

# Our Farmer Abraham: The Binding of Isaac and Willing What God Wills

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**Abstract:** In *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture*, Yoram Hazony uses the archetypes of Cain, a farmer, and Abel, a shepherd, to characterise two distinct types of religious believers; those who piously submit to what others say the natural law is, and those who try to work out for themselves what the natural law involves. In this paper, I present a problem unique to Shepherds, namely, what should a Shepherd do if God were to ask them to violate what they understand to be a principle of natural law? I suggest that the Akedah provides an insight into just such a problem, and I conclude by offering one reason to think that Shepherds are preferable to Farmers.

In chapter four of *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture*, Yoram Hazony uses the archetypes of Cain and Abel to contrast what he calls a Farmer ethic against a Shepherd ethic in religious believers.<sup>1</sup> He writes:

Cain [the farmer] has piously accepted the curse on the soil, and God's having sent Adam to work the soil, as unchallengeable. His response is to submit, as his father did before him. And within the framework of this submission, he initiates ways of giving up what little he has as an offer of thanksgiving. In the eyes of the biblical author, Cain represents the life of a farmer, a life of pious submission, obeying in gratitude the custom that has been handed down, which alone provides the bread so that man may live.

Abel [the shepherd] takes the curse on the soil as a fact, but not as one that possesses any intrinsic merit, so that it should command his allegiance. The fact that God has decreed it, and that his father has submitted to it, does not make it good. His response is the opposite of submission. He resists with ingenuity and daring, risking the anger of man and God to secure improvement for himself and for his children. Abel represents the life of the shepherd, which is a life of dissent and initiative, whose aim is to find the good life for man, which is presumed to be God's true will. (Hazony 2012, 108)

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<sup>1</sup> See Hazony (2012, 103-139). Note that both Shepherd and Farmer want some sort of relationship with God. A person who does not want such a relationship does not fall under either the Shepherd or Farmer ethic. Hazony does not offer a vocational archetype(s) for such persons. As noted by an anonymous referee, this usage of "Shepherd" and "Farmer" is idiosyncratic; however, I will be sticking with it throughout this paper.

As tempting as it might be to view the difference between the ethic of a Shepherd and the ethic of a Farmer in terms of the difference between natural law and something akin to divine command theory, Hazony thinks neither ethic admits any normative *obligation* to obey God.<sup>2</sup> Instead, he sees both as falling under the purview of a (merely evaluative) natural law theory.<sup>3</sup> The difference between the Shepherd and the Farmer rests on the thought that natural law is, in his words, “not immediately evident, and in fact not evident at all to that many” (2012, 256).

Whilst Farmers unquestioningly obey what others—either those before them, or current religious authorities—have understood and passed on to them as the natural law, Shepherds sincerely seek to discover the natural law *for themselves*, even if this means questioning religious authorities, or what appear to be divine decrees.<sup>4</sup> Shepherds, Hazony writes, “believe that such wisdom [i.e., natural law] can be found in the world, because they believe that God has spoken it [i.e., that God has a ‘true will’]. To find it is the difficulty, and the subject of a lifelong quest” (2012, 256). Shepherds, then, “look beyond obedience and [that] which appears to be required in a given moment, to seek what God truly loves, and what the Mosaic law is truly intended to achieve” (2012, 139). So, Hazony concludes, whilst Farmer’s best exemplify the virtues of piety, obedience, and trust,<sup>5</sup> Shepherd’s best exemplify the virtues of fear and love of the Lord.<sup>6</sup>

Although there is nothing improper about adopting the ethic of a Farmer over that of the Shepherd, Hazony suggests that God might prefer Shepherds over Farmers. He writes:

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<sup>2</sup> For Hazony, it is never obligatory to obey divine requests. They are perhaps best seen as the requests of a friend (perhaps a friend you owe a significant debt to). There are, of course, consequences of not obeying these requests, but these consequences are presented as a choice to be chosen. Perhaps the best way to view God’s requests is that they are an invitation to wrestle with him. And, somewhat perversely, you don’t do the best thing if you always merely obey them. Hazony writes:

The fact is that no one has to obey because God said so. From the story of Adam in Eden, through almost every page of Scripture, and down to our own time, people choose to live as they choose to live. Some live in accordance with what seems reasonable to them, and do not live in accordance with God’s law; others live in accordance with what seems reasonable to them, and do live in accordance with God’s law. The choice is entirely in Human hands. This is why Moses has to urge Israel to “choose life.” Moses has to urge this on them and on us precisely because no one has to obey because God said so. Indeed, the principle that no one has to obey is pretty close to the heart of the biblical world view – and this is what the authors of Scripture are trying to teach. (2012, 254)

<sup>3</sup> “On this view, the ethics of the Bible is based, in the first instance, on a form of natural law.” (2012, 103)

<sup>4</sup> Many Psalms, for instance, read like extended wrestling contests with God. Likewise, the book of Job paints its protagonist as wrestling with God for answers.

<sup>5</sup> “In the biblical narratives, there is a keen awareness of the virtues—obedience, piety, stability, productivity—that belong principally to the farmer rather than the shepherd, and which are ascribed to figures such as Cain, Noah, Isaac, and Joseph. Thus while the line of shepherds represented by Abel, Abraham, Jacob, and Moses receives by far the greater emphasis and praise, the History also recognises the central role that individuals of the contrasting type must inevitably play in building up any human society” (2012, 139).

<sup>6</sup> “The fear and love of God, then, are commanded by Moses, and are inscribed in his law. But these qualities, as they are understood in the History of Israel, are shepherd’s virtues, which can serve as a source for individual inquiry, for challenging the existing order and the decreed course of events. Not so the trust in God, which is a genuine virtue as well—but a farmer’s virtue, a virtue of men such as Cain and Noah, Isaac and Joseph, who are never portrayed as questioning the fate God has decreed for them, no matter how harsh their road has become” (2012, 251).

The Biblical God is portrayed as revealing his truths and unleashing his deeds in response to man's search for truth. He even longs for man's questioning and seeking. Indeed, his preference for human beings who seek and question is such as to have given rise to an entire tradition of biblical figures questioning God's decrees, conducting disputations with God, and at times even changing God's mind – including Abraham's argument with God over the justice of destroying Sodom; a series of occasions in which Moses challenges God's intentions to destroy Israel; Gideon's questioning whether God has not abandoned Israel; David's anger over what he sees as God's unjust killing of one of his men; and the arguments of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hava-kuk, Jonah, and Job questioning God's justice. In all of these cases, man is shown as able to challenge God's decrees and yet have the respect of God as a consequence. In the cases of Abraham and Moses, it would appear that a view presented by a human being can prevail even over that which God initially sees as right. . . . [T]he capstone of this tradition is the story in which Jacob struggles all night with God himself and in the morning receives a new name—the name Israel: "Your name will no more be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed." (2012, 235)

However, whilst they may be preferred, Shepherds are also open to a possible dilemma not faced by the Farmer. Assuming God can in fact do so,<sup>7</sup> what should the Shepherd do if God clearly requests that they violate what they understand to be a principle of natural law?<sup>8</sup> Farmers, it seems, can demonstrate their trust in God without doing violence to their ethic by straightforwardly obeying this divine request.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, even though Hazony thinks it is never obligatory to obey divine requests, it seems to me that Shepherds cannot sincerely cultivate the virtues of fear *and* love of the Lord, at least as Hazony paints these virtues, whilst at the same time either directly defying a clear divine request or obeying a request they understand to be bad (that is, contrary to their understanding of the natural law).<sup>10</sup> So, should circumstances obtain that

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Adams, for instance, thinks God is incapable of commanding something specific that violates natural law (namely, God's own goodness). He writes:

I think even if there were situations in which every possible action would be contrary, all things considered, to divine commands, Abraham's Dilemma would not be likely to be among them. The most plausible cases for inescapable violation of God's commands would be cases in which divine commands that are quite general (say a command to respect certain rights, and a command to prevent certain sorts of disasters) come into conflict and God has not said how to deal with the conflict. But Abraham is said to have been commanded quite specifically to sacrifice Isaac, and such a particular command seems to imply a suspension of any contrary commands from the same source. A command so specific that does not carry permission to do what is commanded might be thought to show the commander to be so lacking in consistency as to be unfit for the exalted role of defining moral obligation. (1999, 283)

<sup>8</sup> As before, it seems this requires an account of God's nature that is compatible with God's being able to request something that is contrary to natural law. It is not clear to me that the God of classical theism could do such a thing. Hazony, however, is not committed to classical theism.

<sup>9</sup> As indicated, Hazony does not think it is obligatory to obey divine requests.

<sup>10</sup> In *The Guide for the Perplexed*, Maimonides suggests the binding of Isaac shows the limits of the human capacity to both love and fear God (1963, 497-502).

force this decision, which horn of the dilemma should the Shephard take? Should the Shepherd become a Farmer, or should the Shepherd defy God's clear request?<sup>11</sup>

As I see it, this was the very situation Abraham found himself faced with when asked by God to sacrifice his son, Isaac.<sup>12</sup> But rather than acting as another archetypal Shepherd (as it seems Hazony (2012, 118) hints him to be doing), I will suggest instead that Abraham acted here as a Farmer—and that he acted so even though there was a third option open to him, an option that would have allowed him to remain a Shepherd, whilst at the same time, allowing him to refrain from the sort of defiance that inhibits the cultivation of fear and love of the Lord. Finally, I will use this story and its consequence to explore one reason why God might prefer this Shepherd ethic over simplistic obedience to His divine requests.

## Abraham and the Binding of Isaac

Before I turn to the Akedah, let me set the scene with a quote from the Zohar, and a comparison made between the actions of Moses, who had been told by God to leave Him alone, so that God might destroy the Israelites and start again with him (see Exodus 32:7-14), and Noah who had also been requested by God to build an ark, so that God might destroy the world and similarly start again with him (see Genesis 6:13-22):

What is the difference between Moses and all others? . . . Moses said am I to leave the Jewish People's cause for myself [my own]? Now everyone in the world will say that I killed the Jews, like Noah did . . . . Once he was told that he and his sons would be saved he did not ask for mercy over the world, and they were lost, and because of this the deluge is called the waters of Noah, by his name [Isaiah 54:9]. . . . Moses said, now people will say that I killed them because he said to me "and I shall make you a great nation," now, it is better for me to die and the Jews will not be destroyed. . . . And he did not let go of God until he gave himself over for death. . . . But Noah did not do thus, but wanted to be saved and let go of [or, leave behind] the whole world.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Perhaps one helpful way to emphasize the difference between Shepherds and Farmers is to say that Shepherd's prioritize sincerity, whilst Farmers prioritize obedience. See Joshua 24:14: "Now, therefore, fear the LORD and serve Him in sincerity and truth," and also Micah 6:6-8:

With what shall I come before the Lord,  
and bow myself before God on high?  
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,  
with calves a year old?  
Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,  
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?  
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,  
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"  
He has told you, O man, what is good;  
and what does the Lord require of you  
but to do justice, and to love kindness,  
and to walk humbly with your God?

<sup>12</sup> In his encounter with God in Genesis 18, Abraham clearly demonstrated a belief that killing the righteous was in some sense incompatible with his understanding of natural law.

<sup>13</sup> Zohar, vol 1, 67b, A Comparison Between Noah and Moses. (The English translation was kindly provided by an anonymous reviewer). Such a comparison between Noah and Abraham, as between those who do and do not challenge God, is also (possibly) intimated in the Mishna (Avot 5:2) and more clearly developed in Genesis Rabbah (39:6).

In this passage, Moses, another archetypal Shepherd, is set in contradistinction to Noah,<sup>14</sup> who is pictured here as an archetypal Farmer, fearfully (or selfishly) obeying God's request without question.<sup>15</sup> Now, unlike Noah, but like Moses after him, we read in Genesis 18 that Abraham, too, argues (albeit unsuccessfully) with God over the fate of Sodom:

So the men turned from there, and went toward Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before the Lord. Then Abraham came near and said, "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" And the Lord said, "If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake." (Genesis 18:22-26)

However, four chapters later, we see a very different scene play out between Abraham and God:<sup>16</sup>

After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you." So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac... (Genesis 22:1-3)

I can see someone thinking that Abraham might have picked his battles poorly here.<sup>17</sup> Hazony, however, suggests that Abraham's supposed easy acquiescence is explained away by the thought that Abraham never really intended to sacrifice Isaac, and therefore, that Abraham remains even in the story of the Akedah a model Shepherd.<sup>18</sup> He justifies this position by suggesting that the intended-sacrifice view is in fact a Christian interpretation, not found in the Jewish tradition (Hazony 2012, 115). This view is, however, contestable.<sup>19</sup> But if this view is contestable, why else, then, might Abraham have so quickly and apparently uncharacteristically acquiesced?

I'm not sure I can offer a satisfactory explanation. Perhaps we could read something into the fact that Abraham was greatly distressed when Sarah asked for

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<sup>14</sup> See also Zohar, vol. 1, 68a for a defense, and a dispute concerning the defense, of this view of Noah.

<sup>15</sup> No less than four times in twelve verses God reportedly tells Noah that he will destroy them (Genesis 6:13, 6:17a, 6:17b, 7:4). In the Christian tradition, Noah built the ark in fear and by doing so "he condemned the world" (Hebrews 11:7). One interpretation of 1 Peter 3:19-20 also suggests that Jesus preached to those who had been prematurely killed during the flood so that there could be no accusation of divine unfairness.

<sup>16</sup> I recognize that the passage in Genesis 18 could be interpreted as a discussion about what forensic justice requires, whilst in Genesis 22, God is shown as asking for a sacrifice, making it more difficult to compare the two situations. One might think the difference between a request and a discussion renders Abraham's previous stance untenable in this instance, or that the innocence of Isaac makes him in some sense a more suitable sacrifice. However, even if Abraham cannot reuse the same argument or take exactly the same stance, there are evidently arguments and stances in a similar neighborhood that he could have used instead.

<sup>17</sup> This indeed seems to be the view express in Zohar, 106a.

<sup>18</sup> See Hazony (2012, 115-120).

<sup>19</sup> See Lebens (2017, 500-514).

Ishmael to be sent away (Genesis 21:11), yet no such distress is recorded in the Akedah passage. Likewise, it is perhaps interesting that God emphasises the fact that Isaac is “your son, your only son, the one you love” in 22:2, yet omits the phrase “the one you love” when this identification is repeated in 22:16. Could it be that God was highlighting here that Abraham loved Ishmael more than he loved Isaac?<sup>20</sup>

Regardless of Abraham’s intention, however, after Abraham sacrifices the stand-in ram on Mt. Moriah, Isaac and Abraham are never again seen together.<sup>21</sup> One tradition records that Abraham returned to Sarah alone, whilst Isaac travelled onwards towards Ishmael.<sup>22</sup> Although evidently upset at his mother’s death, the Biblical text does not record Isaac appearing either at her death or her burial.<sup>23</sup> Neither does the text record Abraham attending his son’s wedding. Instead, we are told he sent a servant to arrange the marriage between Isaac and Rebekah. In fact, Isaac only reappears in the text to bury his father, after his death.<sup>24</sup> With all this in mind, Hazony writes:

[T]he text opens a window into the soul of a son who believes that his father was really prepared to sacrifice him on the altar, or at least, that he may have been. . . . No words of Abraham can mend this. The damage is done, and the wounds do not heal. Thus while Abraham never intends to slaughter his son and to burn him on the altar, he does sacrifice something exceedingly precious to him on that journey of three days to Moria, which he took on God’s behest: the trust and love of his only son, which it seems he never regains. Both Abraham and Isaac bear this the rest of their lives. (2012, 120)

Assuming this is indeed how we should understand the narrative, are we to think that Isaac’s entirely foreseeable traumatization and the destruction of his relationship with Abraham was God’s intention all along? I cannot bring myself to think so.

One of the hallmarks of the Hebrew Bible is the treatment of its key protagonists: their faults and the consequences thereof are to a person laid bare, often in inglorious detail, and always for us to learn from.<sup>25</sup> Noah’s drunkenness,<sup>26</sup> Moses’ frustration,<sup>27</sup> David’s adultery.<sup>28</sup> And so on. If Hazony is right both about God’s preference for the Shepherd ethic, and about our ability to abductively infer ethical principles from the biblical narrative, there is, I think, another interpretation of the Akedah open to us, and another ethical principle for us to reflect upon. On this interpretation, Abraham is in

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<sup>20</sup> Alternatively, of course, having heard how God had saved Ishmael, Abraham might now be accustomed to putting his children in life threatening situations, and leaving their fate to God.

<sup>21</sup> Of course, absence of evidence is not necessarily evidence of absence. Isaac is rarely mentioned prior to the Akedah, either.

<sup>22</sup> For context, Isaac, according to varying Jewish commentaries, would have been between the ages of 16 and 37, well capable of resisting Abraham, and capable of taking care of himself, to some degree.

<sup>23</sup> See Genesis 24:67.

<sup>24</sup> I recognize that this reading is not the only one available. For instance, on one Rabbinic tradition, Isaac was sent away by Abraham to study Torah for three years. Likewise, Jon Levenson notes that further mention of Isaac and Abraham being together is not entirely unsurprising, as Isaac and Abraham are not recorded as speaking to each other prior to the Akedah, either (Levenson, 2012: 59).

<sup>25</sup> Shepherds do not act as Shepherds all the time, and that gives us all hope!

<sup>26</sup> See Genesis 9:20-25.

<sup>27</sup> See Numbers 20:8-12.

<sup>28</sup> See 2 Samuel 11:1-27.

some sense at fault for not pushing back. He is at fault precisely because in this moment of trial he *does not* act like a Shepherd. This is *his* Noah moment.<sup>29</sup>

Indeed, as noted by Sam Lebens, in its imagination of Abraham's prayer to God, the Jerusalem Talmud suggests that Abraham knew he had a viable loophole he could have used to push back against God. "Master of the Universe," Abraham prays,

it's revealed and known before you that when you asked me to bring up Isaac, my son, I had a response open to me, in order to say, "yesterday you said to me that Isaac shall be called my seed, and now you're telling me to bring him up as an offering?!" [i.e., I could have made such a claim to avoid having to go through with what you commanded me to do]. God forbid! I didn't act in such a way, but instead conquered my desire, and did your will. So may it be your will, before you, Lord, my God, that when the children of Isaac, my son, enter into times of distress, and they don't have somebody to act as their defence [in the heavenly court], you shall act as their defence. (Taanit 2:4)<sup>30</sup>

Had Abraham pushed back as he had done four chapters previously, and as the Jerusalem Talmud imagines he could have easily done here, his relationship with Isaac may have been preserved. However, rather than acting as an archetypal Shepherd, Abraham acted here as a Farmer. Instead of passionately engaging and wrestling with God, Abraham submitted in obedience to God's request.<sup>31</sup> And, I suggest, his doing so may have cost him the great good of his relationship with Isaac. Quite plausibly, the consequence of Abraham's decision to unquestioningly obey was his never seeing Isaac again.

Of course, we do not know what might have happened had he pushed back. Perhaps, as over Sodom, God would still have prevailed, or perhaps, as with Moses, God may have relented.<sup>32</sup> I recognise that we are on dangerous territory when we speculate counterfactually; however, putting myself in Isaac's position, I can't help but think that Isaac seeing his father (at the very least) attempt to wrestle with God over God's request might have gone some way to saving something of their relationship.

## Submission, Surrender, and the Will of God

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<sup>29</sup> If blaming Noah for the flood resonates with you, I suspect blaming Abraham for the breakdown in relationship between himself and Isaac might also resonate. If the former doesn't, the latter is less likely to.

<sup>30</sup> Translation provided in Lebens 2017 (502). See also, Genesis Rabbah 56:10. Sam Lebens' gloss of this passage reads "Abraham was able to find a loop-hole by which to get out of the obligation to sacrifice his son, but he didn't act in such a way. 'God forbid.' Instead, he conquered his desire in order to do God's will" (2017, 502).

<sup>31</sup> For further commentary on God's invitation to wrestle, see Babylonian Talmud 32a, Exodus Rabbah 2:9, and Deuteronomy Rabbah 3:15. I thank an anonymous reviewer for bringing these to my attention.

<sup>32</sup> As pointed out by an anonymous reviewer, God neither commands Abraham to do anything in the discussion over Sodom, nor commands Moses to do anything in Exodus 32:10. With that in view, it might seem as though there is no biblical precedent for challenging God's direct and unequivocal command (although Hazony does seem to suggest that Abel rejects God's command to work the soil, and it seems there is one way of reading Moses' interaction with God where Moses refuses to leave God alone, as requested). Even granting this, though, I am happy affirming that during the Akedah, God might have wanted Abraham to "push back."

In the final section of this paper I want to explore, briefly, one reason why God might favour the Shepherd ethic, and why God might have so tested Abraham with this request.

Earlier in this paper I presented a dilemma I said was unique to the Shepherd. Assuming its possibility, should God ask that the Shepherd violate what they understand to be part of the natural law, it looks like the Shepherd would be limited to either submitting in Farmer-like obedience to God's request, or to acting in outright defiance of God's request. However, I believe this defiance can be further qualified. There is a difference between the defiance of, say, Jonah, who ran away from God, and the defiance of Moses or Jacob,<sup>33</sup> who stood their ground and wrestled with God. A person who runs away accepts that their will and God's will are, and will remain, conflicted. On the other hand, a person who stands their ground and engages with God acts in such a way as to indicate that whilst their wills may now conflict, they desire for them to be at peace, that is, to be in alignment.

As I see it, as long as the Shepherd continues to wrestle, such wrestling will eventuate in one of three outcomes. Either, (1) the Shepherd changes God's previously stated position (which may itself have been a ploy), as with Moses' pleading for Israel;<sup>34</sup> or (2) the Shepherd achieves peace with God's will, but on terms they both agree to; or (3) the Shepherd comes, perhaps through surrender, to will what God wills, as with Abraham's pleading for Sodom.<sup>35</sup> But note that such alignment of wills is not secured through mere submission, rather, perhaps through seeing as God sees, the Shepherd comes to a new appreciation for God's wisdom, and so desires the thing that God desires for its own sake, and not just because God desires it.<sup>36</sup> Finally, they can, like Jacob, reach an impasse.<sup>37</sup> In this case both God's will and Jacob's will were changed, for they were both content to call their contest a draw. In each of these three scenarios, this conflict of

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<sup>33</sup> The man Jacob was wrestling with asked Jacob go, and Jacob refused to do so without a blessing. See Genesis 32:26. This is certainly how Hazony reads this encounter, at any rate. See Hazony (2012, 235).

<sup>34</sup> See Exodus 32:9-14.

<sup>35</sup> For a good discussion of the difference between surrender and submission, see Stump (2010, 167-170). Stump writes:

[I]t is important to see that surrender is not the same as submission. For Paula to submit to Jerome is for Paula to desire that something be done or that something be the case just because she believes that Jerome desires that she desire this, even when she herself would desire the opposite of this if it were not for her belief that Jerome desires that she desire it and her fear of what Jerome would do if she did not desire what he desires her to desire. It is certainly possible for Paula to submit to Jerome in this way while she helplessly hates Jerome. By contrast, in the sense of surrender at issue here, for Paula to surrender to Jerome is for Paula to come to desire Jerome. It is for her to desire him and union with him after a period of resistance to him. On this way of thinking about the difference between submission and surrender, one can submit to someone without surrendering to him, and one can surrender to someone without submitting to him. Paula could desire Jerome and union with Jerome without thereby desiring that something-or-other be the case or be done just because she knows that Jerome desires that she desire this. Paula might in fact desire what Jerome desires, but only because she herself desires it as good, and not for the reason that Jerome desires that she desire this. On the other hand, Paula might desire Jerome but actually not desire what Jerome desires; she might instead desire that Jerome change his desires to bring them into harmony with what she desires. So, surrender is not to be confused with submission. (2010, 168)

<sup>36</sup> Perhaps in realizing there were not even ten righteous men in Sodom, Abraham caught a glimpse of the situation as God saw it and came to believe in the righteousness of God's decision to destroy Sodom.

<sup>37</sup> See Genesis 32:22-32.

wills is resolved, and in no outcome is it resolved through Farmer-like obedient submission by any party.

This being said, a call to wrestle with God is not an excuse to be obstinate for the sake of obstinacy.<sup>38</sup> It is not a license for rebellion. For a Shepherd, wrestling with God is only appropriate when they receive a divine request that violates what they honestly and sincerely (but perhaps mistakenly) believe to part of natural law.<sup>39</sup> But even granting this, why might God have tested Abraham in this way? I suspect God was providing Abraham with an invitation to and an occasion for another second personal encounter with Him. An occasion for Abraham to once again come face to face with God, and in what could have been a repeat of the Sodom wrestling match, an occasion for Abraham to grow in his knowledge of God, and an occasion for Abraham's relationship with God to be deepened.<sup>40</sup>

However, I also see a further reason why God might have so challenged Abraham, a reason that might help explain why God prefers Shepherds to Farmers. If, as Hazony thinks (2012, 110), God wants independent, dignified partners—co-workers, rather than toiling, subservient minions—it is important that both God's and Abraham's wills align, that is, that both Abraham and God will such a partnership with each other. However, if Abraham subserviently obeys what he is told corresponds to the natural law, Abraham is reduced to little more than God's minion. The cost of this sort of submission is high, for a person in submission to God's (supposed) true will is in practice little more than—to use Hazony's own words—an automaton (2012, 97). If Abraham so submits, I suggest that he cannot engage in an independent, dignified partnership with God. In willing whatever God wills because God wills it, and not for its own sake, Abraham divests himself of his own independent will, and, in so doing, divests himself of his status as God's co-partner.<sup>41</sup> Alternatively, a person who wrestles with God, even if they end up willing what God initially requested, wills what they do because *they* will to do so, and *not* just because God requested it. In willing so, that person, the Shepherd, can be a *co-partner* with God.

Even though the end result may look similar, there is a difference in the intention behind submitting to God's will and the intention behind willing what God wills for its own sake. Furthermore, this difference in intention has important ramifications when one considers unions of love. For I take it that a union of love requires two wills to will union with each other in order for it to obtain. Given what I have previously noted, there are thus (at least) two ways a person could will union with God.<sup>42</sup> They could, as perhaps a Farmer might, simply submit to the request to love God, because God has requested it.<sup>43</sup> Alternatively, they could, as a Shepherd might, desire union with God for its own sake, because the Shepherd comes to realise that their union with God is a great good, desirable in its own right.

Whilst acting on both intentions might eventuate in a person's willing union with God, it seems to me this difference in intention can lead to a difference in the sort of union that might ensue in each case. If we submit to whatever God wills, and thereby will

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<sup>38</sup> As in Exodus 32:9.

<sup>39</sup> Hazony in fact writes, "The God of Israel loves those who disobey for the sake of what is right, and is capable of being pleased when a man has used his freedom to wrestle with him and to prevail, so long as the path on behalf of which he struggles ultimately proves to be the right one in God's eyes" (2012, 138). Or to put it another way, Stump characterizes putative disobedience "for the sake of what's right" as being akin to willing God's antecedent will rather than God's consequent will (2013, 165-6).

<sup>40</sup> For more details on this view, see Worsley (2017).

<sup>41</sup> For more on this point see Stump (2013, 155-171). It is perhaps interesting to note that Abraham appears to go into some form of retirement after the Akedah, no longer used by God in the way he had previous been.

<sup>42</sup> For more on the nature of union and love, see chapters four and five of Stump (2010).

<sup>43</sup> See, for instance, what seems to be a command to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and strength in Deuteronomy 6:5.

union with God because that is what God wills, one might conclude either that union of the sort wanted cannot in fact obtain, or if it does, that the sort of union that has obtained is just not very serious. Why might either be the case? Well, one might conclude that in so submitting, only one will, namely, God's, will have been operative. Were God to have willed otherwise, that person would not have willed union with God.<sup>44</sup> So, whilst it may be that such a person desires union with God whilst submitting to God's will, they would only be so desirous inadvertently, because God wills that they be so, and not because they *actually want* union with God for its own sake.<sup>45</sup> This situation could be likened to a fearful captive willing union with their infatuated kidnapper, taking this to be the best thing for them to do. Perhaps some sort of union will eventuate in this instance, but it certainly won't be the sort of maximal union one might hope for in a relationship, and no doubt, were the kidnapper to change their mind (Stockholm syndrome cases excepted) we might expect that the captive's desire for union with their captor would quickly dissipate. On this view, then, if God really wanted to enter into a greater union of love with us, either as a lover, or as a friend, God must desire that we will union with God for its own sake, because we come to see that such union is a great good, and not just because God has requested us to do so.<sup>46</sup>

Indeed, I take it that such an intentional desire for union is particularly precious to God. In what reads to me as lovely illustration of this, the second chapter of Jeremiah offers a delightful insight into God's attitude towards such two-willed union. Casting His mind back over centuries of apparent idolatry and rejection, God recalls Israel's love for him in the wilderness:

I remember the devotion of your youth,  
                   your love as a bride  
 how you followed me in the wilderness,  
                   in a land not sown. (Jeremiah 2:2)

On one interpretation, this "devotion of youth" lasted, at best, three days.<sup>47</sup> Yet this freely willed devotion was such a powerful image that amid Israel's then present idolatry and sin, God held this moment from many centuries previous at the forefront of his mind. One hardly imagines this picture would have been so poignant had those people in the wilderness merely willed whatever God willed, and thereby inadvertently found themselves willing union with God.

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<sup>44</sup> For more on the importance of will in union with God, see Stump (2013).

<sup>45</sup> Does this mean Farmers cannot unite with God in love? Not necessarily. If the farmer thinks the only way they can unite with God is through submission, this initial act of submission will be motivated by the desire for union, and so such union, as weak as it may be, may still obtain. Nevertheless, if Hazony is right about the difference between Farmer and Shepherd, it seems God has a preference for the Shepherd over the Farmer, presumably because the sort of union available between God and a Shepherd is deeper than the union possible between God and a Farmer. Furthermore, if the Farmer's desire for union with God precedes submission to the command to love God (that is, they want to unite with God, and see submission as the only way to attain such union), it seems the Farmer has in this initial desire acted as a something like a Shepherd.

<sup>46</sup> This will not prevent God from issuing commands to love Him. Such a request might prompt a person to wrestle with God over why God has issued such a request (and through such wrestling, come to a deeper knowledge of God). Alternatively, such requests might help point a Shepherd in the right direction, causing them to question why they do not love God, or letting them know that such a relationship with God is possible.

<sup>47</sup> See Exodus 15. On this interpretation, "devotion of youth" refers to the song of Moses and Miriam, immediately after the parting of the Red Sea. However, just three days after this event, the children of Israel are repeatedly grumbling in frustration—and within three months are worshipping a golden calf.

## Conclusion

I have suggested that when presented with a divine request running contrary to what they understand to be a principle of the natural law, a Shepherd can find peace with God without adopting a position of Farmer-like obedient submission to this request. However, I suggested such peace is possible only if they are willing to wrestle with God—a situation, I suspect, God might deliberately engineer in order to facilitate an intense knowledge-providing second-personal encounter with Him.

Of course, the Shepherd may find, as Abraham did over Sodom, that they must eventually surrender to God's will. However, such surrender need not involve divesting themselves of their autonomy or dignity, for, in the process of wrestling with God they may find themselves coming to want the thing that God wills, and wanting it for its own sake—not just because they think it is what God has requested.<sup>48</sup> However, they may also find, as happened with Moses (and, who knows, might have happened on Mt. Moriah), that in wrestling with God, they find peace with God because it is God who changes His mind.<sup>49</sup>

In concluding, I have suggested that sincere Shepherds have a palatable route out of their unique dilemma: they can always choose to wrestle with God. However, I have claimed that during the Akedah, Abraham did not take this route, opting instead for the trusting ethic of the Farmer. Whilst what Abraham did in obeying God's request might be praiseworthy *qua* Farmer,<sup>50</sup> it is quite plausible that, in virtue of submitting in the way that he did, Abraham may have lost out on what could have been the tremendous blessing of a life with his son Isaac still in it.<sup>51</sup> Had Abraham replicated the *chutzpa* of the stiff-necked Shepherd as seen in Genesis 18, his relationship with God may still have been deepened and yet his relationship with Isaac saved.

In sum, then, as Hazony suggests is possible, reflection on this interpretation of the Akedah narrative can enrich our practical understanding of the ethics of a Shepherd. A Farmer submits. A Shepherd does not. Sincere Shepherds are, by necessity, wrestlers.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> If, for instance, the wrestling Shepherd tries to work out why God would request such a thing, they may come to see the divine perspective behind the request, or they may find out new facts about the situation that eventuate in their seeing the justice of the request in a way not previously obvious or available to them.

<sup>49</sup> If talk of God changing his mind is difficult to swallow, note that God seems to do so in several places in the Hebrew Bible, see, for instance, Genesis 6:6 or Exodus 32:14. One can think of this as God moving between his antecedent and consequent will, or that God's consequent will changes in virtue of the fact that a person has given God a reason to change it (much as prayer is, on some accounts, supposed to do).

<sup>50</sup> See Genesis 22:16, where Abraham is blessed for his obedience.

<sup>51</sup> There is, of course, a question raised about the moral legitimacy of Farmer like obedience when a life is at stake. Clearly, the excuse of "just following orders" does not absolve one of responsibility in ordinary circumstances, but I am not convinced that this sort of responsibility translates when the request comes from God. Nevertheless, whilst there might not be a prohibition on such blind obedience, it is, for the reasons I have presented (namely, because the Shepherd is able to develop and deepen their relationship with God in a way a Farmer is unable to), far from preferred.

<sup>52</sup> What of those who "do what is right in their own eyes" and question, for instance, the sacrifice of animals, or campaign for the sort of social justice that seems incompatible with divine requests? See Proverbs 21:2-3: "Every way of a man is right in his own eyes, but the LORD weighs the heart. To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the LORD than sacrifice." Nevertheless, if a person truly wrestles with God, I take it that they will also want to see as God sees, if only so they can appeal to God on God's own terms.

And because they are, they are also co-partners, lovers, and friends of God in a way that Farmers could never be.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Although this interpretation of the Akedah is difficult to reconcile with the Christian tradition, both due to Hebrews 11:17-19 (where it is stated Abraham believed God would raise Isaac from the dead) and also due to what is taken to be the overt Messianic typology found in the passage, the Christian tradition does also praise examples of Shepherd-like wrestling. See, for instance, Jesus and the Syrophenician women in Mark 7:24-30, the disciples in John 6:60-71, John the Baptist questioning Jesus in Luke 7:18-35, and Nathaniel under the fig tree in John 1:46-50.

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