



October 2014

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Recommended Citation

Rogers, Eugene F.. "The Binding of Isaac as a Trickster Narrative: And God Said “Na”." *Journal of Textual Reasoning* 8, no. 1 (2014): 80-88. <https://doi.org/10.21220/s2-7z4w-gs53>.

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THE BINDING OF ISAAC AS A TRICKSTER NARRATIVE: AND GOD SAID “NA”

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New Testament accounts of discipleship, especially of Peter, and especially in the Gospel of Mark, emphasize that the disciples frequently or usually fail to understand, disobey, deny, betray, fall asleep, and run away. The synoptics portray God as exercising patience and forbearance to use ordinary, fallible people. Thus, Peter (whose unreliability renders his name, “the rock” ironic) denies Jesus three times, Jesus once calls him “Satan,” and yet, this is the very one whom God elects a servant. Paul persecutes the God-fearers, and yet God makes him an apostle. In the Christian context, it is at least possible to entertain the possibility that

¹ Peter Ochs first got me to think seriously about the Aqedah at a Children of Abraham Institute session in Charlottesville after 9/11/2001 (“Isaac in the Eucharist,” *Journal for Scriptural Reasoning* 2:3 [(September 2002) at <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/journals/ssr/>]) The present paper began when I sat in on my colleague Marc Bregman’s course on the Aqedah, took shape at the Tantur Ecumenical Research Institute in Jerusalem, and took final form as I thought about blood and sacrifice during a Templeton-supported fellowship at the Center of Theological Inquiry. I wish to thank my Dean, Timothy Johnston, for making all three occasions possible. I thank Marc Bregman, Sarah Bregman, Steven Kepnes, and Diana Lipton for reading earlier drafts, although I have only myself to thank for neglecting their advice. See also the discussion in *Journal of Textual Reasoning* 2:1 on the Aqedah.

Abraham, in the best of company, also fails the test—and, like the others, remains the one of God’s choice. The pattern is that the human being fails miserably, and God uses him or her anyway. In the Book of Genesis, it would scarcely be an overstatement to say that this use translates into the language of trickery. From Laban’s duplicity concerning the marriages of his sisters and Jacob’s duplicity in return, to Jacob’s and Rebekah’s ruses to co-opt Esau’s birthright, to Joseph’s brothers’ conspiracy to eliminate him, multiple stories in Genesis showcase tricksters who make advantageous use of the fallibilities of those with whom they interact. Abraham—who, repeatedly attempts to pass off his wife as his sister—is not the least of these tricksters, and one may entertain the possibility that in the story of the Aqedah, Abraham fails a test of his own—not unlike Peter and Paul—but that God chooses him regardless, opting to speak Abraham’s familiar language of trickery in order to correct his near-fatal misunderstanding of God’s will.

What if Abraham misunderstands God’s desires, and God goes along with him as a teaching exercise? Then God’s command, “[t]ake your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah” (Gen. 22:2) has a different tenor. The object of the imperative features a long, extended pile up of appositives (“your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love”) as if the speaker is buying time while thinking out loud. It has a slow, building, deliberative quality. It says, “I know you, Abraham. You’re infected by the Molochite tendency to think that child sacrifice is a good thing to do.² I’m not sure how I’m going to persuade you that this is not what I want. Maybe I have to let you go ahead with this maniacal idea, and stop you well into the process.” It says, “Okay, go ahead! I throw up my hands! Oh, no, don’t let me stop you, Abraham. (Not yet, anyway.)” The command, in short, is to be read as irony. The story is not tragedy—it does, after all, have a happy ending—but it has rarely been read as a dark comedy. My reading is unconventional. Is there any textual evidence for it?

² See Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 50.

I think there is just a little, which will bring this essay into that legendary category of exegesis in which everything depends upon a jot or a tittle (or in this case, a bit more: two letters). I call the essay “And God said ‘Na.’” “Na” (nun-aleph) is the particle of entreaty, usually untranslated or rendered as “please,” with which God’s command to Abraham begins: “Take (na) your son.” Brown Driver Briggs, the standard lexicon of the Hebrew Bible, admits that it is sometimes used “ironically, as a challenge.” So it is in Is. 47:12 (“Stand fast (na) in your enchantments and your many sorceries”) or when God speaks to Job out of the whirlwind in 40:10 (“Deck yourself (na) with majesty and dignity; clothe yourself with glory and splendor”). These, I argue, are both commands with the ironic or even sarcastic “na,” as in Genesis 22:2.

Sometimes “na” appears with a sense of warning, as in the “Beware (na)” of Judges 13:4, and, significantly, when Delilah is tricking Samson: “Tell me (na) how you might be bound” (Judges 16:6 and 16:10). It appears again when Samson begs God to return his strength in Judges 16:28, again with no innocent intent. I could go on.

In some cases “na” seems colorless, but in many cases it seems loaded. If it is polite, it may mask the mocking of excessive courtesy. If it starts out colorless, it marks the first stage of craving a favorable response, a stage that may lead to bargaining and manipulation. In signal cases it becomes ironic, dubious, or tricky. It issues an implicit or explicit warning. “Na,” in the mouth of Samson or Delilah, the prophet or the psalmist, or, as we will see, in the mouth of Abraham or God, is rarely innocent, and it is particularly instructive to see how Abraham himself uses “na.” From Abraham we get what you might call the “na” of the dubious proposition. So Abraham uses “na” to propose that Sarah lie: “Say (na) you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared on your account” (Gen. 12:13). He also voices the “na” of “let’s see.” When “the land could not support [Abram and Lot] dwelling together,” Abraham suggests dividing it, with “na”: “Separate yourself (na) from me. if to the left, then I will go to the right” (Gen 13.9). This is not said in irony, but in the sense of “let’s make a deal.” Is this good for Lot? Let him beware, if Abraham proposes it.

What if God is imitating Abraham's own usages—deliberative, ironic, using his wits: "Say! I have an idea! Let's try this! Hey, Abraham, want to sacrifice your son? Okay, go ahead! See if I care! (But maybe you'll come to your senses!)" It is easy to see how this tack may be the right to deal with Abraham, whom "the author of Genesis 20 portrays as an even more subtle con man than does the author of Genesis 12" in a pattern of escalating manipulation.³ It is easy to see how this strategy on God's part might link up with tricksters in the Hebrew Bible and misguided disciples in the New Testament. Many rabbinic interpretations offer no support to mine,⁴ but *Midrash Tanhuma* does offer some:

(According to Jer. 19:5), "And they have built high places to Baal for burning their sons in the fire, burnt offerings to Baal, which I never commanded, never spoke for, and which never entered my mind" ...Moreover, it "never entered my mind" to tell Abraham to slaughter his son...Even though I said to him (in Gen. 22:2): "Please take your son," it never entered my mind that he would slaughter his son. It is therefore stated (in Ps. 89:35): "I will not defile my covenant."⁵

The attraction of my interpretation is that it solves the theodicy puzzle of why a good God would command child sacrifice even as a test: Abraham *fails* the test. He should have said "No!" After all, Abraham does sometimes say "no" to God, as in his bargaining for Sodom. This time, however, Abraham fails to say "no" or even to bargain—and God can work with that.

My interpretation depends upon hearing irony in a written text with no stage directions. We could hear it in a properly inflected oral performance, but in a text there is no recourse except to other textual examples. It is in the nature of this case that I will provide the evidence at

³ Susan Niditch, *Underdogs and Tricksters: A Prelude to Biblical Folklore* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 55.

⁴ With thanks to Marc Bregman, whose attitude is interested skepticism; Sarah Bregman finds my interpretation scandalous.

⁵ *Midrash Tanhuma: Genesis*, trans. and ed. John T. Townsend (Jersey City, NJ: KTAV, 1989), 124.

some length, with or even without editorial comment, because it must be convincing more or less on its own. I quote the RSV and organize it according to the speaker. Please (na) skip ahead if you don't need it. Go ahead. Feel free. Be my guest.

Abraham Says "Na"

In several of these examples, the "na" creates the impression that the powerful party occupies a servile position.

It came about when he came near to Egypt, that he said to Sarai his wife, "See now (na), I know that you are a beautiful woman. Please (na) say that you are my sister so that it may go well with me because of you, and that I may live on account of you." (Gen. 12.11-13)

So Abram said to Lot, "Please (na) let there be no strife between you and me, nor between my herdsmen and your herdsmen, for we are brothers. Is not the whole land before you? Please (na) separate from me; if to the left, then I will go to the right; or if to the right, then I will go to the left." (Gen. 13.8)

Then he said, "Oh may (na) the Lord not be angry, and I shall speak; suppose thirty are found there?" And He said, "I will not do it if I find thirty there." And he said, "Now (na) behold, I have ventured to speak to the Lord; suppose twenty are found there?" And He said, "I will not destroy it on account of the twenty." Then he said, "Oh may (na) the Lord not be angry, and I shall speak only this once ; suppose ten are found there ?" And He said, "I will not destroy it on account of the ten." (Gen. 18.30-32)

Lot Says "Na"

And [Lot] said, "Now behold, my lords, please (na) turn aside into your servant's house, and spend the night, and wash your feet; then you may rise early and go on your way." They said however, "No, but we shall spend the night in the square." (Gen. 19.2)

"Please [na], my brothers, do not act wickedly. Now behold, I have two daughters who have not had relations with man; please (na) let me bring them out to you, and do to them whatever you like; only do nothing to these men, inasmuch as they have come under the shelter of my roof." (Gen. 19.7-8)

Another dubious proposition; people do things they shouldn't, under duress.

But Lot said to them, "Oh no, my lords! Now behold, your servant has found favor in your sight, and you have magnified your lovingkindness, which you have shown me by saving my life; but I cannot escape to the mountains, for the disaster will overtake me and I will die; now behold, this town is near enough to flee to, and it is small. Please (na), let me escape there (is it not small?) that my life may be saved." (Gen. 19.18-20)

Esau Says "Na"

Esau said to Jacob, "Please (na) let me have a swallow of that red stuff there, for I am famished. But Jacob said, "First sell me your birthright." Esau said, "Behold, I am about to die; so of what use then is the birthright to me?" And Jacob said, "First swear to me"; so he swore to him, and he sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew; and he ate and drank, and rose and went on his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright. (Gen. 25.30-34)

Not a wise bargain. What starts with "na" may not end well.

Jacob Hears His Father Say "Na" and Says "Na" Himself

Isaac said, "Behold now (na), I am old and I do not know the day of my death. "Now then, please (na) take your gear, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field and hunt game for me..."Go now to the flock and bring me two choice young goats from there, that I may prepare them as a savory dish for your father, such as he loves. (Gen. 27.2-3, 9)

Jacob said to his father, "I am Esau your firstborn; I have done as you told me. Get up, please (na), sit and eat of my game, that you may bless me" ... Then Isaac said to Jacob, "Please come close (na), that I may feel you, my son, whether you are really my son Esau or not." (Gen. 27.19, 21)

Laban's Trickery Revealed with "Na": Jacob Speaking to Rachel and Leah

He said, 'Lift up now your eyes and see that all the male goats which are mating are striped, speckled, and mottled; for I have seen all that Laban has been doing to you.'" (Gen. 31.12)

Jacob Asks the Angel's Name (Not a Fair Question):

Then Jacob asked him and said, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And he blessed him there. (Gen 32.29)

The Hearers of "Na":

And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, "Please (na) let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain after one in whose sight I may find favor." And she said to her, "Go, my daughter." (Ruth 2.2)

In Ruth, the Use of "na" sounds colorless, but it is not colorless, just cleverer than usual. Ruth too does not ask innocently. Ruth too has a plan. Here too there is more in store for the hearer of "na" than he foresees.

God Says "Na"

"Come now (na), and let us reason together," says the LORD, "though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool." (Isa. 1:18)

"Now therefore, come make a bargain (na) with my master the king of Assyria, and I will give you two thousand horses, if you are able on your part to set riders on them." (Isa. 36.8)

Stand fast now (na) in your spells and in your many sorceries with which you have labored from your youth; perhaps you will be able to profit, perhaps you may cause trembling. You are wearied with your many counsels; let now (na) the astrologers, Those who prophesy by the stars, those who predict by the new moons, stand up and save you from what will come upon you. (Isa. 47.12-13).

Therefore, please (na) hear this, you afflicted, who are drunk, but not with wine. (Isa. 51.21)

The Joseph story is also full of tricks with "na," and other cases recur as Jacob woos Rachel—a scenario full of negotiation and desire—but we hardly need more evidence. In Genesis, it is bargainers and tricksters more often than not say "na." We should be wary of it, as we have seen, and regarding this, we close with considering the one person tellingly left out of the "na" conversation between God and Abraham in the Aqedah. The

story does not portray Sarah as hearing the “na,”⁶ but nevertheless, and unlike Abraham, she may be more used to hearing it than saying it. She may, then, be in a better position to hear it as ambiguous and manipulative, manic and fraught with bravado, than Abraham is, who hardly has the self-awareness to hear *himself* using it that way. Sarah knows Abraham is prone to such negotiations, and, thus, he is also susceptible to them. These “na”s might well rouse exasperation in a spouse, but now they would strike Sarah with terror. This is her son the bargainers are negotiating. According to the midrash in *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer*, it is Satan who comes to tell Sarah what went on at Mt. Moriah,⁷ and he could have hardly begun with a more chilling phrase than “I heard God speaking to Abraham, and God said ‘Na...’”

Rarely is “na” colorless in Genesis. It reveals power relations, and, typically, the more powerful party craves something that is nevertheless in the power of the subordinate to give. We should expect, then, that God’s “na” in the Aqedah is of this sort, because by saying “na,” God acts the role of the petitioner; he assumes the posture of the one without power, at

⁶ Jerome Gellman notes that the role of Sarah [in Gen. 22] throws into relief the role of Abraham, representing a maternal logic [that does not bargain over sons] in direct conflict with a paternal imperative. ‘Sarah is lost,’ he concludes, unless the sacrificial imperative does not stand alone; unless there exists an additional, quite different central religious imperative; unless we say that Abraham personified one religious ideal and Sarah another; unless, somehow, in fairness to both Sarah and Abraham, we are to live an exquisite balance between two opposing religious commands.’ [Gellman, *Abraham! Abraham! Kierkegaard and the Hasidim on the Binding of Isaac* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Press, 2003)] This ‘opposing’ religious command may be reflected in that aspect of the discourse of sacrifice often left to the background in the theories we have been canvassing, the dimension that is not focused on blood, expiation, and paternity but on food, nourishment, and communal identity. Indeed, these dimensions of sacrifice may not be as easily divorced as has been implied, for the two often go together, the bloody sacrifice and immolation of parts of an animal, for instance, followed by a feast of celebration in which other parts are consumed in celebration. Here, the role of women and mothers comes to the fore in a different way and offers different possibilities for figural representation and religious practice.” Cleo McNelly Kearns, “Abrahamic Sacrifice,” in *The Virgin Mary, Monotheism, and Sacrifice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 80-81.

⁷ *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer* 32 (72b).

the mercy of the human he petitions. In the binding of Isaac, "na" puts God in the position of the powerful at the mercy of the subordinate. God experiences the helplessness of the one who loves someone flawed, and resorts to the scheming of the other Genesis tricksters, scheming which can take place in deadly earnest.