

**The Theological and Ethical Complexities of Abraham's Sacrificial Test in Genesis 22:1-10:
A Multi-Faceted Hermeneutical Approach**

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Abstract

This study critically examines the theological and ethical complexities embedded in the Akedah narrative (Genesis 22:1-10) through a multi-faceted hermeneutical approach. Employing narrative criticism, historical-critical analysis, literary deconstruction, and trauma-informed reader-response hermeneutics, the paper explores how the biblical text negotiates the tension between divine command and human suffering. The analysis reveals the narrative's deliberate silences of Isaac's unvoiced trauma, Sarah's erasure, and Abraham's muted obedience that function as sites of theological ambivalence and narrative violence. Historical-critical insights contextualize the Akedah within Ancient Near Eastern child sacrifice practices, highlighting its role as a contested theological polemic rather than a straightforward repudiation of such rites. Literary criticism exposes how the text's omissions reinforce patriarchal structures, while African feminist and postcolonial reader-response critiques challenge colonial appropriations that have weaponized the narrative to justify oppression. This study advances scholarship by advocating a trauma-informed rereading that centers the silenced voices and calls for a decolonizing interpretive framework. Such an approach not only deepens understanding of the text's ethical dimensions but also confronts the complicity of its reception history in perpetuating violence. The paper concludes that the Akedah remains an unsettled and unsettling text, demanding ongoing ethical engagement and reflective resistance from contemporary interpreters.

Keywords: *Akedah, Genesis 22, trauma theory, African feminist hermeneutics, postcolonial theology*

Introduction

The *Akedah* narrative (Genesis 22:1-10), commonly known as the binding of Isaac, occupies a pivotal yet profoundly ambivalent place within the Hebrew Bible. This narrative portrays Abraham's divine command to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac, a story that has shaped foundational theological constructs of faith, obedience, and covenantal relationship across Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions (Levenson, 1993; Firestone, 1990). Despite its canonical prominence, the *Akedah* elicits enduring ethical and hermeneutical tensions, notably concerning the moral implications of divine commands that seemingly sanction filicide and the human response to such demands. These tensions invite critical reflection on the intersection of divine sovereignty, ethical agency, and the costs of faith (Sørensen, 2018; Kierkegaard, 1985/1843).

Central to the *Akedah's* complexity are the narrative's strategic silences and lacunae, which complicate straightforward readings. Isaac's trauma is conspicuously unarticulated; the text omits any expression of his fear, protest, or psychological suffering (Boase, 2020; Caruth, 1996). Equally significant is the erasure of Sarah, Isaac's mother and the covenantal matriarch, whose absence marks a profound narrative and theological omission (Trible, 1984; Oduyoye, 2001). Abraham's own silence, especially when juxtaposed with his earlier intercessory dialogues with God in Genesis 18, further deepens the text's hermeneutical opacity (Alter, 1996). These silences are not accidental narrative gaps but deliberate rhetorical devices that foreground theological ambivalence and ethical complexity, compelling readers to grapple with what remains unspoken (Sternberg, 1985; Boase, 2020).

Historically, exegetical traditions from classical rabbinic *Midrashim* to Christian typological frameworks have predominantly valorized Abraham's obedience as an exemplar of *emuna* אֱמוּנָה (faith) and divine providence. Such readings often mitigate or reframe Isaac's victimhood by attributing willing consent or typological significance, thereby obscuring the traumatic dimensions embedded within the narrative (Genesis Rabbah 56:4; Dunn, 1988; Josephus, 1930). Contemporary scholarship, however, increasingly challenges these interpretations by illuminating the ethical discomfort and silenced voices within the text. Employing literary, feminist, trauma-informed, and postcolonial critiques, scholars reveal how patriarchal structures, colonial appropriations, and theological justifications have shaped the *Akedah's* reception, often

perpetuating systemic violences under the guise of sacred obedience (Dube, 2000; Amoah, 1987; Gutierrez, 1973).

The Contribution of This Study: While each hermeneutical approach examined here, narrative criticism, historical-critical analysis, literary deconstruction, trauma theory, African feminist hermeneutics, and decolonial critique, has been applied individually to Genesis 22, their integrated application remains undeveloped in existing scholarship. This study's primary contribution is methodological: it demonstrates how these approaches function not as competing readings but as complementary analytical layers. Narrative criticism establishes the literary architecture; historical-critical analysis supplies the ANE context; literary deconstruction exposes the ideological functions of omission; trauma theory illuminates the psychological dimensions of silence; African feminist hermeneutics centers marginalized voices; and decolonial critique interrogates the complicity of reception history in imperial violence. The integration reveals what single-method approaches cannot: namely, how the *Akedah's* silences operate simultaneously as literary devices, ideological mechanisms, traumatic traces, gendered erasures, and colonial resources. This synthetic reading advances scholarship by providing a replicable model for multi-faceted biblical interpretation that refuses methodological reductionism while maintaining analytical rigor.

The paper unfolds in five sections. The first examines the narrative economy and traumatic silences that characterize Genesis 22, analyzing literary strategies that evoke suspense, erasure, and psychological trauma (Alter, 1996; Caruth, 1996). The second situates the narrative within its Ancient Near Eastern context, investigating the complex interplay between child sacrifice practices and emerging Yahwistic theological reformulations (Smith, 2014; Levenson, 1993). The third section applies literary criticism to expose the politics of omission, focusing on Sarah's erasure as a locus of patriarchal narrative control (Trible, 1984; Oduyoye, 2001). The fourth advances a trauma-informed, decolonial reader-response critique that highlights resistant interpretive traditions and ethical imperatives (Boase, 2020; Dube, 2000). The conclusion synthesizes these insights, emphasizing the *Akedah's* enduring status as an unresolved theological and ethical challenge demanding ongoing critical engagement.

While this study concentrates on Genesis 22:1-10, it acknowledges the broader literary and reception history, including verses 11-19 and later Islamic and rabbinic interpretations, as important avenues for future research (Firestone, 1990; Genesis Rabbah, 1983). By maintaining a focused, interdisciplinary lens, the paper models an approach to biblical interpretation that is both historically grounded and ethically responsive. Ultimately, the *Akedah* emerges not as a closed theological resolution but as a dynamic narrative that continues to provoke ethical questioning and interpretive responsibility.

Narrative Economy and Trauma in Genesis 22

The narrative economy of Genesis 22 is striking in its deliberate silences and carefully calibrated literary techniques, which together create a tense and psychologically charged account of Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac. The text's brevity, nineteen verses, belies its profound theological and ethical complexity, achieved through strategic omissions and focalization that invite readers into a space of suspense and unresolved trauma. Central to this narrative economy are the silences surrounding Isaac's experience, Sarah's conspicuous absence, Abraham's mute obedience, and the restrained depiction of the knife as the instrument of impending violence.

A defining feature of the text is Abraham's immediate, unhesitating obedience to God's command: "So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac" (Gen. 22:3, NRSV). Abraham's repeated affirmation "Here I am" (הִנְנִי, *hineni*) at crucial junctures (vv. 1, 7, 11) functions as a literary heartbeat, intensifying the narrative's dramatic tension (Alter, 1996). Each *hineni* signals Abraham's availability and submission, yet the narrative provides no insight into his internal conflict or emotions, rendering his obedience both noteworthy and unsettling.

Isaac's role in the narrative is marked by enforced silence. Apart from his single question, "Where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" (Gen. 22:7), Isaac's voice vanishes; the text offers no record of his fear, protest, or trauma. This silence is central to the narrative's traumatic dimension (Boase, 2020). Isaac's muteness reflects what trauma theory conceptualizes as dissociation, an involuntary psychological response in which victims of trauma suppress or fragment their memories and emotions to survive overwhelming distress (Caruth, 1996). The narrative's repetition of the phrase "they walked together" (וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם יַחְדָּם, *vayelchu shneyhem yachdav*, Gen. 22:6, 8) underscores

Isaac's compelled compliance and the bond between father and son, even as it foreshadows the traumatic rupture that follows.

Methodological Note on Trauma Theory: Applying modern trauma theory to an ancient text requires methodological caution. Contemporary psychological categories developed within specific cultural and clinical contexts cannot be unproblematically retrojected onto biblical figures. The interpretive value of trauma theory lies not in Isaac's clinical diagnosis but in its heuristic capacity to illuminate narrative silences and their effects on readers. As Boase (2020) argues, trauma theory provides a "lens for reading" that attends to fragmentation, dissociation, and unspoken suffering as literary phenomena, without claiming psychological access to ancient subjectivities. This study employs trauma theory as an interpretive framework for analyzing the text's narrative strategies rather than as a diagnostic tool for its characters.

Equally significant is Sarah's absence from the narrative. Despite her pivotal role in Isaac's birth and the Abrahamic covenant, Sarah is entirely erased from Genesis 22. This omission reflects a patriarchal narrative control that marginalizes maternal grief and female agency (Trible, 1984). African feminist scholarship further illuminates this erasure as a structural silencing, situating Sarah's absence within broader patterns of gendered violence and ritual exclusion (Amoah, 1987; Oduyoye, 2001). Sarah's silence is a theological and narrative void that both conceals and amplifies the ethical tensions of the *Akedah*.

The knife (*ma'akelet*, מַאֲכֶלֶת) emerges as a powerful focalizer within the narrative. Its rare Hebrew usage, appearing only here and in Proverbs 30:14, draws attention to its symbolic and traumatic significance. The root of *ma'akelet* relates etymologically to "food" (*'ōkel*, אוֹכֵל), creating a literary irony: the instrument of potential sacrifice is linguistically tied to sustenance (Sarna, 1989). The narrative's emphasis on Abraham "taking the knife" and "reaching out his hand" (Gen. 22:10) evokes a suspended moment of impending violence, intensified by the imperfect tense, which suggests an action begun but never completed. This linguistic suspension mirrors the fragmentation associated with traumatic experience, in which moments of crisis are recalled in halting sequences (Caruth, 1996).

Hebrew philology further reveals the text's intricate play with sacrificial terminology. The verb *aqad* (אָקַד, "to bind") is a *hapax legomenon* in the Hebrew Bible, appearing only in the contexts of Genesis 22:9 and Judges 15:13, both involving coercive restraint rather than ritual sacrifice (Sarna, 1989). This lexical choice challenges traditional interpretations of Isaac's binding as a sacred ritual, instead emphasizing physical violence and restraint. Likewise, the term *olah* (עֹלָה, "burnt offering") appears ambiguously in Genesis 22:2 and 13, signaling a theological tension between the demand to sacrifice Isaac and the eventual substitution of a ram. The preposition *tachad* (תַּחַת, "instead of") in verse 13 explicitly marks this substitution, yet does not erase the memory of or the demand for the original sacrifice, leaving the text suspended between violence and mercy.

The narrative's economy of detail, with its gaps and silences, functions as a literary enactment of ritual trauma. The three-day journey (Gen. 22:4), the delayed angelic intervention (v. 11), and the stark focus on the knife's descent generate a sustained atmosphere of suspense. Rather than providing complete catharsis, the substitution of the ram (v. 13) leaves unresolved tensions, underscoring the ongoing psychological and theological ramifications of the command (Levenson, 1993). The trauma is not erased but deferred; the knife's potential to inflict harm lingers symbolically, implicating the reader as a witness to unresolved violence.

In sum, Genesis 22's narrative economy reveals a text deeply invested in the interplay between silence and violence, obedience and trauma, presence and erasure. Through its literary techniques and Hebrew philology, the narrative invites a trauma-informed reading that centers the unspoken suffering of Isaac and Sarah while complicating simplistic notions of faith and sacrifice. This approach exposes the *Akedah* as a text that both enacts and invites reflection on the trauma of sacrificial violence, challenging interpreters to confront its ethical and theological complexities.

Historical-Critical Method: Child Sacrifice And Theological Revolt In The Akedah

The *Akedah* narrative (Genesis 22) emerges from a complex Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) milieu in which child sacrifice was a known, albeit contested, religious practice. To fully appreciate the theological and ethical dimensions of the Binding of Isaac, it is necessary to situate the narrative within this broader cultural and ritual context. The historical-critical method facilitates this by examining archaeological data, ancient texts, and biblical intertexts, revealing how the *Akedah* negotiates, subverts, and reconfigures prevailing sacrificial paradigms.

Archaeological excavations in Carthage and other Phoenician sites have uncovered tophets' sacred precincts containing urns with cremated remains of infants and animals, documenting the practice of *mlk* מִלֶּךְ (or *molek*) sacrifices to deities such as *Baal Hammon* and *Tanit* (Stager, 1980; Schwartz, 1993). These findings confirm that ritual child sacrifice was integrated into certain ANE religious systems as an act of devotion or appeasement, often involving firstborn sons (Smith, 2014). However, scholarly debate continues regarding the extent and interpretation of this evidence, including whether all Tophet remains represent sacrificial victims or include stillbirths and natural deaths. Biblical texts acknowledge such rites with disapproval. Leviticus 18:21 explicitly forbids "[giving] any of your children to be sacrificed to Molek" (NRSV), and Jeremiah 7:31 condemns the high places where children were consumed in fire, highlighting the practice's contemporaneous presence and theological contestation within Israelite religion.

The *Akedah* reflects this contested reality but does not simply reject child sacrifice outright. Instead, it reinterprets it through the substitution motif, a theological innovation that retains the form of sacrifice while fundamentally altering its substance. Genesis 22:2 commands Abraham to "offer [Isaac] as a burnt offering" עֹלָה (*olah*), echoing sacrificial terminology from Leviticus 1 and other cultic texts. However, the narrative culminates in the provision of a ram "caught in a thicket by its horns" (Gen. 22:13), offered "instead of his son" תַּחַת בְּנוֹ (*tachat beno*), a substitution that both preserves and subverts sacrificial logic.

This substitutionary act is neither a simple abolition of sacrifice nor a mere narrative contrivance; it embodies a theological recalibration. Levenson (1993) argues that the *Akedah's* ram embodies the unresolved tension between ritual violence and divine mercy, pushing the boundaries of Israelite sacrificial ideology. While Levenson's analysis is foundational, his emphasis on continuity between the *Akedah* and earlier traditions of child sacrifice may understate the narrative's innovative critique. The text's linguistic precision underscores this tension. The command to "offer" הָאֵלֶּהּ (*ha'alehu*) employs the root *-l-h* associated with burnt offerings but conspicuously avoids the verb *zabh* זָבַח ("to slaughter"), which would connote unequivocal killing (Weinfeld, 1972). This lexical ambiguity allows the narrative to maintain sacrificial formality while signaling a departure from the lethal execution of the victim.

Biblical ambivalence toward child sacrifice extends beyond the *Akedah*, revealing socio-religious tensions within Israelite culture. While Deuteronomy 12:31 and 18:10 condemn child sacrifice as abominable, other texts imply its lingering conceptual legitimacy. Micah 6:7, with its rhetorical question, "Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression?" reflects an ambiguous stance, suggesting that child sacrifice remained a conceptual possibility within popular religious imagination (Sørensen, 2018). Judges 11:30-39 recounts Jephthah's tragic vow, resulting in the sacrifice of his daughter, a narrative devoid of divine intervention or explicit condemnation, underscoring the persistence and complexity of sacrificial ideals.

The *Akedah* functions as a liminal text, at once embedded in ANE sacrificial traditions and pioneering a theological critique of those traditions. The substitution of the ram can be read as a polemic against conventional *mlk* rites, where the divine demand for filicide is replaced by an animal sacrifice that preserves the patriarchal lineage (Albertz, 1994). This shift aligns with broader Deuteronomistic reforms that sought to centralize and regulate cultic practices, eliminating local sacrificial excesses (Levenson, 1993). Yet the *Akedah's* unresolved tension, symbolized by the explicit "instead of" phrase, signals that the specter of child sacrifice continues to haunt Israelite religious consciousness.

Furthermore, the narrative's legal and ritual vocabulary reflects judicial restraint rather than mere theological rejection. The angel's command, "Do not lay your hand on the boy" (Gen. 22:12), echoes prohibitions against unlawful violence found in Exodus 22:10 and other legal codes, suggesting that the halted sacrifice is framed as a divine interruption of what would otherwise be an illicit killing (Levenson, 1993). This framing positions the *Akedah* not simply as a test of faith but as a theological critique of sacrificial violence, redefining obedience as submission to divine justice rather than blind compliance with violent ritual.

The substitution motif's theological afterlives extend beyond the Hebrew Bible, resonating in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions. Rabbinic literature reinterprets the *Akedah* as a paradigm of divine mercy and covenantal faithfulness, often spiritualizing Isaac's near-sacrifice (Genesis Rabbah 56:4). Christian typology casts Isaac as a prefiguration of Christ's sacrificial death and resurrection, emphasizing substitutionary atonement (Dunn, 1988). Islamic exegesis highlights Ibrahim's submission (Islam) and God's provision of a ram as a merciful alternative to human

sacrifice (Firestone, 1990). These diverse receptions attest to the *Akedah's* theological potency and its capacity to reframe sacrifice within evolving religious frameworks.

In sum, the historical-critical analysis of Genesis 22 reveals a narrative deeply engaged with its ANE context of child sacrifice, yet one that innovatively contests and transforms it. The *Akedah's* substitution motif neither negates nor endorses sacrificial violence outright; rather, it reconfigures it within a theology of divine provision and judicial restraint, reflecting Israel's complex relationship to sacrificial practice. This dynamic underscores the narrative's enduring theological relevance and ethical challenge, inviting readers to reconsider the limits of obedience, sacrifice, and divine command.

Literary Criticism: The Politics of Omission in the Akedah

The *Akedah* narrative's power and complexity derive not only from what it explicitly states but also from its deliberate silences and omissions. These absences function as ideological tools that shape the reader's understanding and reinforce particular patriarchal and theological frameworks. Central among these strategic omissions are the erasure of Isaac's victimhood and the conspicuous absence of Isaac's mother, Sarah. A literary-critical analysis reveals how these silences operate linguistically and ideologically, producing narrative effects that uphold patriarchal authority and shape the ethical discourse surrounding sacrifice and obedience.

Isaac's Silenced Victimhood: Trauma and Narrative Erasure

The most significant omission in Genesis 22 is Isaac's near-total silence concerning his traumatic experience. Apart from a single question, "Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" (Gen. 22:7, NRSV), Isaac's voice disappears. The text offers no record of his fear, protest, or emotional response, which is striking given the gravity of the situation. This narrative silence functions as a form of erasure, effectively excluding Isaac's subjectivity and positioning him as a passive object within the story's sacrificial economy.

Isaac's silence can be understood through the heuristic lens of trauma theory, which highlights how traumatic experiences are often characterized by dissociation and fragmentation (Caruth, 1996; Boase, 2020). The textual suppression of Isaac's voice presents the reader with a fragmented narrative that invites inference regarding unspoken suffering. The Hebrew repetition of "they

walked together" (וַיֵּלְכּוּ שְׁנֵי־הֶם יַחְדָּו, *vayelchu shneyhem yachdav*, Gen. 22:6, 8) underscores Isaac's compelled compliance and the intimate yet coerced proximity between father and son, heightening the pathos of his unvoiced experience.

Later interpretive traditions have sought to address Isaac's silenced victimhood by attributing agency or willing consent to him. The Jewish historian Josephus describes Isaac as a willing participant, enthusiastic about his role in the divine test (Josephus, 1930). Rabbinic *Midrashim* similarly portray Isaac as active and cooperative, even urging Abraham to bind him tightly to ensure the sacrifice's validity (Genesis Rabbah 56:4). Christian typology transforms Isaac into a Christ-figure, whose willing submission prefigures Jesus' sacrificial death (Dunn, 1988). While these reinterpretations attempt to restore coherence to the narrative, they risk obscuring the original trauma by overlaying interpretive frameworks that emphasize voluntarism and redemption (Spiegel, 1993).

Sarah's Absence: Patriarchal Control and Maternal Erasure

Equally significant is the narrative's systematic exclusion of Sarah, Isaac's mother and the covenantal matriarch. Though Sarah plays a central role in the Abrahamic covenant and Isaac's birth narrative (Genesis 17:15–21; 21:1–7), she is entirely absent from the *Akedah* episode. This absence reflects patriarchal mechanisms of control that marginalize maternal grief and female agency.

Trible (1984) and Oduyoye (2001) highlight how Sarah's erasure functions as a form of patriarchal silencing, denying narrative space for maternal grief or protest. By excluding Sarah's perspective, the text contains the ethical scope of Abraham's obedience and divine command, foreclosing alternative readings that might center maternal response. This exclusion reflects broader ancient Near Eastern and biblical patterns in which women's voices are suppressed in cultic and familial contexts (Trible, 1984; Olyan, 2000).

African feminist critiques deepen this analysis by situating Sarah's silence within broader cultural practices of maternal exclusion from death and mourning rituals. Oduyoye (2001) draws parallels between Sarah's absence and African widowhood rites, where mothers are often prevented from participating in sons' funerals to forestall disruptive grief (p. 89). This framing exposes how

biblical narratives can reflect and reinforce gendered silencing, underscoring the intersection of theology, culture, and gendered power.

Jewish interpretive traditions have attempted to address Sarah's absence *post factum*, recognizing the narrative gap, yet have been unable to fully challenge its patriarchal framework. *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* attributes Sarah's death to grief over the *Akedah*, reimagining her as a tragic figure whose anguish is real but ultimately marginalized (*Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, Gen. 22). Similarly, *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* dramatizes Sarah's cries as an unheeded protest against divine and patriarchal violence (Genesis Rabbah 56:11). These narrative interpolations acknowledge the silencing but often sentimentalize it rather than dismantling its ideological functions.

Linguistic and Ideological Functions of Silences

The narrative's linguistic choices actively construct these silences. The masculine singular imperative "*Lech-lecha*" (לֵךְ-לְךָ, "go forth," Gen. 22:2) directs Abraham alone, excluding Sarah through gendered syntax (Trible, 1984). The verb *aqad* (אָקַד, "he bound"), a rare biblical term appearing only here and in Judges 15:13, connotes physical restraint rather than ritual sacrifice, emphasizing violence over willing offering (Sarna, 1989). This lexical framing focuses the narrative's ethical attention on Abraham's obedience and divine command while marginalizing the human cost.

The text's silences thus function ideologically to privilege patriarchal authority and divine sovereignty over individual suffering. By erasing Isaac's trauma and Sarah's grief, the narrative conceals ethical tensions inherent in sacrificial obedience and forecloses readings that might valorize resistance or dissent.

Narrative Effects and Interpretive Implications

These strategic omissions produce particular narrative effects. As Jay (1992) argues, the dehumanization implicit in sacrificial systems extends to the erasure of victims' voices, perpetuating cycles of violence under the guise of religious obedience (p. 10). The *Akedah's* literary silences mirror societal patterns of silencing, inviting readers to consider the ethical implications of narratives that withhold victim perspectives.

While early Jewish and Christian traditions often filled these gaps by emphasizing Abraham's faith and Isaac's willing participation, contemporary critical scholarship challenges these normative readings. Trauma-informed and feminist critiques highlight the ethical costs of such narrative repairs, insisting on attending to the silenced voices and the text's ambivalent ethical message (Boase, 2020; Dube, 2000).

In this light, the *Akedah* emerges not as a simple model of faith but as a contested site where power, violence, and obedience intersect. Its silences demand that interpreters reckon with what is omitted as much as with what is said, and that they question the theological frameworks that have historically marginalized suffering and resistance.

Reader-Response Criticism And Decolonizing The Akedah's Interpretive Legacy

The Binding of Isaac (*Akedah*) narrative in Genesis 22 has long served as a touchstone for theological reflection on faith, obedience, and sacrifice. However, beyond its canonical status, the *Akedah's* interpretive history reveals a complex trajectory marked by colonial deployments, liberationist resistance, and feminist reclamations. A critical reader-response hermeneutic, particularly one informed by decolonial and trauma perspectives, uncovers the text's contested legacy and challenges its appropriation as an unquestioned paradigm of obedience. This section examines how the *Akedah* has been deployed in imperial contexts, how liberation theology and African feminist voices resist sacrificial theologies, and how a decolonial reader-response approach insists upon ethical accountability.

Colonial Deployments: The Akedah as Imperial Theology

The *Akedah's* ideological potency made it a significant instrument in colonial contexts where biblical texts were invoked to legitimize imperial domination. As Dube (2000) documents, nineteenth-century missionaries and colonial administrators in Southern Africa appropriated Abraham's unquestioning obedience to justify demands for indigenous peoples to surrender land, resources, and even children to colonial authorities. Abraham's submission was reframed as a divine mandate for colonial subjects to accept dispossession and coercion with faith, mirroring the *Akedah's* narrative of sacrificial loyalty (pp. 112–115). This imperial theology positioned colonized communities as modern-day Isaacs: silenced, dispossessed, and compelled to comply.

The *Akedah's* silences, particularly Isaac's lack of protest and the narrative's refusal to disclose divine rationale, facilitated this hermeneutic. Jennings (2010) develops this critique through what he terms a "hermeneutic of erasure," an interpretive practice that systematically nullifies colonized voices, rendering their suffering invisible under the guise of providential will (p. 132). For Jennings, this erasure operates not merely through explicit violence but through the subtler mechanism of narrative omission, in which the absence of protest is read as consent. Even the substitution motif was co-opted: the ram symbolically recast as the colonial power's redemptive agent, "saving" the colonized through assimilation and control (Pui-lan, 2005, p. 77). The text's ambiguity and narrative gaps, rather than inviting compassionate inquiry, were deployed to enforce submission and legitimize violence.

This imperial reading relied on particular linguistic and theological emphases. The divine command's tone, marked by the particle *na* (נָא, "please," Gen 22:2), was interpreted as an imperative demanding immediate compliance, echoing legal injunctions that colonial powers co-opted to demand swift obedience (Sugirtharajah, 2001, p. 46). The sacrificial term *olah* (עֹלָה) linked with ascending smoke and offering, was employed to spiritualize conquest and displacement, aligning divine provision (YHWH Yireh) with imperial "providence" (Dube, 2000, p. 114). Thus, the *Akedah's* theological ambiguity became a tool of colonial hegemony, masking systemic violence under sacred obedience.

Liberationist Critiques: Resisting Sacrificial Theologies

In contrast, liberation theology offers a critique of the *Akedah's* sacrificial paradigm. Gutiérrez (1973) challenges the universalization of Abraham's obedience, emphasizing that for the oppressed, particularly in Latin America, such a faith demands an impossible surrender of what is most precious: children, land, and dignity (p. 197). The liberationist lens reframes the *Akedah* as a narrative that exposes the violence inherent in sacrificial obedience rather than sanctifying it.

Liberation theologians argue that valorizing uncritical submission risks perpetuating cycles of oppression and violence. The text's silence regarding Isaac's trauma and Sarah's grief exemplifies theological avoidance that ignores the lived realities of suffering communities (Dube, 2000). De la Torre's (2010) ethnographic work among Filipino peasants reveals how grassroots interpretations reject sacrificial logic, viewing the angel's intervention as divine repudiation of all

forms of child sacrifice, whether ritual or socio-economic (pp. 89–92). Similarly, South African liberation readings see the ram not as a mere substitution but as a call for divine provision that breaks the cycle of sacrifice and violence (West, 2012, p. 144).

These critiques highlight how the *Akedah's* colonial and patriarchal appropriations obscure its ethical tensions. The command to sacrifice becomes a metaphor for structural violence, where the poor and marginalized are coerced into sacrificial roles to sustain dominant power. Liberationist hermeneutics insist on reading the text alongside these socio-political realities, exposing the cost of obedience and demanding ethical reflection.

African Feminist Interventions: Centering the Silenced Voices

African feminist theology advances this critique by centering the silenced maternal and child voices marginalized in the *Akedah*. Amoah (1987) asks, "If Sarah had spoken, would God have listened?" highlighting the ideological function of women's silence in biblical narratives (p. 65). Sarah's absence in Genesis 22 is understood not as an oversight but as a patriarchal erasure designed to suppress maternal protest and uphold male authority (Oduyoye, 2001, p. 89). This aligns with broader cross-cultural patterns wherein African widowhood rites sometimes exclude mothers from mourning rituals to manage grief and maintain social order.

The Normative Status of African Cosmology: The invocation of African indigenous frameworks in this analysis requires clarification regarding their interpretive function. African cosmological principles, such as the Akan Gye Nyame concept, emphasizing trust in a life-affirming God, are employed here dialogically rather than normatively. They provide hermeneutical resources for resisting patriarchal and colonial readings, demonstrating how cultural frameworks shape interpretive possibilities. However, these traditions are not presented as universally authoritative or inherently superior to other hermeneutical lenses. Rather, they function as contextual resources that enable particular readings and highlight dimensions of the text obscured by dominant Western interpretive traditions.

African feminist scholars reclaim these silences by reconstructing communal ethics that foreground maternal grief and child suffering. Dube (2003) and Nadar (2009) illustrate how African women's interpretive practices resist sacrificial theologies, invoking indigenous traditions that emphasize communal care and protection over individual sacrifice (Dube, 2003, pp. 112–115;

Nadar, 2009, p. 134). These readings challenge the *Akedah's* patriarchal logic by affirming relationality and embodied resistance, calling attention to the ethical costs of obedience in contexts where women and children bear the brunt of violence.

Methodologically, African feminist hermeneutics employ interdisciplinary tools, such as oral storytelling, communal memory, and liberation praxis, to dismantle colonial and patriarchal impositions. They critique Abraham's action as a failure of divine trust and communal responsibility, resonating with African cosmologies that center a trusting, life-affirming God (Okyere-Manu, 2020, p. 91). This reclamation not only amplifies the silenced but reorients the *Akedah's* ethical horizon toward justice, compassion, and communal survival.

Toward a Decolonial Reader-Response Framework

Building on these critiques, a decolonial reader-response hermeneutic refuses closure and normative obedience, insisting instead on ethical accountability and interpretive plurality. This approach acknowledges the *Akedah's* "gaps" as sites of both complicity and resistance, where dominant theologies have reinforced oppression while marginalized communities have asserted alternative meanings (Dube, 2000; Amoah, 1987).

Clarifying Decolonial Theory's Distinct Contribution: To address the question of whether decolonial theory merely repackages feminist and trauma insights, three distinctions are necessary. First, feminist criticism addresses gendered silencing, how patriarchal structures erase women's voices and perspectives. The question feminist reading asks is: "Whose voice is missing, and what power relation produces that absence?" Second, trauma theory addresses psychological fragmentation, how overwhelming events disrupt narrative coherence, and produce dissociation. The question trauma reading asks is: "How does the text's form register unspoken suffering?" Third, decolonial theory addresses geopolitical appropriation, how colonial powers weaponized biblical narratives to legitimize dispossession. The question decolonial reading asks is: "How has this text been used to justify imperial violence, and what features of the text enabled such use?" These are different questions yielding different insights. Feminist reading exposes Sarah's erasure; trauma reading exposes Isaac's dissociation; decolonial reading exposes how colonial administrators invoked Abraham's obedience to demand indigenous submission. No single approach accomplishes all three. This study, therefore, does not claim that decolonial theory

supersedes feminist or trauma approaches but rather that each addresses a distinct dimension of the *Akedah's* complexity. Their integration, rather than competition, produces the most comprehensive analysis.

A decolonial framework documents the *Akedah's* colonial weaponization and patriarchal erasures while elevating insurgent readings from the Global South. It rejects interpretive closure that sanitizes the narrative's violence and instead embraces its unresolved tensions as ethical provocations requiring ongoing engagement. This hermeneutic centers the text's victims, Isaac, Sarah, and colonized peoples, rather than its divine or patriarchal protagonists.

Moreover, it calls interpreters to reckon with their own positionality and with the ways in which interpretation can either perpetuate or challenge systemic violence. The *Akedah* becomes not merely a biblical episode but a living dialogue on power, trauma, and resistance, reminding readers that faithfulness to the text includes attentiveness to the silenced and oppressed.

Conclusion

The *Akedah* narrative remains a complex and challenging text within biblical literature, characterized by unresolved theological tensions, strategic silences, and manifold appropriations for colonial and patriarchal agendas. This study has demonstrated that Genesis 22 cannot be adequately understood through traditional frameworks that valorize Abraham's obedience as an unequivocal model of faith. Rather, the narrative's significance derives from its deliberate narrative economy and the linguistic and thematic silences surrounding Isaac's trauma, Sarah's erasure, and Abraham's muted compliance, which function as sites of theological ambivalence and ethical discomfort (Boase, 2020; Tribble, 1984).

Through a multifaceted hermeneutical approach integrating narrative criticism, historical-critical analysis, literary deconstruction, and trauma-informed reader-response theory, this study has examined how the text's silences operate as narrative strategies with ideological effects. The erasure of Isaac's victimhood invites reflection on the dynamics of trauma and dissociation, while Sarah's exclusion from the narrative reflects patterns of gendered silencing that suppress maternal grief and agency (Caruth, 1996; Oduyoye, 2001). Moreover, this research has highlighted how colonial interpreters deployed the *Akedah's* rhetoric of obedience to legitimize dispossession and

violence against Indigenous peoples, revealing the narrative's reception history as a site of ideological contestation (Dube, 2000; Jennings, 2010).

A contribution of this study lies in its advocacy for a trauma-informed and decolonial hermeneutic that acknowledges the ongoing ethical challenges posed by the *Akedah*. By centering the silenced voices of Isaac and Sarah and interrogating the colonial and patriarchal power dynamics inscribed in the text and its reception, this approach disrupts hegemonic interpretive traditions and opens space for alternative readings grounded in justice and compassion (Amoah, 1987; Pui-lan, 2005). The methodological integration employed throughout, where each analytical layer builds upon and deepens the preceding one, demonstrates how interdisciplinary biblical interpretation can proceed with both rigor and ethical accountability.

The *Akedah's* enduring relevance lies in its capacity to serve as a continuing test not merely of Abraham's faith but of each generation's willingness to confront the ethical dilemmas embedded in divine-command narratives. It challenges interpreters to resist facile resolutions that obscure trauma and complicity, instead demanding critical engagement with the narrative's wounds and the sociopolitical structures that have shaped its meaning (Herman, 1992; Dube, 2003). The command to "not lay a hand on the boy" (Genesis 22:12) emerges as a significant ethical injunction, inviting ongoing reflection on the limits of obedience and the imperative to protect the vulnerable.

This study's interdisciplinary methodology and critical insights contribute to the growing corpus of scholarship that reads the Bible through lenses attuned to trauma, gender, and coloniality. By amplifying voices that have been historically marginalized and silenced, the study offers a framework for ethical biblical interpretation, one that honors the text's theological depth while acknowledging the interpretive responsibilities it entails. The *Akedah* thus remains a provocative narrative, challenging readers across time to wrestle with faith, obedience, and the costs of sacrifice in ways that are both critically rigorous and ethically engaged.

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