

CROSS-CURRENTS IN RELIGION AND CULTURE

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The study of theology and religion nowadays calls upon a wide range of interdisciplinary skills and cultural perspectives to illuminate the concerns at the heart of religious faith. Books in this new series will variously explore the contributions made by literature, philosophy and science in forming our historical and contemporary understanding of religious issues and theological perspectives.

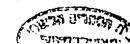
New Stories for Old

Biblical Patterns in the Novel

Harold Fisch



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directions, no longer controlled by the metaphysic of redemption.

The result of evacuating the divine presence from the myth is thus to render it logically inexplicable even though its power remains. This is the price we must pay for receiving the benefits and freedoms of secularization. The more honest the writer is, the higher is the price. Yehoshua is a very honest writer indeed. So that if he has given us a flawed masterpiece, it is a masterpiece nevertheless.

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The Day before Yesterday

1

S.Y. Agnon is a major writer by any standard and the central figure in the history of modern Hebrew fiction. He is above all Israel's classic novelist, representing the fullness of the Hebraic tradition with the Bible at its center. "In my writing I have been influenced first and foremost by the Bible, Mishnah, Talmud, Midrash and Rashi's commentary on the Bible," he declared in his acceptance speech on being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1966. This may suggest a certain scholarly remoteness – as of a Miltonian figure (Milton's poetry carried a like weight of theological and other learning). But in fact Agnon was not the least bit remote; his playfulness, his witty control of so many varied sources, his rich allusiveness and stylistic virtuosity helped him to gain popularity with all ranks and classes of the new reading public in the early part of the century. But what fascinated his readers above all was the amazing fertility of his invention, a kind of midrashic excess. There was always another story, and a story within that story, and another story suggested by that one in a seemingly infinite series. This may suggest something like the wealth of invention of the great nineteenth-century novelists. But Agnon, as his more discerning critics have noted, is also a truly contemporary figure. If his sources are traditional, the tone of his narration is often ironical and the personality of the narrator, quizzical and arcane. With a reflexive subtlety which is thoroughly modern he will share with his readers this very problem of narrative excess. Thus in a short story entitled "Knots Upon Knots" the narrator imagines himself vainly tying up his papers into bundles in order to get them home from a bookbinder's shop where they have been stored:

but the rope was old and had many knots in it, and as I undid them, I cut my fingers and broke my nails, and when I finally managed to get the knots undone, the rope itself came apart and unravelled.¹

The combination here of symbolism with realistic description is remarkable. It is clearly an allegory of writing and yet at the same time it portrays a firmly localized Jerusalem setting on an autumn afternoon with the narrator waiting for a bus just as the first rains come splashing down. In his masterly full-length novel *A Guest For the Night* (1935),² based on a visit he made to his place of birth in Eastern Europe in 1930, the problem of narrative control (as well as ideological direction) is projected through the symbolism of a key – the great brass key to the *Bet Midrash* (House of Study) in the narrator's home town of "Shibush" (itself an allegorical name suggesting "confusion"). The key, found and lost and then found again at the end of the story, when it is discovered in the lining of his suitcase on the narrator's return to Jerusalem, is a powerful unifying symbol calling out rather obviously for interpretation. And yet it belongs also to an everyday world, that of the *shtetl* in decline, which is presented faithfully and in striking detail throughout this novel. This yoking together of the symbolic and the everyday reminds us not a little of Kafka, though Agnon claimed not to have read a line of Kafka at the time of writing these fictions. But whether that is to be believed or not, the analogy with Kafka has become a commonplace of Agnon-criticism.

All this has caused Agnon to be perceived as a modern figure. He is in fact a writers' writer and has been a major force in shaping the novel and short story for a whole generation of younger writers, including David Shachar, Amos Oz and A.B. Yehoshua. These writers and many others have found Agnon to be an exciting and liberating contemporary model, helping them to escape from the narrower modes of social realism coming from Eastern Europe and still widely practiced in Israel in the mid-century. And though they do not acknowledge anything like Agnon's debt to traditional Jewish sources, there can be no doubt that his influence has gone beyond mere technique and narrative method. If he taught them the use of dream symbols, then we should remember that, as he told his audience in Stockholm, his dreams have been above all biblical dreams. The younger writers too, as we

saw in the case of Yehoshua, have a copy of the Bible in their baggage even if the key to the old *Bet Midrash* is for them still missing. And one of the biblical dreams (or in this case perhaps, nightmares) which they all share is that of the Akedah.

Agnon's feeling for the biblical patterns is, as we might suppose, more reverent than that of most of the writers we have considered so far. During the greater part of his life he observed the commandments and occupied himself (in addition to his fictional writings) with the collecting and editing of rabbinic sayings and anecdotes. Practically all his major works and collections have biblical titles. The last volume of short stories published in his lifetime is entitled "The Wood and the Fire" (1962).³ The phrase is of course from the Akedah (Genesis 22:7) and the Akedah is also the subject of the first story in that collection – "According to the Pain is the Reward." It tells of a certain Rabbi Zidkiyyah, noted equally for his inspired liturgical poems and his works of charity. A due note of piety is sounded early on. The Rabbi is contemplating the unending history of Jewish suffering and martyrdom. "Whence" he asks himself, "do we draw this strength, for every day we are slain and butchered and every day we are bound down [*ne'ekadim*]?"

His thoughts settled on our father Isaac, God's own burnt-offering, the first of those who were bound, who indeed bound himself on the altar in order that he might perform the will of his father in heaven.

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He determines forthwith to compose a hymn on the Akedah to be sung in the synagogue during the coming Days of Awe. He seems to see the ashes of Isaac himself spread out on the altar and is duly inspired.

And thus he wove his rhymes, as do the sacred poets who "bind" up [*okedim*] their very hearts to their poems out of devotion to God, until he had versified the whole Akedah in wonderful and awesome verses.

(ibid.)

It will be noted that Agnon speaks of the poem which R. Zidkiyyah composes as itself an "Akedah." In fact the many poems on the

Binding of Isaac, regularly inserted in the blessing for the resurrection of the dead during the High Holy Day services, are technically known as "Akedot." He has "bound up his heart in his poem" and thus the fate of the poem becomes a symbol for the survival or death of the poet and, by extension, of the community of worshippers.

Agnon's story is conducted at this symbolic level. The question is whether the poem deserves to survive or not. Zidkiyyah has formed the habit of testing the value of his liturgical compositions by the quality of the poor folk who turn to him for alms. If the current applicant is God-fearing and grounded in the Torah he will take that as a sign that his verses are accepted on high; if he is not, then he draws the opposite conclusion. On the present occasion he is visited by a beggar uncouth and defiant in manner; from God, he declares that he expects neither blessing nor salvation. He is clothed in rags and strips of paper, his body covered with filth and running sores. Zidkiyyah gives him all the money he has – a gold coin in fact – which the man takes with a bad grace, complaining the whole time. And so Zidkiyyah sadly determines, in accordance with his principle, to burn his poem. After so clear a sign of divine displeasure, he takes a flint, raises a fire in the hearth, and reduces his "Akedah" to ashes. Not only that. From then on he will write no more poems.

But this is not quite the last word. The years go by and R. Zidkiyyah is now near death, his wife and children having all predeceased him. Too weak to stand or walk and lying on his bed, he is brought to the synagogue with the assistance of a surviving grandson – there to attend the services of the Day of Atonement. It is then, in the interval before the afternoon prayer (the day and hour when, according to tradition, the Binding of Isaac took place), that Zidkiyyah has his hour of grace. He finds new strength, rises from his bed, and approaches the reading-desk to lead the congregation in prayer, as the *seraphim* from Isaiah's vision surround him with wings outspread. But most wonderful of all, the words and the melody of the Akedah which he had burnt are restored to him, echoed in the beating of the angels' wings. They have, it seems, been accepted "above." This is where a simple and pious story-teller might have ended his tale. But Agnon though pious is by no means simple. Having uttered his swan song, R. Zidkiyya falls to the ground and appears to be dead. But the narrator corrects this like the author of the

midrash quoted earlier (p. 168) on the disappearance of Isaac at the end of the Akedah chapter. Zidkiyyah, the narrator tells us, did not die. He managed to go home on his own two feet and spent the hours of the following night with quill, ink and paper before him, vainly seeking to recapture the verses of his lost Akedah "which lay on his tongue like Isaac's ashes spread on the altar" (18). But all he can recall is a scattered word here and there. The poem will not consent to return to earth. "Once the 'Akedah' has been accepted above, it is not required here below" (*ibid.*).

Agnon is here exploring the same ambivalence that we considered in the previous chapter. Abraham Mani is committed to life, to survival – the survival of his seed – and yet he pronounces his own death sentence and that of his son. Likewise Zidkiyyah in Agnon's tale is dead and yet he is not dead; his poem exists and yet does not exist. It is at one and the same time a failure and a success. It does not make it into the festival prayer-book; it fails on earth but it succeeds in heaven! There is here a sharp division between transcendental and earthbound values. This is pointed out by the Israeli critic Baruch Kurzweil who relates this to the near despair, the basic questioning of all historical rewards and promises in the years following the Holocaust and the Second World War.⁴ The outer world with its disenchantment, ruin and disaster no longer coincides with the world of the spirit. What would it now mean to speak of God "testing" Abraham? Where in such a dehumanized environment can the dialogue recorded in Genesis 22 be imagined as taking place? In particular, it would seem that the call of the angel in Genesis 22:12 is no longer so confidently awaited or so clearly heard.

From this point of view the key figure in the story is the old man in rags with his running sores, his mouth empty of teeth, who comes begging to Zidkiyyah's door. We have here crossed the threshold of the human in a downward direction; we have reached a point where all faith in man and all hope in God as the ruler of this world – are reduced to seeming absurdity. There is no space left in which the Akedah with its inbuilt concept of the near miss, the rescue, the hope of futurity, can still function. And so Zidkiyyah condemns his "Akedah" to oblivion. He has beheld the ultimate antithesis to its message of salvation – that is, unaccommodated man himself, despised and without honor or dignity, the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 reduced to a subhuman state of wretchedness. It is only when R. Zidkiyyah, on his

death-bed, finds himself reduced to a like condition that the image of his visitor returns to him (14). And at that same moment his "Akedah" is marvelously restored to his memory and he finds himself able to recite the poem in the original words and melody. But only for that moment. There has been a general declension of the human, in the light of which devotional poetry, especially that inspired by the Akedah, is it would seem, no longer possible. Or else we may say that it only becomes possible by a crossing of thresholds in the opposite direction, an upward transcendence, and with that a like eclipsing of human possibilities and hopes.

And yet this will not quite do as a summary of Agnon's sense of the Akedah in relation to the events of our own time. He does not in the end adopt so despairing a conclusion. His sense of the grand sweep of Jewish history in the twentieth century is not confined to the horrors of 1942-5. These take their place in a larger scene of witness which he displays and to which he invites our attention. And corresponding with that larger vision, he shows a uniquely informed awareness of the wider literary and theological context of the Akedah narrative itself. The result is one of the great epic novels of our time.

2

We turn to Agnon's novel *Temol Shilshom* ("The Day before Yesterday" 1945)⁵ which has been rightly described as "the most successfully realized . . . , the richest in connotation, and the most universal in import" of his full-length works.⁶ Completed, like Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus* in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, its implicit claims are similar to those of Mann's great work. It sums up the modern history of a nation, focusing for this purpose on a single individual – in Agnon's case it is Yitzhak Kummer – in whose life that history in its aspirations and its tragic range is encapsulated. Like Mann's masterpiece, Agnon's novel uses expressionist devices which break sharply with the traditional realism of the *Bildungsroman*. And there is a similar crossing of time boundaries. Mann takes us back and forth between the nineteenth century of Nietzsche, the present day of Leverkühn and the sixteenth century of Luther. But he never strays far from the fearful catastrophe of 1933-45 as the ultimate point of reference. Agnon's novel, written likewise from the perspective of the War

years and their immediate aftermath,⁷ is set in the early part of this century, the time of the Second "Aliyah" (or "wave of immigration" – approximately 1907-13) which marked the beginning of the modern renewal of Jewish national existence. And there is a backward perspective also, an ever present awareness of the Diaspora world of "the day before yesterday" with its pieties and continuities. Those pieties were shared also by the "Old Yishuv," that is, the Jews who had lived in the holy cities of the Holy Land for many decades, indeed many generations, prior to the arrival of the "pioneers" of the Second Aliyah. In that context we are frequently reminded that Yitzhak Kummer is the great-grandson of Reb Yudel, representing the world of eighteenth-century hasidic piety. He had been the hero of Agnon's first full-length novel, *Hakhnasat Kallah* (*A Bridal Canopy*) published in 1931. Both Yitzhak and Reb Yudel are enchanted seekers, making their way to the Holy Land (Reb Yudel at the end of his tale, Yitzhak at the beginning of his) there to find the Sleeping Beauty of Jewish history and to awaken her to new life with a lover's kiss. But the contrast between them is even more marked. Yitzhak with his doubts and confusions, is very much a child of our time. He knows the bitter taste of guilt, frustration and disillusionment, whilst Reb Yudel, like some Jewish Don Quixote, is blissfully unaware of discordances. The world without reflects the world within and the soon-to-be-awaited coming of the Messiah will set to rights any troubling questions that we may still have. One is left to wonder whether in the end Reb Yudel's world was not the saner of the two. We are told, ironically, that what they will both have in common to enjoy for all future time is a burial place in the Land of Israel (607).

Yitzhak, obeying an age-old imperative, makes his way from Galicia in Eastern Europe to the Holy Land (as Agnon had done) around the year 1907, arriving, like Reb Yudel before him, in a state of exaltation. But the harsh realities of Jaffa in 1907 lead to a certain disenchantment. There is the heat, the dust and squalor and we also note the selfishness and avarice of the existing population. Yitzhak in short becomes aware of the non-ideal character of the land of promise as he makes his way to Petah-Tikvah, one of the new "colonies." There Yitzhak, who has come to Palestine to "build and to be himself rebuilt" finds that the idealism of the new pioneers finds no encouragement from the Jewish farmers and landowners already established in the country. They

prefer to hire local Arab labor in their farms and orchards. The *halutzim*, or pioneers, actually go hungry from lack of work.

In this gloom Yitzhak is consoled by the comradeship felt among the young workers. Among his friends are Rabinowitz and Yohanan Leichtfuss. With the help of Leichtfuss Yitzhak trains himself to be a house painter. The mode of narration is here above all things realistic, the novel giving us a marvelously informed account of the life of the Yishuv in the early part of the century. The impression of near total realism is well founded; Agnon on arriving in Jaffa in 1907 had become secretary of the local Jewish court and subsequently of the Land of Israel Council. In these capacities he seems to have got to know just about everyone in the Jewish population of the country, the so-called *Yishuv*.

Yitzhak, who has now abandoned the traditional pieties of his ancestors, enters into a friendship with Sonia, Rabinowitz's girlfriend, Rabinowitz having in the meantime gone abroad. After a few months Sonia tires of the rather bashful young man from Galicia and their intimacy cools off, leaving Yitzhak both desolate and also ridden with guilt at the thought of having betrayed his best friend. In this state of mind, he decides to leave for Jerusalem which in all the months since his arrival in the country he has never visited.

Here he encounters a different atmosphere – a religious tone in contrast with the secular tone of Jaffa society. There is much piety but also much suffering – more than in Jaffa. He strikes up a friendship with the artist and fellow Galician Shimshon Blaukopf who is dying of consumption (211). Another tragic figure is Reb Alter, a man of learning from Yitzhak's home town, and also a circumciser (who had in fact circumcised the infant Yitzhak). He is now living, or rather dying, in poverty in a one-room hovel within the walls of the Old City close to the temple-mount – Mount Moriah, of course. But he has never managed to go to the Western Wall. On arrival in the country he had broken his leg and he is still immobilized, his injured leg wrapped in rags (348); in addition he had lost his money after having been persuaded by the treasurer of a yeshivah to invest it in a lottery fund (346) and he cannot afford medical attention.

Such a figure of extreme poverty and sickness, like the toothless beggar in his rags in the short story that we looked at earlier, marks the introduction into the narrative of what may be termed the semiotics of the Akedah. Reb Alter becomes a para-

digm for human suffering *in extremis*. Yitzhak – his name is a give-away – had, we are told, never before beheld such poverty (345). He, like Rabbi Zidkiyyahu, is being tested, for he too, at the novel's end will be subjected to the kind of suffering which marks the outer limits of the human. How can Yitzhak sustain the faith which had brought him back to his ancestral land in the light of such misery? In his joy at seeing the young arrival from his old township, Reb Alter presses his visitor to drink tea with him, only to discover that there is no tea in the house. They will have to do with water which Reb Alter heats for him on a kerosene stove, adding to it a tiny piece of sugar, at the same time urging Yitzhak to say the blessing for his refreshment to him "by whose word all things come into being." He has something like the simple faith of Yitzhak's ancestor Reb Yudel. Others in this city he tells Yitzhak are not as fortunate as he is, for he has a water cistern beside his door and enjoys a plentiful supply of that commodity (347). And in general he declares that we who dwell in the Land are given many more opportunities for gratitude and praise to the Almighty than we enjoyed in the Dispersion for there we had all things in plenty but here we are verily become God's favorite child for whom every drop of water has become a precious gift from heaven! The reader is also in a manner being tested; for sharply refracted through Reb Alter's simple expressions of piety, there is the narrator's fierce and ironical questioning. The reader is being forced to ask himself whether it was for this that Yitzhak (along with the hopeful generation of pioneers whom he represents) had ventured on the epic journey, announced, as in the *Aeneid*, in the first sentence of the book. There we are told that he "left his land and his place of birth and went up to the Land of Israel in order to rebuild it from its ruins and to be himself rebuilt." Is this scene of Reb Alter the promised end?

But not everything is black. Yitzhak establishes himself as a house painter in Jerusalem and is much in demand. Before he dies Blaukopf teaches him an additional skill, that of painting signboards for shops and businesses (241–2). In fact he prospers and achieves a "state of tranquillity" (*midat haHishtavut*) (240). Something of the spiritual calm of Jerusalem enters his life, and he also finds himself in love with a new girl, Shifra – devout, modest and beautiful, the antitype of the worldly and emancipated Sonia in Jaffa. Shifra is the daughter of the ugly and unlovable

Reb Faish, one of a group of satirically drawn figures of narrow-minded bigotry of whom the most colorful is Rabbi Gronam Yekum Purkan, a popular preacher. Yitzhak plans to marry Shifra but before doing so, he feels he has to settle things with Sonia in Jaffa, to assure himself and her that their relationship is over.

Once back in Jaffa he does not easily move away again. Moreover, his friend Leichtfuss goes on a trip and gives him the key of his home – a lonely hut near the sea (433–6) – where all his needs are supplied and he enjoys the comfort of perfect idleness. It is an idyllic interval. This second visit to Jaffa is also marked by a change in the economic and social situation of the “comrades” of the Second Aliyah, indeed of the new *yishuv* as a whole. There is an atmosphere of promise and eagerness; it is 1909 and the newest suburbs of Jaffa are going up – the beginning of what will become Tel-Aviv. The problems of “Jewish labor” have been overcome. There is work to be had and all around a sense of hope and a bustle of activity. The Zionist enterprise has been truly launched and the promise of the future can already be felt in the present. Nevertheless, when Leichtfuss returns and he has to move out of his hut, Yitzhak resolves to take the train back to Jerusalem. Ominously the porter who carries his things to the railway station turns out to be the porter of a burial society (458).

Returning to Jerusalem is to return to a world lacking the hopefulness of Jaffa. Shifra, living in Mea Shearim, tends to her father who has been struck down by a paralytic stroke. But there are still idyllic phases and moments. In Shifra it would seem that he has found his soul's mate. He also returns to his ancestral faith and practices. He takes up lodging in the home of another artist, a craftsman who makes souvenirs and religious articles out of olive wood. There, for the first time since his arrival in Palestine, Yitzhak enjoys a home setting, becoming almost one of the family and, what is more, he makes a satisfactory living. But Yitzhak is doomed. He marries Shifra but a week after their marriage he is bitten by a mad dog, Balak, who is actually – as we shall see later – a major character in the novel! The novel here lurches into a wild surrealist mode, not unlike the writings of Kafka. Yitzhak now infected with rabies, dies in agony, strapped to his bed on the doctor's advice and kept in isolation in a locked room. Like his biblical namesake, Yitzhak Kummer is thus bound on a kind of altar for sacrifice. But unlike his biblical namesake, he is not going to be saved by a voice from heaven.

Although the Akedah is not explicitly invoked here nor at any other point in the novel, the motif of the Binding of Isaac is surely as powerfully present in *The Day before Yesterday* as in any of the other examples we have noted. Arnold Band did well to point out the parallels in an important article which appeared in 1967.⁸ He has returned to the same topic more recently, tracing a similar pattern in Kafka's short story “In the Penal Colony.”⁹ Other critics have taken up the notion.¹⁰ The Binding of Isaac, it is claimed, provides a key to the understanding of the novel. The fate of Yizhak Kummer belongs to the same region of absurdity, or, put in theological terms, to the inscrutable will of a God who does not have to explain his reasons to anyone. Professor Band sees the novel as focused on this. The fate of Yitzhak becomes a microcosm of the terrible, undeserved, and unaccountable sufferings of European Jewry during the years of the Holocaust.

Apparent confirmation for this view of the centrality of the Akedah in Agnon's novel comes from the publication in 1978 of a passage found in the manuscript of a preliminary draft of the first part of the novel to which Agnon gave the name *Eretz Hefetz* (“Land of Delight”) – from Malachi 3:12. In this passage, omitted from the novel in its final form, the Akedah is specifically alluded to in the context of a discourse on the glories of Jerusalem:

Many events are associated with Jerusalem, the city that God desired for his dwelling. From afar he called to Abraham his beloved to offer up his son. Abraham wondered which place it was where God desired to be thus honoured. God answered, Where you see my glory, there I will await you. Abraham knew at once that that place must be Jerusalem. He saddled his ass and he and his son Isaac went forth with great joy, the one to bind, the other to be bound. Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place and said of it: “This is my resting place forever: here will I dwell because I have desired it” (Ps. 132).¹¹

Now whilst Sarah Hager has performed a service in recovering this passage from the Agnon archives and pointing out its relevance to the novel, the main critical issue that should be faced is that it was in fact cancelled and does not appear in the novel as finally published by Agnon in 1945! Certainly he had good reason for omitting the rather sermon-like discourse on the spiritual meaning of the history of Jerusalem from the Creation of the world

onwards to which this passage belongs and for starting straight into the story of Yitzhak Kummer's arrival in the Land, but in view of the crucial importance of the topic, one might have expected him to reinstate the Akedah passage at some other appropriate point in the narrative. This he did not do.

There are I think two reasons for this. One is that the "Binding" as finally enacted in Jerusalem when Yitzhak Kummer is struck down by rabies to die a violent and horrible death is out of tune with the above-quoted passage which speaks of the "great joy" with which Abraham and his son went up to Jerusalem, "the one to bind, the other to be bound." Such an account is perfectly in tune with the traditional understanding of the Akedah as salvation-myth but could not have served Agnon's purpose as that purpose finally took shape. The early draft was, we may surmise, written either before the outbreak of the Second World War or, at any rate, before the full horror of the Holocaust had become known. It was then still possible to speak of the Akedah as an act of love and devotion in accord with the "spirit of tranquillity" exemplified by Jerusalem. In 1945 we are confronted with a darker Akedah and inevitably with a different kind of interpretive problem, one which tests both reader and narrator in new ways.

Another somewhat different, if not contrary, reason for omitting this passage is that the novel as a whole, as it took shape, does not quite accord with the parameters of an "Akedah." It has a broader range and is also more upbeat than the other examples we have discussed. True, we witness the bitterness and horror of the ending and the troubles and sufferings of so many of the characters – Reb Faish, Blaukopf, Reb Alter. But the novel has also, as a central theme, the trials undergone by the *halutzim* of the Second Aliyah, their overcoming of obstacles, the building up of the *Yishuv*, with its colonies and towns. There are light and hope and creativity as well as darkness and despair in this novel, especially in those parts of it which survey the world of Jaffa and the new colonies. It would be to distort the novel not to see the grandeur of the achievements which it celebrates. Indeed, in Book 3 we sense that everything is throbbing with new life. Little by little, Jewish history is being forged anew (388, 448–9). Here is an essential part of the epic structure of the novel.

The Day Before Yesterday I would suggest is a kind of modern midrash. But the text that it seeks to interpret is not the Akedah in isolation, but the Akedah viewed in its total context as the last trial of Abraham which completes the first. That is why Agnon did not think it necessary to cite the cancelled passage. The Akedah is seen as part of a larger narrative. And it is that larger narrative on which Agnon focuses our attention and which is actually reflected in the total design of his novel. Abraham's trials had begun at Genesis 12:1 where he was commanded to leave his father's house and go out to a new land of which he knew nothing. "Get thee out of thy land and thy place of birth and from thy father's house, to the land which I will show thee" (12:1). Agnon's reader is immediately alerted to this source by the very first sentence of the novel, already quoted, which reads in full:

Like the rest of our brethren of the Dispersion, children of the Second Aliyah, Yitzhak Kummer left his land and his place of birth and went up to the Land of Israel in order to rebuild it from its ruins and to be himself rebuilt.¹²

(7)

It is not only that the Hebrew phrase translated as "his land and his place of birth" is an unmistakable echo of the language of Genesis 12:1 but that it evokes the whole biblical context, thus associating Yitzhak's "going up" to the Land of Israel with that of the patriarch Abraham who was commanded to "get thee out" (*lekh-lekha*) from his homeland and place of birth and journey to a new land which would be shown to him. This epic journey with its clear biblical overtones serves to point the direction which the novel will take.

Yitzhak Kummer's career thus evokes the first trial of Abraham as surely as it evokes the last trial, namely, the "Binding." Interestingly, the Rabbis of the midrash link these two commands together, basing themselves on several verbal affinities. In particular, we have in the command relating to the Akedah the same crucial term, *lekh-lekha*, a phrase which occurs nowhere else in Scripture except in these two places:

Take now thy son, thy one-and-only, whom thou lovest, Yitzhak, and get thee (*lekh-lekha*) into the land of Moriah: and offer him there for a burnt-offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.

It will also be noted that both passages speak of a location still to be defined – “to the Land which I will show thee,” balancing “one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.” And above all there is the same use of an unusual rhetorical configuration which we may term the decremental catalogue – “from thy land, from thy birthplace, and from thy father’s house” matching, “thy son, thy one-and-only, whom thou lovest, Yitzhak” – each successive phrase defining the object of the trial more narrowly. In noting this the midrash on Genesis performs something like an exercise in literary analysis:

R. Levi said, Twice the term *lekh-lekha* occurs and we do not know which of the two is dearer [to the Almighty], the first or the second. Since in the second episode he added immediately “to the land of Moriah” it would appear that this was dearer than the first. R. Yohanan said, “Get thee out of thy land” – i.e. thy province; “from thy place of birth” – i.e. thy neighbourhood, “and from thy father’s house” – i.e. thy parental home; “to the land which I will show thee.” And why did he not reveal [his destination] to him at once? It was to make the land more precious to him and to give him a reward for every separate step. And parallel to this, we read: “Take now thy son.” Said Abraham, Which of my [two] sons? He said to him, “thy only one.” Said Abraham, Each is the only child of his mother. He said to him: “him whom thou lovest.” Said Abraham, Are the bounds of love marked out? [lit. are there compartments in the bowels?]. He finally said to him, “even Yitzhak.” And why did he not reveal [his identity] to him at once? In order to make him [i.e. Yitzhak] more precious to him and to give him a reward for each separate phrase. For R. Huna said in the name of R. Eliezer, the son of R. Yose the Galilean, The Holy One, blessed is he, keeps the righteous waiting and holds them in suspense, only later revealing his object to them. Thus it is written: “to the Land which I will show thee” and parallel to that: “upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.”¹³

The novel may be seen as a fictional working out of this dialectic, the going-up to the new land and the Akedah bound together by affinity and contrast. The Rabbis were not interested in verbal parallels and symmetries for their own sake. What they are saying here is that both episodes have things in common. Both are trials. As the narrator says in the first Jaffa period of Agnon’s novel: “The Land of Israel is only acquired through suffering” (45) – even the creative work of nation-building involved – for Yitzhak and his friends – tearing oneself away from one’s family and surroundings and then there were the hardships and privations of a new and unknown land. This too was a kind of Akedah, calling for heroism and sacrifice and above all, faith. That is what was required of Abraham and those are the qualities shown also by the *halutzim* of the Second Aliyah. Modern Jewish history, we might say, imposes both kinds of trial on us – the trial of going up to the Land, “to build it and to be oneself rebuilt” and the darker trial of Yitzhak Kummer’s biblical namesake, who is bound down on the altar in fear and trembling, his throat stretched out to the knife.

The symmetry which the Rabbis of the midrash found between these two chapters with their different kinds of trial will help us to understand the symmetry of Agnon’s novel, consisting as it does of four blocks of narration: the first and third connected with Jaffa, the second and fourth connected with Jerusalem. There is here, we may suggest, a balancing of the two kinds of *lekh-lekha*: broadly speaking the two Jaffa portions, Books 1 and 3, together with the 40 introductory pages describing the journey from Galicia to Jaffa, belong to the first trial of Abraham, that which spoke of the going up to a strange and unknown land with all its risks and hardships as well as its promises. Interlocked with these and balancing them like a quadratic equation are Books 2 and 4 which belong to the other *lekh-lekha*, that which announced the last trial of Abraham. These Books, 2 and 4, situate Yitzhak appropriately in Jerusalem, the “place” which Abraham saw from afar when he went to sacrifice his son on the altar. We thus have a dialectical and balanced structure – as befits an epic composition.

But it is not simply a matter of a pleasing aesthetic design. The structure reflects a visionary history and a visionary geography. As we noted earlier in reference to Joseph Roth’s novel, *Job*, the epic is essentially a type of narrative which brings the divine

and human orders together and explores the lines of communication between them. Men and women are commanded, tested; there is an overarching divine plot. Roth's *Job*, like Agnon's novel, also involved two contrasting locations and two contrasting spiritual states. Such contrasts are likewise typical of the epic. We remember the metaphysical geography of *The Divine Comedy*, or of *Paradise Lost*, with their great balancing blocks of narration. Agnon's novel is a tale of two cities in this sense. But it consists not merely of two cities, Jaffa and Jerusalem, but of two alternating modes of experience – the one associated with the trials and hardships of "going up," of building and being remade, the other associated with darker sufferings and trials, but also with "the spirit of tranquillity" which it seems Jerusalem is best able to provide. It is in Jerusalem that Yitzhak will find his true soul's partner, the somewhat cloistered Shifra, but there he will also find his death, a death mediated for us by the stray dog Balak. To Balak we then return.

4

The story of Balak was written in great part before the story of Yitzhak Kummer had taken final shape. Parts of it were separately published as early as 1935 and 1936.¹⁴ But the idea of putting the dog into the story of the Second Aliyah and connecting his career with that of the hero must have come to Agnon relatively late in the process of composition. It proved to be the novel's most brilliant and arresting feature. We will be concerned not with the history of the novel's composition and the genesis of its separate parts but with the final product, its meaning, and its effect on the reader. In particular we will ask ourselves how the entry of Balak, his doings and the things done to him, affect the design.

Balak, a stray mongrel, enters the novel as a major character in Book 2 during Yitzhak's first period in Jerusalem. Blaukopf had taught Yitzhak to paint signs. Bothered one day whilst at work by the friendly attentions of Balak, he had in a mood of frivolity painted the words "mad dog" on the dog's back (275–6). It was a whimsical, freakish and thoughtless action. Yitzhak thinks no more about it but for Balak it marks a disastrous change in his way of life. He is shunned and persecuted. Feared as a mad

dog, he is now hunted down by everyone who can read the words inscribed on his back. He seeks refuge in the non-Jewish neighborhoods where he finds himself less frequently molested, the reason being of course that the people there are unable to read the writing. In a word he is in exile. Grotesquely, his meditations, his wanderings, his sufferings, even his dreams (281, 571), become the subject of long stretches of narrative. Likewise his thoughts about human beings, about Jews, even his reflections on Jewish law, including the regulation allowing a dog to be fed with non-kosher meat. Balak prefers the Jewish setting; he pines for the Meah Shearim quarter where he enjoys listening to the discourses of Rabbi Gronam Yekum Purkan.

The baroque fantasies relating to Balak and his fate are wildly funny but nevertheless they are the key to the tragic denouement. After many weeks of reflection, Balak comes to the conclusion that his unique fate is somehow connected with the signs that the man with the paintbrush had painted on him. And he determines to take his revenge. As the weeks go by his condition deteriorates, he suffers hunger, thirst and disease until finally he does become actually deranged. His opportunity comes a week after Yitzhak's marriage to Shifra. Balak creates an uproar in Meah Shearim by appearing in the middle of one of Rabbi Gronam's open-air discourses just as he has announced – quoting a talmudic saying – that the face of the generation is the face of a dog (586). All the assembly flees in terror at the sight of Balak. The only one who isn't afraid is Yitzhak who now remembers that he was the author of the words on Balak's back and so he assures everyone that the dog is not really mad at all. However, he is wrong and as he stands fearlessly by his side, Balak, seeking out the final truth about himself from the flesh of the author of his troubles, turns and bites his leg and hand (595). After a few days Yitzhak becomes mortally ill. He dies in agony, bound down to his bed on the advice of a doctor called in by the community and left in isolation so that he should not be able to infect other people.

The figure of Balak has attracted more attention from the critics than anything else in the book. And understandably so, for he has a portentous symbolic weight and demands interpretation. But there is also a striking tonal contrast between this tragicomic fantasy and the realism of the rest. Agnon is clearly making a major statement through the figure of Balak. It is a bit like the cat in Bulgakov's, *The Master and Margarita*. But Agnon is both

more realistic and more inventive than Bulgakov. At the same time he deliberately covers his tracks, teasing those interpreters who might be inclined to propose allegorical readings of one kind or another. For instance, he tells us that rumors about the dog with the inscription on his fur had reached Tel-Aviv and were being treated there as political allegory, or as a satire on some local person or persons, or as a jocular beast fable like Mendele's stories of the horse or medieval tales about foxes and birds! (459-60).

The author is in short poking fun at his learned readers who will try to fathom the meaning of the dog in this incredible shaggy-dog story. It is all a little unnerving for students of Agnon. Nevertheless, it has been attempted. It has been suggested for instance that Balak is a demonic parody of Yitzhak.¹⁵ The trouble with this notion is that Balak is not particularly demonic. He is rather a likeable dog with a warm heart and a capacity for patient long-suffering. We feel sympathy for him in his undeserved troubles. If he becomes mad and drives others mad, it is through no fault of his own.

What Agnon's Israeli critics seem to have missed is the utterly comic nature of the Balak episode. The critics are on the whole terribly solemn about something that is terribly funny. They are looking for an interpretation which might support a unified epic reading of this great novel, but what the Balak chapters do is basically to undermine, or as we might nowadays say, deconstruct all epic meanings whatever. Jews take history very seriously and Agnon is entirely Jewish in this respect. The story of the great historical reawakening which brought the first modern type settlers to Jaffa at the beginning of the century will be told, but it will also be turned upside-down to become the story of a man and a dog. Balak is Yitzhak's "secret sharer" in that they share the same kind of trouble. There is we may say a measure of transference between the two. But it is comic transference like Molly Seagrim's "Homeric" battle in the churchyard in *Tom Jones*. The novel had from its beginnings been the vehicle of the epic but it had also, from Cervantes and Fielding onwards, been the vehicle of the mock-epic. Agnon, by placing the story of Balak side by side with that of Yitzhak, is providing the scherzo movement for his symphony, transforming it briefly and at intervals into what Fielding called a "comic Epic-Poem in Prose." It is a reductive technique, serving to proclaim the vanity and absurdity of our

highest endeavors as well as of the literary forms in which those same endeavors are celebrated. In the Bible this attitude is represented by Qohelet. He tells us, very much in the spirit of Falstaff, that it is better to be a living dog than a dead lion and later, after recounting the tale of a poor man who through his wisdom had saved a whole city from destruction, drily remarks that "no-one remembered that same poor man" (Eccles. 9:15). The general conclusion: all is vanity, even the greatest of epic achievements.

Here we may say is the non-heroic reading of history, as seen through the wrong end of the telescope, a "dog's-eye view" of human exploits and a dog's-eye view of the great fables in which those exploits are immortalized. Agnon does not demolish the Zionist myth. Quite the contrary. But he puts it in perspective. The midrash does the same in reference to the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife. It sees him as nearly-but-not-quite capitulating to her charms. But we need not look beyond the text of the Bible itself for a non-heroic realigning of some of its most notable passages. In the continuation of the very same chapter in which Abraham receives and carries out the great command to leave his birthplace and go up to the new land "which I will show thee," we see him running away from that new land to Egypt on account of the famine and there somewhat ingloriously passing off his wife as his sister so as to escape death, whilst Sarai is seized for the harem of the local chieftain. We could argue that the introduction of Balak provides a reductive angle of vision not entirely foreign to the Bible itself.

Many have felt that there is something Kafkaesque about Balak. Hillel Barzel has suggested that Agnon was thinking of Kafka's *The Trial*. Joseph K. dies at the end, we are told, "like a dog."¹⁶ Agnon may very well have had this episode in mind. A more suggestive parallel is with Kafka's shorter work "Investigations of a Dog."¹⁷ Kafka is more allegorical, Agnon more realistic. But there is, it seems to me, a real similarity nevertheless. Like Balak, Kafka's dog, the first-person narrator in this strange fiction, is also in search of the truth about his existence and has philosophical reflections. Agnon's Balak is funnier and we seem to know him better as a fellow creature but, like Kafka's dog, he also carries out "investigations." He seeks an answer to the riddle of why he is hated (290) and will not rest until he discovers the truth. His sufferings, like those of Kafka's dog, do not deter him from his search (291). Why are the Jews suddenly his enemies and the

Arabs his friends (283)? He carries out a kind of scientific inquiry and when he gets results, he has, like Kafka's dog, the pride of a successful inquirer (588).

I would want to add that both dog fables have a similar metaphysical meaning. In Kafka's fable, the dogs do not see the human beings who give them food. They tend to think in terms of a divine agency. The scientifically-minded dog who is the subject of his story tries to find a more rational and empirically-based explanation for the phenomenon of the canine food supply, rejecting more traditional "religious" views. But his experiments actually endanger his life, for in seeking to disprove the existence of an outside agency who needs to be propitiated, he practices various forms of self-repression, such as refusing to paw the ground and to put his face up appealingly into the air. He waits to see if these changes in behavior will affect the food supply, and of course they do. He goes hungry and thirsty as a result. In short the key to Kafka's story is the equation which says: dog is to man as man is to God. The dog's existence is governed by certain conditions imposed on him by the will of an arbitrary deity (= Man).

The Balak story in Agnon works in a similar fashion. Eliezer Schweid suggested the parallel some 40 years ago, remarking that, like Balak, Yitzhak Kummer is also the object of a kind of practical joke perpetrated on him by a blind deity.¹⁸ I should like to go further and suggest that Balak is to Yitzhak as the Jewish People as a whole are to the God of Israel who has sent them off on their journey through history. It was told them in connection with both the first and the last trials of Abraham that they would become a blessing to all the nations of the earth. In light of the disaster that overtook the Jewries of Europe in the mid-century, this promise does begin to look very much like a divine practical joke! Remember what Yitzhak does: he writes words on Balak's flesh and then sends him off with a kick so that he might wander round the city streets and thus publish his handiwork (276). Here it would seem is a bitter-comic reduction of the notion of the election of Israel for special trials, ordeals, and blessings. The God of Israel too had imposed on the people of Israel the burden of a written text. It was even, as a matter of fact, imprinted on their flesh! That indeed is how the prayer-book phrases it: it speaks of "the covenant which thou hast stamped on our flesh."¹⁹ The election of Israel as related in the Bible comes to seem like a

whimsical and inexplicable act. "How odd/ of God/ To choose/ the Jews" wrote William Ewer. He said it as a quip; Agnon in the story of Balak says the same out of pain and bitterness.

We noted earlier that in his short story "According to the Pain is the Reward" Agnon gave us an upward transcendence of the biblical paradigm. The Akedah is taken up into heaven. Here, arising out of the same historical crisis, we have instead a "downward transcendence." Again, the middle ground of the human has been lost and in its place we have a "dog's-eye view" of the covenant, its promises and trials, a kind of parody, or photographic negative of the ways of God to Man as presented in the Genesis narratives. The introduction of Balak thus provides, by way of inversion, a key to what might be termed the divine plot of Agnon's epic. This is done by means of a series of alternating and interlocking chapters in which we move from Yitzhak's world to that of Balak and then back again. Thus as well as being a tale of two cities, Agnon's novel is an account of the ways of God to Man seen from opposite directions, Balak's adventures in relation to the human world above him providing a dark simulacrum of Yitzhak's own situation and his relation to the metaphysical order. To be the object of God's special attention is to be, like Balak in Jerusalem, liable to mania. Far from being a blessing to the families of the earth, one becomes a disaster to oneself and to everyone around.

5

This would seem to be not very different from the conclusion that A.B. Yehoshua was to reach later on and which he would seek to demonstrate in *Mr Mani* where the family is driven to madness by the demons of the past, the central feature of which being the evil influence of the "Akedah" myth. But in fact the existential premises of the two writers are essentially different. The ironic shading provided by the Balak story by no means signifies for Agnon a denial of the fundamental ideology represented by the twin trials of Abraham. He remains committed to this ideology and bears testimony to it through the very structure of his masterpiece. Yehoshua seemingly dismisses the metaphysic of election, and explicitly, the divine ground of Israel's existence. At least he tries to do so. As a result he is left with the problem

of explaining the sense of inescapable responsibility with which his characters are charged as well as the intensity with which his own imagination seizes on the Akedah and other signs of Jewish particularity. There is in Yehoshua no escape from this *aporia*.

It is true that Agnon and his characters are similarly seized by unwanted responsibilities, by unanswerable questions. But the novel itself gives us a kind of explanation: it is because they are text-haunted, still carrying a legend on their backs, that they draw on themselves suspicion, insults, sticks, and stones. If they take revenge, as Balak does, they have the world against them. What to Yehoshua are unresolvable contradictions are for Agnon paradoxes to be explored by means of a special kind of analogical discourse, a more intense hermeneutic effort, a more attentive listening both to the prime text itself and to the accumulated literature of interpretation and retelling to which it has been subjected.

Thus the two trials of Abraham, so dramatically realized in our time come together as a metaphysical paradox to be understood as we saw with the help of the midrash quoted earlier. In spite of the appalling distance between these two occasions, the midrash finds strange affinities, an arcane echoing. They have in common a deferring of aims and conclusions. It is in one case "the Land which I will show thee," and in the other case it is "the mountain that I will tell thee of." Not all our questions are going to be answered, and those that are will not be answered at once.

Above all the language of the two trials, each with a hidden objective to be revealed only when the trial is under way, each built on a catalogue which stresses the increasing difficulty of the enterprise, is the language of testing. The two trials of Abraham are not merely stories to be imitated but tests to be endured. This sense of a situation in which we are tested in new ways is clearly articulated in a comment made by the narrator towards the end of the novel. Yitzhak is lying mortally ill and his pious friends have exhausted all the verses of Psalms and all other modes of intercession customary in such cases, but to no avail "because the decree had already been sealed" (604). Agnon ends this chapter with a question as old as the book of Job and as old as the story of the Akedah. But though it is posed anew in every generation, it has never been so persistently and so terribly forced upon us as in our own time:

And now, good friends, when we contemplate the things that have befallen Yitzhak, we are struck with trembling and amazement. Yitzhak who was no worse than the rest of mankind, why was he so terribly punished? . . . It is easy for those who, on account of excessive simplicity or excessive wisdom, do not trouble themselves much with such thoughts. But for one who is neither overly simple nor overly wise, what answer can he give and what can he say?

(604)

This is somewhat in the spirit of Job's great closing speech:

But where shall wisdom be found? and where is the place of understanding? Man cannot know its price; nor is it found in the land of the living. The depth says, It is not in me: and the sea says, It is not with me.

(Job 28:12-14)

There is a point where we reach the limits alike of art and wisdom. We are unable to find all the answers. But even here there is the hint of a vision deferred, of answers still to be disclosed in the long perspective of future time. Job will receive an answer of sorts out of the storm. And of Abraham it is said that "on the third day he saw the place from afar" (Genesis 22:4). The test is to remain faithful to the promise deferred, the destination still to be disclosed. In that way "the place of understanding" may yet be glimpsed.

15. See A.B. Yehoshua, *On Behalf of Normality* (in Hebrew) – official English title: "Between Right and Right" (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1980), pp.16, 21 and *passim*
16. This episode (like everything else in the novel) is undoubtedly symbolic. Shalev (in Ben-Dov, p.413) sees it as the rejection of the false, alien versions of the myth and as marking the point at which the biblical version with its redemptive ending is affirmed. In a seminar which I gave at Yale in 1991, one participant, Meira Levinson, proposed the opposite interpretation. The old books with their hard words and their traditional tunes are the scriptural legends (specifically the Akedah) imposed on us and against which the narrator and his audience are – at one level – rebelling. I incline more to this view.
17. Examples of the sacrifice carried out are legion, typically in Wilfred Owen's war poem, "Parable of the Old Man and the Young" and in many Israeli fictions inspired by similar sentiments, e.g. Amos Oz's "The Way of the Wind" (1965). It often seems as though the paradigm of the murderous father who actually destroys his fair offspring has been adopted in Israeli literature as an (unconscious) importation from European writings where it came to answer needs and express impulses – for instance anti-Puritan impulses – which originated in non-Jewish societies.
18. See Shalev in Ben-Dov, p.411.
19. *Midrash Haggadol*, on Genesis 22:19. (Edition of M. Margulies [Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1975], p.360)
20. *A Remembered Future*, p.87
21. Cf. Hyam Maccoby, *The Sacred Executioner: Human Sacrifice and the Legacy of Guilt* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982), pp.88–9
22. Shalev sees the Passion narrative as well as the Passion play as a strong shaping influence in this story (see Ben-Dov, pp.427–8)
23. "Early in the Summer of 1970," trans. Miriam Arad (New York: Doubleday, 1977), p.43. (Page numbers hereafter in parentheses in the text)
24. See Ben-Dov, pp.419–26 and see note 22 above
25. Section 18 in the Hebrew text; in the English translation the subsections are not numbered.
26. Cf. Shalev in Ben-Dov, p.429
27. Published in the collection *Debits and Credits* (1926)
28. Abraham B. Yehoshua, *Mr. Mani* (in Hebrew) (Tel-Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1990). Quotations (hereinafter in parentheses in the text) are from the English translation by Hillel Halkin (London: Phoenix Books, 1994), first published by Doubleday, New York, 1992
29. In Ben-Dov, pp.339–47
30. And just that there should be no mistake, the use of the verb *la-akod* in the original Hebrew text at p.341 drives the point home.
31. In Ben-Dov, pp.395–6
32. Ben-Dov, Introduction, p.36
33. Shalev, *ibid.*, p.435
34. *Ibid.*, p.436
35. Yehoshua, *ibid.*, p.396

CHAPTER 10

1. From *Sefer Hamaasim* ("The Book of Fables") in S.Y. Agnon's *Collected Fiction* (in Hebrew) (Tel-Aviv: Schocken, 1953), vol.VI, p.189. This is the standard edition of Agnon's writings, to be referred to hereafter as CF. To the seven volumes of this edition an eighth ("The Wood and the Fire") was added in his lifetime (see below, page 195.) Subsequent page references, given in parentheses in the text, are to this edition. A translation of this story by Anne Golomb Hoffman is included in S.Y. Agnon, *A Book That Was and Other Stories*, eds. Alan Mintz and Anne Golomb Hoffman (New York: Schocken Books, 1995). This and all other citations from Agnon in this chapter are, however, translated by H.F.
2. CF, vol. IV. An English translation by Misha Louvish appeared in 1968.
3. Page numbers given in parentheses in the text down to the end of this section (section 1) refer to this volume, i.e. CF vol.VIII.
4. B. Kurzweil, *Massot al Sippure S.Y. Agnon* ("Essays on Agnon's Fiction"), (in Hebrew), 3rd rev. edn (Tel-Aviv: Schocken, 1970), pp.316–19
5. The novel appears as CF vol.V. Page numbers in parentheses in the text from this point on refer to this volume.
6. Arnold J. Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare: A Study in the Fiction of S.Y. Agnon* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), pp.414–15. Kurzweil pointed to the fundamentally epic character of Agnon's major writings in a highly influential essay which appeared in 1952 (reprinted in his *Essays on Agnon's Fiction*, pp.9–17) and he returns to this categorization in discussions of this novel. His position has generally been echoed by later critics, though definitions of "epic" have generally been lacking. I would wish to argue that as well as the epic, *Temol Shilshom* also gives us in the Balak chapters a powerful demonstration of the mock-epic. (On this aspect see below, p.210).
7. This is meant of the final design and composition only. Individual stories and parts of stories, later to be embodied in the novel, began to appear in journals and collections in the 1930s and earlier. Sarah Hager counts ten such prior publications and that, without counting the unpublished archival material which likewise belongs to an earlier period than the final version. (S. Hager, "The Day Before Yesterday: Evolving Structure and Unity" [in Hebrew], in *Shai Agnon: Researches and Documents*, eds. G. Shaked and R. Weiser [Mosad Bialik: Jerusalem, 1978], pp.154–93. And see below, note 11)
8. A.J. Band, "Crime and Punishment in *Temol Shilshom*," (in Hebrew), *Molad* 211 (May–June, 1967), 75–81
9. *Idem*, "Isaac Rebound: The Akedah Motif in Two Modern Jewish Writers," *The Nahum N. Glatzer Lecture in Judaism and the Humanities* (Boston University, 1988), pp.1–12
10. E.g. Gershon Shaked, *Hebrew Narrative Fiction, 1880–1980* (in Hebrew), vol.2 (Tel-Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad and Keter, 1983), p.207; Hillel Barzel, *Agnon and Kafka: A Comparative Study* (in Hebrew), (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Urian, 1972), p.230; Michael Brown, art. cit., 108

11. Quoted by Hager, art. cit., pp.168-9
12. This opening sentence is a good example of the density of Agnon's biblical allusions. Apart from the echo of Genesis 12:1, there is also a subtler allusion infolded here in the phrase that I have translated by "our brethren of the Dispersion." The reference is to Ezekiel 11:15 where the exiles in Babylon, desiring to return to Jerusalem and finding difficulties in their path, are termed "thy brothers, the men of thy redemption" (*anshe geullatekha*). It is an odd expression. We would have expected rather *anshe galutkha* - i.e. "the men of thy exile." Here Agnon it would seem (and before him Ezekiel himself who was fond of such word-play) is punning ironically on the two like-sounding words with their opposite meanings. Are the exiles going to be redeemed or not? It is the question on which in a sense the whole plot of this novel will also turn.
13. *Yalkut Shimoni*, sect. 62; *Gen. Rabbah*, Chap. 39. Agnon had a near complete knowledge of the whole rabbinic corpus and his familiarity with this well-known text need not be doubted. This applies also to a great part of his readership, especially as the central portion of this midrash, that attributed to R. Yohanan, is cited in Rashi's standard commentary on Gen. 22:2.
14. See Hager, art. cit., pp.154-5 and Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare*, pp.415-20, 432-7
15. B. Kurzweil, op. cit., pp.104-14
16. H. Barzel, op. cit., p.228
17. In Franz Kafka, *The Great Wall of China*, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), pp.1-43. The link had been proposed by Shlomo Zernach (*The Two Doorposts* [in Hebrew] [Ramat-Gan: Massadah, 1965], p.131). Barzel discusses this parallel also (op. cit., pp.264-5) but tends to see essential differences between the function of the dog in Kafka and that of Balak.
18. Eli Shweid, "Kelev hutsot, veAdam" (in Hebrew), *Molad*, 120 (July, 1958), 381-8
19. Cf. "Grace After Meals" in *The Authorized Daily Prayer-Book of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Empire*, trans. S. Singer (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1957), p.280

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