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Genesis 22 through the Lens of Roland Barthes

In his *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche posits that true objectivity lies in the gathering of multiple perspectives; "There is only a perspective seeing, only a perspective 'knowing'; and the more affects we allow to speak about one thing, the more eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our 'concept' of this thing, our 'objectivity,' be." The Nietzschean idea of objectivity can be applied to literature through the study of semantics. This concept was explored within my original sketch, through of the use of Roland Barthes' *Death of the Author* theorem as a tool to aid the reader in his or her comprehension of literature in a way that fully develops a more objective or personal understanding of the text. Most of the generalizations one can make about any given piece of writing come from the black-and-white way in which we deal with literature. Objectivity is an often sought and rarely achieved goal of the reader, and one way of fully realizing it is through the use of Barthes' *Death of the Author* theory in the scope of a collectively Barthes-ian analysis. In his critical work *S/Z*, Barthes seeks objectivity through the use of five codes in analyzing Balzac's short story "Sarrasine." Employing the use of Barthes' codes to analyze any given text (in this case, Genesis 22) in a line-by-line, comprehensive footnoted list of thoughts and ideas is a task that is essential to the core principles of

Mosaics— a class that is designed to force students to think critically and figure out what is really behind all of the words. This type of analysis may be deemed too highbrow for an undergraduate general education class, however, the quintessentially Mosaic principle of discovery makes the Barthes-ian connection quite strong. As Mosaics provides a space for young thinkers to develop and uncover new ideas about old texts, the analytical style of Roland Barthes provides an in-depth way to search for new meaning in a text that many people think they already know.

A well-known yet seldom actually studied text within the literary anthology of the layperson, Genesis, and especially the climactic near-sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22, is a piece of work that draws emotion and opinion from many. Because of its inevitable ability to draw connotations (both as a text and an orally repeated story instilled in people from a young age), the dissection of Genesis 22 with a wholly objective and complete Barthes-ian analysis will be extremely beneficial. Mosaics is a class that is designed to let us question everything as a method of discovering new and personal truths. Combining the subjectivity of religion and biblical tradition with the almost scientific quest for perspective that one discovers in the ideals of Roland Barthes is a way of juxtaposing two radically different literary traditions in a way that will expose meaningful and unexpected conclusions.

The analytical code that Barthes developed when writing *S/Z* can be applied to any text as a manner by which to extract objectivity and meaning. The five codes are all applied to the text as detailed footnotes to the work itself. The Hermeneutic Code deals with enigmatic elements of the text that one must resolve for oneself. Use of the code

(often signaled with the abbreviation HER) often results in questions that lead to a conclusion being drawn from the text. This code is structural in nature and is meant to reveal hidden meaning. The Proairetic Code (abbreviated ACT) is meant to show sequential action as it motivates the movement of the story, anticipating and relying on previous sources of action to build the story. Proairetic Code, also dependent heavily upon the structure of the narrative, derives meaning from the sequence and statutory order of events in the story. Semic (SEM) Code is a nonstructural element that builds upon the connotations of various semes (phrases). Semic Code does not deal with context or story, but seeks to arrange semes into thematic groupings, using popular connotation as opposed to denotation to develop a theme throughout the text. Symbolic (SYM) Code is similar to Semic Code, however where Semic Code always deals with images that are represented through the text, Symbolic Code ties to images that are not or cannot be shown in the text, stemming from more abstract concepts such as sexuality, religion, or politics. Unlike Semic Code, Symbolic Code does not seek to connect thematic images intertextually, because its purpose is to draw upon outside ideas. The last code is the Cultural Code, represented by the abbreviation REF, which refers to scientific, cultural, or common knowledge. Although admittedly the plural nature of reading between different readers would result in varied analyses through each different attempt at using the codes, Barthes maintained that every lexia of every literary work could be properly analyzed using these five codes.

The following text is the NRSV translation of Genesis 22. To avoid confusion, verse numbers have been taken out-- all numbers within the passage refer to the subsequent footnotes.

After these things God tested¹ Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am."² He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac,³ whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah⁴ and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you." So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him.⁵ On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you."⁶ Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac,⁷ and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father!"⁸ And he said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Abraham said, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son."⁹ So the two of them walked on together. When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood.¹⁰ Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son.¹¹ But the angel of the LORD¹² called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God,¹³ since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me."¹⁴ And Abraham looked up and saw a ram,¹⁵ caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place "The LORD will provide"; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided."¹⁶ The angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said, "By myself I have sworn, says the LORD: Because you have done this, and have

not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you,¹⁷ and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore.¹⁸ And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice."¹⁹ So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beer-sheba; and Abraham lived at Beer-sheba. Now after these things it was told Abraham, "Milcah also has borne children, to your brother Nahor: Uz the firstborn, Buz his brother, Kemuel the father of Aram, Chesed, Hazo, Pildash, Jidlaph, and Bethuel." Bethuel became the father of Rebekah. These eight Milcah bore to Nahor, Abraham's brother. Moreover, his concubine, whose name was Reumah, bore Tebah, Gaham, Tahash, and Maacah.

1 *After these things God tested*: ACT. The Tanakh, the translation of the Old Testament that is approved and printed by the Jewish Publication Society, translates this line as *God did prove*. SEM. The use of *tested* as opposed to *did prove* displays a semic theme of Genesis 22 in the NRSV translation, which highlights the thematic importance that Abraham must either pass or fail the test.

2 *And he said, "Here I am."*: HER. The larger, broader question that is posed throughout God's dialogues with Abraham— is God ever *physically* present? Where is he? Who is he? The reader can conclude that God, if not actually near Abraham, can at least see what is happening. God as a character is perhaps the most important enigma of this text, and his literal identity, feelings, and ideas are purposefully obscured so as to allow the reader to develop their own personal God with whom he or she can identify. SYM. In every major biblical translation, God is referred to as male. Many people visualize God as a male figure, and the people with whom he chooses to communicate are usually men. Throughout Genesis 22, the feelings of Sarah are never even addressed. Women of the biblical narrative is rarely regarded with importance as people.

3 *Take your son, your only son Isaac*: REF. Abraham did have another son, Ishmael, with his slave Hagar. He and his mother were freed in Genesis 21, when Sarah encouraged Abraham to cast them away after the birth of Isaac, in part so that Ishmael would not obtain an inheritance that she felt belonged to Isaac. ACT. God's insistence that Isaac is Abraham's only son seems to validate their actions.

4 *go to the land of Moriah*: REF. Moriah is said to be Temple Mount in Jerusalem.

5 *So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him:* ACT. Abraham has a habit of immediately complying with the wishes of God, a practice that always rewards him.

Abraham arose, saddled his donkey, took his men and his son, cut the wood, and set out. The actions which Abraham took are described sequentially here, and with more detail than most pieces of this story. This shows that Abraham's immediate compliance is an important part of his narrative.

6 *"Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you."*: SEM. This is one of several passages in which it seems as though Abraham believes that God will change his mind or provide an alternative sacrifice. This speaks to the theme of Abraham's extreme devotion to God as well as the pass/fail narrative that centers around God's test of Abraham's faith.

7 *Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac:* SYM. Here, Abraham has already saddled Isaac with the wood by which the offering is supposed to burn. Abraham has begun to superimpose the idea of an offering with the idea of his son as a way of preparing himself for the upcoming act. Isaac is unknowingly compliant in his own sacrifice at this point, carrying the thing that is supposed to kill him. This is a very powerful image that evokes Isaac as a victim and, later, a martyr. HER. The great moral issue of Genesis 22 is this: Does his near-sacrifice of Isaac make Abraham a religious pioneer or a bad father? In this passage, as he lets his son help carry the

supplies that he plans to use to sacrifice him, Abraham seems more of a poor parental figure than a celebrated religious patriarch.

8 *Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father!"*: SEM. The NRSV translation invokes the use of an exclamation mark where neither the Tanakh nor the King James Bible do so. This changes the inflection of the seme; Isaac seems worried now, as if he has begun to realize what is about to happen. This assumption and use of an exclamation mark draws upon the characteristically narrative elements of the New Revised Standard translation. SYM. Isaac's realization of what is to come marks the beginning of a martyr-like state that lasts for the rest of the chapter.

9 *"God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son."*: SEM. Yet again, Abraham is demonstrating his faith in God. Although one might argue that Abraham says that God will provide the offering as a way of calming Isaac, it seems that he is also saying it to assure himself that this is the case. This is another instance of Abraham vocalizing his faith in God as a way to affirm his faith to himself.

10 *He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood*: SYM. Genesis 22 is often referred to as The Binding of Isaac. The image of Abraham binding his son to the altar is central to the story. He also places Isaac directly on top of the wood that he carried. Symbolically, this is where Isaac begins to take on an almost pre-christlike role. Not only is he a martyr here, but he is being physically bound to the altar. At this point he comprehends what is going on, but he doesn't struggle. This speaks largely to Isaac's own faith. HER. Does Isaac have the same faith as Abraham? Is this a test of Isaac's faith too? As a patriarchal religion, monotheism is dependent upon Isaac

passing his beliefs along to subsequent religions. It is evident through his marriage to Rebecca and his enforcement of religion within his family later on in Genesis that Isaac is a man of faith. However, up until this chapter, the reader cannot yet really tell if Isaac will follow the traditions of his father. After Genesis 22, it is clear that Abraham has instilled his monotheistic ideas upon his son, and it is very fathomable that Isaac will be able to carry monotheism on through the next generation.

11 *took the knife to kill his son*: SEM. Again, Abraham considers this an act of faith and does not hesitate.

12 *But the angel of the LORD*: REF. An angel relays this message, not God himself. HER. Why is this message coming from an angel and not from God? Earlier, God spoke directly to Abraham— what prevents him from doing this again?

13 *for now I know that you fear God*: ACT. The emphasis is on the act of *fearing* God as opposed to putting *faith* in God. Being “god-fearing” is generally viewed positively among the religious— due to the fact that fear apparently manifests in a firm religious compass, to fear God is, then, to be a follower of God. If God was a person rather than a religious manifestation, being scared into following his word would be viewed as unhealthy.

14 *you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me*: SEM. God once again affirms that Isaac is Abraham’s only son.

15 *Abraham looked up and saw a ram*: REF. Rams were often used in ritual sacrifice. SEM. Abraham’s faith that God would find an alternative to the sacrifice was rewarded.

16 *So Abraham called that place "The LORD will provide"; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided."*: ACT. An alternative translation of this text substitutes "will provide" and "shall be provided" with "will see" and "shall be seen." The choice to use "provide" shows that visualization of God is not as important as reliance on him.

17 *I will indeed bless you*: SEM. Abraham is being rewarded for his constant and unflappable faith in God.

18 *I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore*: SYM. Throughout the Bible, children are often compared to things that are numerous in nature (stars, sand, etcetera). Due to the fact that the spread of monotheism was heavily reliant upon being passed down through generations, the promise of such numerous progeny is beneficial both to Abraham and to God— the reward Abraham gets for passing God's test of faith is something that God would have wanted for his followers to begin with.

19 *because you have obeyed my voice*: REF. Abraham and Sarah could not have children until Sarah was 100, once they had the help of God. After struggling to become a father for much of his life, and passing God's test of faith, God is giving Abraham the opportunity to become the patriarch of a vast and important people.