

Review Essay

JACK BIELER

Tracing Trends in Orthodoxy

LIPPMAN BODOFF

The Binding of Isaac, Religious Murders, & Kabbalah: Seeds of Jewish Extremism and Alienation?

Jerusalem: Devora Publishing, 2005, 463pp. \$21.95.

Lippman Bodoff's *The Binding of Isaac, Religious Murders, & Kabbalah: Seeds of Jewish Extremism and Alienation?* sports the sort of title that will pique the curiosity and imagination of many. Roughly half the book is devoted to exploring various dimensions of the following hypothesis: a particular and, according to the author, wrong-headed understanding of the biblical account of the *akedah* (binding of Isaac) in Genesis 22 has contributed mightily to the readiness on the part of serious halakhic Ashkenazi Jews beginning during the period of the Crusades to take their own lives as well as those of their families in order to escape what they have determined to be the base evil of their surroundings.¹ This in turn constitutes a symptom of a progressively mystical outlook leading its adherents to separate themselves as much as possible from the society surrounding them. Bodoff bemoans what constitutes, in his opinion, the unfortunate direction that Orthodox Jewry has been taking for the past ten centuries, whereby it has progressively disengaged from general culture and eschewed even halakhically acceptable progressivism in favor of an overall narrow, isolationist perspective vis-à-vis the non-Jewish as well as the irreligious Jewish world.

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In the early chapters of the book, Bodoff formulates the widely-held classical interpretation that the divine test of the *akedah* was intended to teach that God desires Abraham, and by extension, all observant Jews to be so devoted to their belief in the divine and the tenets of Judaism that they would be prepared to literally sacrifice their children if called upon to do so. Bodoff argues that this interpretation is patently false. In fact, the author contends, Abraham fully expected to be reined in by God prior to his actually carrying out the divine order to kill Isaac and turn him into a burnt offering. Abraham clearly had made assumptions regarding divine mercy and justice that had led him to arrive at his strikingly iconoclastic monotheistic beliefs in the first place; logically, he maintained these beliefs throughout the sequence of events of *akedat Yizhak*, and would therefore not countenance the possibility that God would actually ask him to sacrifice his son. Paradoxically, Bodoff claims, the test of the *akedah* is really a case of Abraham testing God, despite the statement in the biblical text that it was God Who tested Abraham (Genesis 22:1).² Furthermore, whereas some interpret the details of the story of the *akedah* as a reflection of Abraham's eagerness to comply with God's command, as seen in the many actions that Abraham unhesitatingly performed in preparation for the sacrifice,³ Bodoff contends that these actions were actually Abraham's attempt to stall for time. Abraham wanted to allow God ample opportunity to ultimately pronounce his opposition to the sacrifice, and Abraham was eagerly awaiting this message.⁴

Once Bodoff makes the case for his "correct" interpretation of the *akedah*, he draws his conclusion: had the Jews during the Crusader persecutions understood Genesis 22 in a similarly life-affirming manner, rather than insisting that the text supports the view that God considers as a positive value the readiness to sacrifice one's child *le-shem Shamayim*, they would have found it far more difficult to justify murdering their children and families in order to prevent them from falling into the hands of their oppressors. The author goes on to claim that the "misguided" interpretation of the *akedah* was subsequently compounded by the *Ba'alei ha-Tosafot* of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, who pointedly avoided censoring those who took the lives of family members in order to defy their persecutors. They thereby tacitly supported the overall outlook regarding that acceptability of "human sacrifice" under certain extreme conditions.⁵

Although the author's perspective regarding the "perversion" of the *akedat Yizhak* story by medieval Ashkenazi Jewry is provocative,

methodical, and lucidly presented, it does not appear to me to be compelling, on several accounts. First, I am reminded of Aldous Huxley's critique of those who attempt to explain complex data and experience by means of an all-encompassing relatively simple hypothesis: "Weary with much wandering in the maze of phenomena, frightened by the inhospitable strangeness of the world, men have rushed into the systems prepared for them by philosophers and founders of religion as they would rush from a dank jungle into a haven of a well-lit commodious house."⁶ While it is understandable why one would strive to explain religious trends that he personally finds alienating and regrettable,⁷ it seems to me that such developments are sooner to be explained by nuanced analysis of multi-faceted and integrated historical, sociological, and psychological factors, rather than a focus on the world of biblical exegesis. In this particular case, halakhic principles and values also came into play. To claim that the understanding of a particular non-normative text such as the *akedah* served as the primary justification for the worldview of medieval Jewry stretches credulity.⁸ By virtue of the principle *shiv'im panim la-Torah* (there are 70 [infinite] perspectives for understanding material in the Bible), on what basis should it be assumed that at any given time a single, dominant understanding of the *akedah* would be so overwhelming and universally accepted that it could smooth the path towards the deliberate taking of human life? Certainly the numerous normative verses in the Bible prohibiting all forms of murder⁹ should have trumped a specific understanding of the "Binding of Isaac!"

At the same time, how is Bodoff so certain that his own interpretation, in contrast to what he purports was the "mistaken" view, is the "correct" way to understand the underlying lesson of the *akedah*? Did medieval Ashkenazi commentators who arrived at the interpretation of the *akedah* criticized by the author do so as a result of a particular dark view of the world, or was their understanding the fruit of their attempt to honestly and objectively read the biblical text? A simple, non-homiletic reading of Genesis 22¹⁰ would appear to affirm the approach advanced by the *rishonim* derided by the author much more directly than the considerably more subtle and complex approach recommended by Bodoff. It seems likely that the author's reading of *akedat Yizhak* is one informed by contemporary twenty-first century life-affirming sensibilities as much as the readings of Rashi, Rashbam, and Ramban might have been influenced by the events through which they lived. It is possible that contrary to Bodoff's "if only" speculation, it would be incomprehensible to a Jew living in Germany at the end of the eleventh century, whose community

had been subjected to severe persecution, that the *akedah* constitutes a statement about the preservation and sanctity of life under all conditions rather than the justification to sacrifice life if called upon to do so for religious reasons.

A disagreement with the central premise of the book, however, does not mean that a reader cannot discover a great deal of food for thought in this well-researched and extensively footnoted volume. I am particularly intrigued by the essay, "Hellenism verses Hebraism on the Inevitability of Tragedy: Studying the Cain and Joseph Stories" (133-144) contained in the chapter dealing with exegesis. The exercise whereby one imagines how the elements of well-known biblical stories would appear in a Greek cultural context highlights a dimension of the *kulturkampf* between the Jewish and Hellenistic traditions that is original and effective. Applying Bodoff's approach in this regard to additional biblical stories beyond the ones that he explicitly develops, as well as thinking about how classical Greek drama might look when viewed from a Jewish perspective, promotes a powerful exercise for any reader.

Most of the later chapters of Bodoff's book address attempts on the part of Jews to reengage with general society despite the ever-narrowing strictures of the prevailing Orthodox Judaism. He discusses the phenomenon of court Jews, the *Haskalah* in general, modern Jewish literature (which, he claims, reflects *haskalah* values), current attempts to reconcile contemporary scientific theory with traditional religious thought, and Modern Orthodoxy as the latest attempt to counter the increasing inwardness of Orthodox Judaism as a whole. These sections, while intriguing, deal with trends that allegedly began during the medieval period. But they do not relate to "The Binding of Isaac," "Religious Murder," or "Kabbalah," and the title of the volume is consequently misleading.¹¹

Finally, with regard to the volume's stylistic composition, I feel that a great deal of ground is revisited too many times during the course of the initial set of articles, and I would have appreciated a more tightly edited compendium of these previously published articles. Nevertheless, whether one agrees or disagrees with Bodoff's analyses and conclusions, there is much here to contemplate and much that will enrich one's thinking and understanding regarding central issues in biblical interpretation and our religious history.

Notes

1. The author lists a number of articles, primarily “Religious Law and Change” by Haym Soloveitchik (*AJS Review* 12[1987]:205-21), as the basis for this contention (49-50, n. 4).
2. The author attributes a similar interpretation to Elie Wiesel in his essay on the *akedah* in *Messengers of God* (New York, 1977) (66, n. 8 and 76, n. 3).
3. “And he *got up* early,” “and he *saddled* his donkey,” “and he *took* his two youths along with Isaac,” “and he *chopped* wood for the burnt offering,” “and he *rose* and *went* to the place,” “and he *took* the wood for the burnt offering,” “and he *placed* it on Isaac his son,” “and he *took* in his hand the fire and the knife,” “and he *built* there the altar,” “and he *arranged* the wood,” “and he *bound* Isaac his son,” “and he *placed* him upon it,” “and he *extended* his hand,” “and he *took* the knife.”
4. The author draws a pertinent analogy between the *akedah* and the tactics of Aaron, who, according to commentators, tried to delay the worship of the Golden Calf for as long as possible in order to allow for the return of Moses, whom the Calf was intended to replace. See, e.g., Rashi on Ex. 32:3, 5.
5. Bodoff’s implication that all *Ba’alei ha-Tosafot* should be equally impugned for their position regarding the murdering of children would appear to be at least somewhat mitigated by the famous passage in *Da’at Zekenim mi-Ba’alei ha-Tosafot* on Gen. 9:5, which records a debate between Tosafist authorities who advocated diametrically opposing views regarding whether killing one’s children in such a context was a reflection of virtue or extreme evil.
6. “Wordsworth in the Tropics,” in Aldous Huxley, *Collected Essays* (New York, 1959), 5.
7. It is hard to avoid the impression that the author engages in a great deal of special pleading for his preferred view of Orthodoxy. See, e.g., pp. 75, 125, 167, 229, etc. In my opinion, an argument is more effective when it is presented as dispassionately as possible, rather than as an extended polemical exercise.
8. The *akedah* is “non-normative” in the sense that it was a one-time event that was not meant to be replicable other than under the conditions of clear-cut Divine Revelation to a genuine prophet. As opposed to being a commandment that was for eternity, it was a one-time directive specifically targeting Abraham. There is no record or indication that any sort of parallel event will ever involve anyone other than Abraham and Isaac themselves.
9. E.g., Gen. 9:5-6; 37:22; Ex. 20:12; 21:12; Lev. 19:16; 24:17; Num. 35:9-34; Deut. 5:16; 19:1-13; 22:26; 27:25.
10. Such an approach informs the understandings of classical commentators like Rashbam and Ibn Ezra, and is justified by a strict adherence to the rule, (*Shabbat* 63a; *Yevamot* 11b) “*Ein mikra yozei mi-yedei peshuto*” (no text can be explained independently of its simple, obvious meaning).
11. The final essays on contemporary synagogue music do not appear to fit at all into the overall thrust of the book, even if one were to accept the interconnection between the volume’s original thesis and the representation that the subsequent chapters illustrate where the original trends have led.