

Research Article

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The Impossibility of Representing the Sacrifice of Abraham and Isaac in Barnett Newman's Painting

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Abstract: One of the archetypes of the Judeo-Christian (and Muslim) sacrifice is the story of Abraham and his beloved son, Isaac. The central element of the Akedah (Binding of Isaac) narrative, which moves not only theological but also philosophical discourse, is the vulnerability of the human body, the depiction of which is unimaginable in both the Jewish and Muslim religious beliefs. The sacrifice and body, as well as the ancient correspondence between these two, can be visualized in Barnett Newman's painting *Abraham* (MoMa, New York/NY, 1949) created in the decade of the end of World War II. This study interprets the painting, which is painted on a dark background, as a strange and outstanding work of Newman's abstract expressionism. The nonfigurative image creates an opportunity for a diversity of interpretations. These interpretations can be traced back from the biographical context through the national trauma of the twentieth-century Holocaust to the biblical book of Genesis. In the course of theology and comparative literature and cultural studies interpretations, the visualization of the drama of Abraham and Isaac gradually emerges, deconstructing again and again the approaches that seemed to be predictable before. The study ventures to compare Newman's painting with as many interpretations of the title "Abraham" as possible, so that such comparisons may lead to just as many different interpretations of the image and the text.

Keywords: Barnett Newman, sacrifice and body, Abrahamic cycle, sacrifice in the Bible, Interarts studies, cultural studies, systematic theology, biblical theology, comparative literature, Abraham and his child

1 Introduction

The study undertakes to conduct a comparative analysis of Barnett Newman's painting entitled *Abraham*. The religious connotation of the name *Abraham* leads the reader to the *akedah* narrative in the Book of Genesis. This narrative has the same significance in the theological approach to the correlation between the sacrifice and the body as in the artistic tradition of the sacrifice and the body. After defining the akedah sacrifice, the next part of the study reminds one of the paradoxes of faith inherent in the Abraham narrative through the interpretation given by Kierkegaard in his treatise entitled *Fear and Trembling*. Then, the interpretation of Newman's painting introduced the possibilities inherent in the semiology of the name "Abraham" in widening concentric circles. First, it is the painter's own life, then it is the twentieth-century culmination of the national traumas, due to his Jewish origins, then finally, the first occurrence of the name in the figure of the patriarch of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism that serve as the starting points for the interpretation of the painting. Most of the last part of the train of thoughts is made up by the comparison with the Biblical Abraham narrative. The concentric approach is meant to ask, again and again, what one can see in the painting, what one can read

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about the figure of Abraham, who is considered the example par excellence of faith. In the meantime, the study intends to show the context of twentieth-century arts and history not only in an ad hoc relationship with the ancient religious tradition but also to lead one closer to clarifying the ideological relations of the sacrifice and the material relations of the body.

2 The Paradoxical View of the Sacrifice of Abraham and Isaac

The *akedah* comes from the biblical Hebrew term עקידת יצחק, which in its full form, literally means the binding of Isaac. In the *Book of Genesis*, it is linked to one of the most quoted moments of the Abrahamic narratives (Gen 12-25): the patriarch binds his only son as a sacrificial gift in the land of Moriah (Gen 22:9). Later, Mount Moriah was identified as the *Temple Mount*, precisely because of the *akedah*, a sacred place for Jews, Islam, and Christianity as one of the New Testament locations. From the beginning, all three monotheistic religions considered Abraham as the ancestor of humanity and its own particular religious tradition. The shocking Abrahamic story of a single person, therefore, can also be read as a universal drama of humanity in these cultures. It is no coincidence that the European philosophical tradition also paid special attention to the *heroes* of the *akedah*, feeling that basic anthropological, ethical, theological, and theodical questions were confronting each other in their stories. Among the early theological writings of Hegel, alongside the positivity of the Christian religion, Søren Kierkegaard's work *Fear and Trembling* is also a stage of this thinking process.¹ The philosophical *line* was based on the theology of the Christian Church Fathers, together with the Talmud and the Midras. The Greek and Latin-language authors shared each other's hermeneutics when they considered Isaac, who was innocently sacrificed, as a typological symbol of Christ. For example, St. Gregory of Nyssa, at a point of *De deitate Filii et Spiritus Sancti*, wrote about the *akedah*:

First, the father binds the son. I have often seen the representation of this suffering in paintings (γραφῆς εἰκόνα), and I could never observe it without tears, because art (τῆς τέχνης) revealed the event extremely vividly. Isaac is stooping before his father, beside the altar, down on his knees, his hands tied behind his back. Abraham is placed behind him, stepping on his knee joint, pulling the boy's hair towards himself, bending above his face and looking at him with pity, while his right hand is gripping a dagger and is about to strike. The weapon's blade is almost bruising the body when the divine voice forbids the act to be performed.²

The Bishop of Cappadocia schematizes ancient depictions unknown to us in these lines and describes the result in an extremely vivid, pictorial formulation. The fact that theological hermeneutics turns into an ecphrasis, and as if the paraphrasing heritage of the Antiochian scripture is kept alive by a painting description, at the same time testifies to the fact that the artists could often process the scene of the *akedah* as a popular topic very early on, and that the visual perception inserted into the theological treatise is also one of the relevant interpretive paths for Gregory.

Compared to the preaching and scholarly discourse of the Baroque period, this relatively rare procedure in ancient Christian theological literature invites theological and image hermeneutics to a distinguished meeting. The dialogue partner of this meeting is not only biblical exegesis and iconography but also

¹ In the authoritative edition of Herman Nohl, the entire text, including the Abrahamic aspects of the foundation of the Jesus' religion in the Old Testament, which is more important to us, is published in the second part: Hegel, *Hegels theologische Jugendschriften*, 137–342, especially 243–60. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 1986. In a pioneering way, Mark C. Taylor undertook the deconstructive theological comparison of the two works: Taylor, *Journeys to Moriah*, 1–22. Further relevant studies were published in this special issue: *Interdisciplinary Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society*, 2022/2. Especially: Sjöberg, "Other Abrahams," 234–55.

² My translation – M. H. "Ἐντεῦθεν δεσμοῖς πρότερον διαλάμβανει ὁ πατήρ τὸν παῖδα. Εἶδον πολλάκις ἐπὶ γραφῆς εἰκόνα τοῦ πάθους, καὶ οὐκ ἀδακρυτὶ τὴν θέαν παρῆλθον, ἐναργῶς τῆς τέχνης ὑπ' ὅψιν ἀγούσης τὴν ἱστορίαν. Πρόκειται ὁ Ἰσαὰκ τῷ πατρὶ παρ' αὐτῷ τῷ θυσιαστηρίῳ, ὀκλάσας ἐπὶ γόνυ, καὶ περιηγμένους ἔχων εἰς τοῦπίσω τὰς χεῖρας· ὁ δὲ ἐπιβεβηκῶς κατότιν πῶ πόδε τῆς ἀνκύλης, καὶ τῇ λαιᾷ χειρὶ τὴν κόμην τοῦ παιδὸς πρὸς ἑατὸν ἀνακλάσας ἐπικύπτει τῷ προσώπῳ ἐλεεινῶς πρὸς αὐτὸν ἀναβλέποντι καὶ τὴν δεξιάν καθωπλισμένην τῷ ξίφει πρὸς τὴν σφαγὴν κατευθύνει, καὶ ἄπτεται ἤδη τοῦ σώματος ἢ τοῦ ξίφους ἀκμῇ, καὶ τότε αὐτῷ γίνεται θεόθεν φωνὴ τῷ ἔργῳ κωλύουσα." Gregory of Nyssa, *De deitate Filii et Spiritus Sancti*, 572C-D.

fundamental theological and dogmatic thinking about faith. This is possible because Abraham, as a privileged witness of the faith (Heb 11:8-19), realizes precisely what the theology of the New Testament says, which includes trust in God in the literal and abstract sense of invisibility – precisely in spite of previsibility and/or invisibility. The author of the *Epistle to the Hebrews* interpreting Abraham as a witness to the faith defined faith in his theological genealogy leading to the patriarch: “Now faith (πίστις) is the substance (ὑπόστασις) of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen (οὐ βλεπομένον).”³ Therefore, in the Christian belief of patriarchs, faith, primarily associated with Abraham, seems to have an adversarial relationship with the perception of vision. Examining the theological and visual aspects in Kierkegaard's oeuvre, George Pattison elaborates his arguments at the end of Kierkegaard's book entitled *The Aesthetic and the Religious* from a different approach, though on similar grounds.⁴ In Pattison's interpretation of Kierkegaard, the topic of paradox is the scandal of the event regarding Christ.⁵ Kierkegaard, however, discusses the paradox of faith not only in relation to Christ, but also to Abraham on the pages of the aforementioned *Fear and Trembling*. This is why the Danish philosopher's theory of communication approach is to be cited here. Since the paradox is a figure of speech, its interpretation is not to be carried out in a systematic theological way, as *dogmatic theology* performs it, but requires a *rhetorical* approach. Kierkegaard refers to the paradoxically appearing Christ as a pattern, an English expression behind which – as Pattison points it out with a sharp eye – is “Forbilde” in the Danish original.⁶ The second part of the compound word in Danish thus uses the term “image” that allows Kierkegaard to approach the paradoxical nature of the Christ pattern through visualization. According to Kierkegaard's interpretation, Christ's becoming visible is part of Kenosis, since the invisible God has become a visible man. Kierkegaard concludes that nothingness becomes visible, and thus, we arrive at the paradox that must also be raised in connection with Newman's pictorial unrepresentation of Abraham, who may be considered as the forerunner of Christ.

Christianity, of course, is the heir of the religious tradition of Judaism at this point, which is even more radical than Christianity, when, in addition to the prohibition of pronouncing the name of the Lord, it also advocated the written form of the unreadability of the name of God, and, like the later prohibition of Islam, generally opposed pictorial representations since they could become objects of worship.⁷ Moreover, the Abrahamic religions and especially the rabbinic tradition of Judaism held that Abraham was the first iconoclast, the idea that can be considered evidence of the heroic experience of faith, although the text of the *Torah* does not notify of any image destruction.⁸ This was also the basis of one of the oldest stories about the destruction of Hazor (Joshua 11:10-13), which was based on archaeological findings – from a religious point of view – clearly the systematic mutilation, burning, and other damage of the god representations in the conquered, ancient Canaanite city.⁹ That systematic iconoclasm during the ruining of the city in which Hazor's

³ Heb 11:1. Generally, I use the King James Version as a Bible translation except those cases when I indicate other sources.

⁴ Pattison, *Kierkegaard*, 174–88.

⁵ *Op. cit.* 174.

⁶ *Op. cit.* 175.

⁷ The Decalogue explicitly prohibited the worship of pictorial representation, not only toward God, but also toward creation: “You shall not make for yourself a carved image—any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth [...]” (Ex 20:4). However, this does not mean that the creation of images alone was prohibited, provided that they were not an object of worship reserved to God. Nordhofen, “Die Ikone – eine Antwort auf das Bilderverbot,” 179–89.

⁸ For example, the Russian-born Ginzberg, who created in America, as an outstanding expert of the *Talmud*, made available the image-destroying deeds of Abraham in this popular work, originally published in 1909, which aimed to eliminate idolatry: Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews I*, 213–7. In comparison, as the youngest practitioner of the Abrahamic religion, we can give an example from the Persian poetry of the thirteenth century, as Abraham's iconoclasm also circulated the literature of the Middle East as a topos. Along with Firdausi and Hafiz, the most outstanding poetic oeuvre was the Mosleho ‘d-din Sa’ prize, who became known in world literature as the creator of the *Orchard* (Bustan) and the *Rose Garden* (Gulistan). In the first of the two collections, there is a short narrative poem from Mosleho ‘din Sa ‘di, which sings the radicalism, as well as the virtue of hospitality, when it is revealed that the stranger eating with his family is a fire worshipper. The example of Persian poetry is based on the Qur‘an at 21:50–70, which, like the Midras, details the courageous actions of the patriarch, who heroically opposed idolatry. The 38th chapter of Rabba's midrash for the *Book of Genesis* contains the Hebrew version of the same Muslim story as an interpretation of Gen 11:28, and the first six chapters of the apocalypse of *Abraham*, preserved in the Old Slavonic language, address the same issue.

⁹ Ben-Tor, *The Sad Fate of Statues*, 7–16.

statues and other depictions were sacrificed, can also be understood from postbiblical literature as the *application* of the destruction regulations recorded in the Mishnah.¹⁰ Thanks to this strict legal regulation and the cultural-religious attitude reflecting this, it is no coincidence that until the advent of modernity, painting remained a prohibited activity for those of Jewish origin outside a well-defined area, starting from the second commandment of the Decalogue.¹¹ Continuing Kierkegaard's proposition, we can say that the case of Abraham from the beginning is not only the paradox of faith, but also that of vision.

3 Barnett Newman's Painting

Barnett Baruch Newman (1905–1970) has relatively few works of art attributed to him, when compared to his contemporaries. The painter, who produced 120 works on canvas, together with other media, falls short of even reaching 300 pieces in his body of work in visual arts.¹² As a member of the first generation of American abstract expressionism, he added many of his paintings to the title related to the *Book of Genesis*, including a very special one called *Abraham*.¹³ The oil painting of the Jewish artist on canvas in 1949 is 6' 10³/₄" × 34¹/₂", so it is a narrow, human-scale, but slightly larger than the human height, which is still part of the permanent exhibition in New York, in its twentieth-century collection. The uniqueness of the work lies in that it breaks the usual patterns of the reception strategies of paintings with its nonfigurative image painted in black on a dirty black background.¹⁴ Newman found the specific character of his painting shortly before he made this painting in 1949. The straight line strip, which he marked with the word "zip," looks like a strip from a distance, with variable sharp contours – for the preparation of which the insulating tape adhered to the foundation or the first cover paint layer provided the technical cover – became a real trademark of Newman's painting space creation.¹⁵ Compared to his previous works, the application of zip was the moment of a new understanding of space for Newman.¹⁶ The reason why *Abraham* is a radical image among his first zipped artworks is because, with his use of color, the painter puts visibility at risk. The gaze *when* the painting is seen for the first time, almost without exception, creates a sense of an incomprehensible dark Abraham picture, bringing to play the problem of the biblical figure of Abraham around the paradox of visibility and invisibility, as explained earlier. An anchoring point for interpreting the painting may be the art historical fact that Barnett Newman painted this work a year after losing his father, who was called Abraham Newman. In Western culture, dark colors that express grief can make some sense in this way. However, the international literature prefers a broader interpretation when the title is also applied to Abraham, the father of all nations.¹⁷

¹⁰ *The Mishnah. A New Translation*, trans. Jacob Neusner, Yale University Press, New Haven-London, 1988, 668.

¹¹ Danto, "Barnett Newman and the Heroic Sublime."

¹² Bois, "On Two Paintings by Barnett Newman," 3.

¹³ During the sketchy review of the painter's oeuvre, Edward Maza said that it could be a visual rewriting of the first book of the Pentateuch. He convincingly argues for the presence of biblical thinking in the title interpretation of the following paintings: he interprets the 1951 painting *Day Before One* as a reference to the first day of creation, and associates the four *The Name 1* (1949) works of art with the revelation of the sacred tetragrammaton. Maza, "Rewriting Genesis," 296–310. A later point of the work has not been compared by the literature, but it can be an inverse mirror of *Abraham* in the colors, space management and the number of zips of the acrylic work of Newman's *Thirteenth Station* completed in 1966.

¹⁴ In art history literature, András Rényi has dated the creation of the painting to 1948. Like other authors, he saw the picture as Newman painted black on the canvas with black paint. In its description of the artwork, MoMA distinguishes between black and brown. Rényi, *Az értelmezés tébolya*, 165. I borrow the name of the color difference between (matte) black (glossy) black paints from Newman's first monographer and friend and continue to use it: Thomas B. Hess, *Barnett Newman*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York/NY, 1971, 59–60.

¹⁵ Danto, "Barnett Newman and the Heroic Sublime."

¹⁶ In an interview with Dorothy Gees Seckler, Newman said that instead of the echo of art criticism focusing on color management, the talent of drawing should be evaluated, which is suitable for making a new statement about the space: "... my drawing declares the space." Newman, *Interview with Dorothy Gees Seckler*, 784.

¹⁷ For example, HESS, *op. cit.*, 61. Already here, Hess referred to the Kabbalistic idea of the first man as an artist. As one of the most ancient mystical texts of the Kabbalistic tradition. The *Sefer Yetzirah* (book of Creation or Formation) stated that its author was the

The transition between the so-called reference (Abraham Newman) and intermediate (Abraham, the patriarch) readings of the title can be facilitated by the etymological examination of the title of the painting. According to the Bible testimony, Abraham belongs to a group of biblical figures to whom God gave a new name during their. The figure of Abram (אַבְרָם) marks the patriarch as the name until Gen 17:5, after which – as a result of the so-called Priestly revision – he receives the personal name Abraham (אַבְרָהָם) as his proper name. While the former has a theophoric meaning (“the Father is majestic”), the latter can be translated with the statement “the Father loves.”¹⁸ In the sentence-level structure of this Western Semitic name, which compresses the subject and predicate, the common component is therefore the fatherly character that can relate to the Creator, but also reveals the significance from the perspective of Salvation History of the patriarch (salaam) who becomes the father of peoples, as the divine articulation of the name change draws attention to it.¹⁹ Based on this, it is precisely the sacred and profane interpretation of fatherhood that is integrated in the biblical narrative of Abraham and, through this, in the history of the Jewish personal name, thus making the profane and sacred reading of the title of the twentieth-century painting equally plausible. Of the two types of black shown in the painting, the more vividly colored zip may indicate the biographical father on this basis, as he is more sharply visible for the twentieth- to twenty-first-century recipient, also due to his proximity in history, behind whom the use of washed black may refer to the ancient naming patriarch. The same genealogical thinking, which is closely related to both the individual and national self-definition of Judaism, determines the position of the sons in the world of interpretation in addition to remembering the two Abrahams. Just as the two Abrahams can be sons themselves, ultimately the sons of the Lord, so too can their descendants, Isaac and Barnett Newman, be the subject who pronounces the personal name of the title. The sons may be invisible, merely by the utterers of the name and title “Abraham,” but the reality of the zip running black on black serves as the narrower and more vividly black descendant of the washed-out black color. Thus, Abraham, Abraham Newman, Isaac, and Barnett Newman can all be shapers of the zip.

4 The Negative Theological Interpretation of the Painting

In the following, I strive to link this broader interpretation of the title of the painting to as many specific points of the biblical Abraham narrative as possible, not only as a reference, but also on the basis of the gradually revealing view of the work of art. I am aware that the nature of abstract painting supports this hermeneutical approach to the same extent as it limits it. For this reason, I think that no matter how impressive the interpretative gestures are, their totalization would be the same as the elimination of the work of art. In this sense, we can discover a kinship between a cataphatic theology that knows its own boundaries and this path of interpretation.

patriarch Abraham himself, who closes his work of writing, which was left out of the *Torah*, by presenting himself as an imitator of God's creation: “Undoubtedly the first man was an artist.” This was echoed several times by Newman in his publication in the first issue of *Tiger's Eye* in 1947. Newman, *The First Man Was an Artist in Art in Theory*, 576. The title and motto-like reference of the art-theoretic article is clearly the quote from Kabbalah, on which Newman still twisted it in this article. It starts from the archaeological finds of the period and proclaims the historical priority of art before any other communication and self-expression. After that, Barnett Newman is the first to claim that Adam was an artist, which is a novelty as compared to Kabbalah, and the rhetorical intention may have been that this idea could also enter into a dialogue with the scientific discoveries that investigated into the first traces of humans in the age of Newman. Ibid. 577. The important thing for us, however, is that the painter was demonstrably familiar with the line of thought that identifies *Sefer Yetzirah* Abraham as the first artist. The use of this mystical theory barely precedes the preparation of *Abraham*. Therefore, if someone is more open to a creative-oriented art historical context, it is stated from the philological data that the title of the painting, in the knowledge of the Kabbalistic tradition, said something about art that might be considered as *ars poetica*. Therefore, in addition to the loss of his father, it is important to make the painting accessible as a new way of artistic self-understanding. In the future, when explaining the ratios of the spatial arrangement offered by zip and the interpretation of the Kabbalistic number perception, I will discuss the importance of this.

¹⁸ The linguistic debate about the two figures was recapitulated by the review of RÓZSA, *A Genesis könyve II. [The Book of Genesis II.]*, 183–4. The distinction between the two figures earlier and later in the chapter functions as a reference to the part of the Abraham Cycle before or after Gen 17:5.

¹⁹ RÓZSA, Ibid., 426.

The mention of negative theology is instructive because this expression about God only tells what can be denied, and its origin can be found mostly in the work of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. Dionysius is the one to whom the Christian belief of mysticism owes at least as much, if not more, than the discourse of negative theology. This approach to Dionysius' speech about God, which is rooted in silence and serves as a starting point for mysticism, grew out of the work of St. Gregory of Nyssa entitled *The Life of Moses*, which, based on the specific obscurity of the cloud of theophany in connection with Moses' mystical God experiences, presented the unknowability of the Lord in his paradoxical self-discovery. The conceptual basis of the Cappadocian exegesis was inspired by a few lines of Clement of Alexandria:

Whence Moses, persuaded that God is not to be known by human wisdom, said, 'Show me Thy glory;' (Ex 33:13) and into the *obscurity* (Ex 20:21) where God's voice was, pressed to enter—that is, into the inaccessible and invisible ideas respecting Existence. For God is not in darkness or in place, but above both space and time, and qualities of objects.²⁰

Therefore, the quoted part deals with the theophanies of Moses and in particular refers to the vision related to Mount Sinai in Ex 33. We follow the worship of the golden calf and the Mosaic icons that destroyed it (Ex 32) in the story when the prophet asks YHWH to see his face. However, God refuses to see Moses face to face (Ex 33:20). The perception of vision in a platonic environment such as the Philo of Alexandria,²¹ the city of Clement and Origen was a privileged form of knowledge. Therefore, it is understandable why Clement talks about the unknowability of the biblical God who refuses to see him in the previous quote explaining this event. The God who refused Moses the opportunity to see him on Mount Sinai in a physical sense was unknowable on the spiritual plane. The latter reading of Clement gives the opportunity to read the sentence in Ex 20:21 as prolepsis: "The people remained behind, and Moses entered into the obscurity."²²

The text of the *Septuagint* is correctly translated into English, if the singular object case of the Greek noun γνόφος is interpreted with the word "obscurity" as the purpose of entering somewhere (εἰσερχομαι), since the patristic authors have understood this term in many cases, and therefore, the Latin of the Vulgate (caliginem) also expressed the rolling obscurity of the cloud, and the appropriate word of the Masoretic Text (עָרַפֶּל – arapel) indicates a thick and dense cloud primarily and the resulting obscurity secondarily. At the same time, it is also true that the primary meaning of the Greek γνόφος is specifically in profane literature, of which Clement of Alexandria was one of the best acquainted among the Christian Church Fathers, is darkness, and the same can be said of Hebrew עָרַפֶּל and Latin caligo. At one point (12:18), the author of the previously quoted *Epistle to the Hebrews*, who is famous for his eloquent Greek, recalled the theophany of Moses on Mount Sinai, by using the term γνόφος in Ex 20:21 in a list that shows the paradoxical human perception of the appearance of God by combining two opposing pairs of concepts: "For you have not come to a mountain that can be touched and to a blazing fire, and to gloom and darkness and a raging windstorm [...]."²³ The four figurative phenomena in Heb 12:18 are 1) flaming fire, 2) gloom (γνόφος), 3) darkness (ζόφος),²⁴ and 4) storm. We can only interpret that pictorial structure as a visual chiasm if we read *darkness* as the meaning of the term γνόφος, and not the obscurity of the fog or the cloud, between the extreme members of the light of fire and the storm burdened with the light of the lightning. Thus, the two magnificent sources of light of the numinous pair with two types of dark experiences, whose interpretation of the Moses narrative was probably an intra-biblical interpretation that could be verified by Clement. Therefore, the Alexandrian theologian could mean the Greek noun γνόφος as *darkness* by the works of Heb 12:18 and other pagan Greek authors.²⁵

²⁰ CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA, *The Stromata*, 348. Based on the Clement's Greek text, I changed the original English translation at one point to the italicized version – M. H.

²¹ It is enough to remember that, as far as we know, Origen had the same teacher in the person of Ammonius Saccas as Plotinus, the first significant representative of neoplatonism.

²² I translated the biblical verse based on the text of the *Septuagint*, because from the point of view of Clement, the reconstruction of the Hebrew text is essentially negligible, since it exegetized the Greek Bible, as it is seen from the above quote.

²³ This is the Amplified Bible's English translation.

²⁴ This term, in addition to the extinct darkness in Ancient Greek, can indicate an obscurity in the same way as γνόφος.

²⁵ In addition to the painting, the indicators of obscurity and darkness are stylistically related to the biblical Abraham Cycle itself, according to Auerbach's intrinsic reading. Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 7–11.

5 Intermedial Relationships Standing Out from the Symbolics of Darkness

The darkness, which can have an elemental effect on everyone when viewing the Newman-painting, is not related to Moses, rather to Abraham in its title, but the spiritual relationship between the biblical characters seems to be justified at many points. Thanks to Clement's writing, the theological historical parallel that has determined the paths of negative theology and mystical theologies will soon come back. On the one hand, the negative theology plays the role of the common background of the inter-artistic connection between the muted music of the contemporary John Cage (e.g. 4'33") and *Abraham*, which gained its main source of inspiration from the unknowability of God.

On the other hand, a similar path leads from the point of view of Jewish mysticism, and especially from the previously mentioned Kabbalistic tradition, to which Newman's art and theoretical work have proven to be open. From the perspective of the Torah, the most important witnesses of faith are both Abraham and Moses. The stories of both of them affect Egypt and their covenants were the most important commitments to God in the history of Jewry. The connection of their figures in the Christian reception appeals to the witnessing power of the true people from the beginning. However, there is a very important difference between the theophanies of Abraham and Moses: Moses was forbidden to see God, and Abraham's face-to-face vision was seemingly impossible in the same way. In fact, at the oak tree of Mamre, Abraham hosted three strangers who, although unrecognizable, were God's messengers, but based on their prophecy and the preliminary communication of the narrator (Gen 18:1), they can be clearly recorded as the manifestations of God. This difference seems to provide enough reason to take steps toward the development of mysticism, negative theology, and even – in accordance with Clementine theology, which thinks about the visibility of the invisible – the icons when we talk about the iconic features of Newman's dark image.

On the icon of the *Holy Trinity*, completed in 1411 Andrei Rublyov, we can see three figures who can be linked to the Mamre apparition in Gen 18 according to the professional works of art history and theology. On this basis, the three angels, who may be viewed as the depictions of the three divine persons, could come into antagonistic conflict with the nonfigurative bands of the three-part (due to the zip) *Abraham* painting, while they can be accepted as paraphrases of each other due to their spatial management and the identity of the blindness of faith. The twentieth-century painting, which is also the dark, inverse triptych of the three angel representations of the modern age, can therefore be the pictorial manifestation of mysticism, sacral iconicity and negative theology.

6 The Painting and the Abraham Cycle of the Hebrew Bible

The symbolism of the black color is the next object that directs our attention to the history of the first patriarch of the Muslim, Jewish, and Christian religions, as well as the American life of the twentieth century. During his life, Abraham had contact with the people of Egypt according to the biblical and later – still to be referred to – Judaist traditions. The most succinct of our sources is the biblical *Book of Genesis*, which informs us that the patriarch, who visited the Promised Land at the command of the Lord, decides to enter the land of Egypt with his family due to the famine in the region (Gen 12:5-10). The ancestor, who disguises his wife as his sister, goes directly to the court of Pharaoh, according to the biblical report, from where he manages to leave towing to a divine intervention protecting Sarah's marital status. The significance of all this may be that the memorable encounter with the Egyptian culture, which was included as a member of the Abraham Cycle, makes the relationship of this advanced ancient civilization with the black color and completely different from the perception of the color of Western culture remarkable. Because instead of the proper name of Egypt from Greek mythology, the Egyptians marked their own country with the *black (soil)* common name meaning *kmt* radicals (probably pronouncing those consonants as Kemet).²⁶ After the flood of the Nile, the black color was the symbol of the land flooded with dark sludge in its fertility in connection with life and its sacred blessing, in

²⁶ Kákósy, *Az ókori Egyiptom története és kultúrája*, [The history and culture of ancient Egypt], 28.

contrast with the surrounding desert, which was also given a color-speaking name: red. Based on the Egyptian detour of the Abraham Cycle, black can even give the painting's dark colors a positive reading. From here, the three lanes can refer to the sediment-laden Nile and its two fertilized shores from the history of Abraham. This symbolic, map-like approach also calls for a more detailed examination of the patriarch's geographical path in the Torah.

He took the ancestor from the city of Ur in Chaldea to Canaan and then to the south to the region of the Negev owned by many nations before reaching Egypt. The Hebrew נֶגֶב (negev) word is the marker of this penultimate station, which in most cases only indicated the southern compass in the oldest language of the Bible. The meaning of "dry land" clearly refers to the desert, in many cases uninhabitable climate of the land of Kadesh and Beer-sheba. It is no wonder that Abram and his family went to the west of Egypt driven by a banal human need, the famine in the surrounding region, instead of the motivation of the divine mission from Ur, which was studied in more detail in the following (Gen 12:10). This profane circumstance replaces the sacred command of relocation in the life of the nomadic figurative community. The shelter will be the black country of Egypt, which due to the flood of the Nile in the second millennium before Christ, was not as vulnerable as the Negev region in the south of Israel. This is why the dark color of Kemet may originally be the carrier of abundance and life in the Abraham Cycle, rather than the expression of grief and destruction in postmodern, Western culture. Thus, living permanently on the road seems easy to associate with the nomadic life story of Abraham, and – even within it, similar to the Nile interpretation – the zip can be approached as a possible element of an abstract map.

Therefore, this topographical approach to the painting can indicate the figurative life path in general, not just in the external sense, since it does not only go from Canaan to Egypt and beyond; but before all this, from the very beginning of the twelfth chapter of *Genesis*, we can read about *how* God started the chosen Abram from the region of Ur in Chaldea, tearing him from his original environment. In the biblical verse of Gen 12:1, there is a curiosity that reveals to the reader this first departure as an inner mission, as much as it promotes the departure to the topographic place: "*Then the Lord said to Abram: 'Go out of your land, from your relatives and from your father's house to the land I will show you'*" (Gen 12:1 – emphasis added by the Author).

The call to "go out" obscures the importance of the Hebrew lamed (ל) in almost all modern Western national translations. The verb meaning to go appears here and soon after (12:4 a) as the activity of Abram and Lot, since, as previously said, the existence on the road characterized the entire Abraham Cycle. The interesting point about 12:1 is that there is an expression beside the verb of "to go" that sounds like a figura etymologica, which can only be translated by paraphrasing. In the לך-לך construction, in addition to the imperative of the verb belonging to the basic vocabulary (to go/walk ²⁷הלך), according to the previous results of the secondary literature, we find a dativus ethicus.²⁸ In fact, this grammatical category of the dative case does not fit the Semitic languages, and therefore we cannot access the meaning of Gen. 12:1.²⁹ The Hebrew verb with an imperative modality encourages Abram to take action that next to his command, he names the inner core of the patriarch's personality as the reason for the mission. Therefore, it would be appropriate to translate it as "Go out of your own land for yourself," or exploiting the potential of the grammatical construction even more, the translation "For yourself go out of your land..." also seems to be adequate. The Hebrew call of God, which is not recognized in the Greek of the *Septuagint* and the Latin of the *Vulgate*, therefore drives Abraham to external and internal action at the same time.

²⁷ Since it is a verb belonging to the basic vocabulary, this walking verb had a very similar phonetics not only in modern Ivrit, but also in the Ugaritic and Akkadian languages of the biblical Old Hebrew age or even in the previous language states. This linguistic historical fact is important because Abraham was from the city of Ur in Chaldea, so he could meet the Akkadian language there, but also the Ugaritic language during his migrations. On this basis, in the Hebrew expression of the Masoretic text, God launches Abraham with a Semitic sounding word above national languages, which should have been known by the historical Abraham, and which can also integrate the origin of the hero shaped by biblical faith.

²⁸ RÓZSA, *op. cit.*, 207.

²⁹ As Muraoka, one of the former Hebraists of the University of Leiden, pointed out: MURAOKA, *On the So-Called Dativus Ethicus in Hebrew*, 495–8.

The semantic causality of these two types of rhetorical calls is more pronounced in the translations, since even in the solutions just proposed, depending on the order in which the term “for yourself” pointing to Abram is published, it can be emphasized that this is the cause or goal of external action. In the Hebrew expression “lechl^echa” (לך-לך), the two words built from the same radical (lamed, khaf) are connected by a maqgef. In Hebrew, maqgef indicates a close relationship that phonetically eliminates the emphasis of the word before maqgef, so it becomes one with the word following maqgef in the pronunciation. Therefore, the composition that sounds the same when the expression is pronounced, precisely because of the same consonants, retains something of its independence only with the differences of the high and low vowels (segol, qamec) and the sewa quiescens at the end of the first word, and then the sewa mobile after maqgef. The dropping and writing of the composition, which can be rewritten as “lechl^echa,” is intended to serve the same prose poetic solution: meaning-dense, symbolic highlighting. It is the difference between the horizontal line of maqgef and the vowels of the punctuated text that represents separability in the writing image. However, the same maqgef weakens the distinctiveness when pronounced, and we perceive the difference due to the pronounced vowels and the dormant sewa that remains unpronounced. Based on this, we can draw a parallel between the horizontal maqgef inscribed in the divine invitation sending Abram and the vertical zip of the painting *Abraham*, which visually divides and connects the space of the picture in the same way as the maqgef did with the לך-לך words.³⁰

Moreover, the asymmetric placement of the zip is similar to the phonetic effect of maqgef. In Jewish culture, the first of the words read from right to left becomes out of focus in the ancient text exactly as Barnett Newman's postmodern zip reduces the left-wing image space in Western culture reading from left to right. Knowing the importance of the writing image in Hebrew thinking from the beginning to the medieval Kabbalistic Aleph-Bet interpretations, we can risk that such a comparison of the writing image and the abstract painting is not foreign to the Christian way of thinking of Judaism and even the Middle Ages.³¹ At the same time, recognizing the complexity of the approach, I will continue to call it the maqgef analogy of the painting for the sake of simplicity.

However, in the separate word forms and descriptions of modern and ancient translations, the figurativeness is lost, which, precisely because of its linguistic concentration, can become a real expression of the fact that, according to the Torah, Abram experiences the external and internal motivations at the same time, with their possible causes and purposes. This is also of paramount importance because the same figure only occurs once in the Abraham Cycle and even in the entire text of the *Book of Genesis*: at the beginning of the *divine* mission calling to the akedah. So we could correctly translate this verse as follows: “Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah for yourself (ולך-לך)” (Gen 22:2b). In this way, the

³⁰ The literal meaning of maqgef (מקף) is (all)binding.

³¹ It is certainly stated, for example, from Baigell's comprehensive writing that the inspiration of Kabbalah for Barnett Newman may have included the visual creation of such a subtle parallel. Matthew BAIGELL, *Barnett Newman's Stripe Paintings and Kabbalah: A Jewish Take*, American Art, 1994/2, 33–43. The most important stage of Christian interpretation is Joachim of Fiore, who also thinks about the divine Name in diagrams. Abbot Joachim undertook to base his own Christian exegesis on an in-depth, alphabetic study of the Jewish Kabbalah and the Holy Scriptures as its basis. One of the most well-known works of God's biblical names, the sacred tetragrammaton and the interpretation of “Alpha and Omega” in the *Book of Revelation* were combined with its specific church history concept. Within this framework, Joachim created a diagram in which the peak of the alpha (A) indicates the heavenly Father and its stems indicate the origins of the Son and the Holy Spirit in the mystical interpretation. Gábor László AMBRUS, *Isten négybetűs Neve Fiorei Joachimnál*, [God's name as a tetragram in Joachim of Fiore's oeuvre] *Communio*, 2020/1-2, 63–64; 68. The Rényi interpretation, which will soon play a role, which views Abraham as an opponent, recalls the tradition of icon creation, which traditionally talks about *writing* icons instead of painting. Cf. Eckhard NORDHOFEN, *op. cit.*, 66. When looking at the icons, therefore, the concept of writing and visual reality is uniquely linked in terms of typography and figurativeness. If we consider the geometric rearrangement of the three vertical bands of Newman's *Abraham*, based on the intermedial analogy of the horizontal line of the maqgef typeface, which is so decisive in the poetics of the Abraham Cycle, we can get a similar abstraction as Joachim of Fiore. The monogram of the proper name ‘A’ in the title of the painting – similar to the name interpretation of Joachim, which continues the tradition of Jewish Kabbalists – is divided into its abstract elements and appears in the vertical parallel lines. The possibility of this abstraction-based, undoubtedly courageous kabbalistic image interpretation can be interesting primarily because of a letter hiding that, in connection with the tradition of iconography, does *not* count the icon maker, for example, by showing the signature of the creator, but always draws attention to the depicted object, in this case the shape of the word *Abraham*.

editors of the first book of the Bible connected Abram's own mission with the test of the akedah, so it can be clear from this motivational framework that God thinks of the sacrifice of Isaac as part of the story of Abraham's awakening, as well as the previous discovery of the Promised Land.³² This also means that the akedah represents itself more radically as the story of Abraham than it is known from the translations according to the Hebrew text.

If the young Hegel, Kierkegaard or Mark C. Taylor had known the semantic depth of this linguistic turn, probably the questioning of the faith and ethics of their akedah interpretation could have been centered around the Abrahamic identity. But the same can be said in the same way when reading the title of Barnett Newman *Abraham* that anyone who "only" focuses on the identity of the biblical patriarch in relation to the proper name raised in the title misses that God sends and that it was said not once but twice, so it is impossible to study the identity of Abraham independently of the test of Isaac's sacrifice. This significant relationship from both theological and literary sides regarding image interpretation: the zip and the black image parts outside it can lead the recipient to the traditional Western idea of the body-soul, which is based on the external-internal dichotomy. Although it is foreign to the Tanach's conception of the body to perceive the soul in its Aristotelian form and to visualize it as the eternal soul of a spiritual nature residing in the temporal body as its vulgarized idea, this is not far from the postmodern American context in which Barnett Newman's image was born. Thus, the zip can also be referred to as the image part indicating the identity of Abraham compared to other, external markers. This is how YHWH sends Abram to Canaan first, and then Abraham to Mount Moriah, so that the external and internal reality of the father of the peoples is directed to his awakening at the same time. The disparity of the two realities is only seen when the shade of difference between the blacks is perceived, though they are uniform from a distance.

7 *Abraham* as an Anti-icon

Before moving on to the connection of the relations between the generations – namely, Abraham and Isaac – and the narratives that shape them to the painting, it is worthwhile to dwell on the Rényi's "mystical anti-icon" of the painting.³³ The art history basis of this interpretation is provided by the series of so-called black paintings. Goya was the first painter, some of whose works were called black paintings by posterity, but in the case of pictures with controversial names, the black adjective only refers to the grim thematic reality of the depictions. The most important and upcoming prequel is the work of Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square*, which is born in Ukraine, representing Russian avant-garde which can be understood as the pravoslavlic representation of the anti-icon deprived of light.³⁴ Just three years after the famous 1915 avant-garde artwork, Rodchenko's lesser-known *Black on Black* painting was made, which is somewhat closer to Newman's efforts due to the emphasis on space management. The next stage of the black pictures is Newman's, followed by Adolph Dietrich Friedrich Reinhardt in 1964, the painter who created the next generation of American abstract expressionism, whose work *Black Painting* sparked a significant debate between him and Newman, due to the questioning of the originality of the idea. In this art history line, it is undoubtedly important to find the place of Barnett Newman's work. In my opinion, with its dark colors, it is worth viewing the painting as the appropriate rendering of the iconoclast connotation of the title "Abraham," rather an anti-icon. This distinction within the abstract paintings (rather iconoclasm than anti-icon) is thought of primarily because of the title,

³² The promise to Abraham as a sacred heritage becomes known in the life of the chosen people and through Moses, which allows the conquest, to Joshua and further in the history of Jewry. The symbol of the promised land (ארץ) can be related to *Abraham* in such a way that the zip-shape of the ancestor is surrounded on both sides by the sight of the promised land itself.

³³ András RÉNYI, *ibid.*

³⁴ The sacred importance of light in icon painting has been discussed by many authors. For a short summary of the icon perception projected on the whole Russian culture, see: Valery LEPAHIN, *Az óorosz kultúra ikonarcúsága*, [The preference of icons in the Old-Russian culture.] JATE Department of Slavic Philology, Szeged, 1992, 59. The historical and aesthetic presentation of Malevich's picture related to Orthodox theology see: Perneczky, *A korszak mint műalkotás*, [An era as an art work], 64.

which is not related to the titles of either the avant-garde or the postmodern works, as it is clear that the mad themes of Goya point in another direction than Newman's title choice. For this reason, figurative Abraham depictions, such as the *sacrifice of Rembrandt's 1635 Abraham*, may be more closely related to Newman's painting than their counterparts mentioned in the nonfigurative series. With its aspect ratios and monochrome blackness, the Malevich *Black Square* is provided the paradoxical criticism of the respective icon. If András Rényi likewise understands the description of *Abraham* included in the term "counter icon" as the opposite point of the general icon representation, then his interpretation does not take into account the existence of the zip. If the "counter icon" is an artistic position imagined *against* something, it is worth defining both sides of the opposition. This missing element, in my opinion, must account for the triad and be linked to the title *Abraham*.

In the spirit of the biblical approach, only the meeting of Abraham with three men seems an adequate opportunity (Gen 18:1-15). The reason why the appearance of the men could very quickly become theophanic through the angels is that both before and after their arrival, the Lord plans to tell Abraham in the first person singular the same things that the men convey to him during their visit. The exegesis of the Church Fathers received the opportunity to read the preview of the Holy Trinity from the number of men, in accordance with the reading of typological symbolism. The best-known icon depiction of this Old Testament Trinity is the work of Andrei Rublyov made in the first quarter of the fifteenth century and mentioned earlier. The painting, which is titled *Троица* in Russian, is sometimes referred to as the *hospitality of Abraham*, recalling what happened at the oak of Mamre to this day. The inclusion of these three figures, and the head position of two of them leaning in the same direction, divides the space of the picture similar to Newman's painting with the zip. The men who predicted Isaac's conception came at the hottest time of the day according to the biblical narrative (Gen 18:1). The heat must belong to the brightest hours of the day,³⁵ which optical experience could create the contrast of the three men appearing unexpectedly as the perception of Abraham, so that in the all-blinding brightness, the men could first stand out as dark figures, which he could apperceive by falling down before them (Gen 18:2), repeating in the trio of their shadows. Both perception phases are made visible with Newman's *Abraham*. At the same time, this tension based on the opposite of optical light and darkness also has a symbolic meaning in hospitality, if the suffering from childlessness is associated with the darkness and the divine promise that dissolves it with the light.³⁶ We can hardly find any trace of the light-shadow double that is deduced from the biblical text in the picture of Rublyov, but the head restraint of the brown and green tunic figures and the arch of the canopy of the (turpentine) tree appearing above the shoulder of the middle figure asymmetrically push the center of the picture to the left, toward the third angel and the architectural element symbolizing the place of Abraham's residence. In addition, even in the time of Barnett Newman, a vertical fracture line between the upper body of the blue-clothed and the only upward-facing angels was recognizable on the carrier of the icon made with the tempera, the line that found its organic counterpart in the painting in a zip-like line: through the wings to the foot and beyond, ending on the surface of the postament, on the one side, partly on the filigree held by the angel, lined with a red instrument. To this extent, the work in The State

³⁵ The *Septuagint* still means the time when the seat at the entrance to the tent is literally placed south, that is, in the middle of the day, using the word composition μεσημβρία (cf. μέσος, middle and ἡμέρα, day).

³⁶ Compared to the Hebrew text, the sentence of the *Septuagint* is remarkable. One of the meanings of ἀναβλέπω is the same as the verb (κων) in the Masoretic text, and in Gen 18:2, by entering into a syntactic relationship with the eyes, it is clear that looking up with your eyes is the primary translation option. Along with this, the other meaning of ἀναβλέπω is 'to regain (lost) vision', for which many New Testament healing stories (e. g. Matt 11:5; John 9:11), as well as in classical literature (Herodotus, Plato, etc.). If this meaning is preferred, the dichotomy of recognition and unrecognition throughout the pericope bends the interpretation toward recognition. Abraham, who sees the three shapes with his eyes through the direct recovery of vision, must recognize the theophany in the encounter in a symbolic sense, with the eyes of faith. The Greek ἀνάγνωσις term for both reading and recognition is missing from the narrative of Chapter 18 in such a way that it hyperbolically refers to Sara's unrecognition and the doubtful but recognizing Abraham act. The pronounced presence of verbalization referring to the organ of vision and gaze, which, however, leaves the hermeneutical circle untouched in the perception of the actors, is again related to the negative theology and the vision paradox at the beginning of the chapter. In vain does the text of *Genesis* speak of vision, if the understanding can be yours by misunderstanding the transcendent encounter, so for the Alexandrian Jewry, the Abraham of the *Septuagint* could not be ready for the event of the ἀνάγνωσις in Chapter 18.

Tretyakov Gallery also has a spatial element that divides the picture horizontally in almost the same proportion as the postmodern zip of *Abraham*. If we accept Rényi's definition of "anti-icon" not in a general sense, but in a specific image, the icon of Rublyov can be a work of art arranged in an intermediate relationship with Newman's painting. In this way, the dark colors can make sense when the three angels appear, referring to the blindness of the biblical figure,³⁷ and the thin, white strips along the zip show the invasion of hope with the divine message of the visit: Abram will have innumerable descendants.

8 Talking Colors

The black color, which is subject to achromatic judgment together with gray and white according to modern colorology, allows you to recall the invisible and transcendent characteristics included in the faith.³⁸ If we give in to Newman's warning and take a close look at *Abraham*, we can observe that the dawn of white color runs parallel to the zip on both sides, and due to the interaction of light and dark colors, the gray appears on the border of the zip. The painting, which looks like a monochrome at first, therefore contains three colors that cannot be regarded as colors.³⁹ This work, which shows itself with its colorless colors, again reminds those who are familiar with the Judeo-Christian tradition, which has been talking about the mystical theology again through the experience of theophany since the Sinai theophany of Moses, St. John of the Cross and the mystics of the atomic age with an abundance of uncertainty.⁴⁰ In the vertical of the zip that extends beyond the human dimension, it would be an exaggeration to say that it is read as a reference to the presence of God, but it can perhaps be interpreted as a transcendent way of connecting the Creator with His creation. From a distance, the zip has a single vector-like, vertical line, which, in the iconographic tradition, in addition to the presence of the divine unit and the numinous in general, also indicated the aspiration of man toward God in the history of Western abstract visualization.⁴¹ This vertical of reciprocity, if it starts from Abraham, the hero of faith, can

³⁷ If the assumption of blindness related to the presumed vision conditions seems unstable, in relation to the hermeneutics of the spectacle, it can be said that the narrator of the biblical text uses Abraham as a focalizer when he claims that men approached at the beginning of the pericope, although they were angels.

³⁸ Inevitably, the materiality of (modern) painting is also emphasized by this work, which is built from the denial of colors and the "spoilage" of the fantasy of abstract lines thanks to hand-drawn lines. The painting that can ultimately be reduced to combinations of colors and (circular) lines is faced with the elementary criticism of this reduction in Newman's painting. The material thus highlighted also brings postmodern issues related to mediality to the stage.

³⁹ Pollock, Newman, and Rothko chose an abstract art direction that engaged the members of the New York school in a minimalist style. Within this, the three significant creators realized the completion of their own abstraction in three different ways. In my opinion, one of the most radical works of Newman is *Abraham*, which approached the endpoints of minimalism and abstraction with the reduction of colors. It is no coincidence that, at the same time as these efforts, John Cage, the most influential innovator of American postmodern music, is a decade younger than the painting giants, with his contemporary compositions directed toward radical silence. The 1952 presentation of the previously mentioned composer's work *4'33"* is very similar to the aesthetic, and through it, it posed metaphysical problems like Newman's *Abraham*. But even more direct are several passages of his *programmatic and disruptive study, The forerunners of modern music*, published in 1949 in the journal *Tiger's Eye*. Speaking about the strategy, right at the beginning of the study, after quoting the mystical Eckhart, "*Any attempt to eliminate the 'irrational' is irrational itself. All completely 'rational' music-making strategies are irrational to the utmost.*" CAGE, *Forerunners of Modern Music* in John CAGE, *Silence*, 62. This paradoxical idea could also be interpreted as Newman's *ars poetica*. This magazine, which was published between 1947 and 1949, was one of the distinguished places of intellectual encounters, which was primarily intended to present representatives of American abstract expressionism, so Barnett Newman also published the first issue, and moreover, as an editorial staff member of the newspaper, he certainly also took care of Cage's publication. *Art in Theory*, 575. Black as the intermittent silence of colors is linked to Abraham in the most complete form, but in the second half of the 1940s, others have already experimented with its potential, such as Willem de Kooning with his black and white Painting, completed in 1948.

⁴⁰ The mention of Christianity in the study of Barnett Newman's work cannot be excluded because he himself has created works related to the New Testament and Christian tradition, it may be enough to refer to the black and white series of fourteen pictures of *Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani*. The paintings promoting the heritage of the Judeo-Christian culture took account of the cultural history of the United States.

⁴¹ For the iconographic significance of the single vertical line see: Koch, *The Book of Signs*, 1.

also be the painted picture of faith freed from idolatry itself. Finally, the abstract image of the same path can be expressed as a sublime moment of the relationship between God and His creation. The alliance of Abram with YHWH was made with the image of the Hebrew idiom.⁴² In the Hebrew language, next to the noun indicating the ברית כרת alliance or obligation, the verb referring to the English binding is replaced by the verb meaning “down, split, cut,” which means that the meaning of the idiomatic expression is correctly given by the version “make an alliance” instead of “cut an alliance.” It is argued that this picture is due to the development of the ritual or legal environment, but a significant part of the biblical scholars are in favor of the fact that the rite of the fifteenth chapter, figurative covenant of the *Book of Genesis* best explains and models the etymology.⁴³ This form of wedding seals the passage between the slaughtered animals in the middle with the curse of those who took the oath: We should do the same if we break our now-bound alliance. As the way to enter this alliance, we can also understand the zip of *Abraham*, which warns those who want to pass by on both sides and on the road with the color of the death curse, that their oath is a matter of life and death.

In addition to the theological and anthropological connection, from a similar point of view, the light color with a weak light, which is almost completely lost in the darkness, can be interpreted as the abstract formulation of the sky, as the astronomical and astrological bond of Abraham. During the Venetian Baroque, Antonio Zanchi (1631–1722) painted this legend from late Judaist sources, which, looking at Abraham as a cultural hero, claimed that he taught the Egyptians the science of astronomy. The oil picture in Santa Maria del Giglio, entitled *Abraham Teaches the Egyptians Astronomy*, painted in 1665, captures this moment. In the history of Abraham's depiction, Zanchi's painting can only be a distant and inverse parallel to Newman's twentieth-century painting because of the Caravaggio shading technique, the chiaroscuro. From here, approaching *Abraham*, we can see the abstract formulation of the starry sky and through it the memento of the scene of the divine promise: “Then He brought him outside and said, ‘Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them.’ And He said to him, ‘So shall your descendants be.’ And he believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness” (Gen 15:5–6).⁴⁴ The same late Judaist tradition that regarded Abraham as the forerunner of astronomy gave the patriarch a similar title in mathematics. As the most important representative of this tradition, the work of Josephus Flavius entitled *Jewish Antiquities* can be quoted, which shows (I. 167–168) the deep relationship they saw at this time between the arithmetic, astrological, and rhetorical forms of thinking.⁴⁵ The relationship between mathematics and the division of space is linked to the width and location of *Abraham's* zip. In the Newman literature, Thomas B. Hess introduced the concept of secret symmetry, which he first mentioned in his book on Newman at the time of the discussion of *Abraham*.⁴⁶ At first glance, the zip position on the painting, which is moved to the left of the center, radiates the asymmetry to the recipients of the image. However, the width of the zip allows the painting's space to be divided into six equal parts in the longitudinal direction. There are two zip areas to the left of the zip and three zip areas to the right. For this reason, the zip and the area to the left of it are the same as the width of the field to the right of the zip. Thus, the zip is at the same time the representative of the asymmetry based on its own location, while as the creator of the unit of measurement of the space it does not fill, its right border halves the painting in the longitudinal direction. It is not classical, modern mathematics, but its symbolism linked to ancient

⁴² Gen 15:7–20.

⁴³ RÓZSA, *op. cit.*, 374–6.

⁴⁴ About how the starry sky refers to God's infinite power and wisdom, and how it could become a Master Trope of the growth of the chosen people: RÓZSA, *op. cit.*, 359–61. In Newman's image, the blackness that fills the image space horizontally and vertically can refer to infinity, which can be paired with biblical concepts of either wisdom or power.

⁴⁵ Flavius, *Jewish Antiquities*, 82.

⁴⁶ HESS, *op. cit.*, 59. If we did not know the title of the painting *Abraham*, the horizontal dark black stripes alone could remind us of the famous asymmetric rhyme pair of William Blake's *The Tyger* from the first verse and the black lines of the illustration for the poem. However, this interpretation possibility, taking into account the title *Abraham*, essentially fails, even if at the time of the creation of Newman's painting the painter was also the author and collaborator of the already quoted journal of *Tyger's Eye*, which alluded to the Blake poem, and there was a copy of Blake's poems published at Oxford University Press in 1927 in the Newman library.

numerology, which at this point may be of interest both to Judaism and to the Christian theological thinking that has its origins in it. According to St. Augustine, the sum of the two, one, and three units that result in the six represents the path of the Bible. The Latin Church Father in his work on *the Holy Trinity* (IV. 4-5.) read out the trinitological symbolism in the digits of one and two at the same time, and by adding the one and two together with the three formed from their sum, the symbol of the six-day creation.⁴⁷ Augustine goes so far as to see in the Pythagorean numerical conclusions that in the six, he sees the manifestation of divine perfection, which in the first creation story sees the timing of the creation of man on the sixth day as intentional: “The perfection of the number six is also indicated by the Holy Scripture.”⁴⁸ In this way, the relationship between the *Book of Genesis* and the number six in the Christian tradition is even more intense in theosophical Kabbalah. In this mystical trend, which Barnett Newman was sure to study, the Tree of Life (Sefirot) is of central importance.⁴⁹ This model of creation, which produced the ten divine hypostases, including the combination of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew Aleph-Bet, calls the sixth hypostasis Tifareth. The meaning of the Hebrew תפארה word is *beauty*. That symbolic beauty is placed on the central axis of Sefirot which a channel for the flow of creative power is in a similar spatial position as the right, framing line of the zip of *Abraham*.⁵⁰ Thus, the kabbalistic model of creation and the Newman Abraham figures referring to the *Book of Genesis* are linked to the six in the world of arithmetic by meeting the act of creation and the beauty of art. The topos reflecting the concept of Aristotelian poetics, in parallel with the gesture of Kabbalah’s *Sefer Yetzirah* identifying Abraham as an artist, suggests in multiple ways that Abraham is also a metanarrative parergon.⁵¹ As the real authors of the *Sefer Yetzirah* quote Abraham, who quotes the words of God in the *Sefer Yetzirah*, Barnett Newman presents the title of his painting that the name Abraham is readable as a name of the artist as a creator instead of a title thanks to the kabbalistic tradition of the first artist. If *Abraham* is to be interpreted as a title, it can depict the first artist and, as such, the ancestor of all artists. If *Abraham* is the designation of the creator, Barnett Newman is connected with a fictional opportunity as part of a multiple creative game, which unfolds the role of Abraham as a co-creator of the art work. This latter interpretation is somewhat similar to the narrative border violations of Borges’ novel *Pierre Menard, the Author of the Quixote*, published ten years earlier, in 1939.

9 Isaac’s Sacrifice

In the previous sense, the painting is connected to Isaac in such a way that the vivid and narrow strip of the zip directs the gaze to the son, and the blurred, spacious black part directs the gaze to the father. The joint display of the father and the son can be read as follows: the zip is the space that separates the shape of the boy unfolding in the left lane from the wider lane of the father in front of the zip. The position in front of each other emphasizes descent and intimate relationship, and the one in back, opposing interpretation highlights the confrontational nature of Abraham’s mission. In the story of the two of them, the three-day journey to the land of Moriah is a mourning process in the eyes of Abraham, which shows no more than a nuance of difference in the same darkness. If the space of the painting, which is divided into three parts, is read horizontally in the spirit of this interpretation, it can refer to the passage of time in an abstract way with the width of the lanes, and with their colors it can reflect the tragic process of internal release, which is revived

⁴⁷ ST. AUGUSTINE, *De Trinitate*, [On Trinity], IV: 4–5.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 145. The exegesis of Augustine and other Church Fathers is also largely influenced by Pythagorean numerology, which is only displaced from theological and philosophical thinking by the Aristotelian number concept of the scholastics. Brach, *Pythagorean Number Mysticism in the Renaissance*, 458.

⁴⁹ Matthew BAIGELL, *op. cit.*, 32–40. In the library of Newman, there was the main work of the medieval Spanish Kabbalist Josef ben Abraham Gikatilla (who, according to his name, was himself a child of Abraham) in a publication, on the cover of which a reproduction of a sixteenth century woodcut shows how a Kabbalist meditates on the Sephiroth. HESS, *op. cit.*, 114.

⁵⁰ Roob, *The Hermetic Museum*, 262.

⁵¹ I use the term of parergon as Fruzsina Nagy suggested: Nagy, “Borders of a Notion: Parergon,” 85–91.

by the laconic dialogue with Isaac.⁵² (Gen 22:7-8) Continuing to look at the painting as a whole, from a distance, the whiteness running on both sides of the zip can indicate the ropes of the akedah, which strap Isaac to the place of the tragic sacrifice. In this case, the painting abstracts the top view of the tied Isaac. The same zip, based on the maqqef analogy, can be viewed at a right angle. In this case, the view of the zip is seen from the bottom, so that Isaac sees the blade of the knife held above his head in the brightness of the day, which shines on the edges of the blade or the physical light of the sun, or the transcendent light of the angel of God who saved Isaac. If the light *edges* of the zip are paired with the post-Akedah moment, as rope traces left on the body of the rescued boy, the possibility of trauma may be permanent or fleeting, but the traces are still visible.⁵³ In this sense, besides Abraham, Isaac is also the dark knight of faith, but who simultaneously witnesses and performs the sacrifice in the passivity of Abraham, who obediently suffers due to his trial.⁵⁴ The biblical characters looking at each other, when they see each other at the *moment* of the akedah, see something terrible. If they look beyond each other in the visible action of invisible faith, then in the darkness, light can have a chance to dawn.

10 Conclusion

To conclude the study, we may state that the non-figurative painting is subtly related to the title that establishes many intermediate references. The comparative interpretation developing in concentric circles may also help the receiver to make a theological and cultural-historical interpretation of the concept of sacrifice. In both the Abrahamic presentation of sacrifice and Isaac's experience of vulnerability, we can recognize the defenselessness of the body. The father is about to sacrifice the genetic and symbolic heritage of his own body – indirectly the future of himself. And Isaac, in the helplessness of his own body, is giving back to his father and the Lord the body he has received from them, instead of expressing justifiable anger at the sacrifice. When reading the biblical text, this compulsion to return can only be interpreted as a free choice because of the son's silence in his consciousness. The simultaneous experience of faith of freedom and compulsion is similar to the

⁵² The possibility of temporal reading of the image spaces divided by the zip has already been proposed in the Newman literature. Cernuschi could start from the left-to-right reading direction of Western languages, when he placed the space to the left of the zip with the past and the one to the right with the future. Based on this, the zip that appears on the vertical splits of the abstract images can be considered as the grasp of the present by joining the philosophical discourse about time. Cernuschi, *The Visualization of Temporality in the Abstract Paintings of Barnett Newman* in *The Iconology of Abstraction*, 115. Lyotard touched on the same question in the 1980s, starting from the majestic aspects of space and time: Lyotard, "The Sublime and the Avantgarde," 36.

⁵³ The meaning of the *תָּרַן* (akod) verb behind the term akedah originally refers to the state showing the imprints of the strips tied or left by some object. Based on this, for example, Rashi's medieval interpretation of Gen 22:9 on the body of Isaac considers the rope traces as permanent traces as a parallel to the wording of Gen 30:35, just as the striped fur of the goats was indelible in the last text. In addition to all this, we can remember the New Testament type of Jesus from the traumatized body image of Isaac. This comparison may be adequate not only because of the typology of the Innocent Son, but also because of the icon depicting the very first Christ in the story of the icons *made without hands* (acheiropoieta). One of the archetypes of non-handmade icons is the bloody impression on the pillar used to bind Christ during the scourging, which became suitable for the cultivation of icons in antiquity. Belting, *Likeness and Present*, 49. Like the Old Testament akedah, the suffering of Jesus created an opportunity for the visual recall of memory, which comes alive when *Abraham* is interpreted by the viewer.

⁵⁴ It is worth quoting Moshe Halbertal when mentioning this duality (sacrifice and victim). The professor of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem interprets the test of akedah as God wanted to make sure that Abraham remains an ally without giving birth. Halbertal, *On Sacrifice*, 24. At a later point in his monograph on the victim, he considers the ambivalence of the killer and martyr behavior of the suicide bombers to be similar in the Abrahamic test, which is understood as an ethical suspension on the basis of Kierkegaard, *op. cit.*, 74. The suspension of ethics – similar to Cage's persistent pauses suspending music – can also pair *Abraham* with his gesture suspending colors with black. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 129. Regarding the painting, we must also reflect on the projection of Isaac's inner image when studying the relationship between suicide and sacrifice. Isaac's obedience is a voluntary, dark blindness in the face of a looming reality. His awareness during the akedah that his father is about to extinguish his life shows us the meaning of the zip as a preliminary, spiritual, internal wounding of the Abrahamic slaughter yet to be performed.

artistic paradox that confronts us with the dilemma of the visible and the invisible when glimpsing a colorless painting.

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