

Unbinding Isaac and God

Story as Promise in Adele Wiseman's *The Sacrifice*

In a poem titled "Their Lonely Betters," W.H. Auden observes that language entails culpability. Unlike birds and flowers, humans have words and are therefore capable of "lying," knowing about death, and "assum[ing] responsibility for time." "Words," Auden says, "are for those with promises to keep" (444). Not only human beings, but God also, as a character in sacred stories, uses words and assumes responsibility for time, especially the future. And we assume further responsibilities as we read, interpret, and appropriate the stories of God. As Adele Wiseman discovered in childhood, it is difficult "to separate the act of reading from the acts of living" (*Memoirs* 6), or, for that matter, to separate the acts of living from the acts of reading and writing. This difficulty becomes apparent when one examines the interwoven influences of text and life, of reading and of acting in her characters, many of whom are themselves storytellers (Greene xxiii).

That (con)fusion is the real issue at the heart of her first novel, *The Sacrifice* (published in 1956 and winner of the Governor General's Award). The protagonist, Abraham, is perpetually linked with stories, through the biblical myth that defines him, through the compelling stories about himself that he tells his friend, and through the biblical and legendary stories with which he educates his grandson. If Wiseman was right in her childhood conviction that in "stories life was in a sense holding still for [her] to look at and learn from and make judgments on" (*Memoirs* 7), then it is worthwhile to examine Abraham's use of story within the novel.

The obvious central problem of *The Sacrifice* is the murder of Laiah. In Abraham, an elderly Jew devoted to God and his beloved family, Wiseman

has created a very sympathetic character. To see him then as a murderer is a shock to the imagination and a forceful invitation to “go behind [the circumstances],” as Wiseman put it, in order to discover “the *implications* of this kind of act” (“Consciousness” 149, 152). Given the Jewish reverence for life that is very evident in the novel, Abraham’s murder of Laiah is as inexplicable as God’s command to the original biblical Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, but for Laiah, the loose-living divorcee, there is no last-second divine intervention, no convenient substitute.¹

Critical efforts to make sense of this unfathomable act have revealed a further difficulty. If one follows the narrator’s evident sympathy for Abraham and seeks to rationalize the murder, then Laiah and perhaps all women in the novel are denied real human value. Most early criticism, in fact, chose that alternative, reading the novel as an immigrant novel with mythical underpinnings, perfect as an example of a developing Canadian myth, so necessary in the years when “Canadian literature had suddenly become fashionable” (Keith 72). John Moss, for example, sees the violence in Wiseman’s novel as similar to the violence in other novels concerning European immigrants and concludes, “all exchange the blood of their kin for their passage to a new world. . . . They pay their debts to the past in tokens of their blood that bind them more resolutely to it. Ultimately, by violence the violence of their leaving is redeemed, and the past is finally cast adrift in time” (82). Robert Thacker similarly explains the murder as a “clash between old- and new-world values” (29). For Donald Stephens, the murder becomes a “ritualistic sacrifice” necessary for the “renewed possibility of life” (508), a theme he attaches to Canadian writing in general:

Inherent in the dilemma of the modern Canadian writer is the idea of the sacrifice. Consciously and unconsciously, this phenomenon has become a significant part of the early stages of the literature. It manifests itself in the death of the individual or of the spirit, where the signs of decadence must be obliterated to permit the growth of a nation, a literature, or a human being. (509)

Such readings, patriotic or not, leave Abraham valorized for the murder (Mack 135–36), or, and often at the same time, dismissed as a madman (Moss 101; Stephens 508; Rosenthal 84). Abraham can then join other characters who have courted insanity in their struggle with harsh Canadian conditions (although the madness usually results from too much wilderness, not from cultural conflicts).

If, however, one chooses to focus on the treatment of women in the novel, noting their secondary role in a very patriarchal community and

their expendability as sacrifices, both literal and figurative,² then the novel seems crack'd from side to side, since it no longer reflects a coherent moral vision from within itself, although it pretends to. One reads thus from a hermeneutic of suspicion, to use Paul Ricoeur's phrase,³ and a position morally above the text, an uncomfortable position given Wiseman's intentions to "[change] the way we see, [draw] us closer to good and [settle] for nothing less than the truth" (Greene xviii).

Thus, although the predominantly male perspective and pervasive patriarchal values provide sufficient material for the hermeneutic of suspicion, *The Sacrifice* can nonetheless speak to us and "extend" our consciousness in a way that will make us "better" (to use Wiseman's description of the function of the artist [*Old Woman* 59–60]) if we pay attention to the importance of reading story within the novel.⁴ Abraham is above all a story-maker, that is, both teller and interpreter, not an unusual role. But Abraham chooses also to be a character in a story that is not truly his, "[trying] to literalize what he has been given" (Wiseman, "Permissible" 122). He has chosen to read story as promise, out of a hermeneutic of devotion.

In one of the happiest moments in the novel, Abraham retells for his family the story of the sacrifice of Isaac. His version includes Midrashic interpretations of the Genesis account as well as legendary material and his own gloss. Just as early practitioners of Midrash used specific cues in the original to help them account for actions and find guidance for themselves in their own relation to God, so Abraham uses story to give structure and meaning to his life.⁵ It is instructive to note his omissions and elaborations, for they prepare us for his later sacrifice of Laiah. With his grandson Moses as the primary listener, Abraham happily recounts the patriarch's adventures: his early belief that there is only one God although he lived among a "wild people" who "sacrificed human beings to their wild gods" (194); his miraculous exploit of walking through the fire in proof of his God; his work of preaching against idol worship and the sacrifice of children; the birth of his son Isaac in his old age; and finally the sacrifice of Isaac, which is first called for and then prevented by God. He includes much legendary material on Abraham (Ginzberg; Rappoport), but none concerning Isaac. His Isaac is almost as passive as the Genesis Isaac, although Abraham does include the legendary Isaac's knowledge of the sacrifice and willingness to participate (Kugel 176). Abraham's own additions are the wording of God's initial promise of a son "who will go in [his] steps," and the observation that "his father loved him very much, for he grew just as Abraham had wished him to

grow” (197). The listening Isaac could not miss the implication of these added comments.

Then, in the climactic moment of the story, when the biblical Abraham lifts his knife to slay Isaac, the narrating Abraham interprets thus:

In that moment lay the future of our people, and even more than that. In that moment lay the secrets of life and death, in that closed circle with just the three of them, with Abraham offering the whole of the past and the future, and Isaac lying very still, so as not to spoil the sacrifice. . . . *And God himself is bound at that moment*, for it is the point of mutual surrender, the one thing He cannot resist, a faith so absolute. . . .

That was the moment that even God could not resist, and so *He gave us the future*. (199, italics mine)

This is Abraham’s defining myth, with its implied promise that God must respond to absolute faith.

Because the novel is written in limited third person, with Abraham as centre of consciousness for most of the novel, it is possible to trace his narrative practices and observe his deliberate appropriation of sacred story. In the opening pages of the novel, he and his family leave the train before their arranged destination because Abraham suddenly concludes “that they had fled far enough,” a thought which takes “hold in his mind like a command (9), “as though it were written” (12). He is sustained in their initial poverty by his belief that “God had chosen to set him and his family down in this strange city to await what further He had in store for them. Very well” (30). That “Very well” is exactly the phrase with which the legendary Abraham responds to God’s demand of Isaac as sacrifice.

His early experiences and flight from Europe, as he relates them to his new friend Chaim Knopp, are all told with a similar intent of establishing his unique relationship to God. He “was born with the feeling” that “something extraordinary was going to happen in [his] lifetime. . . . as though it had been promised to [him] in another place, another lifetime” (64). That tell-tale “as though” repeatedly signals his tendency to self-dramatization and his identification with the patriarch. His story to Chaim about his forced sacrilegious slaying of a cow for a butcher too greedy to wait for the *shoichet* who alone can slaughter kosher meat is shot through with that “as though”: “I looked about me for [God] to deliver me. . . . I felt as though . . . this moment did not really exist and as though it had existed forever, as though it had never begun and would never end. Where had this happened to me before?” (47). The moment of slaughter becomes a metaphysical revelation about the balance of life and death, when he understands that his forefathers

probably “made [their] sacrifices to renew their wonder and their fear and their belief” (47, italics mine). Abraham is drawn to the older blood rituals that seem closer to mystery and closer to a God who could be held to his promises—who could be manipulated, although Abraham would never use the word.

The difficulty with conceiving such a God is how to fit evil or tragic events into a predetermined story of promise. In his struggle to retain meaning, Abraham reshapes his life into a terrifying chain of cause and effect and turns his God into a forensic God, a “Demander,” in Abraham’s words (199).⁶ Abraham’s two older, unusually gifted sons (named after Moses and Jacob—both adroit bargainers with God) are readily accepted as “an augury” to be fulfilled (64, 71), but then their grisly deaths in a pogrom plunge Abraham not only into grief but into unbelief and rage. When his remaining son Isaac nearly dies of typhus in their flight to Canada, Abraham construes that as punishment for his anger and turns to frantic prayer. Chaim, his listener, seems not to notice that Abraham almost merges his identity with that of the biblical prophet Elijah who prayed a dead child to life again, as well as the patriarch Jacob who wrestled with God and won a blessing for himself. Isaac’s survival becomes “a reiterated promise” (31), for he could not have been “spared for nothing” (18). Eventually Abraham fits even the deaths of his two sons into his scheme of reward and punishment, for as he concludes his story of the profane slaughter of the cow, he tells Chaim that the greedy butcher was punished: he had “his skull split in an argument with another butcher,” and adds, “Perhaps God has punished me too for not denouncing the butchers” (48). No wonder Abraham needs continual reassurance that God is in control of his future—for benevolent purposes.

The effect of Abraham’s single-minded appropriation of story as promise of future glory for his family and his people is a wholesale binding, particularly of Isaac. God himself is bound, in Abraham’s mind, to respond to individual faith by giving the future (199), and the future comes through sons. When Isaac and Ruth are married, Abraham assumes their firstborn will be a son; when Chaim grieves over his son’s failing marriage, Abraham prophesies for him a son, a miracle son even since the daughter-in-law can give birth only at great risk. This pervasive emphasis on sons as the guarantee of divine promise means that women become negligible, expendable.⁷ Even Ruth seems necessary to Abraham only for the nurture of the young Moische, on whom rests all of the weight of the future after Isaac is dead.

True to his biblical prototype, Isaac submits with little resistance. Although he does not share Abraham’s absolute faith—Isaac is, in fact, the

relativist in the novel (Loverso; Greenstein)—he nevertheless depends on Abraham’s “living presence,” his “confidence” which conveys “safety” (236). Initially merely the youngest son who “worshiped his brothers” (65), Isaac is nearly forgotten in the madness of grief when his brothers are killed. Now in Canada, he bears the weight of his father’s immense expectations, perpetually measuring himself against his dead, idealized brothers. When he succeeds in winning Abraham’s approval for his first independent decision—to leave school in order to work—he congratulates himself: “he had done the right thing. Neither of his brothers could have done a more proper thing at this moment” (59). His very purpose in living seems determined for him by his father: “he had been saved. . . . If he was confused often, at least sometimes he could sense vaguely what his father seemed to know for a certainty; that he was not here for nothing. . . . There was something in life itself that his father had drawn him back to, that waited for him” (80).

The weight of Abraham’s expectations, however, is as destructive as the mountain in one of Abraham’s stories about Iloig, the giant, who is crushed by the mountain he carried in order to assure his own future against an invading people (241). Abraham is repeatedly linked with Mad Mountain even before he finally lives in its asylum. Early in the novel, Isaac thinks, “It was strange that, no matter where his mind went, the hill remained there, solid in his vision, every time he looked up. It was a comfort that it didn’t change. . . . It was like the sight of his father’s face when he had opened his eyes for the first time after the fever, towering over him, claiming him” (30). While Abraham’s *Weltanschauung* does provide security for Isaac, it also destroys him.

Abraham’s expectations for Isaac eventually become imprisoning, suffocating (Isaac suffers from a weak heart and constricted breathing). Even before Isaac’s last illness following his heroic rescue of the Torah from a burning synagogue—a demonstration surely of his adoption, even if briefly, of Abraham’s values—he has had a recurring dream about being caught in an imprisoning, suffocating “transparent bubble” (220) that is Isaac’s struggle against Abraham’s need to see the future through his son.⁸ When Isaac discusses the dream with his wife Ruth, he concludes, “If I broke through [the bubble] I’d no longer have the sphere as my boundary, but I’d lose its protection too. The bubble bursts, and I burst with it, into the unknown” (223). The dream indicates both Isaac’s inevitable binding through Abraham’s appropriation of story and the fragility of Abraham’s enterprise. When Isaac dies, Abraham is tossed out of his surrounding bubble of mean-

ing, for sons have been the guarantee of divine promise for him. All he has left now is his young grandson, Moses Jacob, whom he named. He is robbed even of joy and pride in Isaac's sacrifice since that story has no happy ending and is rapidly disintegrating in gossiping mouths.⁹

Lost in his grief and existential angst, Abraham tries "painstakingly to piece together everything" (260), alert for further signs from God, since he cannot abandon the stories that have become his blueprint for the future. But his single-minded focus distorts the grieving process and robs him of his ability to listen to others (Loverso 172). This is particularly devastating in his conversations with his daughter-in-law Ruth, which turn into ugly quarrels, and his conversations with Laiah, former mistress and current friend of his employer, who now attempts to befriend Abraham, but with her own agenda. Because he is "*waiting for a word*" (281, italics mine), Abraham becomes vulnerable to the words of the two women who speak most directly to him, Ruth and Laiah. Both plan for the future and thus confuse Abraham, who cannot separate thoughts of the future from his own duel with God for blessing and control.

In their final explosive quarrel, Ruth wrenches Abraham's master-narrative away from him, accusing Abraham of making Isaac into a "figment of [his] imagination" (319), and pointing out what has been obvious to everyone except Abraham—"you wanted one son should make up for three. What did you care that God only gave him heart enough for one" (320). When Abraham protests, "I could swear by God, by the Almighty," Ruth retorts, "You and God together are always thinking. Whatever is convenient for you God happens to think" (318). For Abraham, Ruth's words are like a mirror "flipped up in his face" so that he "[stands] revealed as he [is] to another—a stranger, an enemy, an egoist" (316). For the first time, it occurs to Abraham to ask, "How had his dream appeared to them, his sons? . . . Was it for his own pride that he had dreamed his sons into heroes, so that he could boast that he was the father of such marvels? Was this why they had been taken from him? . . . Was this his answer, that not only the dream was lost, but also the dreamer?" (322). (Note again the presence of the forensic God.) Abraham has seen himself through the lens of the Abraham story for so long that Ruth's words are an intolerable assault on his very identity.

When, in his distracted pacing through dark city streets, he realizes that he is close to Laiah's apartment, the long habit of seeking divine guidance returns: "There came to him the whole puzzling aspect of his life to which she, this woman, seemed strangely related. Hadn't she lurked always in the

shadow of their new life in the city? . . . Somewhere must be the thread to unravel the knotted skein. Others had been led. He would trust. He would follow. *He would even, if necessary, demand*" (323, italics mine). Then he crosses the street to walk up the stairs to Laiah's apartment.

Laiah, meanwhile, has been appropriating story in her own way. And, indeed, she and Mrs. Plopler, the neighbourhood gossip, both misappropriate story as consumable product for personal uses (both are frequently seen eating). Mrs. Plopler, a parody of Abraham the storyteller, takes possession of all stories that come her way and alters them in the retelling according to her audience and her own need to aggrandize herself, to justify herself, to climb socially, or to assuage her own loneliness. Laiah takes only one story, that of her first seduction by the bearded Russian master, and attempts to relive it through Abraham (Rosenthal 80). She, too, is running out of future in which to manoeuvre. Abraham, the unworldly man with the rabbi's beard, shall re-enact the story of her first lover, give her back her virginity, so to speak, and provide for her a respectable position in the community as Abraham's wife. Although she would never dare to imagine herself as a recipient of God's blessing or a vehicle through which an entire people will be blessed, she is like Abraham in her use of story to find purpose.

After his terrifying glimpse into the abyss, Abraham is prepared to see meaning everywhere. Laiah, meanwhile, reads every move as a possible sign that her story is about to be relived. Thus each player in this awful sacrifice scene is attempting to push the other into filling the appropriate role in his or her predetermined script. When Laiah says, daringly, "I've waited a long time," Abraham thinks, "Now it seemed to him that she was beginning to reveal herself. If he listened now, if he could seize the right moment to ask the right question—It had been done in stranger ways" (327–28). As Laiah moves into Abraham's arms, the language deliberately echoes an earlier scene—Abraham's sacrilegious slaughter of the cow when he was a young man, that moment that he still thinks of as a glimpse into life and death. And it is life and death that he now seeks to understand. Critics have focused on the imagery of death and emptiness in the scene, noting the way Laiah becomes Abraham's shadow-side; Abraham does ask himself, "did he come at last to accept the shadow, to embrace the emptiness, to acknowledge his oneness with the fruit without seed, with death, his other self?" (331). He does contemplate emptiness, because without the story that has been the pattern for his life, and, especially, for his understanding of God, death would be welcome. But that is not what Abraham seeks, not what he can accept.

Instead, he makes one more effort to bind God, to demand an answer. To Laiah's petulant dismissal of his family—"they're dead; we're alive"—Abraham responds inwardly, "Who sent you to mock me? Who? And the thought leaped, as though it had been waiting, electrifying, terrifying, to his mind. One he could seek who knew, who would speak if he asked, *who would give if he offered*—if he had the courage" (333, italics mine). Laiah becomes for Abraham "something holy as she lay back, a willing burden, to offer, to receive, as once another" (333).¹⁰ The language is ambiguous enough that it could refer to the gentle cow he once killed (and most have read the scene this way), but it also alludes to that ancient sacrifice scene between the biblical Abraham and his willing son, Isaac. Abraham now forgets fear and feels "as though he were almost on the point of some wonderful revelation" (333). It is a longing to recover that intense emotional moment of the slaughter of the cow, which Abraham has imbued with metaphysical significance, and a longing to hear, finally, from God, to win from him a blessing.¹¹ He is about to commit an act of what Wiseman called a combination of "Greek hubris with Hebrew morality," adding, "The protagonist, Abraham, demands that God should consider him, Abraham, over again, within his own personal, historical context. It is his own need for some kind of personal revelation but it never comes" ("Charm" 145). In the moment before the knife leaps almost of its own will, Wiseman's Abraham stands "once again, terrified, fascinated, on the brink of creation where life and death waver toward each other, reiterating his surrender; now was the time for the circle to close, to enclose him in its safety, in its peace. There *must be a word, with them, in the room, hovering to descend*" (334, italics mine). Now surely God must speak and affirm Abraham's faith. God is bound to respond to such faith. But, no, God is not bound and this is not a willing sacrifice.

At this point in the novel, everyone is bound. Isaac was bound by his father's determination to make story serve his own ends. Abraham is shackled with a guilt he will never lose. Ruth and Moses are forever bound by the story of the murder of Laiah: they have lost a father and grandfather and gained a burden of shame by association. Laiah, the one person prepared to surrender herself, albeit only sexually, will now live on in shocking stories and misunderstanding. Chaim Knopp will have to choose between repudiating his friend Abraham and suffering ostracism among his synagogue friends. Abraham's former employer and his cronies debate the sequence of events like amateur detectives or newspaper reporters; they are the least

bound in their reaction because they are, oddly enough, the most willing to try to understand without judging anyone.

This abrupt descent from the intensity of the transcendental sacrifice scene to the almost comic realism of the scenes immediately following may well have contributed to the confusing readings of Wiseman's resolution. Yet Wiseman has throughout shifted smoothly between complex metaphorical explorations of the mysteries of life and death, and ironic, even comic, renderings of the gritty realities that usually accompany both life and death. Now, as if to underline the dangers of misappropriated story, Wiseman picks up again the motif of story as rumour and nasty gossip, particularly in the mouths of Mrs. Plopler and other Jewish immigrants, themselves already damaged by prejudice and untrue stories. All who are acquainted with Abraham, including those who attempt to administer justice, and even Abraham himself, are now forced to interpret this new and horrific story of a sacrifice. The realistic suggestions—a crime of passion, a defense against a hot-tempered woman, or simple madness—are clearly inadequate. Abraham's own effort to explain himself is so tangled up in his grief over his dead sons and his desire to suffer, "to pay, perhaps to atone" (360) that readers are left finally to turn back to the whole novel in order to make sense of the unthinkable.

Most critical readings of the novel have located the resolution in Moses, making him either the heir of his grandfather's vision (however that vision is defined, whether as specifically patriarchal or vaguely nationalistic) or a symbol of a new vision that repudiates the old world embodied by his grandfather. Zeidman, in a specifically Jewish reading of the novel, focuses on the novel's generally "critical vision of modern Jewish life" (164), but still adds a positive note through Moses, who bears the biblical name of a "character who acts and finally saves Israel from slavery in Egypt" (164). Zeidman concludes, "Wiseman's vision of hope for her generation is clearly one of the Moses variety: compassionate, non-religious and thoughtful, with a sense of Zionism as an entrée into a new world" (165). I agree with parts of this historically grounded reading of *The Sacrifice's* conclusion, but find it difficult to accept that Wiseman would thus displace the protagonist she has given so much loving attention to, especially since Wiseman has said that she wrote the novel in order to explore "what is the best possible reason for the worst possible deed" (Wiseman qtd. in Greene xxii), in this case a murder by a Jew.¹² Thus, the final chapter, although rendered in Moses' perspective, still concerns Abraham and that "worst possible deed."

The reunion between the adolescent Moses, still haunted by memories of his grandfather's stories, and Abraham takes place on Mad Mountain in the insane asylum. Moses has often imagined meeting him again, hoping for some closure to the pain of his abrupt departure out of their lives. When he decides to see his grandfather, he feels "as though all along he had known it would have to be" (374). He does not believe in his grandfather's religion any more, but he does seem to hope "that a revelation [awaits] him" (375). And he does find some revelation: when he leaves, he knows "that he [is] a different person from the boy who had gone up the hill" (380). For he has sat beside his grandfather and felt his grandfather's hand on his, has seen those "hands fused together" so that "it was as though he stood suddenly within the threshold of a different kind of understanding, no longer crouching behind locked doors, but standing upright, with his grandfather leading him, as he always had" (379). Moses responds, laying his own hand over his grandfather's in a gesture of love completely contrary to the hurtful accusations that he had often imagined hurling at his grandfather. As he travels back to the city on the bus, Moses wonders if he will have the courage to say to his new friend Aaron, the young Zionist, "I love him" (380).

Yet, powerful as the change in Moses is, the resolution of the novel is not primarily his. Moses makes no effort to place himself within a biblical story as Abraham so pridefully and desperately did. That kind of reading of story as promise is not passed on, because Abraham has achieved a resolution that is more important and more specific than Moses' new grasp of the complexity of human beings. In words addressed partly to the absent Laiah and partly to Moses, Abraham returns to the moment of sacrifice, and clearly repudiates his previous thinking: "though something in me reached out, I did not understand. Nothing was necessary. I could have blessed you and left you. I could have loved you. . . . I took what was not mine to take . . . , what was given to me to hold gently in my hands, to look at with wonder" (378). Blessing—it is the opposite of taking. To bless is to give, to set free, not to bind. Abraham has now realized that neither blood rituals nor any other manipulations of divine promise—magic, really—are necessary to revive wonder and fear. Love is a more powerful way of grasping wonder. He has understood finally that God is not a Demander, nor does he, Abraham, have any right to demand. Had he chosen simply to listen to Laiah, rather than make her a character in his story, Abraham could have affirmed life, not death.

Although Abraham clearly refers to Laiah, his words apply equally to story. Story is also given to us to "hold gently . . . to look at with wonder,"

not to appropriate as validation for our deepest desires, or wield as weapon in the face of the unknown future (or a threatening ideology). This is not to argue that the hermeneutic of suspicion is never justified—it is. It is merely to argue that when a novel exerts such power as *The Sacrifice* does, it is worth reading carefully to find that core that can “make us better,” in Wiseman’s phrase. *The Sacrifice* asks us to inhabit Abraham’s space as we read, not because his patriarchal assumptions deserve replication or because his crime is justifiable, but because his narrative practices, with their profound results, are so familiar to many of us. We also need to have a mirror flipped up in our face, lest we take what is not ours to take.

NOTES

- 1 Leon Kass notes that “Jews have always had an unusually keen appreciation of life. . . . The celebration of life—of *this* life, not the next one—has from the beginning been central to Jewish ethical and religious sensibilities” (17). Wiseman similarly commented, “the Judaism I was taught, is a Judaism which is life-oriented, which celebrates life, because it’s all we’ve got, because beyond life is somebody else’s responsibility” (“Consciousness” 153).
- 2 For insightful examinations both of the roles of the women in the novel and the male view of women, see Ruth Panofsky, Donna Palmateer Pennee, and Marcia Mack. Particularly damning is Pennee’s observation that even the young men, Moses and Aaron, who presumably represent new hope, dismiss women as “dames” (9–10).
- 3 Ricoeur observes that texts conceal/reveal a “hidden relation which connects ideology to the phenomena of domination” (215), so that the first task of a reader is often determining where the latter really come from (213). Language is too often “filled” by a chosen group, which elevates a particular perspective at the cost of nullifying others.
- 4 Wiseman never clarifies directly what she means by “better,” leaving the word in its qualifying quotation marks, but throughout this sensitive examination of her mother’s artistic work and creative spirit, Wiseman repeatedly returns to the “enlargement of consciousness,” the disturbance of familiar perceptions. Earlier in the passage quoted from, she says, “For what the artist creates is consciousness. Hers is an expression of consciousness which extends consciousness. We cherish it because it represents us not as good, but as aware, and lets us feel that we have contributed to the dignity of creation an expression of our awareness of our situation, which enlarges creation and ourselves” (59).
- 5 James Kugel explains the process of ancient biblical interpreters who, as they recopied and compiled the oral stories and written versions, assumed that they were working with cryptic documents that demanded interpretation. Every detail in the story had meaning that needed uncovering and that was immediately relevant to the readers.
- 6 I have adopted the term “forensic God” from Madeleine L’Engle, *The Genesis Trilogy*. She uses the term throughout to describe the Old Testament God whom many Christians continue to see as a God who operates according to inscrutable laws and who must be placated somehow.
- 7 Panofsky and Pennee have rightly pointed out the dangers of being female in *The Sacrifice*: Panofsky notes, “Wiseman’s first novel ‘sacrifices’ a female sensibility to the

patriarchal discourse of orthodox Judaism” (41); Pennee suggests that “the murder in this novel is not a homicide but a femicide, and specifically for the purpose of renewing a patriarchal structure and community” (3). I would argue, however, that the misogyny is an indirect consequence of Abraham’s sincere effort to hear the voice of his God, and that the murder is not intended, either by Abraham or by Wiseman, to renew patriarchal structures.

- 8 The bubble has been read as a “relativistic microcosm” (Greenstein 33) or a solipsistic refusal to participate in spiritual conversation (Loverso 170).
- 9 Even before his death, Isaac anticipates that the miraculously saved Torah will be connected with the name of the unscrupulous real-estate agent who donated it as “conscience money”: “And someone else will say, ‘Schwarzgeist—aha, he must have been a fine man if God saw fit that his Torah should be saved’” (215–16). Fortunately, the already horrified Abraham never hears the later speculations that Isaac first set the synagogue on fire and then rescued the Torah (318).
- 10 It seems to me that this quotation particularly argues against the view that Abraham sacrifices Laiah because she is evil (Loverso 179; Stephens 507) or the embodiment of “the God of death” (Moss 99). Abraham has indeed judged Laiah for her promiscuity and her sterility. Nevertheless, I would still argue that the murder scene makes sense only when we take into account Abraham’s increasingly desperate need to retrieve the meaning of his defining myth, and that means forcing God’s hand by threatening human sacrifice.
- 11 In the last storytelling conversation with Moses, when the young Moses forestalls Abraham’s wish to retell the story of the biblical Moses who saw God face to face, Abraham reveals his prideful longing to force God’s hand: “It’s not just a story. Can you imagine what it would be to see God face to face? And to win His blessing? My blessing I give you with all of my heart. But to win for you His blessing. Ah!” (279).
- 12 In the interview with Butovsky, this phrase refers only to Hoda’s act of incest in Wiseman’s second novel, *Crackpot*. However, in an earlier interview with Belkin, Wiseman explains the beginnings of *The Sacrifice*: “My intention was to find the optimal conditions under which a Jew would commit murder. By optimal, I mean what were the best possible reasons that the man himself could see for his act and could be driven to perform an act like that?” (“Consciousness” 152).

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