

“Behold, Here I Am!” (Gen 22:1) as Verbalization of Trust and Hope

Insights from Transformative Learning Theory

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After the long journey of Gen 12-21, Abraham makes the declaration, “Behold, here I am!” in response to God’s call in Gen 22. It is an announcement not just of physical presence before God, but also readiness to do what God asks rooted in a deep trust in God. How did Abraham arrive at this trust? Taking insights from Transformative Learning theory, a theory from the field of adult education that frames learning as a paradigm shift, this study examines the paradigms that have operated in Abraham’s journey, suggesting that the declaration “Behold, here I am!” is an important verbalization of Abraham adopting a new paradigm of trust and hope, that “God himself will provide” (Gen 22:8).

Keywords: Genesis 22, Abraham, *hineni*, “Here I am!”, Transformative Learning

The Declaration, “Behold, Here I Am!”

How does one respond to the divine call? In the Old Testament, the “classic response of biblical heroes” is the declaration, “Behold, here I am!”¹ It is a response that marks a special readiness before God, indicating a “spontaneous, unhesitating response to a divine call.”²

The spontaneity is conveyed in the simplicity of the phrase. In Hebrew it is only one word—*hineni*. It is a contraction of *hinneh* (“behold”) and *ani* (“I/me”). In the bible, *hinneh* draws interest and “deserves special attention in translation.”³ “Behold” or “look!” is an “interjection demanding attention” and is used to emphasize the information that follows, or in this case, to the specific person speaking.⁴ When used together contracted with *ani*, the resulting *hineni*—literally, “Behold, I!”—indicates “readiness, alertness, attentiveness, receptivity, and responsiveness to instructions”⁵ with the additional aspect of *hinneh* bringing an added layer of urgency, immediacy, and a “here-and-now-ness” to the declaration.⁶ Thus it is a declaration not only of physical presence, but also of “emotional and spiritual presence,”⁷

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

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

³ Thomas O. Lambdin, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew* (New York: Charles Scribner’s sons, 1971), 168.

⁴ Carl Philip Weber, “Hen,” ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason Archer, and Bruce Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1980), 220.

⁵ Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 45.

⁶ Lambdin, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew*, 168.

⁷ Rabbi Amy Schwartzman, “Hineni Revisited: Rosh Hashanah Sermon 5771-2010,” *Temple Rodef Shalom*, 1–2, last modified September 9, 2010,

<http://www.templerodefshalom.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/RH5771.pdf>.

as one presents their entire self before God. The verbalization of one's presence—at this very moment—constitutes the declaration's specialness.

To understand this declaration more deeply, the case of Abraham's declaration is examined below. Unlike Moses in Ex 3 or Isaiah in Is 6, the declaration comes toward the end of the journey and not at the start. Why is this the case? It seems that Abraham's "journey of faith is not completed at the beginning"⁸ and something must change within Abraham before he makes the declaration. Insights from Transformative Learning Theory will help.

Transformative Learning Theory

In 1978, American psychologist Jack Mezirow first proposed the theory of Transformative Learning (TL) in the field of adult education. In his pioneering study, he examined the experience of adult women returning to college in the U.S. after extended periods away, finding that rather than just new knowledge or skills gained, the key factor for success lay in the ability to adjust the frames of reference underlying said knowledge and skills.⁹ For Mezirow, learning consists of a change in meaning perspectives, which he defines as defined as the "structure of assumptions within which new experience is assimilated and transformed by one's past experience during the process of interpretation."¹⁰

A simple way of understanding the process of TL is to liken it to a paradigm shift. Scientific revolutions take place not only when new discoveries are made, but when the underlying assumptions and definitions change.¹¹ In a similar way, Mezirow found that true learning takes place not only when new knowledge and skills are acquired, but only when one's assumptions transform to "permit a more inclusive, discriminating, permeable, and integrative perspective," that results in "making decisions or otherwise acting upon these new understandings."¹² Processes of critical reflection and critical dialogue therefore become integral to the transformation process.

J. Regan builds on Mezirow's original formulation of TL theory and presents four fundamental movements in the learning process: 1) questioning the present perspective; 2) exploring alternatives; 3) applying the transformed perspective; 4) reintegrating and grounding of the new perspective.¹³

The first movement is caused by the disorienting dilemma, the first phase of Mezirow's theory. An experience or series of experiences exposes the inadequacy and weaknesses of one's present presumptions and paradigms, leading one to question their present perspectives.¹⁴ This can be an event that simply does not make sense and evades easy interpretation, or it could be the unfolding impact of an accumulated series of events that challenge specific assumptions about one's self or the world, causing the disorientation.

⁸ Charles Conroy, "Abraham's Journey of Faith," in *Journeys and Servants*, by Charles Conroy, CBAP Lectures (Quezon City: CBAP, 2003), 11.

⁹ Jack Mezirow, *Education for Perspective Transformation: Women's Re-Entry Programs in Community Colleges* (New York: Center for Adult Education, Teacher's College, Columbia University, 1978), 1.

¹⁰ Jack Mezirow, *Fostering Critical Reflection in Adulthood: A Guide to Transformative and Emancipatory Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1990), 2.

¹¹ Thomas S. Kuhn, "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions," January 1, 1970, 12.

¹² Mezirow, *Fostering Critical Reflection in Adulthood*, 14.

¹³ Jane E. Regan, *Toward an Adult Church: A Vision of Faith Formation* (Chicago: Loyola, 2002), 87.

¹⁴ Regan, 87.

Critical reflection takes place as one begins to question the different assumptions of the paradigm.¹⁵

From here, the second movement is that of exploring alternatives. Having identified the inadequacy of existing paradigms, one now searches for new paradigms. One explores options for new roles, relationships, and actions. Regan highlights the importance of conversation and interaction with others in this exploration.¹⁶ She identifies sustained critical conversation as an integral factor, with “sustained” referring both to the length of time for each conversation—long enough to allow a genuine exploration of ideas—and to a certain consistency in the opportunities for conversation.¹⁷ Dialogue partners have enough opportunity to give deeper expression to their convictions, concerns, and questions, bringing to light the ways of perceiving, thinking, feeling, and acting.¹⁸

Having been exposed to alternative paradigms, the next movement is to begin to apply the new perspective. For Regan, this means that “we have stepped back from our tacitly held meaning perspective, examined the values and assumptions that ground it, and raised questions of the meaning perspective’s adequacy and authenticity for us and for our experience.”¹⁹ In the language of Mezirow, this includes the phases of acquiring knowledge and skills, provisional efforts of testing the new paradigm, and building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships. As argued by Mezirow new meaning perspectives are “more inclusive, discriminating, integrative, and permeable than less developed ones,”²⁰ and one attempts to move past the disorientation by testing a new paradigm.

The final movement—before eventually starting over again—is reintegrating and grounding the new perspective. Having “tried on” new paradigms, and finding the most adequate and effective, one can now take on the new paradigm with a little more permanency. Mezirow’s last phases of reintegrating into society and renegotiating relationships or negotiating new relationships are part of this movement of beginning to move forward with the new meaning perspective. For Regan, this can be a long and challenging process, especially because of the longer implications and domino effect of the new meaning perspective.²¹ These new actions and new (or renewed) relationships mark the effect of transformation.

An important addition to Regan’s four movements can be taken from C. Young. Young refers to the movement after the adoption of the new paradigm as a “growth phase,” highlighting the “newfound freedom and purpose” that results from TL.²² Before this phase, however, Young identifies a phase of “the surge of vitality” that accompanies the TL process.²³ Taking cues from James Loder’s view of transformation, which identifies celebration as an integral step in the transformation process,²⁴ Young highlights a “celebrative release of energy” as

¹⁵ Cf. Regan, 89.

¹⁶ Regan, *Toward an Adult Church*, 92.

¹⁷ Regan, 135.

¹⁸ Regan, 137.

¹⁹ Regan, *Toward an Adult Church*, 92.

²⁰ Jack Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991), 193.

²¹ Regan, *Toward an Adult Church*, 93.

²² Curtis J. Young, “Transformational Learning in Ministry,” *Christian Education Journal: Research on Educational Ministry* 10, no. 2 (November 2013): 333.

²³ Young, 332.

²⁴ Young, 327; cf. James Edwin Loder, “Transformation in Christian Education,” *Religious Education* 76, no. 2 (March 1981): 218–219.

a surge of vitality linked directly to the new perspective. It is a vector that energizes the transformation of individuals so their lives conform to the fresh truth. Its impact can extend well beyond the circumstances of the crisis that initiated the learning process. The surge of vitality affects the will and conscience of the person, but is not limited to conscious decision-making. People make decisions to change in particular ways, but their lives also change in ways they had not first thought through.²⁵

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

Recognizing and marking the surge of vitality is important in ensuring the success of a TL process in order to make the transformation more lasting. One might ask whether some form of ritualization might also be useful in marking the transformation, to accompany the surge of vitality.²⁶ The celebration and release of energy then diffuses further through the person's entire life. Young also calls this a "metamorphosis" that allows one to "better able to deal with life because they are thriving to a degree they had not before."²⁷

In summary, TL theory is a theory about how the transformation process takes place. In the face of a disorienting dilemma that current ways of thinking are unable to address, one adapts by going through critical self-reflection, not just on their abilities and skills, but on the very premise of their knowledge and sense of self. Ideally this takes place through critical dialogue and genuine encounter with others, which allows for the emergence and adoption of new and better paradigms. The new paradigm is then celebrated and, with a burst of new energy and the surge of vitality, new action is possible to overcome the initial disorientation.

Abraham's Transformative Learning

Paradigm of Abraham's Kin

If the Abraham story is a journey and journey presupposes change, what changes with Abraham? The saga begins in Gen 12:1-3 with God's command to "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you" (Gen 12:1). From this promise of land comes the promises of a great nation (12:2), later expressed as promises of offspring (13:15), descendants (15:5), a multitude of nations and a line of kings (17:4-7)—what can be summarized as promises of land, nation, and blessing.²⁸ All these, however, are premised on the first call which is to "go" (*lekh lekha*).

In language of TL, the command to go on the physical journey will also entail leaving behind an old paradigm. With leaving the land of his father and his family, Abraham must "leave the past behind"²⁹ and leave behind "all markers of social identity."³⁰ The departure from the land will make Abraham a migrant, like the many migrants who find themselves

²⁵ Young, "Transformational Learning in Ministry," 332.

²⁶ A point that will be explored further below.

²⁷ Young, "Transformational Learning in Ministry," 333.

²⁸ Cf. Bruce Birch, *What Does the Lord Require? The Old Testament Call to Social Witness* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 34.

²⁹ Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy* (New York: Schocken, 2000), 54.

³⁰ Mark S. Smith, "Genesis," in *Jerome Biblical Commentary for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. John J. Collins et al. (India: Bloomsbury, 2022), 219.

“out of their own environment, of all the places where they feel secure, integrated, and accepted.”³¹ This, as the narrative will show, pushes Abraham into the unfamiliar territory of a disorienting dilemma—and leaving his kin will prove to be a challenge.

In Abraham’s immediate response to God’s call in Gen 12, most commentators find no fault with Abraham since it is quickly reported that “Abram went, as with the Lord had told him” (Gen 12:4). Abraham is therefore seen as a “paragon of faith and obedience” who offers no objection to God’s command.³² D. Rickett agrees with this estimation insofar as Abraham “going,” but he raises a question about Abraham’s “going from.”³³ Abraham indeed leaves the land and his household, but with the attachment the clause “and Lot went with him,” Rickett finds Abraham’s disobedience: Abraham does not fully “go” from his kindred because he takes his nephew with him. The biblical text does not provide the reason for bringing Lot and Lot’s family. It could be an early sign and foreshadowing of Abraham’s later generosity, as he now cares for his nephew whose father, Haran, had previously died (Gen 11:28). Lot, however, still constitutes part of Abraham’s kin—that Abraham has evidently has not fully left behind.

Rickett further points out the oddity of Lot’s constant reappearance throughout Abraham’s story—here in Gen 12, and again in Gen 13 and 14. He proposes that these mentions are placed by the author “purposefully in order to remind the reader that Lot is with Abraham though he was not supposed to be.”³⁴ They are indications of Abraham’s inability to detach from Lot.³⁵ Rickett asks, “Did Abraham finally break from his father’s household? With the mention of Lot in 13.1 the answer is, ‘no.’ Only after Abraham has broken all ties with his father’s household can Abraham settle.”³⁶

For L. Helyer, the story of Abraham and Lot also relates to the question of Abraham’s heir. Following the traditions of succession, Helyer points out that with the cultural norms of the time, Lot could technically be Abraham’s heir.³⁷ Since Sarah was barren even before Abraham’s journey began (cf. Gen 11:39), the decision to take Lot along can be the first example of what Helyer calls the “folly of human initiatives” by which Abraham tries to secure an heir.³⁸

By Gen 15 Abraham articulates his growing doubt in the promise of an heir, lamenting that he is yet childless, “O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless... you have given me no offspring” (Gen 15:2-3). Despite God’s assurance to Abraham that one by “your very own issue shall be your heir” (Gen 15:5), the doubt manifests again in Gen 17. Here God reaffirms the covenant and says that Abraham and Sarah will indeed bear children (Gen 17:16), but Abraham laughs with incredulity at the idea, “Can a child be born to man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?” (Gen 17:17). R. Alter comments that Abraham’s laughter here is “in disbelief, perhaps edged with bitterness.”³⁹ Alter presents Abraham “wondering whether God is not playing a cruel joke on him in these repeated promises of fertility as time passes and he and his wife approach

³¹ Conroy, “Abraham’s Journey of Faith,” 8.

³² Dan Rickett, “Rethinking the Place and Purpose of Genesis 13,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 36, no. 1 (September 2011): 43, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309089211419774>.

³³ Rickett, 43, emphasis in original.

³⁴ Rickett, 48.

³⁵ Rickett, 46–47.

³⁶ Rickett points out the explicit statement in Gen 13:1, “...after Lot had separated from [Abraham]” Rickett, 48.

³⁷ A point Rickett also explores in Rickett, 44–45.

³⁸ Larry R. Helyer, “The Separation of Abram and Lot: Its Significance in the Patriarchal Narratives,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 8, no. 26 (June 1983): 82.

³⁹ Alter, *Hebrew Bible*, 1:55.

fabulous old age.”⁴⁰ The promises of God were the foundation of the relationship between God and Abraham, but with more time passing and the promise of an heir still unfulfilled, not only is the promise of nation and descendants in doubt, but perhaps also that of land and blessing.

The same doubt in God’s promises can also be inferred from the way that Abraham and Sarah continue to take matters into their own hands throughout the saga. Abraham follows God’s commands, but he also takes initiative to do things that, while not in themselves contrary to God’s commands, are definitely not explicitly instructed by God either. For example, just as Abraham sets out on the journey, a famine hits the land and Abraham detours to Egypt (Gen 12:10). This was not an instruction from God—in fact it is the opposite—and the journey takes him away from the promised land. Here, “Abraham is acting on his own. Maybe he is not having enough trust in the Lord?”⁴¹

This is compounded by what takes place in Egypt, the first sister-wife episode of Gen 12:11-20. Fearing that the Egyptians would try to take his life upon seeing Sarah, Abraham asks that she instead present herself as his sister (cf. Gen 12:13). He knows that he must stay alive in order for the promises of God to be fulfilled,⁴² and so he sets up the deception in order to ensure his safety. Abraham acts out of fear,⁴³ and also self-preservation. Abraham journeys into the unknown and, fearing the unexpected he “puts Sarah in that terrible situation because he does not trust God to pull them through the danger.”⁴⁴ The lack of trust is seen in Abraham acting on his own to protect himself.

The story of the birth of Ishmael can be considered another instance of Abraham and Sarah taking matters into their own hands.⁴⁵ Ten years since the initial journey, impatience now seems to grow at the lack of a child, thus the couple resort to concubinage and take their own initiative to find a way to bear children.⁴⁶ Sarah reasons that “the Lord has prevented me from bearing children” and so, in order that Abraham have an heir, Sarah offers Hagar the slave girl so that through the slave-girl “that I shall obtain children by her” (Gen 16:2). The plan is something they perceive to be in line with the fulfilment of God’s promises,⁴⁷ and they carry it out. The ensuing events in Gen 21, however, prove it to be a stumbling block that causes more tension in the household,⁴⁸ necessitating God’s intervention with God agreeing to the banishment and assuring Abraham that Hagar and Ishmael will be protected.

These actions of Abraham are manifestations of a lack of trust in God, thus far in the narrative. Commentators land moral judgment on Abraham for the acts of deception, self-preservation, and harsh treatment of others—actions that are contrary to later values of Israelite life.⁴⁹ M. Smith refers to these episodes as a “deception on the part of the usually ideal patriarch,”⁵⁰ presenting Abraham’s decision as essentially flawed. Abraham is seen to

⁴⁰ Alter, 1:55.

⁴¹ Conroy, “Abraham’s Journey of Faith,” 10.

⁴² Clifford and Murphy, “Genesis,” 20.

⁴³ Lieber, *Etz Hayim*, 72.

⁴⁴ Davis, “Abraham’s Radical Trust,” 30.

⁴⁵ Clifford and Murphy, “Genesis,” 21.

⁴⁶ Lieber, *Etz Hayim*, 86.

⁴⁷ Okoye, “Sarah and Hagar,” 166.

⁴⁸ H. Angel also presents an overview of rabbinic interpretation that lands moral judgement on Abraham and Sarah for their transgressions in their harsh treatment of Hagar. See Angel, “Sarah’s Treatment of Hagar (Genesis 16).”

⁴⁹ As in the case of the above, see Angel.

⁵⁰ Smith, “Genesis,” 219.

have fallen into the depravity of the world,⁵¹ and it necessitates God's corrective action—God is the one that sends plagues that sway Pharaoh and protect Sarah (Gen 12:17) and God will be the one to ensure Ishmael's survival after banishment (Gen 21:13).

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

it ought not to be thought that Abram's actions entail taking the divine promises into his own hands; that would be a docetic way of viewing God's way of working in the world.... The narrative speaks not one word of Abram's faith in God or lack thereof; it centers on the way he handles a problem in daily life, with all of its complexities and ambiguities.⁵²

Viewed this way, Abraham's actions are not particularly extraordinary,⁵³ especially since the text does not make any explicit judgment on his actions. T. Eskenazi comments that it is not a story about unethical behavior, but rather "a story of marginalized persons who succeed in roundabout, unorthodox ways,"⁵⁴ commending the ingenuity of problem solving.

Based on the absence of explicit judgment in the text, Fretheim's view would make sense. This view, however, fails to take consideration of the subtle shifts (explored below) in the story that begins with Gen 18 and culminates in the test of Gen 22. It is important to recognize Abraham's not-so-stellar start as it highlights the growth of trust that takes place as the saga continues.⁵⁵ The question of Abraham's trust in God therefore emerges as a theme of this part of the saga. Abraham and God are building their relationship on trust that develops through these experiences. Conroy labels this early section of the narrative as "the promise delayed, endangered, but confirmed."⁵⁶ Abraham constantly taking matters into his own hands results in missteps, causing only further complications.⁵⁷ Abraham's paradigm is inadequate for the journey.

Exploring Alternatives

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

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

⁵¹ Lieber, *Etz Hayim*, 72.

⁵² Fretheim, "Genesis," 431, commenting on Gen 20.

⁵³ Even the practice of concubinage was deemed legitimate and a common practice in the Ancient Near East. See Fox, *The Five Books of Moses*, 66.

⁵⁴ Eskenazi and Weiss, *The Torah*, 63, commenting on Gen 12.

⁵⁵ cf. Conroy, "Abraham's Journey of Faith," 11.

⁵⁶ Conroy, 10 referring to Gen 12-15.

⁵⁷ Helyer also adds further that after each of these follies, God reiterates and insists that Abraham will have an heir "coming from his own body" (Gen 15:4) and affirms the promise each time (cf. Gen 13:15; 15:4; 17:2; 18:14), in Helyer, "Separation of Abram and Lot," 83-84.

It is at this point that the narrative is interrupted by the appearance of another king, Melchizedek the king of Salem (Gen 14:17-20). The interruption is abrupt, appearing as an interjection between Abraham bringing back the goods (Gen 14:16) and the king of Sodom asking for them, “give me the people, but take the goods for yourself” (Gen 14:21). J. Klitsner’s analysis highlights the significance of the encounter with Melchizedek as an important reminder of Abraham’s purpose and calling.⁵⁸ The offer of the king of Sodom could actually be read as a trap. An alternative translation renders Gen 14:21 as “give me *your soul*, keeping the booty.”⁵⁹ Once again, there is an offer of riches—similar to the riches Abraham had gained from the pharaoh in the first sister-wife episode of Gen 12:10-20. But it would come at the cost of his very soul and “further erode his moral standing.”⁶⁰

At this crucial decision point, we find Melchizedek’s interjection. Bringing bread and wine, he blesses Abraham, “blessed be Abram by God Most High, maker of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand!” (Gen 14:19).⁶¹ Melchizedek’s blessing reminds Abraham of who the true king is, in the midst of all the conflict among the human kings. The moment itself with Melchizedek is understated, with the narrative jumping quickly to Abraham giving a tenth of the goods (Gen 14:20), and Melchizedek disappears from the narrative just as suddenly as he appeared. The influence on Abraham, however, is clear.

J. Klitsner draws attention to Melchizedek’s influence on Abraham:

The first sign of Melchizedek’s influence comes with Abraham’s references to God as “God Most High,” the “Creator of heaven and earth,” terms he has never before used. These new appellations for God point to His sublime, powerful standing which contrasts starkly with the uninspiring nature of Abraham’s recent experiences.⁶²

Abraham finds from Melchizedek “the vocabulary with which to rebuff the advances of the evil king [of Sodom].”⁶³ When he returns to the king of Sodom, Abraham immediately uses the appellation introduced by Melchizedek, rejecting him, saying, “I have sworn to God Most High, maker of heaven and earth” (Gen 14:22). Melchizedek’s words have urged Abraham to “avert his gaze from the mundane protocols of the world around him and to re-affix it upon the heavens, the figurative dwelling place of God Most High.”⁶⁴ With the encounter, Abraham is reminded who the true heavenly king is—God Most High.

It would perhaps be reading too much into the text to analyze very closely the dialogue in these pericopes, and without access to Abraham’s thoughts it is not possible to assess them on the level of what TL calls critical dialogue. However, it is still clear that, narratively, in Abraham’s encounters a deeper engagement takes place, close to what TL identifies as premise reflection. As J. Klitsner points out, Melchizedek’s repetition of the title “God Most High” causes Abraham to “avert his gaze from the mundane protocols of the world around

⁵⁸ Judy Klitsner, *Subversive Sequels in the Bible* (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2011), 71.

⁵⁹ The word for “soul” is the Hebrew “nefesh,” which could mean people or a soul—in this case, Abraham’s. Klitsner, 72.

⁶⁰ Klitsner, 72.

⁶¹ In Hebrew, *El Elyon*. This name for God appears for the first time here in Genesis, and later used in Numbers 24:16, Psalm 7:17, Psalm 18:13. G. T. Manley and F. F. Bruce, “Names of God,” in *New Bible Dictionary*, ed. D. R. Wood (Leicester: Intervarsity, 1996), 420.

⁶² Klitsner, *Subversive Sequels in the Bible*, 73, italics in original.

⁶³ Klitsner, 72.

⁶⁴ Klitsner, 70.

him and to re-affix it upon the heavens.”⁶⁵ This happens at a “critical juncture” for Abraham, in “a context of chronic challenges to Abraham’s integrity.”⁶⁶ Klitsner suggests that the title “God Most High” is “intended to remind Abraham of his early relationship with God and of its accompanying sublime ideals.”⁶⁷ And Abraham’s immediate use of the same title “God Most High” when he meets the king of Salem in Gen 14:22 suggests that he may have taken on Melchizedek’s point of view—consistent with the exploration of a new paradigm.

Another notable moment happens with Abraham and God’s conversation in Gen 18:16-33, the discussion over the fate of the righteous among the wicked in Sodom. A common interpretation of this event commends Abraham’s capacity for instructing God. With Abraham seemingly making a case for God to spare Sodom, the story could offer “a model of spirituality where humans can take the initiative in talking and negotiating with God.”⁶⁸ The dynamics of bargaining and haggling together with the insider-outsider relationships is also an interesting point of study.⁶⁹

These interpretations are challenged, however, and the opposite can be asserted—rather than God being taught by Abraham, it is in fact Abraham who learns about God’s justice, despite being the instigator of questions. N. MacDonald and R. Eisen present an overview of this argument, showing how the goal of the conversation is that Abraham “may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice” (Gen 18:19 NRSV).⁷⁰ In this view, Abraham’s knowledge of God is yet lacking, as he has yet to understand fully God’s righteousness and justice. What then takes place is a kind of Socratic teaching dialogue, where God reveals his plans of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah to Abraham in order to “entice him to plead for the righteous inhabitants of the wicked city.”⁷¹ It is therefore an “important moment in the moral education of Abraham. It is the moment when Yhwh seeks to instruct Abraham about ‘his way,’ and the dialogue is an interactive lesson in which Abraham learns the extent of Yhwh’s mercy toward his creation, so that Abraham and his descendants may follow.”⁷²

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

At this decisive juncture, Yhwh begins to reveal his plans to his chosen servant for the first time. From this point on, Israel, through its prophets, will be given privileged access to Yhwh’s counsel. Abraham is commissioned to teach his children the way of Yhwh, but the patriarch must first learn it himself. That he does learn Yhwh’s way—that is, the forgiving mercy of Yhwh is clear from all subsequent intercessions; but the anomalous course of this first intercession suggests that this exchange is a learning incident.⁷³

⁶⁵ Judy Klitsner, *Subversive Sequels in the Bible* (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2011), 70.

⁶⁶ Klitsner, 70.

⁶⁷ Klitsner, 70.

⁶⁸ Smith, “Genesis,” 224.

⁶⁹ Troy Miller, “Relationships, Haggling, and Injustice in Genesis 18,” *Journal of Theta Alpha Kappa* 36, no. 2 (2012): 29–38.

⁷⁰ Nathan Macdonald, “Listening to Abraham—Listening to Yhwh: Divine Justice and Mercy in Genesis 18:16-33,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 66, no. 1 (2004): 25–43; Robert Eisen, “The Education of Abraham: The Encounter between Abraham and God over the Fate of Sodom and Gomorrah,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (April 2000): 80–86; Rabbi Shai Held and Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, “In Praise of Protest: Or, Who’s Teaching Whom?,” in *The Heart of Torah, Volume 1, Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion: Genesis and Exodus* (University of Nebraska Press, 2017), 35–39, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1tg5nz2.14>.

⁷¹ Eisen, “The Education of Abraham,” 86.

⁷² Macdonald, “Listening to Abraham—Listening to Yhwh,” 41.

⁷³ Macdonald, 40.

It is a mark of trust on both God and Abraham's parts. On God's side, a decision is made to not hide from Abraham what God is about to do, precisely because God has "chosen" him (Gen 18:17-19 NRSV). The word translated as "chosen" by the NRSV is the Hebrew word *yada* or "to know," a word that indicates an intimate relationship.⁷⁴ To know in this sense means "to be related to the reality of what is known."⁷⁵ It is the experiences from Gen 12-17 that, narratively speaking, have allowed God to know Abraham—and also Abraham to know God.

Despite Abraham's fumbling described in the section above, God does not abandon Abraham and still deems him trustworthy.⁷⁶ God has then chosen Abraham for a specific task: "I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice" (Gen 18:19 NRSV). Therefore, as the designated "ancestor of a multitude of nations" (Gen 17:4 NRSV), God engages Abraham in the teaching moment.

For Abraham, the line of questions he raises is "surprisingly audacious,"⁷⁷ and strikingly bold, but is it not completely unexpected. As mentioned above, Abraham had already asked God bold questions in Gen 17:17, "can a child be born to man who is a hundred years old?" Though he was repudiated there, as discussed above, Abraham learns that God is merciful. He learns "that God, the judge of the world, is indeed just, distinguishing between the righteous and the wicked."⁷⁸

Through the encounter, "God promises to have a special relationship with Abraham and his progeny, so that they will be inspired to do what is right and just. The negotiation over the fate of Sodom is one result of that relationship and that commitment to what is right and just."⁷⁹ Macdonald calls this conversation a "learning incident" where Abraham, "presuming Yhwh to be a harsh judge, [Abraham] prepares to barter with him. His strategy is undone by Yhwh's persistent acceptance of Abraham's offer; Yhwh turns out to be far more merciful than Abraham imagines."⁸⁰ At the end of the conversation Abraham has deeper knowledge of God's mercy and justice, and Abraham is left to consider this as a possible new paradigm for moving forward.

A preliminary attempt to apply this paradigm can be seen in the second sister-wife episode of Gen 20:10-20. At first glance, it may seem identical to the first, with Abraham again asking Sarah to lie about their marriage and instead present herself as his sister, just like the deception in Gen 12:10-20. However, unlike the previous episode, Abraham's fear is named. This time, Abraham's reason for the deception is that "there is no fear of God at all in this place" (Gen 20:11). It is no longer about self-preservation due to Sarah's beauty (Gen 12:12), but rather about an uncertainty about the people's relationship with God.⁸¹

⁷⁴ Fox, *The Five Books of Moses*, 74.

⁷⁵ Birch, *What Does the Lord Require*, 28; see also Jack P. Lewis, "Yada'," in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 366.

⁷⁶ Conroy, "Abraham's Journey of Faith," 11.

⁷⁷ Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 23; See also Edward J. Bridge, "An Audacious Request: Abraham's Dialogue with God in Genesis 18," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 40, no. 3 (March 2016): 283, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309089216637143>.

⁷⁸ Clifford and Murphy, "Genesis," 23.

⁷⁹ Lieber, *Etz Hayim*, 102.

⁸⁰ Macdonald, "Listening to Abraham—Listening to Yhwh," 40.

⁸¹ Abraham is proven wrong and there is in fact fear of God as Abimelech acts with greater honor than Abraham. Abraham is still liable for the deception and lack of trust in God, as per Clifford and Murphy, "Genesis," 24.

Another marked difference is that Abraham is involved in the “solution,” where he prays to God (Gen 20:17). Unlike the previous story where Abraham was not involved at all in the restoration of Pharaoh, here, Abimelech’s healing—and his wife’s and female slaves’—comes after Abraham’s intercession.⁸² This can be taken as an indication that God and Abraham are now working together.⁸³ Abimelech later admits to Abraham, “God is with you in all that you do” (Gen 21:22), and so it seems, will Abraham be in all that God does, too.

A New Paradigm: “God will provide”

With these markers on Abraham’s journey noted, attention now turns to God’s call in Gen 22:1, “after these things God tested Abraham.” This opening phrase implies that what follows is a direct consequence of what has occurred before, as described above.⁸⁴ “These things” that have transpired from Gen 12-21 have revealed the character of God and of Abraham, resulting in the formation of an intimate relationship and deepening trust. Abraham has grown in his knowledge of God, learning God’s ways, and slowly learns to trust God. This relationship of trust between Abraham and God will now find its high point in the narrative of Gen 22.

“He said to him, ‘Abraham!’” (Gen 22:1). An indication of this history in relationship is that God’s use of Abraham’s name. God’s call is direct and by name. This is the first time God addresses Abraham by the name that God had given him in the earlier covenant ritual of Gen 17. The address by name “calls up all he has become,” call that he “knows himself to be,” but also all that he knows “to be hopeful of, including the future promised him.”⁸⁵ It can be pointed out that Abraham’s journey began with a direct—but nameless—call in Gen 12. Now, after all the events of Gen 12-21, with a deep relationship formed, God address Abraham by name.

The bestowal of the new name on Abraham was an act “of utmost significance in the biblical world ... since a person’s name was indicative of personality and fate, the receiving of a new one signified a new life or a new stage in life.”⁸⁶ This new name was given as a preparation of Abraham’s fatherhood,⁸⁷ and here in Gen 22, this will be put to the test. The narrator explicitly mentions that the events constitute a test, making it clear that the reader must pay close attention to Abraham’s response.

“And he said, ‘Here I am’” (Gen 22:1). Abraham’s immediate response is a promising start to the test. Abraham indicates his “complete availability”⁸⁸ with the declaration, “placing himself completely at God’s disposal.”⁸⁹ Abraham’s response to God’s call is articulate in an “unconditional acceptance, a self-oblation,”⁹⁰ a readiness to do whatever God would command.

⁸² cf. Lieber, *Etz Hayim*, 112.

⁸³ At the very least, more than in the first sister-wife episode.

⁸⁴ Megan Warner, “Genesis 20-22:19: Abraham’s Test of Allegiance,” *Australian Biblical Review* 53 (2005): 26.

⁸⁵ J. Gerald Janzen, *Abraham and All the Families of the Earth: A Commentary on the Book of Genesis 12-50*, International Theological Commentary (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1993), 78.

⁸⁶ Fox, *The Five Books of Moses*, 70.

⁸⁷ Fox, 70.

⁸⁸ Clifford and Murphy, “Genesis,” 25.

⁸⁹ Janzen, *Abraham and All the Families of the Earth: A Commentary on the Book of Genesis 12-50*, 78.

⁹⁰ Angel Gonzalez, *Abraham: Father of Believers*, trans. Robert J. Olsen (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), 120.

While the narration indicates that the “call and the response are instantaneous,”⁹¹ it must be reiterated that the response is made possible by the relationship between God and Abraham formed through the events of Gen 12-21. The call and response manifest a “familiar mutual trust built over considerable experience together.”⁹²

With the immediacy and the lack of further verbal response to God’s eventual command to “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt-offering on one of the mountains that I will show you” (Gen 22:3), Abraham is sometimes characterized as “silently trusting and obedient”⁹³ to the point of blind obedience. A. Gonzalez interprets Abraham’s quick response as having given up arguing with God—“Abraham had long before given up trying to understand ... he had decided to make no attempt to understand.”⁹⁴

Blind obedience, however, is not an acceptable interpretation. When taken in view of Gen 12-21 discussed above, Gen 22 can be taken as a dramatic high point of the relationship and a “climactic encounter”⁹⁵ between God and Abraham, not merely an instance of blind command and blind obedience. God’s call by name and Abraham’s response of self-oblation indicate the complete presence of the two characters before each other, acting almost as dramatic intensification of all their prior encounters.

Two questions can then be asked—what exactly is being tested and does Abraham pass? The text itself makes no indication of what Abraham has learned or what has changed in Abraham. Nowhere does it say that he now trusts more or has learned a lesson or gained new knowledge. It is not therefore a test of knowledge or if Abraham will do the right thing, but rather it is a test that “*confirms a fact*: Abraham trusts deeply that God has his best interests at heart so that he will follow where God’s command leads.”⁹⁶

What is tested is Abraham’s commitment of faith. In other instances where the Hebrew *nasa* is used, it is about testing faith, not in the sense of checking for presence or absence of faith, but as testing the quality of one’s faith.⁹⁷ A test is often about revealing the “true orientation” of the one tested to see if they will stay on the path.⁹⁸ In this way, a better translation for *nasa* would be “to prove.”⁹⁹ Gen 22 provides the opportunity for Abraham to demonstrate that he is “completely devoted to God.”¹⁰⁰

E. Davis points out that, narratively, much is also at stake for God here:

Remember, Abraham is the person on whom God had chosen to rely completely. After the flood when God almost gave up on humanity, after we had filled the whole world with violence, God decided to move forward in

⁹¹ Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *Genesis: The Beginning of Desire* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1995), 80.

⁹² Terence E. Fretheim, “God, Abraham, and the Abuse of Isaac,” *Word & World* XV, no. 1 (Winter 1995): 51.

⁹³ Clifford and Murphy, “Genesis,” 25.

⁹⁴ Gonzalez, *Abraham: Father of Believers*, 114.

⁹⁵ Clifford and Murphy, “Genesis,” 25.

⁹⁶ Fretheim, “Genesis,” 497. Italics in original.

⁹⁷ For example, Ex 16:4 “...test to see whether they follow My instructions or not” (JPS), Deut 8:2 “...test you by hardships to see what was in your hearts.” G. Gerleman, “Nsh,” in *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, ed. Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, trans. Mark E. Biddle (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 1997).

⁹⁸ Clifford and Murphy, “Genesis,” 25; see also Stefan Fischer, “The Testing of Abraham in Genesis 22 and the Testing of Job,” *Acta Theologica* 37 (December 31, 2024): 39.

⁹⁹ Marvin R. Wilson, “Nasa,” in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 581.

¹⁰⁰ Davis, “Abraham’s Radical Trust,” 30.

relationship with the world. But there was a condition: from that point on, Abraham and his seed are the one channel for the dissemination of God's blessing. Abraham is like a prism: he focuses God's blessing and spreads it through the world like a rainbow stream of light. God has staked everything on Abraham, even the whole world. Yet there is serious reason to doubt that Abraham has staked everything on God. Abraham and God have been in relationship for decades now—it is already a long marriage but there are signs that Abraham still does not totally trust God, that he is still looking out for his own interest.¹⁰¹

With the perspective of TL theory, two further insights can be made. First is a clear articulation of Abraham's new paradigm. Responding to God's call, Abraham sets off silently, but not blindly. Though there are no indications to Abraham's disposition, it would be a mistake to view it as mere blind obedience.¹⁰² Abraham is silently following and quietly trusting because he has already made the paradigm shift.

There is no longer any hesitation or questioning in Abraham's response. He no longer tries to find his own solution to (yet another) predicament brought before him by God. There is no more doubt or questioning of God's intentions. There is no disordered attachment to his kin or to his own wealth or safety. There is only trust in God and a desire to do what God asks, trusting that there would be nothing to worry about.

Abraham reveals this new paradigm in the dialogue of Gen 22:8. When asked by Isaac about the lamb for the burnt-offering, Abraham responds, "God himself will provide the lamb for the sacrifice" (Gen 22:8). Abraham proves that his trust in God has now reached its height and fullness. No longer will he take matters into his own hands or find a solution to the predicament he faces, Abraham trusts that God himself will provide.

Abraham's "Behold, Here I Am!" as a Sign of Transformation

The declaration encapsulates his journey of coming to know and trust God. A. Zornberg refers to Abraham's call and conversion experience. She writes, "to say that a man is 'converted' means, in these terms, that religious ideas, previously peripheral in his consciousness, now take a central place, and that religious aims form the habitual centre of his energy."¹⁰³ Compared to his previous experiences discussed above, Abraham has now placed, in Gen 22, God's promises at the center rather than the periphery. Abraham would act to find his own solutions to the sister-wife episodes and the lack of offspring, but now he demonstrates only a quiet trust. To get to this point required "a long incubation period, in which subconscious elements prepare themselves for a flowering, which is as much of a process as an event,"¹⁰⁴ seen in the events of Gen 12-21.

The declaration is rooted in the history and relationship between Abraham and God, with Abraham coming to deeper knowledge of God. By Gen 22, then, Abraham demonstrates the height of trust and knowledge. It is read therefore as a narrative high point and climax, a culmination of the relationship between Abraham and God, with both coming to a deep sense of trust.

¹⁰¹. Davis, 30.

¹⁰². See Chapter II, 34.

¹⁰³. William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience* (Fontana: 1960), 201, quoted in Zornberg, *Genesis: The Beginning of Desire*, 80.

¹⁰⁴. Zornberg, 80.

“Behold, here I am!” is the verbalization of this culmination, with Abraham responding with immediacy and readiness, awaiting God’s instructions. It is not automatic nor blind, but Abraham’s own choice and willingness, founded on the knowledge of and trust in God that has developed. In this sense the declaration is also self-defining: Abraham declares who he is before God, fully trusting God and willing to do will be asked. Thematically, then, the declaration is a fitting close to the Abraham saga—with these declarations among the last words attributed to Abraham in Genesis.

Using TL theory, we can also consider “God himself will provide” as the articulation of the new paradigm that he has now adopted after the journey of Gen 12-21. “After these things” (Gen 22:1) where Abraham has explored alternative paradigms and even had preliminary attempts of applying them, in Gen 22 the new paradigm is now very clear. With no more questions or objections to God’s command and no more taking matters into his own hands, Abraham demonstrates complete trust in God—for God himself will provide. No longer does Abraham need to secure an heir by himself, God will provide. No longer does he have to care for his own safety as he does in the sister-wife episodes, God will provide. And even as he might be wondering how Isaac would survive the sacrifice, Abraham trusts, God will provide.

A second insight can be taken from the Gen 22 narrative and the centrality of Abraham’s declaration, “Behold, here I am!” As mentioned previously, the declaration is a self-oblation by which he declares his readiness to do what God asks, rooted in a deep trust in and relationship with God. The declaration is neither blind nor naïve, but an exercise of Abraham’s freedom aligning with God’s will.

From the perspective of TL theory, we can see how the declaration, “Behold, here I am!” captures the surge of vitality that Young identifies as part of the TL process. Before moving on to new action with the new paradigm, a “celebratory surge of vitality” happens, where one’s life is changed in new and unexpected ways.¹⁰⁵ It was proposed above that some kind of ritualization would be significant in marking the transformation that has occurred, and with Abraham we find precisely an important one—a verbalization of the surge of vitality with the declaration, “Behold, here I am!”

In the moment of Gen 22:1, Abraham declares out loud who he is before God and how he stands, fully trusting God and willing to do whatever is asked. With TL theory, it can also be said to be self-defining in terms of announcing the full adoption of the new paradigm. Its “here-and-now-ness” and sense of urgency captures the surge of vitality and the “newfound freedom and purpose”¹⁰⁶ that one gains with the new paradigm. As Cranton states, “when people revise their habits of mind, they are reinterpreting their sense of self in relation to the world.”¹⁰⁷

What, then, has Abraham learned? With the discussion above, we can conclude that by the end of the saga, Abraham has learned to wholeheartedly trust in God. What began as a journey into the unknown and a leaving behind of everything that is familiar to him in response to the call of an unknown God (Gen 12:1-3) ends with the story of Gen 22:1-19, where the trust is demonstrated with Abraham passing the test, captured by his declaration “Behold, here I am!”—an expression of the new paradigm that “God himself will provide” (Gen 22:8).

¹⁰⁵ Young, “Transformational Learning in Ministry,” 332.

¹⁰⁶ Young, “Transformational Learning in Ministry,” 333.

¹⁰⁷ Cranton, 7.

