. Nahman   }

Secondary Sources


§ Eight Trials, Cosmic Balance and other Philosophical Problems

Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, III:24
*Zohar*, I:119b-120b

Secondary Sources


Part III: The Modern Age and the (Im)Possibility of Belief

§ Nine Ethical Imperatives, Leaps of Faith, and Existential Choice

Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* [1793], pp. 79-82
------, *The Conflict of the Faculties* [1798], p. 115
*Soren Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling* [1843], pp. 41-95

* not included in primary source packets
§ Ten  The Akedah in the Shadow of the Crematoria

Saul Friedlander, *When Memory Comes* (1979), pp. 24-29
Eliezer Berkovits, *With God in Hell: Judaism in the Ghettos and Deathcamps* (1979), pp. 113-131

§ Eleven  The Paradox of Israeliness: Poetics of a Modern Jewish Torment

Amir Gilboa, *Isaac*
Tuvia Rubner, *Voices*
Hayyim Gouri, *Heritage*
T. Carmi, *The Sacrifice*
Yitzhak La'or, *This Dolt Isaac*
Ra'aya Harnick, *Poems of Attrition*
Hanokh Levin, from the play, *The Queen of the Bath*
Yehudah Amichai, *The Real Hero*
Hava Pinhas-Cohen, *Entreaty*

Secondary Sources

Ruth Kartun-Blum, “‘Where does this wood in my hand come from?’ The Binding of Isaac in Modern Hebrew Poetry,” *Prooftexts* 8 (1988), pp. 293-310 [e-journal]
§ Twelve  Recovering Sarah: Feminist Readings


Secondary Sources