From Mt. Moriah to Mom's Basement: Playing *The Binding of Isaac* Video Game through the Reception History of the Aqedah

by

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

In 2011, Edmund McMillen released *The Binding of Isaac (TBOI)* video game that retells the story of Abraham's attempt to sacrifice Isaac on Mt. Moriah. However, the game departs significantly from the biblical account in various ways, such as placing the retelling in a modern setting and switching the parental figure from father to mother. Contemporary scholars have sought to understand *The Binding of Isaac* primarily through the context and intentions of the game's creator. In contrast, my thesis analyzes *TBOI* through the lens of the Aqedah's reception history. Finally, this thesis shows that *TBOI* represents another example of the Aqedah's reception albeit within an unorthodox medium, that both reflects and draws on elements of the broader history of interpretation and demonstrates itself capable of holding multiple viewpoints at the same time. Thus, I show how *TBOI* functions as a *midrash generator* whose narratological and ludological elements encourage and accelerate reinterpretations of the game as it is played.

To do so, the first half of the project surveys a sampling of the Aqedah's reception history (chapter 2) and describes *TBOI's* ludological elements within the broader field of game studies (chapter 3). I begin the second half of my thesis where I analyze *TBOI* in light of the Aqedah's reception history and show how it both resonates with and critiques other interpreters (chapter 4). Finally, I analyze *TBOI's* function as a *midrash generator* that prompts ongoing reinterpretations (chapter 5).

This project adopts an interdisciplinary approach using *TBOI* as a case study for integrating reception history and game studies. This project provides a precedent for exploring both how a reception history approach could be applied to other retellings of religious stories in the video game medium, and a starting point for further development of midrash generation as a concept.

Acknowledgements

I must exercise some restraint here, for if I described in full the number of people and the extent to which they enabled me to complete my research, this section could easily rival the length of the thesis itself. Moving across the country to study in a place with no preestablished friends or family was an intimidating prospect, one that was ultimately made possible by those who stepped in to help and become the community I needed.

First, I would like to thank Jeremy Bergen who graciously received my unorthodox research idea about video games and bible stories. While I was nervous and expected him to politely maneuver me to a different field of study, his enthusiasm and encouragement gave me the motivation to take my own idea seriously. Likewise, the entire Theological Studies department has been extremely supportive, and I deeply appreciated the classes, instruction, and material they presented. To the different cohorts I participated in, you were all wonderful colleagues. A special acknowledgement to Bekah Smoot-Enns who guided me safely through some difficult terms regarding my health and administrative requirements.

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To Pastor Don Penner and the community at Shantz Mennonite Church, thank you for taking pity on us when we were only three weeks away from giving birth to our firstborn child. We were scared, in over our heads, and needed more support than we realized, but we knew we could count on you all if we were ever in need.

I thank my parents, Wes and Esther Friesen, for their love and blessing on this massive undertaking. I thank my sister Whitney for her support and Marcus, we have loved getting to know you and look forward to more in the future. Likewise, my father and mother-in-law, Bill and Betty Kelley never ceased their optimism and excitement toward our big adventure. To my friends both old and new, I thank them for their continued investment in my life.

Now I must thank my thesis supervisor Dr. Derek Suderman, who from the very beginning of my degree was a terrific interlocutor. His dedication, genuine interest, thoughtful critique, and relentless editing always improved my writing and strengthened my arguments. His compassion and patience when I went through periods of deteriorating health gave me the freedom I needed to continue working at my own pace. For this and more, I am deeply grateful for his instruction and guidance.

Last but certainly not least, there is a term used in competitive contexts, no less in video game communities, where someone's skill, performance, or leadership has such an impact that their actions "carry" the team to victory. *My wife, Faith, carried me to victory.* Her enthusiasm for my research and career goals often outpaced my own, and her belief in me was steadfast throughout. The past three years often felt like an uphill battle trying to juggle parenthood, school, new jobs, illness, and community building, but Faith consistently stepped up as a mother and a spouse. When I was discouraged and at low points, she was there with me, and I cannot begin to fathom what would have happened without her constant support. From the bottom of my heart, thank you Faith.

Dedication

This work is dedicated to my daughter Ronen. May we always find reasons to play together.

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Thesis

As the sacred text in numerous religious communities and traditions, the Bible has shaped and been shaped by the countless people who interact with it. Scriptural communities draw from the Bible's amalgamation of different books and genres to facilitate worship in both communal and private settings as well as inspiring spiritual formation in liturgical and devotional practices. By orienting their religious identity around a text, scriptural communities connect deeply to the stories and passages contained within the Bible, demonstrating its ability to inspire communities and retell cherished stories in new ways and contexts. Seeing that scriptural communities place so much value in the biblical text, vigorous hermeneutical debates frequently erupt as readers and practitioners discuss how to read the Bible. These conversations demonstrate the text's importance and reveal how a community's approach to the Bible is crucial for interpretation and application. Its place of prominence in human history is substantiated by its influence in providing literary and cultural anchors to communities of faith.

In a book full of influential stories, the Aqedah of Genesis 22 remains one of the most puzzling and important texts in the Bible.[1] Divine tests, human sacrifice, and the dramatic unfolding of God's promise to bless Abraham and Sarah's offspring have captivated and confused communities of faith throughout history. The story's curious structure and mysterious qualities resist monolithic interpretations and generate as many explanations as readers. The Aqedah also enjoys a long history of representation in the arts as interpretive communities demonstrated their reception of the text through different media including literature, paintings, and other artforms. With the rapid development of visual and communicative technologies in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, new generations of readers have more ways than ever before to express their interpretations.

[1] Ha-Aqedah (Hebrew: הָעֲקֵידָה), Hebrew for "the binding," became the traditional Jewish title of the account in Genesis 22:1-19.

At the same time, the cultural and economic impact of the contemporary video game industry cannot be overstated. Nintendo's most famous mascot, Mario, has attained iconic status similar to Disney's Mickey Mouse or other famous entertainment mascots. Despite the common assumption that video games represent a niche market of entertainment targeted towards children, recent statistics suggest otherwise. In 2019, global video game sales amounted to over forty-three billion dollars, while the video game industry as a whole was projected to be worth over one hundred and fifty-two billion dollars.[2] Three-fourths of American households have at least one gamer, while male and female representation within the gaming community is nearly fifty-fifty. The average age of a gamer is thirty-three, with most having played video games for nearly half their life. As the ESA report states, "Video game players represent a diverse cross-section of the American populace spanning every age, gender, and ethnicity. They live healthy lives, are civically engaged, and are socially active."[3]

Moreover, numerous examples within the medium challenge the notion that video games offer little in the way of substantive or meaningful content. Not only functioning as entertainment devices, video games offer another platform for developers to craft games that draw from the wealth of human culture and experience. Thus, it was inevitable then that video games would address topics related to religious communities and the sacred texts important to them. After co-creating the popular video game *Super Meat Boy*,[4] Edmund McMillen launched a game titled, *The Binding of Isaac (TBOI)* in 2011.[5] In it the player assumes the role of a contemporary boy named Isaac whose mother hears a voice from above that tells her to slaughter her son as an act of love and devotion. Isaac's mother obediently

[2] As the trade association for the video game industry, the *Entertainment Software Association (ESA)* releases an annual report on the video game industry and its user base. See "2019 Essential Facts About the Computer and Video Game Industry," *Entertainment Software Association,* May 2019, accessed December 11, 2019, https://www.theesa.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/2019-Essential-Facts-About-the-Computer-and-Video-Game-Industry.pdf

[3] *Ibid*, 3

[4] Edmund McMillen and Tommy Refenes, *Super Meat Boy* (Team Meat, October 20, 2010).

[5] Edmund McMillen and Florian Himsl, *The Binding of Isaac* (September 28, 2011).

accepts the command and attempts to kill her son, after which the player runs away and later confronts Isaac's mother in a climatic showdown.[6]

This thesis illustrates the long and varied reception history of the Aqedah, revealing how interpretive communities have drawn new insights from the Genesis 22 text. In light of this reception history, I will demonstrate how *The Binding of Isaac* offers innovative ways of engaging with the biblical text as a presentation of the Aqedah through the video game medium.[7] In short, this thesis shows that *TBOI* represents another example of the Aqedah's reception albeit within an unorthodox medium, that both reflects and draws on elements of the broader reception history and demonstrates itself capable of holding a multiplicity of interpretive viewpoints at the same time. Thus, I will show how *TBOI* functions as a *midrash generator* whose narratological and ludological elements encourage and accelerate reinterpretations of the game as it is played.[8]

1.1 Methodological Approaches

In a manner similar to historical criticism, contemporary scholarship on *The Binding of Isaac* video game focuses on the intent of the creator as integral to the proper interpretation of the game's content. Since this thesis builds on theories of reception history, I will briefly describe this methodology and its relation to other approaches in biblical studies, and historical criticism in particular. By adopting

[6] Released on September 28, 2011 to the digital distribution platform, Steam, *The Binding of Isaac* has enjoyed much success over the past nine years. After releasing an expansion called *Wrath of the Lamb* (May 28, 2012), McMillen partnered with publishing company Nicalis Inc. to release an upgraded version called *The Binding of Isaac: Rebirth.* See Edmund McMillen, *The Binding of Isaac: Rebirth,* Nicalis Inc. (November 4, 2014). Additionally, McMillen released two content packs called "Afterbirth" (October 30, 2015) and "Afterbirth+" (January 3, 2017). This project does not include the recently announced, "Repentance" expansion due later in 2021. The game is playable on Windows, Linux, iOS, Android, PlayStation 4, PlayStation Vita, Xbox One, Nintendo Wii U, Nintendo 3DS, and the Nintendo Switch.

[7] To avoid confusing the video game with the biblical account, I will italicize the title or abbreviation of the game and refer to the textual account as either the Aqedah or Genesis 22.

[8] As an interdisciplinary project, I draw from terminology used in both biblical studies and game studies. Ludology (from the Latin, "ludus" referring to *game* or *play*) refers to the mechanical elements of a game the player interacts with directly. Narratology refers to the narrative or story built into a game to provide context for the player's actions. See 1.3 for more details.

reception theory, my project highlights key issues that historical criticism or an authorial intent approach miss by passing over the reception history of the Aqedah.

1.1.1 Historical Criticism and Author Centered Approaches

Reception theory developed as a response to historical criticism, a methodology applied to the interpretation of biblical texts. Historical criticism attempts to describe the origins of the text by reconstructing its various contextual elements such as author, date, setting, language, and geographic location. By reconstructing its history and how it originated, historical criticism seeks to provide the text's original meaning as intended by the author.[9]

However, the method is not without its limitations. First, while historical criticism aims to reconstruct the past and provide the original meaning of any text or artifact, at best, historical criticism can only offer an incomplete picture of what the past truly looked like. No one can know with absolute certainty whether the image created by the historical critic represents an accurate portrayal of the conditions that led to that text's formation or original reception. Rather than transporting the reader to the time and place of the text, historical criticism creates something akin to a museum exhibit that interpreters walk by and engage at a distance.[10] Second, historical criticism bypasses interpretations of the text that do not prioritize or seek the aforementioned original meaning, and thereby skips over whole traditions of biblical interpretation in the process. Finally, by prioritizing the original meaning of

[9]Historical criticism has several merits. First, the methodology attempts to preserve the original voice and culture of the text. Second, historical criticism helps reorient meandering interpreters back to the text and reminds them to see the Bible as an artifact existing in history. Finally, historical criticism highlights the texts contextual origins helping contemporary interpreters consider what the original author and audience had in mind when writing and reading the text. This not only reveals ancient perspectives that potentially carried values and intentions quite different from our own, but helps contemporary readers see how the text was passed down to them and whether their own values and intentions with the text resonate with the ancients. For a detailed discussion of this, see David Paul Parris, *Reception Theory and Biblical Hermeneutics* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2009), 11.

[10] Historical criticism's preservation of the original voice also reinforces a displacement of time by maintaining a gap between reader and text. As will be discussed later, theories of reception history not only bridge the gap between reader and text but discuss the text with passersby along the way to the text.

the text and the context in which that text came about, historical criticism privileges those with access to the tools and resources necessary for proper interpretation.[11]

Two academic papers have recently been published on *The Binding of Isaac* video game. Frank Bosman and Archibald van Wieringen's "I have Faith in Thee, Lord," and Rebekah Welton's "Isaac Rebound."[12] Both compare McMillen's adaptation with the biblical story and so contribute to a conversation regarding the interpretive value video games offer biblical texts. Similar to a historical critical approach in biblical studies, their methodologies emphasize the author or creator's view of the game and this limits the interpretive potential of the game to McMillen's vision

1.2 Theory of Reception History

In contrast to Bosman, Wieringen, and Welton, whose previous work has emphasized authorial intent, my thesis aims to broaden that interpretive conversation by utilizing a methodology derived from reception history to analyze the Aqedah text of Genesis 22 and *The Binding of Isaac* video game. Unlike the reconstructions of historical criticism or examinations of the author's motivation, reception theory analyzes the history of interpretation.[13] Emphasizing the history of interpretation naturally recognizes the value of tradition in hermeneutics, where other methodologies developed under Enlightenment assumptions of objectivity and rationalist empiricism do not.[14] Reception assumes a neutral stance towards the reader's bias and accepts the reader's interpretive act as performance within their specific "historical horizon," the place and time representing the sum of collected experiences and biases

[11] *Ibid,* 11-12.

[12] Frank Bosman and Archibald van Wieringen, "I Have Faith in Thee, Lord: Criticism of Religion and Child Abuse in the Video Game the Binding of Isaac," *Religions,* vol. 9, no. 4 (Spring 2018): 133–, accessed April 1, 2020, https://doi:10.3390/rel9040133, and Rebekah Welton, "Isaac Rebounds: A Video Game Retelling of the Aqedah." *Journal for the study of the Old Testament,* vol. 44, no. 3 (March 2020): 293–314, accessed April 2, 2020, https://DOI: 10.1177/0309089219862803.

[13] Parris, *Reception Theory and Biblical Hermeneutics,* xvii.

[14] *Ibid,* 2.

shaping their reading of a text.[15] Not only will this project analyze the reception history of the Aqedah to understand *TBOI's* place amongst other interpretations, the lens of reception history demonstrates *TBOI's* ability to encourage and accelerate the interpretive experience of the player.

Key contributors throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries shaped what has come to be known as reception theory in contemporary scholarship. While this thesis aspires to emulate the early form of reception by resisting a formal methodological framework, I acknowledge the contributions of various reception-based scholars and will utilize helpful concepts as necessary.

Hans-George Gadamer laid the foundations for reception theory by providing an alternative to prevailing methods in biblical studies. Gadamer described an interpretive process which favoured the reader's interpretation over the author's original intent.[16] Building on his work, Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser both helped solidify reception into a literary methodology, popularizing terms such as the "horizon of expectation" and "repertoire" respectively.[17] Of particular importance for this thesis, Stuart Hall then applied reception theory to television and so applied reception theory beyond literary media.[18] Likewise, Susanne Eichner created a unified reception methodology that applied to film, television, and video games.[19] Thus, Eichner and Hall inspired the approach I use for my thesis.

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[15] *Ibid,* 5.

[16] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* trans. Joel. Weinsheimer, and Donald G. Marshall (London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic), 2013

[17] Hans Robert Jauss, "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory," *New Literary History,* vol. 2, no. 1, trans. Elizabeth Benzinger (1970): 7–37, accessed Fall 2019, http://doi:10.2307/468585 and Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press), 1978.

[18] Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79* (New York and London: Routledge Ltd, 1980), 117-128.

[19] Susanne Eichner, *Agency and Media Reception: Experiencing Video Games, Film, and Television*, vol. 3 (Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien, 2014), Adobe PDF eBook.

1.3 Game Studies

Game Studies represents the recent academic pursuit of providing a critical and theoretical examination of video games. Given the diversity of video games and the kinds of audiences they attract, Game Studies, has developed numerous sub-fields to address the expanding medium. After only a few decades of research, the field has already contributed an array of meaningful work describing the nuances of video game design, industry practice, and the act of playing video games. This thesis draws from the work of several scholars from Game Studies and related fields provide helpful terminological descriptions and frameworks crucial to the goals of this thesis, especially in recognizing *The Binding of Isaac* as a *midrash generator* that encourages and accelerates the process of reinterpretation while playing a game.

Johann Huizinga, whose description of the magic circle practically catalyzed academic thought about games in western society provides the foundational work for Game Studies.[20] Subsequently, many scholars proposed modifications to the magic circle paradigm. For this project's goals, Jesper Juul's definition of games and Katie Salen Tekinbaş and Eric Zimmerman's definition of play as the "space of possibility" provide extraordinary potential to connect game studies and biblical reception together.[21] Finally, Rachel Wagner proves vital for this thesis since her work created the potential to link biblical interpretation and gameplay together.[22]

Finally, a significant debate erupted regarding whether or not stories or narrative elements could exist in a video game comparable to other media such as literature or film. This debate generally divided scholars into two camps with those in favour of applying literary methodologies to video games falling

[20] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (London: Routledge, 2000)

[21] Katie Salen Tekinbaş and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003) and Jesper Juul, "The Game, the Player, the World: Looking for a Heart of Gameness," in *Level Up: Digital Games Research Conference Proceedings*, ed. Marinka Copier and Joost Raessens (Utrecht: Utrecht University, 2003). https://www.jesperjuul.net/text/gameplayerworld/.

[22] Rachel Wagner, *Godwired: Religion, Ritual, and Virtual Reality* (Abingdon, Oxon; Routledge, 2012).

into the 'Narratology' camp, whereas those who preferred to study games purely by their mechanical elements fell into the 'Ludology' camp. While heated debates frequently occurred in the early years of the field, scholarship has stabilized recently and continues to include both perspectives. This project assumes that narrative in games can exist in medium specific ways and that they provide opportunities to uniquely communicate stories and themes.

1.4 Chapter Outline

Having established the goals and methodology of this thesis, I will outline the following chapters and their contributions to the argument as a whole. This thesis contains six chapters, four of which represent the main body of my argument with the other two making up the introductory and concluding chapters. The content divides neatly into two halves with chapters 2 and 3 functioning primarily as description and chapters 4 and 5 providing analysis of *TBOI* itself.

As an examination of the Aqedah's reception, I intend to demonstrate a range of interpretive perspectives regarding a single text across the millennia in chapter 2. By choosing certain interpreters from within the Jewish and Christian traditions and by including both notable and more obscure figures around the table of interpretive traditions, I demonstrate the diversity of interpretations for the text's reception history. After discussing the development of reception theory of some of its key contributors, I move chronologically and topically through typological readings from early Patristic writers and aggadic midrash of Rabbinical Judaism; commentaries of the reformers Martin Luther and Jean Calvin, and the ethical treatises of Enlightenment scholars Immanuel Kant and Søren Kierkegaard.[23] Jumping to the mid-

[23] By specifying aggadic midrash, this thesis strives to avoid oversimplifications that fail to distinguish the range of hermeneutical work within the rabbinical tradition that has endured for centuries. When referencing midrash, it is important to recognize when one utilizes aggadic (tales and stories that expound on the narrative of the Tanakh in order to teach an ethical lesson) or halakhic (legal teachings that center on the commandments to clarify religious practice) midrash. This thesis draws from aggadic midrashim as the point of comparison for my description of midrash generation. For a brief description of the distinction between aggadic and halakhic midrash, see Section 5.1. See also Daniel Maoz, "Haggadic Midrash and the Hermeneutics of Reveal-Ment," *Biblical*

twentieth century, the Aqedah's reception by Jews during and after the Holocaust provide an insightful look into the changing interpretive landscape. From there, interpreters express growing concern over the presentation of God's character in the Bible, including divine behaviour in the Aqedah narrative. Concluding the chapter, a survey of recent feminist interpretations of the Aqedah demonstrates the significance of shifting the focus from characters the text deemed pivotal to others who seem strangely absent from the story.

Having provided a sampling of interpreters from the Aqedah's reception history, chapter 3 introduces Game Studies, where I discuss "game" and "play" and then move on to a discussion of *The Binding of Isaac's* genre as a "roguelike" game. I explain how the different elements and distinctive traits of a roguelike game differentiate them from other games and provide a unique play experience. In doing so, this chapter lays the groundwork for the analysis to follow.

In chapter 4, I analyze *TBOI* in light of the reception history discussed in chapter 2. While recent scholarship on *TBOI* has opted to focus on the creator's motivations and intentions for the game, examining *TBOI* in light of the Aqedah's reception history described in chapter 2 demonstrates both the commonalities and differences *TBOI* shares with other traditional sources. Even though *TBOI* reflects an unorthodox medium, I show how playing the game in light of past reception widens its interpretive potential, just as it draws from a far wider interpretive tradition than simply the source text of the Aqedah itself. Finally, this chapter utilizes the "religion in gaming" lens as described by Rachel Wagner.

Building on Wagner's comparison between ritual and play, in chapter 5 I expand her conception of midrash and analyze *TBOI's* ludological and narratological elements to show how *TBOI* generates new interpretations as it is played. Importantly, I describe three separate ways *TBOI* generates

Theology Bulletin, vol. 37, no. 2 (May 2007): 69–77, accessed November 19, 2020, https://DOI: 10.1177/01461079070370020401.

interpretations and liken them to similar interpretive processes of other artifacts such as sacred texts. Importantly, this chapter uses a different lens from the previous one, instead analyzing *TBOI* through the "gaming as religion" lens.

Finally, in the concluding chapter I briefly summarize and discuss the implications for this project by explaining how I used *TBOI* as a case study to contrast author centered approaches with player centered approaches as the key methodological insight. While the Aqedah remains an imposing and challenging text, readers continue to interpret it within their own contexts. Likewise, the video game medium continues to utilize religious worldviews to recontextualize the stories and mythologies they attempt to retell. I suggest that a reception history approach spearheaded in this project could be applied to other games as well and that this kind of engagement within the video game medium provides an opportunity to stimulate ongoing conversations about the intersection between religion and video games.

Chapter 2: The Reception History of the Aqedah

As various scriptural communities interpreted the Aqedah over time, they have read the text in unique ways and often came to different conclusions. This chapter examines the reception history of Genesis 22, providing a brief survey of the Aqedah in Jewish and Christian traditions. This sampling highlights key developments to demonstrate the interpretive potential of the text as it has been read over two and a half millennia. At the outset, this chapter will provide a brief overview of the development of reception as a methodology and key influencers relevant to this project.

2.1 Methodological Influences

Reception theory initially emerged from the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer in his magnum opus *Truth and Method*.[24] Interested in hermeneutics, Gadamer pushed back against assertions made by scholars such as Friedrich Schleiermacher that a methodology could lead one to an objectively correct interpretation by prioritizing the authorial intent of the text. Instead, Gadamer set out to describe what people do when they interpret, engaging in conversation with their tradition in what he called "historically effected consciousness."[25] Importantly for this project's focus on the video game medium, Gadamer refers to the interaction between artwork and recipient as "play." The implication of both a player and something that is played leads to two significant observations; first, a piece of art does not exist self-sufficiently without a participant interacting with it, just as a game does not function without someone playing with it; second, just as the act of play leads to different outcomes within a game, play as interpretation means that we should expect divergent interpretations of a text because the conditions of play within one's historically effected consciousness constantly change.[26]

[24] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*.
[25] Parris, *Reception Theory and Biblical Hermeneutics,* 110.
[26] *Ibid,* 83, 85, 88.

Credited with the formal establishment of reception theory, Hans Robert Jauss then applied Gadamer's insights to the study of medieval literature and argued for the use of reception theory in academic study. As any individual person lives in a concrete place and time in history, there exist certain boundaries and influences on their perception that Jauss referred to as the "horizon of expectation." By recognizing one's horizon and discovering how it interacts with the horizons of other interpreters or the artifact itself, one discovers how their horizon influences the kinds of questions they ask when approaching an artifact and what kind of answers they could expect. Likewise, the horizon helps us understand our questions in relation to other interpreters, both past and present, and why we come to a text with different questions and receive different answers.[27]

While not as prominent as Jauss or Gadamer, Wolfgang Iser also helpfully described the interpretive process and how readers drew from their "repertoire," the collection of experiences, knowledge, and prejudices that a reader used to "fill in the gaps" of missing information or inferred experience in the text.[28]

While reception theory was previously applied mainly to literature, Stuart Hall adapted it to the television medium. Hall described how producers and audiences communicated and received messages where producers encode messages or construct coded meanings into pieces of media to audiences who then decode or interpret the coded meaning and come to various conclusions about the message. His Encoding/Decoding formulation demonstrates the first major shift from literary to television media in reception studies.[29]

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[27] Jauss, "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory."

[28] Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*.

[29] Hall described three decoding positions the audience takes upon receiving the encoded message. First, audiences can adopt the Dominant/Hegemonic position where the interpreter takes the view of the producer accepting the message exactly the way it was encoded. Second, audiences can take a Negotiated Position where the encoded message is recognized with aspects of it accepted or rejected depending on the intricacies of the message and circumstances of the interpreter. Finally, audiences can take the Oppositional Position, where interpreters recognize their view as contrary to the dominant message. Having received the encoded message

In the most recent scholarship, Susanne Eichner attempted to articulate a universal reception theory across film, television, and video game media centering on her formulation of "Agency." Often used to describe the kind of involvement a player acquires in connection to a video game, Eichner demonstrated how Agency functions unilaterally across film, television, and video games despite assumptions of passive viewership from film and television audiences.[30] By demonstrating the possible applications of reception across media, Hall and Eichner lay the foundations for my thesis.

2.2 Reception History of the Aqedah

The Christian and Jewish interpreters selected for this project were chosen for three reasons. First, they show how certain hermeneutical approaches developed into dominant or influential readings, giving context and reasons for understanding the text a certain way. Second, they provide helpful comparisons to the game. Finally, by choosing from both Jewish and Christian interpreters from multiple time periods that respond to the text from their own contexts, I demonstrate how the Aqedah resisted monolithic readings of the text. While some might argue uniformly for a specific interpretation, this has not stopped others from offering their own as the text has been reinterpreted and understood differently over time. This diversity allows *The Binding of Isaac* to sit at the table of interpreters, despite its unorthodox presentation and medium.

2.2.1 Patristics and Genesis Rabbah

Falling under the larger umbrella term of figural interpretation that also includes allegory, typological interpretations mark the first step in surveying the Aqedah's reception history.[31] Typology

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from the Producer, their Oppositional Position compels the interpreter to reject the Producer's encoded meaning entirely. See Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79* (New York and London: Routledge Ltd, 1980), 117-128.

[30] Susanne Eichner, *Agency and Media Reception: Experiencing Video Games, Film, and Television*, vol. 3 (Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien, 2014), Adobe PDF eBook.

[31] There is debate as to whether "figural" is an appropriate umbrella term for both typology and allegory. While some scholars believe that the two terms were used almost interchangeably in the early church, others see serious distinctions between the two that make it problematic to generalize both into a larger category of "figural"

recognizes patterns or types from earlier events, characters, and places, which are then charged with symbolic significance that manifest in future parallels. Described in one sense as "scripture interpreting scripture," typological interpretations also encourage readers to make symbolic connections between earlier and later sections of the Bible. Typological readings are also important as they portray God as at work in history. Examples of typology exist both in Christian and Jewish traditions.[32]

Early patristic writers often interpreted the Aqedah typologically and discerned patterns they likened to the coming of Christ and Trinitarian theology.[33] They interpreted the Aqedah typologically through the particular events of the story. After Abraham had been told to sacrifice his son Isaac in a vision, Abraham took him and two servants to Mt. Moriah. Both Origen and Caesarius of Arles found significance in the statement concerning the third day in Genesis 22:4. "'Origen: The third day, however, is always applied to mysteries. For also when the people had departed from Egypt, they offer sacrifice to God on the third day and are purified on the third day. And the third day is the day of the Lord's resurrection. Many other mysteries also are included within this day.' Homilies on Genesis 8.4."[34] Like Origen, Caesarius of Arles reflected on the third day as one of mystery and alluded to events in Jewish history that occurred on the third day, such as the three day cycles of holy events at Sinai or Joshua's

readings. Brent E. Parker has suggested merging typology and allegory into a new category called "Acts of Revelation" to reflect how these methodologies require a certain degree of spiritual insight or revelation to interpret. The use of figural in this project is meant more as convenient shorthand, rather than staking a claim on either side of the debate. See Brent E. Parker, "Typology and Allegory: Is There a Distinction? A Brief Examination of Figural Reading," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology,* vol. 21, no. 1 (January 1, 2017): 57–83.

[32] In his section on typology, Soulen cites the work of Michael Fishbane who categorized different kinds of Jewish typology into "Cosmological-Historical Typologies," "Retrojective Typologies," "Projective Typologies," "Typologies of a Spatial Nature," and "Typologies of a Biographical Nature." Soulen then applies these categories to New Testament typological interpretation. See Richard N. Soulen, *Sacred Scripture: A Short History of Interpretation,* 1st ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 62-75, and Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford, Oxfordshire: Clarendon Press, 1985), 353-375.

[33] Mark Sheridan, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Genesis 12-50* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002).

[34] Fathers of the Church: A New Translation (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1947-) FC 71:140, quoted in Sheridan, *Ancient Christian Commentary: Gen. 12-50,* 103.

crossing into the promised land as a foreshadowing of the Trinity.[35] The third day of Abraham's journey was significant to both these writers because of the way they prefigured other significant events in Biblical history that also occurred on the third day. For both Origen and Caesarius, the third day is most significant because it relates to Christ's resurrection from the dead on the third day.

Another way the patristic writers read the Aqedah typologically was in its location by linking the site to the same place as Jesus' crucifixion. "'Caesarius of Arles: Listen to another mystery. Blessed Jerome, a priest, wrote that he knew most certainly from the ancient Jews and elders that Christ our Lord was afterward crucified in the place where Isaac was offered.' Sermon 84.5."[36]

Finally, and most consistently noted, patristic writers saw a typological connection between the different characters in the Aqedah story and those related to the death and resurrection of Christ. The writers specifically understood Isaac to prefigure Christ, as Origen observed that Isaac carried the wood for the offering just as Christ carried his cross to Golgotha.[37] Caesarius of Arles wrote of both Abraham and Isaac as types, suggesting they represented the first and second persons of the Trinity respectively.[38] Clement of Alexandria also read Abraham and Isaac typologically, agreeing with Caesarius that Isaac was son to Abraham as Christ was to God the Father. Clement explained Isaac's joy as a prefiguration of the

[35]"'Caesarius of Arles: The fact that he arrived at the place of sacrifice on the third day is shown to represent the mystery of the Trinity. That the third day should be accepted in the sense of a promise or mystery of the Trinity is found frequently in the sacred Books. In Exodus we read, 'We will go a three days' journey into the wilderness.' Again, upon arriving at Mount Sinai it is said to the people, 'Be sanctified, and be ready for the third day.' When Joshua was about to cross the Jordan, he admonished the people to be ready on the third day. Moreover, our Lord arose on the third day. We have mentioned all this because blessed Abraham on the third day came to the place that the Lord had showed him.' Sermon 84.2." Fathers of the Church, FC 47:16-17, quoted in Sheridan, *Ancient Christian Commentary: Gen. 12-50,* 103.

[36] FC 47:18-19. Fathers of the Church, quoted in Sheridan, *Ancient Christian Commentary: Gen. 12-50*, 111.

[37] "'Origen: That Isaac carries on himself 'the wood for the burnt offering' is a figure, because Christ also 'himself carried his own cross,' and yet to carry 'the wood for the burnt offering' is the duty of a priest. He therefore becomes victim and priest…' Homilies on Genesis 8.6." Fathers of the Church, FC 71:140-41, quoted in Sheridan, *Ancient Christian Commentary: Gen. 12-50,* 105.

[38] "'Caesarius of Arles: When Abraham offered his son Isaac, he was a type of God the Father, while Isaac prefigured our Lord and Savior.' Sermon 84.2." Fathers of the Church, FC 47:16, quoted in Sheridan, *Ancient Christian Commentary: Gen. 12-50,* 102.

joy all believers experience due to the saving work of God.[39] Even the Ram that was provided as a replacement for Isaac was considered a prefiguration of Christ.[40]

John Chrysostom offers a summative conclusion to the typological interpretations of the patristic writers, suggesting that the prefiguration of Jesus within the Hebrew scriptures was necessary and pointed to the "superiority of the truth."

> Chrysostom: All this, however, happened as a type of the cross. Hence Christ too said to the Jews, 'Your father Abraham rejoiced in anticipation of seeing my day; he saw it and was delighted. How did he see it if he lived so long before? In type, in shadow... You see, it was necessary that the truth be sketched out ahead of time in shadow. Notice, I ask you, dearly beloved, how everything was prefigured in shadow … Up to this point there is shadow, but now the truth of things is shown to be more excellent … Do you see the superiority of the truth? Do you see how shadow is, on the one hand, and truth, on the other? Homilies on Genesis 47:14.[41]

Similar to the Christian tradition, Jacob Neusner's English translation of Genesis Rabbah (400 CE) notes several instances in the Aqedah where the Rabbis demonstrate the life of the patriarchs as

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[39] "'Clement of Alexandria: Isaac is another type too … He was a son, just as is the Son (he is the son of Abraham; Christ, of God). He was a victim, as was the Lord, but his sacrifice was not consummated, while the Lord's was … Isaac rejoiced for a mystical reason, to prefigure the joy with which the Lord has filled us, in saving us from destruction through his blood.' Christ The Educator 1.5.23." Fathers of the Church, FC 23:23, quoted in Sheridan, *Ancient Christian Commentary: Gen. 12-50*, 105.

[40] "'Origen: We said above, I think, that Isaac represented Christ. But this ram no less also seems to represent Christ. Now it is worthwhile to know how both are appropriate to Christ, both Isaac, who is not slain, and the ram which is slain…' Homilies on Genesis 8.9." Fathers of the Church, FC 71:145, quoted in Sheridan, *Ancient Christian Commentary: Gen. 12-50,* 109 and "'Ambrose: Let us discuss the meaning of the mystery for a little while. God showed a ram sticking fast with its horns; the ram is the Word, full of tranquility and restraint and patience.' Letters to Bishops 21." Fathers of the Church, FC 26:115-16, quoted in Sheridan, *Ancient Christian Commentary: Gen. 12-50,* 110 and "'Ephrem the Syrian: The mountain spit out the tree and the tree the ram. In the ram that hung in the tree and had become the sacrifice in the place of Abraham's son, there might be depicted the day of him who was to hang upon the wood like a ram and was to taste death for the sake of the whole world.' Commentary on Genesis 20.3." Fathers of the Church, FC 91:169, quoted in Sheridan, *Ancient Christian Commentary: Gen. 12-50,* 110.

[41] Fathers of the Church, FC 87:21-22, quoted in, Sheridan, *Ancient Christian Commentary: Gen. 12-50,* 110.

prefiguration's of the pillars of Israelite religion.[42] Examining the aggadic midrash of Genesis Rabbah reveals how the Rabbis made typological connections through specific wording paying close attention to the grammatical structure and consonantal text in the Hebrew Bible.[43] In part, this linguistic approach distinguishes Jewish interpretations from Christian readings.

For instance, the Rabbis showed how God's call to Abraham prefigured that of Moses the lawgiver of Israel. "'And he said to him, 'Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am'" (Gen 22:1) …" "Moses for his part also said, 'Here I am' (Ex. 3:4). 'Here I am, ready for the priesthood, here I am, ready for the monarchy.'" Because both Abraham and Moses responded with, "Here I am" to the divine call, their words merit a typological connection.[44]

Second, the Rabbis observed that the Aqedah occurred on Mt. Moriah, the same location as the Temple. As the center of worship and the dwelling place of God, the Temple's location was of utmost importance and the subject of much debate.[45] While the Samaritans and the Rabbis agreed that the location of the Aqedah established the site of the Temple, they disagreed where the event took place. Where the Samaritans claimed that the Aqedah took place on Mt. Gerezim, Rabbi Hiyya the Elder and

[42] Jacob Neusner, *Genesis Rabbah: The Judaic Commentary to the Book of Genesis: A New American Translation*, Brown Judaic Studies, vol. 2, no. 105 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1985).

[43] Typological readings demonstrate how some rabbis used stories to connect different texts together thereby reinforcing the notion that aggadic midrash goes beyond the assumption that it developed solely as an exegetical practice to address "problems" in the text. In this way, aggadic midrash offers a broader interpretation of the biblical story. For the distinction between aggadic and halakhic midrash and the significance of the former for this thesis, see Section 5.1. See also Devora Steinmetz, "Beyond the Verse: Midrash Aggadah as Interpretation of Biblical Narrative," *AJS Review,* vol. 30, no. 2 (November 2006): 325–345, accessed November 14, 2020, https://DOI: 10.1017/S036400940600016X.

[44] Neusner observes, "The upshot is to link Abraham to Moses and to show how the biography of the patriarch prefigures the life of the founder of the nation. Since Moses is usually represented as meek and mild, the comparison presents a certain irony." *Ibid,* 271.

[45] Isaac Kalimi, "'Go, I Beg You, Take Your Beloved Son and Slay Him!' The Binding of Isaac in Rabbinic Literature and Thought," *Review of Rabbinic Judaism,* vol. 13, no. 1 (2010), accessed August 4, 2020, https://DOI: 10.1163/157180310X502377

Rabbi Yannai insisted on connecting the etymology of Moriah to the Temple to strengthen their claim for Jerusalem as the site for God's Temple.[46]

Third, where some Christian Patristic writers read this passage as prefiguring Christ, Rabbi Ishmael believed the Aqedah prefigured the Exodus. "Let the sword held in the hand of Abraham, as it is said, 'Then Abraham put forth his hand and took the knife to slay his son' (Gen. 22:10) serve to counteract the sword taken by Pharaoh in hand: 'I will draw my sword, my hand shall destroy them (Ex. 15:9)." Similarly, Neusner suggests Abraham's actions prefigure Israel's salvation in the Exodus account here, "In response to each gesture of Abraham, God produced a counterpart in saving Israel from its enemies."[47]

Finally, the Rabbis of Genesis Rabbah took "the third day" from Genesis 22:4 to prefigure several things. Like the third day prefiguring Christ's resurrection for the patristic writers, the Rabbis interpreted the third day to refer to the resurrection of the dead in general, citing Jonah's three-day experience in the fish and Hosea's prophecy of God raising Israel on the third day.[48]

While he does not use the terminology, Neusner observes how some Rabbis related the actual binding to both horizontal and vertical typological patterns.[49] For instance, "R. Hinenah bar Isaac said, 'All the time that Abraham was binding his son below, the Holy One, blessed be he, was binding the

[46] Neusner, *Genesis Rabbah,* 272-273.

[47] *Ibid,* 275.

[48] "On the third day of Jonah: 'And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights' (Jonah 2:1), and "On the third day of the resurrection of the dead: 'After two days he will revive us, on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live in his presence' (Hos. 6:2)." *Ibid,* 277.

[49] Brent E. Parker describes the difference between two kinds of typology. The most common are "horizontal" typologies that track patterns across time. However, a second and rarer form of typology, known as "vertical" typology also exists. This refers to a kind of typology that interprets certain divinely inspired earthly patterns as correlating with similar heavenly ones. While horizontal typology concerns itself in history, vertical typology regards relation to the divine. See Brent E. Parker, "Typology and Allegory: Is There a Distinction? A Brief Examination of Figural Reading," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology,* vol. 21, no. 1 (January 1, 2017), 61, accessed December 3, 2019, https://equip.sbts.edu/publications/journals/journal-of-theology/sbjt-211-spring-2017/typology-allegory-distinction-brief-examination-figural-reading/.

[heavenly] Princes of the nations above. [Hence the merit of the binding of Isaac served to protect Israel from the angelic patrons of the nations at large. They were bound and made powerless by God.] But they did not remain so."[50] In effect, Abraham and Isaac's actions earthly actions connect to corresponding heavenly ones and so exhibit a vertical typology. But the heavenly binding is only temporary, as it was with Isaac, and the duration for binding these "princes" represents a horizontal typological framework. "For when the Israelites separated themselves [from God] in the time of Jeremiah, the Holy One, blessed be he, said, 'Do you think that those bonds still endure?"[51] Isaac's temporary bonds prefigure Israel's rebellion towards God and the release of the princes who were prevented from oppressing Israel.

As stated before, typological interpretations reveal cyclical and reiterated patterns that emerge as history unfolds and charge events with significance as the past and present merge together. Reading the Aqedah typologically demonstrates the significance for both Jewish and Christian traditions as it foreshadows the incarnation or the Trinity in Christianity or the Torah, Temple, and peoplehood in Judaism. In the following interpreters the typological pattern of cycles and foreshadowing makes way to a more linear understanding of the biblical story and God's relation to it.

2.2.2 Obedience: Luther and Calvin

As fathers of the European reformation, Martin Luther (1483-1546) and Jean Calvin (1509-1564) wrote extensive commentaries on the Bible that reveal their interpretive tendencies and emphases, especially in how they differ from their ancient predecessors.[52] Luther, and especially Calvin, distanced themselves from typological readings of the Aqedah, preferring to identify the tension in the apparent

[50] Neusner, *Genesis Rabbah,* 281.
[51] *Ibid,* 282.
[52] Jean Calvin, *A Commentary on Genesis,* trans. John King (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1975); Martin Luther, *Luther's Works: Lectures on Genesis Chapters 21-25,* vol. 4, trans. Jaroslav Pelikan (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1955).

contradiction between God's promise to Abraham through Isaac (Gen. 17:1-9; 20) and his command to immolate Isaac on Moriah. While Luther and Calvin each offer their unique perspective on the passage, both agree that no matter the obstacle, the promises of God will remain requiring only that God's people exercise their faith and obedience to endure trials and receive blessing.

Luther spends a great deal of time contextualizing the Aqedah, lending to his strengths as a storyteller and describes the trial's significance as reflective of Abraham's stature among the saints.[53] Luther empathizes with Abraham's plight, detailing the anxieties of such a trial with emotive language and further speculation.[54] However Luther sees the primary tension in the passage as the promise of heirs through Isaac and the contradiction created in sacrificing Isaac. Abraham's anxiety comes not only at the loss of his son, but also in the consequences of God's promises remaining unfulfilled. According to Luther, the fulfillment of the promise carried high stakes, since the sacrifice of Isaac would not only be the loss of his heir, but it would also undo the miraculous birth of Isaac to elderly parents and God's promise in Genesis 12 and Genesis 21:12 to give Abraham descendants.[55] Finally, Abraham's profession of faith in Genesis 15:6 links his righteousness to his continued belief in the promise.[56]

For Luther, the Aqedah represents the case study par excellence of faith in God's promises. The Christian must imitate the degree of Abraham and Isaac's obedience, not necessarily their actions.[57] To Luther, the Aqedah story holds biblical, pastoral, and theological implications. First, Luther states simply that this "temptation" of Abraham represented a seeming contradiction in Holy Scripture. How should Abraham proceed given the contradictory state God has put him in? Luther sees the solution as

[53] Luther, *Luther's Works,* 91.
[54] *Ibid,* 110.
[55] Luther speculates that Isaac's birth gave Abraham much joy. *Ibid,* 93.
[56] *Ibid,* 112-113.
[57] "Accordingly, this extraordinary example of Abraham should not be dragged along as a precedent to be followed; but we should imitate his obedience and his faith in the resurrection, in the killing of sin and death which takes place in Abraham and in his son. Then let everyone, in his own place and station, remain in the same faith, and let everyone obey God." *Ibid,* 124.

persistent obedience to God's commandment, with the assurance that obedience leads to blessing.[58] Second, Luther uses the Aqedah as an opportunity to provide pastoral counseling and advice to Christians who experience similar temptations. Luther anticipates the readers' various inclinations and shortcomings that might draw them away from God and compels them towards imitation of the obedience of Abraham and Isaac.[59] Finally, Luther compares Isaac's obedience to Christ and uses the Aqedah to expound upon doctrine concerning the resurrection of the dead.[60] He refers to Hebrews 11 to argue that Abraham and Isaac both understood that's God promise would be vindicated through Isaac's resurrection should the sacrifice be successful. Finally, Luther uses the resurrection of the dead to point towards God's plan of bringing eternal life to his people, in a grand overarching plan that includes both the Old and New Testaments.[61]

While not as longwinded as Luther, Calvin writes similarly as his reformer counterpart. He sets the scene with evocative language to empathize with Abraham's trial and magnify Abraham's display of faith.[62] Again, Calvin speculates on the thoughts of the characters and harnesses them to train the reader to bear the same mindset as the patriarchs.[63] Furthermore, Calvin finds the dramatic tension of

[58] "I have stated what Abraham's trial was, namely, the contradiction of the promise… And although Isaac has to be sacrificed, he nevertheless has no doubt whatever that the promise will be fulfilled, even if he does not know the manner of its fulfillment. Yet he is also alarmed and terrified. For what else could the father do? Nevertheless, he clings to the promise that at some time Isaac will have descendants." *Ibid,* 95.

[59] "When some physical affliction besets us, our conscience is soon at hand, and the devil torments it by assembling all the circumstances. Therefore a troubled heart looks about and considers how it may have offended God most. This leads to murmuring against God and to the greatest trial, hatred of God… This trial cannot be overcome and is far too great to be understood by us. For there is a contradiction with which God contradicts Himself. It is impossible for the flesh to understand this; for it inevitably concludes either that God is lying – and this is blasphemy – or that God hates me – and that leads to despair … But we must hold fast to the promise and maintain that, just as the text states about Abraham, we are tempted by God, not because He really wants this, but because He wants to find out whether we love Him above all things and are able to bear Him when He is angry as we gladly bear Him when He is beneficent and makes promises." *Ibid,* 92-93.

[60] "The son is obedient, like a sheep for the slaughter, and he does not open his mouth. He thought: 'Let the will of the Lord be done,' because he was brought up to conduct himself properly and to be obedient to his father. With the exception of Christ we have no similar example of obedience." *Ibid,* 114.

[61] *Ibid,* 112-113, 118-119.

[62] Calvin, *Genesis,* 561, 564.

[63] *Ibid,* 563.

the story in the contradiction between God's promise and the commandment to kill Isaac. He also describes the consequences for breaking the promise, implying that Abraham's awareness of his plight was far reaching.[64] At several points Calvin makes direct correlations between Isaac and the future coming and salvific implications of Jesus Christ.[65]

For Calvin, God's promise is the blessing given to Abraham that he would one day act as a blessing to all the nations. Calvin is concerned with the implications of the promise made manifest in history through Isaac's line. Not only is God's trustworthiness at stake, but also God's sovereignty in moving history towards salvation.[66] Calvin also addresses the purpose of such a trial explaining that it represents a test of faith to the utmost degree. Abraham succeeds in practicing an undaunting belief in the faithfulness of God despite difficulty and hardship.[67] The Aqedah describes a potential turning point in God's plan, where the entire salvation process was at risk of falling apart. Despite the appearances of tragedy, God's promise of blessing through Isaac's line would not fail and Abraham's obedience would prove strong.

Several similarities between Luther and Calvin appear as both see obedience as the primary response to the commandment of God, even if it seemingly led to destruction. Both understand that the Aqedah was a contradiction, yet neither commentator expresses concern over this reality. They

[64] "For the great source of grief to him was not his own bereavement, not that he was commanded to slay his only heir, the hope of future memorial and of name, the glory and support of his family; but that, in the person of this son, the whole salvation of the world seemed to be extinguished and to perish." *Ibid,* 560.

[65] "We must always remember that Isaac was not a son of the common order, but one in whose person the Mediator was promised." And, "But it is our business, with earnest minds to consider how wonderfully God, in the very article of death, both recalled Isaac from death to life, and restored to Abraham his son, as one who had risen from the tomb." *Ibid,* 565, 569.

[66] "But the other was a far more severe and horrible thing; namely, that he conceives God to contradict Himself and His own word; and then, that he supposes the hope of the promised blessing to be cut off from him, when Isaac is torn away from his embrace." *Ibid,* 564.

[67] *Ibid,* 562-563.

recognize the Aqedah's difficulty and trust that God remains faithful by highlighting the event's nature as a trial.

Some differences emerge between Luther and Calvin due in part to their disparate word counts. While Luther spends a significant amount of time using the text as pastoral application for readers, Calvin spends far less. While Luther writes at length to connect the Aqedah with the resurrection of Jesus and of the dead in general, Calvin comments only once about how the two relate. Significant divergences also occur out of the author's application of the text. Luther uses the text as an opportunity to define what true obedience and faithfulness looks like for an audience living in the height of the sixteenth century Reformation, writing in opposition to those he saw as hostile to the faith such as the Pope, the Episcopate, the "Turks," and "Jews" who did not behave in obedience to God.[68] Calvin on the other hand, used the text to reinforce confidence in God's sovereignty over events that took place in history. Advocating for a trust in "Divine Providence," Calvin suggested to his audience that faith and obedience requires acceptance of one's limitations; in the face of mysterious and harrowing circumstances, one must be led by God.[69]

Having said this, Luther and Calvin agree that the Aqedah represents a seminal point in the trajectory of God's promise; where God's plan was seemingly at risk of failure, ultimately the promise of God's salvation and blessing came through the line of Isaac. To Luther and Calvin, the Aqedah proves that nothing can thwart the promises of God and that one's belief in that truth will return with blessing. While Luther and Calvin claimed no wrongdoing on Abraham's part, the following interpreters focused entirely on whether or not Abraham's behaviour was justified.

[68] Luther, *Luther's Works,* 121, 124.
[69] Calvin, *Genesis*, 563.

2.2.3 Enlightenment Ethics: Kant and Kierkegaard

Of the interpreters sampled so far, all have celebrated the obedience of Abraham, whose actions not only demonstrated his viability as an archetype for the faith but had far reaching consequences in the history of God's people. However, a shift occurred during the Enlightenment that brought new issues into focus, where Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), discussed whether Abraham's actions were morally justifiable. While Kant argued that Abraham's actions went against universal ethical obligations, Kierkegaard offered a counter argument that potentially absolved Abraham of wrongdoing.

Kant provides a natural starting point since his work deviates most clearly from previous interpreters in this chapter. While both *Religion in the Boundaries of Mere Reason* and *The Conflict of the Faculties* reference the Aqedah, Kant does not provide a typological reading or discuss Abraham's obedience, but rather takes issue with Abraham's attempted sacrifice and posits a critique. Kant believed that objective human reason existed separately from one's experiences and so could be accessed. As a result, morality and ethics were all determined through reason and were universally accessible to rational beings. Kant held Abraham to this universal ethic as the standard in the Aqedah event and found him wanting. As a rational being, Abraham should have concluded that killing his innocent son was morally wrong, even if he was supposedly commanded by God to do so.

In *Religion in the Boundaries of Mere Reason* Kant initially alludes to the Aqedah, mentioning the example of a nameless father ordered to kill his innocent son. In the context of a larger discussion on "theistic miracles" and morality, Kant supposes that if a miracle or revelation is ordained by God, yet contradicts the universal moral law, then the miracle or revelation is suspect.[70] Furthermore, the miracle

[70] Immanuel Kant, "Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason (1793)" In *Religion and Rational Theology: The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant,* ed. Allen W. Wood, trans. George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 6:87; 124-125.

or revelation in of itself cannot be readily distinguished from a divine or demonic source. Thus, these phenomena should not be employed while attempting to make rational decisions, especially as it relates to morality and ethics.

This naturally leads to his other work, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, wherein Kant states that the Bible has the potential to act as the guiding narrative for human beings, especially as it related to moral behavior and bringing humanity to its natural telos. This is possible due to its claim of a divine source, from which the moral law also derives. Kant suggests that proof of these claims is exceptionally hard to identify. For if God wanted to speak to an individual and verify the Bible's authority, it would be difficult to ascertain whether or not this voice actually belonged to God. In this context, Kant alludes to the Aqedah event again.

> But in some cases the human being can be sure that the voice he hears is not God's; for if the voice commands him to do something contrary to the moral law, then no matter how majestic the apparition may be, and no matter how it may seem to surpass the whole of nature, he must consider it an illusion.[71]

According to Kant, Abraham should not have listened to the voice of God in Genesis 22. As a rational creature, Abraham should have used his reason to determine that murdering his innocent son was wrong, especially since he did not know whether the voice truly came from a divine source. Therefore, the voice could not be trusted and the Aqedah event should never have taken place.

Kant's criticism of Abraham marks a dramatic shift in the reception history of the Aqedah. Because Kant asserts that the ethical is the primary criterion in the interpretation of the text, Abraham's obedience is of little consequence. To Kant, Abraham's ironclad obedience morally compromises

[71] Immanuel Kant. "The Conflict of the Faculties (1798)" trans. Mary J. Gregor and Robert Anchor, in *Religion and Rational Theology: The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant,* ed. Allen W. Wood and George di Giovanni, 233–328 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 7:83; 283.

himself. While Kant will not have the final word on this subject, this fixation on an ethical reading, and the bold move to critique the Aqedah rather than revere it, manifests itself in future interpreters.

Though born after Kant's death, Søren Kierkegaard became Kant's literary interlocutor, responding to the ideas Kant helped initiate. Unlike Kant, Kierkegaard defended Abraham's actions during the Aqedah through a complex series of arguments in *Fear and Trembling.*[72] Under the pseudonym of Johannes De Silentio, Kierkegaard contrasts the Knight of Infinite Resignation with the Knight of Faith, both of whom undergo incredible ethical trials and asks the now famous three problemata.[73]

For Kierkegaard, the Knight of Infinite Resignation is anyone who willingly gives up the things that matter most to them for the sake of the ethical or universal. Tragically, the Knight of Infinite Resignation does what must be done, but also resigns themselves against any possibility that the thing they love would ever be returned to them. In contrast, the Knight of Faith goes a step beyond the Knight of Infinite Resignation. Though they walk down the same path, the Knight of Faith believes that what was lost would ultimately return. For Kierkegaard, Abraham was the Knight of Faith par excellence because despite the anticipated death of his son, Abraham believed that the promise would be fulfilled anyway. Thus, the Knight of Faith is capable of doing two things at once, grieving and giving up what they love, and fully expecting (with joy and love) that what they lose is theirs regardless, by virtue of their relation to the "absolute" or God.[74]

This relation to the absolute functions as the key to answering Silentio's three problemata. Abraham's unique, subjective relationship with the divine absolute supersedes the ethical, which is what

[72] Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling; The Book on Adler* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 3-110.

[73] First, is there such a thing as a teleological suspension of the ethical? Second, is there such a thing as an absolute duty to God? And finally, was Abraham ethically defensible in keeping silent about his purpose before Sarah, Eleazar, before Isaac?

[74] *Ibid,* 47.

Johannes refers to in Abraham's movement through the "absurd." Abraham essentially went beyond ethics into a realm defined by his faith and trust in the divine, a metaphysical reality that could command anything of him; the story would still end for Abraham's good (despite all evidence to the contrary).[75] Johannes fundamentally switched the universal with the absolute, since the Knight of Faith does not presume to understand the absolute by their ethics, but rather understands his ethics by the absolute.[76] To Johannes, faith is a subjective and inward experience in connection with the divine that supersedes any ethical obligations.[77]

Thus, Abraham's subjective and internal faith compelled him to remain silent before his household. While all must communicate with each other to hold the moral standard for an ethical community to exist, because Abraham's relation to the absolute suspends the ethical, his silence is justifiable because the uniqueness of his situation and the particularity of his faith is inexpressible.[78] It is not a question of whether Abraham should speak, but rather whether he could speak. For Johannes, it was impossible for Abraham to communicate his wholly subjective experience of the absurd nor would it have been helpful for him to do so, because by expressing it out loud he would suddenly be subject to the universal.[79]

The works of Kant and Kierkegaard reveal a fascinating conversation. Although Kierkegaard does not engage with Kant by name, he certainly engages with the worldview and ideas Kant helped create.

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[75] "The paradox of faith is this, that the individual is higher than the universal …" *Ibid,* 59.

[76] "… that the individual … determines his relation to the universal by his relation to the absolute, not his relation to the absolute by his relation to the universal." *Ibid,* 59.

[77] "Thus in saying that there is an absolute duty to God, Johannes means, first, that such a duty exists over and above's duty to the ethical, and, second, that in relation to the duty to God, the duty to the ethical is relative. Only such a standpoint will enable us to justify Abraham." John Lippitt, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Kierkegaard and Fear and Trembling* (London: Routledge, 2003), 103.

[78] "The ethical as such is the universal, again, as the universal it is the manifest, the revealed. The individual regarded as he is immediately, that is, as a physical and psychical being, is the hidden, the concealed. So his ethical task is to develop out of this concealment and to reveal himself in the universal." Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling,* 71.

[79] Lippitt, *Routledge Guidebook,* 128-132.

Kant's ethical reading of the Aqedah gave him no other recourse than to suggest Abraham's fault in being willing to go through with the sacrifice. Kierkegaard, on the other hand does not propose an alternative ethic in order to defend Abraham, but instead goes to great lengths to expose the limitation of ethics, especially as it relates to the human/divine experience.

For the purposes of this survey of reception history, two points of interest emerge. First, despite the length of their discussion regarding Abraham's actions, Kant and Kierkegaard's interpretations lift the Aqedah into a debate between metaphysics and existentialism separate from the rest of the Bible. These readings are not concerned with or informed by the context of the event or how it is connected to greater themes present in the Bible. Neither assumed that Abraham's failure to ultimately sacrifice Isaac exempt him from criticism. While Kierkegaard does rush to Abraham's defense, he does not withdraw the ethical question to do so but rather reoriented the ethical so that it changed depending on the situation and the person's relation to the divine. *Fear and Trembling* values ethics highly, but argues that in Abraham's situation universal ethics did not directly apply.[80]

Second, God's role in the Aqedah carries little relevance to their theories overall. While God may not have been the voice in Abraham's head to Kant or the Absolute to Kierkegaard, God does little for their theories. God is not on trial for either philosophers since their ethical lens focuses on Abraham's behaviour, not God's actions. To speak of God in abstract terms absent of any wrongdoing fits with the Enlightenment tendency to see God in a deist sensibility as distant and largely disinterested in the coming and goings of the world's denizens.

[80] I recommend Emil Fackenheim's work as a companion piece to Kant and Kierkegaard. As a Jewish philosopher and Rabbi, Fackenheim's engagement with the enlightenment philosophers reveal many insights. See Emil Ludwig Fackenheim, *Encounters between Judaism and Modern Philosophy: A Preface to Future Jewish Thought* (New York, Basic Books, 1973).

Kant and Kierkegaard's focus on behaviour will re-emerge as an important issue for future interpreters. But just as the Enlightenment era shaped views of God for the philosophers, later contexts dramatically impacted people's interpretive traditions, with the behavioural emphasis shifting focus to other characters in the text.

2.2.4 Holocaust: Jewish Perspectives

Jumping forward two centuries, the systematic extermination of the Jewish people under Nazi Germany was a tragedy of an unimaginable scale whose impact cannot be overestimated, as many Jews saw this moment in history as the pivotal turning point for their story that demanded an explanation.[81] In light of this context, some looked back to the Aqedah yet again to try to make sense of their experience by reinterpreting the text at the very brink of their own destruction. After experiencing catastrophe, many saw themselves reliving the very stories and archetypes found within their history. David Roskies helpfully distinguished between "Literal Recall," where an event in Jewish memory was appropriated point-for-point with no change, while others saw their history reenacted as a "Sacred Parody," where certain elements of the story or archetype changed, offering an alternative

[81] Having become more familiarized with Jewish perspectives on stewarding the memory of the Holocaust, I am aware of the complex and divisive responses to the Holocaust's impact and portrayal in literature and other media. Furthermore, as someone who belongs to the Mennonite tradition, I am also aware that recent discoveries of German Mennonite complicity with the Nazi regime adds a further layer of complexity, which demands humility and clarity on my part. Within the space afforded to me in this chapter, I endeavored to research and write this section with great care in order to avoid minimizing or oversimplifying issues that have often led to the suffering of so many. I am thankful to Dr. Daniel Maoz for gently reminding me of my obligation to write responsibly on these topics. For an examination of several direct connections between Mennonites and the Holocaust, see Gerhard Rempel, "Mennonites and the Holocaust: From Collaboration to Perpetuation," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review,* vol. 84, no. 4 (October 1, 2010): 507–549, accessed November 21, 2020. https://login.proxy.lib.uwaterloo.ca/login?qurl=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rfh&AN=ATLA0001807385&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

interpretation of the comparable event.[82] The following examples demonstrate reinterpretations that resemble both categories Roskies identified with special attention given to sacred parody later.[83]

Eliezer Berkovitz exemplifies literal recall as he connects the Jewish experience of the Holocaust with the Aqedah. For instance, in one of his works the Aqedah serves as Abraham's introduction to the nature of chosenness for God's people. The Aqedah was not a punishment or an especially aberrant episode in the history of God's people, but the prototype of Jewish existence in which God's people bear a long-suffering posture of covenant faithfulness despite catastrophe.[84] Thus, Isaac's near destruction on the altar on Moriah mirrored the experience of European Jews during the Holocaust.[85] Berkovitz later argued that Abraham endured the Aqedah with a powerful trust in God through their Covenant relationship, so that authentic Judaism always affirms and maintains the Covenant regardless of circumstance.[86] Berkovitz highlights the stories of Jews during the Holocaust that maintained Jewish practice and worship despite their horrifying treatment by the Nazi regime. Just as Abraham trusted God and upheld the Covenant relationship, so must all faithful Jews continue to uphold the Covenant in their own context.[87] Berkovitz' examples of reinterpretation as literal recall may seem to suggest that interpretations should leave the original text of the Aqedah unchanged.

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[82] David G. Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 17.

[83] I am especially thankful to Isabel Wollaston's article on Post-Holocaust interpretive traditions of Genesis 22. She introduces Roskies' categories of Literal Recall and Sacred Parody and presents the following interpreters in Eliezer Berkovitz and Ellie Wiesel as examples. See Isabel Wollaston, "'Traditions of Remembrance': Post-Holocaust Interpretations of Genesis 22," in John F. A. Sawyer, Wilfred G. E. Watson, Jon Davies, and Graham Harvey, *Words Remembered, Texts Renewed: Essays in Honour of John F.A. Sawyer*, JSOT supp. 195 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 41-51.

[84] Berkovitz unites the Aqedah with Israel's history of exile and the suffering-servant image of Isaiah 53 to illustrate the role of God's people in the world, that they are meant to endure suffering and injustice alongside the long silences of God. See Eliezer Berkovits, *Faith after the Holocaust* (New York: KTAV Pub House, 1973), 120-121, 125-126.

[85] *Ibid,* 124-125.

[86] Eliezer Berkovits, *With God in Hell: Judaism in the Ghettos and Deathcamps* (New York: Sanhedrin Press, 1979), 125.

[87] *Ibid,* 125.

In contrast, "sacred parody" exhibits a more malleable interpretive process and the freedom for readers to make sense of their experience. Famous for his memoir of the Holocaust, Nobel peace prize winner Elie Wiesel passionately articulated the Aqedah, but understood it as someone who was profoundly shaped by the cruelty and hatred of the Nazi regime. In his chapter "The Sacrifice of Isaac: A Survivor's Story," Wiesel saw the Aqedah as the summation of the Jewish experience, representing every existential movement made in their history.[88] After briefly discussing some Rabbinic interpretations of the Aqedah, Wiesel opts to discuss Isaac and his disappearance from the Aqedah story in between the angel's intervention and Abraham's descent down Mt. Moriah to represent the shocking twist to the story. Isaac did not come down from the mountain with Abraham because Isaac *did* in fact die on the altar, with Isaac's death on Moriah becoming the symbol for Jewish destruction through the ages. More specifically, the image of fire consuming Isaac held deep resonance for Jews who witnessed their people set ablaze by the Nazi regime.[89]

Wiesel asks a series of rhetorical questions about Isaac's name, which means "laughter." While the Aqedah mysteriously leaves Isaac out of the final moments, Isaac reappears in the text to inherit the next part of the patriarch's story. Isaac's namesake represents resiliency in the face of annihilation. Isaac not only endured the horrors of the burnt offering and turned that trauma into a life well lived, but God honours this transformation, since the Temple was built on Moriah and not Sinai, where the Law was given. Wiesel uses the example of Isaac to inspire Jews who have suffered outrageous cruelty to not give up and forget the joy of laughter. Despite Wiesel's strength in finding a redemptive theme to take from the Aqedah, the connection between the Aqedah and the Holocaust remains a sobering reminder of the potential stake and the theological weight of such a conviction.[90]

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[88] "The Sacrifice of Isaac: A Survivor's Story," in Elie Wiesel, *Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends,* 1st ed, (New York: Random House, 1976), 75.

[89] *Ibid,* 95.

[90] *Ibid,* 97.

While the Holocaust fueled and intensified images of a suffering, victimized Isaac, the Aqedah was not exclusively read that way by mid-twentieth century Jews. The history of the Zionist movement reveals contrasting depictions of the Aqedah narrative representing, on the one hand, victimhood in the context of global antisemitism, and heroic national sacrifice in the pursuit of a Jewish state on the other. Scholars widely agree that Zionists embraced Isaac in the Aqedah as an archetype. While not static in Zionist interpretive history, the movement from Isaac as an unwilling victim of sacrificial malice to the voluntary or even heroic self-sacrifice for national interest represents a particular interpretive strain of the Aqedah, powerfully invigorated by the unifying, yet devastating fallout of the Holocaust.[91] In *Glory and Agony: Isaac's Sacrifice and National Narrative,* Yael Feldman charted the complex evolution of Zionist interpretation by examining a number of fields such as history, linguistics, gender theory, and literary criticism. Given the scope of this project, there is only space to address a few of Feldman's anecdotes as they relate to the development of the Aqedah as a symbol of national sacrifice.[92]

To begin, Feldman identifies an evocative use of the Aqedah in 1949 near the closing of the Israeli War for Independence where the term *osher Aqedah* was inserted into a Passover Haggadah. Feldman speculates that this phrase, the "bliss of the Aqedah", encapsulated the "pathos of the moment" by joining what would have been a harrowing and somber sacrificial narrative in Genesis 22 with the notion

[91] Importantly, Jewish scholars disagree to the extent the Holocaust and Jewish antisemitism in the twentieth century inspired Zionist mobilization to form a State of Israel. For instance, David Novak highlights that the Zionist desire for a Jewish homeland already existed prior to the Holocaust, and afterwards resistance toward the pursuit of statehood was pushed to the fringes of Jewish ideology. Novak suggests that the Holocaust helped give Jewish statehood legitimacy with the international community. See David Novak, "Is There a Theological Connection between the Holocaust and the Reestablishment of the State of Israel?" in S.T. Katz, *The Impact of the Holocaust on Jewish Theology* (New York University Press, 2005), 248-262. However, others wanted to minimize the impact of the Holocaust on Jewish identity in general, reflecting a concern over perceptions of the Jewish people and an oversimplification of their history. See Shalom Rosenberg, "The Holocaust: Lessons, Explanation, Meaning" in S.T. Katz, *The Impact of the Holocaust on Jewish Theology* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 82-109.

[92] Yael S. Feldman, *Glory and Agony: Isaac's Sacrifice and National Narrative*, Stanford Studies in Jewish History and Culture (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).

of happiness or joy.[93] Feldman highlights the work of historian Anita Shapira, who discovered very similar Hebrew phrases such as "the love of sacrifice" and "the joy of the Aqedah" spoken by Berl Katznelson (1887-1944) during the generation of the second Aliya decades before World War II and the Israeli War for Independence. Despite the language of heroism and sacrifice used frequently in early twentieth century Zionist writings, Katznelson's appropriation of the Aqedah represented the beginning of its interpretive usage as a rallying call for a Jewish state.[94]

Katznelson's Aqedah made a small but significant departure. Feldman notes that some ancient Jewish writers (i.e., Philo, Pseudo-Philo, Josephus) saw Isaac as a willing but ultimately averted human sacrifice. To Katznelson, Isaac was not only willingly bound, but cooperative in his own self-immolation. Feldman even suggests this reinterpretation is "… a denial of the principle of substitution, and the reinstatement of human sacrifice."[95] The Aqedah was used as a reflection of, and perhaps the inspiration for, young Jewish men sacrificing their lives in the struggle to create a Jewish state.

While Katznelson's *osher Aqedah* initially appeared in World War I, the advent of World War II and the Holocaust gave rise to the victimized Isaac interpretation Katznelson initially moved away from. Interestingly, despite their contradictory and conflicting symbolism, neither interpretation canceled out the other. The Aqedah simultaneously represented the experiences of those who suffered the Holocaust and those who, invigorated and united by European antisemitism, were willing to die for the creation of a Jewish state. Others were uncomfortable with the language of *osher Aqedah* and the violence it encouraged Jewish fighters to accept. Even while this understanding of the Aqedah was gaining

[93] *Ibid,* 41.
[94] *Ibid,* 43
[95] *Ibid,* 93.

popularity among Zionists, there were also those who lamented its use and protested the need to continually sacrifice their children for national interests.[96]

Far from exhaustive, this sampling of Jewish interpreters after the Holocaust demonstrate Roskies' categories of "Literal Recall" and "Sacred Parody" in Jewish interpretation. The interpretive potential to change or shape the content of the Aqedah text to relate more closely to the context of the reader bears significant implications in hermeneutical practice. Fears of radical departure from the text leading readers astray frustrate and dismay others who commit to an unmodified interpretation of the text. However, examples from noteworthy Jewish sources illustrate that sacred parodies can function within the tradition as creative adaptations, not malevolent digressions. However, it was the following interpreters' accusation's against God's character that amplified divine malevolence into the interpretive history of the Aqedah.

2.2.5 Questioning Divine Character: Recent Interpretations

Except for some Jewish sources in the previous section, most of the interpreters in this survey have refrained from holding God accountable for the Aqedah. However, some recent Christian and secular interpreters have questioned whether God's behavior as the instigator of the Aqedah was justifiable. Scholars have increasingly challenged the character of God and speculated whether the text's

[96] "When was this ideal picture undermined? When did Israeli culture begin to feel uncomfortable with the myth of the Akedah? Contrary to appearances, the shattering of this myth is not one more declaration of a 'here and now' culture striving to shed historic symbols and live the present. Queries and doubts about the Akedah myth began to surface soon after independence. We read in the central work about the War of Liberation, written by S. Yizhar and published in 1958: 'There is no evading the akedah. It only seems you could leave everything and run; you cannot ... I hate our father Abraham, who binds Isaac. What right does he have over Isaac? Let him bind himself. I hate the God who sent him and closed all paths, leaving only that of the akedah. I hate the fact that Isaac serves merely as a test between Abraham and his God ... The sanctification of God in the akedah, I hate. To kill the sons for a test of love! To use power and interfere and take life to make a point by force. And the world that stood still and did not cry out: Villains, why must the sons die.'" S. Yizhar, *Yemei Ziklag: The Days of Ziklag*, v.2 (Tel-Aviv, 1958), 804, in Avi Sagi, "The Meaning of the 'Akedah' in Israeli Culture and Jewish Tradition," *Israel studies,* vol. 3, no. 1 (April 1, 1998), 45–60.

description of testing Abraham made God worthy of worship. Since various readings of this interpretive debate exist, in what follows three different perspectives are categorized as Rejection, Rescue, and Restorative interpretations.

Rejection interpretations critique the Aqedah's presentation of God by either condemning divine behavior or questioning the relevance of the story as part of the biblical narrative. For instance, Louise Antony suggests that the Aqedah event implies that "… God's laws really do have a degree of moral arbitrariness to them, that he doesn't so much care whether murder occurs as he cares about whether the murder is authorized."[97] The inconsistency by which the command "Thou shall not kill" is applied leads her to believe that God is obsessed with control over creatures, only to demand tribute and obedience from them.[98] She compares this control to parents who are abusive towards their children, especially in the way Scripture describes God's punishments towards people.[99]

Edwin Curley discusses the intricacies of the Aqedah plot, suggesting that God's testing of Abraham only makes sense if Abraham actually believed God would have him sacrifice Isaac. Abraham needed to believe this or else the test would have been invalid. Curley concludes that God could not be good because a good God would not mislead Abraham and the reader about divine morality.[100]

Troels Nørager expressed concern about how the Aqedah could be used by some to justify horrible acts of violence such as "… suicide bombings and terror actions."[101] Nørager reads the Aqedah

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[97] Louise Antony, "Does God Love us?" In *Divine Evil? The Moral Character of the God of Abraham,* ed. Michael Bergmann, Michael J. Murray, and Michael C. Rea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 40.

[98] *Ibid,* 41.

[99] *Ibid,* 43.

[100] Edwin Curley, "The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob," In *Divine Evil? The Moral Character of the God of Abraham,* ed. Michael Bergmann, Michael J. Murray, and Michael C. Rea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 61.

[101] Troels Nørager, *Taking Leave of Abraham. An Essay on Religion and Democracy* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2008), quoted in Kirsten Nielsen, "The Violent God of the Old Testament: Reading Strategies And Responsibility," in Markus Philipp Zehnder and Hallvard Hagelia, *Encountering Violence in the Bible*, Bible in the Modern World, 55 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013), 208.

from within the context of a democratic society ruled by law. Since sacrificing a child is always a crime, a "… secularised society must bid farewell to the concept of God as embodied in the Abraham-Isaac story in Genesis 22."[102]

Rescue interpretations seek to justify God's behaviour in the text. These interpretations tend to disagree with the previous arguments about God's inappropriate behaviour and see readers' discomfort with the text as misguided. For instance, Walter C. Kaiser argues that the Aqedah should not be lumped together with foolish sacrificial practices or attempts found in the rest of the Old Testament, as these were not legitimate.[103] Kaiser boldly claims that it is inappropriate for God's creatures to deny God the right to ask for their lives, since doing so would challenge divine sovereignty. Since a murder did not actually take place and God's purpose was to test Abraham, God's goodness is not compromised.[104]

Kirsten Nielsen responded to Nørager in a similar way as Kaiser. For her, the point of the Aqedah is that Isaac was *not* sacrificed. Citing Mic. 6:6-8 to show that offering first-born children for sacrifice was prohibited, she writes, "Genesis 22 forms part of a lengthy narrative the actual purpose of which is to speak of God's blessings and how they are spread wider and wider despite his people's disobedience."[105] God's actions in the Aqedah are trivial compared to God's intent reflected throughout the whole narrative of Genesis which chronicles the formation of the people of Israel through one family.

Thomas Römer is quick to show how difficult the test would have been for Abraham, suggesting it was beyond cruelty noting, "… it seems unbearable."[106] He also raises the problem of God's image as it is

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[102] *Ibid,* 212.

[103] Kaiser describes examples of sacrifice as foolish such as Jephthah and his daughter, Judg. 11:30-40; Gibeon's demands, 2 Sam. 21:8, 9 14; and the practices of wicked Israelite kings, 2 Kgs. 16:3; 21:6, 2 Chron. 33:6. See Walter C Kaiser, *Hard Sayings of the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 53.

[104] *Ibid,* 53.

[105] Nielsen, "The Violent God of the Old Testament," 212.

[106] Thomas Römer, *Dark God: Cruelty, Sex, and Violence in the Old Testament,* trans. Sean O'Neil, 3rd ed (New York: Paulist Press, 2013), 53.

portrayed in the text and how it might make the reader feel uncomfortable. However, according to Römer, this way of thinking is misguided. He writes, "… we want a God who corresponds to the ideal of the enlightened human being, a just God, and therefore a God who fits our conception of this enlightened human being." Römer argues that this creates a "politically correct" God, and runs the risk of idolatry, a God that legitimizes "human aspirations."[107]

Restorative interpretations attempt to address both sides of the argument. On the one hand, these interpreters acknowledge the difficulty of these kinds of texts in the Bible, while also arguing that dismissing complaints is irresponsible; the way the text portrays God is problematic and resembles the complaints of Rejection interpreters. However, their solution to the problem does not call for abandonment or a total condemnation of God but, similar to the Rescue interpreters, they intend to keep the text and the God of that text with an alternative reading that redeems God's character.

Several of these interpreters use some form of a christocentric reading to describe God's character across the entire Biblical narrative.[108] Gregory Boyd uses what he calls a "cruciform hermeneutic," a way of interpreting all of God's actions in the Bible through the character of the crucified Christ Jesus. This means that if God behaves a certain way in the text, the reader must assume a consistency with the character of Jesus as presented in the Gospels.[109] In the Aqedah Boyd suggests that God was attempting to rid any "lingering pagan elements of Abraham's conception of Yahweh." As

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[107] *Ibid,* 57.

[108] J. Denny Weaver advocates for a nonviolent interpretation of God throughout the Bible, relying on the portrayal of Christ and a pacifist reading to guide him through the pages of scripture. While not mentioning the Aqedah directly, Weaver uses slavery and the limitation of women in leadership as examples of practices that were once biblically defended by Christians, and yet now are challenged with nonviolent theology applied to the same texts. Likewise, Walter Brueggemann emphasizes that God's contact with human individuals and institutions is dialogical and relational. While in this text, he does not mention the Aqedah, this dialogical approach forces us to reject a top-down relation between God and Abraham in the Aqedah. See J. Denny Weaver, *God without Violence: Following a Nonviolent God in a Violent World* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2016), 197-198. See also Walter Brueggemann, *An Unsettling God: The Heart of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), 96.

[109] Gregory A. Boyd, *The Crucifixion of the Warrior God: Interpreting the Old Testament's Violent Portraits of God in Light of the Cross* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017), XXXIV.

such, God essentially behaved as an ancient near eastern deity in order to teach Abraham a powerful pedagogical lesson that human sacrifice is wrong: [110] "… Abraham would now be able to understand that his ultimate loyalty was to a God who not only did not require a child sacrifice, but to a God who himself provides the sacrifice. He now had a vision of a God who was radically unlike all the pagan gods of his past."[111]

Likewise, Eric Siebert employs a "christocentric hermeneutic" as an interpretive lens that allows him to call out inappropriate behavior in relation to Christ's portrayal. As he states, "God's behavior in this passage [the Aqedah] is morally offensive, and we should not hesitate to say so."[112] Siebert finds the depiction of God's willingness for child sacrifice and to "inflict serious psychological trauma" [113] on Isaac to test Abraham deeply disturbing, indicating that the Aqedah has been used to justify abuse towards children.[114] Siebert's hermeneutic stresses that violent texts should be read in light of other readers who themselves have been impacted by violence.[115]

W. Lee. Humphreys offers a novel interpretation of the text by noting that, after the Aqedah, God never again appears as a character in Genesis. The Patriarchs and their descendants speak of God but never to God.[116] Humphreys highlights the work of David Gunn and Danna Fewell to say that, throughout his life, Abraham was more than willing to give up his family if the situation required it. He

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[110] *Ibid,* 1292-1293. John Hare suggested a similar interpretation as Boyd, that God was attempting to teach Abraham he was different from the surrounding cultures. To Hare, the Aqedah was an attempt at replacing the human sacrificial system with animal sacrifice. Despite this, the Aqedah did not necessarily legitimize animal sacrifice throughout all time and history, it simply represented how God's commands were tailored to the people and time they were given. To outright ban all sacrifice would have been a step too far for Abraham and his descendants. John Hare, "Animal Sacrifices," in *Divine Evil? The Moral Character of the God of Abraham,* ed. Michael Bergmann, Michael J. Murray, and Michael C. Rea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 128, 145-146.

[111] Boyd, *Warrior God*, 1294-1295.

[112] Eric A Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior: Troubling Old Testament Images of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), brackets added, 218.

[113] *Ibid,* 217.

[114] *Ibid,* 21.

[115] *Ibid,* 85.

[116] W. Lee. Humphreys, *The Character of God in the Book of Genesis: A Narrative Appraisal*, 1st ed (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 144-145.

gave his wife Sarah to Pharaoh and Abimelech, and also gave Hagar and Ishmael up to the wilderness. "Perhaps God seeks to know if there is a limit, a point at which he will risk discomfort and danger rather than put another in his family at risk … God is caught in a pattern of stepping in to get Abraham off the hook."[117] Humphreys concludes his interpretation with the haunting speculation that perhaps the reason for God's silence is exactly because Abraham went to the furthest extremes of his detachment and was willing to risk the promise out of sheer obedience. "Is this [God's silence] because Abraham fears God, or is it God who fears what this man's obedience might lead to next?"[118]

This overview of divine character readings reveal the complexity within recent Christian and secular interpretations. This collection shows that interpreters are becoming increasingly strident in critiquing aspects of the text and of God. Despite the varied responses and sides of the debate, Siebert offers a concise summary of this interpretive tradition, "Whatever words or phrases one uses, the point is the same: in the Old Testament, God sometimes acts in ways that leave readers perplexed and bothered."[119]

2.2.6 Feminist Approaches: Phyllis Trible and Norma Rosen

The feminist interpreters of this chapter all attempt to do justice to a character who they see as absent in the biblical account: the Matriarch Sarah. Indeed, Sarah's absence in Genesis 22 is particularly perplexing given her status as a recipient of the promised son and her attachment to Isaac. Arguing from feminist perspectives, these authors attempt to draw Sarah closer to the Aqedah, focusing attention on forgotten or historically neglected characters.[120]

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[117] *Ibid,* 144.

[118] *Ibid,* brackets added, 145.

[119] Siebert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior,* 3.

[120] Sarah Coakley has written a piece on the Aqedah using gender theory. In it, she suggests that the sacrifice, which she admits to being a thoroughly patriarchal activity, can be redeemed from its damning portrayal by focusing on Isaac as the primary character and by seeing him as gender-labile. See Sarah Coakley, "In Defense of

Phyllis Trible notes that the patriarchal event of human sacrifice in the Aqedah would not only destroy father and son, but also Sarah the mother.[121] Confused by her absence from the text, Trible examines the Genesis narrative for answers, noting that Genesis 21 and Genesis 22 act as parallel stories only to be upended by a patriarchal intrusion. Following the birth of Isaac in Genesis 21:1-7, the text records the banishment of Hagar and Ishmael. After wandering in the wilderness and running out of water, Hagar cries out and is heard by God. An angel appears and tells her not to worry for God was going to make a great nation out of her son Ishmael. Trible notes that the wilderness, the brink of death, an angelic interruption, and the promise of nationhood all resonate with the Aqedah event. Yet, unlike the portrayal of Hagar and Ishmael as mother and son, Genesis 22 presents father and son as a distinct change in the pattern of the text.[122]

Trible identifies another point of contrast between Gen. 21 and 22 by observing the degree of attachment between the two families. Hagar is clearly attached to Ishmael with Sarah acting as a parallel to Isaac, yet the Aqedah records Abraham as the relevant parental figure and not Sarah. Indeed, Trible notes Abraham's lack of attachment throughout Genesis and his obedience to God as stalwart and unflinching. Abraham was willing to let go of whatever God commanded him, such as leaving his homeland to go west.[123] Abraham showed detachment from his personal relationships, like when he gave Sarah to foreign rulers twice over.[124] Economically, Abraham gave much of his possessions to others for various reasons, showing that Abraham consistently demonstrated detachment from his relations and his possessions.[125] Trible writes, "Be the incident an occasion for weal or woe, nowhere

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Sacrifice: Gender, Selfhood, and the Binding of Isaac," in Linda Alcoff and John D. Caputo, *Feminism, Sexuality, and the Return of Religion* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011), 17-39.

[121] Phyllis Trible, "Genesis 22: The Sacrifice of Sarah," in Alice Bach, *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 271-287.

[122] Trible, "The Sacrifice of Sarah," 285.

[123] Genesis 12:1-4

[124] Genesis 12:10-20; 20:1-18

[125] For instance, Abraham: allows Lot to choose the land where they would pasture, (Gen. 13:2-12); Gives a tenth of what he had to Melchizedek, (14:1-24); and gives gifts to Abimelech, (21:22-34).

prior to Genesis 22 does Abraham emerge as a man of attachment. That is not his problem. How ill-fitted he is, then, for a narrative of testing and sacrifice."[126]

Trible suggests that Sarah is the rightful recipient of the test since she is the one attached to Isaac. The Aqedah could have been the event that allowed Sarah to become the model of faithfulness, as Abraham had already demonstrated multiple times. Trible also notes that if Sarah were to learn detachment, she would be liberated from her conflict with Hagar, as it was her attachment to Isaac that destroyed their relationship in the first place.[127] Furthermore, Trible bemoans that the next time the text mentions Sarah, it simply notes that she had died. Trible blames patriarchy for Sarah's absence and her sudden elimination from the text speculating that Sarah died estranged from Abraham.[128] She notes that Abraham went to Beersheba after the Aqedah while Sarah died in Hebron, suggesting that they never reunited after the Aqedah. In titling her paper "The Sacrifice of Sarah," Trible indicates that Sarah experienced the most damning effects of patriarchy. Sarah was the one who was truly sacrificed in the Aqedah, in order to promote the continued supremacy of patriarchal emphasis in the biblical narrative. In light of the lesson of the Aqedah, Trible implores her readers to let go and experience their own detachment from a patriarchal stance of interpreting the Bible, hoping that once patriarchy has been rejected worship of God would finally find its full expression.[129]

In *Biblical Women Unbound*, Norma Rosen demonstrates contemporary Jewish midrash that addresses the lack of representation women have in the Hebrew Bible.[130] She expressed a desire "… to give a voice to women in the Bible who have had nearly none. To be an advocate for biblical figures over

[126] Trible, "The Sacrifice of Sarah," 285.
[127] *Ibid,* 285-286.
[128] *Ibid,* 286.
[129] *Ibid,* 287.
[130] Norma Rosen, *Biblical Women Unbound: Counter-Tales* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 15.

whom the ages have kicked considerable dust, and to imagine their lives."[131] Rosen devotes a large introduction to the examination of midrash as a discipline as well as a reason to justify the rest of the book. Midrash gives Rosen the opportunity to address new questions the text fails to ask in a creative and authentic way. While Rosen recognizes that this kind of midrash might act as a "feminist reparation," she sees it as something more, noting that biblical women's lack of voice constitutes a great historical and cultural loss. She also hopes her midrash might bring these biblical women closer to contemporary issues and readers.[132]

Like Trible, Rosen marvels at Sarah's absence in the Aqedah. For all the midrash regarding Sarah, she claims the Rabbis did nothing to answer the obvious questions: where was Sarah during the Aqedah?[133] If she heard God's voice during the announcement of her conception, then how did she not hear God's voice for the Aqedah? In the chapter "The Unbinding of Sarah," Rosen seeks to answer those questions.[134] Almost immediately, Rosen's midrash diverges from the biblical account by claiming that Sarah indeed had heard God's voice in the night as he spoke to Abraham. She portrays Sarah as the one who emphasizes caution and hesitance at the command of God while Abraham dismisses her warnings, almost deaf to his wife's pleas.[135]

Sarah herself has a dream where she encounters Hagar who is young, beautiful, clothed in Egyptian robes and enthroned. The two have a conversation where Sarah asks Hagar what she did to

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[131] *Ibid,* 6.

[132] *Ibid,* 8-9.

[133] Historically, many interpreters from Christian and Jewish traditions blamed Sarah's absence on the supposed weakness of her sex. For instance, Martin Luther wrote, "The text says nothing about Sarah, whether she was aware of this command or not. Perhaps – because she was too weak to be able to stand that great shock – Abraham concealed this matter from her." Luther, *Luther's Works,* 98. Likewise, the Rabbis of *Leviticus Rabbah* claimed that the shock of the Aqedah killed Sarah when Isaac returned from Mt. Moriah. Later, Rashi upheld the same interpretation. *Leviticus Rabbah 20:2,* quoted in Kalimi, "The Binding of Isaac In Rabbinic Literature And Thought," 26.

[134] *Ibid,* 44-45.

[135] *Ibid,* 46-47.

invoke God in the wilderness to save Ishmael's life. Hagar behaves spitefully towards her former mistress, repulsed by Sarah's desperation. Despite this, Hagar simply proclaims that if Sarah is found worthy, her son will be saved.[136] Later, after having a brief conversation with Eliezer where she was confident that God would accept an alternative sacrifice if provided, she chases after Abraham and Isaac.[137]

On the road, God intervenes and engages in a lengthy conversation with Sarah. At her behest, God slows down time so that they can talk and prevent Abraham and Isaac from reaching the top of Mt. Moriah. They speak at length about her relationship with Ishmael and why she chose to banish him and Hagar from their company. God also continually reminds her that she laughed after hearing of the promised Isaac. God is portrayed here as rambling, in a purposeful attempt to distract her. Eventually, Sarah accuses God of making creatures in a hostile world with a lack of resources to share, forcing humans to exploit each other. After providing a male sheep to offer as a sacrifice in Isaac's stead, God reveals that Isaac will not be sacrificed and a ram will be provided instead, calling it "… a joke for all creation to savor."[138] God disappears with the sound of laughter and Sarah races up the mountain to confront Abraham where she witnesses Isaac bound on an altar and Abraham bent on killing him as two angels try to stop him. Sarah intervenes by showing the ram to Abraham, who then reluctantly unties Isaac from the altar.[139]

This experience breaks Sarah, who, after hearing God's laughter for a final time, realizes that God sent an illusion to her on the road to Moriah. As she dies, she cries out creating the basis for blowing the Shofar and reciting the Aqedah during Rosh Hashanah.[140] The final question left by those who bury

[136] *Ibid,* 48-49.
[137] *Ibid,* 49-50.
[138] *Ibid,* 57.
[139] *Ibid,* 51-58.
[140] *Ibid,* 58-59.

Sarah is, "Who can tell, they wondered, whether silence is a degree of speech we have not yet learned to fathom?"[141]

Despite some notable differences, Trible and Rosen's respective pieces contrast with each other well. While Trible suggests that Sarah should have been the prime character of the tale, Rosen places Sarah in the center of the Aqedah retelling but does not replace Abraham's role in the story. Each also comes to differing conclusions. Trible speculated that Sarah would be tested instead of Abraham, and in succeeding, would learn detachment and become the model of faith. Rosen's Sarah is surely tested but does not learn detachment. Instead, she becomes the crucial interruption in the sacrificial attempt. Trible's Sarah ultimately appears triumphant, while Rosen's Sarah is tragic. Trible predicted Sarah's restitution with Hagar, while Rosen implied that Hagar never forgave Sarah for what she did.

Trible does not make any mention of God's role in the Aqedah, or whether Sarah's involvement would somehow change her interaction with God. In contrast, Sarah's conversation with God dominates the majority of Rosen's midrash. She makes God mysterious, neither benevolent or malevolent, yet never intending to sacrifice Isaac either, relying on Sarah to intercede and acknowledge the ram. God is consistently introduced and concluded with the sound of laughter, echoing Sarah's response to God's earlier promise. Their conversation, despite Sarah's insistence at stopping Abraham, continually revolves around Sarah's actions and why God's creatures are cruel to each other. In this way, the midrash takes on the tone of theodicy, suggesting that cruelty and evil is out of human control and God should carry the blame for the terrible things creatures do to each other.

Both of these writers shrug off the silencing effects of patriarchal bias in order to reimagine Sarah as a vital part of the Aqedah story. In each case, bringing Sarah into the Aqedah comes with high stakes. For Trible, focusing on Sarah impacts the very integrity of a worshipping community while for Rosen, her

[141] *Ibid,* 60.

midrash resurrects lost history and culture that God's people should happily embrace. These vital contributions offer more than simple speculation but, as Rosen suggested, are the result of wrestling with scripture, and these stories represent the expressions of that struggle.[142]

2.3 Conclusion

By examining the reception history of the Aqedah, this chapter demonstrated the range of Jewish and Christian interpretations regarding Genesis 22. Rather than reading the Aqedah statically through the millennia, interpreters engaged the text from their contexts revealing the kinds of questions important to those readers. In turn, the interpreters' engagement with those texts produced unique answers to their questions that future readers benefit from by treating interpretation as an evolving conversation between interpreter and text.

Of the interpreters surveyed, receptions of the Aqedah ranged widely from positive to negative, ancient to contemporary, virtue ethics to character studies, and more. The Aqedah's diverse reception history clarifies this project's goal of presenting *The Binding of Isaac* as not only a reinterpretation of the Aqedah story, but capable of holding a multiplicity of interpretations at the same time. Before an analysis of *TBOI* can begin properly, this project must introduce the reader to the Game Studies field in order to establish *TBOI's* place within its medium.

[142] *Ibid,* 15.

Chapter 3: *The Binding of Isaac* in the Context of Game Studies

Historically, playing games rarely evoked academic scrutiny. Instead, games have often occupied the realm of informal leisure with the average layperson putting little thought into the activity itself.[143] However, game studies has since developed into a vibrant field of study with its own body of literature. This chapter situates *The Binding of Isaac* within the wider field of game studies before describing its ludic and narrative elements in greater detail. A brief survey of literature concerning the interdisciplinary field of digital media and religious studies demonstrates the breadth of academic research on games and their connections to more established fields. Dutch scholar Johan Huizinga laid the foundations in the mid-twentieth century for scholars to move towards more formal theorization in this field prompting debates centered around the definitions of *game* and *play.*[144]

While scholarly contributions built on Huizinga's initial thoughts, the work of Jesper Juul and Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman provide helpful frames of reference for this project, since each of their definitions prioritizes the experience of the player. This project builds on their formulations of *game* and *play* in order to examine *The Binding of Isaac* through the reception history of the Aqedah. Likewise, I draw heavily from Rachel Wagner's *Godwired,* which explores play and ritual in order to understand how virtual and sacred spaces function similarly to each other by requiring human interaction to participate in and perform stories. I shall address Wagner's work in more detail in chapter 5, especially in relation to this thesis' goals in describing the concept of midrash generation.[145]

[143] While much of the academic discussion in this chapter deals with games and play more broadly, the concepts introduced here apply to the video game medium as well.

[144] When referencing "game" and "play" as concepts (as opposed to artifacts or activities) these terms will be italicised.

[145] Rachel Wagner also described this phenomenon, which I have adopted and built on for this thesis. See chapter 5 for my analysis of *The Binding of Isaac* and biblical interpretation as the "space of possibility."

3.1 Religion and Game Studies

Various scholars have connected game studies with religious studies, thereby creating a new interdisciplinary field that explores the connections and similarities between religious praxis and gameplay.[146] For instance, a number of influential edited compilations about digital media and religion have emerged. *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* examines concepts that appear in religion and across various digital media beyond video games, while *Understanding Religion and Popular Culture* and *God in the Details* explores digital media and religion within the context of its expression in popular culture.[147] *Methods for Studying Video Games and Religion* offers different approaches for inquiring scholars to engage with video games and religion from an academic perspective.[148] *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game* offers a glimpse into how narratives function in both ritualistic activity and video games.[149] *Playing with Religion in Digital Games* explores video games influenced by religion and how some games function like religion.[150]

Beyond edited compilations, William Sims Bainbridge examines video games from a sociological perspective and explores religious emergence within the video game medium. Specifically, Bainbridge suggests that the western movement toward secularism has enabled virtual reality to not merely

[146] I am also indebted to Rachel Wagner's article which offers a solid introduction to the field of digital media and religion. See Rachel Wagner, "Gaming Religion? Teaching Religious Studies with Videogames," *Transformations*, vol. 25, no. 1 (July 1, 2014): 101–111, accessed November 21, 2020, https://doi.org/10.1353/tnf.2014.0007.

[147] See Heidi Campbell, *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2013); Terry Ray Clark and Dan W. Clanton, *Understanding Religion and Popular Culture: Theories, Themes, Products and Practices (*Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2012); Eric Michael Mazur and Kate McCarthy, *God in the Details: American Religion in Popular* Culture (New York: Routledge, 2001).

[148] Vit Šisler, Kerstin Radde-Antweiler and Xenia Zeiler, *Methods for Studying Video Games and Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

[149] Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan, *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).

[150] Heidi Campbell and Gregory P. Grieve, *Playing with Religion in Digital Games* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014).

resemble religious practice but replace it through engagement with virtual worlds.[151] Writing from within the Christian tradition, Kevin Schut argues apologetically to reach skeptics who doubt the compatibility of video games with Christian practice.[152] Likewise, Frank Bosman argues that video games as artifacts within culture can be sources of divine revelation and offers a theological approach for discerning practitioners who play video games.[153]

While religion and game studies represent a more recent academic development in the field, scholars endeavored to address more fundamental questions about the video game medium and the implications of interactivity with a digital medium.

3.2 Huizinga's Magic Circle

Many Game Studies scholars credit Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* as a foundational text.[154] In it, Huizinga defended the value of *play* in history and cultural formation and argued for the practice of *play* in a culture that often disregarded it. Even though sport experienced something of a renaissance in the twentieth century, Huizinga lamented western culture's decline in playfulness, noting Romanticism as the last era embodying this "playful spirit."[155] Huizinga did much of his work in between the horrors of two world wars, with Europe's descent into fascism proving it had reached its cultural maturity.[156] Concurrently, his theory of *play* opposed the predominant Protestant work ethic culture of the time.[157]

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[151] See William Sims Bainbridge, *An Information Technology Surrogate for Religion: The Veneration of Deceased Family in Online Games,* 1st ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); William Sims Bainbridge, *eGods: Faith Versus Fantasy in Computer Gaming* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[152] Kevin Schut, *Of Games and God: A Christian Exploration of Video Games* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2013).

[153] Frank G. Bosman, *Gaming and the Divine: A New Systematic Theology of Video Games* (London: Routledge, 2019).

[154] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (London: Routledge, 2000), first published 1938, quoted in Simon Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Jonas Heide Smith, and Susana Pajares Tosca, *Understanding Video Games: The Essential Introduction, 2nd ed*. (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), 29

[155] Valerie Frissen, et al, "Homo Ludens 2.0: Play, Media, and Identity," in *Playful Identities: The Ludification of Digital Media Cultures* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 15.

[156] *Ibid*, 16

[157]Egenfeldt-Nielsen, *Understanding Video Games,* 29.

Huizinga theorized that all cultures grew out of *play* and his work serves as a reminder to recapture playfulness as a meaningful and invaluable part of the human experience.[158]

Within Game Studies, many regard Huizinga's concept of the *magic circle* as his preeminent contribution.[159] To him, games construct *magic circles,* in which different rules and contexts apply that both define and separate the game world from the outside world. By playing the game, participants voluntarily suspend the rules of ordinary life and replace them with the rules and expectations within the magic circle. For instance, playing basketball only functions appropriately if all players adhere to agreed-upon rules that carry little relevance outside the game. While under normal circumstances one does not commit a "traveling violation," within the magic circle of Basketball that rule carries the utmost importance. Likewise, the magic circle permits the use of apparatus such as a hoop and ball that serve no purpose outside the sport itself. Thus, games occur in predefined constructions that people can willingly engage or disengage.

3.3 Movement Toward Player-Centered and Distinctive Formulations

Despite the novelty of Huizinga's work, scholars discovered significant limitations to his argument. For instance, Huizinga runs the risk of generalizing his theory to fit virtually any context that differentiates itself from the mundane. One could argue that humans create magic circles every time they enter new social contexts such as classrooms, bars and nightclubs, and doctor's offices. From this point, Huizinga would have to admit that all of life centers around entering and leaving different magic circles. While his research strove to elevate *games* and *play* in a culture that had mostly moved beyond it, if his theory applies to any social construction then *games* and *play* lose their distinctiveness and value.[160]

[158] Frissen, *Homo Ludens 2.0*, 15.
[159] Egenfeldt-Nielsen, *Understanding Video Games*, 29.
[160] *Ibid*, 29.

3.3.1 Models for Defining *Games*

Ever since Huizinga's ground-breaking work, scholars and professionals endeavoured to fill in the gaps of Huizinga's theory and clarify what these key terms meant.[161] French sociologist Roger Caillois defined *play* as exhibiting four core qualities: it is voluntary, uncertain, unproductive, and make-believe. In that frame of reference, games fell into four different categories: competition, chance, imitation, and vertigo.[162] Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan moved away from using systems and categorization to define games, suggesting instead that they were cultural reflections that revealed societal tendencies and trends. Thus, he described games as "popular art" and "social reactions."[163] Similar to McLuhan, Henry Jenkins agreed that works of popular art, as opposed to the "great arts" or classical arts, were worthy of study. Whereas the classical arts emphasized the intellect, popular arts or "lively arts" often emphasized a person's emotions.[164] Legendary game designer Sid Meier offered another definition where "A game is a series of interesting choices."[165] This more pragmatic version promoted actionable and concrete decisions in game design and theory. Meier's oversimplification is the point, since seeing games from this point of view forces specific outcomes and game mechanics.

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[161] I accept Huizinga's concept of a "magic circle" as a helpful formulation while recognizing that some scholars have argued strongly against this idea. See Mia Consalvo, "There Is No Magic Circle," *Games and Culture,* vol. 4 (October 2009), 408–417, quoted in Egenfeldt-Nielsen, *Understanding Video Games,* 30.

[162] Roger Caillois and Meyer Barash, *Man, Play, and Games* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2001), quoted in Egenfeldt-Nielsen, *Understanding Video Games*, 31-32.

[163] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media; the Extensions of Man*, 1st ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 208-209, quoted in Egenfeldt-Nielsen, *Understanding Video Games,* 33-34

[164] Henry Jenkins, "Games, the New Lively Art," In *Handbook of Computer Game Studies*, ed. Jeffrey H. Goldstein, and Joost Raessens (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 177, quoted in Egenfeldt-Nielsen, *Understanding Video Games*, 36-37.

[165] Egenfeldt-Nielsen, *Understanding Video Games,* 43. See also Leigh Anderson, "GDC 2012: Sid Meier on how to see games as sets of interesting decisions," www.gamasutra.com March 7, 2012, accessed April 21 2020, https://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/164869/GDC_2012_Sid_Meier_on_how_to_see_games_as_sets_of_interesting_decisions.php#:~:text=%22Games%20are%20a%20series%20of,%22%20says%20Firaxis'%20Sid%20Meier.&text=One%20of%20the%20things%20I,elements%20will%20also%20be%20fun.

Two influential works have reinvigorated Game Studies in the opening of the new millennium. In their book, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals,*[166] Katie Salen Tekinbaş and Eric Zimmerman employed a game design perspective to shift the analytical viewpoint from the observer to the participant.[167] Salen and Zimmerman stress the importance of experiencing the interactivity of a video game rather than merely observing from a distance. Drawing from previous scholarship while adding a twist, Salen and Zimmerman strove to make as narrow a definition for a game as possible.

> A game is a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome.[168]

Broken down point for point: games are systems, include players, are artificial, embody conflict, provide rules, and lead to quantifiable outcomes. Since game design prioritizes the player experience (as a designer must consider how the player interacts with the game they create), player centered definitions parallel reception based approaches of which this project utilizes.

However, scholars Simon Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Jonas Heide Smith, and Susana Pajares Tosca point out that, like Huizinga's magic circle, this definition, too, runs the risk of generalization. Despite Salen and Zimmerman's intentions, the definition is too abstract to relate specifically to games. Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, and Tosca use the analogy of taking an exam at school. One could argue that writing the exam behaves like a game due to the existence of an artificial conflict (whether between students or

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[166] Katie Salen Tekinbaş and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).

[167] According to, Keith Burgun, "Game design is the development of the most fundamental aspect of a game: rules … Put simply, game design is deciding what the game's *mechanics* will be." See Keith Burgun, *Game Design Theory a New Philosophy for Understanding Games* (Boca Raton, FL: A K Peters/CRC Press, 2013), 2, Adobe PDF eBook.

[168] Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play*, 80, quoted in Egenfeldt-Neilsen, *Understanding Video Games*, 39.

student and teacher), defined rules (as explained by the institution and the parameters of the exam), and a quantifiable outcome (an earned grade).[169]

During a presentation at the Level Up – Digital Games Research Conference in 2003, Jesper Juul[170] offered a definition of games that proves particularly helpful by being player-centered and distinct to gaming:

> A game is a rule-based formal system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are optional and negotiable.[171]

Juul clarifies Huizinga's vague definition by adding two specific dimensions: the player's experience and "optional and negotiable" consequences. Juul's definition is unique in that the experience and intent of the player shape the game's meaning, including their perceived attachment to its outcome. This addition correlates with Salen and Zimmerman's overarching focus on player experience over external observation. Second, negotiable consequences prevent the definition from sliding into whatever context the user wants. Juul differentiated *classic games* from various other activities that others might casually refer to as games. Continuing the basketball analogy, the fact that it can be played both on a neighbourhood court by amateurs and in a stadium by professional athletes upholds its efficacy as a game and represents the optional and negotiable consequences Juul identifies. In this context, consequences could amount to payment and sponsorships in a professional setting,

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[169] Egenfeldt-Nielsen, *Understanding Video Games*, 40.

[170] Jesper Juul, "The Game, the Player, the World: Looking for a Heart of Gameness," in *Level Up: Digital Games Research Conference Proceedings*, ed. Marinka Copier and Joost Raessens. (Utrecht: Utrecht University, 2003), https://www.jesperjuul.net/text/gameplayerworld/.

[171] *Ibid*.

while amateurs playing together in their backyard may receive nothing by the end of the game.[172] In contrast, activities such as gambling require a bet and payment. While people casually refer to Poker as a game, Juul believes that its predetermined consequences position it farther away from the definition of a *classic game*.[173]

Since this project analyzes *The Binding of Isaac* through the reception history of the Aqedah and describes its function as a *midrash generator*, it favours a player-centered definition. Since reception studies focus on the recipient of any given text, definitions that incorporate the user's experience are more helpful. However, to facilitate comparisons between interpreting texts and playing games, this project requires a distinctive definition for *games*. A game's distinctiveness from other activities simplifies comparisons between playing games and reading the Bible. The comparison itself may indicate that this project falls back into the initial problem created by Huizinga's *magic circle*, that loose comparisons diminish games' unique qualities. However, this thesis emphasizes only that interpreting biblical texts resembles playing games.

3.3.2 Models for Defining *Play*

Most people intuit that one plays a game, not the other way around. However, as in the previous discussion of games, scholars have worked to describe precisely what *play* is. Scholars who study the effects of *play* are quick to point out the complexities of the topic, along with the challenges of communicating to a greater audience. Gordon M. Burghardt admits to the difficulty of defining *play* in an academic sense, lamenting definitions that err on the side of rigidity and others so loose that the

[172] Juul further explains that, "A game is characterized by the fact that it can optionally be assigned real-life consequences. The actual assignment can be negotiated on a play-by-play, location by location, and person to person basis. So while it is possible to bet in the outcome of any normally for-fun-game, it is impossible to enter a casino in Las Vegas and play without betting money." *Ibid*.

[173] I am grateful for Simon Egenfeldt-Neilsen, Jonas Heide Smith, and Susana Pajares Tosca's book, *Understanding Video Games*, that introduced me to many of these scholars and thinkers, especially related to Game Studies. Their guidance helped determine the trajectory of my thought concerning these topics.

concept loses its meaning entirely. While Burghardt admits that many see *play* as, "… seemingly purposeless behaviour that is enjoyable," he argues that "play has been central to the developmental, educational, and therapeutic theories and understanding history, anthropology, social rituals, and the arts."[174]

Bernard Suits suggested framing *play* as the opposite of *work*. In a utopian setting, all activity would be considered *autotelic* or *play*, something done for its own sake, whereas work is a means to another end.[175] Graeme Kirkpatrick's framework of *play* is based on pleasure, players play games to engage an ordered structure or pattern that is pleasurable because of its perfection. In doing so, Kirkpatrick differentiates between *game* as a structure and engagement as *play*.[176] Frustrated by formal definitions of *play* that existed only in the act of playing, Lasse Juel Larsen represents play as an independent phenomenon fully applicable outside the act of playing. He argues for "Play as a Spatial Dyad," made up of two separate but interconnected spaces. The first space is the actual place where *play* happens, whether it be a playground or with a set of toys. The second space is created through what Larsen calls "mental augmentation," where the player uses their imagination to alter the first space into a different context.[177] While a noteworthy definition, it is unclear how Larsen's theory would

[174] Gordon M. Burghardt, "Defining and Recognizing Play," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Development of Play*, vol. 1, ed. Peter Nathan and Anthony D. Pellegrini (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3.

[175] Christopher C. Yorke, "Bernard Suits on Capacities: Games, Perfectionism, and Utopia," *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* vol. 45, no. 2 (May 4, 2018): 177–188, accessed April 21, 2020, http://search.proquest.com/docview/2213817381/. See also, Bernard Suits, *The Grasshopper Games, Life and Utopia* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press), 2005.

[176] Graeme Kirkpatrick, *Aesthetic Theory and the Video Game* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), 23, quoted in Lasse Juel Larsen, "Play and Space - Towards a Formal Definition of Play," *International Journal of Play,* vol. 4, no. 2 (May 4, 2015): 175–189. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/21594937.2015.1060567.

[177] Larsen provides the example of someone climbing an artificial climbing wall as the first space, and then the same person mentally augments the first space, reimagining it as a mountainside cliff; This reimagination is the second space. If mental augmentation occurs between the two spaces, *play* exists outside of any predefined activity. See Larsen, "Play and Space," 183-184.

apply to video games since the medium provides a virtually augmented space for the player to engage with.

Once again, Salen and Zimmerman provide a helpful framework that is readily applicable to the video game medium that consists of a threefold process: First, Salen and Zimmerman describe *play* as "… free movement within a more rigid structure." Where the players' activities have certain boundaries and limitations. Second, game designers define boundaries and limitations that represent systems and rules the player must follow for *play* to exist. Finally, game designers only create the systems and rules that players engage in. Therefore, all potential future actions possible within the game reflect the *Space of Possibility*. The result of a player's free movement, or *play*, within the system leads to all of the creative, unpredictable outcomes possible within the space created by playing the game.[178]

3.3.4 Summary

On the one hand, this chapter provides a brief survey of literature related to digital media and religion and recounted various models for describing *games* and *play*. On the other hand, this project builds on Juul's player-centered view of *classic games* and Salen and Zimmerman's *play* as *Space of Possibility*.

Juul's inclusion of the player experience is vital to the goals of the thesis for two reasons: Just as reception studies favour the reader's interpretation over the author's intent, Juul's definition focuses on the action and intent of the player over that of the games' creator. This complements reception studies assertions that any text, such as the Bible, requires a reader's interpretation to generate meaning in the same sense that a game requires a player's interaction to function.

[178] Katie Salen Tekinbaş and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 66-67.

Salen and Zimmerman's theory of *play* promotes free movement and creative potential, and so benefits this project in two ways: First, their *space of possibility* both clarifies what gameplay consists of and offers a compelling description of biblical interpretation. Rather than presenting a singular reading, the text itself is the "space of possibility" facilitating multiple interpretations. This possibility also undergirds the project's claim that *The Binding of Isaac* functions as a *midrash generator,* that facilitates a multiplicity of interpretations. Secondly, as with Juul, adopting Salen and Zimmerman's *space of possibility* reinforces the experience of the player and recognizes the game as an artifact of interaction. Since both scholars emphasize a player-centered approach, their definitions resonate with the objectives of reception studies.

3.4 *The Binding of Isaac's* Place in the Video Game Medium

Having thoroughly discussed theories of *game* and *play* more broadly, the rest of this chapter focuses on *The Binding of Isaac* itself. Just as in other media, video games can be categorized into genres and subgenres by characteristic tropes and styles. More specifically, *TBOI* exhibits tropes and design characteristics that set it apart from its contemporaries. A description of *TBOI* serves the thesis for one primary reason: *TBOI's* genre helps describe the connections between its gameplay and biblical interpretation. Therefore, *TBOI's* genre and ludic elements offer insights into the different ways the game generates and holds a multiplicity of interpretations.

3.4.1 Role-Playing Games (RPG's) and Roguelikes

The Binding of Isaac falls under the Role-Playing Game (RPG) genre that creates opportunities for players to assume a role different from their own. RPG's are often character-focused, tracking progress through the development of the player character (PC) and supplementary characters that exist in the game world. Character progression can take place in the form of narrative or in gameplay, where the

player accumulates more and more skills, abilities, and items that enable them to tackle significant challenges and experience more of the game's content.

Andrew Burn describes three different characteristics of RPGs: Mimicry, Semiotics, and Drama Theory. Mimicry is concerned with the players' ability to control an avatar and become the protagonist in a narrative. While role-play as mimicry hearkens to wearing masks, disguises, theatre, and acting, the vital difference lies in the agency of the player who is able to effect change within the game. Semiotics' examines the engagement of the player with the avatar, noting the differences between games and other media such as film or literature. Where the latter media often present characters in the third or first-person, the text of a game addresses the avatar in the second person; theoretically, "You" are the character being addressed. Finally, "Drama Theory" suggests that games also represent a dramatic form, with the potential to explore social and political issues. Players often assume the role of skilled individuals beset by sophisticated and authentic simulations of real-world issues that they must somehow reconcile.[179]

TBOI incorporates all the elements of RPGs and also draws upon other narratival and ludic elements of a "roguelike." *TBOI* drew upon the design philosophy and gameplay mechanics/dynamics from a game released decades earlier called *Rogue*,[180] and so *TBOI* is part of the *roguelike* (a portmanteau of "a game like *Rogue*") video game subgenre.[181] After conquering several different levels, players could reach the bottom of the dungeon to collect the final item, thus beating the game. Two of

[179] Andrew Burn, "Role-Playing," in *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies,* ed. Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (New York: Routledge, 2014), 244-247.

[180] Michael Toy, Glenn Wichman, and Ken Arnold, *Rogue,* A.I. Design (Epyx, 1980).

[181] *Rogue* was also part of the *dungeon-crawler* subgenre, whereby the player would navigate through a series of dangerous levels, fending off monsters while picking up items that would empower the character both offensively and defensively. Despite releasing six years after *Rogue,* many consider *The Legend of Zelda* video game as one of the most influential dungeon-crawlers. In it, the player explored a vast overworld with monsters roaming the terrain, and would stumble into *dungeons,* dangerous labyrinths filled with more monsters, deadly puzzles, and treasure. Now a long running franchise, the original *The Legend of Zelda* helped define the dungeon crawler video game genre. See Shigeru Miyamoto and Tezuka Takashi, *The Legend of Zelda,* Nintendo EAD (Nintendo, 1986).

Rogue's most foundational concepts would continue to endure in the roguelike subgenre: Procedural Generation, and Permadeath.

Procedural generation is the process by which each level, monster, and item is randomly pre-generated before every encounter. Upon loading a new level, each layer of the dungeon was different from the time before so that no two playthroughs of the game were the same. The player could not simply memorize the content to complete the game, but had to learn and master its core gameplay mechanics in order to adapt to any situation the game created.

The implementation of Permadeath in *Rogue* added yet another level of complexity and challenge. Many popular games gave the player multiple attempts to complete the content commonly experienced as *extra lives* before any more mistakes resulted in a *game over*. Some games also allowed players to save their progress, so they could stop and quit playing without completely resetting their playthrough or ruining any progress. In *Rogue*, when the avatar died, they were effectively erased and the playthrough ended. Every subsequent playthrough would begin with the creation of a brand-new character with none of the items carrying over from the previous playthrough.[182]

The two innovations of procedural generation and permadeath made *Rogue* and its imitators very challenging and memorable experiences. Players had to master the game despite the potential for unfortunate map layouts, item distribution, and monster positioning. Any mistake could result in the premature death of the avatar and the subsequent loss of all progress. Since then, roguelikes have evolved to include many other genre-defining features as well.[183][184]

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[182] While a player can save their game in a roguelike, they cannot go back to a previously saved file.

[183] The International Roguelike Development Conference in 2008 set out to categorize and define the gameplay elements that constituted a roguelike game. See John Harris, "The Berlin Interpretation," *@Play* GameSetWatch.com, December 18, 2009, accessed April 15, 2020. https://www.gamesetwatch.com/2009/12/column_play_the_berlin_interpr.php

[184] The criteria subsequently known as "The Berlin Interpretation" provided a mixture of both high-value and low-value factors in describing a roguelike. Other high-value factors included: resource management (limited

3.4.2 *The Binding of Isaac's* Ludic Elements

Every playthrough (colloquially known as a "run") of *The Binding of Isaac* begins with the PC placed in a procedurally generated level or "map," with a randomly assigned number of rooms. The player cannot anticipate what kinds of enemies (or items) they will encounter, but can fight back using their tears as projectiles. The player also has a health gauge represented by several hearts that decreases when an enemy lands an attack. To proceed, the player must explore the level by unveiling the map with every new room they enter. The requirements to succeed in each room usually involve defeating enemies, solving simple puzzles, or a combination of both. Completing a room not only allows the player to continue exploring, but also often results in small incremental rewards that appear in the form of coins, hearts, keys, bombs, and a variety of other helpful items.[185] Substantially more impactful items are also randomly generated throughout the level with hundreds of these items existing in the game. Some have minor effects like *buffing* or *nerfing* the avatars' stats such as damage, health, movement speed, or even luck. [186][187] Other items can dramatically transform a certain aspect of the character, forcing the player to adopt different strategies and tactics for the rest of the run. None of these items are inherently good or bad, though some items are more useful in a wider array of contexts. With millions of possible combinations, players must adapt to unexpected situations.[188]

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supplies force the player-character to make meaningful decisions about what they take and leave behind), hack and slash gameplay (a type of combat epitomized by defeating a high number of monsters with no peaceful alternatives), and non-modality (all player actions can be enacted at any time, that includes violent actions in otherwise non-violent contexts) and more. The list from the original conference was moved to this database: Rogue Basin, "Berlin Interpretation," last modified May 15, 2013, accessed April 15, 2020, http://www.roguebasin.com/index.php?title=Berlin_Interpretation

[185] Most of these objects are holdovers from the dungeon-crawler genre. Coins act as currency, hearts as health, keys unlock doors and treasure chests, while bombs damage enemies and blast open weak walls.

[186] Slang employed by gamers and members of the gaming industry, these terms refer to increases or decreases in power to certain elements in the game.

[187] Luck determines the odds for favourable generation of different systems within the game.

[188] Players refer to the algorithmic determination inherent to games with these kinds of design features as a Random Numbers Generator (RNG). Coincidentally, players have come to refer to the term also as *RNGesus*, attributing a caricatural divine status to randomized game systems. By associating procedural generation with the hand of God, players praise or curse *RNGesus* depending on the outcome of events.

The player navigates the labyrinth until they find the boss room.[189] Upon entering, the player must defeat a randomly selected boss enemy, whose defeat triggers a randomly generated item. Then a trap door opens, leading down to the next level. The player must complete several of these levels to get to the final layer where they encounter Mom. If the player defeats Mom, the run ends and the player wins. If, the PC loses all their health at any point, the avatar dies and all progress is lost. To keep playing the game, the player must restart and begin an entirely new playthrough with another randomized dungeon. Sometimes, the game generates a "bad" map, with poor items, tougher enemies, and challenging rooms. Like Poker, part of the skill of the game is knowing when to cut losses and maximize advantages.

The game does not end at simply defeating Mom, but rather encourages the player to start and restart multiple times. While the entire game can realistically occur in under an hour, the player might also fail and die within the first few seconds. The game's many roguelike mechanics make it challenging to complete for most players. Between each level, a small animated vignette plays that gives more backstory to the Isaac character, most of which reveal painful or embarrassing moments in Isaac's life.

Successful completion of any run also brings the opportunity of expanding and lengthening the following one. For instance, after defeating Mom the first time, two more levels are added for all subsequent runs that prompt a radically different encounter with Mom as a final boss. This pattern continues with even more changes and final bosses to defeat as the player succeeds and enters deeper into the game. There are also many *unlockables* that come in the form of new items that appear in the basement when the player meets certain conditions. Finally, the player can unlock a variety of different character avatars to play beside Isaac. Each avatar comes with statistical differentials that has strengths

[189]A "boss" is a common title within gaming jargon that denotes a powerful enemy of unique or special status, often serving as a gatekeeper to more content and a test of skill for players to overcome.

and weaknesses that promote or benefit one's *playstyle*, a unique tactical approach that reflects the players' strengths or preferences.

There are many hidden secrets in *TBOI* as well. Highly experienced players use their intuition to discover secret rooms, while special items assist players to do the same thing. *Consumables* (items used only once before disappearing) may only have a series of question marks as a title, forcing the player to use the item before learning whether it will help or hurt them. *TBOI* asks the player to experiment with its systems even if they are detrimental to the playthrough and risk mitigation is a moment by moment decision. The player must constantly assess situations to determine whether an action is worth doing. Sometimes, the game rewards the player with an item that holds potential but nothing valuable in the moment. The player is forced to choose whether to add it to their collection, hoping for synergistic opportunities in the future, or abandon it in favour of something better.

Everything in-game occurs in *real-time*, so that all player and non-player character (NPC) actions take place without any pause or turn order.[190] The player must react immediately to any threats and retaliate in kind. Movement is key, as sitting still generally makes the player vulnerable to enemy attack. The player must act offensively and defensively at the same time, which can also become overwhelming.

Visual information is communicated crudely, but clearly. The Heads-Up Display (HUD) uses familiar symbols and iconography to provide practical information superimposed over the game screen for the player's benefit. Every acquired item is visible to the player and physically changes the avatar after picking it up, while exploring rooms unfold a small map to show the player where they are and where they have been. [191]

[190] Non-player characters refer to any characters in the game the player has no direct control over. This includes both friendly NPC's and enemy NPC's.

[191] While the avatar appears uniform in the beginning of a run, they are often grossly misshapen or malformed by the end, reflecting the various items the player picked up on their journey.

Even though *TBOI's* unapproachability hinders some from playing, the challenge of learning and mastering something this complex brings satisfaction to others. Further, the randomized nature of the game provides a fresh experience every time. Even if one were to unlock every item, every boss, every piece of content the game offered, randomized placements guarantee a wholly new run requiring different tactics. Fundamentally, the goals and outcomes of the game do not change from run to run. The player always explores the level in order to descend further and must defeat the final boss to trigger the conclusion. Nevertheless, how the player reaches that conclusion is never the same.

3.5 Conclusion

The player's interaction with roguelike games create a unique play experience amidst the vast selection of video games available to consumers. In contrast to others in the roguelike genre, *TBOI* is distinctively suited to create a context for gamers to play through their own story since it emphasizes the user's experience, expanding Salen and Zimmerman's *space of possibility* to extraordinary degrees. Perhaps this explains why gamers talk about *TBOI* endlessly, sharing new perspectives, strategies, and scenarios despite its relatively aged status in the medium. Since *TBOI*'s release in 2011, players have spent hundreds or even thousands of hours playing. Every new run tells a different story.

Chapter 4: Playing *The Binding of Isaac* Through the Lens of Reception History

Having discussed the reception history of the Aqedah and established *The Binding of Isaac's* place in the broader field of game studies, this chapter analyzes *TBOI* through the lens of the Aqedah's reception history. Likewise, Rachel Wagner's lenses for religion and gaming categorize the following chapters within the wider field of digital media and religious studies. After a brief synopsis of the game's narrative, two academic articles provide a methodological contrast with the current project. Indeed, by focusing on reception history, this project fills gaps Bosman, Wieringen, and Welton cannot address. Finally, *TBOI* offers an example of the reception history of the Aqedah while simultaneously demonstrating its propensity for sustaining multiple interpretations. Playing the game with previous interpreters in mind brings new hermeneutical discoveries to the fore and reveals how multilayered *TBOI* truly is.

4.1 Four Lenses for Viewing Religion and Gaming

During a round table discussion with the American Academy of Religion in 2013, Rachel Wagner offered four different lenses for studying religion and video games. While differences between them are subtle, they offer helpful ways of approaching digital media and religious studies. First, the "gaming in religion" lens highlights instances of ludic phenomena manifesting in religious practice. Some religions implemented practices that resembled elements of gaming such as divination or casting lots. Second, the "religion as gaming" lens explains how religious practice resembles elements within the gaming medium. For example, Wagner draws parallels between the Apocalyptic genre and aspects of traditionally designed video games. Third, the "gaming as religion" lens describes the numerous ways gaming communities generate meaning and purpose through the activity of play. Games are extremely good at creating alternative spaces that provide similar benefits to religious practice to adapt to a

chaotic world (ie. escape, ritual, structure, etc.). Finally, the "religion in gaming" lens concerns itself with representations of real world or fictionalized religions expressed as content within the game's ludology or narratology. An example of this might be if part of the game's setting takes place in a religious building or features certain religious beliefs within the actual content.

Of the four lenses described above, this chapter utilizes the "religion in gaming" lens by discussing examples of the Aqedah's reception history that appear in *The Binding of Isaac's* content. This content features references and allusions to various real world religious traditions or Biblical passages beyond the game's inspired setting of Genesis 22. Later, chapter 5 employs the "gaming as religion" lens in order to explore the many ways *TBOI* encourages reinterpretation and meaning making through midrash generation.

4.2 A Narratological Synopsis of *The Binding of Isaac*

The Binding of Isaac broke ground for its controversial story and explicit mixture of religion and vulgarity. The opening "cinematic" introduces the premise of the game with an artistic style that may initially surprise players since it employs a hand-drawn aesthetic, mimicking the pencil scribblings in a child's schoolbook. The narrator begins a traditional monologue, setting up the main characters and conflict. Two people, a mother and son, live in a house on a hill. The son, the eponymous Isaac, plays with toys and draws happily on paper while his mother, dubbed throughout the game simply as "Mom," watches Christian television programs. The narrator states they were initially happy, when suddenly Mom hears a voice from above telling her that sin has corrupted Isaac who now requires salvation. Responding quickly and obediently, Mom follows the command by taking away all of Isaac's toys, drawings, and even his clothes, leaving him naked. Again, a voice from above tells Mom that Isaac is still corrupt; she must separate him from all that is evil and compel him to confess his sins. Again, in obedience, she responds by locking Isaac in his room. Finally, the voice commands her to sacrifice Isaac

to prove her love and devotion. Without hesitation Mom races to Isaac's bedroom with a kitchen knife in hand intent on killing him, while Isaac uncovers a trapdoor beneath a rug leading to the basement. Just as he escapes through the trapdoor, Mom bursts into the room and the chase begins. From this point on, the player controls Isaac and runs deeper into the basement to avoid and ultimately defeat Mom.

The story of the game unfolds in two ways: First, every time the player completes a level a short vignette plays that illustrates a moment in Isaac's past. For example, some of these reveal Isaac being bullied for various reasons, while others show Mom neglecting Isaac as a child. Second, successful completion of the game unlocks new endings that expand the mythos of Isaac's experience, with twenty unique endings in all. The first ten generally end with Isaac opening a treasure chest, a common trope in many dungeon-crawlers, that provides an item to use in subsequent runs. However, most of these endings usually have negative repercussions on Isaac.

4.3 Authorial Intent Approaches

In recent years, articles by Bosman, Wieringen, and Welton analyze *The Binding of Isaac* seeking to offer insight into McMillen's motivations for creating *TBOI* and point readers to issues McMillen valued. Just as scholars attempt to look at the author's intent in a written document, so Bosman, Wieringen, and Welton prioritize the intended meaning of the creator of *TBOI* within the video game medium. However, this approach limits the interpretive potential of the game by compelling players to familiarize themselves with McMillen's background and worldview in order to form a proper interpretation of the game.

Frank Bosman and Archibald van Wieringen use intertextual comparisons drawn from the work of Julia Kristeva to suggest that *The Binding of Isaac* primarily criticizes religion and child abuse.[192] By thoroughly examining the narratological elements of the game, they endeavour to reconstruct the story of *TBOI,* which they see constructed by McMillen to communicate his view of the Aqedah and to compel players to consider the consequences of previously unchallenged belief systems. According to Bosman and Wieringen, McMillen reinterprets the Aqedah to condemn all forms of abuse, whether they take place in the archaic form of human sacrifice or contemporary contexts of domestic abuse or divorce.[193]

Bosman and Wieringen structure their argument in two ways. First, they make direct comparisons between the "arche-text" of the Aqedah narrative in Genesis 22 with the "feno-text" of *The Binding of Isaac*.[194] Second, they suggest that multiple narratological levels contribute to a complex discussion of religious appropriation, ritual human sacrifice, child abuse, divorce, and psychological coping mechanisms. Despite attributing only the first of their narratological levels to McMillen's religious upbringing, his inspiration provides the foundation for the rest of the work.

> McMillen's heavy use of religious phrases, artefacts, items, and images is, therefore, not accidental to the game, but expresses the developer's inspiration and intentions. Every interpretation of the game's content should take this religious inspiration into consideration.[195]

For Bosman and Wieringen, every proper interpretation of the game requires familiarity with McMillen's religious background. As their reference to McMillen's "inspiration and intentions" reflects, their approach relies on discovering authorial intent. Anyone who plays *TBOI* and is not familiar with the

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[192] Frank Bosman and Archibald van Wieringen, "I Have Faith in Thee, Lord: Criticism of Religion and Child Abuse in the Video Game the Binding of Isaac," *Religions,* vol. 9, no. 4 (2018): 133–150, accessed April 1, 2020, http:// doi:10.3390/rel9040133.

[193] *Ibid,* 16.

[194] Bosman and Wieringen do not provide definitions for the terms "arche-text" and "feno-text," citing only Kristeva's *Desire in Language*. Their use of the terms implies an intertextual connection between the source text of Genesis 22 with the retelling of *The Binding of Isaac*.

[195] *Ibid*, 5.

arche-text or the interviews McMIllen gave to explain his past and viewpoints is left behind in the interpretive foot race towards a more perfect understanding of the feno-text.

In a similar way, Rebekah Welton also focuses on the life and intention of the creator of *TBOI.*[196] Drawing from Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg's *Sustained Fictions*, Welton comes to two conclusions. First, *TBOI* depicts the Aqedah horrifically to criticize corporal punishment practiced in conservative or fundamentalist Christian communities. Second, this interpretation is undermined by misogynistic portrayals of the primary antagonist, Mom, which continues the long tradition of vilifying the feminine in place of the masculine.

Welton mentions McMillen many times throughout the article, as her methodology compels her to consider the reasons why he made certain decisions about the game and the retelling it presents. As stated before, McMillen's horrific portrayal of the story as "translocated" to a contemporary setting convinces Welton that the Aqedah not only deserves to be read as a horrific text, but leads her to challenge whether the text can be read any other way.

> It might be more tempting to believe that in *TBoI* Mom chases Isaac with a knife because she is mentally ill, but McMillen has stated this is not the case. Instead, he is confronting people with the idea that this pious act of child sacrifice is horrendous, and if it is viewed as horrendous now, then why should the biblical story be viewed any differently?[197]

Welton also stresses the agency of the player, whose physical actions merge with the events on screen allowing the player to, in a way, experience what Isaac does in-game. If this is what McMillen intended the player to experience, then by Welton's logic, the player cannot come to any conclusion but critique.

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[196] Rebekah Welton, "Isaac Rebounds: A Video Game Retelling of the Aqedah," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament,* vol. 44, no. 3 (March 2020): 293–314.

[197] *Ibid,* 12.

Both of these recent articles adopt an authorial intent approach that demand players to identify the concerns and values of the creator before building their interpretation of the game. However, by only examining the original source text of the Aqedah in relation to the contemporary retelling of *TBOI*, scholars bypass the two thousand years of interpretive voices. In contrast, the current focus on reception studies lift those voices out of history to speak together in the same space.

4.4 Reception History Approach

When one considers the reception history of the Aqedah in light of *The Binding of Isaac*, the player becomes aware of the divergent interpretations readers gave the text from within their own horizon. Furthermore, readers interpret the text by emphasizing certain points over others, making changes, or filling in the gaps of the source text using their repertoire. Welton believes that interpretive changes in an adaptation might disorient or even compromise the sacredness of the source text. As she states: "These changes radically transform the story and, while disruptive to the story's status as 'canonical' or 'sacred', they also confront and challenge the thematic preferences of the text."[198] Welton suggests that *TBOI's* divergences challenge the "thematic preferences" of a blameless, obedient, Abraham as the model of faith for believing communities. However, a survey of reception history proves that radical changes do not disrupt its canonicity or sacredness. On the contrary, it was precisely the nature of the text's canonicity and sacredness that spurred so many interpretations that emerged from wrestling with the Aqedah from within their own setting.

In *Reception Theory and Biblical Hermeneutic's*, David Paul Parris describes three benefits of reception history in biblical studies. First, surveying the reception history of a biblical text enables the interpreter to discern "legitimate and illegitimate interpretations of the text" while reminding them of insights raised by other traditions that may have been lost over time. Second, reception history reveals

[198] *Ibid,* 7.

how interpretations of the Bible have influenced and shaped history. Finally, studying reception history situates the reader's position within their tradition in relation to the text and its interpreters throughout history.[199] Analyzing *TBOI* with the range of reception history in mind opens the possibility for new questions to emerge in the resulting conversation created between the interpreter and the game.

4.5 *The Binding of Isaac* as Sacred Parody

While some react negatively to changes in the Aqedah text in *The Binding of Isaac,* they forget that a long tradition within Judaism permits radical divergences in reinterpretations. As explained in chapter two, David Roskies described two categories of Jewish reinterpretation that both reflected interpretive strategies that enabled Jews to understand their own circumstances as cyclical in light of their history. While "literal recall" adapted Jewish stories point for point to contemporary events, "sacred parody" permitted significant variations to the original story to contextualize it into the present.[200] Using Roskies' terminology, this project places *TBOI* within the sacred parody tradition of reinterpretation.

Sacred parodies demonstrate the flexibility to reinterpret texts using the language, symbols, and reordered events relevant to generations of different readers. Rather than disrupting the sacredness or canonicity of a text, sacred parodies reflect a community's engagement with biblical texts. Instead of seeing texts as recorded events fixed in time, sacred parodies recognize cyclical historical patterns perpetually open to new interpretations. Therefore, a reaction to an interpretation often says more about the interpreter than the potential relevance of the interpretation.

The following does not analyze *TBOI* as an isolated piece of reception disconnected from the Aqedah's interpretive history but rather examines the game through the lens of that history. In other words, this analysis engages *TBOI* as if the interpreters of the past are playing the game together in the

[199] Parris, *Reception Theory and Biblical Hermeneutics,* 301.
[200] See 2.2.4.

same room. Rather than discuss each interpreter in turn with the game, the section analyzes the game and then draws key interpretive hallmarks from the reception history of the Aqedah in order to reveal the many ways they resonate with each other.

4.5.1 Critique and Embrace of the Tradition

Wide agreement persists that *The Binding of Isaac* functions as a critique of religious adherence and certain community practices. In a pure critique, every element of the accused would experience a subversion or rejection of its once accepted qualities. Through Mom's character, *TBOI* certainly portrays aspects of institutional Christianity and practice negatively. However, despite the presentation of its backstory and thematic elements of child abuse, playing the game reveals a tension between criticism and embrace of religious traditions.

Within the game, the vast majority of items related to biblical and extrabiblical events or practices help rather than hurt the player. "The Wafer," an item meant to represent the Host in Catholic Mass, increases damage resistance. "Jawbone," a reference to Samson, summons a familiar that attacks enemies.[201] "Spear of Destiny," the weapon of a Roman soldier used to stab Jesus Christ on the cross, does damage to any enemy the spear touches. Dozens more examples of religious or biblical paraphernalia with positive benefits seemingly oppose a blanket condemnation of traditional religion.

This said, items and powerups related to the Satanic and occult can be equally beneficial. One of the most coveted items is "Brimstone," whose icon represents the Alchemical sign for sulphur and so a symbol for Satanism. Rather than shooting individual tears, "Brimstone" transforms the avatar's main attack into a "blood laser beam" that does significantly more damage, passes through enemies, and

[201] "Familiars" in games usually refer to any creature or object summoned by the player to assist their avatar, which may relate to its real-world definition: "a spirit often embodied in an animal and held to attend and serve or guard a person." See *Meriam-Webster Online*, s.v. "Familiar," accessed September 8, 2020, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/familiar.

bypasses obstacles. Likewise, the "Spirit of the Night," whose icon resembles the Pagan symbol for blessing, makes the avatar's tears pass through objects and grants flight.

If *TBOI* was meant to function as a criticism of traditional religion, one might also expect the majority of bosses to represent the accused faction. In reality, the player often encounters traditional foes of religiously orthodox Christianity, including "The Seven Deadly Sins," "The Four Horsemen," "Satan," and many others. At the same time, subversions of this framework also exist; the player can fight angelic beings as well as a boss called, "The Lamb," a reference to Christ in the book of Revelation. Nonetheless, in comparison with the demonic and satanic which have held adversarial status in traditional Christianity, angelic and heavenly enemies represent a small fraction of the potential encounters.

Finally, *TBOI* contains numerous references to other video games and gaming culture in general, whose inclusion is noteworthy due to the medium's unsubstantiated association with satanism. During the "Satanic Panic" of the 1980s, Christian groups advocated against *Dungeons & Dragons* as a partner to evil and Satanic powers.[202] Christian advocacy groups stigmatized the medium itself as games became associated with Satanism.[203] In *TBOI,* players can find items such as "D10" and "D20," both references to dice used in *Dungeons & Dragons*. Another item from gaming culture is the "Gamekid," an obvious pseudonym for Nintendo's massively popular handheld console Gameboy, "Gamekid" transforms the avatar into a Pacman lookalike, makes them invincible, scares all enemies in the room and replenishes health for every two enemies killed. By bringing items from the broader gaming culture into the game itself, *TBOI* affirms the game medium as the player fights against those that most likely demonized it, such as Mom or satanic factions that were associated with role-playing games in the past.

[202] *Dungeons & Dragons* is an influential "pen and paper" role-playing game and progenitor to modern digital RPGs, to which *TBOI* belongs.

[203] Joseph P. Laycock, *Dangerous Games: What the Moral Panic over Role-Playing Games Says About Play, Religion, and Imagined Worlds*, 1st ed (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), 103.

Recognizing that *TBOI* simultaneously embraces and critiques religious tradition reveals two points. First, rather than definitively scrutinizing the Christian tradition, *TBOI* holds multiple traditions accountable while admitting a degree of usefulness and character formation by those same traditions. This is clearly demonstrated through its vast array of items from biblical, extrabiblical, traditional, and unorthodox sources, many of which actively help the player or provide positive benefits in some way. Second, by incorporating items from various traditions and the subcultures they belong to, *TBOI* itself recognizes the effect reception has had on traditions the game references. For instance, though the "Sacred Heart" item does not appear anywhere in the Bible or the Aqedah, *TBOI* brings this item into its reinterpretation of the Aqedah acknowledging the Catholic voice within the interpretive tradition.[204] *TBOI's* representation of other traditions reflect the varied reception history of the Aqedah and incorporates their contributions into the game's narrative and ludological elements.

4.5.2 Gaps, Changes, and Subversions

In 'Odysseus' Scar' Erich Auerbach compares the *Odyssey's* fastidiousness with the Aqedah's ambiguity and reveals how each text's style offered a completely different reading experience that ultimately predisposed the Aqedah to interpretation.[205] Auerbach explains that throughout the *Odyssey* Homer's attention to detail foregrounds the characters' locations, intentions, motivations, and decision making process. While Homer's meticulousness offers the reader an opportunity for in-depth analysis, little room exists for interpretation. In contrast, Auerbach describes how the Aqedah provides the opposite reading experience as Genesis 22 moves important narrative detail to the background of the text so that characters' thoughts, intentions, and motivations are not explicitly stated. Therefore, reading the Aqedah lends itself more naturally to interpretation because the lack of information inspires

[204] Birgit Meyer, "The Sacred Heart of Jesus," *Material Religion,* vol. 13, no. 2 (April 3, 2017), 232, accessed July 23, 2020, https://doi.org/10.1080/17432200.2017.1302126.

[205] Erich Auerbach, "Odysseus' Scar," in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature, Fiftieth-Anniversary Edition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 3-23, Adobe PDF eBook.

readers to ask questions of the text when answers are not readily provided. To Auerbach, the Aqedah reads as if "…all else (is) left to obscurity; the decisive points of the narrative alone are emphasized, what lies between is nonexistent…"[206]

In a similar way, *The Binding of Isaac* harbours its own style of narrative presentation that lends itself open to debate and interpretation. *TBOI's* introduction only offers enough material to trigger the inciting incident. Much like the Aqedah, the narration describes little beyond what is required for the game to proceed. Outside of two scenes with narration, no dialogue exists in the game and characters remain mostly silent throughout. Vignettes in between levels display only a few seconds of images, forcing the player to infer their meaning and significance. Like the biblical Aqedah, *TBOI's* presentation leaves critical information out of the narrative, compelling the player to fill in gaps and embrace changes to the story through interpretation.

For instance, rather than setting *TBOI* in its ancient near eastern context at Mt. Moriah, the game takes place in the contemporary setting of Isaac's home where the player navigates the house's ever-changing basement filled with obstacles, traps, and monsters. In doing so, *TBOI's* contemporary setting conveniently positions itself in the ideal place to benefit from the Aqedah's reception history. From the game's vantage point, *TBOI* draws from a larger pool of traditions than if it were placed in its original context, which both has the benefit of using the Aqedah for the game's source material and provides a broader interpretive canvas for the player to experience. Additionally, the changes from the Aqedah reflect a shift in orientation. The Aqedah describes an ascent up a mountain in a culture where mountains were commonly associated with divine spaces.[207] Despite the overall complexity of the

[206] *Ibid*, 11.

[207] Susan Ackerman connects ancient Israelite conceptions of the "cosmic mountain" of Eden with holy mountains and sacred places such as Solomon's Temple and the site at Tel Dan. Her descriptions of cosmic paradisal mountains, theophanies, and Temple sites evoke images of the Aqedah as well. See Susan Ackerman, "E-Dan," *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions,* vol. 13, no. 2 (2013): 153-87, accessed July 27, 2020. https://doi:10.1163/1569212412341250.

Aqedah event, Abraham and Isaac's ascension up Mt. Moriah metaphorically represents their journey towards a greater holiness or experience of God. *TBOI* reinterprets the Aqedah with a downward orientation, where Isaac moves deeper and deeper into the basement, and so moving himself further from the light of day and the world familiar to him. At one point the player has a choice whether to ascend to a new level called the "Cathedral" or to continue their downward orientation into "Sheol." While both heavenly and hellish spaces in *TBOI* are hostile to Isaac, the game reverses the traditional orientation by taking the player downward, and then subverts the player's expectation by allowing them to choose their orientation even if challenges await either way.

While in the biblical account Isaac's state remains unknown until Abraham's servant presents Rebekah to him in Genesis 24:62-66, *TBOI's* various endings offers ambiguous clues as to Isaac's fate. Rather than a linear progression, the player must repeat the game in many cycles to earn increasingly vivid glimpses of the story. While several endings look identical to each other with only minor variations, other endings make radical additions. The final unlockable cinematics in the game reveal bits and pieces of the characters' backstory, implying that at one point a father figure left the family and that Isaac may have had a sister. Even so, the reasons for character absences go unresolved. In his last scene, Isaac's skeleton lies in a chest in his room, only to see him wandering intact through a gray wasteland in the next scene. Is Isaac alive, dead, or something in between? Did the player win or lose the game, and is that even the right question? Not only does *TBOI's* cyclical storytelling resemble a Jewish understanding of time as cyclical or a series of reoccurrences, but the game demonstrates its ability to generate and maintain a multitude of interpretations.[208]

[208] Sara Gribetz and Lynn Kaye survey the development in Jewish Studies about the concept of time. They reframe cyclical understandings of time into "reoccurrences" emphasizing that events do not merely repeat themselves in a cycle again and again but recur without holding a particular shape. See Sarit Kattan Gribetz and Lynn Kaye, "The Temporal Turn in Ancient Judaism and Jewish Studies," *Currents in Biblical Research,* vol. 17, no. 3 (June 2019): 340, accessed August 16, 2020. https://doi:10.1177/1476993X19833309.

Although Isaac was presumably old enough to speak and comprehend conversation, Genesis 22 does not provide the reader with a clear indication for how old Isaac is at the time of the Aqedah (vv.7-8). However, the game version of Isaac physically looks like an infant who is naked and hairless with large exaggerated eyes that cry constantly. While this visual portrays the biblical patriarch as an unwilling, vulnerable, and innocent sacrificial victim, *TBOI* subverts expectations by also giving Isaac a high degree of agency and power. Unlike an infant, Isaac can walk upright, giving him the ability to maneuver around obstacles, traps, and foes in the basement. Isaac weaponizes his tears and can pick up the numerous items strewn throughout the basement to empower himself against his enemies.[209] Isaac's perceived vulnerability fades away as he draws upon the various influences in his life represented by the items and powerups in the game. The Aqedah's unclear description of Isaac's age and capability pushes readers to interpret and come to their own conclusions, and by filling the game with items from biblical and extrabiblical sources, *TBOI* gives the player as Isaac the advantages they need to defeat Mom and thwart her sacrificial plan.

4.5.3 Obedience, Protest, and Criticism

The Binding of Isaac's portrayal of Mom and Isaac call for a discussion on obedience as an expression of faith. In game, Mom's obedience compels her to kill Isaac, while Isaac's flight preserves his life. *TBOI* caricaturizes the image of a faithful and obedient Christian parent as unquestioning, undiscerning, and unethical. Bosman, Wieringen, and Welton all see McMillen criticizing this kind of interpretation and affirming the notion that such intense obedience leads to abusive behaviours in certain communities. By portraying Mom as the antagonist, the game implies that Isaac's victory over her also functions as a triumph over religious zealotry and blind obedience.

[209] See 3.3.2.

As seen previously, Martin Luther and John Calvin popularized the virtue of obedience in western Protestant readings of the Aqedah by presenting Abraham and Isaac as the preeminent examples for Christians who demonstrate the level of trust required for faithful practice.[210] Since Abraham's obedience received so much praise throughout history, Welton wonders if his exalted stature protected him from rightful judgment. From Welton's assessment of McMillen, *TBOI* takes off the rose-tinted glasses and reveals to everyone the horror of the Aqedah and how obedience understood in this way leads to dangerous praxis in faith communities. While Luther and Calvin's renowned interpretation may give the impression that they held an exclusive view accepted by everyone, chapter two demonstrates their views have not been universally accepted, with others contributing various challenges to this view of faith and obedience. The following examples demonstrate how *TBOI* relates to the variety of critiques levied at the Aqedah text over the centuries.

In *TBOI,* Mom hears the command from the voice above and, like Abraham, chooses to heed it. Therefore, according to Immanuel Kant she falls into the same trap Abraham does. As a rational being, Isaac's mom knew better than to trust the voice because the command was so abhorrent that she could not know for sure whether it came from God or something more sinister. While the opening cinematic does not confirm the source of the voice from above, a randomly assigned vignette displayed between levels reveals who spoke to Mom. The vignette shows an apparition in the ceiling whispering down revealing that a secret playable character known as "The Lost" spoke to Mom in the opening cinematic. Since Kant speculated that the voice belonged not to God but a demonic being, he argued that as a

[210] Luther and Calvin were not the first to advocate for obedience as a primary interpretation. Celebrations of Rosh Hashanah hearken back to the Aqedah as a way of reminding God of Abraham and Isaac's obedience. Jews ask God to extend mercy to them every year just as was done for Abraham and Isaac in the Aqedah. See Eli Reich, "God of Judgment, God of compassion: A reading of the Rosh Hashanah Service," *Judaism: A Quarterly Journal of Jewish Life and Thought,* vol. 46, no. 3 (1997): 259-266, *Gale Academic OneFile* (accessed August 12, 2020), https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A20119160/AONE?u=uniwater&sid=AONE&xid=466c7194.

rational being Abraham should not have listened to the voice of God because it violated the universal or the ethical.

In effect, Mom's actions illustrate Kant's fears of an unethically formed mind influenced by whatever spectre happens to cross paths with them. *TBOI* not only critiques religious traditions that affirm the belief in a benevolent God giving unethical commands while expecting unflinching obedience, but also critiques undiscerning communities who obey any command given to them. Rather than a radical departure, *TBOI* resonates strongly with this aspect of the reception history of the Aqedah. Of the interpreters sampled in chapter two, Kant's condemnation of Abraham's ethics offered the first significant critique of what was Luther and Calvin's view of the text.

Søren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* functioned as a theoretical defence of Abraham's decision to sacrifice Isaac and a rebuttal to the argument posed by Kant. However, *TBOI* functions as an examination of Kierkegaard's description of a subjective, ethically suspended faith in relation to the absolute by recontextualizing Abraham's behaviour through Mom. While Kierkegaard claimed that Abraham's trial was his alone, *TBOI* places Mom in similar circumstances and with comparable devotion to the biblical patriarch. However, Mom never becomes Kierkegaard's "Knight of Faith" because, despite her obedience and intent to sacrifice her son, she fails to anticipate two contingencies: Isaac runs away and retaliates, and God's intervention leads to her death. When applied this way, Kierkegaard's subjective and personal description of faith isolates Mom from Isaac and the being she worships and blinds her to their reactions. Rather than becoming the triumphant and mysterious "Knight of Faith" Kierkegaard described, Mom unwittingly becomes the exact thing Kant feared thus reinforcing his insistence for theological and ethical compatibility.

TBOI sympathizes with other interpreters who feel uncomfortable or appalled by God's behaviour in Genesis 22. For instance, the opening cinematic revealed that after hearing the voice from above, Mom progressively intensified the level of restriction and control she imposed on Isaac. She took away

his toys, his clothes, and eventually locked Isaac in his room before seeking his death. Likewise, Philosopher Louise Antony's reading of the Aqedah convinced her that God obsessed over controlling creatures, allowing murder and death if it fit into a divine plan, likening it to that of an abusive parent. Antony and *TBOI* indicate here that metaphors portraying God as a good parent dissolve in light of the Aqedah, exemplified clearly in abusive parentage motivated by religious beliefs as in Mom's case.

As a video game, *TBOI* offers players a unique opportunity to engage with an interpretation of the Aqedah from the perspective of someone suffering from abuse. Here, Welton's observation about player "agency" and "immersion" provides language to understand how this functions. By suggesting that "…Isaac becomes a self of the player," they confront Isaac's predicament and those who experienced a similar kind of abuse can potentially feel catharsis.[211] While some scholars, like Luther and Calvin, focused on Abraham's faith, others such as Greg Boyd and Eric Siebert focused on God's seemingly disturbing behaviour. Siebert advocates for reading the text with those who experienced similar abuse and follow their lead, which naturally crosses paths with Welton's observation about immersion and agency in gaming. Like Siebert's hermeneutic of solidarity, *TBOI* enables players to interpret the story from the perspective of someone living in an abusive home. Perhaps Siebert would affirm video games as a means to empathize with others as *TBOI* does.

From this discussion, several things become apparent. First, *TBOI* functions like a case study of Kant's suspicions, demonstrating the "what if" worst-case scenario of the indiscriminate layperson. Second, the game carries a deep suspicion of religious communities and/or interpretations that permit abusive and restrictive behaviour, especially if biblical or theological belief systems inspire those behaviours. *TBOI* shows how certain beliefs of God's character can legitimize human action in real world contexts. Finally, reception history shows that Abraham and the Aqedah have not been spared critique,

[211] Welton, "Isaac Rebounds," 7.

and indeed have received tremendous scrutiny. While Bosman, Wieringen, and Welton presented the reception of the Aqedah as if Luther and Calvin held the monopoly of interpretation, interpreters over the centuries have presented challenges and questions to the reformers' perspective of Genesis 22.[212] In short, *TBOI* represents a more recent contribution to major discussions that have already occurred for centuries on the acceptability of obedience as a primary virtue within the Aqedah narrative.

4.5.4 Horror, Humour, and Heroism

TBOI contains a dark and disorienting narrative. Despite its childish aesthetic and seemingly immature presentation, the unsettling themes of religious zealotry and abuse appear repeatedly. Welton acknowledges this tone by suggesting that the games "horrific" presentation proves the Aqedah horrific as well. Isaac's descent through the basement and monsters he must defeat create a nightmarish scenario that potentially represents Isaac's experience of abuse at the hands of his mother. However, *TBOI's* retro aesthetic and exaggerated character designs often evoke a childlike cuteness that occasionally interrupts the player's relationship with the potentially horrific content. Welton sees this artistic aspect "softening" the game's themes, which she compares to midrash that reinterpreted Isaac's role in the Aqedah as voluntary and pious as opposed to unaware and helpless. From her perspective, softening the text or game obscures the true horror of the story by making its content more palatable. However, Welton's claim does not consider the reception history of the Aqedah that embraces a variety of thematic tones that understand the Aqedah as more than simply horror.

For instance, the game is replete with moments of levity and dark humour. For every disgusting monster or demonic entity the player encounters, they are just as likely to find an item like "Jesus Juice,"

[212] Despite their focus on authorial intent, Bosman, Wieringen, and Welton cite other sources from the reception history of the Aqedah as part of their analysis of *TBOI*. For instance, Bosman and Wieringen discuss the implications for the Aqedah's use as an anti-human sacrificial apology and they cite Boehm (Omri Boehm, *The Binding of Isaac: A Religious Model of Disobedience*, The Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 468 New York and London: T & T Clark) as supplementary material in agreement with their argument. Welton cites Jewish Midrash on the insertion of Satan in the Aqedah and Isaac's more voluntary portrayal. However, they invoke these perspectives to strengthen their arguments rather than entering into dialogue with them.

a tongue-in-cheek reference to communion whereby some traditions replaced wine with grape juice. Likewise, some other items contain the potential to trigger a dark sense of humour. For instance, few players would expect to pick up the "Dead Cat" item, nor expect it to have a positive effect in game. Finally, *TBOI* employs crude toilet humour that often subverts its serious undertones of human sacrifice and religious criticism. Feces are strewn throughout the basement, while items in the game can make the player defecate or urinate uncontrollably. While certainly invoking humour of an entirely different calibre, in *Messengers of God* Elie Wiesel suggested that just as the Jewish people survived the Holocaust and learned to move on, the biblical Isaac lived a full life and learned to embrace his namesake of laughter. Wiesel's observation serves as a reminder that the Aqedah and the game inspired by it both contain the interpretive possibility to experience humour through Isaac himself.

TBOI also provides glimpses of heroism. Whether picking up a new heart container to improve Isaac's health or overcoming numerous challenges in the basement, Isaac conquers every obstacle set against him by the player's hand, leading triumphantly to his battle with Mom where he proudly stands atop her corpse after the player beats the game. This emphasis on heroism in the midst of overwhelming odds resonates with the Zionist movement's appropriation of the Aqedah narrative that took what was once understood as a victim text and transformed it into a heroic martyrology. Not without its controversy either, the Zionist view mingled horror and heroism together, creating an interpretation that justified sending Jewish people to war. This mixture of surviving and thriving, speaks to the horror and blessing of the Aqedah the Zionist movement fought for. Like the Aqedah, *TBOI* is too complex to reduce to only one kind of thematic tone. As readers and players interact with the text and game, they inevitably discover nuances in the story that others miss.

Like a crossroad, the Aqedah and *TBOI* mingle horror, humour, and heroism into a new narrative arc. Rather than softening the themes in the text and the game, additional thematic tones recontextualize the offensive themes in a way that appeals to a wider set of interpretive backgrounds.

Alongside the horrific scenarios played out in *TBOI*, humour and heroism complicate the game's narratology and assist the player to come to their own conclusions about the content and what it means to them.

4.5.5 Matriarchy and Shifting Focus

The shift from a father figure to a mother figure represents one of the most provocative changes to the Aqedah in *The Binding of Isaac,* illustrating the game's status as a sacred parody.[213] While Mom's natural parallel seemingly belongs with Sarah the biblical matriarch, *TBOI* toys with the connection between Abraham and Sarah by making Mom the sacrificer in the game. As one of *TBOI's* primary antagonists, the game sets the player against Mom in their inevitable conflict from the very beginning. Mom's role as sacrificer in *TBOI* develops out of a fractured family life and religious obsession that subverts expectations of a caring mother figure and demonstrates how these contextual factors distorted Mom's disposition towards Isaac into violence and abuse. When compared with other interpreters' reimaginings of the matriarch, *TBOI's* portrayal of Mom finds its unique place amongst the portraits of matriarchs. Finally, Mom's role as the antagonist demands a shift in focus to Isaac as the protagonist, which encourages players to empathize with Isaac's perspective and prioritize questions from his point of view.

Mom's portrayal changes depending on the context of each encounter. In cinematics, Mom appears unremarkable with no noteworthy features, a polka dot dress and white hair forming the basis

[213] Bosman and Wieringen argue that the parental switch in *TBOI* bears little significance. They suggest the arche-text's primary concern revolved around sonship and inheritance customs common in ancient near eastern settings and so propose *TBOI's* gender change generalizes the source of abuse thereby negating the role of gender in the abuser. Furthermore, since inheritance rites do not overshadow the setting of the game, *TBOI* can swap the gender of the parent without generating problems. See Bosman and Wieringen, "I have Faith in Thee," 15. However, the adoption of matrilineal genealogies described in rabbinical texts such as m.Kiddushin 3:12 complicate claims of inheritance rites since Sarah was there alongside Abraham in receiving the promise of a son in Genesis 18:9-15. See also Susan Sorek, "Mothers of Israel: Why the Rabbis Adopted a Matrilineal Principle," *Women in Judaism,* vol. 3, no. 1 (January 1, 2002): 1–, accessed August 17, 2020, https://wjudaism.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/wjudaism/article/view/197/247.

of her appearance. However, encounters with Mom during gameplay reveal an almost entirely different character. She is so comically oversized that her body cannot fit in the frame of the screen, with various appendages bulging through doorways and dropping from the ceiling to crush Isaac. When Mom attacks a giant, veiny, obese leg stuffed into a red high heel crashes into frame. Likewise, after defeating her for the first time two additional levels of the basement open up for subsequent playthroughs where Isaac can go back inside Mom's body in stages called, "Womb" and "Utero." Here, Isaac has the opportunity to defeat Mom once and for all by destroying her from the inside out.

One of *TBOI's* endings reveal that Isaac's father left the family for unknown reasons, which explains the parental change from the Aqedah and establishes Mom as the sacrificer in the game. Including the parents' divorce or separation in the game not only reveals crucial background information for Isaac and his family but clarifies their collective experience of trauma. Mom raises Isaac as a single parent and clues from various ending cinematics and vignettes suggest that Mom was negligent and controlling in her behaviour towards Isaac. As demonstrated in the opening cinematic of the game, Mom's actions seem inspired by her religious beliefs, which might imply the use of her beliefs as coping mechanisms for the fallout of her marriage and the struggles of single parenthood.

By revealing conditions that led to Mom and Isaac's conflict, *TBOI* provides a deeper context for the matriarch's role as sacrificer beyond a mere swap. Mom's actions and behaviour in the game heighten the tension because, her dispassion toward her son's anguish runs antithetical to the image of a tender, compassionate mother dedicated to their child's wellbeing. Since the voice from above tells Mom of Isaac's corruption, which motivates her to purify him, ridding Isaac of corruption could be construed as a kind of "tough love" methodology. However, by the end her motivations transform into sheer obedience to a sacrificial command. As the voice from above says:

To prove your love and devotion, I require a sacrifice. Your son Isaac will be this sacrifice. Go into his room and end his life as an offering to me, to prove that you love me above all else![214]

From this point on, Mom compels herself to sacrifice Isaac purely to prove her love to the voice she considers to be God. *TBOI* provides no more insight into her motivation, state of mind, or disposition toward Isaac beyond his purpose as a sacrifice. In this way, *TBOI's* parent swap reflects the current demographics of families in the United States, as eighty percent of all single parents are mothers.[215] The game presents Mom's role of sacrificer as the result of a fractured family where past trauma combined with her religious convictions collapse on Isaac.[216] Rather than committing herself to Isaac's health and wellbeing, Mom shockingly abandons her obligations as a parent and fails to recognize Isaac's resistance as a plea for mercy. Since *TBOI* frames itself from Isaac's perspective, it is not surprising that he would see his mother as an enemy.

Mom's larger-than-life presence in-game contrasts with most of Sarah's presentation in reception history. While Luther and some Rabbis blamed Sarah's absence from the Aqedah because of her lack of constitution to endure it, in contrast, in *TBOI*, Mom wields the power and conviction to kill her son in a stunning reversal of Luther and the Rabbis' speculations. Perhaps Isaac's experiences of Mom affect his perception of her, that due to her suppressive and restrictive impositions on Isaac's life she becomes a massive, suffocating, and dominating figure. As one of the primary antagonists, her role in Isaac's nightmare fits the archetype of a final boss both in the fantasy of his imagination and in his real life under an abusive parent. This view of the matriarch bears implications for the Aqedah story. Did Isaac

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[214] McMillen, *The Binding of Isaac*.

[215] Timothy Grall, "Custodial Mothers and Fathers and Their Child Support: 2015," United States Census Bureau, January 2018 (re-released February 2020), accessed August 26, 2020, https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2020/demo/p60-262.pdf, 3.

[216] "Research has shown that transitions into and out of relationships are associated with increased parenting stress and changes in parenting behaviors, and single mothers experience more relationship instability than partnered mothers." See Ann Meier, Kelly Musick, Sarah Flood, and Rachel Dunifon, "Mothering Experiences: How Single Parenthood and Employment Structure the Emotional Valence of Parenting," *Demography,* vol. 53, no. 3 (2016): 653, accessed August 26, 2020, https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/24757136.pdf.

view Abraham in Genesis 22 as the antagonist in his story? Was Abraham the "final boss" on his path up the holy mountain, the last gatekeeper between Isaac and a divine encounter? Playing the game from Isaac's perspective legitimizes these questions and compels the player to prioritize Isaac's point of view in the Aqedah text.

Like *TBOI,* Phyllis Trible swaps the parental figure from father to mother, essentially rewriting the story to make Sarah the sacrificing figure. In doing so, Trible meant to give Sarah the chance to prove her faith and detachment by succeeding in the Aqedah like Abraham did. Genesis robbed Sarah of an opportunity to become the icon of faith by keeping Sarah out of the Aqedah. In *TBOI,* however*,* Mom's dispassion problematizes Sarah's reimagined role as the replacement for Abraham. Trible wanted Sarah to learn detachment so that she could become the rightful paragon of faith, she does not envision Sarah's actions as having a detrimental effect on Isaac as they do in *TBOI*.

In contrast for Norma Rosen, Sarah employs a Job-like role, interrogating and debating with God about the events of the Aqedah and her own life. Rather than replacing Abraham in Genesis 22, Rosen makes Sarah the interceding voice that stops Abraham from continuing the sacrifice. Unlike Trible and *TBOI,* Rosen's matriarch never learns detachment or dispassion, as her affection for Isaac drives her to protect him at all costs. Rosen's Sarah demonstrates what Mom could have done if she questioned the voice from above and incorporated an affection for Isaac into her religious convictions rather than using him as a sacrifice. Even so, Rosen's Sarah shares the same fate as Mom in *TBOI* with both versions of the matriarch dying albeit for different reasons.

Having analyzed Trible and Rosen's interpretations, *TBOI* resembles parts of each by adopting the sacrificing role emblematic of Trible's account while at the same time dramatizing the matriarch's death as seen in Rosen's account. *TBOI* amplifies the previous considerations regarding Trible and Rosen's reinterpretations through Mom's antagonism. For instance, Mom's dispassion and violence towards Isaac exposes Trible's neglect toward the biblical Isaac by highlighting the destructive consequences of

Sarah's detachment. Likewise, *TBOI* also demonstrates how Trible's parental swap does not absolve Sarah's behaviour or make the situation better for Isaac since he still becomes the sacrificial object. In a similar way, Mom's antagonism and dispassion toward Isaac amplifies the tragedy of Rosen's version of Sarah who remains estranged and unreconciled with her family despite the love she feels for them.

Finally, Welton thoroughly relates Mom as a character in *TBOI* to Sarah's role in the Aqedah. She sees Mom's portrayal as misogynistic and typical of receptions to female sacrificial archetypes in history, so that *TBOI* continues a long tradition of vilifying women where men would receive praise, as Abraham has.[217] However, previous interpreters that critiqued Abraham heavily in the centuries after the reformation open the door for more generous interpretations of Mom in the game. The shifting interpretations of the Aqedah's reception reveal the possibility to leave Abraham's actions open to debate. Therefore, if Abraham can be held as an ambiguous character, then so can Sarah. For instance, having accepted the deficiencies in Trible's interpretation, she still offers an extremely charitable view of Sarah even as a replacement to Abraham. Whereas Welton believed *TBOI's* sin was the vilification of matriarchal figures, Trible argued that the Aqedah's sin was Sarah's exclusion from the text. Likewise, Rosen's estranged and tragic Sarah aligns well with *TBOI's* distressing portrayal of Mom, yet despite both matriarchs' failures to reconcile with their families, they both occupy meaningful roles in the reimagined story.

Comparing each portrait of the matriarchal role within the Aqedah and its retellings helpfully clarifies key attributes of each reading. Reception history provides the opportunity to address claims made by Trible, Rosen, and Welton while providing nuance to Sarah's character and the archetype she represents in the story. Finally, Mom's role as the antagonist of *The Binding of Isaac* contextualizes her villainous sacrificial intent and naturally compels players to sympathize with Isaac as the protagonist and motivate them to defeat Mom who functions as a kind of "final boss" to Isaac in his journey.

[217] Welton, "Isaac Rebound," 9.

4.6 Conclusion

As previous scholars have noted, the game makes strong statements against religious communities who share interpretations of the text that accommodate violence and propitiation as acceptable theories of praxis. By examining *The Binding of Isaac* in light of the reception history of the Aqedah several additional viewpoints rise to the surface and find resonance with *TBOI*. First, the game functions like a "sacred parody" participating in a long interpretive tradition of changing the text to resonate with the reader's experience. Second, *TBOI* equally critiques and embraces many religious traditions through both its ludology and narratology. Third, *TBOI* gives players the opportunity to engage in a highly complex ethical quandary and potentially empathize with Isaac as a suffering but resilient protagonist. Fourth, *TBOI* merges different thematic tones together, which broadens the experience for players who might identify with one tone over another. Finally, *TBOI's* portrayal of Mom offers a helpful comparison to both Abraham and Sarah as a way of framing the couple's actions as interpreted in the Aqedah's reception history.

By playing the game through the lens of the Aqedah's reception history, this methodology broadens the interpretive landscape and highlights points of interest that authorial intent approaches miss. By virtue of both its design and the story it adapts, *TBOI* resists monolithic interpretations and proves capable of holding multiple interpretations at once.

Chapter 5: Play within Interpretive Communities

Eric Zimmerman asseverated the rise of the "ludic century" at the turn of the millennium in anticipation of the ascent of games and digital platforms.[218] In many ways, this project epitomizes the simultaneous development of digitization and ludology. Digital formats, simulations, and virtual reality have grown increasingly more sophisticated and phenomena such as "gamification" manifest even in mundane routines.[219] As a result, digitization and ludology inevitably intersect with religious study and practice.[220]

This project has already demonstrated that *The Binding of Isaac* shares many commonalities with other instances of the Aqedah's reception and so contributes to the reception history of the Aqedah. However, *TBOI* naturally differs from the previous interpretations by virtue of its medium. This chapter compares the effect playing a video game has alongside reading a literary text. A brief examination of the intersection between religion and video games leads to an overview of Rachel Wagner's *Godwired*, which argues that playing video games resembles many aspects of religious practice, including the interpretation of sacred texts. The chapter builds on Patrick Jagoda's category of *interpretive difficulty* to explain why certain games are so difficult to interpret in the first place. On these bases, this chapter demonstrates that *The Binding of Isaac* functions as a *midrash generator*, a device that facilitates and encourages constant reinterpretation of the game's narrative as well as how its fundamental qualities

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[218] Eric Zimmerman, "Manifesto: The 21st Century Will Be Defined by Games," www.kotaku.com (September 9, 2013), accessed August 17, 2020. Available at: http://kotaku.com/manifesto-the-21st-century-will-be-defined-by-games-1275355204 quoted in Vít Šisler, "Procedural Religion: Methodological Reflections on Studying Religion in Video Games," *New Media & Society,* vol. 19, no. 1 (January 2017): 126, accessed June 2, 2020, http://DOI: 10.1177/1461444816649923.

[219] Gamification is the process of applying "… game related elements to nongame contexts…" Gamifying a service or product typically involves incorporating three aspects of game design known as, "Mechanics," "Dynamics," and "Aesthetics." See Dirk Basten, "Gamification," *IEEE software,* vol. 34, no. 5 (2017): 76–77, accessed August 17, 2020, http://doi: 10.1109/MS.2017.3571581.

[220] Examples of digitization and religion abound in contemporary life, especially under the duress of the Covid-19 pandemic that spread rapidly around the globe in 2020. With public gatherings banned in many places, advancements in communication technology enabled religious communities to virtually meet together through video conferencing applications.

demonstrate its unique capability of holding multiple interpretations at once. Where chapter 4 corresponded to Wagner's description of "religion in gaming," this chapter employs a "gaming as religion" lens in order to demonstrate how *TBOI* resembles the interpretive process of sacred texts.[221]

This project explores the difference *TBOI* makes to the reception of the Aqedah text as a video game and what changes the experience of reinterpretation by playing as opposed to reading it. As Genesis 22 belongs to both Jewish and Christian biblical traditions, the rapidly emerging interdisciplinary subfield of religious studies and game studies offers resources and tools for interpreters to understand the implications of games drawing from or re-enacting elements from sacred texts or religious praxis. Applying these resources and tools specifically to *TBOI* reveals its ability to hold and generate a multiplicity of interpretations of the game's narrative, and by extension the Aqedah itself. In doing so, *TBOI* also seeds creating communities of players who interpret the game's narrative and identify optimal ways to play the game.

5.1 *Godwired*

In *Godwired: Religion, Ritual, and Virtual Reality*, Rachel Wagner builds a bridge between the practice of religion and playing video games.[222] Wagner builds on Johann Huizinga's work citing his *magic circle* theory as a way of not only understanding games but also sacred spaces and rituals that function in a similar manner.[223] She compellingly argues that the act of playing a game and the act of practicing religion are more similar than some would think. For instance, Wagner sees both religious

[221] Campbell, "Gaming Religionworlds," 644.

[222] Rachel Wagner, *Godwired: Religion, Ritual, and Virtual Reality* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012).

[223] *Ibid,* 86-89. Jesper Juul's definition of games addressed in chapter three clarify this project's use of the magic circle by integrating player attitude, and optional and negotiable consequences. In the context of religious practice, active participation and involvement from within the worshipping community is clearly paramount and reflects the "player attitude" in Juul's definition. But what might optional and negotiable consequences mean in religious practice? For laity, consequences resemble worshipping communities' different liturgical, theological, and practical expectations. Not all rituals carry the same significance or serve the same purpose, since the day of the week and the time of year impact the importance and purpose of religious practices.

rituals and video games as interactions with the "other." Rituals are human activities that interact with sacred space, while playing games are human activities that interact with virtual space. Finally, both rituals and games are concerned with storytelling, interactivity, performance, rules, and stereotypes that inform behaviour in evolving media.[224]

In *Godwired*, Wagner charts the history of storytelling in linear and interactive media. Both stories and games are rich with interactive potential since they invite participants to immerse themselves in experiences that resemble religious activity. She suggests that rituals, games, and stories are overlapping human phenomena and should be held together as a unified hybrid experience. Ultimately, "*Godwired* asks why we are so drawn to such programmed environments, to virtual places in which we know there is some order, where we hope for connection, where we enter into a mode of being that both is and is not the same as our ordinary lives."[225]

Wagner's examination of *play* as a hermeneutic proves particularly relevant to this study. Drawing upon Salen and Zimmerman's definition that, "Play is the free movement within a more rigid structure…" Wagner suggests that play also exists within the "rigid structures" of religious systems but manifests itself in different ways, such as the level of theological movement and flexibility permitted within a tradition. The hermeneutical practice of interpreting holy texts is another example of play manifesting as the "space of possibility." In this instance, the pages of the text itself represent the rigidity of the structure and the hermeneutic methodology at work, the play reflecting the interpretive process of reading those texts.[226] Wagner contrasts both Christian and Jewish interpretations of their respective scriptures and examines how these traditions differ in their interpretive methodology.

[224] *Ibid,* 2.
[225] *Ibid,* 13.
[226] *Ibid,* 32.

Starting with the Christian tradition, Wagner claims that the New Testament's insistence that the death and resurrection of Christ represents a historically fixed event lends itself to a comparison with linear narratives in conventional storytelling. The limitation of *play* within this interpretive tradition is extreme, with nary a space of possibility to play in. To support this, she refers to the early church fathers (or those church fathers considered orthodox) who were concerned primarily with passing down and protecting the one interpretation they received. Rather than celebration, they chastised Christians who offered interpretations outside the norm.[227]

Juxtaposed to the early Christian tradition, Jewish Midrash offers an interpretive tradition far more at ease with *play* in the text. As Wagner explains through Susan Handelman's work, a Rabbi could read a verse in the Torah and hold multiple conflicting meanings at once. Aggadic midrash was comfortable placing different experiences beside each other without the need to reconcile all of them together. Wagner helpfully notes that in gaming, alternative routes players take are not considered aberrant or in need of reconciliation. Each individual's experience of the game is valid and can offer something to the larger conversation.[228] "This means if we consider the text of the Bible as a 'fictional world' rather than as a series of fixed events, then the process of Midrash (telling stories to fill the gaps in the text) is a form of 'play' exhibiting rules of interactivity with the text as system."[229]

While Wagner does not differentiate between *halakhot* and *aggadot* in her use of the term midrash, her description assumes the latter. While *halakhah* refers to legal teachings that define the practices of proper Jewish obedience, *aggadah* identifies stories that creatively adapt the text in order to provide ethical guidance for the reader. Together, *halakhot* and *aggadot* are interdependent on one

[227] *Ibid,* 33-36.
[228] *Ibid,* 49-51.
[229] *Ibid,* 50.

another even though the distinction between the two gives midrash the power to address needs that cover the range of Jewish experience.

Further recognition of this distinction may actually serve to strengthen Wagner's comparison of midrash and the space of possibility. For instance, if the creative, spontaneous, and interactive storytelling of aggadic midrash represents the "free movement" of Salen and Zimmerman's theory, than halakhic midrash's structured, linear, and logical methodology resembles the "rigid structure" providing the shape for play to flourish.[230]

5.2 *The Binding of Isaac* as a Midrash Generator

Building on Wagner's framework of games and play as transmedial and transdisciplinary, this thesis suggests that *The Binding of Isaac* goes beyond her observation that playing games merely resemble the Midrashic process and asserts that *TBOI* functions as a *midrash generator*, whose ludology and narratology encourage and produce fresh reinterpretations of the narrative experience. The space of possibility here is enormous, as the potentially infinite number of ways the player interacts with the game create unique playthroughs. In this way, *TBOI* reveals the complexities of biblical reception by demonstrating in real time how players come to reinterpret the game in different ways. Therefore, playing *TBOI* encapsulates and exemplifies the Aqedah's reception history by reproducing instances of micro reception each time the game is played.

The following subsections demonstrate how *TBOI* functions as a *midrash generator* in *TBOI* in three ways. First, as described in chapter three the ludological mechanics of roguelikes create optimal conditions for reinterpretation as environments and encounters shift and change in every playthrough.

[230] For an example of the interplay between Aggadah and Halakhah, see Yonatan Feintuch, "Uncovering Covert Links Between Halakhah and Aggadah in the Babylonian Talmud: The Talmudic Discussion of the Yom Kippur Afflictions in B. Yoma," *AJS Review,* vol. 40, no. 1 (April 2016): 17–32, accessed November 19, 2020, DOI: 10.1017/S0364009416000027.

Second, *TBOI's* unconventional storytelling and fragmented narrative reveal the game's high *interpretive difficulty*, representing the challenges a player overcomes to understand the narrative within the video game. Finally, a cultural phenomenon in online communities known as *theorycrafting* resembles the work and process of textually oriented worshipping communities, where players of the game band together, sharing insights and observations to discover what happens in the game and attempt to uncover narrative and ludological formulas that lead to greater understanding.

5.2.1 Roguelike Mechanics

The Binding of Isaac contains game mechanics emblematic of the roguelike subgenre that generate new interpretations as the player plays the game again and again. A roguelike's randomized elements create a much greater degree of interactivity and possibility in Wagner's "fictional worlds" than a traditional game could envision.

For instance, procedural generation influences most of the ways players engage with the world of *TBOI*. While a finite number of enemy types, bosses, traps, puzzles, items, and rooms exist, the variation, distribution and combination of these elements lead the player to believe in the possibility of an almost infinite number of engagements and situations. Principally, the player has little influence over how the basement appears to them at the beginning of a run, since the various pieces of the game shift to create an entirely new situation.

This is not to be confused with Ian Bogost's concept of procedural rhetoric in which games are "persuasive media" that impose limitations within the game that shepherd players into making certain decisions over others. Bogost speculates that this persuasive effect could "program" a player in such a way that they behave differently in the real world. In contrast, my thesis proposes that *TBOI's*

procedural generation encourages players to come up with their own interpretations of the game thereby expanding rather than limiting the players behaviour outside of the game.[231]

In effect, procedural generation replicates the interpretive process of reading the Aqedah by changing key words, characters, or circumstances in the body of the text to explore different interpretive possibilities. Every interpreter brings with them their biases, perspectives, goals, and more that make up the horizon of expectations, as Jauss noted. Likewise, interpreters acquiesce to their own procedural generation as they read the text and experience it in unique ways. Just as the game shifts bosses, enemies, and rooms into different combinations and placements, interpreters can change characters, settings, add or remove dialogue, and even attribute motivations and purposes unknown in the source text itself to the characters. Interpretation and play find themselves on common ground interacting with texts and systems while simultaneously abiding by the influence of one's horizon of expectation or procedural generation. *TBOI* recreates the interpretive experience but in an accelerated fashion, producing one of any number of outcomes or conclusions upon triumphing or dying in the game.

The player dies often in *TBOI*, at which point, permadeath ends the run and forces the player to restart. While death often functions as a kind of punishment for playing poorly in other games, procedural generation and randomized encounters stack the odds against the player in *TBOI*. Here, death functions less as a failure of the player and more as a pedagogical tool to educate the player so that when the player comes to a similar problem in the next run, they may have learned from their previous experience and overcome the challenge.

[231] Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 1-65.

This view has two implications for how *TBOI* generates interpretations about the Aqedah. First, while death in *TBOI* seems harsh, once the player accepts that dying occurs frequently and teaches them about the game itself, death loses the sting of defeat assumed in other games. Therefore, *TBOI* subverts the common perception that equates death with failure, encouraging players to try again and find unique solutions to circumstances and challenges instead. Similarly, readers can feel the need to discover the "correct" interpretation within any text so that rather than leaning into their unique perspective and assessing how it contributes to the overall conversation about a text, they argue first for the supremacy of their view. Reception theory circumvents this problem by facilitating a conversation between interpreters that explores how each contributes to addressing certain issues raised by the text, the interpreter, or both. By functioning as a midrash generator, *TBOI* teaches players how to value each run even if it does not go according to plan. Similarly, listening to more voices and interpretations creates the opportunity to learn from others and consider ways to avoid pitfalls themselves.

Second, the player does not remain the same at the start of the next run, whether they "beat" the game or die. While completion of a run unlocks a new item for Isaac to use in the next playthrough, players also often unwittingly complete secret challenges or meet certain criteria that unlocks a new item, character, or boss to appear in the Basement. This not only serves to encourage replayability, but analogically mimics Wolfgang Iser's "repertoire," the context by which readers fill in gaps in the story. Whether or not players die, they acquire new items that serve to broaden their repertoire and so give them new opportunities and new ways to solve problems in the subsequent run. Just like one's interpretation of the text changes over time and adapts alongside the enhanced repertoire of the interpreter, a player's repertoire expands through extended play of the game leading to a greater variety of options in the future.

For instance, once more characters have been unlocked, the player can select a different playable character before every run begins. As discussed in the previous chapter, these characters come from

both biblical and extrabiblical traditions and give the player the opportunity to attempt the game with different advantages and disadvantages. The ludological experience of engaging situations with different statistical variations mean that some players might find a character that works better for them, or excels in certain situations over others. From a narratalogical and interpretive perspective, the implications for playing *TBOI* as other characters are profound and mirror the experiences of interpreters reading the Aqedah.

For instance, character swapping allows the player to place someone else in Isaac's position, rather than playing as Isaac. Perhaps readers experience an impetus to speculate or identify with the characters of the text, even when their motivations remain hidden or appear unrelatable. Players can choose characters that fit their experience in other ways: a player may pick Magdalene to experience the story from a woman's perspective; another player picks Judas because of the character's association with betrayal and rebellion against traditional religious structures; still another chooses Azazel or Lilith to play as embodied reactions against religious orthodoxy through the power fantasy of demonic beings; someone else may have no idea where to start, so they pick Eden, allowing them to create their own entirely unique character, a fresh start with no baggage or history tying them down.[232]

Some interpreters place the focus on different characters such as Sarah, while others accept the characters as they exist in the text but see them as representing something else like the typological readings of patristic writers and Rabbis of Genesis Rabbah. Others rearrange the text with different characters in the place of Isaac, like Jewish prisoners of the Holocaust or Jewish soldiers in one of several Israeli-Palestinian wars. As demonstrated in chapters two and four, interpreters play and explore the space of possibility that comes when a different character takes Isaac's or any other character's position. Likewise, these changes ask different questions and notice different aspects of the text and thereby

[232] In addition to Isaac, the unlockable characters in-game include: "Magdalene," "Cain," "Judas," "???," "Eve," "Samson," "Azazel," "Lazarus," "Eden," "The Lost," "Lilith," "Keeper," "Apollyon," and "The Forgotten."

draw out new conclusions, allowing interpreters to explore new avenues of play and possibility within the limitations of the system or text, just like players do when they start a new run of *TBOI*.

5.2.2 Interpretive Difficulty

TBOI is a challenging game to play. Its punishing and cryptic ludology hinder the player's efforts toward improvement, while the game's narratology is equally inaccessible. Borrowing Patrick Jagoda's application of *aesthetic difficulty* describes yet another way *TBOI* functions as a midrash generator. While Aesthetic difficulty originally described the challenges one encounters while reading literature, such as poetry, this section focuses on one aspect called *interpretive difficulty*, initially described as the kind of "… difficulties that are common to poetry and artworks."[233] Players experience *TBOI's* interpretive difficulty while trying to piece together its many disparate themes, references, and abstractions of biblical and extrabiblical material, as the game's complex narratology forces players to explore different avenues of meaning-making to apprehend their experience of the game.[234] Just as hermeneutics and analysis have been a part of close readings of any text, Jagoda also applies the four expressions of *interpretive difficulty* in games.[235]

First, *contingent difficulties* represent the reader's, or in this case, player's, lack of knowledge concerning content. As noticed in the previous chapter, *TBOI* abounds with references and allusions to biblical and extrabiblical content, both of a popular and niche variety. For instance, while someone may already know the story of Abraham and Isaac, many might not realize that the game's title references itself to the same story through its Jewish moniker. Likewise, a host of other references make up the

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[233] *Ibid,* 201.

[234] Patrick Jagoda, "On Difficulty in Video Games: Mechanics, Interpretation, Affect," *Critical inquiry,* vol 45, no. 1 (October 1, 2018): 212–220, accessed May 23, 2020. https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.1086/699585.

[235] Jagoda bases his article on George Steiner's original piece, "On Difficulty." Jagoda applies Steiner's categorizations originally used for poetry and literature to video games. See George Steiner, "On Difficulty," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism,* vol. 36, no. 3 (April 1, 1978): 263–276, accessed July 7, 2020, http://doi:10.2307/430437.

majority of *TBOI's* content, including the numerous items, bosses, and levels mentioned previously. Some are so obscure that even a player familiar with the material may puzzle over its inclusion in the game. The game's content can also be an obstacle to the player unaware of the various references made in the game. Though, players can overcome contingent difficulties by researching the reference in question, this places the onus on the player to learn the meaning of the content they play with, especially when the game intentionally withholds that information.

Second, *modal difficulties* challenge the player's comprehension of the game, even if they understand its content. In the case of *TBOI*, this manifests in how the game is portrayed visually with the game presenting itself in an obfuscating two-dimensional, hand-drawn aesthetic. The crude style may distract and disorient players, while the limitations of the technology powering the game may add other unintended complications such as simple animations and pixelated in-game assets distorting the image they represent. Anyone unfamiliar with retro video game aesthetics or agitated by its implementation may be annoyed by the game's compromising presentation.[236]

Third, *TBOI's* "help-or-hurt" item philosophy illustrates *tactical difficulties* where games subvert player expectations through the introduction of idiosyncratic or unanticipated disruptions to established and familiar formulas. While most other video games draw from similar influences, they generally do not allow the player to consume items that actively hurt the avatar, nor would they make the items easy to find. In *TBOI,* however the player can take nondescript pills that can either help or hurt the player. Pills are commonly occurring items and upon first playing, the pill's appearance would not necessarily

[236] Despite advances in technology and the push towards higher visual fidelity in video games, some developers still choose to use retro graphical styles. For smaller independent teams, retro aesthetics can both simplify development and reflect their artistic preferences.

indicate a danger to the player themselves, especially since using drugs as a means to make the player more powerful represents a common trope in other video games.[237]

Finally, *ontological difficulties* occur whenever the player encounters a tension or paradox in the act of play and so threaten to break the relationship between player and game, since the act of playing raises fundamental questions about the medium itself. For instance, playing *TBOI* might threaten a player by presenting its subject matter as a parody of sacred texts. Adapting a biblical story charged with religious significance into a video game may come across as disrespectful, sacrilegious, or blasphemous especially given the dire subject matter and crude content. Additionally, while items utilized in game have certain ludological benefits or deficiencies, the symbols representing the items often conflict with their usual understanding. An item's title, function, and symbol may all seemingly dissent from each other resisting any harmony of terms.

For example, "Transcendence," empowers the player's avatar to fly over obstacles and pitfalls in the basement. While the name implies an ethereal, spiritual experience, a noose acts as the visual symbol of "Transcendence," potentially confusing or offending the player; here the positive title and function are at odds with its symbol. Likewise, the item "Depression" creates a small cloud that helps the player damage enemies. While an obvious benefit in the game, depression also represents a crippling mental illness that afflicts millions of people. "Transcendence" and "Depression" illustrate how various items shock players, forcing them to reconcile the symbols that items represent with the benefits they provide ludologically. These examples demonstrate *ontological difficulty* by confronting and challenging the player with potentially irreconcilable problems unique to the act of playing.

[237] A recent example of drug usage in video games appears in *The Last of Us: Part II (TLOU2)*, which takes place in a post-apocalyptic world where players scavenge and collect resources to survive. Despite its grounded and realistic narrative, the player improves their abilities by collecting a certain number of nondescript pills throughout the game world. Even though real-world drug misuse often bears significant negative side effects and few drugs have performance enhancing effects, every pill in *TLOU2* helps the player become stronger. See Neil Druckmann, *The Last of Us: Part II,* Naughty Dog (June 19, 2020).

Players of *TBOI* encounter *contingent, modal, tactical*, and *ontological difficulties* of varying degrees that promote *TBOI's* function as a midrash generator by complicating the interpretive process. Players either must adopt creative techniques to engage with *TBOI's* themes and narrative or ignore them, leaving large aspects of the game untouched. Regardless of approach, players come to their own path of meaning-making due to the *TBOI's* high interpretive difficulty, resulting in variable understandings of the game's messaging and content.

5.2.3 Community Formation and Theorycrafting

Just as reading and interpreting scripture binds communities together, video games also draw players into community to share ideas, strategies, and new discoveries. Additionally, as in scriptural communities, a subset of players commit themselves to "theorycrafting," a much more intensive effort to understand the ludology and narratology of a game at a deeper level. This phenomena of community formation and intensive debate mimics the practices of scriptural communities that interpret sacred texts as a community and under instruction from clergy or teachers. Therefore, another way *The Binding of Isaac* generates midrash is by inspiring highly communal approaches to gameplay optimization and narrative interpretation that accelerates the likelihood of discovering new strategies and interpretations within the playerbase.

Scriptural communities have read sacred texts together in various contexts such as centres of worship, private study, or in academic settings for millennia. While traditions have prescribed different ways of proper scriptural reading and interpretation, reading scripture within a larger community framework persists in most scriptural communities. Not only have sacred texts been the focal point of religious expression in Judaism and Christianity, but the act of reading sacred texts brings people

together to share their experiences, knowledge, and interpretations with others.[238] Reading sacred texts can also provide points of contact for people who have dissimilar views of the text. In a similar way, communities form around their favourite video games and have done so since the medium's beginning. *TBOI* has generated a dedicated community over the past nine years in which players share their strategies, passion, and interpretations of the game on fora and video streaming platforms such as YouTube.[239]

Similar to scriptural communities who often follow individuals that instruct or traditions that guide hermeneutic approaches, gaming communities often rally around individuals called "theorycrafters" whose expertise within the game exerts a significant influence over others. Sometimes referred to as the "scientification of gameplay," theorycrafting accumulates a swath of knowledge concerning the technology and deeper mechanical structure of a game to deconstruct its function.[240] *TBOI's* roguelike mechanics and interpretive difficulty help theorycrafting thrive as the game's ambiguous and cryptic presentation encourages the community to investigate and contribute their ideas. Players discuss the strengths and weaknesses of enemies, bosses, and items while posting statistical information like damage, health, and other key values. Since the player collects an assortment of items through every run of the game, the most important information available relates to item

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[238] Carolyn J. Sharp, "The Formation of Godly Community: Old Testament Hermeneutics in the Presence of the Other," *Anglican Theological Review,* vol. 86, no. 4 (October 1, 2004), 624-625, accessed June 28, 2020, http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rfh&AN=ATLA0001578740&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

[239] "The Binding of Isaac: Rebirth Wiki" represents only one of several websites dedicated to the collection and categorization of content on the game. The wiki contains thousands of fan-edited articles that describe every element and item in the game. See "The Binding of Isaac: Rebirth Wiki," *Fandom Inc.,* last modified May 13, 2020, accessed throughout Winter 2020, https://bindingofisaacrebirth.gamepedia.com/Binding_of_Isaac:_Rebirth_Wiki. For video content on YouTube, "Northernlion" emerged as one of the preeminent content creators for *The Binding of Isaac*. Northernlion records himself playing *TBOI* and provides live commentary of his gameplay. As of the time of this writing, Northernlion has amassed a following of over eight hundred thousand subscribers, produced one thousand seven hundred and thirty-three separate videos about *TBOI* with his channel on YouTube accumulating over eight hundred and seventy million separate views. See Ryan Letourneau, "Northernlion," https://www.youtube.com/user/Northernlion, *Google LLC*, accessed throughout Winter 2020.

[240] Karin Wenz, "Theorycrafting," *Information, Communication & Society,* vol. 16, no. 2 (March 1, 2013): 181, accessed June 27, 2020, http://search.proquest.com/docview/1373428533/.

synergies. Players create "builds" for others to try out by experimenting with different combinations of items as they uncover them.

Theorycrafters also apply similar rubrics of analysis and deconstruction towards a game's narrative, often referred to as its "lore." Many games explain the history and context of its fictional world in arduous detail, and so a theorycrafter's main challenge amounts to organizing and synthesizing the available data. While other games also offer cryptic or ambiguous narratives forcing theorycrafters to hunt for clues and fill in the gaps where information lacks, the provocative and ambiguous presentation of *TBOI* inspires a subset of the community to explain as much of the game's narrative as possible. *TBOI's* numerous references to biblical and extrabiblical content, let alone allusions to other media and pop culture, represents an imposing task for theorycrafters. Likewise, theorycrafters analyze the narrative to explain the sequence of events and attempt to clarify the mysteries present in the game.[241]

Sharing new ludological and narratological discoveries with others in the larger gaming community motivates theorycrafters' to invest an enormous amount of time to influence the "metagame" or offer a compelling interpretation of the game's "lore." Theorycrafters post their strategies on community developed online fora or make YouTube videos with footage to describe their contributions. Players adopt, discuss, and experiment with these new strategies and interpretations which impacts and potentially shapes the way the broader community plays and understands the game.[242]

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[241] For instance, the community still debates whether Isaac died in the game. See The Game Theorists, "Game Theory: Does Isaac DIE?!? Binding of Isaac Rebirth Endings EXPLAINED," www.youtube.com, *Google LLC*, accessed August 1, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=avCB6HOjsG4.

[242] Michael S. Debus, "Metagames: On the Ontology of Games Outside of Games," in *Proceedings of the 12th International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games*, Association for Computing Machinery (New York, NY, USA, Article 18, 2017), 1–9, accessed June 27, 2020, https://doi.org/10.1145/3102071.3102097.

With *TBOI*, players become the authority for the game rather than the creator or development team; The dynamic between the larger *TBOI* community and its theorycrafters emphasizes the player-centeredness of the phenomenon. As an independent title developed by a handful of people, *TBOI* also affords the developers and community a high degree of interaction and accessibility not possible from large game studios. Nevertheless, Edmund McMillen surrenders *TBOI* over to the community every time he releases an update or expansion since the community determines the full extent of the game's potential as players share and promote new strategies and ideas amongst themselves.

The willingness to try new ideas from theorycrafters within the community stimulates midrash generation for *TBOI.* As Wagner alluded to earlier, many viable paths exist to complete a game or find enjoyment in it since players do not need to limit or isolate themselves to one method within *TBOI* to succeed, they willingly experiment with others' ideas and theories to improve their own experience of the game's ludology or narratology. This enthusiasm for learning and appropriating ideas from within the community transforms a player's individual experience of the game into a communal one and shapes their individual play of *TBOI* into something different than had they not invested in the community in the first place. Playing *TBOI* solo does not terminate midrash generation, but the expanded integration of communal theory further stimulates its interpretive possibilities beyond what the individual could accomplish in isolation.[243]

Finally, the process of theorycrafting suggests the existence of a "metagame," so that gaming communities inevitably bottleneck potential strategies into a singular ideal that all must imitate. Indeed, theorycrafters' desires to perfect the experience of play often clashes with community members feeling

[243] In this way, theorycrafting again demonstrates how my thesis contrasts with Bogost's "procedural rhetoric" (See 5.2.1). Rather than programming players to behave in certain ways, players are encouraged to consider new ideas and expand their understanding of the game's lore and mechanics beyond the intentions of the developer. Contra Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 1-65.

pressured to affirm right or wrong ways to play the game, which clearly highlights existing tensions within the playerbase. Such a tension proves analogous to the experiences of scriptural communities that struggle whether to affirm certain interpretations over others or to embrace a wide set of interpretive disciplines.

The inevitability of "metagames" in *TBOI* is tempered by two limitations, with one instituted by the game itself. First, metagames inevitably change over time, since no singular way to play a game endures indefinitely. Even when players seemingly find the perfect way to play or understand a game, a weakness or stronger alternative appears eventually, whether by a certain player's skill and playstyle or a newly discovered technique.[244] Games give players easy ways to determine the validity of a meta claim by measuring its success in the game itself. For instance, how much damage does the item synergy inflict? How efficient is it? How quickly can players complete the game with this new build?

Second, *TBOI's* roguelike mechanics and ambiguous presentation limits the dominance of a singular metagame or interpretation within the community, as no player controls what kind of run they experience. The randomization of encounters, multiple endings, and interpretive difficulties force players to improvise, experimenting with new builds and rhetoric without the certainty of the "most powerful item" showing up exactly when and where they want it to appear.

While theorycrafting resembles aspects of scriptural communities' interpretive processes, theorycrafting also accelerates midrash generation by incorporating the combined efforts of the gaming community in order to discover new metagames and interpretations of the lore. As a phenomenon

[244] At times, developers also "patch" changes into a game in an attempt to influence play or fix problems, especially if the metagame reveals broken or unfair player dynamics. While more commonly implemented in competitive gaming contexts, the intervention of developer patches does not functionally end theorycrafting, as new strategies and metagames develop out of the newly patched version of the game.

initiated by the gaming community, theorycrafting represents the player centeredness of midrash generation and clearly demonstrates how lore and metagames develop in *TBOI.*

5.3 Conclusion

The Binding of Isaac's roguelike mechanics, high interpretive difficulty, and tendency to promote community engagement and theorycrafting helps to generate multiple interpretations leading to what I have called midrash generation. Not only does a player's gameplay change from run to run due to *TBOI's* randomizing features, cryptic presentation, and community engagement, but a player's experience with the game's themes, aesthetic, and subject matter also evolve for the same reasons. This dynamic makes *TBOI* well suited to generate new ways to play the game and understand its narratology.

In parallel with scriptural communities that exhibit similar tendencies, *TBOI* acts as a midrash generator that rapidly accelerates the potential for a plethora of novel builds and interpretations within gaming communities. While not the only example of midrash generation in the video game medium, *TBOI* provides a striking case study and proof of concept that playing games prompts interpretive practices that encourage players to develop many "micro receptions" as they play the game.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Recognizing the long and diverse reception history of any ancient text, especially one as influential as the Bible, broadens its interpretive potential. This thesis explores how the harrowing story of Abraham's attempted sacrifice of Isaac continues to speak to generation after generation in profound ways throughout the reception history of the Aqedah. As a part of holy writ, the Aqedah provides ample opportunity for readers to bring their questions and expectations to the text and to interact with the traditions associated with scriptural communities. Despite its unorthodox medium, we should not be surprised when reinterpretations such as *The Binding of Isaac* appear since they represent a voice reinterpreting the text within their time and place of the Aqedah's reception history.

Seen through the lens of reception history, this project demonstrates how playing *The Binding of Isaac* participates in a conversation occurring within the joint reception history of the game and the Aqedah. Playing the game with the reception history of the Aqedah in mind expands the interpretive potential of *TBOI* by listening to the interpreters of the past and letting their observations stand alongside each other. Furthermore, interacting with the game promotes and generates new ways of play, effectively serving as complimentary reinterpretations of the ludological and narrative experience resembling aggadic midrash found within the Jewish tradition.

6.1 Implications

What I propose throughout this thesis describes the existent interpretive behaviours of those who read the Bible, play video games, or both. As Rachel Wagner says,

> We might be tempted to think that "playing" stories is something new, but interactivity has long played a pervasive role in religious storytelling. Every religious tradition has stories of its

> founders, its practitioners or its legendary figures, and many of these stories have "interactive" forms, what we might call the "stories we play."[245]

Where some might resist associating interpretation with play, treating play and interpretation as analogous terms envisions biblical and game studies as complementary fields. Even now when I describe the nature of my research, people often return an incredulous gaze surprised that the video game medium offers more than mere entertainment let alone speaks to religious experience.

As such, this thesis provides a template for further study into video games and religious texts with the potential for gaining valuable insight in two significant ways. First, a methodological approach that examines *TBOI* through the lens of reception history could be applied to other video games that also retell stories from religious traditions. As developers make games inspired from religious stories within different contexts, reception history helps to broaden the interpretive conversation.

Second, my research begins an exploration of the uniquely accelerative properties of midrash generation in video games that deserve further development. While I outlined three categories of midrash generation in chapter five, more categories could be added to the list. By using the criteria for midrash generation with *TBOI* as a prototype, scholars could analyze more video games that also embody qualities required to encourage and generate reinterpretations.

Furthermore, this study suggests that video games that draw from religious traditions may be able to serve as educational platforms to introduce new conversations into the gaming community and industry. As developers use the video game medium to create more games like *TBOI,* they expose more players to themes and stories that the public might not otherwise know about. This exposure provides more opportunities for the emerging interdisciplinary field of game studies and religious/biblical studies

[245] Wagner, *Godwired*, 16

to research, publish material, and engage inquiring students. This project and others like it may also provide aspiring writers and game developers with the tools and resources to encourage more reinterpretations of stories from religious traditions, and so add to the collective reception history of sacred texts and other religious artifacts.

Exposure to such religious retellings has been met with resistance by some sectors in the gaming industry. For instance, after initially giving the game a recommended age rating of 12+, Germany changed *TBOI's* age rating to 16+ due to the game's portrayal of blasphemous content.[246] When Edmund McMillen attempted to move *TBOI* to Apple's iOS platform, Apple refused to admit it due to the game's depiction of child abuse.[247] Likewise, McMillen struggled to release *TBOI* on Nintendo's different platforms due to their own policies against the publication of questionable religious content.[248] Despite attempts at censorship due to the game's content, proponents for *TBOI* pushed for the game's release on more platforms. What publishers failed to realize was that the offensive content within *TBOI* represented a conversation concerning a biblical story that had gone on for centuries. *TBOI* presented the recontextualized Aqedah tradition into a medium and format that proved exceptionally popular. The video game medium provides a venue where developers can present controversial or unfamiliar stories to a wide audience.

6.2 Biblical Interpretation, A Double-Edged Sword

The Binding of Isaac includes "The Bible," as an in-game item that bears significant narratological and ludological functions. Activating "The Bible" grants the avatar flight, which allows the player to

[246] Dan Ryckert, "The Binding of Isaac's German Rating Raised for 'Blasphemy,'" *Game Informer* (Feb 11, 2012), accessed August 19, 2020, https://www.gameinformer.com/b/news/archive/2012/02/11/binding-of-isaac-german-rating.aspx.

[247] Jeff Grub, "Apple's Gaming Censorship Continues: The Binding of Isaac blocked from App Store," *Venture Beat* (Feb 7, 2016), accessed August 19, 2020, https://venturebeat.com/2016/02/07/apples-gaming-censorship-continues-the-binding-of-isaac-blocked-from-app-store/.

[248] Thomas Whitehead, "Nintendo Rejects The Binding of Isaac," *Nintendo Life* (Feb 29th, 2012), accessed August 19, 2020, https://www.nintendolife.com/news/2012/02/nintendo_rejects_the_binding_of_isaac.

bypass obstacles and gaps in the floor. However, when Isaac uses it in his fight against Mom, “The Bible” instantly defeats her. The narrator states that God intervened by knocking a Bible off a shelf striking Mom in the head, which kills her. In contrast, if the player uses “The Bible” in a fight against “Satan,” the avatar dies instantly. Giving the player a means to instantly defeat a boss subverts traditional boss encounters meant to represent tests of endurance, skill, and determination; having the same item also give a player the means to kill themselves is especially unique. In this context, “The Bible” serves a dual purpose capable of aiding or hindering the player depending on how and when it is used.

This dual role of the Bible in-game reflects the struggle scriptural communities experience as debate continues over one of the most troubling texts in the canon. “The Bible’s” destructive power against Mom seems to represent experiencing an interpretation of a sacred text betray them. Mom truly believed that her faith and adherence to the biblical tradition put her in the place of righteousness, when in reality “The Bible” was her ultimate weakness. In contrast, when Isaac encounters the traditional foe of orthodox belief, the place where “The Bible” would be expected to succeed, the player’s faith and adherence to the text betrays them.

The simultaneous experience of belief and betrayal in the interpretation of biblical texts reflects debates within the reception history of the Aqedah, as communities struggled to understand this complex and unique story of Abraham’s family on Mt. Moriah. *TBOI* demonstrates how the Bible resists monolithic interpretations, compels readers to encounter ancient and contemporary voices, and recognizes that the Bible can be misused. Though in an unusual medium, *TBOI* participates in the broader reception history and so continues its longstanding search for meaning and guidance.

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