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התחלות חדשות

New Beginnings

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מדעי היהדות

Land Acknowledgment

We acknowledge that this edition of *Dorot* was produced on unceded Kanien'kehà:ka land. The area upon which McGill University now sits has also long been a place of meeting and exchange for Huron-Wendat, Abenaki, and Anishinaabe peoples.

The opinions expressed herein are solely those of the authors included. They do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Jewish Studies or the Jewish Studies Students' Association.

Cover Art: Claire Elizabeth Frankel

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Foreword

Professor Eric Caplan
Jewish Studies Department Chair

To an onlooker like me, this issue of *Dorot* feels like the proverbial rabbit pulled out of the magician's hat: from nothing, something wonderful has appeared! But, like every good magician's trick, a lot of behind-the-scenes work is required to make a journal appear, seemingly out of thin air. My colleagues and I applaud the editors for initiating and seeing to fruition the impressive "magic trick" that is *Dorot* (Volume 20) and extend our congratulations to the authors of the four interesting and well-researched papers included with its pages. The Department of Jewish Studies is blessed with gifted students and we, your teachers, do not take this for granted.

I have no doubt that the editors and authors, whose work appears here, will continue to look back in pride at this volume. Congratulations and best wishes to all!

Letter from the Editors in Chief

Jonah Philip Fried
Minna Bachman

Jewish Studies has changed considerably since this journal's last issue. Every month, it seems, researchers reveal new findings that seem to re-write the Jewish past. In December 2022, we learned that the great Ashkenazi genetic "bottleneck" developed sooner than most scholars anticipated.[1] In April, historian Carlo Vecce shared evidence that Leonardo da Vinci's mother may have been an enslaved Jewish woman.[2] Although these findings are not entirely shocking, they demonstrate that Jewish studies is far from stagnant.

And yet, this analytical process may contradict basic Jewish instincts. As Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi put it in his celebrated 1982 work, *Zachor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, there is a disconnect between what Jews remember (*zachor*) about the past and what we learn from historiography.[3] Writing modern history requires a flexible epistemology. Jewish memory, in contrast, is quite rigid. Aside from Josephus (who was, after all, a Romanized Jew), Jewish chroniclers factored their lives into a pre-existing Biblical formula. They reasoned that, if G-d is unchanging, then he tests every generation in similar, predictable ways. Far from a space-time continuum, the Jewish cosmos are an infinite loop that only Mashiach can bisect when he returns. This dialectical logic shapes everything from the weekly *parashot* to the Passover Seder.

Nevertheless, Jewish Studies is constantly in motion. This year's *Dorot* edition is a small sample size—only four articles—but its articles cover a broad subject area. It begins with Alden Tabac's essay on the *Akedah*, in which he reconsiders Abraham's challenge to G-d. Liam Gerry follows this analytical trajectory, applying a new approach to the Maccabean Revolt. Treating the Books of the Maccabees as primary sources, Gerry argues that the Hellenistic *gymnasia* represented an "anti-Temple." Moving forward to the 20th century, Benjamin Wexler analyzes Walter Benjamin's writings, showing how he reconciled Marxist materialism and Jewish messianism. Finally, Shlomo Enkin Lewis pays careful attention to Susan Bartoletti's Jewish children's literature, which applies a feminist approach to the Story of Noah.

Many people helped us bring this 20th *Dorot* together. Above all, we wish to congratulate the writers and editors. We owe additional thanks to the Jewish Studies Students Association (JSSA) and the Department for their institutional support. We are grateful for their continued backing despite COVID-19's challenges and other hurdles. We also wish to extend a special thanks

[1] Shamam Waldman, Daniel Backenroth, et al., "Genome-wide data from medieval German Jews show that the Ashkenazi founder event pre-dated the 14th century," *Cell* 185, no. 25 (December 8, 2022): 4703-4716, https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0092867422013782.
[2] Marc Weitzman, "Leonardo da Vinci Was Jewish," *Tablet*, April 3, 2023, https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/history/articles/leonardo-da-vinci-jewish?fbclid=IwAR1alBiND39K2EU-0U91pkPGI1h6TjqeBEJ_R7UGH0rzDr3EIuGI0fi8mvo.
[3] Yosef Hayyim Yerushalmi, *Zachor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: UWP, 1982), xxi; 81-90.

to Claire Frankel for her cover design. Lastly (but not least), we are grateful to Professor Eric Kaplan for his foreword to this year's journal.

Thank you for reading.

Jonah Fried and Minna Bachman
Editors-in-Chief
Dorot XX

How Abraham's Challenge to God regarding Sodom Influenced his Behaviour in the Akedah

Alden Tabac

Among the most consequential biblical figures, Abraham is such a significant character that Judaism, Christianity and Islam are referred to as the Abrahamic religions. Abraham's unique relationship with God reveals much about the Divine will. Two of the most iconic interactions between God and Abraham are Abraham's challenge preceding the destruction of Sodom and God's request for Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac (the *Akedah*). This paper seeks to explain the relationship between these two interactions and includes close readings of the biblical narratives along with relevant Midrashic elaborations. To be clear, the argument in this paper is not based on historical context nor purely philosophical analysis; rather, the argument strives to resolve the following issue through a literary account that considers content from midrashim.

Before delving into Abraham's challenge regarding the destruction of Sodom, it is interesting to note the textual context in which the challenge occurs. Chapter 18 of Genesis tells the story of three men who come to Abraham and Sarah's tent to tell the couple that they will have a son in spite of their old age.[1] This son turns out to be Isaac, who is the crucial pawn in the *Akedah*, when God asks Abraham to sacrifice him. Isaac would be the first and only son born to Abraham and his wife, Sarah (Abraham's other son at the time, Ishmael, is the son of Hagar, Sarah's maidservant). Two of the men—who are disguised angels—then depart for Sodom and tell Lot to leave the city.[2] Lot is Abraham's nephew, and the text is unclear as to whether Abraham knows that the angels go to rescue him. Sodom was in the Jordan valley, possibly located just east of the Dead Sea at a location now called Bab edh-Dhra.[3] God's reasons for destroying Sodom are that the city's cry has become great and its sin has become serious.[4] However, the Bible does not mention any specific sin at this point. It is not a coincidence that the beginning of Isaac's existence is described immediately before the God tells Abraham about his plan to destroy Sodom. The juxtaposition of events implies that they are related to each other in some way. After all, God could have sent other angels to rescue Lot in Sodom, but the angels' separate missions must be connected to each other.

Abraham's challenge regarding God's decision to destroy Sodom is told in the following account: And the Lord said, "Shall I conceal from Abraham what I am doing? And Abraham will become a great and powerful nation, and all the nations of the world will be blessed in him. For I have known him because he commands his sons and his household after him, that they should keep

[1] Gen. 18:2-15.
[2] Ibid., 19:15.
[3] Adrian Curtis, *Oxford Bible Atlas*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 72, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/mcgill/reader.action?docID=415625.
[4] Gen. 18:20.

the way of the Lord to perform righteousness and justice, in order that the Lord bring upon Abraham that which He spoke concerning him." And the Lord said, "Since the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah has become great, and since their sin has become very grave, I will descend now and see, whether according to her cry, which has come to Me, they have done; [I will wreak] destruction [upon them]; and if not, I will know." And the men turned from there and went to Sodom, and Abraham was still standing before the Lord. And Abraham approached and said, "Will You even destroy the righteous with the wicked? Perhaps there are fifty righteous men in the midst of the city; will You even destroy and not forgive the place for the sake of the fifty righteous men who are in its midst? Far be it from You to do a thing such as this, to put to death the righteous with the wicked so that the righteous should be like the wicked. Far be it from You! Will the Judge of the entire earth not perform justice?"[5]

In the next part of the exchange, Abraham bargains with God to reduce the number of righteous people required to save the city to forty-five, forty, thirty, twenty, and finally, ten.[6] The biblical narrative includes three significant components: (1) God rhetorically questions whether He should conceal the matter from Abraham and ultimately decides to tell him, (2) God explains his plan to destroy Sodom to Abraham, and (3) Abraham continually asks God to not destroy the city if it contains a certain number of righteous people. Following the challenge, God destroys Sodom,[7] as there are seemingly not even ten righteous people in the city. However, He spares Abraham's nephew, Lot.[8]

Several years after God destroys Sodom, He asks Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac. This request is deeply personal and very difficult for Abraham given Isaac's status as his only son with his wife Sarah and the miraculous circumstances surrounding his birth. For some reason, Abraham opts to not challenge God's request in this instance despite the apparent immorality of the request and its deeply personal nature. Abraham's decision not to challenge God regarding His request that he sacrifice of Isaac is found in the following verses:

And it came to pass after these things, that God tested Abraham, and He said to him, "Abraham," and he said, "Here I am." And He said, "Please take your son, your only one, whom you love, yea, Isaac, and go away to the land of Moriah and bring him up there for a burnt offering on one of the mountains, of which I will tell you." And Abraham arose early in the morning, and he saddled his donkey, and he took his two young men with him and Isaac his son; and he split wood for a burnt offering, and he arose and went to the place of which God had told him. On the third day, Abraham lifted his eyes and saw the place from afar. And Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey, and I and the lad will go yonder, and we will prostrate ourselves and return to you." And Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering, and he placed [it] upon his son Isaac, and he took into his hand the fire and the knife, and they both went together. And Isaac spoke to Abraham his father, and he said, "My father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." And he said, "Here are the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" And Abraham

[5] Ibid., 17-25 (Bible translations taken from Chabad.org).
[6] Ibid., 28-32.
[7] Ibid., 19:24-25.
[8] Ibid., 29.

said, "God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." And they both went together. And they came to the place of which God had spoken to him, and Abraham built the altar there and arranged the wood, and he bound Isaac his son and placed him on the altar upon the wood. And Abraham stretched forth his hand and took the knife, to slaughter his son."[9]

As Abraham is about to kill his son, an angel tells him not to continue because God knows he is Godfearing since he did not withhold his son from Him. Abraham sacrifices a ram instead, and God rewards him with a blessing that he will have many descendants, that these descendants will inherit their enemies' cities, and that all the nations of the world will be blessed through them because Abraham accepted God's request.[10] This story is known as the *Akedah*. The biblical account of the *Akedah* makes it clear that Abraham does not challenge God's request to sacrifice Isaac at any point. Moreover, Abraham only refrains from sacrificing his son when an angel tells him not to. At the story's conclusion, God rewards Abraham for not withholding Isaac with a blessing, implying that he took the correct course of action by not challenging God in this instance. Given the circumstances surrounding the challenge of the destruction of Sodom and the *Akedah*, one would expect Abraham to challenge God's request that he sacrifice Isaac. There are several components of this problem that the paper will address. Firstly, God rewards Abraham for challenging Him regarding the destruction of Sodom but also rewards him for accepting His request to sacrifice Isaac. Secondly, the motivations that convince Abraham to challenge God's decision to destroy Sodom are also present the *Akedah*. Thirdly, Abraham can replicate the formula of the Sodom challenge to challenge God's request in the *Akedah*. Lastly, the moral implications of the Sodom challenge suggest that Abraham has the same moral issues with God's request that he sacrifice Isaac.

All of these problems indicate that Abraham could and logically should challenge God's request that he sacrifice Isaac, but, as the story explains, he does not challenge it. Therefore, Abraham must learn a lesson from outcome the Sodom challenge that convinces him to not challenge God in the *Akedah*. This paper ultimately argues that the outcome of Abraham's challenge regarding the destruction of Sodom convince him to refrain from challenging God's request that he sacrifice his beloved son. God's destruction of the city in spite of His agreement with Abraham that He would save it if it contained ten righteous people teaches Abraham there were not ten righteous people in Sodom, thereby teaching him that God's decisions are always morally right. Knowing that God's decisions are always morally right, Abraham understands that he will not benefit from challenging in the *Akedah*.

As mentioned above, God rewards Abraham for challenging His decision to destroy Sodom, whereas He rewards Abraham for not challenging His request that he sacrifice Isaac. Before Abraham challenges God regarding His decision to destroy Sodom, God asks if He should "conceal from Abraham what I am doing?"[11] The Midrash Tanchumah provides an explanation

[9] Ibid., 22:1-10.
[10] Ibid., 11-18.
[11] Ibid., 18:7.

regarding God's decision to inform Abraham of His plan to destroy Sodom. Rabbi Levi contends that God decides to inform Abraham of His decision because

Abraham had previously reflected critically upon the episode of the generation of the Flood and had said, "It is impossible that there were not twenty righteous people or perhaps even ten righteous people in that generation for whose sake the Holy One, blessed be He, might have suspended His decision." Hence, the Holy One, blessed be He, declared, "I will disclose the entire matter to him so that he will not say to me, 'Perhaps there are righteous people even in Sodom.'"[12]

According to this midrash, Abraham had previously taken issue with God's seemingly immoral decision to destroy the world with the Flood since he believed that there must have been at least ten righteous people in whose merit God could have spared the world. God anticipates that Abraham will have the same moral issue with the destruction of Sodom, and therefore decides to discuss the matter with him in order to morally justify His decision. The Tanchumah thus raises the possibility that God informs Abraham of His decision with the goal of making Abraham challenge. The challenge that God induces ultimately allows Him to teach Abraham a lesson.

Another midrash attributed to Rabbi Levi, this one in Genesis Rabbah, explains that God rewards Abraham for challenging Him about the destruction of Sodom:

Rabbi Levi said: Two men said the same thing: Abraham and Job. Abraham said, "Far be it from You to do a thing such as this, to put to death the righteous with the wicked." (Gen. 18:25) Job said, "It is all one—therefore I said, 'He destroys both the innocent and the wicked.'" (Job 9:22). Yet Abraham was rewarded for it, and Job was punished for it? The reason is because Abraham said it with due deliberation, while Job spoke intemperately.[13]

If one accepts the idea that God encourages Abraham to challenge in this instance, it makes sense that God rewards him for the challenge since the outcome was desirable for God. In contrast to the Sodom challenge, God rewards Abraham for not challenging in the *Akedah*. God blesses Abraham's descendants "because you have done this thing and you did not withhold your son, your only one."[14] God's rewarding Abraham indicates His contentment with Abraham's decision not to challenge in this case, just as His rewarding Abraham for challenging in the Sodom case indicates that He wanted Abraham to challenge at that time. God therefore gets what He wants in both stories, suggesting that the lesson He teaches to Abraham with the outcome of the Sodom challenge is effective. Abraham learns from the first challenge that there is no point in challenging God in the *Akedah*, and God rewards him for this.

As seen in Genesis Rabbah, Abraham may make his challenge on moral grounds. Nevertheless, it is important to establish Abraham's personal connection to Sodom. Lot, Abraham's nephew, lives in Sodom at the time that God tells Abraham of His plans to destroy the city. Perhaps Abraham makes his challenge with the personal goal of saving Lot. If this is the case, Abraham could challenge God in the *Akedah* for personal reasons, namely that Isaac is his beloved

[12] Midrash Tanchumah, Vayera 5. Translation adapted from Dov Weiss, *Pious Irreverence: Confronting God in Rabbinic Judaism*, Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religion (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 130.
[13] Genesis Rabbah, 49:9. Translation adapted from Weiss, *Pious Irreverence*, 89-90.
[14] Gen. 22:16.

only son with his wife, Sarah. This possibility is doubtful, however, as Abraham never mentions Lot in his challenge; he instead bases his challenge on the grounds that it is immoral for God to destroy righteous people in Sodom, and his bargaining ends when God agrees to spare the city if there are at least ten righteous people within it.[15]

One could also argue that Abraham has no right to challenge God in the *Akedah* due to his role as an agent in the request. When God requests something of someone, they should be expected to follow through with the request. However, Abraham can challenge in such a way that his personal involvement is not a significant factor. After the Golden Calf incident, God tells Moses to "leave Me alone, and My anger will be kindled against them [the Israelites] so that I will annihilate them, and I will make you into a great nation."[16] Moses responds, "Why, O Lord, should Your anger be kindled against Your people whom You have brought up from the land of Egypt with great power and with a strong hand?"[17] Deuteronomy Rabbah explains that Moses' challenge is acceptable "because his motive was perfectly unselfish in that he was not pleading for his own needs but for the needs of Israel."[18] Based on this midrash, Dov Weiss argues that Moses' challenge would have been inappropriate had he made it for personal reasons, but his pure and unselfish motives make it acceptable.[19] This is a convincing argument that connects to the motivations behind Abraham's Sodom challenge. If a challenge must have unselfish motivations to be acceptable, Abraham's challenge regarding Sodom must be unselfish and not made with the specific goal of saving Lot. Similarly, Abraham has an opportunity to challenge God in the *Akedah* if he challenges for the sake of Isaac or God instead of himself. He can argue that Isaac's death would be undeserved and immoral, that if he follows through with God's request God's reputation will be tarnished, or a combination of the two.

According to Leviticus Rabbah, Abraham even believes that he has a religious right to challenge God's request in the *Akedah*: Rabbi Bibi in the name of Rabbi Yochanan explained, "Abraham said before the Holy One, blessed be He, 'Sovereign of the Universe! It was manifest and known before Your honourable throne, that when You said to me, 'Please take your son, your only one' (Gen. 22:2) that I could have challenged You and said to You, '[but] yesterday You promised me, 'For in Isaac will be called your seed.'" (21:12), and now You tell me, 'Please take your son, your only one!?' (22:2). But just as I could have challenged You but did not challenge You, so too when the children of Isaac give way to transgressions and evil deeds, You should remember for them the Binding of Isaac and atone [their sins].'"[20]

This passage states that Abraham believes that he can challenge God's request that he sacrifice Isaac but strategically chooses not to so that God will be lenient with Isaac's descendants. In a medieval reworking of this Midrash, Abraham says that he had a right to challenge God but

[15] Ibid., 18:23-33.
[16] Exod. 32:10.
[17] Ibid., 11.
[18] Deuteronomy Rabbah, 11:2. Translation taken from Weiss, *Pious Irreverence*, 93.
[19] Weiss, *Pious Irreverence*, 94.
[20] Leviticus Rabbah, 29:9. Translation adapted from Weiss, *Pious Irreverence*, 62.

chose not to so that God will not punish his descendants even when He has a right to do so.[21] This version explicitly states Abraham's belief that he had a religious right to challenge God in the *Akedah*.[22] Abraham's religious right to challenge gives him even more motivation to challenge in addition to the personal pain he will experience if he sacrifices Isaac. Again, Abraham must have learned a lesson from the Sodom challenge that convinces him not to challenge God in the *Akedah*. Even though he believes he has a right to challenge, Abraham's knowledge that God's decisions are always morally right makes challenging God's request in the *Akedah* futile, as he knows that he will not benefit from a challenge.

Had Abraham decided to challenge God in the *Akedah*, the midrash from Leviticus Rabbah implies that he would have done so on the basis of a contradiction between two of God's statements. While God promises Abraham that his descendants will come from Isaac,[23] implying that Isaac will have children, He asks Abraham to sacrifice Isaac before he has any children.[24] Rabbi Jonathan Sacks notes that child sacrifice was commonplace even among pagans in the ancient world, so it is not a substantial test of courage to ask Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. Furthermore, Abraham's history of giving up things he loved—his birthplace, his land, his father's house, and Ishmael—demonstrates that God's request that he sacrifice Isaac is not a substantial test for Abraham to give up something he loves. Abraham may actually believe that God will not allow Isaac to be sacrificed. In Sacks' view, the test in the *Akedah* is one of uncertainty. Knowing that God cannot contradict Himself, Abraham is tested with the uncertainty of how God's request for him to sacrifice Isaac will be reconciled with His promise that Abraham's descendants will come from Isaac.[25] In addition to refuting that Abraham's challenge in the *Akedah* would have been made on the basis of his love for Isaac, this theory can be related to the Sodom challenge. Abraham challenges God regarding the destruction of Sodom because of an apparent contradiction between God's decision and expected godly behaviour. As such, there is evidence that a challenge based on Divine contradiction is acceptable, which furthers the notion that Abraham can challenge God in the *Akedah* but chooses not to because of something he learns from the Sodom challenge. Now that he knows that God's decisions are always morally right, Abraham does not see the point in challenging God's contradiction in the *Akedah*. He knows that the result of God's request will be morally justified.

Following Rabbi Levi's explanation in Genesis Rabbah that Abraham makes his Sodom challenge on moral grounds, Abraham challenges God either to receive a rational and moral justification for God's decision to destroy Sodom, or to make Him reconsider His decision.[26] It is important to note that Abraham's challenge takes issue with God killing the righteous with the wicked, not with God killing the inhabitants of the city in general. As such, Abraham can challenge

[21] Aggadat Bereshit, 38.
[22] Weiss, *Pious Irreverence*, 63.
[23] Gen. 21:12.
[24] Ibid., 22:2.
[25] Jonathan Sacks, "Negative Capability (Vayera 5780)," The Office of Rabbi Sacks, November 20, 2019, https://rabbisacks.org/vayera-5780/.
[26] Weiss, *Pious Irreverence*, 91.

God's request that he sacrifice Isaac for impersonal reasons. Just as he challenges God's decision in the Sodom case on the grounds that God should not kill those who do not deserve death, he can challenge God in the *Akedah* on the basis that Isaac is innocent and should thus not be killed.
If Abraham challenges God to receive a rational and moral justification for His decision to destroy Sodom, his challenge would be a "challenge as question."[27] One makes a challenge as question with the goal of accessing information that they were not privy to before making the challenge. This type of challenger assumes that the party they are challenging is righteous and that they have more knowledge of the situation at hand. The challenger therefore challenges in order to receive an explanation behind the other's decision.[28] Perhaps the answer Abraham wants to receive is that there are not even ten righteous people in Sodom, so God is justified in destroying the city.

If Abraham challenges God to make Him reconsider His decision to destroy Sodom, this would be a "challenge as persuasion."[29] Instead of challenging to access new information, the challenge as persuasion attempts to teach something to the challenged party that will make them change to a better course of action.[30] If Abraham's challenge is a challenge as persuasion, He educates God with his consistency argument, "Far be it from You to do a thing such as this, to put to death the righteous with the wicked so that the righteous should be like the wicked. Far be it from You! Will the Judge of the entire earth not perform justice?"[31] Abraham essentially tells God that killing the righteous with the wicked is ungodly and unjust with the hope that this information will make God change His mind. Ungodly and unjust can be synonymous, as will be explained in the discussion on the moral implications of Abraham's challenge.

The Torah states that God agrees to Abraham's terms not to destroy Sodom if there are at least ten righteous people in it,[32] but He ultimately destroys the city.[33] If God's honesty can be trusted, this means that there are not ten righteous people in Sodom. Abraham thus makes his challenge in vain from a practical perspective. As Rabbi Sacks explains, Abraham's moral stance is justified but his factual assumption is not.[34] If, therefore, Abraham's challenge is a challenge as question, he receives an answer – there were not ten righteous people in Sodom. If the challenge is a challenge as persuasion, Abraham learns that he had no reason to make the challenge since his argument was based on the idea that it is ungodly and unjust to kill the righteous with the wicked. Given that there are not even ten righteous people in the city and God does not kill the righteous with the wicked according to Abraham's terms, it is impossible to know if Abraham's challenge as persuasion would have had any impact on God. Nevertheless, Abraham learns that no moral challenge can have an impact on God since His decisions are always morally right.

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[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid., 92.
[29] Weiss, *Pious Irreverence*, 92.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Gen. 18:25.
[32] Ibid., 18:32.
[33] Ibid., 19:25.
[34] Original text is not accessible, it was printed by the United Synagogue in a 1982 booklet. Rabbi Sacks' explanation is cited in Michael J. Harris, *Divine Command Ethics: Jewish and Christian Perspectives*, Philosophical Ideas in Debate (London: Routledge, 2003), 62.

Abraham can challenge God's request that he sacrifice Isaac for the same possible motivations that are behind his Sodom challenge. He can make a challenge as question, asking for a rational and moral explanation from God as to why He is asking Abraham to sacrifice his innocent son. God would have the opportunity to explain the morality of the request and even why Isaac deserves to die. Abraham can also make a challenge as persuasion, attempting to convince God to change His mind by educating Him about Isaac's innocence and the immorality of the request. If, however, Abraham learned from his Sodom challenge that God's decisions are always morally right, this would explain why he does not challenge God's request in the *Akedah*. Applying this lesson, Abraham realizes that he cannot persuade God to let him spare Isaac, and he assumes that a rational explanation as to why Isaac deserves death would be extremely painful to hear.

Aside from having acceptable motivations, Abraham's challenge regarding the destruction of Sodom is acceptable due to the content, tone, and nature of the challenge itself. The previously cited statement of Rabbi Levi in Genesis Rabbah contrasts Abraham's challenge to that of Job. While God rewards Abraham for his challenge, He punishes Job. Various explanations of Rabbi Levi's contrast between Abraham's and Job's challenges exist. Firstly, Abraham's challenge is a consistency argument that expresses astonishment with God acting unlike Himself, whereas Job's challenge is an unqualified charge. According to this view, God's positive reaction to Abraham's challenge is a result of the challenge's content. Secondly, while Abraham's challenge is a puzzling question, Job's challenge is a clear critique. This explanation focuses on the challenge's tone. Thirdly, even if Abraham is requesting that God change His mind, his challenge is a prayer, while Job's challenge is a decision. The challenge's nature is the difference maker here. Lastly, Abraham's challenge offers God an opportunity to correct Himself, whereas Job's challenge is an urgent plea. This final explanation combines the challenge's content, nature, and tone. The above explanations offer several possibilities as to why God accepts and rewards Abraham's challenge. Regardless of their specific details, all the aforementioned explanations describe Abraham's challenge as a request for God to either explain Himself or change His decision. In Job's challenge, on the other hand, he has nothing to gain. Unlike Abraham's challenge, Job's statement that "He [God] destroys the innocent and the wicked"[35] does not offer God an opportunity to change His mind nor does it ask God to explain His actions. Job's challenge instead directly insults Divine providence.[36]

Given that God accepts Abraham's challenge based on its content, nature, and tone, Abraham could have formulated an equally acceptable challenge in the *Akedah*. For example, he might say, "Far be it from you, Lord, to demand the death of an innocent. Will the Judge of the earth not perform justice?" This hypothetical challenge is nearly identical to the section of the Sodom challenge that Rabbi Levi uses to justify Abraham's challenge over Job's in Genesis Rabbah, which is the verse, "Far be it from You to do a thing such as this, to put to death the righteous with the wicked."[37] In the biblical text, this line is followed by the question, "Will the

[35] Job 9:22.
[36] Explanations and commonalities drawn from Weiss, *Pious Irreverence*, 91.
[37] Gen. 18:25.

Judge of the entire earth not perform justice?"[38] Accordingly, the proposed hypothetical challenge would be acceptable to challenge God's request that Abraham sacrifice Isaac. The hypothetical challenge employs a consistency argument, is posed as a puzzling question, can be made as a prayer, and gives God an opportunity to explain or correct His decision. In other words, its content, tone, and nature all make the challenge acceptable for the same reasons as Abraham's Sodom challenge.

The content of Abraham's Sodom challenge raises significant moral implications. As mentioned earlier, Abraham's consistency argument suggests that God destroying the righteous along with the wicked is both ungodly and unjust. That Abraham groups these two accusations together demonstrate his belief that God is bound by a certain code. Had he only said that killing the righteous with the wicked is ungodly, the code in question would not necessarily be a moral one. However, Abraham states that killing the righteous with the wicked is also unjust, implying that God's decision is immoral from his perspective. Grouping the two accusations together suggests that, at least in Abraham's view, godly behaviour must also be just and moral.

Abraham's challenge can support different moral theories. Firstly, it can support the idea that the moral rightness of an act does not need to be supported by a revealed statement in the Torah nor God's unrevealed will, combined with the notion that God is bound by a morality that is completely independent of Him.[39] In the case at hand, there is no statement in the Torah suggesting that Abraham knows that God killing the righteous with the wicked is immoral. In addition, if God was to destroy the righteous with the wicked without Abraham's challenge, it would be an act based on His unrevealed will. Moreover, Abraham's accusation that such an action would be unjust suggests that God is bound by a certain moral code independent of Him.

An alternative approach argues that the challenge supports the theory that a revealed Torah command or God's unrevealed will is required to indicate whether an action is morally right,[40] along with the idea that God determined morality through His will when He created the world, and He is bound by this originally determined will.[41] The Sodom challenge is also compatible with the possibility that Divinely created morality can be reasonably assumed to stay the same is it always has been.[42] This line of reasoning would suggest either that morality is tied to God and He must adhere to the morality that He originally created, or that God can be reasonably expected to adhere to it. Either way, if Abraham believes one of these theories, his challenge implies that God destroying the righteous with the wicked is contrary to the morality that He created and is therefore contrary to the Divine will. Reading the challenge in this manner differs from the earlier idea that morality is independent of God. However, both readings portray Abraham's opinion as one that expects God to adhere to a moral standard. In addition, both oppose a type of Divine Command Theory which holds that God's revealed Torah commands are required to give humans moral

[38] Ibid.
[39] Harris, *Divine Command Ethics*, 59.
[40] Ibid., 63.
[41] Ibid., 63-64.
[42] Ibid., 64.

knowledge,[43] as Abraham challenges, with God's invitation, the immorality of an action without any Torah command indicating its immorality.

Abraham can challenge God's request that he sacrifice Isaac with the same moral beliefs that led to his Sodom challenge. Abraham may believe that the moral rightness of an act does not need to be supported by a revealed statement in the Torah nor by God's unrevealed will, combined with the notion that God is bound by a morality that is completely independent of Him.[44] If Abraham's beliefs are as such, he can make a similar argument to his Sodom challenge, in that he can challenge God for requesting the death of someone who does not deserve to die according to an independent moral standard despite the absence of revealed or unrevealed proof. On the other hand, Abraham may believe that either God's revealed command or unrevealed will is a necessary condition of the moral rightness of an act,[45] along with the idea that God determined morality through His will when He created the world, and He is bound by this originally determined moral standard.[46] A challenge in the *Akedah* would also be compatible with the possibility that God's created morality can be reasonably assumed to stay the same is it has always been.[47] In this case, Abraham can challenge God for going against the moral code that He Himself created by demanding the death of an innocent.

There is an additional moral theory that could apply to the case of the *Akedah*, namely that one cannot ignore or disobey a direct instruction from God, and that the recipient of a Divine instruction must follow the instruction with faith that all will become clear at some point in time.[48] This suggests that Abraham cannot challenge God about the *Akedah* because God makes a direct request of him, whereas Abraham's challenge regarding Sodom is acceptable because God does not command him to destroy the city himself. While this is a convincing moral lesson from the story, Abraham does not know that Isaac will be spared so he has no reason to believe that all will become clear. Had Abraham known he would receive clarity later on, the *Akedah* would not have been a substantial test. It is therefore necessary to view the matter from his perspective. Due to the fact that Abraham would have the same moral issues with God in both the Sodom challenge and the *Akedah* request, his decision not to challenge God in the *Akedah* demonstrates that he learned from the Sodom challenge that God's decisions are always morally right, either based on independent or Divinely created morality.

Based on all the considerations above, it is safe to say that Abraham has good motivations and a right to challenge God's request that he sacrifice his son, as well as an acceptable way to formulate such a challenge. Abraham therefore must have a very good reason why he does not challenge – the lesson he learned from his challenge regarding God's destruction of Sodom. That God rewards Abraham for challenging his decision to destroy Sodom and also rewards him for not challenging His request that he sacrifice Isaac shows that God's desired outcome occurs in both

[43] Ibid.
[44] Ibid., 59.
[45] Ibid., 63.
[46] Ibid., 63-64.
[47] Ibid., 64.
[48] Ibid., 128.

stories. As in the Sodom challenge, Abraham could have made an impersonal, morally motivated challenge in the *Akedah* that follows a nearly identical formula. Moreover, the same moral issues can apply to both stories, which gives Abraham further reason to challenge on moral grounds. God's destruction of Sodom in spite of His agreement with Abraham taught Abraham that there were not even ten righteous people in Sodom. Abraham must have realized that God knew this from the very beginning, so He invited Abraham's challenge for educational purposes. Not only did Abraham learn that God's decisions are always morally right either according to an independent or Divinely created morality, but also that the superiority of God's knowledge to that of human beings which inspires His decisions makes it impossible for a person to change God's mind. Consequently, Abraham knows that challenging God in the *Akedah* will not change God's mind, and any information he could receive about the justification of Isaac's death would be painful. Abraham therefore decides not to challenge God when asked to sacrifice his son.

Re-Examining The Maccabean Revolt: Hellēnismos and the Gymnasium as an Anti-Temple

Liam Gerry

The Maccabean Revolt is commonly viewed as an uprising of Pious Jews against their imperial oppressors who persecuted them and prohibited their religion. King Antiochus IV Epiphanes, a ruler during the Seleucid Empire, profaned the temple and restricted Jews from practicing Judaism. The Maccabees, a group of Jewish rebel warriors, led an insurgency resulted in the freedom and rededication of the temple. The pseudo-prophetic work of Daniel and the historiographical accounts of the First and Second Books of the Maccabees recorded these putative events, which occurred from 167 to 164 B.C.E.

This account of the Maccabean Revolt as an one of a conflict between the Seleucids and the Jews left much out. The Books of the Maccabees revealed a thorough historical narrative replete with civil strife and ethno-cultural boundary making, where conflict centered on Jews who pursued Hellenization and those who rejected it. The historiographical accounts of 1 and 2 Maccabees exhibited a campaign of delegitimization undertaken by the authors aimed at the high priests who ruled in the leadup to the Maccabean Revolt. The texts presented a stark contrast the pious Maccabees and their wicked opponents. The author of 2 Maccabees described these two competing social orders using original terminology: *Ioudaïsmos* and *Hellēnismos*. This reading of the Books of Maccabees will explore *Hellēnismos*, the rival social order, and the gymnasium which exemplified *Hellēnismos* and an 'anti-temple.'

Historiographical works of the ancient Mediterranean tended towards flagrant partisanship. The trend of biased writing was so entrenched that Tacitus prefaced his *Annals* with the disclaimer that he wrote "*sine ira et studio*" ("without anger or passion").[1] Similarly, the Books of Maccabees were written with overt anger and passion. The authors directed their hostility against the Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV and Jason, Menelaos, and Alkimos: the high priests who ruled in the interval between Onias III and the Maccabees.

The charges against these figures emphasized the contrast between the Maccabees and their wicked rivals. The Maccabean heroes were praised for rebuilding that which their wicked opponents contributed to destroying. In 2 Maccabees, the impious Jason constructed the gymnasium, an anti-temple, while Judas liberated and reestablished the temple itself.[2] Modern commentators believe that the author of 2 Maccabees was a religious conservative who perceived

[1] Tacitus, Cornelius. "The Annals. 3 vols." *Trans. Clifford Moore. London: W. Heinemann* 1937 (1925), 1.1.
[2] Coogan, Michael, Marc Brettler, Carol Newsom, and Pheme Perkins, eds. *The New Oxford Annotated Apocrypha: New Revised Standard Version*. Oxford University Press, 2018, 2 Macc. 4:7-10.

Hellenism as a threat to Judaism.[3] In the Hebrew Bible, the prophets and the books within the Deuteronomic tradition looked for evidence of idolatry to explain Israel's defeats and its suffering at the hands of its neighbours.[4] However, the institutionalization of Hellenism, which precipitated the Maccabean revolt, involved no instances of idolatry. Previously, Jews perceived foreign cultures as dangerous primarily due to the temptation posed by their gods. In 2 Maccabees, the threat of *Hellēnismos* involved a system of values that were distinct from idolatry and associated with the gymnasium.[5] The 'idolatry' of Hellenization involved a ritual with no specific god; the sin itself was the supersession of existing ritual life.

2 Maccabees was the first work to create an upfront opposition between Judaism and Hellenism.[6] The author of 2 Maccabees likely coined the term *Ioudaïsmos* and used its counterpart *Hellēnismos* in an inventive way. While the term *Hellēnismos* typically referred to the proper use of the Greek language, many scholars believe the author employed the term to denote the "Greek way of life."[7] However, these terms cannot simply be translated by mapping them onto existing modern categories of religion and culture.

Within the text, the terms took on a meaning independent from Judaism, Hellenism, and the Jewish and Greek ways of life. The author of 2 Maccabees viewed *Ioudaïsmos* as an abstract term that captured the entire "complex of ideas and concepts encapsulated in the narrative pattern of temple building" and reflected the legitimate social order attuned to the divine order of things.[8] The author constructed *Hellēnismos* as its opposite: as an abstract for the whole of the wicked social order of things that reflected the illegitimate social order, which Jason contributed to when he established the gymnasium. The presence of the gymnasium demonstrated the wickedness of Jason and other opponents of the Maccabees.

Both Books of the Maccabees and *Antiquities*, written by first-century Romano-Jewish historian and military leader Flavius Josephus, mentioned the establishment of the gymnasium in Jerusalem during the reign of Antiochus IV. Josephus' descriptions paralleled those of both 1 and 2 Maccabees, as he described the desire of Jason and his supporters to "leave the laws of their country, and the Jewish way of living… and to follow the king's laws and the Grecian way of living."[9] 2 Maccabees stated that Jason immorally attained the high priesthood by bribing Antiochus IV for permission to "establish by his authority a gymnasium and a body of youth for it, and to enroll the people of Jerusalem as citizens of Antioch."[10] 2 Maccabees presented the establishment of the gymnasium as the starting point of a crisis that led to the rebellion against

[3] Mason, Steve. "Jews, Judeans, Judaizing, Judaism: Problems of Categorization in Ancient History." *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Period*, vol. 38, no. 4-5 (2007), 464-5.
[4] Himmelfarb, Martha. "Judaism and Hellenism in 2 Maccabees." *Poetics Today*, vol. 19, no. 1 (1998), 26.
[5] Ibid., 19.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Mason, "Jews, Judeans, Judaizing, Judaism…," 463-464.
[8] Honigman, Sylvie. 2014. *Tales of High Priests and Taxes: The Books of the Maccabees and the Judean Rebellion against Antiochus IV*. Hellenistic Culture and Society, Berkeley: University of California Press, 198-199.
[9] Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, University of Cambridge, 1737, 5.1.
[10] Coogan et al., eds., *The New Oxford Annotated Apocrypha…*, 2 Macc. 4:9.

Antiochus IV. 1 Maccabees associated the construction of the gymnasium with "renegade" Jews forming a "a covenant with the Gentiles around" them.[11]

The primacy accorded to the gymnasium and its construction in the ancient sources demonstrated its tremendous impact on life and social order in Jerusalem. Jason was described as shifting "his compatriots over to the Greek way of life" and "putting the highest value upon Greek forms of prestige."[12] The author of 2 Maccabees described an "extreme of Hellenization and increase in the adoption of foreign ways" due to Jason's wickedness and ungodliness.[13] Due to this institutionalized Hellenization, the priests of the temple "were no longer intent upon their service at the altar" and preferred to neglect their ritual and sacrificial duties while hurrying to "take part in the unlawful proceedings in the wrestling arena."[14]

The author of 2 Maccabees defined the wickedness of *Hellēnismos* by the gymnasium and the behaviour associated with it. One vital passage described the construction and institutionalization of the gymnasium, but failed to mention the introduction of the cult of Greek gods to Jerusalem before Antiochus' persecution.[15] While the Torah did not discuss gymnasiums or practices associated with them, the author of 2 Maccabees claimed that participation in the life of the gymnasium involved "customs contrary to the law."[16] The author of 2 Maccabees urged its readers believe that Jason and his followers were disloyal to the God of Israel, painting them as apostates who disregarded the demands of the Torah and showed "irreverence to the divine laws."[17]

Despite its harsh tone and insistence that the gymnasium brought with it behaviour that violated the Torah, 2 Maccabees provided no concrete evidence for its view that Jason and his followers were apostates who abandoned the cult of the Lord. The activities in the gymnasium did not involve worshipping foreign gods or idols, and the author of 2 Maccabees did not claim this occurred. Jason and his Hellenizing compatriots embraced Greek institutions, such as the gymnasium, without moving beyond the limits of Jewish monotheism.[18]

Nonetheless, the activities of the gymnasium distracted the priests from their responsibilities at the temple. In 2 Maccabees, the evil of *Hellēnismos* was not Hellenism in its entirety, but the role that it played in leading Jews away from proper ritual actions and ritual life. Jason's disruption of the temple cult represented the initial disruption of *Ioudaïsmos*: the righteous order of things.[19] In contrast to 2 Maccabees, the description of the gymnasium in 1 Maccabees was brief, but nonetheless conveyed a key allegation that corresponded to the distinct threat posed by *Hellēnismos* of obstructing Jewish ritual life. 1 Maccabees described the construction of the gymnasium as "according with Gentile custom" and claimed the gymnasium attendees "removed

[11] Ibid., 1 Macc. 1:11.
[12] Ibid., 2 Macc. 4:10-15.
[13] Ibid., 2 Macc. 4:13-14.
[14] Ibid., 2018, 2 Macc. 4:14-15.
[15] Himmelfarb, "Judaism and Hellenism in 2 Maccabees," 24-5.
[16] Coogan et al., eds., *The New Oxford Annotated Apocrypha…*, 2 Macc. 4:11.
[17] Ibid., 2 Macc. 4:17.
[18] Himmelfarb, "Judaism and Hellenism…," 25.
[19] Honigman, *Tales of High Priests and Taxes*, 204.

the marks of circumcision, and abandoned the holy covenant… join[in] with the Gentiles" and selling "themselves to do evil."[20] Thus, the author argued, participants in the gymnasium abandoned the Abrahamic covenant.

Scholars often utilize this aspect of the gymnasium's description in 1 Maccabees to substantiate the claim in 2 Maccabees that the gymnasium was a source of impiety.[21] Circumcision was a sign of the covenant, and the negation of this sign amounted to turning oneself away from the God of Israel. 1 Maccabees portrayed the making of "a covenant with the Gentiles around us" as a turn from God, which mirrored the Deuteronomic tradition's association of idolatry and the breaking of the covenant with socio-political disaster.[22] In contrast, Mattathias was depicted as enforcing circumcision, thereby manifesting his faithfulness to the covenant through the performance of ritualized action.[23]

Some scholars argue that the absence of the mention of this reversal of circumcision in 2 Maccabees indicates that the text's author did not believe this occurred.[24] However, Josephus's *Antiquities* discussed how those who attended the gymnasium at Jerusalem "hid the circumcision of their genitals, that even when they were naked they might appear to be Greeks."[25] While some scholars believe these remarks were metaphorical, it is more likely that they referred to processes which directly impacted the conflict between *Ioudaïsmos* and *Hellēnismos*.

Celsus, in his 1st century medical treatise *De Medicina*, described both a surgical and non-surgical procedure, which could reverse circumcision.[26] The non-surgical procedure was more common and involved "stretching the vestigial penile tissue to cover the glans."[27] This procedure, known as epispasm, provided an avenue for Jewish men who desired to pass beyond Jewish communal boundaries and join non-Jewish society. The surgical procedure described by Celsus was likely adapted from one performed on Greeks born with "defectively short" foreskins to cover them in public, as the "baring of the glans apparently appeared vulgarly humorous or indecent."[28] Jewish men in Antiochene Jerusalem wishing to participate in Hellenic society, particularly in the nakedness of the gymnasium, would have felt motivated to pursue the removal of the identifying mark of Jewish identity. Numerous sources from the 1st century C.E. testified that a circumcised individual who appeared nude in public "was undoubtedly subject to scorn and derision."[29] The circumcised individuals who wished to participate in the activities in the gymnasium and the public games would have undergone epispasm to mitigate the shame of publicly baring their

[20] Ibid., 1 Macc. 1:14-1:15.
[21] Honigman, *Tales of High Priests and Taxes*, 211.
[22] Coogan et al., eds., *The New Oxford Annotated Apocrypha…*, 1 Macc. 1:11.
[23] Ibid., 1 Macc. 2:45-46.
[24] Himmelfarb, "Judaism and Hellenism…," 25.
[25] Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 5.1.
[26] Celsus, Aulus Cornelius. "De Medicina (Englische Übersetzung: Spencer WG)." (1971), 7.25.
[27] Rubin, Nissan. Time and Life Cycle in Talmud and Midrash: Socio-Anthropological Perspectives. Academic Studies Press, 2008, 51-52.
[28] Hall, Robert G. "Epispasm and the Dating of Ancient Jewish Writings." *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1, no. 2 (1988), 75-76.
[29] Ibid., 53-4.

circumcisions.[30] The physical removal of the Abrahamic covenant represented a distinct threat to the established divine social order of the Second Temple period. Jews interested in participating in Hellenic culture would have moved away from one of the most important ritualized practices in the Jewish religion. The gymnasium, a Greek institution, laid at the center of this movement away from proper ritual life and social order, and thus, was perceived as a rival to the temple.

The descriptions of the gymnasium in the Books of Maccabees established a causal link between the construction of the gymnasium and the eventual desecration of the temple by Antiochus IV. In 1 Maccabees, the building of the gymnasium was the first episode in a series of events which epitomized the disruption during Antiochus IV's reign. 1 Maccabees established the foundation of the gymnasium as the starting point of the entire crisis. The author, writing under the Hasmonean dynasty of Jewish kings following the Maccabean revolt, promoted that the gymnasium and the accompanying social order of *Hellēnismos* played a prominent role in the crisis.[31]

The central role of the temple, its desecration, and its eventual rededication in the Maccabean narrative mirrored and contrasted the role and fate of the gymnasium. The temple acted as a reflection of the entire social community. When the temple functioned properly, and proper ritualized actions were followed through on, the community thrived. When the temple was destroyed, the community was dispersed and deported, as witnessed repeatedly in the Hebrew Bible. Without the reconstruction and restoration of the temple, Jewish society could not be rebuilt.[32] The temple stood at the center of the Judean social system and symbolic universe.

The authors of the Books of Maccabees used the gymnasium to serve a similar metaphorical role, where it represented the emerging rival Hellenic Jewish social order initiated by Jason, the wicked high priest. The gymnasium was depicted as a rival temple, or an anti-temple, just as *Hellēnismos* was posed as a rival social order to *Ioudaïsmos*.[33] The authors of the Books of Maccabees operated within a symbolic universe, where the temple and gymnasium denoted two distinct and antithetical social systems. The gymnasium threatened to disrupt the legitimate social order centered on the temple by obstructing the proper performance of ritualized actions, which included sacrifices and the negation of the Abrahamic covenant and its identity marker of circumcision. The gymnasium embodied *Hellēnismos*, serving as an anti-temple and focal point for the values and practices of Hellenic culture. The gymnasium and *Hellēnismos* functioned as literary stand-ins for idolatry and covenant breaking that precipitated the disaster of Antiochus IV's religious persecution and military repression.

[30] Kerkeslager, Allen. "Maintaining Jewish Identity in the Greek Gymnasium." *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Period*, vol. 28, no. 1 (1997), 27-28.
[31] Honigman, *Tales of High Priests and Taxes*, 212.
[32] Ibid., 213.
[33] Ibid., 214.

Tracing the Messianic in Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"

Benjamin Wexler

Walter Benjamin's turn to Marxism in the late 1920s marks a period of uncertainty in the oeuvre of the German-Jewish intellectual. Benjamin's Marxist contemporaries were put off by what they considered theoretical eccentricities, particularly those associated with his long-time friend and a scholar of Jewish mysticism, Gershom Scholem. Playwright Bertolt Brecht appreciated Benjamin's Marxist work "despite their metaphors and their Judaism."[1] From the opposite direction, Scholem accused Benjamin of squandering his talents by disguising his best insights, the product of a "metaphysics of language," [2] as materialist analysis. According to Scholem, this artificial Marxism fooled no-one; the output could be easily identified "as the work of an adventurer, a purveyor of ambiguities, and a cardsharper."[3] To some extent, Scholem's harsh accusations were confirmed by Benjamin's limp defence. He conceded his own intellectual desperation, comparing his position to "a castaway who drifts on a wreck by climbing to the top of an already crumbling mast. But from there he has a chance to give a signal leading to his rescue."[4] He grasped for the vitality of dialectical materialism even as he recognized his distance from it.

Nine years later, Benjamin articulated a stronger defense of his peculiar theoretical fusion. He begins his "Theses on the Philosophy History" with a description of the Mechanical Turk, a chess-playing automaton. Hidden beneath the table, a master chess-player pulls strings guiding the automaton to victory. Benjamin makes the image a philosophical parable, explaining that "The puppet called 'historical materialism'" can always win "if it enlists the services of theology, which today, as we know, is wizened and has to keep out of sight."[5] Like the rest of the "Theses," this fragment challenges Marxists to replace materialist teleology with a revolutionary, messianic theory of rupture and restoration. The image can equally be read as a belated response to Scholem. While Benjamin embraces the accusation of 'cardsharper,' he affirms the trick as productive, necessary, and successful.

"The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," first published in 1935 and revised in 1936 and 1939, is widely regarded as one of Benjamin's most unalloyedly Marxist texts.

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[1] Enzo Traverso and Bernard Gibbons, *The Jewish Question: History of a Marxist Debate* (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2018), 166.
[2] Gershom Scholem to Walter Benjamin, March 30, 1931, in Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship* (NY: New York Review of Books Press, 1981), 286.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Benjamin to Scholem, April 7, 1931, in Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship* (NY: New York Review of Books Press, 1981), 291.
[5] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zorn, (NY: Shocken, 1969), 253.

Even scholars that insist on a thorough analysis of Judaism's importance to Benjamin typically set "The Work of Art" aside as a sort of Marxist anomaly.[6] It is therefore unsurprising that Scholem responded with derision when Benjamin first sent him a copy. More curiously, Benjamin wishfully attributed Scholem's distaste to the fact that the copy was sent in French, rather than their first language of German. He was disappointed that Scholem found nothing in the essay that "pointed [him] back to the realm of ideas in which [they] both used to be at home."[7] Responding to the challenge posed by this correspondence and by the fragment on the Mechanical Turk, this essay seeks the hidden theology animating "The Work of Art." Benjamin's relationship with Scholem is central to any such investigation. As he writes in a 1930 letter to Scholem, "the question of my relationship to Judaism is always the question of how I stand […] in relation to the forces you have touched in me."[8] Benjamin's early work also helps to situate his thinking in theological and messianic terms – to locate the strings of the automaton, so to speak.

The Proletariat as Critic/Translator

Benjamin's early writings evince the close connection between language and aesthetics in his philosophy. In his 1916 essay "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," he defines language as "all communication of spiritual contents"[9] and specifies that "there is a language of sculpture, of painting, of poetry."[10] In "The Task of the Translator," from 1921, he argues that translation of art serves a messianic purpose for language itself. An observation of the continuities and discontinuities between these texts and "The Work of Art" begins to reveal the latter's concealed messianism and the transformations that accompanied Benjamin's embrace of Marxism.

"On Language as Such" establishes a theory of language using the first chapter of Genesis. In a letter to Scholem, Benjamin insisted on the topic's "immanent connection to Judaism."[11] For Benjamin, the development of language begins with the name of God and the divine language that God used to create the world. In this divine language, "knowledge and name" exist in "absolute relation."[12] Some of the power of divine language was transmitted in the form of the name to man upon his creation, giving knowledge of God's universe without the full creative force of divine language. Benjamin dismisses as bourgeois the notion that human language is merely an arbitrary signifier. Rather, "the whole of nature is imbued with a nameless, mute language, the residue of the creative word of God."[13] Human language communicates the communicable element of the

[6] Traverso and Gibbons, *The Jewish Question,* 163.
[7] Benjamin to Scholem, Oct. 18, 1936, in *The Correspondences of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, 1932-1940*, ed. Gershom Scholem, trans. Gary Smith and Andre Lefevre, (NY: Schocken, 1989), 186.
[8] Benjamin to Scholem, April 25, 1930, in *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910-1940*, ed. Scholem and Theodor Adorno, trans. Manfred Jacobson and Evelyn Jacobson, (Chicago UP, 1994), 364.
[9] Walter Benjamin, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," *Early Writings, 1910-1917*, ed. and trans. Howard Eiland (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 251.
[10] Benjamin, "On Language as Such," *Early Writings,* 266.
[11] Eric Jacobson, *Metaphysics of the Profane: The Political Theology of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 86.
[12] Benjamin, "On Language as Such," *Early Writings,* 259.
[13] Ibid., 267.

divine essence of an object. [14] Yet, being a corruption of the divine word, human language could not remain unified. The fall from Eden introduced a new language, the language of judgment. While divine language is immanent and exact, the language of judgment "no longer rests blissfully in itself."[15] Knowledge of good and evil "makes language a means (that is, a knowledge inappropriate to [man]), and therefore also, in one part at any rate, a *mere* sign."[16] Exile, the human divergence from the divine word, inevitably leads to the division of human language, as depicted in the story of the tower of Babel. A tragic incompleteness and confusion is introduced to the naming process, as no human language encapsulates the full and mute essence of nature. Here, the symbolic side of language fills in. Human language communicates that which is communicable, but after the Fall it also contains a "symbol of the non-communicable."[17] Divine language persists in mediated, scattered form within human language. The reconstitution of this divine language – "the unity of the movement of language"[18] – occurs through translation between languages, an idea fully in later works.

Benjamin's 1919 dissertation "The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism," although lacking the overt messianism of "On Language as Such," is an important link to his theory of redemption through translation. Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings provide a summary sufficient to contextualize "The Task of the Translator":

> In the dissertation he introduces three theses central to his later work: the notion that the creative destruction or, in Schlegel's terminology, annihilation of the cultural object is a prerequisite to all critique; the assumption that all meaningful criticism intends the redemption of the work's "truth content"; and the understanding of the critical work as an autonomous creation fully commensurate with the "original" work of art.[19]

Eiland and Jennings identify a linguistic and conceptual continuity from the "communicable" (as in "On Language as Such"), to the "criticizable" (as in "The Concept of Criticism"), to the "translatable" (as in "The Task of the Translator").[20] Limited by the scholarly form of the dissertation, Benjamin admits that he does not attempt "to demonstrate the historical essence of Romanticism."[21] In a footnote, he identifies this essence with messianism.[22] "The Task of the Translator," with its overtly messianic framing, actualizes this project.

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[14] Ibid., 261.
[15] Ibid., 264.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid., 266.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Howard Eiland and Michael William Jennings, *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014), 108.
[20] Eiland and Jennings, *Walter Benjamin,* 112.
[21] Benjamin, "The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism," *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 116.
[22] Ibid., 185.

Returning to his rejection of language as a medium, Benjamin emphasizes that translation should not simply transplant meaning. Rather, translation reignites the "suprahistorical kinship between languages," bringing together two languages as components of "the pure language."[23] The notion of *tikkun* in Jewish mysticism posits that redemption will occur with the repair of the sacred vessels, also called the Lurianic vessels, which shattered with the exile from Eden. These shards of divinity are scattered in the profane world and must be freed. Benjamin invokes this idea, likening the original text and the translation to fragments of a vessel.[24] Put together, they are "recognizable as fragments of a greater language."[25] The translator takes on a liberatory, entropic role, freeing divine shards from their exile in the profane world: "To release in his own language that pure language which is exiled among alien tongues, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work[…]he breaks through the decayed barriers of his own language."[26] Good translation is accordingly anti-chauvinistic; contact with a foreign language should challenge, transform, and invigorate the language of translation.

A close reading of "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" demonstrates the deep influence of these early messianic ideas, but the essay is far from an unconvincing superimposition of dialectical materialism. On the contrary, Marxism gives Benjamin's 'metaphysics of language' a new urgency and praxis. The most significant transformation occurs in Benjamin's revolutionary protagonist. The agent of linguistic actualization in Benjamin's early career, whether the critic or the translator, is conceived of as an individual essentially separate from the artwork's general reception. "In the appreciation of a work of art or an art form, consideration of the receiver never proves fruitful,"[27] he declares at the start of "The Task of the Translator." By the 1930s, Benjamin argues that mechanical reproduction, especially film, has a democratizing power over the production, consumption, and criticism of art. The dissemination of the printing press transformed publishing, such that "the distinction between author and public is about to lose its basic character […] at any moment the reader is ready to turn into a writer."[28] This effect in film is even more transformative: "everybody who witnesses its accomplishments is somewhat of an expert."[29] When watching a movie, the audience "takes the position of the camera," engaging with it as a critic assessing a finished artwork, rather than as a component of the performance to which the performer can adapt.[30] The proletarian-critic adopts the liberatory mission detailed in "The Role of the Translator," as is demonstrated by two core ideas of "The Work of Art": distraction and the destruction of the aura.

In "The Task of the Translator," translation watches over "the maturing process of the original language and the birth pangs of its own."[31] The mass embrace of mechanical reproduction

[23] Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 257.
[24] Eiland and Jennings, *Walter Benjamin*, 160.
[25] Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 260.
[26] Ibid., 262.
[27] Ibid., 251.
[28] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, 12.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid., 10.
[31] Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," *Selected Writings,* vol. 1, 256.

inaugurates a new language: the language of the masses. Benjamin argues that the constant changes of a moving picture produce a "shock effect" that forces the spectator to experience art differently.[32] Where the chauvinist refuses the constructive challenge posed by another language to his own, the traditional art critic resents the challenge film poses to his bourgeois sensibilities. Benjamin quotes a contemporary art critic, who complains that in the movies "I can no longer think what I want to think. My thoughts have been replaced by moving images."[33] Benjamin calls this change in aesthetic experience 'distraction':

> Distraction and concentration form polar opposites which may be stated as follows: A man who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it. He enters into this work of art the way legend tells of the Chinese painter when he viewed his finished painting. In contrast, the distracted mass absorbs the work of art.[34]

Distraction does not indicate shallowness, but openness: to be transformed by art and by the masses themselves. Benjamin contrasts "optical reception," a sort of detached contemplation, to "tactile appropriation," which more profoundly transforms the spectator through habitual contact. Habituation transforms human perception, enabling the proletariat to embrace its transformative historic role.[35] When aesthetic experience becomes mass experience, the masses become aware of themselves as such: "individual reactions are predetermined by the mass audience response they are about to produce."[36] The artistic and critical language initiated through mechanical reproduction corresponds uniquely with the masses.

Empowered by mechanical reproduction, the proletariat takes on the entropic role of the translator, freeing art from its state of exilic division. The concept of the aura refers to a work of art's authenticity, or "its unique existence at the place where it happens to be."[37] Traditional art, produced for its cult value, relied on its aura and the associated exclusivity to maintain its cult value. In the words of "On Language as Such," the aura makes art "a means […] and therefore also, in one part at any rate, a *mere* sign."[38] As the artwork's aura is "imbedded in the fabric of tradition,"[39] it is sapped of radical potential and transformative social power. The artwork becomes trapped in a relationship of "parasitical dependence"[40] to ritual; it is a means to its own cult value. The aura's destruction results from "the desire of the contemporary masses to bring things 'closer' spatially and humanly […] their bent towards overcoming the uniqueness of every reality."[41] In the urban milieu, where the streets, taverns, and factories "appeared to have us locked up

[32] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," *Illuminations*, 17.
[33] Ibid., 17.
[34] Ibid., 18.
[35] Ibid., 18.
[36] Ibid., 14.
[37] Ibid., 3.
[38] Benjamin, "On Language as Such," *Early Writings,* 264
[39] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," *Illuminations*, 6.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid., 5.

hopelessly,"[42] the power of mechanical reproduction is most visible. Film's capacity to represent familiar environments in new ways "burst this prison-world asunder"[43] – a clear echo of the messianic freeing of the imprisoned language in "The Task of the Translator." Art is freed for a new and constructive purpose. Photography promotes "the mutual penetration of art and science," or the rapprochement of two complimentary languages. The image produced by the cameraman "consists of multiple fragments which are assembled under a new law,"[44] recalling the mystical assemblage of the divine vessels. With the aura destroyed, the work of art no longer stands alone, but becomes a shard within the messianic whole; the masses guide perception towards wholeness.

Scholem's Dialectic of Enlightenment

The growing threat of fascism lurks behind Benjamin's technological optimism in "The Work of Art." This threat comes to the fore in the epilogue, with a brief but highly influential analysis of fascism as a dialectical extension of modernity. The ruling class, in its desperation to preserve property relations, redirects the massive new capacities of mechanical reproduction and the alienation of the proletariat away from revolution and towards an aestheticized ritual of endless war.

A few years earlier, Gershom Scholem began his career-defining study of the messianic Sabbatian movement. By this time, Scholem was living in Palestine, but Benjamin closely followed and even assisted his friend's research. In 1927, Scholem met with Benjamin and Franz Hessel while visiting Paris. They were dazzled by his research on the Sabbatian mystic Abraham Miguel Cardozo.[45] He first published this research in the March 1928 issue of Martin Buber's *Der Jude* journal, which Benjamin received in April. In a letter to Scholem, he recalled their Paris conversation and recognized the essay's importance "as a junction in the railway net of [Scholem's] thinking."[46] The metaphor of the Mechanical Turk again illuminates the relationship between theology and historical materialism in Benjamin's work. Scholem's dialectical theory of Sabbateanism reverberates in Benjamin's theory of fascism, transformed from a Jewish theological development to a material one.

Writing on Sabbateanism prior to Scholem was basically polemical and made no effort at a theological understanding, but the broad facts of the movement were well-known[47]: Sabbatai Zevi, a kabbalist and rabbi from Ottoman Smyrna, announced himself the Jewish messiah in the mid-seventeenth century. Many rabbis denounced him as a heretic, but the movement gained momentum in Jewish communities across the Middle East and Europe. The Ottomans then arrested Zevi in 1666, giving him the choice between execution or conversion to Islam. Zevi converted. Some adherents followed, believing this was part of his messianic plan. The rabbis reconsolidated

[42] Ibid., 15.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Ibid., 14.
[45] Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, 164.
[46] Benjamin to Scholem, April 23, 1928, in *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin,* 333.
[47] See, for example: Pawel Macieko, "Introduction," *The Mixed Multitude* (Philadelpha: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 1-21.

authority within their humiliated Jewish communities, but despite their best efforts, Sabbateanism survived in secret sects rumoured to engage in ritual transgression of Jewish law. The movement erupted outwards again in mid-eighteenth-century Eastern Europe with Jacob Frank, who claimed to be a reincarnation of Zevi. He gathered a large following. In a disputation with rabbis, he argued that Jewish law required ritual use of the blood of Christians, prompting a massive wave of Church repression against Polish Jews. Frank and his followers then converted to Catholicism.

In the late 1920s, Sabbatai Zevi and Jacob Frank were written about as figures of frightening relevance. Scholem's 1928 essay on Cardozo ends with the oblique warning that "the messianic phraseology of Zionism […] is not in the least that of Sabbatean seduction, which could bring the renewal of Judaism, the stabilization of its world from the unbroken spirit of language, to ruin."[48] This was directed at German-Jewish contemporary Oskar Goldberg who advocated a *Volkisch* rejection of reason.[49] Scholem never missed an opportunity to attack Goldberg in the harshest terms, calling him "demonic," "Luciferian," and "the representative of the devil in our generation."[50] The label of 'fascist,' although not in recorded use by Scholem, was probably also in circulation – in Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus*, the Jewish proto-fascist Dr. Chaim Breisacher is inspired by Goldberg.[51] In August 1928, Scholem circulated a letter accusing Goldberg of being a modern Sabbatai Zevi or Jacob Frank.[52] Benjamin complimented the letter as one of Scholem's "most important and successful writings"[53] and promised to circulate it.[54] Other scholarship of the period also stressed Zevi's contemporaneity. Benjamin procured for Scholem a copy of Joseph Kastein's 1930 history *The Messiah of Izmir*.[55] Kastein cautions that "[Zevi] acted as modern men do in whatever they undertake—he emulated a historical form of leadership without any adequate spiritual equipment."[56] Through his friendship with Scholem, Benjamin was immersed in a tradition of study that feared a newly reincarnated Zevi, symbol for modern man's self-destructive potential.

Scholem rejected pathologizing explanations for Sabbateanism and Frankism, stressing its complex theological underpinnings. His theories of Sabbateanism changed substantially over the decades; the emphasis here is on his earliest work, beginning in 1928. The first of Scholem's key theories regards Sabbatian Gnosticism, or a divine divided in two. According Scholem, this Sabbatean innovation responded to the increasingly complex divine of the Lurianic kabbalah. Scholem writes: "the mystical world lost its simple constitution. The ten aspects of the divine were contorted into an endless mythological catalogue […] that resists any overview."[57] This

[48] Gershom Scholem, "The Theology of Sabbateanism in Light of Abraham Cardozo" (1928), qtd. in Amir Engel, *Gershom Scholem: An Intellectual Biography*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 124.
[49] Bruce Rosenstock, *Transfinite Life: Oskar Goldberg and the Vitalist Imagination* (Indiana University Press, 2017), 162.
[50] Ibid., 173.
[51] Ibid., xvi.
[52] Ibid., 174.
[53] Benjamin to Scholem, Sept. 20, 1928, in Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship,* 194.
[54] Benjamin to Scholem, Oct. 30, 1928, in *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, 343.
[55] Benjamin to Scholem, Feb. 5, 1931, in Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, 210.
[56] Joseph Kastein, *The Messiah of Izmir*, trans. Huntley Paterson, (NY: The Viking Press, 1931), 336.
[57] Scholem, "The Theology of Sabbateanism" (1928), qtd. in Amir Engel, *Gershom Scholem*, 135.

complexity distanced people from the divine. Theologians had to try "to salvage the living relationship with God from such mythological entanglements."[58] Cardozo's Gnosticism attempted to escape this dilemma by dividing between two Gods. The first divinity was the First Cause: unified, in a traditionally monotheistic manner, but without any active role in creation or human life. From the First Cause emerged another divinity, the "God of Israel" that appears in scripture. This divinity is dynamic, mystically complex, and has an active relationship to creation. According to Scholem, Cardozo posited that as part of the exile from Jerusalem the Jews had mistakenly directed their prayers towards the uncaring First Cause. Consequently, redemption would accompany a revolution of faith from the fixed to the dynamic God. This faith-based revolution destabilized the theological foundation of Jewish tradition. [59] Scholem's project was not only a theory of obscure Jewish mystics, but of Jewish proto-modernity, encompassing distance from the divine, a decaying tradition, and the mass desire for a new and immanent redemptive model. In "The Work of Art," Benjamin describes a secularized version of this narrative of enlightenment: "Mankind, which in Homer's time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself."[60]

Sabbateanism's proto-modernity is compounded by a peculiar dialect of reason at its core. According to Scholem, Cardozo's messiah is a "radical rationalist [*radikaler Rationalist*]"[61] who will "perceive God not through tradition or revelation […] but through his intuition [*ratio]*, and this absolute intellectual permeation of the 'mystery of faith' is the actual and unmistakable identifying mark of the Messiah."[62] Through a paradoxical ideological dialectic, "an almost Maimonidean notion of the redemptive power of the intellect"[63] emerges from the deep mysticism of the Lurianic kabbala. The messiah's rationalism allowed him to cut through the mysticism and tradition and to behave as no other Jew dared. Counter to Jewish law, Sabbatai Zevi spoke the name of God – "the primal phenomenon of language [*dem Urphänomen der Sprache*]"[64] – in public. Yet he suffered no divine punishment, demonstrating the power of his messianic ratio. This theory was reinforced through reference to the Lurianic vessels, the shattered vessels whose sparks of divinity needed to be rescued and restored. Cardozo argued that some sparks had fallen, not merely into the profane world, but into the depths of sin. The messiah's transgressions and conversion to Islam were part of a metaphysical struggle, entering the depths of sin to redeem the divine sparks and reconstruct of the Lurianic vessels.[65] The messiah's radical rationalism parallels the radical power of mechanical reproduction in "The Work of Art," dismantling tradition, overturning exile, and redeeming the divine roots of language.

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[58] Ibid., 135.
[59] Amir Engel, *Gershom Scholem*, 137.
[60] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," *Illuminations*, 20.
[61] Gershom Scholem, "Uber die Theologie des Sabbatianismus im Lichte Abraham Cardozos," *Der Jude* (1928), 132. Accessed online through www.compactmemory.de. All translations not credited to Amir Engel are translated with help of DeepL translation software and McGill student Shlomo Jack.
[62] Scholem, "The Theology of Sabbateanism" (1928), qtd. in Amir Engel, *Gershom Scholem*, 137-8.
[63] Scholem, "The Theology of Sabbateanism" (1928), qtd. in Amir Engel, *Gershom Scholem*, 138.
[64] Scholem, "Uber die Theologie des Sabbatianismus," *Der Jude* (1928), 132.
[65] Amir Engel, *Gershom Scholem*, 139.

Cardozo theorized that *only* the messiah, who stood at the threshold of redemption, had the spiritual force necessary for such transgression. But Lurian mysticism undermined this effort at delimiting Sabbateanism's antinomian potential. The mystical theory of moral behaviour was far more ambiguous than the laws of the written and oral Torah. The structures of Jewish life had previously contained this ambiguity. But by inaugurating a false redemption, Sabbateanism contradicted the ideological structures and material realities of exile, with catastrophic results. The dialectic of mysticism and rationalism "which ever endangered the existence of the moral world" [66] collapsed inwards, leading to the Frankist catastrophe. Sabbateanism emerged from the contradictions of kabbalistic mysticism; Frankism represented the full destructive potential of the contradictions within Sabbateanism, down to the blood libel and mass conversion. Frank expressed this theology of destruction in no uncertain terms, declaring that "Wherever Adam trod a city was built, but wherever I set foot all will be destroyed, for I came into this world only to destroy and to annihilate. But what I build, will last forever."[67]

Scholem's dialect of mysticism and rationalism bears resemblance to Adorno and Horkheimer's dialectic of enlightenment, which attempted to explain Europe's descent into fascism. They summarize the dialectic as follows: "Myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology."[68] Even prior to publication of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* Adorno recognized this resonance. He wrote in a 1938 letter to Benjamin: "[Scholem] insists on the existence of a sort of radioactive decay that monadically drives mysticism, regardless of its historical guise, towards enlightenment."[69] Yet Frankism, as described by Scholem, cannot be adequately characterized as either enlightenment or a 'reversion to mythology.' Rather, it is a peculiar collision of mysticism and reason, of myth and enlightenment, that brings out the antinomian potential of both. The rational messiah collapses into the opaque mysticism from which he had emerged.

Benjamin's theory of fascism in the "Work of Art" operates along similar lines. For Scholem, exile is a metaphysical condition; for Benjamin, it is the material condition of capitalism. But in both cases, the masses yearn for redemption, and the redemption offered is merely superficial. Fascism suppresses the right of the masses to transform property relations by giving them "a chance to express themselves."[70] In offering this false redemption, it produces a collision of the aura and mechanical reproduction. The aura, or the cult value of art, is preserved in a "theology of art," or *l'art pour l'art*, the idea that art has inherent value and no social function.[71] A corrosive antinomianism festers within this obsolete concept. Benjamin proposes for fascism

[66] Scholem, "Uber die Theologie des Sabbatianismus," *Der Jude*, 137.
[67] Qtd. in Gershom Scholem, "Redemption Through Sin," *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality,* trans. Hillel Halkin (NY: Schocken, 1971), 130.
[68] Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno*, Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, (Stanford UP, 2002), xviii.
[69] Ansgar Martins and Lars Fischer, *The Migration of Metaphysics into the Realm of the Profane: Theodor W. Adorno Reads Gershom Scholem* (Brill, 2020), 79.
[70] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," *Illuminations*, 19.
[71] Ibid., 6.

the motto "*Fiat ars – pereat mundus* [Let art be created – though the world perish]."[72] The mass desire for redemption and the tools of mechanical reproduction are redirected towards perpetual, aestheticized war. Yet Benjamin ironically observes that "Through gas warfare the aura is abolished in a new way."[73] The aura renewed in violence is continually abolished in violence. As in Frankism, a paradoxical consecration and desecration of the aura – what Scholem later called "Redemption Through Sin" – sustains the fascist fusion of myth and enlightenment.

Conclusion: Kafka's Redemption

An essential distinction remains between Scholem and Benjamin's concept of redemption. Franz Rosenzweig characterized Scholem's attack on Goldberg as "liberal ideology."[74] The Jewish people cannot force redemption; law must mediate between messianic mythology and ratio, deferring the demand for redemption.[75] Benjamin's Marxism, by contrast, stresses the possibility of redemption. If not Scholem's mediation by law, what prevents the pursuit of redemption from "tear[ing] open the abysses"[76] of fascism? "Communism responds," Benjamin explains, "by politicizing art."[77] This difference between Benjamin and Scholem's attitudes towards redemption plays out illustratively in their distinct readings of a mutual touchstone: Franz Kafka.

In 1931, Benjamin asked Scholem for his opinion on Kafka. Scholem suggested that Benjamin focus on Kafka's concept of *Gesetz*, or law. According to Scholem, Kafka's "linguistic world" resembles "the language of the Last Judgment" and thus "probably represents the prosaic in its most canonical form." [78] However, this proximity to linguistic wholeness does not point towards redemption. On the contrary, Kafka's relationship to the Last Judgment puts him alongside the Book of Job, where divine judgment remains impenetrable to man. "Here, for once, a world is expressed in which redemption cannot be anticipated," Scholem explains. He concludes the brief discussion with a reference to Kafka's "overwhelming statement that the Last Judgment is, rather, a kind of martial law." In terms suggestive of the growing fascist threat, Scholem expresses through Kafka the danger of demanding redemption and affirms the necessity of redemption's deferral.

In his 1934 essay on Kafka, Benjamin turns Scholem's reading on its head. The divine Last Judgment is ever-deferred, so redemption must be sought elsewhere, in profane immanence.[79] In describing the alienation defining Kafka's prose, Benjamin plays with ideas around film expanded on in "The Work of Art": "Experiments have proved that a man does not recognize his own gait on film or his own voice on the phonograph. The situation of the subject in such experiments is Kafka's situation; this is what leads him to

[72] Ibid., 20.
[73] Ibid.
[74] Rosenstock, *Transfinite Life*, 181.
[75] Ibid., 162.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," *Illuminations*, 20.
[78] Scholem to Benjamin, Aug. 31, 1931, in Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: Story of a Friendship,* 216.
[79] Jeremy Arnott, "Studying Outside the Law: Kafka and the Question of Benjamin's Politics," in *The Scattered Pelican* (Spring 2017), accessed online.

study, where he may encounter fragments of his own existence."[80] As in "The Work of Art," the fragmentation produced by film has liberating potential because it forces re-evaluation. This re-evaluation, or 'study,' is the essence of Benjamin's 'politicized art'. According to Kafka's parable "The New Advocate," Alexander the Great's horse Bucephalus studied law after Alexander's death. Benjamin agrees with Werner Kraft's assessment of the parable as a "powerful and penetrating criticism of myth."[81] However, not content to stop there, Benjamin highlights that Bucephalus has outlived the myth of his rider *and* the law of his subjugation. Bucephalus was not liberated by law; rather, "the law which is studied but no longer practiced is the gate to justice."[82] Law is merely a rationalization of myth. As such, the assault on myth cannot lead to justice unless it is accompanied by a study of the mythic origins of law itself.

Accordingly, the mechanical attack on myth is insufficient if art is not "politicized"; that is, if it does not study and challenge the laws of political economy. The study of law through film opens a revolutionary horizon of possibility.[83] Consider how the filming of familiar urban environment for example: "on the one hand, [it] extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives; on the other hand, it manages to assure us of an immense and unexpected field of action."[84] This possibility is exemplified in Kafka's Nature of Theatre of Oklahoma (from *Amerika)*. In this theatre, everyone is welcome, each actor plays himself (hence the 'Nature'), and the show closes forever at midnight.[85] The performer is liberated through recognition of immanence. The parable contextualizes Benjamin's admiration of Soviet films in which "people portray *themselves*—and primarily their own work processes."[86] These representations serve, not to valorize labor, but to turn the worker's life and labor into a performance defined by the worker's immediacy. In these fragments the worker finds creative reinvention outside of the oppressive structures that treat them as a means.

In Benjamin's Kafka, as in Benjamin himself, the theological reverberates through the profane. The concerns of Benjamin's early career and of Scholem's scholarship animate "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." He seeks a material solution to a problem beginning in 'the metaphysics of language.' The astonishing entropic power of mechanical reproduction could liberate the language of art and reinvigorate it as a language of the masses, or it could be made a tool for humanity's ritualized self-annihilation. Following Kafka, Benjamin rejects law's deferral of redemption. Instead, he completes theology's migration into the profane, finding redemption in immanence.

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[80] Walter Benjamin, "Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death," *Selected Writings,* vol. 2, trans. Rodney Livingstone, ed. Michael Jennings et al., (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap press of Harvard UP, 1999), 814.
[81] Ibid., 815.
[82] Ibid.
[83] Arnott, "Studying Outside the Law."
[84] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," Illuminations, 15.
[85] Benjamin, "Frank Kafka," *Selected Writings,* vol. 2, 814.
[86] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," Illuminations, 12.

Noah's Wife and Feminist Midrash for Children

Shlomo Enkin Lewis

The story of "Noah's flood" portrayed in Genesis 6:9-9:17 has long captivated children. The basic images are colourful and evocative: an ark containing every kind of animal, forty days and forty nights of rain, a rainbow, and a promise of life. Many picture books have addressed the subject, and Susan Campbell Bartoletti (author of *Naamah and the Ark at Night*) recalls playing with a Noah's ark toy and imagining the story as a child.

The three portrayals for children of the "Noah's flood" story I will be analysing here are *Mrs. Noah's Doves* by Jane Yolen, *Naamah and the Ark at Night* by Susan Campbell Bartoletti, and *Naamah, Noah's Wife* by Sandy Eisenberg Sasso. I will present my analysis in reverse chronological order of publication. These three authors have chosen to focus on and develop into a narrative the experience of a minor character in the biblical narrative, that of Noah's wife. In so doing they have shifted the focus of the story away from Noah, the flood, and the traditional narrative's underlying moral/theological lesson of God wiping out and then renewing the earth due to sin.

At first glance there is not much to draw on in the character of Noah's wife. Noah's wife is mentioned five times in the Bible. This is always as part of a list including Noah, his sons, and his sons' wives, and always in connection to entering or leaving the ark. She does not otherwise take on any active role or have a voice. Rabbinic midrash (which two of our authors explicitly quote) furnishes a small amount more. Genesis 4:22 gives us the name of one of Cain's descendants, a woman named Naamah. In explaining why this name is given (when the names of most women are not,) Midrash Bereshit Rabbah 23:3 tells us: "Rabbi Abba bar Kahana said: Na'amah was Noah's wife. Why was she called Na'amah? Because all her deeds were pleasant (ne'imim)." The Gur Aryeh's commentary on Bereshit Rabbah (4:22:2) explains that Noah's wife must have been righteous and a doer of pleasant deeds, since otherwise, why would she have been saved from the flood?

This impulse to portray Noah's wife as a righteous figure alongside Noah is developed further in these three childrens' books. Each of these books serves a feminist function in that they center a woman and give her an active role, displacing the central role of Noah in the traditional story. Simultaneously, each of these books plays into gender roles and stereotypes. They all seek to portray Noah's wife as his "feminine equal," bringing a tenderness, care, and calm that Noah lacks. Since contemporary gender roles are rooted in patriarchal norms, this reliance on gender stereotypes partially undercuts the feminist message, though not to the extent that I personally would feel uncomfortable reading these books to children.

Mrs. Noah's Doves, written by Jane Yolen and illustrated by Alida Massari, was published in May 2022. Yolen is an 83-year-old author who has written prolifically, primarily for children. She is a Quaker by religious affiliation, of Ukrainian Jewish heritage. She has written several

works about the Holocaust, and has written two other books of biblical stories, both also centering women. *Meet Me at the Well: The Girls and Women of the Bible* is identified by Yolen on her website as a work of midrash, "vetted by a rabbi and a Jewish education specialist." The publisher of *Mrs. Noah's Doves,* Kar-Ben, focuses on "Jewish books for children and families." Nevertheless, nothing in the book itself indicates a specifically Jewish audience. Given Yolen's familiarity with Jewish texts, her decision not to give Mrs. Noah the name Naamah is interesting. Perhaps this is meant to make the text more acceptable to non-Jewish audiences, or perhaps to emphasise the balance and connection between "Mrs. Noah" and "Mr. Noah."

The first four pages of *Mrs. Noah's Doves* establish Mrs. Noah's special relationship to the injured birds in her area. She cares tenderly for each of them and keeps the sickest ones safe in cages until they can fly free. The safety of the cage foreshadows the safety of the ark, and the centrality of bird's ties into the story of the raven and dove in Genesis 8:6-12. These pages establish Mrs. Noah's care for the doves as ongoing, specific, and relational. It also serves no utilitarian purpose, as most often the birds do not return to her after she lets them go. This contrasts to the biblical Noah's more one-time act of care with the ark which serves the general and partially utilitarian purpose of saving all life. On the first page, Mrs. Noah's motivation for caring for the birds is that "they reminded her of her grandmother, cooing over the newest grandchild, or, at night, bending over to pray in her soft, gray clothing." This situates her actions as part of an intergenerational feminine ethic of care. This encourages the readers to recall and identify with the gentleness of their own female ancestors.

On the fifth and sixth pages, the rains begin. Notably, nobody in Mrs. Noah's family has been informed that there will be rain. The illustration shows her watching the rain with concern, and the flooding occurs gradually, seemingly over months. On the seventh page, Mrs. Noah's concern for her birds and her family drives her to act in response to the flood, by asking Mr. Noah for help. The impetus for the life-saving action of the ark is not God's decree; rather, it is Mrs. Noah's care for specific creatures, which widens to a concern for all life. The narrative that one woman's love and care can save all life is beautiful and feminine-centric.

On the eighth and ninth pages, Mr. Noah builds the ark with the help of "his strong sons and his strong daughters," and all the animals "(at least all the animals in the neighborhood)" enter the ark. Mr. Noah's motivation is his love for his wife and her "generous heart." The gender dynamics here are fascinating. The relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Noah is clearly one of mutual respect and love. She can ask him for anything, and he will do anything for her. Their relationship also works 100 per cent within gender stereotypes. She is active in a tender and caregiving role, and he is active in an outward-facing, engineering role. Mrs. Noah must "insist" on the ark having room for all her birds. Of course, Mr. Noah heeds her request, but he is still in charge of making sure it happens.

The inclusion of the Noah's "strong daughters" makes this a more feminist work. While centering a woman who lives out gender stereotypes, the book portrays other women who do not. Classical femininity and feminine roles are thus celebrated but not implied to be obligatory for women.

Also worth analysing is the absence of God in this narrative. In explaining his plan to build an ark, Mr. Noah tells Mrs. Noah, "God has told me what to do." Yet there is no indication from the narrator that God has done this or that God is even present at any point. Rather, God seems to be a stand-in for inspiration and a clear sense of direction. This is like how Mrs. Noah's grandmother's prayers inspired Mrs. Noah towards caring action. God becomes real in the hearts and minds of the characters but does not exist as an active agent or entity. Perhaps

Yolen's goal is to make the story more realist (the comment on "all the animals in the neighborhood" is also a 'realist' touch), and more appealing to atheist readers. Or perhaps Yolen is demonstrating the value of prayer and faith in the absence of any divine action or God-figure.

The tenth and eleventh pages recount the survival of the ark through the flood and makes the connection between the ark and Mrs. Noah's birdcages explicit. On the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth pages, it is Mrs. Noah's actions and her connection to her birds that enable the residents of the ark to find dry land and begin life anew. The story of the raven and dove is expanded to include eagles, terns, and gulls. On the thirteenth and fourteenth pages, Mrs. Noah sends out a male and female dove together. This change from the biblical account underlines one of the book's central messages: that women and men are equally important and must work together, in complementary balance. On the fifteenth page, a rainbow appears, and the doves begin to nest. God is again not mentioned. We are given only Mrs. Noah's perspective: "she knew this was a sign that life on the earth was about to begin anew."

Naamah and the Ark at Night is "a lullaby" written by Susan Campbell Bartoletti and illustrated by Holly Meade, published in 2011. The text is based on the *ghazal* form of classical Arabic poetry. The first three pages (in a gentle manner appropriate for young children) portray a turbulent scene. The ark "swirls" on an endless sea, thunder "crashes," Noah tosses and turns in dreams, and "restless animals prowl the night." Within this restless dark, Naamah's song is the counteracting essence of calm. On the fourth through the eighth pages, Naamah is shown comforting each of the animals and her own children. "Naamah sings all through the night." Naamah's tender, nurturing feminine presence contrasts with the rest of the world. Naamah's song triumphs over the chaos. Her prayer temporarily ends the rain and brings out the stars.

On the ninth page, "song flows" over the ark, replacing the rain falling on the first page. The ninth through twelfth pages show each of the animals falling asleep, soothed from their prowling by Naamah's gentle song. The thirteenth and fourteenth pages show the ark itself "cradled" by Naamah's song. The illustrator shows us Naamah herself yawning and about to go to sleep, implying that her song continues into the night as she sleeps, possibly in the hearts of all those on board the ark.

Likewise, gender roles play a major role in this story which nevertheless centres and celebrates a feminine woman. Noah barely factors into the narrative, but since he is asleep he is

implied to be responsible for maintaining the ark and caring for the animals during the day. Nevertheless, Noah's daytime activity is not enough to keep everyone going. It's Naamah with her nightly gentleness and song who helps everyone survive. Once again, Naamah's feminine actions compliment Noah's masculine work. Naamah holds up the night while Noah holds up the day (incidentally mirroring the Chinese philosophical concept of Yin and Yang, where women are identified with the darkness of Yin), creating a cosmic balance. Both are indispensable.

Again, this creates an effect that is feminist while upholding gender stereotypes. The fact that Naamah works dedicatedly and literally tirelessly into the night, in a way that is personal, individual, likely unnoticed by Noah and fully ignored in the biblical narrative, fits well with stereotypes of women as tireless nurturers who work best in marginalised caregiving roles. Nevertheless, this book centres and celebrates this kind of work and makes it clear that it must not be ignored. It even shows Noah only in a passive, literally sleeping role, implying that this kind of "women's work" is fundamentally more important, perhaps the only thing that deeply matters. As in *Mrs. Noah's Doves*, the character of Naamah is implied to believe in God given that she prays, but God is in no way active. The only action here is on the part of the human woman and mother, Naamah.

Bartoletti's author's note at the end of the book is illuminating, and I believe the ideas therein can be applied somewhat to our other authors' decisions to focus on Noah's wife as well. Bartoletti's starting point is a personal connection to the story developed in childhood. But she was bothered, as perhaps many young people are, by the lack of emphasis on the female characters in the story. A feminist impulse for the representation of women thus underlies this book. Bartoletti cites the midrash quoted above as the source for her understanding of Naamah (including her name). Bartoletti cites an additional midrash that Naamah (not identified with Noah's wife in that source) was "mistress of elegies and songs" (Targum Jonathan on Genesis 4:22).[1] This becomes the inspiration for Naamah's song. Interestingly, given this book's reliance on rabbinic legends, I was not able to find any information on whether Bartoletti is or is not Jewish. The publisher, Candlewick Press, publishes childrens' literature and is not specifically Jewish.

The author's note describes this book as "a lullaby that inspires readers to trust in the darkness." "Noah's flood" is, among other things, a story about trust in God. Here, the story is instead about trust in the darkness, identified with femininity, and with the power of song, nurturance, and care.

Naamah, Noah's Wife is the earliest work I have chosen to analyse. Written by Sandy Eisenberg Sasso and illustrated by Bethanne Andersen, this book was published in 2002. *Naamah, Noah's Wife* is itself an abridged version intended for readers aged 0-4 of *A Prayer for the Earth: The Story of Naamah, Noah's Wife*, with the same author and illustrator, published in 1996. I chose to focus my analysis on the abridged work since it is more similar in tone to the previous two books

[1] This in-text citation scheme is maintained as it is most common in literary analyses.

(a picture book with rather minimal words), as opposed to the original which tells the same story in much more detail.

The first two pages of *Naamah, Noah's Wife* introduce Naamah and Noah, with the illustrations showing them as a couple. God tells Noah about the flood, ark, and animals, and Noah does "as God said." Immediately, in contrast to our other two books, God is present, active, and speaking. In this way, Sasso's book is much closer to the biblical account. Noah does not appear in this book again.

On the third page, God speaks to Naamah, in an exact parallel of God's speech to Noah, telling her to gather "two of every kind" of plant seed. She immediately sets to work. As in our previous works, the man and the woman have separate yet complementary and equally necessary roles to play. Naamah's role in caring for the plants plays in somewhat to gender roles regarding women as more tender and nurturing than men, and to the anthropological generalisation that women are gatherers and men are hunters, as well as the idea that women are more connected to passive things (such as plants) and to nature in general. A woman as the archetype of a gardener also plays into the idea that women are keepers of the home. Nevertheless, I found this story to portray Naamah more completely in her own separate active role equal to that of Noah, rather than in any kind of support role. In this sense this work perhaps accomplishes a feminist goal more cleanly than our other works.

On the fourth and fifth pages, we see Naamah gathering plants. God relates to Naamah in a familiar, friendly way, reminding her to take along the dandelions (*A Prayer for the Earth* adds that Naamah did not want to take the dandelions – reacting as a gardener to the weed). This reimagining of God as familiar and concerned with the intimate details of nature strikes me as itself feminine. There is no implication of God being masculine in this story. The world is portrayed as God's garden and women gardeners are playing a part in creation.

On the sixth page, Naamah creates a garden on the ark as the world is flooded outside. The illustration adds a sign, "these plants are not for food!!!" keeping the plants safe from the animals outside. Naamah assertively protects and creates space for the "feminine" plants in the face of the "masculine" animals. *A Prayer for the Earth* adds that Noah and Naamah would find peace in that garden away from the animals, further showing Naamah as the shaper of a peaceful home.

On the seventh page, the ark comes to rest. The illustration of a barren, desert earth contrasts sharply and painfully with the previous depiction of a lush earth full of plants in which Naamah had gone gathering. *A Prayer for the Earth* further explains that the dove (depicted only in the illustration in *Naamah, Noah's Wife*) found a leaf grown from one of Naamah's seeds that was taken and planted by the raven after the flood. All plant life on earth had died in the flood.

The eighth and ninth pages show Naamah returning life to the earth. First, she scatters milkweed seeds to the wind, trusting in God to make things alright. Then, she turns to meticulously

planting, taking charge as a partner in creation. God is again in a familiar, supportive role, gently making sure that dandelions cover the earth because Naamah had almost forgotten them.

The tenth and eleventh pages create a beautiful parallel and balance between Naamah and God. When Naamah sees the earth full of plants once more, she is happy. God sees that what Naamah has accomplished is good. By way of this reference to the creation story in Genesis, Sasso implies that Naamah has fully become a partner in creation, and that her creation is equal with that of God. After this, "God, too, was happy." This balance and parallel is striking not only for its theological implications. When we compare this to our other two works, we find that Sasso has largely discarded the binary opposition of masculine and feminine, Noah and Naamah, that underpins our other works. Instead of complimenting Noah, Naamah compliments God. Since God is often not understood as masculine or male in Jewish tradition and is not implied to be so anywhere in this book, this ending can be read as boldly feminist – men and masculinity are simply not relevant here, and Naamah is in no way submitting to patriarchy. If the concept is expanded to include all non-men, this book arguably passes the Bechdel test due to the conversations between Naamah and God.

Sandy Eisenberg Sasso differs from our other authors in that her religious affiliation is central to most of her work. Sasso is a rabbi in the Reconstructionist movement, and the first woman in that movement to have been ordained. She has written many picture books on Jewish and religious themes, as well as an analysis of classic rabbinic midrash. *A Prayer for the Earth* even quotes the Naamah midrash in Bereshit Rabbah in full as the opening page. Interestingly, the publishers have chosen to emphasise that this book is "for children of all faiths, all backgrounds." The publisher of *Naamah, Noah's Wife* is Skylight Paths Publishing, which publishes books on spirituality for children and adults. Interestingly, *A Prayer for the Earth* was published by Jewish Lights Publishing, a sister company of Skylight Paths, using the exact same multifaith language. *Naamah, Noah's Wife* is framed in the introduction as a good starting point for a conversation about spirituality. In its focus on God and spirituality, this work differs from the other two books under discussion.

Our analysis has revealed several key commonalities. Each of these authors, in choosing to focus on Noah's wife in recounting the "Noah's flood" story, have chosen to centre femininity in the narrative, in what I deem a feminist act. Each author, however, fails to challenge established Western gender norms rooted in patriarchy. The image that emerges is a desire not to displace men and masculinity from their dominant position in the story that bears Noah's name. Rather, these authors insist that feminine women can and should be equal, complementary partners to masculine men in shaping the world. In each, Noah's wife is depicted as indispensable to the overall survival of life on earth, bringing something that Noah cannot. These authors nevertheless sideline masculinity in a subtle manner, simply by focusing on the feminine.

Each author has made choices with the narrative structure to centre the feminine contributions of Noah's wife and decenter the structure of the basic "Noah's ark" story (God's warning, entering the ark, the flood, and leaving the ark greeted by a rainbow). *Mrs. Noah's Doves* places the emphasis on life before the flood and how relationships and care built during that time proved indispensable later. *Naamah and the Ark at Night* focuses entirely on the period during the flood, showing no sign of the world before or after. *Naamah, Noah's Wife* makes the bold choice of ignoring the rainbow altogether and placing emphasis on the rebuilding of the earth after the flood. In expanding on specific aspects of the story, the authors create room for Noah's wife's personality to shine through. It is worth noting that all the authors and illustrators of these works are women. Above all, these books are a fascinating sample of the possibilities and potential pitfalls of creative feminist midrash for children.