"Behold, Here I Am!" (Gen 22:1) as Verbalization of Trust and Hope: Insights from Transformative Learning Theory

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Abstract: What is the significance of Abraham's declaration of "Behold, here I am!" in Gen 22:1? It can be taken as a statement of presence before God as he responds in readiness to God's command. Taking insights from Transformative Learning Theory, a theory from the field of adult education that frames learning as paradigm shift, this study finds that Abraham's declaration is also an important sign of Abraham's trust in God—which Abraham learns through a series of transformations in Gen 12-21.

Keywords: Genesis 22, Abraham, hineni, "Here I am!", Transformative Learning, paradigm shift

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• *PHILIPPINIANA SACRA***,** Vol. LXI, No. 184 (January-April 2026) pp. 49-68.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.55997/1003pslxi184a3

The Declaration, "Behold, Here I Am!"

In the Old Testament, the declaration *hineni* is the "classic response of biblical heroes."[1] It is a response that marks a special readiness before God, indicating a "spontaneous, unhesitating response to a divine call."[2] Translated into English as "Behold, here I am!" the declaration is composed of the contraction of *hinneh* and *ani*. As a predicator of existence that points to *ani* ("I"), the declaration is a statement of presence, "readiness, alertness, attentiveness, receptivity, and responsiveness to instructions."[3] The inclusion of *hinneh* ("behold!") adds a layer of urgency and immediacy—what T. Lambdin calls a "here-and-now-ness" of the declaration.[4] *Hinneh* is an "interjection demanding attention" that is used to emphasize the information that follows, or in this case, to the specific person speaking.[5] Thus, *hineni* is not only of physical presence, but also of "emotional and spiritual presence,"[6] as one presents their entire self at the very moment.

In Genesis 22:1 Abraham makes this declaration, "Behold, here I am!" in response to God's call. An immediate contrast can be made when Abraham's response to that of the first man in the second story of creation. In Gen 3:9, God calls out for Adam, "Where are you?" The man hides for he was afraid. Now, in Gen 22, Abraham's declaration is the proper response to God's question, "where are you?"—"Behold, here I am!"

Abraham's declaration, therefore, marks a promising start to this final and greatest test of Abraham.[7] How does Abraham arrive at making such a declaration before God, knowing the tumultuous journey from Gen 12-21? This study takes insights from Transformative Learning Theory to examine the significance of the declaration, "Behold, here I am!"

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[1] Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy* (New York: Schocken, 2000), 269, 93.

[2] David L. Lieber, *Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary* (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 2001), 327, commenting on Moses' response in Exodus 3:4.

[3] Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 45.

[4] Thomas O. Lambdin, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew* (Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971), 168.

[5] Carl Philip Weber, "Hen," ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason Archer, and Bruce Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1980), 220.

[6] Rabbi Amy Schwartzman, "Hineni Revisited: Rosh Hashanah Sermon 5771-2010," *Temple Rodef Shalom*, 1–2, last modified September 9, 2010, http://www.templerodefshalom.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/RH5771.pdf.

[7] Richard Clifford and Roland E. Murphy, "Genesis," in *New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, and Roland E. Murphy (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1990), 25.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.55997/1003pslxi184a3

Transformative Learning Theory

In his pioneering 1978 study of adult U.S. women returning to college after an extended period away, sociologist Jack Mezirow found that the key to their success in adapting to the unfamiliar environment lay not in the new skills they learned, but rather in their ability to adjust the frames of reference underlying said knowledge and skills.[8] For Mezirow, learning consists of a change in meaning perspectives, which he defines as defined as the "structure of assumptions within which new experience is assimilated and transformed by one's past experience during the process of interpretation."[9] Mezirow found that true learning takes place not only when new knowledge and skills are acquired, but when one's assumptions transform to "permit a more inclusive, discriminating, permeable, and integrative perspective," that results in "making decisions or otherwise acting upon these new understandings."[10]

Transformative Learning (TL) theory therefore frames the process of learning as a paradigm shift. It was Thomas Kuhn who described developments in science as a phenomenon of transformation of paradigms.[11] Scientific paradigms allow "new and more rigid definitions" in a scientific field, determining, for example, what experiments are worth doing and which ones are not, eliminating the need to constantly reiterate fundamental principles and needlessly repeat basic steps. This provides a common set of problems, solutions, and terminologies from which experiments can be understood.[12] Scientific revolution takes place in the form of radical and revolutionary paradigm shifts, where puzzles unfathomable by old paradigms are now addressed by the problem-solving power of new paradigms.[13] Kuhn's concept of paradigm and paradigm shift influenced the development of TL theory,[14] and Mezirow himself refers to Kuhn's concept of paradigm shift as

[8] Jack Mezirow, *Education for Perspective Transformation: Women's Re-Entry Programs in Community Colleges* (New York: Center for Adult Education, Teacher's College, Columbia University, 1978), 1.

[9] Jack Mezirow, *Fostering Critical Reflection in Adulthood: A Guide to Transformative and Emancipatory Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1990), 2.

[10] Mezirow, *Fostering Critical Reflection in Adulthood*, 14.

[11] Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 18-19.

[12] Andrew Kitchenham, "The Evolution of John Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory," *Journal of Transformative Education* 6, no. 2 (April 2008): 107, https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344608322678.

[13] Tomas Sundnes Drønen, "Scientific Revolution and Religious Conversion: A Closer Look at Thomas Kuhn's Theory of Paradigm-Shift," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 18, no. 3 (2006): 237–38; See also Kitchenham, "Evolution of John Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory," 106.

[14] Kitchenham, "Evolution of John Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory," 107; Curtis J. Young, "Transformational Learning in Ministry," *Christian Education Journal: Research on Educational Ministry* 10, no. 2 (November 2013): 323, https://doi.org/10.1177/073989131301000205.

a "counterpart" to TL theory.[15] For Mezirow, meaning perspectives as "personal paradigm for understanding ourselves and our relationships."[16] F. Alvarez, however, points out that unlike Kuhn's paradigms, meaning perspectives are "usually tacit and unconscious until they are made more explicit during the process of looking for a new perspective."[17]

In her book, *Toward an Adult Church*, J. Regan builds on Mezirow's original formulation of TL theory and presents four fundamental movements in the learning process, especially in the realm of adult religious education: 1) questioning the present perspective; 2) exploring alternatives; 3) applying the transformed perspective; 4) reintegrating and grounding of the new perspective.[18]

The initial catalyst of the TL process is the disorienting dilemma.[19] This is the insurmountable challenge that forces adaptation and transformation because current paradigms or meaning perspectives are inadequate. This experience or series of experiences exposes the inadequacy and weaknesses of one's present presumptions and paradigms, leading one to question their present perspectives.[20]

From here, the second movement is that of exploring alternatives. Faced with the inadequacy of current paradigms, one finds themself "stalled" and "disorganized" and cannot "carry on."[21] Thus, one searches for new paradigms by exploring options for new roles, relationships, and actions. Regan highlights the importance of conversation and interaction with others in this exploration, as one also tries their hand in applying new paradigms, even if in a preliminary way.[22] In the language of Mezirow, this includes the phases of acquiring knowledge and skills, provisional efforts of testing the new paradigm, and building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships.[23]

The final movement—before eventually starting over again—is reintegrating and grounding the new perspective. Having "tried on" new

[15] Jack Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning* (Wiley, 1991), 46.

[16] Jack Mezirow, "Perspective Transformation," *Adult Education* 28, no. 2 (January 1978): 101, https://doi.org/10.1177/074171367802800202.

[17] Francis D. Alvarez, "The Unfolding of Your Words (Ps 119:130): The Pedagogy of the Psalms" (Ph.D., Boston College, 2017), 67.

[18] Jane E. Regan, *Toward an Adult Church: A Vision of Faith Formation* (Chicago: Loyola, 2002), 87.

[19] Barbara Fleischer, "Mezirow's Theory of Transformative Learning and Lonergan's Method in Theology: Resources for Adult Theological Education," *Journal of Adult Theological Education* 3, no. 2 (April 2006): 151, https://doi.org/10.1558/jate.2006.3.2.147.

[20] Regan, *Toward an Adult Church*, 87.

[21] Larry Green, "Agency: The Force and Compass of Transformation," *Journal of Transformative Education* 20, no. 2 (April 2022): 106, https://doi.org/10.1177/15413446211028522.

[22] Regan, *Toward an Adult Church*, 92.

[23] cf. Kitchenham, "Evolution of John Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory," 105.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.55997/1003pslxi184a3

paradigms, and finding the most adequate and effective, one can now take on the new paradigm with a little more permanency. For Regan, this can be a long and challenging process, especially because of the longer implications and domino effect of the new meaning perspective.[24]

An important addition to Regan's four movements comes from Curtis Young. Writing about TL in the context of ministry, he highlights the last movement not only as reintegrating but also as a "growth phase," emphasizing the "newfound freedom and purpose" that results from learning.[25] Young identifies an important "surge of vitality" that happens in the learning process.[26] Taking cues from James Loder's view of transformation, which identifies celebration as an integral step in the transformation process,[27] Young highlights a "celebrative release of energy" as

> a surge of vitality linked directly to the new perspective. It is a vector that energizes the transformation of individuals so their lives conform to the fresh truth. Its impact can extend well beyond the circumstances of the crisis that initiated the learning process. The surge of vitality affects the will and conscience of the person, but is not limited to conscious decision-making. People make decisions to change in particular ways, but their lives also change in ways they had not first thought through.[28]

Emphasis is placed on the renewed energy, vitality, and enthusiasm to act in light of the new paradigm. This further highlights TL's action-orientedness, bringing sharper focus to the new actions that result from successful transformation.

Recognizing and marking the surge of vitality is important in ensuring the success of a TL process in order to make the transformation more lasting. Young also calls this a "metamorphosis" moment that allows one to "better able to deal with life because they are thriving to a degree they had not before."[29] One might ask whether some form of ritualization or verbalization would be important in marking the transformation in order to accompany the surge of vitality.

Abraham's Declaration, "Behold, Here I Am!" (Gen 22:1)

Turning back to Abraham's story, this study proposes that his declaration "Behold, here I am!" is one such verbalization and celebration of a transformation.

[24] Jane E. Regan, *Toward an Adult Church: A Vision of Faith Formation* (Chicago: Loyola, 2002), 93.

[25] Curtis J. Young, "Transformational Learning in Ministry," *Christian Education Journal: Research on Educational Ministry* 10, no. 2 (November 2013): 333.

[26] Young, 332.

[27] Young, 327; cf. James Edwin Loder, "Transformation in Christian Education," *Religious Education* 76, no. 2 (March 1981): 218–219.

[28] Young, "Transformational Learning in Ministry," 332.

[29] Young, "Transformational Learning in Ministry," 333.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.55997/1003pslxi184a3

The text of Genesis 22:1-19 appears as an independent and coherent unit.[30] It "appears front and center in Genesis"[31] as "the climactic event in Abraham's life"[32] and the dramatic high point of the Abraham saga. This study does not explore the story of the *akedah* itself, but instead examines the transformation that Abraham undergoes in order to be able to pass the test.

Genesis 22:1 begins the narrative, "After these things, God tested Abraham." What follows cannot be separated from the "these things" that have transpired before. At this point in the Abraham saga, "these things" includes, from Gen 12-21: God's initial call of Abraham and Abraham's response to begin on the journey, Abraham's escape from famine into Egypt and the first sister-wife episode, Abraham's departure from Egypt and division of possessions with Lot, Lot's capture and Abraham's successful mission to save him, covenant ritual with God and reassurances of the promises, the birth of Ishmael with Hagar, another formalization of the covenant with the instruction of circumcision, the visit of the three men, a conversation with God regarding the judgment of Sodom, Abraham's journey to Negeb and a second sister-wife episode, the birth of Isaac to Sarah, and the banishment of Ishmael and Hagar.

This study finds that "these things" have also caused transformation in Abraham, whereby he is ready to make the declaration in Gen 22:1, only after a learning process of "these things." Using the language of TL theory, what then is the paradigm shift that takes place?

Paradigm of Abraham's Kin

An initial paradigm that can be seen to operate in Abraham is that of sticking to his kin. The Abraham saga begins in Gen 12:1-3 with God's command to "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you" (Gen 12:1). The familiar promises of land, nation, and blessing.[33] All these, however, are premised on the first call which is to "go" (*lekh lekha*).

In Abraham's immediate response to God's call in Gen 12, most commentators find no fault with Abraham since it is quickly reported that "Abram went, as with the Lord had told him" (Gen 12:4). Abraham is therefore seen as a "paragon of faith and obedience" who offers no objection to God's command.[34]

[30] Clifford and Murphy, "Genesis," 25.

[31] Ellen F. Davis, "Abraham's Radical Trust," *The Christian Century* 133, no. 22 (October 2016): 29.

[32] Lieber, *Etz Hayim*, 117.

[33] Cf. Bruce Birch, *What Does the Lord Require? The Old Testament Call to Social Witness* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 34.

[34] Dan Rickett, "Rethinking the Place and Purpose of Genesis 13," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 36, no. 1 (September 2011): 43, https://doi.org/10.1177/0309089211419774.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.55997/1003pslxi184a3

D. Rickett agrees with this estimation insofar as Abraham "*going*," but he raises a question about Abraham's "*going from.*"[35] Abraham indeed leaves the land and his household, but with the attachment the clause "and Lot went with him," Rickett finds Abraham's disobedience: Abraham does not fully "go" from his kindred because he takes his nephew with him. The biblical text does not provide the reason for bringing Lot and Lot's family. It could be an early sign and foreshadowing of Abraham's later generosity, as he now cares for his nephew whose father, Haran, had previously died (Gen 11:28). Lot, however, still constitutes part of Abraham's kin—that Abraham has evidently has not fully left behind.

Rickett further points out the oddity of Lot's constant reappearance throughout Abraham's story—here in Gen 12, and again in Gen 13 and 14. He proposes that these mentions are placed by the author "purposefully in order to remind the reader that Lot is with Abraham though he was not supposed to be."[36] They are indications of Abraham's inability to detach from Lot.[37] Rickett asks, "Did Abraham finally break from his father's household? With the mention of Lot in 13.1 the answer is, 'no.' Only after Abraham has broken all ties with his father's household can Abraham settle."[38]

For L. Helyer, the story of Abraham and Lot also relates to the question of Abraham's heir. Following the traditions of succession, Heyler points out that with the cultural norms of the time, Lot could technically be Abraham's heir.[39] Since Sarah was barren even before Abraham's journey began (cf. Gen 11:39), the decision to take Lot along can be the first example of what Helyer calls the "folly of human initiatives" by which Abraham tries to secure an heir.[40]

This starts a theme in the Abraham story. He follows God's commands, but he also takes initiative to do things that, while not in themselves contrary to God's commands, are definitely not explicitly instructed by God either. For example, just as Abraham sets out on the journey, a famine hits the land and Abraham detours to Egypt (Gen 12:10). This was not an instruction from God—in fact it is the opposite—and the journey takes him away from the promised land.

[35] Rickett, 43, emphasis in original.

[36] Rickett, 48.

[37] Rickett, 46–47.

[38] Rickett points out the explicit statement in Gen 13:1, "...after Lot had separated from [Abraham]" Rickett, 48.

[39] A point Rickett also explores in Rickett, 44–45.

[40] Larry R. Helyer, "The Separation of Abram and Lot: Its Significance in the Patriarchal Narratives," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 8, no. 26 (June 1983): 82.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.55997/1003pslxi184a3

Here, Abraham is acting on his own and C. Conroy asks, "maybe he is not having enough trust in the Lord?"[41]

Further fearing that the Egyptians would try to take his life upon seeing Sarah, Abraham asks that she instead present herself as his sister (cf. Gen 12:13). He knows that he must stay alive in order for the promises of God to be fulfilled,[42] and so he sets up the deception in order to ensure his safety. Abraham acts out of fear,[43] looking after his own interest with self-preservation. Abraham journeys into the unknown and, fearing the unexpected he "puts Sarah in that terrible situation because he does not trust God to pull them through the danger."[44]

These actions of Abraham are manifestations of a still-developing trust in God, thus far in the narrative. Commentators land moral judgment on Abraham for the acts of deception, self-preservation, and harsh treatment of others—actions that are contrary to later values of Israelite life.

The question of Abraham's trust in God therefore emerges as a theme of this part of the saga. Conroy labels this early section of the narrative as "the promise delayed, endangered, but confirmed."[45] Abraham constantly taking matters into his own hands results in missteps, causing only further complications.[46]

As a counterpoint, however, T. Fretheim points out that

> it ought not to be thought that Abram's actions entail taking the divine promises into his own hands; that would be a docetic way of viewing God's way of working in the world…. The narrative speaks not one word of Abram's faith in God or lack thereof; it centers on the way he handles a problem in daily life, with all of its complexities and ambiguities.[47]

Viewed this way, Abraham's actions are not particularly extraordinary,[48] especially since the text does not make any explicit judgment on his actions. T. Eskanazi comments that it is not a story about unethical behavior, but rather "a

[41] Charles Conroy, "Abraham's Journey of Faith," in *Journeys and Servants*, by Charles Conroy, CBAP Lectures (Quezon City: CBAP, 2003), 10.

[42] Clifford and Murphy, "Genesis," 20.

[43] Lieber, *Etz Hayim*, 72.

[44] Davis, "Abraham's Radical Trust," 30.

[45] Conroy, 10 referring to Gen 12-15.

[46] Helyer also adds further that after each of these follies, God reiterates and insists that Abraham will have an heir "coming from his own body" (Gen 15:4) and affirms the promise each time (cf. Gen 13:15; 15:4; 17:2; 18:14), in Helyer, "Separation of Abram and Lot," 83-84.

[47] Fretheim, "Genesis," 431, commenting on Gen 20.

[48] Even the practice of concubinage was deemed legitimate and a common practice in the Ancient Near East. See Fox, *The Five Books of Moses*, 66.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.55997/1003pslxi184a3

story of marginalized persons who succeed in roundabout, unorthodox ways,"[49] commending the ingenuity of problem solving.

Based on the absence of explicit judgment in the text, Fretheim's view would make sense. This view, however, fails to take consideration of the subtle shifts in Abraham that culminate in passing the test of Gen 22. It is important to recognize Abraham's not-so-stellar start as it highlights the growth of trust that takes place as the saga continues.[50]

Exploring Alternatives: Paradigm of God Most High and God's Justice and Mercy

Following TL theory, Abraham is therefore in need of a new paradigm to guide his actions—a paradigm that no longer leads to troubles and complications. Two moments can be highlighted in the search for a new paradigm: Abraham's encounter with Melchizedek (Gen 14) and the conversation with God about the fate of Sodom (Gen 18:16-33). TL theory also highlights encounter and critical dialogue with others as direct paths towards transformative learning.

The brief narrative of Gen 14 names several kings involved in a war: King Amraphel nf Shinar, King Arioch of Ellasar, King Chedorlaomer of Elam, and King Tidal of Goiim who are at war with King Bera of Sodom, King Birsha of Gomorrah, King Shinab of Admah, King Shemeber of Zeboiim, and the king of Bela (Zoar); four kings against five (Gen 14:1, 8-9). This war had been going on for at least two years (cf. Gen 14:4-5). Abraham is drawn into the conflict when Lot is taken captive (Gen 14:12). He organizes his men and sets out to rescue Lot, taking with him the "goods, and the women and the people" (Gen 14:16).

It is at this point that the narrative is interrupted by the appearance of another king, Melchizedek the king of Salem (Gen 14:17-20). The interruption is abrupt, appearing as an interjection between Abraham bringing back the goods (Gen 14:16) and the king of Sodom asking for them, "give me the people, but take the goods for yourself" (Gen 14:21).

Jewish scholar Judy Klitsner highlights the significance of the encounter with Melchizedek as an important reminder of Abraham's purpose and calling.[51] The offer of the king of Sodom could actually be read as a trap. An alternative

[49] Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss, eds., *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (New York: URJ Press, 2008), 63, commenting on Gen 12.

[50] cf. Conroy, "Abraham's Journey of Faith," 11.

[51] Judy Klitsner, *Subversive Sequels in the Bible* (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2011), 71.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.55997/1003pslxi184a3

translation renders Gen 14:21 as "give me *your soul*, keeping the booty."[52] Once again, there is an offer of riches—similar to the riches Abraham had gained from the pharaoh in the first sister-wife episode of Gen 12:10-20. But it would come at the cost of his very soul and "further erode his moral standing."[53]

At this crucial decision point, we find Melchizedek's interjection. Bringing bread and wine, he blesses Abraham, "blessed be Abram by God Most High El Elyon, maker of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand!" (Gen 14:19).[54] Melchizedek's blessing reminds Abraham of who the true king is, in the midst of all the conflict among the human kings. The moment itself with Melchizedek is understated, with the narrative jumping quickly to Abraham giving a tenth of the goods (Gen 14:20), and Melchizedek disappears from the narrative just as suddenly as he appeared. The influence on Abraham, however, is clear.

Klitsner explains:

> The first sign of Melchizedek's influence comes with Abraham's references to God as "God Most High," the "Creator of heaven and earth," terms he has never before used. These new appellations for God point to His sublime, powerful standing which contrasts starkly with the uninspiring nature of Abraham's recent experiences.[55]

Abraham finds from Melchizedek "the vocabulary with which to rebuff the advances of the evil king [of Sodom]."[56] When he returns to the king of Sodom, Abraham immediately uses the appellation introduced by Melchizedek, rejecting him, saying, "I have sworn to God Most High, maker of heaven and earth" (Gen 14:22). Melchizedek's words have urged Abraham to "avert his gaze from the mundane protocols of the world around him and to re-affix it upon the heavens, the figurative dwelling place of God Most High."[57] With the encounter, Abraham is reminded who the true heavenly king is—God Most High.

Melchizedek's repetition of the title "God Most High" causes Abraham to "avert his gaze from the mundane protocols of the world around him and to

[52] The word for "soul" is the Hebrew "nefesh," which could mean people or a soul—in this case, Abraham's. Klitsner, 72.

[53] Klitsner, 72.

[54] In Hebrew, *El Elyon*. This name for God appears for the first time here in Genesis, and later used in Numbers 24:16, Psalm 7:17, Psalm 18:13. G. T. Manley and F. F. Bruce, "Names of God," in *New Bible Dictionary*, ed. D. R. Wood (Leicester: Intervarsity, 1996), 420.

[55] Klitsner, *Subversive Sequels in the Bible*, 73, italics in original.

[56] Klitsner, 72.

[57] Klitsner, 70.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.55997/1003pslxi184a3

re-affix it upon the heavens."[58] This happens at a "critical juncture" for Abraham, in "a context of chronic challenges to Abraham's integrity."[59] Klitsner suggests that the title "God Most High" is "intended to remind Abraham of his early relationship with God and of its accompanying sublime ideals."[60] And Abraham's immediate use of the same title "God Most High" when he meets the king of Salem in Gen 14:22 suggests that he may have taken on Melchizedek's point of view—consistent with the exploration of a new paradigm.

Another notable moment happens with Abraham and God's conversation in Gen 18:16-33, the discussion over the fate of the righteous among the wicked in Sodom. Abraham's line of questioning seems "surprisingly audacious,"[61] and it may seem that Abraham is the one who instructs God by the negotiation.[62] It is more fitting, however, to see how it is Abraham who is instructed by God, where Abraham learns the extent of God's mercy.[63]

N. MacDonald and R. Eisen present how the goal of the conversation is that Abraham "may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice" (Gen 18:19 NRSV).[64] In this view, Abraham's knowledge of God is yet lacking, as he has yet to understand fully God's righteousness and justice. What then takes place is a kind of teaching dialogue, where God reveals his plans of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah to Abraham in order to "entice him to plead for the righteous inhabitants of the wicked city."[65] It is therefore an "important moment in the moral education of Abraham. It is the moment when [God] seeks to instruct Abraham about 'his way,' and the dialogue is an interactive lesson in which Abraham learns the extent of

[58] Klitsner, 70.

[59] Klitsner, 70.

[60] Klitsner, 70.

[61] Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 23; See also Edward J. Bridge, "An Audacious Request: Abraham's Dialogue with God in Genesis 18," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 40, no. 3 (March 2016): 283, https://doi.org/10.1177/0309089216637143.

[62] Mark S. Smith, "Genesis," in *Jerome Biblical Commentary for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. John J. Collins et al. (India: Bloomsbury, 2022), 224.

[63] Nathan MacDonald, "Listening to Abraham—Listening to Yhwh: Divine Justice and Mercy in Genesis 18:16-33," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 66, no. 1 (2004): 41.

[64] MacDonald, "Listening to Abraham—Listening to Yhwh," 25–43; see also Robert Eisen, "The Education of Abraham: The Encounter between Abraham and God over the Fate of Sodom and Gomorrah," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (April 2000): 80–86; Rabbi Shai Held and Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, "In Praise of Protest: Or, Who's Teaching Whom?," in *The Heart of Torah, Volume 1*, Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion: Genesis and Exodus (University of Nebraska Press, 2017), 35–39, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1tg5nz2.14.

[65] Eisen, "The Education of Abraham," 86.

[God's] mercy toward his creation, so that Abraham and his descendants may follow."[66]

The story can therefore be read as moment of the deepening of the trust between Abraham and God—and also between God and Abraham. As MacDonald argues further:

> At this decisive juncture, [God] begins to reveal his plans to his chosen servant for the first time. From this point on, Israel, through its prophets, will be given privileged access to [God's] counsel. Abraham is commissioned to teach his children the way of [God], but the patriarch must first learn it himself. That he does learn [God]'s way—that is, the forgiving mercy of [God] is clear from all subsequent intercessions; but the anomalous course of this first intercession suggests that this exchange is a learning incident.[67]

MacDonald shows that "presuming [God] to be a harsh judge, [Abraham] prepares to barter with him. His strategy is undone by [God]'s persistent acceptance of Abraham's offer; [God] turns out to be far more merciful than Abraham imagines."[68] At the end of the conversation Abraham has deeper knowledge of God's mercy and justice, and Abraham is left to consider this as a paradigm moving forward.

A brief comment can be made here about the second sister-wife episode of Gen 20:10-20. TL theory highlights preliminary attempts to apply new paradigms as part of the learning process. With Abraham this attempt can be seen in the second sister-wife story. At first glance, it may seem identical to the first, with Abraham again asking Sarah to lie about their marriage and instead present herself as his sister, just like the deception in Gen 12:10-20. However, unlike the previous episode, Abraham's fear is named. This time, Abraham's reason for the deception is that "there is no fear of God at all in this place" (Gen 20:11). It is no longer about self-preservation due to Sarah's beauty (Gen 12:12), but rather about an uncertainty about the people's relationship with God.[69]

Another marked difference is that Abraham is involved in the "solution," where he prays to God (Gen 20:17). Unlike the previous story where Abraham was not involved at all in the restoration of Pharaoh, here, Abimelech's healing (together with his wife and female slaves) comes after Abraham's intersession.[70]

[66] MacDonald, "Listening to Abraham—Listening to Yhwh," 41.

[67] MacDonald, "Listening to Abraham—Listening to Yhwh," 40.

[68] MacDonald, "Listening to Abraham—Listening to Yhwh," 40.

[69] Abraham is proven wrong and there is in fact fear of God as Abimelech acts with greater honor than Abraham. Abraham is still liable for the deception and lack of trust in God, as per Clifford and Murphy, "Genesis," 24.

[70] cf. Lieber, *Etz Hayim*, 112.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.55997/1003pslxi184a3

This can be taken as an indication that God and Abraham are now working together.[71] Abraham's fear and concern for his kin are still there, however a new paradigm seems to be emerging as his actions begin to change. Abimelech later admits to Abraham, "God is with you in all that you do" (Gen 21:22).

A New Paradigm: Trust in God

It is in Gen 22, then, that Abraham's paradigm shift finds its completion. Having unlearned the paradigm of kin and slowly learning the paradigm of God Most High and God's justice, Abraham now takes on the paradigm of trust in God.

Gen 22 makes it explicit that the story constitutes a test (Gen 22:1). This makes it clear that the reader must pay close attention to Abraham's response. With the eagerness of the declaration "Behold, Here I am!" Abraham indicates his "complete availability"[72] by which he places himself "completely at God's disposal."[73] Abraham's response to God's call is articulate in an "unconditional acceptance, a self-oblation,"[74] a readiness to do whatever God would command.

With the immediacy and the lack of further verbal response to God's eventual command to "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt-offering on one of the mountains that I will show you" (Gen 22:3), Abraham is sometimes characterized as "silently trusting and obedient"[75] to the point of blind obedience. A. Gonzalez interprets Abraham's quick response as having given up arguing with God—"Abraham had long before given up trying to understand … he had decided to make no attempt to understand."[76]

Blind obedience, however, is not an acceptable interpretation. As we have seen, the response in Gen 22 is rooted in the previous experiences of Gen 12-21, where Abraham has been learning of God's trustworthiness. Likewise, blind stupor is also not an acceptable interpretation. Some commentators highlight the whirlwind of emotions that Abraham must have been feeling at this point. While

[71] At the very least, more than in the first sister-wife episode.

[72] Clifford and Murphy, "Genesis," 25.

[73] J. Gerald Janzen, *Abraham and All the Families of the Earth: A Commentary on the Book of Genesis 12-50*, International Theological Commentary, ed. Fredrick Carlson Holmgren and George A. F. Knight (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1993), 78.

[74] Angel Gonzalez, *Abraham: Father of Believers*, trans. Robert J. Olsen (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), 120.

[75] Clifford and Murphy, "Genesis," 25.

[76] Gonzalez, *Abraham*, 114.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.55997/1003pslxi184a3

there are no direct textual indications of Abraham's disposition and emotions,[77] tension can be inferred from the style of the narration. In Gen 22:3 Abraham rose, saddled, took, split, and went. Then in Gen 22:9-10 he bound, laid, reached, and took. The language is straightforward with a staccato tempo heightening the tension with every action.[78] The narration conveys "a real sense of acting without stopping to weigh consequences."[79] It would be possible to interpret this as Abraham acting no longer thinking. He has perhaps turned numb, losing all agency and goes through the motions not really knowing what he is doing.

The next part of the story, however, denies this interpretation. Abraham is interrupted by the messenger of God, and he declares once more, "Behold, here I am!" Rabbi A. Schwartzman comments, "I am amazed that yet again he is able to redirect his attention and listen to the message that the *malach* brings: 'Stop, turn from this deed, reorient yourself, despite your deep commitment, this isn't the right path.'"[80]

Abraham maintains his senses throughout, and he is not in any kind of stupor nor is he numbed. He is in fact fully conscious and able to make the same declaration before God. Perhaps, then, the staccato tempo of Abraham's actions is not a sign of lack of volition in a kind of "autopilot," but instead, it is a sign of single-mindedness and clarity of purpose. Abraham, at this point in the story, no longer needs to make any decisions—he has already made the decision to do whatever God asks in Gen 22:1. The self-oblation he has made is definitive. Rooted in that deep relationship that has formed over the course of Abraham's journey as discussed above, Abraham's trust in God has reached its highest point and culmination, and Abraham obeys.

Conclusion

Perhaps at is at this point that it has to be said here that this is not a story about father and son, nor is there a parable about God's desires vs. human desires,

[77] There is no mention of distress or anguish before the moment of the sacrifice, and neither is there mention of relief or jubilation after. Jean Louis Ska, "Genesis 22: What Question Should We Ask the Text?," *Biblica* 94, no. 2 (2013): 257–67.

[78] Jonathan D. Safren, "Balaam and Abraham," *Vetus Testamentum* 38, no. 1 (January 1988): 110; cf. Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy* (New York: Schocken, 2000), 92.

[79] Alisa Kasmir, *Hineni: In Imitation of Abraham* (Liturgical Press, 2020).

[80] Rabbi Amy Schwartzman, "Hineni Revisited: Rosh Hashanah Sermon 5771-2010," Temple Rodef Shalom, September 9, 2010, 6, http://www.templerodefshalom.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/RH5771.pdf.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.55997/1003pslxi184a3

or about sacrificing one's son if God commands it.[81] The *akedah* must not be read literally lest the reader think that God approves and demands the child sacrifice, and that Abraham is an abusive father. It must be read as a literary representation of Abraham finally learning how to trust God. The reader "knows that the threat to Isaac is not the subject of the narration,"[82] and it is instead a story about Abraham coming to fullness of trust in God, with the declaration, "Behold, here I am!" at the center.

Gen 22 therefore presents Abraham's faith and trust in contrast to the lack thereof depicted in the earlier stories. It is read therefore as a narrative high point and climax, a culmination of the relationship between Abraham and God, with both coming to a deep sense of trust. A. Zornberg refers to this as his call and conversion experience. She writes, "to say that a man is 'converted' means, in these terms, that religious ideas, previously peripheral in his consciousness, now take a central place, and that religious aims form the habitual centre of his energy."[83] God calls Abraham in Gen 22, and unlike the previous experiences discussed above, Abraham has now placed God's promises at the center rather than the periphery, with the declaration "Behold, here I am!" as a sign of this culmination.

With the language of TL theory, one can conclude that Abraham is silently following and quietly trusting because he has already made the paradigm shift. There is no longer any hesitation or questioning in Abraham's response. He no longer tries to find his own solution to (yet another) predicament brought before him by God. There is no more doubt or questioning of God's intentions. There is no disordered attachment to his kin or to his own wealth or safety. There is only trust in God and a desire to do what God asks, trusting that there would be nothing to worry about. By declaring, "Behold, here I am!" Abraham is responding with immediacy and readiness, awaiting God's instructions. It is a declaration founded on the trust in God that has developed through the previous encounters with God. In this sense the declaration is also self-defining: Abraham declares who he is before God, fully trusting God and willing to do will be asked.

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[81] Cf. Rob Bell, *What Is the Bible?: How an Ancient Library of Poems, Letters, and Stories Can Transform the Way You Think and Feel About Everything* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2017), 110.

[82] George W. Coats, *Genesis*, Forms of the Old Testament Literature (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 158.

[83] William James, Varieties of Religious Experience (Fontana: 1960), 201 quoted in Avivah Gottleib Zornberg, *Genesis: The Beginning of Desire* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1995), 80.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.55997/1003pslxi184a3

Abraham reveals this new paradigm in the dialogue of Gen 22:8. When asked by Isaac about the lamb for the burnt-offering, Abraham responds, "God himself will provide the lamb for the sacrifice" (Gen 22:8). This is Abraham's new paradigm. No more questions or objections no more "taking matters into his own hands." Abraham demonstrates complete trust in God—for he knows that God himself will provide. No longer does Abraham need to secure an heir by himself, God will provide. No longer does he have to care for his own safety as he does in the sister-wife episodes, God will provide. And even as he might be wondering how Isaac would survive the sacrifice, Abraham trusts, the Lord will provide.

From the perspective of TL theory, we can also highlight how the declaration, "Behold, here I am!" captures the surge of vitality that Young identifies as part of the TL process. Before moving on to new action with the new paradigm, a "celebratory surge of vitality" happens, where one's life is changed in new and unexpected ways.[84] It was proposed above that some kind of ritualization would be significant in marking the transformation that has occurred, and with Abraham we find precisely an important one—a verbalization of the surge of vitality with the declaration, "Behold, here I am!"

Its "here-and-now-ness" and sense of urgency captures the surge of vitality and the "newfound freedom and purpose"[85] that one gains with the new paradigm. As TL theory states, "when people revise their habits of mind, they are reinterpreting their sense of self in relation to the world."[86]

What, then, has Abraham learned? With the discussion above, we can conclude that by the end of the saga, Abraham has learned to wholeheartedly trust in God. What began as a journey into the unknown and a leaving behind of everything that is familiar to him in response to the call of an unknown God (Gen 12:1-3) ends with the story of Gen 22:1-19, where the trust is demonstrated with Abraham passing the test, captured by his declaration "Behold, here I am!"—an expression of the new paradigm that "God himself will provide" (Gen 22:8). Rather than an instantaneous and dramatic transformation, what transpires throughout the Abraham saga is what Mezirow calls "incremental transformation," one that involves a "series of transformations in related points of view that culminate in a

[84] Young, "Transformational Learning in Ministry," 332.
[85] Young, "Transformational Learning in Ministry," 333.
[86] Patricia Cranton, *Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning: A Guide to Theory and Practice*, 3rd edition (Stylus Publishing, 2016), 7.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.55997/1003pslxi184a3

transformation of habit or mind."[87] That culminates in the declaration, "Behold, here I am!" It is a declaration that expresses that deep trust in God and in God's promises, which is also a sign of hope. PS

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[87] Mark Nichols and Rosemary Dewerse, "Evaluating Transformative Learning in Theological Education: A Multi-Faceted Approach," *Journal of Adult Theological Education* 7, no. 1 (January 2010): 47, https://doi.org/10.1558/jate.v7i1.44.

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.55997/1003pslxi184a3

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¶ La salue Regina [illegible]

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