

Divine Violence and Divine Sovereignty

DIVINE VIOLENCE AND DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY:
KIERKEGAARD AND THE BINDING OF ISAAC

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Abstract

This thesis examines the concept of sovereignty, as developed by the jurist Carl Schmitt, and argues that this concept helps to elucidate the very core of *Fear and Trembling*, a text that continues to be heavily misunderstood despite its great fame in Western thought today.

Through a close examination of Schmitt's formulation of the concept of sovereignty and the method by which he develops this concept through Kierkegaard's concept of the exception in *Repetition*, I show how Kierkegaard influenced Schmitt and also how Schmitt's interpretation is useful for reading *Fear and Trembling*. However, I also show how Schmitt's usage of Kierkegaard, despite its ingenuity, is misleading, and present a more faithful reading of Kierkegaard's concept of exception. With this reorientation, I in turn critique Schmitt's methodology and the way he understands sovereignty.

Following this reinterpretation of sovereignty, I examine the text of Genesis 22 and *Fear and Trembling* and examine the theological themes that ground the narrative of the Binding of Isaac. I argue that the problem of the Binding and the arguments set forth in *Fear and Trembling* cannot be understood adequately without a clear awareness of the image of reality that is presupposed. Here, I make use of Erich Auerbach's illuminating reading of Genesis 22, and

Jacob Taubes' understanding of eschatology. I then examine the problem of violence as presented in the Binding, and how Kierkegaard departs from both Kant's and Hegel's critique of Abraham.

Finally, I examine Derrida's reading of *Fear and Trembling* in *The Gift of Death* and the way he challenges the height of sovereignty that is implicit within Kierkegaard's "absolute relation to the absolute."

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: The Concept of Sovereignty	7
Schmitt's Concept of Sovereignty and the Exception	8
"Political Theology"	14
On Reading Repetition	21
The Eschaton	27
Between Repetition and Fear and Trembling.....	33
Chapter 2: Father Abraham.....	35
Three Days to Mount Moriah	41
Abraham's Knife	63
Chapter 3: Isaac	88
Final Remarks	103
Bibliography	106

Introduction

Today, the field of what is called “political theology” has developed into a fruitful avenue of contemporary thought, a lively convergence of philosophy, theology, and politics. At the centre of all this is the figure of Carl Schmitt, the author of the seminal book *Political Theology* (1922). Whether one agrees or disagrees with this jurist’s interpretive methods or conclusions, the whole of contemporary political theology begins with Schmitt’s claim that modern political concepts are secularized theological concepts. Beyond the simple comparison of political and theological concepts and the construction of the genealogy of ideas of Western thought, at the heart of *Political Theology* and the field of study that has grown around it is the question of what theology means in post-Christendom. Even in the midst of secular democratic hegemony, is theology still what drives us when we think most deeply philosophically and politically? In what ways does theology still shape and inform our thinking and the fundamental shape of our political institutions even as Christian institutions continue to decline in the West?

These questions are complicated by how difficult it remains to say what “political theology” really entails today, ninety-three years after the first publication of *Political Theology*. Is it the task of political theology to dig into the roots of political concepts for their structural similarity to theological concepts, or is the task to interpret theological doctrine in order to fashion conceptual political structures? Or perhaps

something else entirely? Much of what seems to happen in contemporary political theology appears to be political theory that draws from particular theological concepts, following Schmitt. This is certainly not an invalid methodology in itself but it comes at the price of taking theology piecemeal, treating theology as a kind of reservoir from which one can take conceptual structures to play with. While this may lead to productive developments, it comes at the risk of turning theology into caricature, a body without organs.

In this project, I seek to interpret Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* as primarily being concerned with divine sovereignty, borrowing from Schmitt's definition of sovereignty. I am deeply indebted to Schmitt's conceptual insight (perhaps better understood as *instinct*) but at the same time I am also deeply ambivalent towards both Schmitt's methodology and his conclusions. I hope that in the midst of this difficult dialectic I have presented both Schmitt's influence upon me and my opposition to him both clearly and charitably.

The pairing of Kierkegaard with Schmittian insights came about in two primary ways. Schmitt makes use of Kierkegaard's concept of the exception at the end of the first chapter of *Political Theology*, and through this one comes across a literary bridge. However, Schmitt's reference in *Political Theology* is both selective and misleading, and even as I was dumbstruck by the power of *Political Theology* on my first reading, I was also *deeply* annoyed at how Schmitt deployed the Kierkegaard quote. In at least a small

sense, this project began as a three year long search to understand why this small literary incident bothered me so intensely. Schmitt's brief reference to Kierkegaard is well known, and much of the secondary literature comments on it, but there is little critical treatment of Schmitt's reference, be it textual or conceptual. The name of Schmitt is largely absent when it comes to Kierkegaard scholarship, for reasons that may be myriad. Conversely, when Kierkegaard is mentioned in Schmitt scholarship the Dane is often simply just subsumed.

On the other hand, and more importantly, Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, despite being by far the most (in)famous of all of Kierkegaard's writings, and perhaps even one of the most defining interpretations of the Binding of Isaac today, is a work that continues to give birth to a great deal of interpretive disagreement on seemingly every single part of the short work. Although the (in)famous "teleological suspension of the ethical" is a central part of *Fear and Trembling*, far too many scholarly commentaries lose themselves in trying to understand *Fear and Trembling* as fundamentally being a tract on ethics, both misunderstanding the genre of the work and Kierkegaard's actual focus through the pen of Silentio. *Fear and Trembling* is a religious work that is concerned with the relation between God and the human, and it is written within the broad Lutheran tradition. It is concerned with ethics but in a secondary way. My desire to highlight this orientation of *Fear and Trembling* led me to find Schmitt's concept of sovereignty to be a useful tool for interpreting *Fear and Trembling*, and so I found myself

in a convenient place to make use of the literary-conceptual relationship between Kierkegaard and Schmitt.

Although I have begun by invoking the name of Schmitt, Schmitt himself is not central to the thesis, and after the first chapter he quickly disappears. My concern is with Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah, the terrible nature of God's command to Abraham to sacrifice his only legitimate son, and the horror of encountering Abraham's silent obedience to God's command. What I am concerned with is the way the narrative of the Binding can help us see, in all its disturbing sensuality, the most hyperbolic expression of sovereign force. What is sovereignty, what is the claim of the sovereign, and how is one in relation to the sovereign?

Throughout the thesis I reflect upon how questions of the text, the reader, and the writer become something that I *must* engage with as a hermeneutical problem. While this exercise was highly valuable for me as a student, I fear that my growing concern over the question of hermeneutics at times overpowers the primary problem of sovereignty. This is not to say that the questions of hermeneutics and sovereignty are unrelated, however, as orientation in reading implicitly deals with the question of authority in the dialectical relationship between the reader, the writer, and the text, and this is all the more relevant for the project, as the question of what kind of authority scripture has over the reader is unavoidable when writing about the Binding. My concern over interpretive orientation is fueled by Jacob Taubes' notion that the

philosopher, the theologian, and the jurist, by the duties of their offices, receive and interpret the world differently. For myself as a student, this notion comes to me as a fundamental question of *who* I am and *what* responsibilities I have. How am I to read and how am I to write about the same texts as countless others? Even in the academic field of political theology are there differences between those that are philosophers, those that are theologians, and those that are jurists? After a long period of agony, I chose to orient myself in an explicitly theological manner in deference to the author of *Fear and Trembling*, and this orientation is further fueled by Taubes' rather arrogant quip that everything is "theology" apart from "theological claptrap,"¹ a view which Schmitt himself affirmed.² Whether or not this thesis would be regarded as "theological claptrap" by Taubes and Schmitt, I earnestly endeavored throughout this project to write as a student of theology. If my output here takes the form of "theological claptrap," then so be it.

Chapter 1 is an extended engagement with Schmitt, primarily over his *Political Theology*. In this chapter I interpret the ontological implications and presuppositions of Schmitt's concept of sovereignty, and examine the methodology of his "sociology of concepts" by which he constructs his political theology. Following the discussion of Schmitt's methodology, I examine Schmitt's reference to Kierkegaard at the end of the

¹ Jacob Taubes, "Letter to Armin Mohler," in *To Carl Schmitt: Letters and Reflections*, p.22

² "Taubes is right: today everything is theology, with the exception of what the theologians talk about..." – in the *To Carl Schmitt: Letters and Reflections*, p.26

first chapter of *Political Theology* both in order to critique Schmitt's questionable reference and to provide a counter-interpretation of Kierkegaard's concept of the exception against Schmitt's concept of sovereignty. I conclude the chapter by presenting a theological response to Schmitt.

In Chapter 2 I depart from Schmitt to focus directly on *Fear and Trembling* and the Binding narrative of Genesis 22. In the first half I examine the form and content of Genesis 22 and the question of eschatology in relation to Genesis 22 and *Fear and Trembling*. Here I follow the insights of Erich Auerbach and Taubes closely. In the second half I examine the influences of Kant and Hegel upon Kierkegaard's concept of ethics and how they shape *Fear and Trembling*. I end the chapter continuing the "political-theological" thread from the last part of Chapter 1.

In Chapter 3 I look at Derrida's reading of *Fear and Trembling* presented in his *Gift of Death*. In this final chapter I examine how Derrida takes the content of Kierkegaard's meditation on the Binding and provides an important counter-interpretation against Kierkegaard in a way that is both faithful *and* subversive.

I present this study with humility as a student, with deference to all the thinkers I examine here, and to anyone who reads this. In the margins of every page I ask as a writer from you, pardon.

Chapter 1: The Concept of Sovereignty

At the end of the first chapter of *Political Theology* where he provides his definition of sovereignty as the power to “decide on the exception,” Carl Schmitt quotes from an unnamed Protestant theologian of the 19th century:

The exception explains the general and itself. And if one wants to study the general correctly, one only needs to look around for a true exception. It reveals everything more clearly than does the general. Endless talk about the general becomes boring; there are exceptions. If they cannot be explained, then the general also cannot be explained. The difficulty is usually not noticed because the general is not thought about with passion but with a comfortable superficiality. The exception, on the other hand, thinks the general with intense passion.³

This important passage is excerpted from the final section of the book *Repetition* by the Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard is not mentioned by name, nor is he referred to again in *Political Theology*. But in this passage Kierkegaard turns up in a key point of the book and plays a significant role in the political thought that Schmitt elaborates. It is from this brief but striking reference that Schmitt makes in *Political Theology* that this project will begin.

I begin this project on Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling* with an examination of Carl Schmitt’s *Political Theology* for a few reasons. First, I wish to begin with an examination of *Political Theology* because it is Schmitt’s definition of sovereignty that he develops in the text that I will continue to use throughout this project. The concept of

³ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p.15

sovereignty will be the centre of this entire project and as such it must be dealt with from the beginning. Second, it is in the third chapter of *Political Theology* where Schmitt offers his thesis that “all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts.”⁴ Although this project will not be primarily concerned with examining and developing political theory as such, the reading of *Fear and Trembling* that will be undertaken will inevitably have political implications. Lastly, I would like to call attention to the method of Schmitt’s “sociology of concepts” through which he appropriates Kierkegaard and the field of theology to construct his concept of sovereignty. I will then lay the bridges between the two sister texts, *Repetition* and *Fear and Trembling*, and examine the relevance of the concept of sovereignty as understood in Schmitt’s appropriation of concepts from *Repetition* for understanding the problems given to us in *Fear and Trembling*.

Schmitt’s Concept of Sovereignty and the Exception

Political Theology opens boldly with the thematic line, “Sovereign is he who decides on the exception.”⁵ Schmitt’s understanding of sovereignty carries within it a slew of implications and presupposes (or perhaps seeks to establish) a particular

⁴ Ibid., p.36

⁵ Ibid., p.5

ontology. Schmitt's concept of the exception is heavily indebted to Kierkegaard's meditation upon it in *Repetition* as quoted at the end of the first chapter of *Political Theology*. Here I will unpack Schmitt's definition of sovereignty by going through his elaborations.

The concept of the exception is central to Schmitt's understanding of sovereignty because the decision *on the exception* is a decision in the "true sense of the word."⁶ This is so for Schmitt because the exception is not something that can be encompassed by the norm, as represented by "an ordinary legal prescription," nor can the decision that a real exception exists be entirely derived from the norm. The exception is exceptional precisely because it lies outside the law and cannot be systematically apprehended and grasped by it. The exception is not codified in the existing legal order and can be understood as a case of extreme peril that is an existential threat to the state. But even if the exception has such an importance for the legal order, given that it threatens the existence of the legal order itself, the exception cannot be circumscribed and made to conform to pre-existing law. Because the exception as such is, in a way, incomprehensible for the law, the law has no authority over it. The sovereign, however, is distinct for possessing the capacity to grasp the exception. It is important to note here that Schmitt understands sovereign power as not only being able to understand and apprehend the exception that threatens the state, but primarily for having the power to

⁶ Ibid., p.6

decide that a given situation is exceptional. Whether an emergency exists cannot be known through a juristic test but only through a sovereign decision that declares a state of emergency. It is the sovereign, who “stands outside the normally valid legal system,” that decides whether there is an emergency as well as what must be done to eliminate it.⁷ The sovereign who stands outside of juridical system does, however, also belong to it, as it is the sovereign who decides whether the constitution is to be suspended in face of an emergency.

Schmitt’s understanding of the exception and sovereignty implies a number of metaphysical claims which he does not elaborate on directly through philosophical language, but these are reflected in his assertions on the nature of the juridical order. Schmitt’s meditations in *Political Theology*, which serve as a ferocious polemic against constitutional liberalism, are not concerned simply with the interpretation of the law and the political order but also contain within them an attack against Hegelian metaphysics, which Schmitt sees as the spirit of liberal deliberatism. Here, I would like to examine the metaphysical presuppositions that one can see within Schmitt’s concepts.

Schmitt’s concept of the exception carries within it an ontological claim. The juridical order is defined by the scope and limits of its language, and its being is formed by its legal constitution. The capacity of the juridical order in the governing of the state

⁷ Ibid., p.7

and the self-understanding of its own existence is confined entirely by the pre-existing law. Juristic activity is then simply the mechanical movements of the law – surely one cannot understand this naïvely, as if the law can be read without interpreting, but juridical judgment does not go beyond an interpretation of the law. The function of the juridical order is defined by its adherence to the law that it upholds, and this is what gives the juridical system its legitimacy. The juridical order, as defined by the law and given authority by the law, has the power to judge but only within the limits of the law. For the juridical order there is nothing outside of the text of the law.

Even if the law gives authority to the juridical order, one is still left with the question of how the law came into existence. If the capacity of the juridical order is defined and legitimated by the pre-existing law then the genesis of the law could not have come from the order itself. The genesis of the law, as an event which precedes both the juridical order and the constitution that shapes it, could only be understood as an exception. The juridical order is existentially tied to the exception in two contrary and related ways.⁸ The juridical order is given birth to by an exception and is also threatened with destruction by an exception, and it is unable to speak of either within the limits of its own language that structures it.

⁸ “[E]very legal order is based on a decision... like every other order, the legal order rests on a decision and not a norm.” Ibid.,p.10

Schmitt's concept of sovereignty as both the power that decides on the exception and stands outside the legal system is to be understood then, as encompassing two different roles. As seen above, the sovereign, as the one who has the capacity to decide on the exception, possesses the extra-legal power to suspend the law in extreme cases in order to preserve the existence of the state. Whereas the legal order lacks the capacity to act in the face of the exception that lies beyond its language and structure, the sovereign is able to act decisively when the state is imperiled by an emergency precisely because the sovereign also lies beyond the legal order and is not constrained by its language and structure. Sovereignty possesses such a capacity to deal with an emergency because it lies in the same ontological dimension as the exception. Sovereignty itself is an exceptional power, and it is here that Schmitt's definition of sovereignty as that which *decides* on the exception gains its full force. It is not simply that the sovereign is able to recognize and reveal to the juridical order that the given situation threatens the existence of the state – the sovereign himself, by deciding that the moment is an emergency, also decides on who and what is to be determined as a threat to the state. It is only the exception that may combat the exception as it is the exception alone that may recognize the exception; it is the exception alone that may claim an exception.

The genesis of the law, the preservation of the law, and the end of the law is all grounded upon the exception that is of a different ontological status altogether from the law itself. By following through this implicit "political ontology" one can come to a

clearer understanding of Schmitt's declaration at the end of the first chapter of *Political*

Theology where he claims:

Precisely a philosophy of concrete life must not withdraw from the exception and the extreme case, but must be interested in it to the highest degree. The exception can be more important to it than the rule, not because of a romantic irony for the paradox, but because the seriousness of an insight goes deeper than the clear generalizations inferred from what ordinarily repeats itself. *The exception is more interesting than the rule. The rule proves nothing; the exception proves everything: It confirms not only the rule but also its existence, which derives only from the exception.*⁹ (emphasis mine)

The exception "proves everything" as it is the exceptionality of the sovereign who both produces and guarantees the situation in its totality.¹⁰ The legal order can only make sense when a "normal situation" exists, and just as it is the sovereign alone who decides when there is a real emergency, it is also the sovereign who decides whether a normal situation actually exists.¹¹ All law is thus "situational law" – the essence of sovereignty is not the monopoly to rule, but the monopoly to "decide," and the genesis of the law proves that the production of law is not itself based on law. Sovereignty, as an exception, is in principle unlimited authority.

⁹ Ibid., p.15

¹⁰ Ibid., p.13

¹¹ Ibid., p.13

“Political Theology”

At the beginning of the third chapter of *Political Theology*, for which the book is titled, Schmitt sets out the central thesis of his work:

All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts not only because of their historical development – in which they were transferred from theology to the theory of the state, whereby, for example, the omnipotent God became the omnipotent lawgiver – but also because of their systematic structure, the recognition of which is necessary for a sociological consideration of these concepts. The exception in jurisprudence is analogous to the miracle in theology. Only by being aware of this analogy can we appreciate the manner in which the philosophical ideas of the state developed in the last centuries.¹²

The analogy that Schmitt draws between theology and political theory here provides the means to ground more concretely the metaphysical presuppositions that were teased out from his concept of sovereignty and the exception from the first chapter of *Political Theology*. In the third chapter Schmitt explicitly asserts that metaphysics is “the most intensive and clearest expression of an epoch,”¹³ and undertakes a “sociology of concepts.”¹⁴ Here, I will examine what Schmitt’s “sociology of concepts” entails and how this “sociology of concepts” is then used with theology.

Schmitt’s “sociology of concepts” seeks to discover the “basic, radically systematic structure [of concepts] and to compare this conceptual structure with the

¹²Ibid., p.36

¹³ Ibid., p.46

¹⁴ Ibid., p.37

conceptually represented social structure of a certain epoch.”¹⁵ Schmitt advocates this “sociology of concepts” in opposition to sociology, which he understands as having a method that reduces the object of inquiry to particular conditions. Schmitt notes that “sociology” attributes a change in thought to a change in political or social conditions. Marxist philosophy of history, for example, radicalizes this interdependence between concepts and the socio-political reality to a systematic economic difference that understands concepts as reflections of economic relations. Weber traces the differing concepts of social reality as resulting from particular kinds of thinking and acting that is grounded in differing socio-political “types.”¹⁶ Schmitt calls this Weberian sociology a “psychology” that categorizes by socio-psychological portraits. Following Weber, the Hegelian system, for example, would be characterized as the philosophy of a professional lecturer that comes to think in such a way due to his economic-social situation and means to practice his profession as a professional lecturer. What Schmitt identifies both in Marxist and Weberian sociologies is a dialectic that separates conceptual thought and sociological reality where conceptual phenomena, be it

¹⁵ Ibid., p.45

¹⁶ Ibid., p.43-44

religious, philosophical, artistic, or literary, is causally reduced to material processes.¹⁷

Such sociological methods, Schmitt argues, will necessarily result in caricature.¹⁸

In contrast, Schmitt advances a “sociology of concepts” that reverses the emphasis of sociology. This “sociology of concepts” abandons both the Marxist and Weberian methods that dissolves concepts to material conditions and is concerned with establishing proof of “two spiritual but at the same time substantial identities.”

Concepts are still related to material reality, but this relation is approached differently by Schmitt as this “sociology of concepts” is interested in a comparison of transcendental concepts. The systematic conceptual representation of a social structure is compared with the metaphysical concepts of a certain epoch. When these two conceptual structures are in accordance with one another the material manifestation of the concepts becomes “self-evident.” For example, Schmitt argues that monarchy was self-evident in a prior epoch as is democracy in a later epoch as the political forms of each were in accordance with the consciousness of the epoch. This “sociology of concepts” proceeds from the presupposition that radical conceptualization, radical in the sense of having been thought out to the end consistently, will be pushed into

¹⁷ Schmitt also sees the reverse, a “spiritualist” explanation of material processes where all material phenomena is reduced into spiritual process, also as flawed. However, Schmitt offers no elaboration of the problem of spiritualist explanations and appears to be more sympathetic to it for ideological reasons. Ibid., p.43

¹⁸ “Engels saw the Calvinist dogma of predestination as a reflection of capitalist competition in terms of its senselessness and incalculability.” Ibid., p.43

metaphysics and theology.¹⁹ Following such an understanding, Schmitt believes that metaphysics is the most intensive and clearest expression of an epoch and as such, the fundamental task of examining juridical concepts is examining the transcendental structure of the law. Schmitt argues that it is this “sociology of concepts” alone that has the possibility of achieving a scientific result for juristic concepts.²⁰

Even if one were to follow Schmitt’s view that metaphysics, not material sociology, is the clearest expression of an epoch, one could still raise an objection to how this “sociology of concepts” operates under a transcendental dialectic that appears to be separated from immanent reality. Why is the possibility of a concept having a causal genesis from material conditions not even raised as a question for Schmitt under his method? Schmitt’s method here seems to become more comprehensible if one reads it as presupposing the ontology upon which his concept of sovereignty and the exception operates. For Schmitt, systematic concepts cannot be utterly subordinated to material conditions because such a sociological method renders all phenomena as purely normative schemas. There would be no exceptions, and especially in historical materialist accounts of the world. Ideology would have no substantiality of its own since concepts would simply be reflections of material conditions.

¹⁹ Ibid., p.46

²⁰ Ibid., p.45

Schmitt's interest in preserving a substantiality to ideology serves two purposes. The first is the implicit assertion that concepts can shape the world as much as the sociological claim that concepts are shaped by the world. The second is a reaffirmation of sovereignty as an ontological reality. Schmitt's assertion that each definitive epoch forges a metaphysical image that is structurally identical to what the world "immediately understands to be appropriate as a form of its political organization"²¹ is to be understood as a continuation of his ontology where transcendental decisions constitute the structure of the world. The "structure" of the metaphysical image and the political organization of an epoch are identical because both are forged by the same sovereign decision. *How* the epoch forges this structure and *why* they change is not dealt with by Schmitt here, and perhaps this reflects a systematic consistency on his end. Sovereign decision, as conceptualized by Schmitt, is not subordinate to any system and as such can appear as utterly arbitrary. Ideology, as a consciousness of an epoch, is itself radical in its truest form. Because the general world as such is constituted by a sovereignty that is transcendent to it in Schmitt's political ontology, it only follows that for him a "sociology of concepts" that is concerned with transcendent concepts would alone be able to comprehend juridical concepts radically. The practice of what he calls "political theology" is precisely this "sociology of concepts," and Schmitt's usage of theology is subordinate to this method.

²¹ Ibid., p.46

Despite his claim that all significant modern political concepts are secularized theological concepts, Schmitt does not engage in any real study of theology as such throughout the third chapter of *Political Theology* or in the rest of the book. Schmitt's "political theology" must not be understood as a theological undertaking but as a practice of a "sociology of concepts" that seeks to understand the *systematic* relation between political concepts and theological concepts for the purpose of elucidating the political. Theology is used as a rhetorical tool in *Political Theology* as a radical weapon in Schmitt's polemic against deliberative liberalism and what he sees as its spiritual conceptualization, Hegelianism, but what Schmitt exactly means by the word "theology" remains a question. Because Schmitt does not engage deeply with doctrine, one can only come to a general notion of what theology is in *Political Theology*, which is the basic orthodox Christian belief that God is a personal, transcendent, and singular being. This can be seen clearly in the fact that Schmitt regards deist and pantheistic accounts of the divine separately from monotheism. The way Schmitt regards Hegel as the "greatest systematic architect" of "immanence philosophy" helps us further understand Schmitt's opposition to Hegel.²² The centrality of the figure of Hegel in Schmitt's evaluation of both deliberative liberalism and immanence philosophy shows us that for Schmitt the theologico-political superstructure of deliberative liberalism is Hegelian pantheism, and it is this ground that Schmitt identifies as the root of his

²² Ibid., p.50

ambivalence. What this may imply is that for Schmitt it is not simply that Hegel and the liberals are mistaken in their political concepts but that they are heretics. The orientation of Schmitt's "political theology" is a polemic against all images of reality that he sees as contrary to his understanding of "Christian" politico-theological concepts.

However, since Schmitt is only really interested in the systematic concepts that can be abstracted from theology, the general shape of the theology that he is drawing on is sufficient for the project undertaken in *Political Theology*. For Schmitt, what is important about theology here is not the substantial identity of theology itself with its mysteries, eschatology, proclamations of faith, and its lived practice.

Schmitt's reference to the passage from *Repetition* at the end of the first chapter of *Political Theology* is to be understood as serving a "sociology of concepts." Schmitt is not interested in Kierkegaard's theological thought as such but in the anti-Hegelian structure that can be taken as an epoch defining metaphysic that corresponds to the political form that the epoch seeks. It is precisely because Schmitt's interest is so heavily in the abstract extraction of conceptual structure and in the comparison between structures that Schmitt himself ends up caricaturizing both Kierkegaard and the field of theology. If the historical materialists are flawed for reducing the dialectic between concepts and material reality into the material, Schmitt reduces the dialectic into a rarefied play of structures where the concepts begin to lose their connection to their

actual substance. A “political theology” that abstracts concepts from the reservoir of theology without submitting itself to the authority of the traditions and the spiritual whole of its language, which in itself is a part of its spiritual practice, can hardly be called theology.

On Reading Repetition

Due to Schmitt’s method in his “sociology of concepts,” one must be cautious in drawing a casual and causal link between the thought of Kierkegaard and the thought of Schmitt, even if one may legitimately claim that there are striking similarities in the structure of their concepts. Here, I will look at the way Schmitt quotes the passage from *Repetition* at the end of the first chapter of *Political Theology* and examine the rhetorical purpose of Schmitt’s move in it.

Jacob Taubes refers to Schmitt’s reference at the end of the first chapter of *Political Theology* as a quotation that “knocks your socks off,”²³ and following Schmitt’s lead, Taubes notes a certain political potential in Kierkegaard’s thought. While one may readily agree with Taubes that Schmitt’s usage of Kierkegaard is powerful and that Kierkegaard’s thought certainly contains political potential, Schmitt’s quotation is

²³ “1948-1978: Thirty Years of Refusal,” Appendix A of *The Political Theology of Paul*, trans. Dana Hollander (2004), p.105. An alternative translation by Keith Tribe renders the expression as “quite overpowering,” in *To Carl Schmitt: Letters and Reflections* (2013) p.56.

problematic. According to Bartholomew Ryan, Schmitt provides his own personal translation that is not found in any of his contemporary German editions. This would not be a problem in itself, but Schmitt's quotation extracts from *Repetition* selectively.²⁴ I would like to quote the full passage from *Repetition* here and note the large section that Schmitt omits in his reference, which will be italicized.

The exception explains the universal and himself, and if one really wants to study the universal, one only needs to look around for a legitimate exception; he discloses everything far more clearly than the universal itself. *The legitimate exception is reconciled in the universal; basically, the universal is polemical toward the exception, and it will not betray its partiality before the exception forces it, as it were, to acknowledge it. If the exception does not have this power, he is not legitimized, and for that reason it is very sagacious of the universal not to allow anything to be noticed prematurely. If heaven loves one sinner more than ninety-nine who are righteous, the sinner, of course, does not know this from the beginning; on the contrary, he is aware only of heaven's wrath until he finally, as it were, forces heaven to speak out.*

Eventually one grows weary of the incessant chatter about the universal and the universal repeated to the point of most boring insipidity. There are exceptions. If they cannot be explained, then the universal cannot be explained, either. Generally, the difficulty is not noticed because one thinks the universal not with passion but with a comfortable superficiality. The exception, however, thinks the universal with intense passion."²⁵

When this passage is read together with the part omitted by Schmitt, the sense of the exception quite significantly. What is important to note in the passage omitted by Schmitt is Constantius'²⁶ notion that the "legitimate exception" is "reconciled in the

²⁴ As noted by Bartholomew Ryan in "Carl Schmitt: Zones of Exception and Appropriation" in *Kierkegaard's Influence on Socio-Political Thought* (2011).

²⁵ Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, p.227

²⁶ The pseudonymical author of Kierkegaard's *Repetition*.

universal,” a notion that brings a complexity to the concept of the exception that is lacking in the derivative formulation of sovereignty found in *Political Theology*.

For Constantius, the exception is only legitimate when it has the power to make the universal acknowledge its partiality toward the exception. The universal will always stubbornly challenge any claim to exceptionality, and if the exception proves incapable of making the universal acknowledge itself then it is no exception. It is here that Constantius leads us through a complex sequence. The universal will not “betray its partiality” unless the exception *forces* it to acknowledge it, and through a demonstration of this force it is legitimized. The word *force* is only used one other time in the passage and the one who wields it is the sinner against heaven itself. The sinner *forces heaven to speak out*, and in response to this heaven reveals to the sinner that he is loved. Following Constantius’ argument here, even if one were to understand this passage through the notion of the “infinite qualitative distinction” that separates God and the human, the exception is not confined to the divine alone. Constantius uses the figure of the sinner as the example of the exception in the passage, thus it is a human subject who as the exception forces heaven to speak out. What the restored passage shows is that for Constantius exceptionality is something that immanent reality is already imbued with. In opposition to Schmitt’s interpretation of exceptionality that is concentrated in the singular sovereign, the restored passage from *Repetition* provides a more dynamic image of reality where exceptions come into being from within the immanent in relation

to the divine. That Constantius can even consider the notion of the sinner *forcing* heaven to speak out shows us that his image of reality asserts a radical freedom to immanent creation. The figure of the sinner can be understood as each and every individual – all individuals, after all, are sinners. The tension between the universal and the exception is not only relevant for understanding the relation between the individual and the general but also the tension within the dialectic of the individual understanding oneself as absolutely singular and then returning reconciled to the universal.

Rather than a purely unilateral relationship between sovereignty and the general where sovereignty is of an utterly different ontological quality, in Kierkegaard one can find a more porous intertwining of the general and the exception. It is absolutely vital for Constantius that the *legitimate exception is reconciled in the universal*. Immediately preceding the passage from *Repetition* that has been discussed above, Constantius asserts that the “vigorous and determined exception, *although he is in conflict with the universal still is an offshoot of it.*”²⁷ The exception that Constantius is speaking of is not simply God.

The exception is singular in Kierkegaard, but sovereignty, as defined by Schmitt as the power to decide on the exception, is a capacity that each and every individual already possess within oneself. The wider implications in Kierkegaard’s thinking is obscured in Schmitt’s selective omission from the passage – Kierkegaard’s concept of

²⁷ Ibid., p.227

the exception causes complications for Schmitt's notion of the exception being systematically analogous to a sovereign as "sole architect." Although Kierkegaard conceives of God as having an "infinite qualitative distinction" from the world and thus possessing, in Schmittian terms, an absolute sovereignty, the power to "decide on the exception" is not so simply the prerogative of God alone. Although Schmitt notes that the sovereign belongs to the "normally valid legal system," he says this not because the sovereign is involved in a dialectic where the universal has a substantive identity and agency but because the legal order simply would not exist without sovereign decision. The sovereign "belongs" only in the sense of being creator and protector whereas the Kierkegaardian notion of the exception belongs also to the created, and consequently Kierkegaard's individual carries a singular irreducibility that is not erased even in front of the majesty of sovereign power. Schmitt's appropriation of Kierkegaard obscures the way the exception is, for Kierkegaard, ingrained in the universal. It very well may be that all structure implies genesis – one may even follow through more forcefully to assert that genesis always precedes structure – but Kierkegaard's conceptualization of the dialectic between the exception and the universal plays out in such a way that the exception is always interwoven with the universal and is born within it. Recovering the fuller understanding of Kierkegaard's understanding of the exception can provide us with an angle to critique Schmitt's concept of sovereignty from a position that is also polemically oriented towards the exception and is derived from the same sources – the

history of Christian theology and, more particularly, Kierkegaard. Although Schmitt's appropriation of theology for the formulation of his political concepts is theologically questionable, one cannot deny that the roots of his concepts are grounded in theology, and neither can one deny Schmitt's own self-identification as a Catholic simply in terms of an ideological quarrel.²⁸

I do not criticize Schmitt's method here simply for appropriating Kierkegaard for his own purposes. All thinkers are within their right to creatively use their predecessors and go in different directions. I agree with Schmitt that the substantial identity of concepts must be retained without vulgarly reducing them to purely material categories even if I believe his polemical rejection of sociological methods is far too heavy-handed. This thesis as a whole is deeply indebted to Schmitt's concise and sharp insight into the structure of the concept of sovereignty and the exception. However, Schmitt's appropriation of Kierkegaard is a caricature – a single example from an unfortunately long history of stereotyped understandings of Kierkegaard in scholarly reception. There is no pretense of “correcting” Schmitt here – I am not interested in simply asserting that Schmitt misreads Kierkegaard. Rather, I want to show that Schmitt and Kierkegaard understood exceptionality quite differently, operate upon different metaphysical presuppositions, and consequently carry different implications. I will

²⁸ Heinrich Meier illustrates Schmitt's deep Catholic ideological grounding in *The Lesson of Carl Schmitt: Chapters on the Distinction between Political Theology and Political Philosophy* (1998), particularly in the poetically written third chapter of the book.

borrow Schmitt's definition of sovereignty as the power to decide on the exception but reinterpret it through a closer return to the way Kierkegaard understood the relation between the exception and the universal.

The Eschaton

Schmitt's understanding of the sovereign as an exceptional power that is ontologically different from the general rule causes his political thinking to be apocalyptic – sovereign decision is *rupture*. Schmitt's apocalypticism is utterly unilateral in its structure, as sovereignty is concentrated purely in "the sovereign" in his singularity. This singular sovereign power is exercised, most primarily, to preserve the state, and it is with regard to this aspect of Schmitt's thought that one can make sense of Taubes' characterization of Schmitt as an "apocalyptic prophet of the counterrevolution."²⁹ The preoccupation with the preserving power of sovereignty in *Political Theology* reflects the conservative orientation of Schmitt's political thought. Schmitt's allegiance lies with the sovereign power of the immanent state. But Schmitt's understanding of sovereignty as the only power that may truly preserve the state against an existential threat contains within itself the implicit understanding that the

²⁹ Jacob Taubes, "Carl Schmitt: Apocalyptic Prophet of the Counterrevolution," *To Carl Schmitt: Letters and Reflections* (2013) trans. Keith Tribe, p.8.

power that threatens the very existence of the state is also an exceptional power – the destroyer is also “sovereign,” as one who is outside of the law. It is in this sense that one can understand sovereignty as something that goes beyond the counterrevolutionary orientation of Schmitt. Just as it is the sovereign who may suspend the law for the sake of the preservation of the state against an existential threat, it is also the sovereign that may suspend the law for the sake of the destruction of the state – sovereign power in-itself is the existential threat; only sovereign power can be an existential threat.

Schmitt’s orientation of the concept of sovereignty can be seen further in his understanding of the *katechon* in *The Nomos of the Earth*, “the historical power who restrains the appearance of the Antichrist and the end of the present eon,” which for Schmitt is the decisive historical concept for the political thought in Christendom.³⁰ Schmitt asserts that compared to the doctrine of the *katechon* the political and juridical structures of the Roman Empire were inessential, and these structures already were a degeneration from “piety to scholarly myth,”³¹ an attitude that we can already see in Schmitt’s evaluation of modern political thought throughout *Political Theology*. But Schmitt’s usage of the concept of *katechon* can again be questioned on the same grounds, namely, his theological source. To be sure, as Schmitt says, we can see Paul refer to a

³⁰ Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum* (2003), trans. G.L. Ulmen, p.59-61

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.60

power that restrains the “lawless one” in the Second Letter to the Thessalonians.³² But Paul does not say *what* it is that is “now restraining him,” and it is by no way certain or a simple progression to understand this restraining power as the Roman Empire, as Christendom, or any other particular worldly power. And although the *katechon* restrains the “lawless one” and prevents disorder, “the lawless one” nevertheless “*will be revealed*” (2 Thessalonians 2:8). Schmitt upholds the role of Christendom as that which struggles against and prevents the coming of the Antichrist and the “end of the present eon,” but if we are to read the letter of Paul in the fullness of its eschatology the coming of the Antichrist is to be understood also as the condition for the *eschaton*. Schmitt’s *katechon* impedes the Antichrist, but in its preoccupation with the preservation of the order of the state as such this very same *katechon* struggles against the *eschaton* and the fulfilment of redemption, and here the theologian must respond to Schmitt’s counterrevolutionary apocalyptic with a strong affirmation of the revolutionary essence of apocalyptic. The katechonic power of “Empire” is not only in relation to the revolutionary essence of eschatology but precedes and is subordinate to the *eschaton* that is the fulfilment of prophecy, and while the *katechon* restrains “the lawless one” it is in the *eschaton* that the Antichrist is annihilated by the manifestation of the Messiah (2 Thessalonians 2:8).

³² 2 Thessalonians 2:6-8.

In a closer theological consideration of the concept of sovereignty one must affirm both the katechonic and eschatological capacities of sovereign power, and when one examines Second Thessalonians next to Schmitt it appears that the right hand of sovereignty lies not in the *katechon* but in the *eschaton*, and the preoccupation with the counterrevolutionary *katechon*, as exemplified in Schmitt, is the true turn from “piety to scholarly myth.” Nevertheless, Schmitt helps us get to some important observations. The revolutionary *eschaton* is not merely a destructive power, and both the *katechon* and the *eschaton* serve the same purpose of combatting “the lawless one,” whose exceptional power is abyssal. Although Schmitt’s orientation of the concept of sovereignty is critically flawed, theologically speaking, for its overemphasis on the counterrevolutionary capacity of sovereignty, Schmitt brings us to the first steps of understanding the distinction between two different kinds of force – sovereign power as an upbuilding force, which in Schmitt’s thought takes an unambiguously Catholic form, and another exceptional force that is nihilistic, and Schmitt pointedly forces us to recognize that the force of sovereignty, be it katechonic, eschatological, or nihilistic in form, all carry within it, by the very essence of sovereignty itself, the absolute capacity for violence. The suspension and the restoration of the general are both unilateral actions, imposed by sovereign will on its own pleasure, upon the general, and this exercise of authority is always, by its very nature, violent.

Although there is a certain structural similarity between the katechonic, eschatological, and the abyssal forms of exceptional power, namely the common power to suspend the law, if one were to follow through with Schmitt's reference to Second Thessalonians one would have to say that the *katechon* is of a lesser, preliminary power. The *katechon* must ultimately be removed so that the *eschaton* and the *nihil* can come into being. In contrast to the *katechon* both the *eschaton* and the *nihil* are defined by their radical aim to end the present eon – the immanent political manifestation of this eschatological apocalyptic is revolution. The *katechon*, which for Schmitt is "Empire," is to the language of theology merely the earthly power of the state. The *katechon* is apocalyptic insofar as it derives its mission and form from a theological source, but it is tied to the immanent state and the limits of its capacity. The *nihil* is the existential enemy of the *katechon* precisely because the disintegration of the theologico-political structure of the state is its own death, and the *katechon* is "sovereign" only insofar as it is able to recognize the *nihil* as the exceptional threat. The preserving instinct of the *katechon* is not only exercised for the sake of the preservation of the state but also in the instinctive self-preservation of the *katechon* itself. Consequently, the life of the state and the life of the *katechon* is one and the same, and the role of the *katechon* and its exceptional power reaches its limits at the recognition of the *nihil* and its own counterrevolutionary reflex. Unlike the *nihil* and the *eschaton*, the *katechon* is incapable of dissolving the state as the mandate of its being forbids self-destruction, whether one is

to interpret this as martyrdom or suicide. Whenever the law is suspended it is done purely for the self-preservation of the state with the tacit understanding that the law will be preserved, not only because of the *katechon's* role as preserver but because temporary suspension is the limits of its power. What must be said, then, is that if sovereignty is to be understood as absolute exceptional power the sovereign of the state is sovereign only in a secondary and lesser kind as lord preserver, subordinate to the Messiah whose power extends far beyond the *katechon*, who ultimately is only of this world. Perhaps, then, the katechonic claims to height within immanence is, in actuality, only as the first within political temporality. Following this, one can understand the *katechon* as being ontologically of the same category with the general - it is not sovereign at all.

One is left with the question of how to distinguish, if the distinction is possible at all, between the Messiah and the Antichrist at the very moment the restraints of the *katechon* are removed. If sovereignty and violence are intertwined in a relationship that is intimate and unbreakable, is there any true difference, within the very concept and operation of *force as violence* in sovereign prerogative, between the force of the redeeming *eschaton* and the force of the abyssal "lawless one"? It is with this question that I will move into a reading of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*.

Between Repetition and Fear and Trembling

Fear and Trembling, Kierkegaard's sister text to *Repetition* that was published in the same year, is also deeply concerned with the relation between the exception and the universal. The inner dynamic of each individual that is the heart of the concept of the exception in *Repetition* is also the centre of Silentio's "knight of faith" in *Fear and Trembling*. For Silentio, what distinguishes the "knight of infinite resignation" from the "knight of faith" is that the "knight of faith," like Constantius' "legitimate exception," is reconciled with the universal. It is with this meaning that Silentio says that "the knight of faith is the only happy man, the heir to the finite, while the knight of resignation is a stranger and an alien"³³ This reconciled "knight of faith" can seem like the most mundane person, and the "knight of faith" that Silentio meets appears as an ordinary man who looks "just like a tax collector."³⁴ One can perhaps interpret Constantius' "legitimate exception" and Silentio's "knight of faith" as one and the same – the individual, who is of the immanent, who has both reached beyond the immanent and reconciled himself to the immanent.

I will argue in the following chapter that the concept of sovereignty is central to Kierkegaard's interpretation of the Binding of Isaac in *Fear and Trembling*. The problem that Abraham faces in front of the divine command to sacrifice his son Isaac,

³³ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p.50

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.39

particularly exemplified in what Kierkegaard calls the “teleological suspension of the ethical,” is an examination of the problem of sovereignty and exceptionality. God, as sovereign, gives a command to Abraham that suspends the law. As I will later show when examining the problem of sovereignty shown in *Fear and Trembling*, one can make sense of the Kierkegaardian exception in *Fear and Trembling* in broadly two different ways. One form of the exception is divine sovereignty, which has absolute power in the way Schmitt defines the concept of sovereignty and belongs to God alone. The second is a kind of “subjective exceptionality” that the individual holds the capacity of exercising *in relation to divine command*. Through the theme of the Binding of Isaac, Kierkegaard illustrates in *Fear and Trembling* the dynamic between the human subject and the sovereign God, and this dynamic will be the focus of my attention in the following chapter.

Chapter 2: Father Abraham

Is it possible to speak unreservedly about Abraham without running the risk that some individual will become unbalanced and do the same thing? If I dare not, I will say nothing at all about Abraham, and the last thing I will do is to scale him down in such a way that he thereby becomes a snare for the weak.³⁵

Fear and Trembling is, above all, an interpretation of the narrative of Genesis 22 where Abraham, commanded by God, takes Isaac, his son, to be sacrificed on Mount Moriah. The Binding of Isaac, as the narrative is commonly called in Jewish traditions, has a long history of reception in both Jewish and Christian traditions.³⁶ A part of the difficulty of evaluating *Fear and Trembling* lies not only in understanding the work within the limits of its own text, but also in understanding *Fear and Trembling* within the history of the reception of Genesis 22. This context has importance beyond just a scholastic exercise in intellectual history – understanding the possible meanings of *Fear and Trembling* and the intentions of Kierkegaard within the work requires us to read the text in its context as grounded in both tradition and contemporary times. This contextualization is also necessary for stressing the fact that *Fear and Trembling* is one interpretation among many, and that although the work is ostensibly a sustained

³⁵ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p.31

³⁶ There is also a long history of Islamic reception of this narrative, but due to its own divergence from the shared Jewish and Christian text of Genesis 22, I will not comment on it. This is in part due to my lack of familiarity with the Qur'an and Islamic thought and history, and also my desire to avoid simply reducing the Qur'anic version of the story to a simple off-shoot of Judeo-Christian sources. To be sure, it is a fact that the Qur'anic texts emerged long after the Biblical texts but an evaluation of the Qur'anic portrayal and Islamic reception of the character of Abraham requires much more than just historical criticism. The Christian reception of Genesis 22 itself takes on a very different colouration in relation to the Jewish reception even though the text is identical.

meditation on the narrative of Genesis 22, the work is neither a simple commentary on Genesis 22 nor concerned only with the terrifying story. I emphasize this because *Fear and Trembling* has had such a tremendous influence on how modern readers understand Genesis 22 to the point where it is difficult to imagine any two scholars discussing the Binding narrative without reference to the short treatise of Kierkegaard.³⁷ This is not to say that one must oppose a Kierkegaardian reading of Genesis 22, but rather that one must always keep in mind that the breadth of influence that the narrative has had in the “Abrahamic” religions and the entire Western intellectual tradition far exceeds Kierkegaard’s interpretation in *Fear and Trembling*, and it is only by situating *Fear and Trembling* within this history that one can truly appreciate the novelty of the work.

It is also important to situate *Fear and Trembling* as a Kierkegaardian text and to read it in the context of who Kierkegaard was, and this entails that the text be read without obscuring its Christian colour. If we read *Fear and Trembling* without sensitivity to its explicitly Christian form the core problems of the text become obscured. I do not say this to make a dogmatic assertion, but in the hopes of maintaining a certain ethics of reading. Mark Dooley, in his *The Politics of Exodus* (2001), opens his Derridean reading of Kierkegaard by loosening the “thread of Kierkegaard’s Lutheran straitjacket,” in the desire to present a reading of Kierkegaard that emphasizes the ethical and political

³⁷³⁷ A thought shared by Bradley Beach and Matthew T. Powell in the preface to *Interpreting Abraham: Journeys to Moriah*, p.xiii

dimensions of the Danish thinker.³⁸ Dooley sees a separation between the Kierkegaard who advances what he understands to be the strictly Lutheran idea of the individual's private salvation that is realized through an "absolute relationship to the absolute," and the Kierkegaard who carries a sensitivity toward the other qua neighbour in imitation of the God-man, and distances himself from the former whom he identifies as the Kierkegaard in the "Lutheran straightjacket." While it well may be that one finds a change of emphasis in the later Kierkegaard of *Works of Love* as Dooley claims, not only does his description of the "early" Kierkegaard appear to be based upon a stereotype of Lutheran theology where *sola fides* is taken to have no real ethical or political substance, but it also reflects a lack of awareness of Kierkegaard's own complicated and often ambivalent attitude towards Luther. The desire to "loosen the Lutheran straightjacket" carries the danger of taking Kierkegaard outside of himself, which can result in the construction of a rarefied image of Kierkegaard and his thought.

A more problematic example of reading Kierkegaard is found in a recent study by Michael O'Neill Burns in his *Kierkegaard and the Matter of Philosophy* (2015) where a reading of Kierkegaard is given in order to develop a materialist political ontology. Burns also desires to read Kierkegaard in a way that is not held captive to Christian theology, and he explicitly claims throughout the work that Kierkegaard's notion of

³⁸ Mark Dooley, *The Politics of Exodus: Soren Kierkegaard's Ethics of Responsibility* (2001), p.xv

God is not the traditional transcendent entity but rather an absolute possibility.³⁹ Now it is true, as it has been often noted, that Kierkegaard often seems to have little to say about the actual theological content of his religious tradition. But the notion that this supposed lacuna points to a “purely formal account of religion” in Kierkegaard could only be said by rather willfully ignoring the breadth of religious outpourings we find not only in his religious writings that were published under his own name in contrast to the philosophical-aesthetic works published under his numerous pseudonyms, but also in his voluminous journals. Will we take Kierkegaard’s own self-identification as a religious writer, whose “entire work as an author revolves around: becoming a Christian in Christendom,”⁴⁰ to be a mirage and that over one hundred prayers found throughout his writings⁴¹ were a sustained playacting?

I do not wish to discredit either Dooley’s or Burns’ books. Dooley begins his project with the explicit acknowledgement that he is taking certain liberties with Kierkegaard, and Burns’ serious evaluation of the ontology in Kierkegaard’s thought is important for the history of the scholarly reception of the Dane’s writings. They are both also important for showing the political importance of Kierkegaard, projects that fight against the popular 20th century evaluation of Kierkegaard as a thinker who

³⁹ Michael O’Neill Burns, *Kierkegaard and the Matter of Philosophy: A Fractured Dialectic* (2015), p. 99-106

⁴⁰ Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, p.23, 30

⁴¹ *The Prayers of Kierkegaard*, ed. Perry D. Lefevre

champions a subjective individuality that is in utter isolation.⁴² However, if one wishes to engage with both the form and substance of his work, Kierkegaard must be read not as a nominal Christian who simply happened to write works of great philosophical value in a particular Christian milieu, but as a writer who was a deeply religious thinker. Kierkegaard does not belong only to Copenhagen and the Danish Lutherans. Neither does he belong only to the legacy of Protestantism nor of Christianity as a whole. But just as a serious evaluation of Kierkegaard requires the posing of serious questions about his relation to the German idealists that preceded him⁴³, so also it is important to evaluate his Christianity seriously. Great texts and great thinkers are always, and justifiably, pretexts for interpretive invention and creative misreading. I have little doubt that I too, as a mere student, will be guilty of a great deal of misreading throughout this project, and my desire to read “faithfully” will heighten any error on my end by its intrinsic irony.

It is notable that questions of the nature of God and the evaluation of doctrines are almost wholly absent in *Fear and Trembling*. But this does not mean that the religious form of *Fear and Trembling* is only formal. Outside of the *Exordium* where four alternatives of the Genesis 22 narrative are presented, *Fear and Trembling* is almost

⁴² Perhaps most clearly represented in Theodore W. Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic* (1989), trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, p.24-46.

⁴³ “At any rate a fresh interpretation of Kierkegaard must certainly entail a reconsideration of Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel himself.” - Paul Ricoeur, “Philosophy after Kierkegaard” in *Kierkegaard: A Critical Reader* (1998), eds. Jonathan Rée and Jane Chamberlain, p.11

absent of any extended speculation about the thoughts and intentions of Abraham and Isaac, which one might find odd given the wealth of references to various Greek myths, Shakespeare, Goethe, and the particularly rich psychological exposition of the legend of Agnes and the Merman found in “Problema III.”⁴⁴ But this absence of elaboration and speculation about God, Abraham, and Isaac does not mean that the narrative of Genesis 22 is only important for *Fear and Trembling* in a thematic, structural way, as if the narrative’s importance is only as a means of presenting certain abstract problems to us. I will argue that the silence here is in respect to both the silence of the knight of faith as elaborated within *Fear and Trembling* and also the silence that permeates the scriptural text itself in Genesis 22. Abraham cannot speak⁴⁵ and neither can the author speak for him. Silentio’s usage of the term silence must be understood clearly here. Abraham’s inability to speak is not meant only in the sense that Abraham is beholden to silence but more primarily that others cannot understand him no matter how much he might try to speak to them.⁴⁶ The problem of silence that permeates *Fear and Trembling*, beginning from the name of the pseudonymous author, Johannes de Silentio, to the last “Problema” which is concerned with the ethical validity of Abraham concealing the purpose of the journey to Mount Moriah, stands in relation to the biblical narrative not only in form but also in its religious substance. By maintaining a sensitivity to the

⁴⁴ The commentary on the legend of Agnes and the Merman is found in p.94-99 of *Fear and Trembling*.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.60

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.113

religious orientation of the work, one may more readily identify the problem of sovereignty within *Fear and Trembling*.

This chapter will primarily be concerned with tracing and making explicit how the concept of sovereignty and the exception, as examined in the previous chapter, is a central problem in *Fear and Trembling*. The term “sovereign” is not used by Kierkegaard, however, and so one of the preliminary tasks this chapter must undertake is to show that the concept of sovereignty as it has been defined in the previous chapter is relevant to the substance of *Fear and Trembling*. I will attempt to do this by first examining the text of Genesis 22 so that the way Kierkegaard engages with the Binding in *Fear and Trembling* can be understood better. I will then focus on the tension between the sovereign divine and the individual that Kierkegaard illustrates.

Three Days to Mount Moriah

In this section of the chapter, I will make implicit the eschatological theme one can find in both Genesis 22 and its importance for understanding the Binding and *Fear and Trembling*. The sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22 is a short narrative that spans 19 verses and is notable for its sparse detail. Erich Auerbach, in *Mimesis*, highlights the great difference in style between the form of Genesis 22 and the Homeric epics.⁴⁷ Where

⁴⁷ Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis* (2003), p.7-20

the Homeric epics hold great significance for a wealth of descriptive adjectives and digressions that leave nothing in mystery, with all thoughts and feelings transparently expressed, the biblical narratives have commands given in direct discourse but with their motives and purposes unexpressed, and only what is absolutely necessary for the purpose of narrative is externalized. As Auerbach notes:

[T]he decisive points of the narrative alone are emphasized, what lies between is non-existent; time and place are undefined and all for interpretation; thoughts and feeling remain unexpressed, are only suggested by the silence and the fragmentary speeches; the whole, permeated with the most unrelieved suspense and directed toward a single goal (and to that extent far more of a unity), remains mysterious and “fraught with background.”⁴⁸

God’s command as given in Genesis 22:2 is clear and direct. “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you.” There is, however, no explanation of God’s motive or purpose for this command. Although Abraham responds to God’s call with the immediate, “Here I am” in verse 1, the text does not show any response from Abraham after being given the command to sacrifice his son. We are only told that Abraham “rose early in the morning... and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him.” The narrative leaves us with a great deal of tension. We do not know much of this God that commands Abraham so terribly, this God who enters the scene from a place unknown and calls: “Abraham!” This God,

⁴⁸ Ibid., p.11-12

as represented in the Biblical text, is mysterious and incomprehensible in his presence, hidden in his manifestation. The human characters too are “fraught with background” as Abraham’s actions are not only to be understood by his present moment also but the in context of his history, that is, of God’s promise to him when he was first called (Genesis 12). Abraham’s silent obedience in Genesis 22 is multi-layered and wrought with a psychological terror and agony that is unspoken and veiled by silence. It is this “background,” which permeates the Biblical text, which leads Auerbach to claim that the human characters of the Bible have “greater depths of time, fate, and consciousness” than those of Homer.⁴⁹ The psychological crisis that Abraham finds himself in is “impossible” for the Homeric heroes, “whose destiny is clearly defined.” Following this thought, Auerbach argues that despite the much more highly developed intellectual, linguistic, and syntactical culture of the Homeric poems, they are comparatively simple in their depiction of human beings and their relation to the lived life.⁵⁰

The tension that Auerbach notices in the Genesis 22 narrative is important in wrestling with both Genesis 22 and *Fear and Trembling*. The text requires subtle investigation and interpretation on the part of the reader because it is “dark and incomplete;” the silence of *Silentio* in *Fear and Trembling* on doctrinal elaborations about God and psychological expositions of Abraham and Isaac can be read as a faithful

⁴⁹ Ibid., p.12

⁵⁰ Ibid., p.13

continuation of Genesis 22. What Genesis 22 imparts to us is that the God of Abraham is a hidden God who appears for reasons unknown and who comes down into the immanent world from a place that is unknown. This God is subject to no law, neither moral nor natural, and is utterly exceptional both in being and action. If the Schmittian exception is analogous to the miracle, then one can only say that the very appearance of this God, any appearance of the divine as presence and will, is an exception in the truest sense of the word. The manifestation of God in the immanent occurs as a rupture that is, as revelation, essentially apocalyptic. This God is absolute - he is sovereign. Both the reading of Genesis 22 in itself, and the interpretation of the Binding in *Fear and Trembling*, are grounded by this understanding of God.

There is a textual parallel between Genesis 22 and the beginning of Abraham's story in Genesis 12 that depicts Abram's first calling. There, God calls upon Abram saying:

“Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (Genesis 12:1-3)⁵¹

As he does again later in Genesis 22, Abram obeys this command without question and the text records no reply. Abram hears and he acts. The promise that God gives at the

⁵¹ A number of characters in Genesis have their names changed at significant points. Abram becomes Abraham (Genesis 17:5), and Sarai becomes Sarah (Genesis 17:15).

beginning of Abram's calling, that he will be blessed and be given a legacy through his descendants, is reiterated at the end of the sacrifice of Isaac. That the ending of the final trial is a repetition of the beginning of the first trial of Abraham is significant for understanding the sacrifice of Isaac and is relevant for reading *Fear and Trembling*. The sacrifice of Isaac is the clearest moment in the epic of Abraham that embodies repetition, and although one cannot know for certain if Kierkegaard consciously wrote *Fear and Trembling* with this in mind next to its sister text, *Repetition*, one can note both a textual and conceptual parallel between these two texts that is useful for reading *Fear and Trembling*.

First, I will examine what the repetition that occurs between Genesis 12 and Genesis 22 helps to show us. The reiteration of God's promise at the end of the final trial is worth quoting in full:

By myself I have sworn, says the Lord: Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice. (Genesis 22:16-18)

Here, God reiterates his promise with reference to his initial calling to Abraham in Genesis 12. He says, "I will *indeed* bless you." The manner of God's calling, the way Abraham receives the divine command in silence and carries it out, and the absolute relation between Abraham and God all show clear parallels between Genesis 22 and Genesis 12. But it is important to note that Genesis 22 is a repetition *with a difference* for

the very fact that it is a repetition of the beginning. The history of this repetition is the “background” of the Binding. God, while still the strange sovereign who ruptures into the immanent, is now familiar to Abraham, at least as “familiar” as he might be to the mortal. Abraham has heard this divine voice before and has obeyed his commands. When God calls, “Abraham!” in Genesis 22 it does not come to Abraham suddenly as an utterly foreign voice. God had given Abraham a legitimate son in Isaac, whose conception and birth was a miracle given the old age of both Abraham and Sarah. But here God calls to Abraham and commands him to sacrifice this son who carries not only his hopes and dreams but who is also the symbol and *fulfilled reality* of God’s promise. The full tension of Genesis 22 is obscured without understanding the weight of this history. If the reader simply abstracts these two chapters and compares the naked, literal text, there would be little difficulty in noticing a literary parallel. But the substance of this repetition does not lie solely within the mirrored form of Genesis 12 and 22. Abraham’s silence throughout this final trial is fraught with the background of the entirety of his story, from his first trial to this final trial, and without this history one cannot truly come to grips with how the sacrifice of Isaac is not simply a recollective reproduction.

By following the contours of repetition in the sacrifice of Isaac, one can see what one could call an eschatological thread. The repetition in the narrative is itself history, and the Abrahamic epic reflects an understanding of history that has a certain direction

and carries broader ontological implications.⁵² The sacrifice of Isaac could not have occurred without the initial calling of Abraham - neither the literal acts of the journey to Mount Moriah and the raising of the knife nor the psychological weight hidden behind the silence in the narrative is possible or comprehensible without this relation. The essence of the drama, the background of the repetition, is the problem of faith and trust between God and Abraham, and the life of this drama lies in its eschatological character.

In an important essay, Ronald Green argues that *Fear and Trembling* should be understood primarily as a discussion of Christian soteriology that is grounded in a Pauline-Lutheran tradition of the doctrine of justification through faith alone.⁵³ In this essay, Green argues that Kierkegaard uses the Abraham story “figuratively or typologically,” and that *Fear and Trembling* self-consciously stands in a long tradition of using the figure of Abraham for soteriological purposes.⁵⁴ Although the text of *Fear and Trembling* is absent of any explicit references to such traditional methods of Christian exegesis, Green points to an entry in Kierkegaard’s papers questioning Paul’s failure to use Isaac’s sacrifice as an illustration of Abraham’s faith, and another entry that shows Kierkegaard’s familiarity with the typological tradition that uses the Binding as a

⁵² “[I]f God himself had not willed repetition, the world would not have come into existence.” – Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, p.133

⁵³ In the provocatively titled “Enough is Enough!: *Fear and Trembling* Is Not about Ethics”, *Journal of Religious Studies* 21/2 (1993), p.191-209

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p.199

preface for the crucifixion. Green, unfortunately, does not develop this connection much further, understandably, since Kierkegaard himself provides us with so little.

One could be skeptical of Green's thesis that *Fear and Trembling* is primarily about soteriology. After all, although Green's references to Kierkegaard's entries on Paul and the typological tradition are interesting and are important clues about Kierkegaard's broader understanding of Genesis 22, these entries lie outside of the text of *Fear and Trembling* and Silentio does not seem to make any explicit gestures towards them within the text. But there is a curious aspect of *Fear and Trembling* that may help to support Green's thesis.

Despite the wealth of references to the history of Western literature, from Greek mythology to Shakespeare and Goethe, aside from the figures of Abraham's household, reference to Biblical figures is scant in *Fear and Trembling*. Cain is mentioned once to stress how in contrast to Cain, who killed his brother Abel out of jealousy, Abraham loved Isaac with "his whole soul."⁵⁵ In "Problema III" the story of Tobias and Sarah is mentioned between the story of Agnes and the Mermaid and Faust,⁵⁶ and all three stories are used to illustrate their difference from Abraham. Silentio is little impressed with Tobias, whose courage he thinks is simply necessary for all men, and he praises Sarah as a heroine. But for Silentio, Sarah is only a tragic hero, incomparable to

⁵⁵ *Fear and Trembling*, p.74

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p.102-107

Abraham, the knight of faith. Whereas Sarah had recourse to the ethical and received pity from those around her, Abraham had no such recourse, could speak to no one, and could be comforted by no one. Silentio regards these Biblical figures in a similar way to the non-Biblical figures – as falling short of the example of Abraham. But two figures are mentioned with absolute reverence – Christ and his mother, Mary. There is no evaluation of the qualities of Christ, and his teachings are simply taken as authoritative – the Son is not up for evaluation by human measure by Silentio.⁵⁷ Mary, however, is notable for being the only figure, aside from the nameless and rather ordinary worldly man reported by Silentio,⁵⁸ who is placed as an equal to Abraham in *Fear and Trembling*.⁵⁹ As Silentio says, Mary, like Abraham, is no heroine. Here one can expand from Silentio's pairing of Abraham and Mary. As God only commanded Abraham, the angel only revealed to Mary; as the angel stopped Abraham's knife, Mary was impregnated God incarnate, and both Abraham and Mary were incomprehensible to the world.

That Mary, the mother of God, is the only named figure in *Fear and Trembling* as a knight of faith next to Abraham is significant enough to suggest that Kierkegaard really did, albeit in a subtle way, have the Christian typological tradition in mind in which the Binding is a pre-framing "type" of the crucifixion. Given the soteriological significance

⁵⁷ Ibid., p.28

⁵⁸ Ibid., p.38-41

⁵⁹ Ibid., p.65

of the crucifixion for Christianity, if it can be held that *Fear and Trembling* is implicitly typological by its very subject matter, then one could say that *Fear and Trembling*, as Green claims, is concerned with soteriology. The typological pairing of Abraham and Mary is also interesting as one could note that typological reading is, in itself, an exegetical method that has repetition as its content. A moment of repetition, in the Kierkegaardian sense, is self-consciously framed by its history and by this self-consciousness achieves a true repetition with a difference. This structure is shared in the way typological readings relate the Old and New Testaments. By following this similarity, Silentio's reverence for Mary could be read as one of the conceptual connections between *Repetition* and *Fear and Trembling*. Furthermore, the typological pairing of Abraham and Mary is perhaps the most concrete example of doctrinal substance within the work. What we are dealing with are not just philosophical questions and problems about ethics but a work that is grounded on and concerned with fundamental doctrines of Christian theology. This is particularly significant as it serves to stress further that Kierkegaard's orientation is not only defined by his philosophical turning away from Hegel and the Danish Hegelians, which began in earnest with the simultaneous publication of *Repetition* and *Fear and Trembling*, but also by the way he responds to the historical-critical method of approaching scripture that has become the intellectual orthodoxy in his time, both philosophically and theologically. Kierkegaard's theological reorientation can be seen further in Silentio's

mocking attitude towards the Biblical scholars of his day for either missing the religious substance of the scriptural texts or, horrified at the difficult implications of the texts, interpreting them in such a way that they become domestically palatable for modern Christendom.⁶⁰

Building upon Green's reading of *Fear and Trembling*, Davenport claims that the main point of *Fear and Trembling* is to "present the essence of 'faith' as *eschatological* trust."⁶¹ Here, Davenport shifts the reading from soteriology to eschatology, which greets us with its own complications. I want to note that this shift provides us with an opportunity for a wider range of meaning. While doctrines of salvation may imply certain beliefs of the End Time, they are grounded by the eschatological. On the other hand, the questions of the End Time contains the drama of salvation within it – the eschatological is the ground soteriology operates upon, it is its meta-narrative.

This all must, of course, be said with some caution. Westphal's challenge to the appropriateness of calling the essence of faith as found in *Fear and Trembling* eschatological is important to consider.⁶² Westphal argues that Davenport's usage of the term "eschatology" is an abstraction into the "general structure" underlying normal eschatological discourse, "namely, trust in the ultimate accomplishment of the Good by

⁶⁰ For example, see Silentio's sarcastic comments on "exegetes" in p.9, 72-73, 81

⁶¹ John J. Davenport, "Faith as Eschatological Trust in *Fear and Trembling*," in *Ethics, Love, and Faith in Kierkegaard*, ed. Edward F. Mooney (2008), p.198

⁶² Merold Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith* (2014), p.37-39

divine power,” and that this abstract form is emptied of what he sees to be the actual content of eschatology such as the culmination of history and final judgment.

Consequently, Westphal finds Davenport’s usage of the term to be more misleading than illuminating. Westphal is also concerned with the need to resist “Christianizing” Abraham, as the traditional Christian reading of the sacrifice of Isaac as a typological preface for the crucifixion may obscure the naked text of Genesis 22. What is implied is that an eschatological reading would necessarily entail a Christianizing typological rendering.

I would first like to comment here that eschatology, and in particular the apocalyptic that both Davenport and Westphal also have in mind, need not be confined to the tropes that often follow them in popular thought. I would like to suggest, following the lines of Jacob Taubes, that eschatology should not be narrowly identified only with concrete imagery of the End Time, particularly in the popular conception of apocalypse as nothing other than cosmic existential catastrophe. Rather, the concept of eschatology may be more fluidly understood as an image of reality with a non-cyclical concept of time as attested within the Biblical tradition.⁶³ What is central to what Taubes calls “eschatology” is twofold. First is the essence of history as unidirectional and

⁶³ Florian Rötzer, original: “Interview mit Jacob Taubes,” in *Denken, das an der Zeit ist*, ed. Florian Rötzer (Frankfurt, 1987), 317. “Jacob Taubes: Apocalypse from Below,” trans. Joshua R. Gold, *Telos* (2006), p.140-56.

irreversible, where the direction is always heading toward an end.⁶⁴ The second is the understanding of God as the unknown who is a stranger to the world. This God is “non-existent in the world,”⁶⁵ and this understanding of God is crucial to the apocalyptic vision of reality. These two central aspects of eschatology are significant for us here, as Kierkegaardian repetition is implicitly eschatological and the relationship between the divine and the individual that Kierkegaard paints in *Fear and Trembling* is strongly oriented by the notion of the “height” of divine sovereignty over the individual and the world as a whole.

Apocalypse, both literally and figuratively meaning “revelation,” is the spirit of eschatology insofar as the arrow of history that flies toward the End Time can only be discerned through the sovereign will of the strange God. Taubes’ picture of the apocalyptic eschatology of Israel contains the “actual content” of eschatology that Westphal speaks of, and the ontological and meta-historical “form” of eschatology is presupposed by the concrete images of the End Time. Without this foundation we cannot have the content.

For Taubes, it is the strange God of apocalyptic history, who contests the “entire validity and finality of what exists,”⁶⁶ to whom humankind is to entrust the world,⁶⁷ and

⁶⁴ Jacob Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, p.4

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p.10

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p.15

this understanding of the apocalyptic is consonant with Kierkegaard's interpretation of the Binding where the God of Abraham is presented as the one who can put the being of the world in question, the one who demands the life of Isaac. The structure of "Problema I," "the teleological suspension of the ethical," operates with the same vision of reality as Taubes' Israel. The command of God given to Abraham is strange. It is incomprehensible to the world and subverts its ethical discourses. This strange God, whose command is an exception, is sovereign, and the meta-narrative of the relationship between this sovereign God and the world is eschatology. In this sense one should not be held captive by the popular conception of apocalyptic as nothing other than cosmic catastrophe, akin to what Davenport describes when he elaborates on what he thinks to be literal apocalyptic tropes.⁶⁸ An evaluation of whether or not an image of reality is apocalyptic should not hinge entirely upon its similarity to any of the so-called apocalyptic films and literature that is so popular today. Neither should this evaluation be hinged entirely upon reference to the apocalyptic visions of the prophets in the Old Testament, nor should the lack of explicit reference to Johannine themes, particularly from the Apocalypse of John, prevent the reader from identifying apocalyptic themes – eschatology and apocalyptic revolutionary vision encompasses far more than particular literary tropes. Rather, what is fundamentally central to the question of Biblical eschatology is the relationship between the sovereign God and the immanent world.

⁶⁸ Davenport, "Eschatological faith and repetition: Abraham and Job," p.87

If one follows Taubes' rich conceptualization of eschatology, one could understand eschatology in a way that takes a rather large reorientation from Davenport's usage of "eschatology" that can easily be replaced with "trusting expectancy." Although trust and expectancy in God and his promises are a fundamental aspect of eschatology, it is only a small part of the image of the world and history that constitutes the larger framework of eschatology.⁶⁹ Following a Taubesian concept of eschatology, one may be able to respond to Westphal and Davenport's concern by saying that an eschatological reading of Genesis 22 does not necessarily have to be a "Christianizing" reading. Eschatological sensitivity is not something that is found only in Christianity – if anything, it is something that Christianity has inherited through the history of Israel. The eschatological narrative we find in the Biblical texts is something that is shared by all devotees of the text, even if interpretations of the material is myriad – not only between the Jews and the Christians, but also within each tradition. But one must, regardless, take the concern of Westphal seriously. If one were to say that the typological reading is the only meaning of the Binding, this thought must be firmly rejected. If the meaning of the Old Testament texts were to be utterly subdued by Christianity, then one would be guilty of hermeneutical violence. If the theological reorientation Kierkegaard begins in earnest in *Fear and Trembling* was to lead us to

⁶⁹ In this sense I agree with Westphal's criticism of Davenport's usage of the term "eschatology." Not only is it too abstract, as Westphal says, but Davenport's usage is also too shallow.

interpret the Old Testament in a way that utterly obscures and subjugates both the history and the lived life of Jews today, we would be making a grievous mistake.

Engaging with the text carefully here has more than just scholarly significance – what is also at stake here, in the relationship between the reader and the text, is an ethical task that must weigh heavily upon every Christian reader in light of the crimes that have been committed in modern European history. Even if the reader is not born of European blood one is not absolved of this responsibility. For if one is a Christian the history and the narrative of one's faith is built upon what Taubes calls "Occidental eschatology," and one's identity is defined by one's submission to the strange God of Abraham – above all else! If one is to take upon oneself this eschatological history, one must also be honest about its implications for the Christian today. The blood of the *Shoah* is not on Nazi Germany alone, upon its institutions and servants. The blood of the *Shoah* is upon Europe as a whole, not only of the 20th century but encompassing Europe's long history that is nearly inseparable from its Christianity, and for every Protestant the history of Western Europe is one's own history, inherited not by blood but by faith. In front of the *Shoah* all hands are stained. It is precisely because our eschatological meta-narrative subjects us in such a way that all other aspects of identity are subordinated, whether that be of class, race, or gender, that we are all responsible. Under the sovereignty of the strange God of Abraham all accidental differences are relativized. The claim that eschatology makes on the reader is one and the same for each

and every other - the acknowledgement of the sovereignty of God. It is by this claim that each and every other are made absolutely responsible, and it is by participating in this eschatological history that one not only becomes responsible for one's own actions but also inherits the shared responsibility of the history of its faith.

But even if we must take care here about the question of reading Genesis 22, when it comes to the question of the interpretation of the Binding in *Fear and Trembling* must one not say that what Silentio engages in is a Christian reading? Although Derrida does not mention the subtle typological framing of Abraham and Mary he nevertheless recognizes, with great sensitivity, that the interpretation of the Binding that is given in *Fear and Trembling* is oriented evangelically.⁷⁰ As Derrida notes, when we read the Binding through Kierkegaard's eyes "how can we not recognize there the foreshadowing or the analogy of another passion?" It seems that if we truly are to give deference to Kierkegaard it would be uncontroversial to state that the interpretation of the Binding in *Fear and Trembling* is a "Christianized" reading, and to deny this would be an error. Acknowledging the Christianity of Kierkegaard is not only important for truly recognizing Kierkegaard's own lived life but also for the sake of recognizing that Jewish readings of the Binding have their own distinct traditions and histories that cannot be collapsed into the Christian traditions. This is all the more important because the religious orientation of *Fear and Trembling* gains its weight through its unwavering

⁷⁰ Derrida, *The Gift of Death and Literature in Secret* (2008), p.81

affirmation of a Christianity with a distinctly Lutheran colour. One must always be wary of the violence one may inflict, at any moment, when one reads and writes. All interpretation has an orientation, a context, and an aim, and a part of our responsibility is to accept, no matter how difficult the implications may be, that there has not and never will be such a thing as a “neutral” interpretation. The temptation to seek a de-politicized space, a space where one can avoid ideology, will only lead us to a mirage. It is in this sense that one can find a certain connection, albeit tenuous and one that must be treated with utmost caution, between the spirit of Kierkegaard’s theology and Schmitt’s “political theology” – the substance of all “transcendental concepts,” no matter how abstracted, has an ideological orientation. All concepts contain a certain polemical possibility and this, despite the difficulty that this places upon the reader, even if it leads the reader to complete paralysis, cannot be avoided if the task of reading is to be honest.

What the representation of reality that the Abrahamic epic (Auerbach) and the narrative of reality in the eschatology of Israel (Taubes) presents to us is a world that is in relation to the God who is sovereign. Sovereign, not only in the sense of having authority over his chosen people, to command and be revered, but sovereign over reality as one who is not of that reality. This sovereign, who is bound neither to moral nor natural law, is not only he who decides on the exception but he whose presence itself is exceptional. His sovereignty is neither derived from nor bound by temporal

attributes, and the force of His sovereignty is what the text of the Abrahamic epic presents to us. The claim to truth in the Bible is not only far more urgent than Homer's, it excludes all other claims in a way that Auerbach describes as tyrannical:

The world of the Scripture stories is not satisfied with claiming to be a historically true reality – it insists that it is the only real world, it is destined for autocracy. All other scenes, issues, and ordinances have no right to appear independently of it, and it is promised that all of them, the history of mankind, will be given their due place within its frame, will be subordinated to it. The Scripture stories do not, like Homer's, court our favour, they do not flatter us that they may please us and enchant us – they seek to subject us, and if we refuse to be subjected we are rebels.⁷¹

What Auerbach shows us is that it is not only formal religious doctrines and institutions that subject us, both ideologically and politically, but the scriptural texts themselves that make claims over us.⁷² But the Biblical texts lay claim on far more than temporal political power – the text seeks to overcome our reality. The reader who chooses to kneel to this claim can no longer simply read the text from a position of indifferent curiosity: “we are to fit our life into its world, feel ourselves to be elements in its structure of universal history.”⁷³ The man obsessed with the story of the Binding from his childhood to his old age that Silentio portrays in the “Exordium” is a vivid representation of someone who is captured by the Biblical text.⁷⁴ This man, who earnestly craves for nothing else than to go along the three-day journey and to be

⁷¹ Auerbach, *Mimesis*, p.15

⁷² One can leave a Lutheran note here – the doctrine of *sola scriptura* operates upon an understanding of the text that gives it an authority that is second to nothing but God alone.

⁷³ Auerbach, *Mimesis*, p.15

⁷⁴ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p.9

present next to Abraham, is not a thinker or an exegetical scholar. He will never witness the event and never go beyond Abraham, beyond faith, but he nevertheless submits himself to the world and the reality of the text.

The centrality of the sacrifice of Isaac, what brings the first and final trial of Abraham together in repetition, is obedience in faith, and the evangelical orientation that is brought by Silentio stresses this by emphasizing the individual's singular relationship to God. But one must not be misled by Silentio's emphasis on the individual, an aspect that runs through the entirety of Kierkegaard's oeuvre, and think that the absolute relationship between the individual and God that Kierkegaard writes of is a relationship that thrusts the individual into an absolute isolation from the rest of the world. The incomprehensibility of Abraham for the world poses an unavoidable politico-ethical problem: that Isaac was spared does not change the reality that at the moment Abraham raised his knife he was ethically a murderer. But just as Abraham's action occurs in the suspension of the ethical, Abraham's action itself is not then made universal. What this means is that one cannot form a system of ethics from the events of Mount Moriah. Not only is the event utterly singular, the "teleological suspension of the ethical" that occurs in Genesis 22 is completed by the restoration of ethics and its universality. For Silentio, in a certain sense there is nothing we can learn from Abraham except to be struck with awe, and the notion that an analysis of the Binding could lead

one to faith is denigrated by Silentio as a delusion.⁷⁵ In fact, for Silentio the possibility that a reader might read Genesis 22 and do the same thing as Abraham is the risk of writing about the Binding – the desire to mimic Abraham’s actions in the Binding is “unbalanced.” If either we or our neighbours bound our children upon an altar in imitation of Abraham, we would rightly be considered mad. But if this danger causes us to “exegete away” Genesis 22 in such a way to render it easily palatable we would at that very moment wipe away all meaning from the text.

The journey to Mount Moriah is not to be considered an intellectual problem about ethics, of the possibility of justifying attempted murder through a higher authority, as much as it is about passion, which for Silentio is the “essentially human... [by] which one generation perfectly understands another and understands itself.”⁷⁶ Silentio says that no generation is able to begin at any other point than the beginning and that no generation has a smaller task than the previous one, implying that the conclusion of Abraham’s journey to Mount Moriah does little to solve any problem for every generation that has come after him. That Abraham obeyed and God sent the ram does not mean that any of us are spared the despair and anxieties that accompany faith. Repetition dictates that each and every one of us who is subject to a divine command undergo the same problems that Abraham had, and one can come to “perfectly

⁷⁵ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p.37

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p.121

understand” Abraham through this passion and in no other way. But this passion is incomprehensible to the universal.

The absolute relation to the absolute is an exceptional relationship – God’s command to Abraham comes as an exceptional command given with sovereign force, but Abraham’s obedience was also a choice on his end, a conscious decision to obey God’s command in spite of its monstrosity. For the reader, the moment one shares in this same passion and comes to understand Abraham is the moment one can no longer speak of the passion at all. The lived reality of this passion is veiled, similar to how the Biblical texts are marked with unexpressed mysteries as Auerbach notes. Auerbach’s remark about how the Biblical text seeks to overwhelm our reality is instructive here. Although one cannot reduce a direct divine command to a scriptural text, regardless of what kind of authority one might give to the text, the text is to bring to the reader a real sense of the terror one may feel when one receives a command from God. The heart of an eschatological reading of *Fear and Trembling* is primarily about how the Biblical text of the Abrahamic epic, Silentio’s meditation on Genesis 22, and the reader’s encounter with the Binding through *Fear and Trembling* are all drawn into one shared reality.

What Silentio hopes to strike into the reader, if the reader reads him and Genesis 22 with passion, is fear and trembling in front of the sovereignty of God. *Fear and Trembling* is to be taken as Silentio’s lived experience of his encounter with the Binding, and in turn our own reading of *Fear and Trembling* is to be a complicated lived

experience of both Silentio's encounter and the primary text. The text of *Fear and Trembling* and our reading of the book is in itself to be a certain repetition of the journey to Mount Moriah. Silentio's wager is that all this is possible, to be able to "perfectly understand" one another across generations upon generations, because the sovereignty of God is absolute in such a way that it is absolute for each and every other in the same way,⁷⁷ an assertion that is grounded upon an eschatological image of reality that can be understood as theocratic. What is decisive here is the notion that "one must cleave to God as the subject of unique veneration."⁷⁸

Abraham's Knife

*"There is no higher expression for the ethical in Abraham's life than that the father shall love the son."*⁷⁹

Even if *Fear and Trembling* is not primarily about ethics the problem of ethics is nevertheless unavoidable in the text. Similarly, it is scarcely possible to read Genesis 22 without being struck with its uncomfortable ethical implications. So although one may follow an eschatological-soteriological interpretation of *Fear and Trembling* and the

⁷⁷ This wager also relies on the implicit affirmation that the text is not merely an amalgamation of symbols, an attestation to a historical event or a metaphor, but is a *living* artefact. Silentio's notion that every generation begins "at the beginning" can be understood as a prelude to the concept of contemporaneity in Kierkegaard's later religious works.

⁷⁸ As beautifully stated by Gene Outka in his reply to Ronald Green in "God as the Subject of Unique Veneration," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 21/2 (1993), p.215

⁷⁹ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p.59

primary text of Genesis 22 and find a greater theological meaning in the texts beyond a simple literal meaning, it is necessary on the part of the reader to resist the temptation to interpret away the immediate ethical problems. Silentio's admonishment of the "pious and accommodating exegete" who by offering domestically palatable interpretations hopes to "smuggle Christianity into the world" is instructive for us here.⁸⁰ Just as one should not cower from facing the literality of Luke 14:26,⁸¹ neither should the reader avoid facing the horror of Genesis 22:10: "Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son."

As mentioned earlier, Silentio stresses that Abraham's actions are not to be mimicked and that any such temptation to mimic the Binding would be deranged. But Silentio also stresses that one cannot shy away from the difficulty of truly witnessing the Binding in its full terror despite the risk of doing so. Here, Silentio leaves us with great difficulties in evaluating both Genesis 22 and *Fear and Trembling* itself. The necessity of examining the problem of ethics here is not simply an exegetical responsibility of treating the text in its fullness but is more immediately a human responsibility.⁸² We of course cannot treat the problem of Abraham's knife in a purely disengaged manner – there will always be an orientation, be it theological or otherwise

⁸⁰ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p.72

⁸¹ "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple." Needless to say, it is clear that Silentio's usage of Luke 14:26 is meant as a direct comment on what is required from Abraham.

⁸² "Human," if I may be pardoned for using this expression naively without any qualification.

– but the figure of Isaac, bound upon the altar, must be taken as an immediate human question that cuts across all interpretations.

Regardless of the various complications, at the root of Genesis 22 is the problem of violence, of murder, and the fact that Isaac was spared at the last moment does not change the fact that a father raised his knife with full intention to take his son's life. Even in a committed theological reading, the fact that Abraham was acting in obedience to a divine command, regardless of the height of God's sovereignty and whatever greater purpose may have lain behind the command to sacrifice Isaac, does not change the reality that for ethics Abraham was a murderer. The knife remains an instrument of violence no matter who wields it and no matter who commands it to be raised. An interpretation of Genesis 22 that does not speak of the bound Isaac must be viewed with suspicion, not simply due to textual incompleteness but because it is ethically questionable. On this point it is necessary for one to extend criticism to Kierkegaard who, in *Fear and Trembling*, writes so much of the inner complexity of Abraham but so little of Isaac's own subjectivity. Yes, the terror and obedience that is exemplified in the raising of the knife is of utmost importance. But what of Isaac bound and offered as sacrifice by the hands of his own father? What of this child who was given no explanation for this incomprehensible act, neither by his father or God? Again, that Isaac was spared and his blood was not shed does not solve the problem of murder here - a bloodless violence is still violence. It is precisely because the sovereignty of God and

the absolute relationship to the absolute is what is decisive in *Fear and Trembling* that the book also requires us to think seriously about the relationship between sovereignty and violence.

Kierkegaard's interpretation of Genesis 22 in *Fear and Trembling* is prefigured by both Kant and Hegel, who both also touched upon the Binding in their writing.

Although one cannot be certain if Kierkegaard was aware of the particular writings of his intellectual predecessors on the Binding, it is nevertheless helpful to compare them given the great influence both Kant and Hegel broadly had upon Kierkegaard.

Kierkegaard's complicated relationship to Hegel hardly requires comment, and although Kierkegaard's explicit references to Kant are sparse Kant played an important part in his academic studies.⁸³ What is interesting to note is that both Kant's and Hegel's evaluations of Genesis 22 are unambiguously negative. Although the two frame and arrive at their conclusions differently, for both of them the Binding exemplifies an ethical aberration. So what causes Silentio to evaluate Genesis 22 so differently from Kant and Hegel? For both Kant and Hegel the question of autonomy is central to their critique of Abraham, and given that the concern for autonomy is something Kierkegaard has also inherited from his predecessors, why did Kierkegaard come to regard Abraham so differently from them? I will first examine Kant's critique of

⁸³ As Ronald Green collects for us in the first chapter of his *Kierkegaard and Kant: The Hidden Debt* (1992).

Abraham that can be found in his *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* and *The Conflict of the Faculties*.

Kant mentions Abraham late into his career, with the most stinging rebuke of Abraham appearing in *The Conflict of the Faculties* at 1798. In connection with a discussion of the difficulty of understanding any command as coming from God, Kant asserts that “the human being can be sure that the voice one hears is *not* God’s” if the voice “commands him to do something contrary to the moral law.” For Kant, such a command must be considered an illusion, and here he adds the following footnote that connects him to our reading of Genesis 22:

We can use, as an example, the myth of the sacrifice that Abraham was going to make by butchering and burning his only son at God’s command (the poor child, without knowing it, even brought the wood for the fire). Abraham should have replied to this supposedly divine voice: “That I ought not to kill my good son is quite certain. But that you, this apparition, are God – of that I am not certain, and never can be, not even if this voice rings down to me from (visible) heaven.⁸⁴

Kant also had a similar response to the Binding in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* earlier in 1793:

That to take a human being’s life because of his religious faith is wrong is certain, unless (to allow the most extreme possibility) a divine will, made known to the inquisitor in some extraordinary way, has decreed otherwise. But that God has ever manifested this awful will is a matter of historical documentation and never apodictically certain. After all, the revelation reached the inquisitor only through the intermediary of human beings and their interpretation, and even if it were to appear to him to have come from

⁸⁴ Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties in Religion and Rational Theology*, ed. and trans. Allen Wood and George Di Giovanni (1996), p.283

God himself (like the command issued to Abraham to slaughter his own son like a sheep,) yet it is at least possible that on this point error has prevailed. But then the inquisitor would risk the danger of doing something which would be to the highest degree wrong, and on this score he acts unconscientiously.⁸⁵

There appear to be two primary notions that ground Kant's responses. The first is an epistemological assertion that God, understood as existing outside of phenomenal time and space, cannot be an object of sense experience. No experience could reliably be known as being a communication from God, and because there cannot be any real certainty of the veracity that the command is truly divine one should not comply with it. Rejecting the command is, in a sense, simply the pragmatic choice to take. But the more interesting implication to follow from Kant's argument is the thought that because the command lacks epistemic certainty it carries no force.

On the other hand, the second notion is that what is ethically correct can be known by reason alone without relying on any historical information. One can know for certain that the command Abraham is given is an aberration simply by reason alone, and Kant judges Abraham on the basis of the assumption that each and every person fundamentally has the capacity for moral autonomy. For Kant, it is trivial for anyone to see that the supposed divine command is unethical. It is unethical because the command is left unexplained and thus not proven to be universally valid, and also because the base act of murder cannot be ethically justified in any real sense. Abraham's

⁸⁵ Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* in *Religion and Rational Theology*, p.203-204

obedience to God's command to sacrifice Isaac upends the priority one's ethical duty must have before anything otherwise, regardless of what kind of pressure one may be under. Here, Abraham's silent obedience is taken as a case that exemplifies a moral heteronomy where one is bound to an action that, against one's own rational willing, is pursued out of purposes that are alien to morality.

What is important to note in Kant's rebuke of Abraham is the insistence that the highest authority, what constitutes the source of normative value, can be reached and known by reason. There can be no subjective assertion that transcends the rational moral law, and the categorical imperative carries a consistency that is universal. The validity of the categorical imperative is of such authority that even God cannot suspend it – it is interesting to note that Kant simply states as a matter of fact in *The Conflict of the Faculties* that one could be certain that a command that breaks an ethical obligation would not be a divine command. In this sense, Kant's conception of God may be interpreted as lacking sovereignty in relation to the category of ethics – God, if we were to understand the deity as a kind of supreme good who guarantees the law, cannot choose to make an exceptional decision that goes contrary to the moral law. Here we can understand the categorical imperative as having absolute validity in such a way that the perfect will and grace of God will always stay true to it – the Good is guaranteed by his own being and made secure. Kant's assertions show us a conception of God that is very different from the Biblical conception of God as absolute sovereign.

Although Kant's conception of God is ontologically different from the immanent, like the Biblical God, this ontological transcendence is not then taken to also provide absolute sovereignty. Even if one were to say that under this conception of God one could still think of the moral law as something that is given by God, it nevertheless follows that the divine itself is beholden to the law in such a way that God himself cannot contradict it. Just as any subjective violation of the ethical by an individual would be invalid, a divine subjectivity is also held accountable to the moral law (although, Kant would assert, it is certain that God would never violate the categorical imperative).

The ethics that Silentio speaks of in *Fear and Trembling* has more to do with Hegel than Kant.⁸⁶ This can not only be said by an examination of the text of *Fear and Trembling*, where Hegel is mentioned by name throughout the book while Kant is not mentioned once, but the ethics that Silentio targets is of a historical-institutional form rather than one grounded in ahistorical reason. Despite this, Kant's comments on Abraham are helpful for the reader in attempting to understand Kierkegaard's interpretation. The difference between Kant's conception of God and the Biblical God causes a radical shift on the problem of the Binding. In a sense, with Kant the Binding ceases to truly be a question since the tension between Abraham's love for Isaac and his

⁸⁶ Westphal makes this point insistently in the chapter, "Faith as Obedience to Divine Commands," in his *Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith*, p.40-61

obedience to his sovereign is dissipated. For Kant there is no paradox and the answer to the ethical problem in the Binding is ultimately rather simple: Abraham should not have obeyed the command.

Before making any comment on whether or not Kant's commentary on the Binding is truly helpful or not, one must at the very least admire the spirit of Kant's critique. Genesis 22 sets a dangerous precedent that cannot be ignored and Kant's comments are an effort that seeks to close off possible justification of Abraham's actions on ethical grounds. Kant's notion of ethics that can be understood universally across all history is something that has some resonances in *Fear and Trembling*. The tension that Silentio meditates on is built upon the assumption that every reader will take as granted that it is a duty for a father to love and protect his child. This ethical imperative is to be understood as having weighed as heavily upon Abraham's conscious as it would upon any other father in any other age or culture – this parental responsibility is something that can be understood with equal immediacy by everyone – and in this sense the event of Mount Moriah can have the same kind of immediacy for a young man in Copenhagen and another in Hamilton, worlds and ages apart. Although Silentio has Hegel in mind, there is a real sense in which the concept of ethics carries a distinctively Kantian shape for Silentio which can be seen most clearly in the beginning of "Problema I" where it is said:

The ethical as such is the universal, and as the universal it applies to everyone, which from another angle means that it applies at all times.⁸⁷

But Kant's critique relies on a completely different conception of God and consequently his rebuke of Abraham ultimately fails to be of much help in wrestling with the problem of violence in Genesis 22. If one were to understand Abraham here in his own reality one has to imagine the problem from the perspective that, for the sake of argument, Abraham *knows* God and as such the heart of the issue is not an epistemic one. What is of concern here, what fills the reader with terror, is the paradox that arises from the sovereign issuing a command that conflicts with moral law, a law that was also given by the divine, with Abraham being beholden to both. The importance of *Fear and Trembling* lies in how Abraham is held as the exemplar of faith while also simultaneously being regarded as an ethical failure by the universal. That Abraham obeyed the highest order in itself does not solve the paradox for even if the absolute relation to the absolute holds an exceptional status that transcends the universal, the general nevertheless remains. Even though Isaac was spared, it remains unchanged that his father's hands raised a knife over him. Even if obedience to God takes utmost precedence, that God commanded Abraham to commit a harrowing act of violence remains. A conception of God that erases his sovereignty makes this entire dynamic

⁸⁷ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p.54

impossible and reduces the tension of relationship between the individual and God to a triviality.

Although *Fear and Trembling* rhetorically positions itself against Hegel throughout the book, Kierkegaard would not have known Hegel's most explicit comments on Abraham found in the essay, "The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate," which was first published in 1907, long after Kierkegaard's death in 1855. However, Hegel's reception of the Binding in his early theological writing and his later evaluations of Judaism in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* that were given over the last decade of his career (1821, 1824, 2827, and 1831) provide us with enough material to make sense of how Hegel received the Binding, and with this one can make better sense of how *Fear and Trembling* can be positioned in contrast.

In "The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate," Hegel's reception of the figure of Abraham is negative before he even arrives at the Binding. For Hegel, Abraham had already made a mistake from the very beginning when he left his family and land when he was called upon by God.⁸⁸ The very first act of Abraham, as Hegel understands it, constituted a severance of communal bonds. From this act on, Abraham is considered by Hegel to be a man who no longer has any attachment to the world:

The whole world Abraham regarded as simply his opposite; if he did not take it to be a nullity, he looked on it as sustained by the God who was alien to it. Nothing in nature was supposed to have any part in God; everything was simply under God's mastery. Abraham, as the opposite of the whole

⁸⁸ Hegel, "The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate," in *Early Theological Writings*, trans. T. M. Knox, p.185

world, could have had no higher mode of being than that of the other term in the opposition, and thus he likewise was supported by God. Moreover, it was through God alone that Abraham came into a mediate relation with the world, the only kind of link with the world possible for him.⁸⁹

In this early essay Hegel frames Abraham as a social degenerate who had not only abandoned his family and forsaken his fatherland but continued to cut himself from others as a perpetual foreigner: “a stranger on earth, a stranger to the soil and to men alike.”⁹⁰ This breaking of social ties, which for Hegel is equivalent to breaking with the world as such, is what ultimately leads Abraham willingly to sacrifice his son. As he broke all worldly ties Abraham no longer has anything to prevent him from filicide. Shortly following the passage above, Hegel notes the “jealous God of Abraham,” who laid the “horrible claim that He alone was God and that this nation was the only one to have a god.”⁹¹

This commentary of Hegel is interesting for us here because his understanding of Abraham’s God is one that focuses on his sovereign character. Abraham’s God is strange, not of this world, and is sovereign over the world, descriptions that follow the depictions of God we earlier found in Kierkegaard, Auerbach, and Taubes. But what makes Hegel notable here is the disdain he shows for both Abraham and his sovereign God. For Hegel, the relationship between Abraham and his God is rooted in a contempt

⁸⁹ Ibid., p.187

⁹⁰ Ibid., p.186

⁹¹ Ibid., p.188

for the whole world, and Abraham's willingness to "slay his beloved son with his own hand" is the highest point of Abraham's degeneration. Hegel takes Abraham as a figurehead of Judaism, and judges Jewish history with a vitriol that verges on, if not simply is, anti-Semitic, something which is made all the more acute when he interprets Jesus as a figure who set himself against the whole of Jewish destiny and attacked Judaism's bondage to an alien lord.⁹² As Hegel sees it, Abraham and his nation are God's people only insofar as they have accepted the condition of fearing him and rendering themselves up for servitude. The will of this alien God is external to the will of the worshipper and is to be followed because it is God's will.

Hegel's late lectures approach Judaism with more care compared to the young Hegel of "The Spirit of Christianity." Although the 1821 treatment of the Jewish conception of the divine remains mainly critical, in 1824 Hegel has a more favourable treatment of the Jewish faith, an attitude that continues through to 1831. In contrast to his earlier reception of Judaism as a religion of servitude, Judaism is taken to be a religion of liberation that is freed from worldly dependence.⁹³ This change of tone is accompanied with a more positive evaluation of Abraham: "It is this trust, this faith of Abraham's, that causes the history of this people to carry on."⁹⁴ However, this change in

⁹² Ibid., p.205-6

⁹³ Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 2: *Determinate Religion*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson, trans. R. F. Brown, P. C. Hodgson, J. M. Stewart, and H. S. Harris (1987), p.444

⁹⁴ Ibid., p.446

attitude does not change the fact that Hegel consistently interprets Judaism as fundamentally being about submission to a strange God who is master over his people, and for Hegel, the lack of autonomy he perceives in the Jewish faith remains problematic. The problem is not that being under servitude determines one's actions, since servitude always contains within it the possibility of rebellion. Rather, Hegel's concern here seems to be that even if servitude does not itself determine one's actions one fails to be free when one is governed by laws that are not one's own. If this line of thought is applied to the Binding, one can say that Abraham was compelled to act in a state where he lacked autonomy, and the raising of the knife was governed by a law that was imposed upon him. Hegel's comments here are helpful because his analysis keenly reflects an awareness of the force of God's command upon Abraham. What one could say, following Hegel's analysis, is that the violence we find in the Binding is of a doubled kind – it is not only the raising of the knife that is to be deemed violent but also, and perhaps more fundamentally, the force of the command that is violent. The inequality in the relationship between the servant and the master is inherently violent and the Binding exemplifies this relation.

Kierkegaard's relation to Hegel here is difficult to navigate with care because Hegel's problems with Abraham are framed in a way that deal with the fundamental shape of the relationship between the individual and God that Silentio meditates on. This is greatly to the credit of Hegel evaluating the problem contextually with its own

concept of God in contrast to Kant who, regardless of good intentions, evaluates the problem of the Binding with a concept of God that is irrelevant to the narrative at hand. It is unsurprising, then, that Hegel is able to identify the problem of violence much more sharply.⁹⁵ The Hegel of the late lectures is particularly useful for us here as he appears to understand that the root of the problem has little to do with epistemic or ethical structure – the problem with Abraham lies within sovereignty itself. What makes the problem of violence in the Binding so pressing is the force of the authority behind the command.

With this general orientation of Hegel in mind, Silentio's jab that Hegel "is wrong in not protesting loudly and clearly against Abraham's enjoying honor and glory as a father of faith when he ought to be sent back to a lower court and show up as a murderer" is peculiar. While it is true that Hegel praises Abraham, along with Job, for their fear of God that is the beginning of wisdom and "one essential aspect of freedom,"⁹⁶ the ambivalence that Hegel had in his early writing on the Binding is still carried through to the last of his lectures.⁹⁷ So even if one takes into account that Kierkegaard could not have known Hegel's early theological writings because they were published after Kierkegaard's death, Silentio's complaint towards Hegel, which is

⁹⁵ However, Hegel's parochial attitude to Judaism must not be ignored, and Hegel's Marcionistic approach to the figure of Christ is no trivial detail.

⁹⁶ As Westphal also notes in *Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith*, p.51

⁹⁷ Preston Stovall, "Hegel: Abductive Inference, Autonomy, and the Faith of Abraham," in *Interpreting Abraham: Journeys to Moriah*, p.101-130

likely based on Hegel's late lectures, seems to betray a misunderstanding of Hegel's broader sentiments.

This misreading of Silentio is nevertheless helpful for us to see an important sentiment that Silentio shares with Hegel, inadvertently or not. Abraham's action in the Binding, regardless of whatever "higher" purpose it may serve, despite that the raising of the knife, is the highest moment of the drama that immortalizes Abraham as the father of faith, but nevertheless must be regarded as an ethical crime.

It is important to note that Silentio firmly states this even though ethics is made utterly relative to the "absolute relation to the absolute" in *Fear and Trembling*. Ethics, even if Silentio regards it as the "lower court" that is made relative in relation to the absolute, nevertheless retains the legitimacy and even the duty to judge Abraham as a murderer. It is crucial that the reader remains sensitive to this difficult dialectic for if we miss this aspect of Silentio's meditation on the Binding, the entirety of *Fear and Trembling* disintegrates into a mess where Kierkegaard becomes nothing other than a fideistic simpleton who espouses a naïve divine-command ethic. While an important part of the way Silentio defines faith is as obedience to divine commands, Silentio does not propose that it is divine command alone that defines what is right and wrong. As Westphal notes, while Silentio claims that "what makes it right to sacrifice Isaac is that, and only that, God commands it," the ethical nevertheless retains a relative validity that

is not obliterated by divine command even when it is “teleologically suspended.”⁹⁸

Silentio, while opposed to Hegel, nevertheless builds upon him, and the notion of ethics that is used in *Fear and Trembling* is based on Kierkegaard’s understanding of Hegelian ethics.

The Hegelian shape of Silentio’s notion of the ethics can be seen in his identification of the ethical with the concrete universal as the community that judges and rewards the individual. This community is identified in a few different ways as the nation, the state, society, the church, and the sect.⁹⁹ With this in mind, Silentio’s wager against Hegel in *Fear and Trembling* is that even though the concrete universal maintains its own validity, the universal cannot be the highest source of normativity regardless of its form. The “absolute relationship to the absolute,” which can only be understood as the singularity of the relationship between the individual and God, reduces the ethical to the relative. Silentio’s assertion that the individual is higher than the universal¹⁰⁰ is to be understood through the “absolute relationship” alone.

Here I stress again: it does not follow that the ethics of society is invalidated by being relativized. Rather, Silentio’s position is that through the case of Abraham the ethical receives a different meaning in relation to the paradoxical relationship the individual has with God and the universal community. The paradox is that the

⁹⁸ Merold Westphal, *Kierkegaard’s Concept of Faith*, p.68

⁹⁹ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p.57-59, 74, 79

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p.55-56, 62

“absolute relationship to the absolute” between God and Abraham demands Abraham to obey the command to sacrifice Isaac while Abraham is still responsible and beholden to the ethical imperative of loving and protecting his son. But for such a dynamic to be possible it requires that immanent reality is in relation to a God that is utterly sovereign *and* that the individual as such can have an immediate relationship with this absolute sovereign. Without this implicit “fractured” ontology there can be no teleological suspension, and if there is no teleological suspension of the ethical in the religious, if the universal is not relative to the absolute, then Hegel would be right and Abraham will be lost, and along with the patriarch, faith itself will be shipwrecked.

The lack of interest in apologetics in *Fear and Trembling*, along with the rest of Kierkegaard’s corpus, reflects an awareness of the ultimately polemical ground of faith that can justify itself on no other ground than itself. One can construe a dialogue between Kant, Hegel, and Kierkegaard over the ethical problems of the Binding, but one can only weave a discourse so far before an impasse is reached. Despite Silentio’s polemic against the authority of universal ethics, however, Silentio’s concept of ethics is not so utterly incompatible with both Kantian and Hegelian ethics. One must not be misled here by Kierkegaard’s characteristic hyperbole. The core of the problem is not ethics. As noted above, the dynamic of the problem of ethics that grips *Fear and Trembling*, which is built upon both Kant and Hegel, and Silentio’s meditation throughout the text makes little sense without this contextualization. What separates

Silentio from Kant and Hegel is his faithful adherence to the Biblical God. The reader must, inevitably, speak for one or the other (or none) of the three, and the concept of God that is taken (or the utter rejection of any divinity) must necessarily lead to a different understanding not only of God but also of the individual and the concrete immanent as such. In this sense there can be no neutral judgement made here on the question of Abraham's knife, and what Silentio forces the reader to acknowledge is that the question of ethics always presupposes a structure of reality upon which it operates. Silentio's understanding of God as the absolute sovereign and the notion of the "absolute relationship to the absolute" governs the entire problem of ethics in *Fear and Trembling*. When considering the problem of ethics in the Binding one cannot bracket out the dialectic of the divine and the immanent that complicates the relationships that Abraham has with his God and his son.

Here, let us return directly to the concept the exception that was examined in the previous chapter. The character of Abraham, as interpreted by Silentio, is an embodiment of Constantius' exception. The "knight of faith" is the singular individual who is a "legitimate exception" in the fullest sense. The notion that the "legitimate exception" is made legitimate by its reconciliation in the universal, which was recovered from Schmitt's omission, is important here. Parallel to Constantius' concept of the exception is Silentio's identification of the "knight of faith" as the one who, after being raised above the universal, is returned (or perhaps better expressed *restored*) into

the universal. And just as Constantius' exception reflects the irreducible singularity of the individual as much as it points towards the absolute exceptionality of God, Silentio's Abraham is irreducible even in the "absolute relation to the absolute" that relativizes every other being and relationship. But the dialectic of the exception is made sharper in front of the Binding. Similarly to Constantius' sinner, who does not come to realize his own exceptionality until it is revealed to him by heaven, Silentio's "knight of faith" becomes an irreducible singularity through his "absolute relation to the absolute." What the example of Abraham presses Silentio to say more concretely is that it is *only* through this "absolute relation to the absolute" that one can both be raised above the general *and* be reconciled with the universal. Even if the immanent is imbued with exceptional potentiality this potentiality can be actualized through the power of the divine sovereign alone. Kierkegaard's ontological claim in *Repetition* and *Fear and Trembling* is that without the dialectic between the absolute sovereign and the immanent subject there can be no exception. Without the absolute relation to the absolute all that remains, Kierkegaard implies, is the Hegelian image of reality.

A political implication that follows from the Kierkegaardian concept of the exception and the concept of the knight of faith is a kind of anarchy. Against Hegel, for whom ethics is always grounded on the community and its social institutions, Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms attest to a divine authority that trumps all others. Here, Taubes' understanding of the theocracy of Israel is helpful for making sense of

Kierkegaard's thought. For Taubes, Israel's idea of theocracy, as an order that is grounded in God's lordship over the whole of life, is built upon the "anarchical elements in Israel's soul."¹⁰¹ This theocracy expresses the "human desire to be free from all human, earthly ties and to be in covenant with God." Taubes' interpretation of eschatological polity has strong resonances with Kierkegaard's understanding of the individual's relation to the world. Although the individual is always a part of universal generality, the individual is absolutely beholden to God alone who is sovereign over the individual's own life and the totality of the world. This eschatological image of reality is also reflected in Auerbach's understanding of Biblical scripture that asserts a "tyrannical" claim over the reader and overwhelms the reader's own reality. Following this line of interpretation, an eschatological understanding of reality can be said to be a theocratic interpretation of reality that submits the entirety of the world to the Lord of Hosts. Because the God of Israel is the King of the World the subjects of this theocracy are utterly subordinate to no other earthly power, whether it be the nation, the state, society, the sect, or even the church. If there can be such a thing as a Kierkegaardian "political theology," it would take a shape similar to the subversive Taubesian anarchical theocracy/theocratic anarchy.

With this understanding of the Kierkegaardian exception and its theocratic-anarchical political implication, how then do we talk about the problem of violence in

¹⁰¹ Jacob Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, p.18-19

the Binding? Also, if the “knight of faith” is parallel to the “legitimate exception” in what way do we understand the “knight of faith” as returning to the universal, as becoming reconciled with the universal, in the case of Abraham on Mount Moriah?

Following this theocratic-anarchical interpretation of Kierkegaard, one could venture to say that if it is God alone who is Lord, then no earthly power has the right over any life. Kierkegaard’s opposition of the “knight of faith” to the tragic hero can be made sense of in this way. The tragic hero, exemplified in the examples of Agamemnon, Jephthah, and Brutus, kills a son or daughter for the greater good of the community. Their love for their children and their parental duty is trumped by their duty toward the state. Insofar as the preservation of the state is the greatest existential demand upon both the state itself and the individual subject, the tragic hero is justified in killing his or her child for the sake of the political community. The “knight of faith,” however, does not operate for the sake of the political community. That the “knight of faith” cannot be ethically justified like the tragic hero can be interpreted as also meaning that the “knight of faith” does not recognize the authority of the state as absolute and that consequently it rebels against the authority of the state to justify the killing of any individual. By recognizing that only the authority of God may claim a life the “knight of faith,” by its very being, challenges the authority of the state to exercise lethal force. No human institution may legitimately kill any individual as the life of the individual, as an irreducible singularity, is higher than the preservation of any immanent community.

This leaves us, however, with the implication that God may legitimately order death and that divine sovereignty is at least partly defined by its absolute power over the life and death of the individual and the very existence of reality as such. Also, if Abraham is made irreducibly singular by his “absolute relation to the absolute,” in the very same way Isaac too is irreducibly singular by his own “absolute relation to the absolute” – the God of Abraham is also the God of Isaac. The meaning of murder is made heavy here as the Binding is a sacrifice done in relation to no community with no ethical purpose. On Mount Moriah neither Abraham nor Isaac appear as citizens of a greater community. The two enter the scene as irreducible individuals, and Abraham raises his knife over Isaac who is his only legitimate son, the fulfilment of the promise of God, and an irreplaceable singularity. So how is Abraham reconciled to the universal? Is he reconciled by the fact that Isaac was spared and replaced by the ram given to him? Is Abraham restored to the ethical simply because the knife he raised did not shed the blood of Isaac?

It is of course not a trivial detail that the irreplaceable life of Isaac was spared and that Abraham ultimately did not commit murder, but the happy ending of Genesis 22 does not change the fact that Abraham bound Isaac and raised his knife, and neither does the fact that God spared Isaac and provided the ram change the fact that God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. There were no hints that God was only testing Abraham in such a way that he would never have let Abraham kill his son. There were

no promises of reprieve here, no such “eschatological promise” as Davenport wishes to see. Abraham never questioned the command of his sovereign and never asked for a reprieve. Abraham told no one, neither Isaac nor even Sarah, about the purpose of the journey to Mount Moriah, and when he raised his knife he raised it with the full intention to spill the blood of his son. Nothing changes the reality that in this terrible moment Abraham’s obedience to God, the passion of his faith, was manifested as the will to murder. Abraham’s knife is more terrible than the filicide of the tragic heroes, more horrifying precisely because it was raised in an exceptional moment in full communion with God. The meaning of the Binding is that Abraham was raised above the universal, and the height of the expression of faith was manifested as murder. Abraham, in his irreducible singularity, could have aborted his mission at any point of the journey. At the very last moment he could have refused to raise his knife. But we cannot make this domestically palatable – the four alternate versions of Genesis 22 that Silentio narrates in the “Exordium” are the ethical temptation. If the terror of Abraham’s knife cannot be stomach, faith itself must be rejected. There is no alternative. In the light of this, Abraham’s reconciliation with the universal is the greatest paradox of all. It is God alone who can claim a life, and it is God alone who can

restore a life. One either submits wholly to this *mysterium tremendum*, or one does not at all. There is no neutral ground.¹⁰²

Here, Constantius' notion that the legitimate exception is reconciled in the universal can also be read as a prayer. May the Lord of Hosts, who alone is sovereign, restore the individual to the universal for the sake of the individual who belongs to the world. This God, who is absolute sovereign, who wields an absolute power that operates as *absolute force*, may He be just. May this God, whose divine sovereignty contains the possibility of divine violence, whose absolute force is synonymous with absolute violence, cover his left hand with his right.

And so I pray.

¹⁰² "It is claimed that the arguments against Christianity arise out of doubt. This is a total misunderstanding. [They] arise out of insubordination, reluctance to obey, mutiny against all authority. Therefore, until now the battle against objections has been shadow-boxing, because it has been intellectual combat with doubt instead of ethical combat against mutiny." – Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers v.1*, p.359

Chapter 3: Isaac

*The sacrifice of Isaac is an abomination in the eyes of all, and it should continue to be seen for what it is – atrocious, criminal, unforgivable; Kierkegaard insists on that. The ethical point of view must remain valid: Abraham is a murderer.*¹⁰³

Jacques Derrida's *The Gift of Death and Literature in Secret* unfolds as a pair of essays concerned centrally with Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*. As briefly mentioned in the previous chapter, Derrida's commentary on *Fear and Trembling* is valuable because of Derrida's great sensitivity as a reader. Derrida sees the evangelical orientation of Kierkegaard clearly¹⁰⁴ and leaves the Christian orientation of the interpretation of the Binding intact. He does not try to contort Kierkegaard for his own purposes nor does he attempt to sanitize the text of *Fear and Trembling* of its difficult implications. That Derrida reads Kierkegaard with this kind of care both as a non-Christian and as someone who, in the course of his reading of *Fear and Trembling*, unambiguously challenges Kierkegaard is something that I deeply admire.

In this chapter will focus on the way Derrida interprets Kierkegaard's notion of individual exceptionality in *Fear and Trembling* and takes it further in his own particular fashion. In particular, I wish to give attention to the phrase "*tout autre est tout autre*" ("every other (one) is every (bit) other") that I understand as the crux of both Derrida's

¹⁰³ Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death and Literature in Secret* (2007), trans. David Wills, p.85

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p.81

interpretation of *Fear and Trembling* and the conceptual ground from which Derrida poses his challenge to Kierkegaard.

For Derrida, what makes one tremble in the event of the Binding, or even more generally in front of God, is the dissymmetry between oneself and God.

We fear and tremble because we are already in the hands of God, although free to work, but in the hands and under the gaze of God, whom we don't see and whose will we cannot know, no more than the decisions he will hand down, nor his reasons for wanting this or that, our life or death, our salvation or perdition. We fear and tremble before the inaccessible secret of a God who decides for us although we remain responsible, that is to say free to decide, to work, to assume our life and our death.¹⁰⁵

Derrida's attention in his reading of *Fear and Trembling* is focused on the notion of secrecy that permeates both *Fear and Trembling* and Genesis 22, and the broad shape of Derrida's understanding of the Binding has important parallels with Auerbach's assessment of the Binding that I examined in the previous chapter. Some passages from *The Gift of Death* can almost be mistaken as reflections of the first chapter of *Mimesis*:

... God is himself absent, hidden and silent, separate, secret, at the moment he has to be obeyed. God doesn't give his reasons, he acts as he intends, he doesn't have to give his reasons or share anything with us: neither his motivations, if he has any, nor his deliberations, nor even his decisions.¹⁰⁶

Derrida's reading here sees the hiddenness of God as an important theme in the Binding, similar to the way in which Silentio and Auerbach also understand this as the fundamental aspect the Binding. In both the theme of secrecy in *Fear and Trembling* and

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p.57

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p.58

the title of the work itself, Derrida notes a link to the “great Jewish convert, Paul,”¹⁰⁷ who asks the disciples to work out their salvation with fear and trembling in his absence.¹⁰⁸

In relation to the hidden God who veils his purposes is the Abraham who does not speak. However, Derrida notes that Abraham does indeed speak. In particular, Derrida notes how Silentio recalls Abraham’s reply to Isaac¹⁰⁹ when Isaac asks him where the lamb is for the burnt offering. Abraham answers: “God himself will provide the lamb.”¹¹⁰ This case of Abraham is made more peculiar by the fact that he does not actually lie to Isaac either in his indirect response and how what Abraham says to Isaac, although he does not know it yet, becomes true in the most literal sense. Following Derrida’s reading here, the question of Abraham’s silence for Silentio must be understood as more than just literal silence. Abraham is silent in the sense of keeping God’s command secret, silent in the sense of resisting the temptation of being relieved by “translating himself into the universal.”¹¹¹

Commenting on Silentio’s notion of speaking as the “translation” of oneself into the universal, Derrida argues that the “first effect” of language deprives the individual

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p.57-58

¹⁰⁸ “Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling” – Philippians 2:12

¹⁰⁹ Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, p.59

¹¹⁰ Isaac said to his father Abraham, “Father!” And he said, “Here I am, my son.” He said, “The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” Abraham said, “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” – Genesis 22:7-8

¹¹¹ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p.113

of (or *delivers* one from) one's singularity.¹¹² If Abraham "kept silent" even as he spoke to Isaac, then "speaking" too is to be understood as having a particular meaning other than the simply the literality of speaking. For Derrida, the act of speaking appears to be similar to the return to generality in both *Silentio* and *Constantius*. If one were to "speak all the time without secrets," says Derrida, one "would not be other."¹¹³ If one truly spoke, then by the act itself, which is synonymous with revealing, one enters into relationship with another that shares a "type of homogeneity." It is in this sense that Derrida here asserts that discourse partakes of this sameness. One can here interpret this asserting both that the revealing of a secret manifests in "speaking," and in parallel, speaking, as discourse, is the unveiling of secrets.

Derrida's comments here on language in relation to the Binding follows *Silentio's* footsteps closely. The note that Abraham "says a lot" and the following remarks of speaking without speaking and responding without responding is a continuation of *Silentio's* meditation:

Abraham remains silent – but he *cannot* speak. Therein lies the distress and anxiety. Even though I go on talking night and day without interruption, if I cannot make myself understood when I speak, then I am not speaking. This is the case with Abraham. He can say everything, but one thing he cannot say, and if he cannot say that – that is, say it in such a way that the other understands it – then he is not speaking.¹¹⁴

¹¹² Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, p.61

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p.58

¹¹⁴ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p.113

What is important to note here is the way Derrida carries through Silentio's thoughts closely while also exploring further implications from Silentio's own concepts. Derrida interprets Silentio's notion of the individual who becomes singular in one's "absolute relation to the absolute," to pose the notion that exceptionality, as understood in the Kierkegaardian fashion, has a deep contrary relationship with "speaking." Although it is already present in *Fear and Trembling*, Derrida's interpretation directs our attention more sharply to the question of the secret, and here Derrida sees in the dynamic of Abraham's "absolute relation to the absolute" what he calls a "double secret."¹¹⁵ Abraham must keep the secret of God's command from his family, in part because it is his duty but also because he *can only* keep it. Not only would universal ethics be unable to find the command comprehensible or justifiable but Abraham himself does not know God's reasons. As Derrida sees it, "Abraham is sworn to secrecy because he is in secret."¹¹⁶

Following these comments on language, Derrida notes a strange relationship between responsibility and silence. According to Silentio, ethical exigency is defined by participation in generality by justifying oneself, giving account of one's own decisions, and taking responsibility for one's actions. However, in the case of Abraham the infinite responsibility to God binds him to silence. The generality of ethics compels Abraham to

¹¹⁵ Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, p.60

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

speak, and thus leads him to irresponsibility in relation to God, and on the other hand the “absolute relation to the absolute” compels Abraham to *silence*, and thus leads him to irresponsibility in relation to ethics. For Derrida, the case of Abraham reveals to us a certain aporia of responsibility: there is a “paradoxical contradiction between responsibility *in general* and *absolute* responsibility.”¹¹⁷ The tension in the centre of *Fear and Trembling* is this problem of “irresponsibilization” that remains unresolved in Abraham.

Up to this point, Derrida’s reading follows Kierkegaard closely, particularly maintaining sensitivity to the dissymmetry in the relationship between Abraham and God. Following this theme, Derrida calls the strange God of Abraham “wholly other,”¹¹⁸ and it is from this point that Derrida builds his response to Silentio. It is this God, who is wholly other, that one is bound to by an absolute and unconditional obligation, and to this God one has an absolute duty that demands that one behaves in an irresponsible manner while still recognizing, confirming, and reaffirming the order of universal ethics that retains all its value even as one fails it.¹¹⁹

Here I would like to return to the subject of Isaac that was touched upon in the previous chapter. Just as Abraham is made an irreducible singularity through his “absolute relation to the absolute,” in the same way Isaac is also an irreducible

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p.62

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p.58

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p.67

singularity by his one “absolute relation to the absolute” that is also above universal ethics and discourse as such. One can complicate Silentio’s dialectic by arguing that even if one accepts the “teleological suspension of the ethical” and say that one’s absolute responsibility to God supersedes all universal ethics, this says little about the life of Isaac as such. Isaac as a singular individual is not synonymous with the nation, the state, or the church, because his irreducible singularity cannot be subsumed into some kind of totality. It is from this thought that Derrida builds his response to Silentio with a particular reinterpretation of the Kierkegaardian concept of the exception.

The term “wholly other” that Derrida applies to God is consonant with the concept of God that has been examined throughout this project in the sense that the absolute sovereign who is not of this world and is shrouded in mysteries, both in being and action, can be understood as the one who is “wholly other.” But Derrida takes this concept and carries it further with the formula: *every other (one) is every (bit) other*. For Derrida, this formula both disturbs and reinforces the implications of Silentio’s dialectic.¹²⁰

What Derrida sees in the structure of the dynamic of irresponsibilization in the “absolute relation to the absolute” is that the very notion of an absolute responsibility, an absolute duty, forces one to be responsible to one at the cost of all others. But while Silentio’s meditation on the Binding focuses on how Abraham’s responsibility to God

¹²⁰ Ibid., p.78

operates in a “teleological suspension” of universal ethics for God, Derrida’s interpretation universalizes this dynamic so that the process of irresponsibilization does not rest only in the tension between one’s responsibility to God and one’s responsibility to the world, but between one’s responsibility to the other and *any* other. What Derrida argues is that even within the framework of human ethics one’s responsibility to any particular person is upheld only by failing in one’s responsibility to all others. Just as Abraham cannot ethically justify the raising of his knife, one’s failure to *any* other for the sake of *an* other cannot be justified either. “What binds me to singularities, to this one or that one, male or female, rather than that one or this one, remains finally unjustifiable.”¹²¹ Just as Abraham’s responsibility to God is to the singularity of his divine majesty, Abraham’s responsibility to Isaac is also a father’s responsibility to the singularity of his son, and this paternal responsibility itself is an irreducible singularity that is not completely subsumed by ethical generality.

By following this thought, Derrida further complicates Silentio’s problem by arguing that our responsibility to any particular other is structurally similar to, if not the same as, Abraham’s responsibility to God. If the other is singular like both God and myself in the “absolute relation to the absolute,” then my relation to the other is structurally similar to my relation to God. Following this thought, Derrida then postulates that God, as “wholly other,” can be found wherever there is something

¹²¹ Ibid., p.71

“wholly other.” Since each and every one of us are irreducible singularities, what one can say about Abraham’s relation to God can be said about every relation to each and every other. “Every other (in the sense of each other) is wholly other (absolutely other).¹²² The formula ‘every other (one) is every (bit) other’ can then be reproduced as ‘every other (one) is God,’ or ‘God is every (bit) other.’”¹²³

Derrida is well aware that what he presents here is not just a simple reading, that this formula he fashions out of what he sees in Silentio is a kind of counter-interpretation. Fundamentally, Derrida’s response to Silentio operates by displacing the “absolute uniqueness” of the Biblical God that does not tolerate analogy.¹²⁴ But I believe that there is a real sense to Derrida’s universalization of the exception that one can follow without erasing the “absolute uniqueness” of God that is central to Kierkegaard’s exception and the Binding. In Chapter 1 I noted that the Kierkegaardian concept of the exception in *Repetition* carries a broader sense than it does in Schmitt’s interpretation, which the latter fashions into his concept of sovereignty in *Political Theology*. Exceptionality is not something that is in God alone. Even if one were to understand the concept of the exception and the “knight of faith” as being singular and above the world through the sovereign God, the structure of this exceptional “absolute relation to the absolute” is something that is possible for each and every person. The

¹²² Ibid., p.78

¹²³ Ibid., p.87

¹²⁴ Ibid., p.79

Kierkegaardian concept of the exception and its orientation towards the singular individual is “universal” in a Lutheran sense that anyone has, or can have, a direct personal relationship with God that is unmediated.

But Derrida’s counter-interpretation that “every other (one) is every (bit) other” is, despite its “disturbing likeness” to Silentio’s concepts, incompatible with Kierkegaard.¹²⁵ The crux of the matter is that although one could argue that Kierkegaard’s concept of the exception implies a certain radical singularity that exists in each and every individual, the irreducibility of the individual is only possible through the absolute sovereign and as such the singularity of the individual has no direct relationship to the other. If two individuals were to somehow come into relation with each other in a singular way, within the Kierkegaardian framework such a thing could only be possible *through* God. But Derrida’s counter-interpretation suggests that the structure of the “absolute relation to the absolute” exists in one’s relation not only to God but to each and every other, and this is reinforced with the notion that the singularity of any other is as singular and irreducible as God himself. If in Kierkegaard the singularity of every individual is parallel to one another, with Derrida one could perhaps imagine a sprawling network where each and every other can have an “absolute relation” with one another, but with only one at any singular moment of time. The singularity of both oneself and the other is no longer grounded on the sovereignty

¹²⁵ Ibid., p.83

of the transcendent God and through this the dynamic of the case of Abraham can be understood as applicable to *all* relations. One can make sense of Derrida's formula, "every other (one) is every (bit) other," by understanding it as a radical reorientation of the Kierkegaardian "absolute relation to the absolute."

Here one is brought to another crossroad. Despite the similarities between Kierkegaard and Derrida in their treatment of Abraham, their "disturbing likeness," Derrida's counter-interpretation is ultimately incompatible with Kierkegaard because it rests on a different concept of God. Derrida wishes to stop thinking about God as a transcendent figure, and the reproduction of his formula that equates the other with God so that *every other* is *wholly other* reflects this desire. One could perhaps risk saying here that Derrida's counter-interpretation of the Binding shows us an underlying "atheism." Because of this fundamental difference one cannot simply find a happy medium between the two, a kind of neutral ground. Falling into such a temptation would be a deep error that would disregard what is at stake for both Kierkegaard and Derrida over the Binding.

One can perhaps understand Derrida's notion that "every other (one) is every (bit) other" also as a challenge to sovereignty as such. In the context of the Binding this counter-interpretation means that Abraham's duty to Isaac claims Abraham with as much exceptional immediacy as God's command to sacrifice Isaac. If "every other (one) is every (bit) other," then Isaac is as wholly other as God, and with such a radical

reorientation, the sovereignty of the strange God is dissolved. What is valuable in Derrida's reading of the Binding is his powerful affirmation of the otherness of the other, that the other is not and cannot be subsumed into the general totality and that each and every other has its own irreducible singularity by the virtue of being other.

Derrida's reading does not "solve" the problem of Abraham's knife. Despite its ultimate incompatibility with Silentio's interpretation of the Binding, what is shared between Derrida and Kierkegaard is that the tension is irresolvable and will always remain as a paradox. Even in the universalized "every other (one) is every (bit) other," the tension that Silentio sees in Abraham remains. Furthermore, Derrida's universalization of the Kierkegaardian exception still follows Kierkegaard's suspicion of generality and universal ethics. But by destabilizing the uniqueness of God and jettisoning with it the unique veneration that one is to give to God, Derrida challenges the ground of Kierkegaard's faith upon which the concept of the exception and the "knight of faith" operates: the power of sovereignty, the force of sovereignty, and the faith in the sovereign that will restore what is lost.

A decision must be made here. Who is God, and what is God's relation to the world? Is there a God at all? What is the status of the other, and what is the other's relation to me; what is the other's relation to God, to the other other? Derrida's reading of *Fear and Trembling* is important for the sensitivity and ingenuity displayed, but ultimately one is met with a chasm over the question of God himself and the ontological

implications that follow every different concept of (or denial of) God. But the lesson that remains for the reader of Kierkegaard, even if the reader chooses to affirm the transcendent and sovereign God of Kierkegaard, is the absolute singularity of Isaac that is heightened by Derrida's reading. What Derrida emphasizes for us is that the tension is irresolvable, that one *cannot* fulfil all of one's duties. It is ontologically impossible. The other who is not God also has his or her mysteries that are hidden to us, and one may be beholden to such an other, bound by a "double secret," and our relation to any other may not be symmetrical.

In a certain sense, the tension between Silentio's interpretation of the Binding and Derrida's counter-interpretation of *Fear and Trembling* too is irresolvable, undecidable without recourse to fundamental prejudices. We of course cannot *not think* about what the event of the Binding means in a work of the late 20th century and to the reader of today. Isaac was bound on the altar as a burnt offering, as *holocaust*. One must read Derrida's treatment of the Binding in *The Gift of Death*, first published in 1990, in proximity to *The Force of Law* that was first presented in 1989. Derrida's suspicion of Benjamin's concept of divine violence that annihilates as it expiates as bloodless violence is instructive for us here. Just as Derrida is terrified at the idea of an interpretation that would make the holocaust a form of bloodless violence through the image of the gas chambers and the cremation ovens,¹²⁶ one must also be terrified of the

¹²⁶ Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority,'" *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar, p.298

idea of the Binding being interpreted unproblematically, as if the fact that Isaac's blood was not shed clears the event from violence. One could perhaps object that all of this proceeds too literally. But is there anything more vivid than blood, more representative of both life and violence than blood? Derrida's suspicion concerning the "messianico-Marxist" and "archeo-eschatological" form of Benjamin's thought can be carried on to suggest that Derrida's counter-interpretation of Kierkegaard is also suspicious of the implicit eschatology in Kierkegaard's thought. Even if Kierkegaard differs greatly from Benjamin, Kierkegaard's thought also submits to an eschatology that attests to the sovereign God who wields divine violence.

Although it may be that sovereignty is inseparable from violence as force, if one submits to this God then the difficult implications of the nature of sovereignty cannot lead one to dismiss the sovereignty of the strange God. In a certain sense the tension between Kierkegaard and Derrida on the Binding is undecidable because the decision was already made before one comes to realize Derrida's subversive strategy. Either one affirms the sovereign, unique God of Abraham or one does not, and in the face of the *mysterium tremendum* either one prays or one revolts. There is no neutral alternative. The concept of the exception, both interpreted within the dynamic of sovereignty and in Derrida's anti-sovereignty, remains unresolved, and with it the unsolved problem of violence also remains unresolved. Perhaps I too, here as both reader and writer, am

bound to a double secret, unable to speak because I do not know what is to be spoken, if anything can truly be spoken at all.

And so I submit myself.

Final Remarks

By focusing on the problem of sovereignty in Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* I hope to have emphasized dutifully the central importance of the "absolute relation to the absolute" for understanding both the text of *Fear and Trembling* itself and the primary intellectual orientation of Kierkegaard as a thinker. With regards to the scriptural text of Genesis 22 in particular, I hope to have presented a faithful interpretation that did not "exegete away" the difficulties of the text that are at once also the flesh and blood of the Binding. If I have succeeded in this endeavor I could perhaps say with some certainty that the force of sovereignty cannot be separated from violence. This relationship between sovereignty and violence is not simply one of possibility where sovereign power, by the very fact of it being sovereign, can exercise the highest violence. Rather, due to the heteronomy within the very structure of sovereign power and sovereign command, the very exercise of sovereign power is in itself *always* a violent action; the very being of the sovereign is violent, for the manifestation of he who is not of this world always comes as a *rupture*, as apocalypse. If one is to affirm sovereignty one must, by that very fact, affirm also the most hyperbolic form of violence. However, this does not preclude the possibility of the Good, and in the language of theology, it is this very sovereign who saves the world.

This is the difficulty – how does one understand God the sovereign as at once being both the God who commands Abraham to murder his only legitimate son while

also being the God who promises salvation? Human ethics may not have any legitimacy *over* the will of the sovereign but our ethics still stands on its own grounds even before God. This is one of the most important parts of Silentio's meditation in *Fear and Trembling*, and it is precisely because Silentio affirms the relative legitimacy of ethics even in front of the absolute sovereign that both Hegel and Derrida's critique of Abraham, although very different from each other, are deeply important for the reader of *Fear and Trembling*. In the abstract, it is difficult to follow through with the implications of *Fear and Trembling* and with Biblical eschatology as a whole, and as a student of philosophy, I side with Derrida's counter-interpretation against Kierkegaard.

But as a student of theology, as one who affirms both the form and the content of Kierkegaard's meditations in *Repetition* and *Fear and Trembling*, I can only kneel to the God of Abraham and pray even if I share Derrida's suspicions and concerns. And perhaps here I can go no further within the framework of this project as a study of the concept of sovereignty in *Fear and Trembling*. But there are a number of avenues from which one could expand from this study. Every part of this thesis could be expanded through more thorough scholarship such as looking more deeply into Schmitt, examining the relationship between Schmitt and Taubes, and commenting on Taubes' negative reception of Kierkegaard. The third chapter of this thesis is particularly lacking and could be greatly expanded through a close examination of Benjamin's *Critique of*

Violence and Derrida's *Force of Law* which would undoubtedly have significance for interpreting the problem of sovereignty as conceptualized in this project.

In a way, it seems that my work here culminates by merely pointing at crossroads where each of us must make a decision, and I pray that I have at the very least fulfilled this preliminary task dutifully. I do not hope to have accomplished more than that. If for Silentio, the poet cannot hope to be greater than the heroes the poet immortalizes, in turn I do not hope to be greater than Silentio, who called himself a supplementary clerk, nor greater than Kierkegaard, who wrote with "no authority." If I have, at the very least, succeeded in performing the duties of a supplementary clerk to "theological claptrap," I will be at peace.

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