

Richard McBee's Akedah Series: Reimagining and Reconfiguring Jewish Art

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Before considering the paintings of the Akedah, or the Binding of Isaac, by Richard McBee (b. 1947), some background information needs to be presented.¹ Literary historian Julian Levinson made an important point in his recent book, *Exiles on Main Street: Jewish American Writers and American Literary Culture*, when he noted that writers such as Gertrude Stein, Lillian Hellman, Arthur Miller, and Norman Mailer did not “evinced any particular inclination to return to Jewishness,” or to have much to say about “the ways in which Judaism and Jewishness have been reimagined and reconfigured.”² Levinson contrasts these authors with Emma Lazarus, Ludwig Lewisohn, Alfred Kazin, and Irving Howe, and others whose works embody such qualities. In other words, the fact that an author is Jewish does not mean that he or she has contributed anything to the development of Jewish American culture.

An analogous situation exists today with regard to contemporary Jewish American artists – in this instance, the stark distinction between those celebrated and those overlooked. Popular figures such as Roy Lichtenstein, Judy Chicago, and Lee Krasner are well known but it would be difficult – impossible with Lichtenstein and Krasner – to find in their work any interest in a reimagined or reconfigured Jewishness. However, within the last two decades there has been a proliferation of art devoted to

Jewish subject matter based on the Holocaust, Jewish feminism, and the ancient texts – the Bible, Talmud, midrashim, commentaries, and Kabbalah. Yet, though the artists who create this art have been largely ignored, they are the ones who are reimagining and reconfiguring Jewish American art.

Reasons for their lack of recognition are not hard to find. Too few persons in the general public, in the art world, and even in the Jewish art world, bother to look at contemporary Jewish American art. This myopia is perhaps due to the combined effects of a still evident abhorrence in the art world to anything parochial, the yearning among Jews to assimilate into mainstream culture, and an ever present desire to keep a low Jewish profile in a hostile world. Many major Jewish museums rarely exhibit Jewish art, particularly with explicitly Jewish subject matter. Critics and historians tend to avoid writing about it or even noticing it. Nevertheless, there are dozens of Jewish American artists with whom I have corresponded in the last twenty years who, while resigned to being ignored, still persist. These artists, with minimal support from patrons, museums, galleries, or the press, choose to create such art because of their own religious, spiritual, and personal commitments. As a result, I will state categorically that we are in the midst of a golden age of Jewish American art – and especially a golden age of religiously based art.³

1 Richard McBee prefers to spell the Binding of Isaac as “Akeidah,” although several paintings are entitled “Akeda.” I am deeply grateful to him for his many contributions to this essay with regard to style, form, and content. [*Ars Judaica* prefers the customary Akedah, except when different spellings appear in direct quotations, titles of published works, or names of works of art. Ed.]

2 Julian Levinson, *Exiles on Main Street: Jewish American Writers and American Literary Culture* (Bloomington, 2008), 4.

3 I have discussed the works of many contemporary artists in *Jewish-American Artists and the Holocaust* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1997); in the last five chapters of *American Artist, Jewish Images* (Syracuse, 2006); and in the last six chapters of *Jewish Art in America: An Introduction* (Lanham, MD, 2007), as well as in exhibition catalogue essays and journal articles, including “Spiritualism and Mysticism in Recent Jewish American Art,” *AJ* 2 (2006): 135–50. See also *Biblical Palimpsests: Narrative Cycles by Jewish American Artists* (in preparation).

We might ask: What has prompted artists to turn to Jewish themes in the last few decades? Answers are quite varied and it should be understood that there are no overarching models. No generalizations are possible because motivations are varied, entirely personal, and deeply felt, if not easily articulated. Concerning the artists directly, some grew up in traditional homes, others did not. Some said there are no logical explanations for their turn to Jewish subject matter. It just happened. Still others mention their need to identify themselves Jewish, to belong to a group, to develop their religious and spiritual interests, or to do something for *klal Yisrael*.

General factors in the wider Jewish world that might have affected these artists include the newly found pride in Judaism after the Six-Day War in 1967, the rise of feminism in the 1970s, the Jewish Renewal Movement in America in the 1980s which includes an interest in Kabbalah and various Eastern spiritual systems, the broad based *ba'al teshuvah* (the return of secular Jews to religious belief) movement, and the fact that there are no central rabbinical authorities or religious organizations that might inhibit artists from exploring their own values and interests through the ancient texts.

Jewish American artists who concentrate on secular or religious Jewish subject matter are blatantly challenging the insistent universalist intentions of previous generations of Jewish artists who desperately wanted to leave behind their Jewish heritage in order to join the mainstream.⁴ Many contemporary Jewish American artists no longer feel as if they must abandon their heritage and adopt the culture of their host country (in this instance, the United States) or to work in the latest popular styles. Nor must Jewish American artists contend with open anti-Semitism as in past decades (although it still exists), and as it still exists in parts of Europe. Rather, they now feel quite comfortable living as relatively assimilated Americans who also happily accept and want to examine quite openly Judaism and their Jewish heritage.

They also reject the determined secularism of most twentieth-century art. And further, because of their desire to communicate their inmost feelings and personal sense of authenticity, many artists repudiate post-modernist irony and rejection of values. In fact, they are part of a

broad, decentralized movement that is attempting to build a recognizable contemporary secular-religious Jewish American culture different from that of the earlier eastern European immigrant generations through an interest in *klezmer* music, attending *havuras* (groups for study, prayer, celebration, social action, etc.), studying the Bible, participating in Jewish cultural and Jewish studies programs, and visiting the destroyed European *shtetls* of their parents and grandparents while participating fully in American life. They also seem to agree with cultural historian Stephen Whitfield, who recently wrote: “There is simply no longer a serious way to being Jewish—and of living within Jewish culture—without Judaism,” and “Only religion can form the inspirational core of a viable and meaningful Jewish culture.”⁵ In short, there has been a major change in attitudes and interests by the current generations of Jewish American artists and it has been, so far, largely unrecorded.

Richard McBee, part of this younger wave of Jewish American artists who feel completely at home in America, chooses to follow Orthodox religious practices. His father was of mixed Irish and Native American ancestry and his mother was a secular German Jew. He did not become aware that he was a Jew until he was twenty years old and did not really act upon it until he approached his fortieth birthday. His depiction of biblical subject matter, initially viewed as a communal rather than a religious narrative, was the motivating force, he has said, that focused his attention on Judaism. In time, he became more interested in religious aspects of Judaism, developed a keen regard for the stories of the Patriarchs, and by the late 1980s became one of the most religiously observant among Jewish American artists. I note this biographical information to make the point that in the open American environment, he, like others, chooses to be Jewish and to paint Jewish subjects, but does not feel bound to a particular point of view or to explicate a text for itself but rather to explicate his own ideas through the text. Over the years, he has created at

4 See Baigell, *Jewish Art in America*, 96–97.

5 Stephen J. Whitfield, *In Search of American Jewish Culture* (Hanover, NH, 1999), 224–37.

least sixteen multi-paneled series of narrative paintings based on the lives of Queen Esther and King David, Ruth, Jacob, Joseph, Judah, and Tamar, among others, but his major effort has been to explore the relationships between Abraham, Isaac, and Sarah. Since the late 1970s, he has made over sixty paintings on the theme of the Akedah.

The Binding of Isaac is told succinctly in nineteen verses of Genesis 22. With no apparent explanation, God commands Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac, which he proceeds to prepare for until an angel tells him, at the last moment, to stop. God then promises Abraham that his descendants will be “as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sands on the seashore” (Gen. 22:17). Abraham then returns alone to Beersheba.

What is the meaning of this episode? To this day, it still generates books and articles laden with interpretations.⁶ The narrative occupies a unique place in Judaism; the text is included in every morning service and is featured both as the biblical reading of Rosh Hashanah and as one of the three central themes explicated in the Rosh Hashanah *Musaf* service.⁷ McBee, like others through the centuries, finds the story of the Akedah incomprehensible but gripping. In one of the earliest manifestations of recognizable monotheism, God and Abraham appear to be irascible, inscrutable, difficult, and arbitrary figures. Indeed in one of the several recorded conversations we have had since 2004, McBee has said:

I simply did not understand Abraham or God Himself. But I felt we had to come to terms with both of them. Isaac's passivity was plausible, but ultimately, troubling. And Sarah. Sarah we mourn. After working with this subject for close to thirty years, I still don't understand, but now I don't understand in a deeper more troubling way.

Or, rather, how do we connect the human drama to the biblical story? The big question for McBee is: “How can we live with a God who demands such a sacrifice?” His answer: “We go on living. We Jews have a rough relationship with God. We challenge God by engaging Him, not by abandoning Him. I do not see myself as a victim, but as a receiver of a gift with thorns on it.” The Akedah, for McBee, is a thoroughly complex and



Fig. 1. *Akeida*, 1982, oil on canvas, 70 x 90 in. All illustrations for this article are of works in the Richard McBee Collection, reproduced from photos supplied by the artist

disjunctive event with multiple, irresolvable points of view, a problematic encounter between God, Abraham, Isaac, and Sarah that perplexes him both as a believing Jew aware of biblical exegeses and as a modern individual aware of psychological interpretations and issues about family interrelationships. Remarkably, he has come to believe that the inscrutable nature of this narrative reflects the fundamentally inscrutable nature of God Himself.

McBee has explored various aspects and interpretations of the behavior of the principal characters of this biblical drama. One interesting observation of his, seen in *Akeida* (1982), created early in the series of paintings, is based on an understanding of the human mind before it became aware of itself, before self-consciousness, subjectivity, and free will became common (fig. 1). For example, Bruno

6 Some interpretations will be given below.

7 An additional prayer added on the Sabbath and the festivals.

Snell in *The Discovery of Mind* finds that Euripides' *Medea* marks the first time in literature that an individual is self-willed rather than performing at the insistence of the gods, that one's body – for example, one's legs – are moving not at the motivation of the gods but because of human agency and contingency.⁸ McBee was much taken by Julian Jaynes' *The Origin of Consciousness: The Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*, which posited a similar theory of the rise of self-consciousness. Jaynes held, for example, that there is no sense of self-consciousness or of free will in *The Iliad*. He calls this the action of the bicameral mind according to which an outside force controls an individual's activities. In the Bible, Jaynes suggests that the Book of Amos, dating to the 8th century BCE, is an example of the bicameral mind, whereas the author(s) of Ecclesiastes, which might date from the 2nd century BCE, reveals instead a subjective, reflective consciousness that is entirely post-bicameral.

Jaynes sees Abraham as having a bicameral mind and even goes so far as to say that Abraham hallucinates voices that direct his activities.⁹ In figure 1, McBee portrayed Abraham as a person towering over Isaac, unreachable, inhuman, unselfconscious, and monstrous, seemingly following the dictates of an interior motivation beyond his awareness and control, an example of the bicameral mind at work. He drops the knife not because he loves his son, but at the behest of the hallucinated voice of an angel. Isaac, on the other hand, in one of the few non-passive moments recorded by McBee, calls to his father as he touched him. To no avail. Isaac's is the cry that cannot be heard, the cry without sound. The tiles McBee added to this scene play a role in several paintings. Meant to indicate the presence of a rational pattern, they oftentimes appear to be on the verge of falling apart, thus indicating anything but rational patterns of behavior.

8 This is a major premise of Bruno Snell in his *The Discovery of Mind in Greek Philosophy and Literature* (New York, 1982).

9 Julian Jaynes, *The Origin of Consciousness: The Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (Boston, 1976), 69–99, 295, 304.

10 See, for example, Silvano Arieli, *Abraham and the Contemporary Mind* (New York, 1981), 156; Michael Brown, "Biblical Myth and Contemporary Experience: The Akedah in Modern Jewish Literature,"

McBee also found in Jaynes' book the interesting notion that dictators can manipulate the minds of modern populations into a passive, virtually hypnotized bicameral state and demand from them the performance of murderous activities. It was therefore an easy step for McBee to make a connection between the Binding of Isaac and the Holocaust. But the Holocaust has also been inserted into the story of Abraham and Isaac in another way – as, finally, completing the sacrifice of Isaac. Accordingly, Abraham has been instructed to sacrifice Isaac. Because of Abraham's limitless love of God, because of his willingness to sacrifice his son without counter argument, his action has come to represent misguided, unquestioned faith which, in modern times, was symbolized, it has been suggested (but not by McBee), as Jewish complicity in self-destruction during the Holocaust.¹⁰

Around 1980, McBee completed a group of paintings about the connections between the Binding and the Holocaust. In one of his most dramatic compositions that portrays Isaac as a Holocaust victim, McBee evoked Ezekiel's vision of the valley of the still lifeless dry bones (Ezek. 37:1–2) (fig. 2). Bodies lie everywhere. In the upper right, the macabre figure of Abraham looms over Isaac, representing both the bicameral mind at work as well as the conflict between generations. McBee also sees Isaac as a soul who, as reported in the midrash, died and was resurrected in contrast to the fate of the victims of the Holocaust.¹¹ In this regard, Isaac becomes a representative figure of those members of the pre- and post-Holocaust generations who have suffered and to whom uncounted, unaccountable, and uncontrollable things have happened.

Of the actual moments immediately before the Binding of Isaac itself takes place, one scholar observed that when Isaac asked Abraham where was the sheep for the burnt offering and Abraham responded that God would see to it, the subsequent passage, "and the two of

Judaism 31 (Winter 1982): 103, 105–11. See also Milly Heyd, "Isaac's Sacrifice in the Bible: Illustrations of Lilien and Pann," *Jewish Book Annual* 40 (1982/83): 60.

11 See for example, *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* [...], translated and annotated with introduction and indices by Gerald Friedlander (New York, 1970 [1st ed.: London, 1916]), 228.

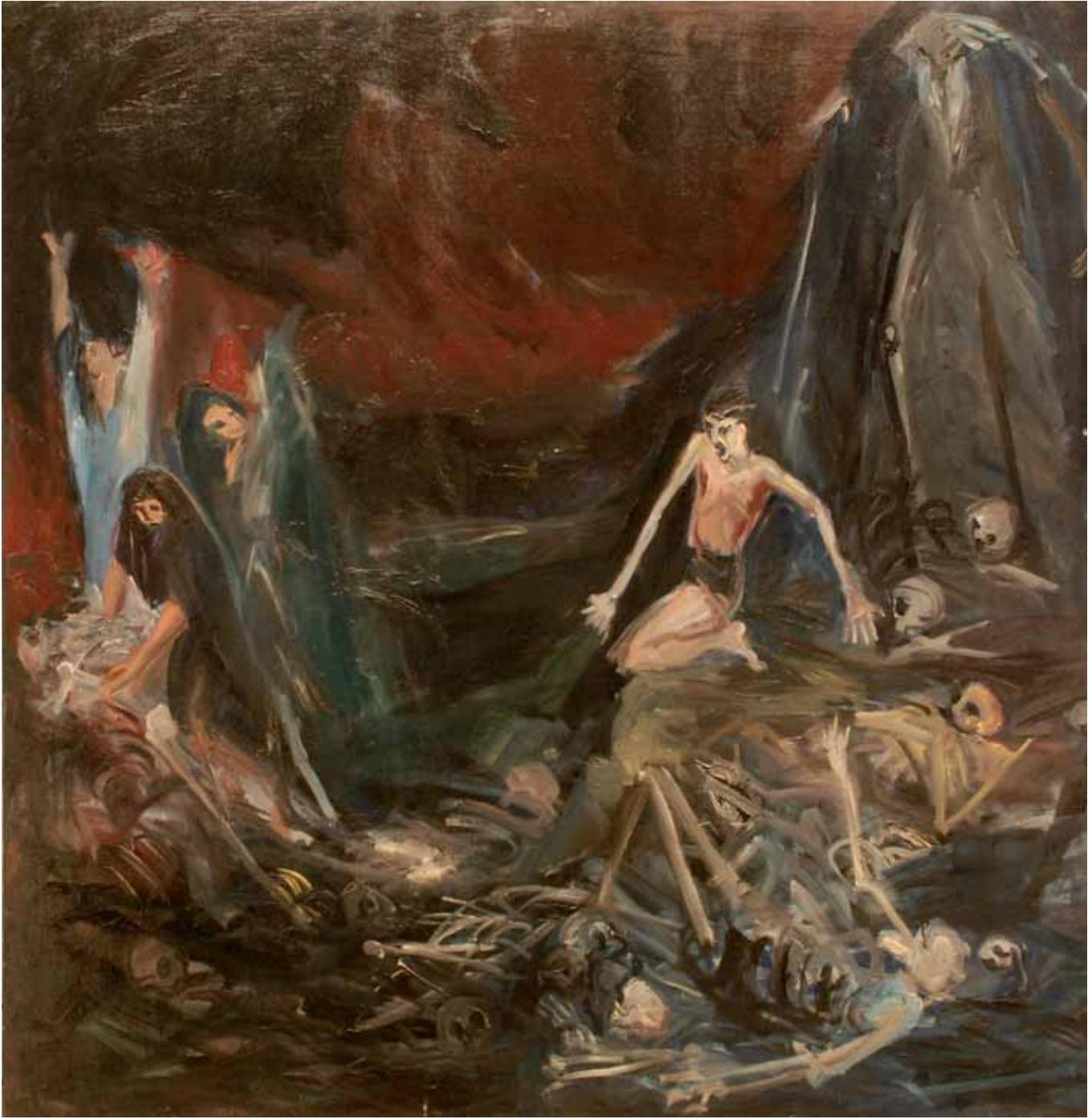


Fig. 2. *Abraham and Isaac*, 1980, oil on canvas, 68 x 68 in

them walked on together” (Gen. 22:8), was perhaps the most poignant and eloquent silence in all of literature.¹² But the scholar’s response depends upon how one views Abraham’s intentions. Perhaps Abraham looked forward

12 Genesis, trans. Ephraim A. Speiser (Garden City, NY, 1964), 164.

to the sacrifice because his only desire was to do God’s will and therefore, as the Rosh Hashanah *Musaf* prayer reminds God, “he suppressed his mercy to do Your will wholeheartedly [...] So may Your Mercy suppress Your anger from upon us.” Other scholars have explained the act differently. Some have commented that it was common

in the pagan world to kill a child to propitiate the gods or to assure success in battle, although Abraham was not leading an army at the time.¹³ Alternatively, Freudian analysis posits that Abraham possibly had a reverse oedipal problem and wanted to kill his son.¹⁴ But neither of these scenarios is found in McBee's work because he prefers to think of the Akedah as a paradigmatic Jewish story rather than a pietistic model of the blind, non-thinking behavior of a believer or a case study in pagan behavior or oedipal issues.

Other scholars have offered yet more explanations of the Binding.¹⁵ For example, Abraham might have been very troubled both by Isaac's question as well as by God's command. As the biblical text itself states: "God put Abraham to the test" (Gen. 22:1), that is, this was a test of faith, a test of religious duty. Was Abraham's faith strong enough? Was he willing to sacrifice his son as an act of obedience to God's will? In this regard, Abraham has been considered to be "the paradigm of a religious man who continues in his faith though that very faith has brought him to the most terrible of sacrifices." Even so, perhaps Abraham thought that God was testing him because He was still not certain about his (Abraham's) reliability? In yet another explanation, Abraham, in turn, might have wanted to test Isaac's loyalty because Abraham had earlier abandoned his own father. In addition, the episode has also been understood within traditional Judaism as the readiness to sacrifice, but not about the actual Sacrifice itself. Finally, perhaps the entire episode symbolizes Isaac's death as Abraham's biological son in order to become his successor chosen by God. The Binding is, therefore, a prefiguration of Israel's election under Moses in that Isaac's faith is a precondition of the Covenant that leads to the theophany on Mt. Sinai.

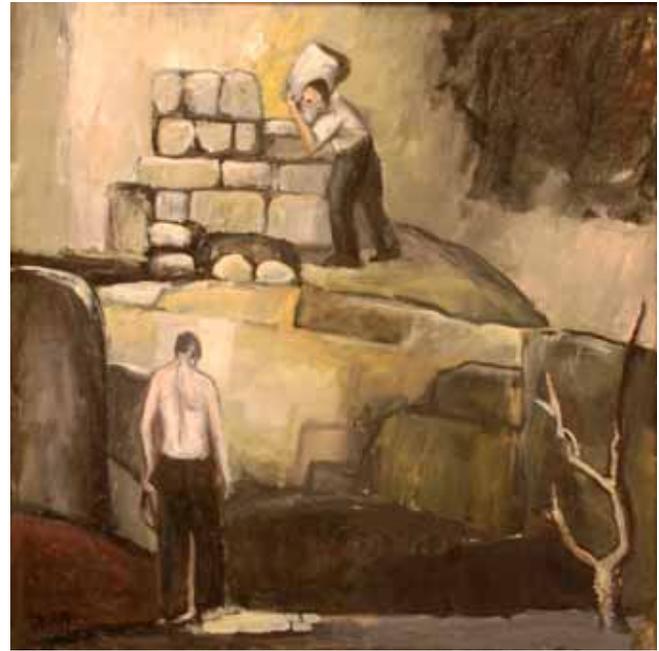


Fig. 3. *Building*, 1994, oil on canvas, 36 x 36 in

The point of all of this is that there are as many interpretations of Abraham's motivations and God's intentions as there are people who have written about the event. And the options for an artist are endless. McBee, obviously well acquainted with the modern literature about the Binding, prefers to study and reread the biblical text itself and to rely on the creative stimulation of various midrashim and commentaries about Abraham, Isaac, and Sarah that have accrued over the centuries, many of which are recorded in Louis Ginzberg's monumental *The Legends of the Jews*.¹⁶

McBee often returns to Isaac's character, examines his various responses, and usually presents him as passive. In Genesis, for example, Isaac questions only the lack of sheep for a burnt offering (verse 7). In the commentaries,

13 Omri Boehm, *The Binding of Isaac: A Religious Model of Disobedience* (New York, 2007), 17.

14 Erich Wellisch, *Isaac and Oedipus: A Study in Biblical Psychology of the Sacrifice of Isaac, the Akedah* (London, 2000 [1954]), 9–24, 74–77.

15 Aharon Agies, *The Binding of Isaac and Messiah: Law, Martyrdom and Deliverance in Early Rabbinic Religiosity* (Albany, 1988), 30. See also Chaim Navon, *Genesis and Jewish Thought* (Jersey City, 2008); Henry Hanoh Abramovitch, *The First Father, Abraham: The Psychology and Culture of a Spiritual Revolution* (Lanham, MD, 1994), 3, 123; Tammi

J. Schneider, *Sarah: Mother of Nations* (New York, 2004), 105; Jo Milgrom, *The Binding of Isaac: The Akedah—A Primary Symbol of Jewish Thought and Art* (Berkeley, 1988), 2, 24; Boehm, *The Binding of Isaac*, 12–19. I should add here the famous interpretations of Erich Auerbach in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, 1953 [1st ed. 1946]), 8–11 and of Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Alastair Hannay (New York, 1985 [1st ed. 1843]).

16 Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, 7 vols. (Philadelphia, 1909–38).



Fig. 4. *Akeida*, 1987, sculptamold, 48 x 48 in

Abraham tells Isaac that he (Isaac) is the offering. Isaac gladly consents because he understands that it is God's will. Isaac then helps his father build the sacrificial altar and asks Abraham to bind him securely so that he would not become blemished and therefore unfit for sacrifice if he moved (fig. 3).¹⁷ In this building scene, McBee makes the point of showing both men cooperating with each other by dressing both in modern clothing – as if they were constructing something in their backyard. It is virtually a

17 Ginzberg, *Legends*, 1:279, 280.

domestic scene of family collaboration until one notices that they are on different planes in the shallow pictorial space, separated by a chasm which represents the divide between the slaughterer and the victim.

Then, in a relief sculpture, a medium rarely used by McBee, he shows the sacrifice scene itself (fig. 4). In this work, which includes elements from the frescoes surrounding the Torah niche in the famous synagogue at Dura Europos (244–56 CE) synagogue, McBee has included a ram in the lower right which looks imploringly at Abraham, still preoccupied with Isaac on the altar. In



Fig. 5. *Sacrifice*, 2003, oil on canvas and collage, 20 x 24 in

the upper right, Sarah, who, although not mentioned in the biblical text, watches with great interest the scene unfolding before her.¹⁸ According to a midrash, if Abraham had seen the ram before raising his knife to Isaac, he might have placed it rather than Isaac on the altar. Isaac would then have avoided the trauma of his near murder. But the ram, hidden by Satan in a bush, was unable to run to and reveal itself to Abraham.¹⁹

18 See Kurt Weitzman and Herbert L. Kessler, *The Frescoes of the Dura Synagogue and Christian Art* (Washington, DC, 1990), pls. 3 and 193.

19 Ginzberg, *Legends*, 1:282; see also *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*, 228.

What were the consequences of Isaac's terrible experience? McBee, in a variety of works of his own invention, imagines Isaac's immediate reaction as a person, as the son of a murderous father, and as a more distant figure described in various ancient commentaries. In one of his strongest paintings, *Sacrifice*, part of a mini-series of four that include collaged words, McBee placed the altar to the left. In the center is a jumble of brush strokes, and Isaac crouches in the lower right, his arms and ankles still bound, as if he has just tumbled to the ground (fig. 5). The central portion symbolizes the tumultuous emotions raging in Isaac's mind immediately after being set free.



Fig. 6. *Sand and Stars*, 2003. oil on canvas and collage, 20 x 24 in

The questions McBee raises are these: given Isaac's near-death experience, will he ever be able to regain his mental equilibrium and will he ever lead a normal life? We will never know the answers.

But what of Isaac's whereabouts after his near death? Where does he go and what does he do? The commentaries, both ancient and modern, offer many suggestions. He lagged behind Abraham, was sent home at night, or went to study Torah for three years. Or perhaps he died and was brought back to life immediately after leaving the altar or perhaps he visited instead the Garden of Eden for a number of years. In short, he either survived his ordeal

but did not physically return to Beersheba with Abraham, or he died and was miraculously resurrected.²⁰ Isaac only reappears in the biblical text 92 lines later when he finally meets his bride, Rebecca.

Among McBee's responses to these possibilities, two works from the 2003 series stand out. One shows Isaac lying on the ground, presumably dead (fig. 6). The painting gains power as the viewer contemplates the reasons for Isaac's temporary demise and by the bright color in the

²⁰ See, for example, Sholom Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, trans. Judah Goldin (Philadelphia, 1967), 3–6; Ginzberg, *Legends*, 1:281–82, 286.



Fig. 7. *Ghost*, 2003. oil on canvas and collage, 20 x 24 in

upper left indicating Divine Presence. This work, by the inference that someone actually died, also leads the viewer to thoughts about Sarah's place in and knowledge of the Binding (discussed below). In another painting, McBee, in one of his most poignant inventions, shows Abraham reaching out to the unreachable, ghost-like soul of Isaac, the son he has lost perhaps forever (fig. 7). According to the Bible, they never speak to each other again after the sacrifice scene.

In another group of paintings, McBee explores the possible responses of Isaac to his father. Will they be able to communicate with each other as before or be

permanently estranged (fig. 8)? McBee thinks the latter is the more likely answer. In the work entitled *After*, here illustrated, Abraham, in ancient garb, reaches out to Isaac dressed in modern clothing. No longer reflecting the lack of internal motivation of the bicameral mind, Abraham's facial expression seems to show remorse as well as a desire to apologize and to explain his actions. He is fully human here. But Isaac pulls away. Even in profile, we see fear and incomprehension still expressed in his face. The space between the two suggests both unbridgeable generational differences between a father and a son as well as the more obvious lack of trust Isaac must have felt for his father.



Fig. 8. *After*, 1994, oil on canvas, 68 x 84 in



Fig. 9. *Abraham Abraham*, 2003, oil on canvas, 20 x 24 in

Abraham, as indicated in Genesis 22:19, then returns to Beersheba without Isaac (fig. 9).

Although Sarah's connection to the Binding is not mentioned in Genesis 22 or in Genesis 23 (concerned with her death), McBee has made many paintings based on various midrashim concerning her knowledge of and responses to Isaac's fate. In a painting based on a panel in the Torah niche in the synagogue at Dura Europos, McBee indicates Sarah's physical proximity to the scene.²¹ Just as in the image in the ancient synagogue, we see Abraham's

²¹ For Dura Europos, see Weitzmann and Kessler, *Frescoes*, pls. 3 and 193.



Fig. 10. *Isaac, Abraham, Sarah*, 2002, oil on canvas, 8 x 84 in

back, Isaac lying on the altar, and a diminutive Sarah standing in a tent in the upper right (fig. 10). Heightened by the stark abstraction of space, the viewer's inability to predict Abraham's next move, and the portentous absence of the ram, the painting is charged with terrifying implications. Suddenly God's test now concerns the whole family. What will Abraham do? What is his relation to his wife, to his son? How long can Sarah remain at a physical and emotional distance? How long can she endure the knowledge of what her husband almost did to her only son? Will the family reconstitute itself? A work such as this clearly reflects McBee's thought mentioned at the beginning of this essay about his confusion years ago and now his confusion at a deeper level in that we will probably never be able to make sense of the entire episode.

In the midrashim, we learn that Abraham told Sarah that he was taking Isaac to study and to learn the ways of God, a boldfaced lie. Sarah asked Abraham not to keep Isaac away for long. On parting, she said that she might never see Isaac again. And then in a variety of scenarios, Sarah is said to have died when Abraham returned alone, when she was told that Isaac had been murdered, and when Isaac returned home – the first two from the presumed tragedy, the last from incomprehensible shock



Fig. 11. *Sarah's Fear after Ardon*, 2006, oil on canvas, 24 x 18 in

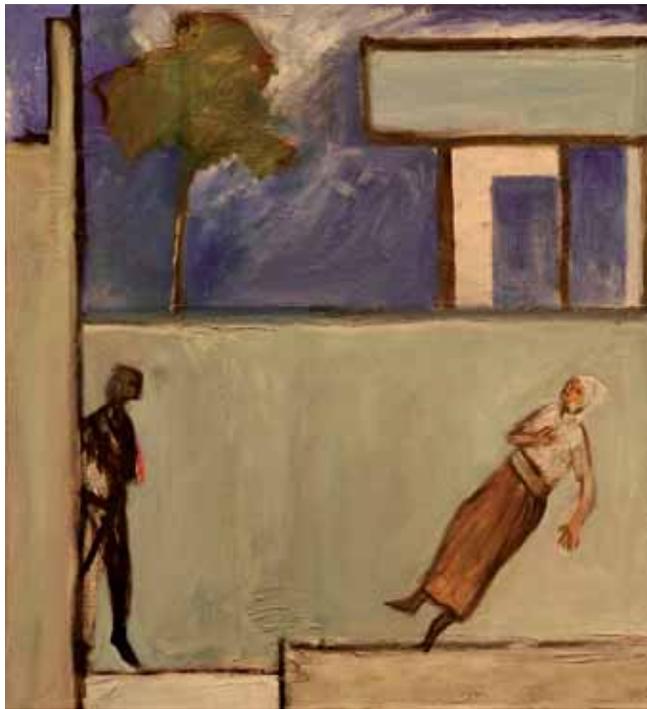


Fig. 12. *Isaac Returns*, 2007, oil on canvas, 18 x 18 in

and joy.²² Sarah, a figure who has fascinated McBee in recent years, is seen here in two paintings, *Sarah's Fear after Ardon* (2006) in which she sees the body of Isaac (fig. 11) and in *Isaac Returns* (fig. 12). As examples of McBee's open-ended desire to understand the Binding in all possible ways, one painting is highly emotional, the other understated, but equally powerful. The former is a representation of a personal encounter with the corpse of her dead son. The graphic starkness of the latter (it is in a new 16-part series exploring the trials of Sarah) might be interpreted in more strictly religious terms. Sarah dies from what has been called "radical doubt [...], an attack of vertigo," which means the existential senselessness of life that ultimately undermines everything she thought she understood about God's promise and Abraham's marital love.²³ The former painting, then, connotes loss, the latter suggests the collapse of faith.

In 2006, McBee introduced the figure of the Angel of Death, a personification of God's test of Abraham, into his continuous search for meaning in the Akedah. Traditionally, when it is time for a person to die, God dispatches the Angel of Death to collect his or her soul. McBee reasoned that if God was serious about Abraham's test, the Angel must have been on his way to collect the soul of Isaac, but was then deflected from his mission when Abraham was instructed to release his son. McBee has often thought about this sequence of events when contemplating where in the daily morning service (Shaharit) the two *Shemas* are recited.²⁴ The first *Shema*, the archetypal statement of belief in the indivisible God, occurs following the recitation of the Akedah after the morning blessings. McBee has called this the *Shema of Fear* because of its proximity to the story of the Akedah. The second recitation of the *Shema* is said right before the 'Amidah, or the Eighteen Blessings, the penitential prayer, and occurs immediately after a section about God's

22 Ginzberg, *Legends*, 1:274–86; 5:256. Versions of Sarah's demise are also mentioned in several books previously noted.

23 Avivah Zornberg, *Genesis: The Beginning of Desire* (Philadelphia, 1995), 128. See also Shera Aranoff Tuchman and Sandra E. Rapoport, *The Passions of the Matriarchs* (New York, 2004), 73–77.

24 *Shema*, the first word of the prayer "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One."

abundant love. McBee labels this *Shema* the *Shema of Love* because of the nature of the immediately preceding paragraphs. Joining together the two *Shemas* in this way prompted McBee to approach the puzzle of the Binding in yet another way: that, despite the actions of God, belief is still possible, necessary, and redemptive.²⁵ McBee feels that even after the terror described in the Akedah, the same God loves, is merciful, teaches us, and ultimately brings us into our land.

The most developed work in this particular group of paintings is a large diptych, entitled *Urban Akedah* (fig. 13). On the left, the Angel of Death, the black angel, approaches Abraham as he is about to slaughter Isaac, but hesitates and instead stares at the viewer as the angel calls out to Abraham to desist. Simultaneously, the viewer is also invited to call out to the Angel of Death to quit the scene. In the right-hand panel, the Angel of Death, now commanded by God to spare Isaac, abandons the still-living but shattered Isaac and heads for Sarah in an adjacent building whom we see recoiling from the scene before her. For McBee, this image begins to explain the terrible logic of Sarah's death, the only person who dies as a result of the Binding. The Angel of Death had to take somebody. But this obviously leads to additional questions and their multiple answers built around the key question: why did God allow Sarah to die? McBee's meditations here will undoubtedly lead to many more paintings in the years to come.

In short, one mini-series within the larger series provokes another mini-series and so on. New insights lead to further insights. One plausible explanation leads to another. The end is never to be reached. McBee and I agree that the current American environment especially lends itself to projects such as this one. (This is not to say that artists in other countries cannot do likewise.) McBee considers himself to be religiously orthodox, but he is unafraid to approach the material in an unorthodox way, even as an outsider looking in at the seemingly strange behavior of the key players. In the open American atmosphere, he seeks out and creates

²⁵ *The Complete Art Scroll Siddur*, eds. Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz (New York, 1984), 23–29, 89–91.

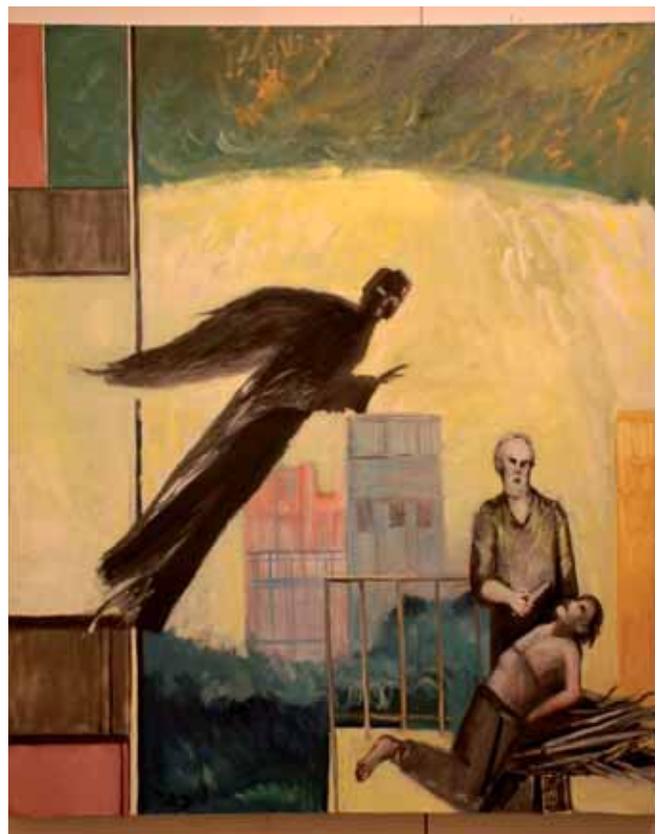


Fig. 13. *Urban Akedah*, oil on canvas, each panel 60 x 72 in

of human self-consciousness. His sense of inquiry knows no limits. In this regard, McBee becomes a paradigmatic contemporary Jewish American artist, whatever his particular beliefs and religious practices might be, free from any institutional restrictions or restraints. He has explored various interpretations and commentaries in his considerations of family and individual personality issues as strictly human encounters and has also combined these with the more religiously oriented desire to understand an incomprehensible but familiar God, the God of the Jews.

The key figures float, then, in a nether world of myth and legend, as instruments of God's will and as individuals

capable of human feeling. Through his paintings, both McBee and the viewer can relate to the actors in this drama as ordinary people caught in an extraordinary situation or as remote figures acting out a preordained plan of which we have no true knowledge or full understanding. We teeter on the edge of both, accepting their predicament based on our own blind religious faith or trying to imagine what they might be thinking, as if they were next-door neighbors. McBee, to his great credit, believes and challenges, accepts and questions, and views himself both as part of a community and as a solitary individual seeking his own version of the truth.