Review Essay

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Tracing Trends in Orthodoxy

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

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

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

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

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

At the same time, how is Bodoff so certain that his own interpretation, in contrast to what he purports was the "mistaken" view, is the "correct" way to understand the underlying lesson of the akedah? Did medieval Ashkenazi commentators who arrived at the interpretation of the akedah criticized by the author do so as a result of a particular dark view of the world, or was their understanding the fruit of their attempt to honestly and objectively read the biblical text? A simple, non-homiletic reading of Genesis 22 would appear to affirm the approach advanced by the rishonim derived by the author much more directly than the considerably more subtle and complex approach recommended by Bodoff. It seems likely that the author's reading of akedat Yitzhak is one informed by contemporary twenty-first century life-affirming sensibilities as much as the readings of Rashi, Rashbam, and Ramban might have been influenced by the events through which they lived. It is possible that contrary to Bodoff's "if only" speculation, it would be incomprehensible to a Jew living in Germany at the end of the eleventh century, whose community
had been subjected to severe persecution, that the *akedah* constitutes a statement about the preservation and sanctity of life under all conditions rather than the justification to sacrifice life if called upon to do so for religious reasons.

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

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

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