Raskolnikov and the Aqedah (Isaac's Binding)

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Many offensive quotes can be used to expose Dostoevsky's anti-Semitic prejudices. Like some anti-Semites, Dostoevsky tends to usurp the uniqueness of Jews' identity, experience, messianic missionism, and relationship with God, claiming these features as those of his own or of his own group. Unlike most anti-Semites, however, rather than merely appropriating them for his nation, the God-fearing Russians, he identifies with specific Jews, very personally. This makes him a Jew wanna-be much more than a Jew-hater—but some may still justly consider these to be two sides of the same coin.

This love–hate attitude points to an interesting notion in his poetics, and even his Christianity. His identification with the Jews is more poetically productive, and morally and theologically significant, than his hatred of them. Paradoxically, in some cases, the only key to interpreting both Dostoevsky's faith and his poetics is his personal identification with Jewish figures important for the Jews themselves. This identification might be a matter of life-and-death importance for the writer.

We may notice, for example, not only that Isai Fomich, in *Notes from a Dead House*, symbolically presides over a scene very much like the hierarchy of hell—to which the narrator Gorianchikov compares the bath-house with its shelves and tiers—but also that he symbolizes freedom, a very important motif in the

Notes as such. Isai Fomich is free to come and go from the territory of the Siberian prison because he is permitted to attend Jewish worship outside the territory. More importantly still, unbeknownst to the prejudiced and unsuspecting narrator, Isai Fomich cites a key Jewish song about liberation. According to the narrator Gorianchikov, Isai Fomich claims that the song was sung by all the Jews as they left Egypt. Gorianchikov himself, of course, hears merely gibberish—a meaningless “la-la-la-la.” But if we assume the song could be meaningful, we may guess that it is “Dai-dayeinu” (דַּיֵּינוּ), indeed sung during the Passover Seder by the Jews. The song says, in a rather apophatic manner, that each step God grants us (the Jews) on our way to liberation, even taken separately and not followed by the rest of the steps, would be “enough,” “enough for us”:

Isai Fomich . . . starts to sing, in a high treble, for the whole barrack to hear: “La-la-la-la-la!”—a song without words, to some absurd and ridiculous tune, the only one he sang all the while he was in prison. Lately, when he became more closely acquainted with me, he assured me under oath that it was the same song and the same tune that all six hundred thousand Jews, big and small, sang as they crossed the Red Sea, and that every Jew was supposed to sing it at the moment of triumph and victory over his enemies.¹

But even Gorianchikov is impressed by the liberating effect of Isai Fomich’s prayer—ridiculous and ecstatic, it renders the Jew oblivious of all external observers, including the representatives of oppressive authorities. The hostile and prejudiced Gorianchikov, of course, believes that Isai Fomich is pretending and making a show of his prayer and that he follows a very precise script provided by his Jewish prayer book—specifying when to rejoice, when to feel upset, and when to make a noble face “shouting and grimacing.”² What he describes to us, however, is the praying Jew’s defiance of earthly authority, Egyptian or Russian. Once when the Jew prayed, the major came in. Isai Fomich continued to follow his prayer script by grimacing the major straight in the face, but when reminded of that by his admiring fellow inmates, the Jew was genuinely surprised:

—“What major?”

—“What do you mean what major? Didn’t you see him?”

1 Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from a Dead House*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2015), 117.

2 *Ibid.*, 118.

—“No.”

—“Why, he was standing two feet away, right in front of your face.”

But Isai Fomich began to assure me in the most serious way that he had decidedly not seen any major and that while saying these prayers he falls into some sort of ecstasy, so that he no longer sees or hears anything that happens around him.³

Isai Fomich is not the main point of my investigation, but even this case demonstrates a feature of Dostoevsky's polyphony important to us: the described character is sincere, while the describing one, albeit a seemingly reliable narrator, mistrusts and disdains him. Gorianchikov is an unreliable narrator who seems reliable. He implicates us in believing Isai Fomich is insincere. Dostoevsky, on the other hand, implicates us in the *wrong* of that narrator's vision. Of course, we do see Isai Fomich through the anti-Semitic prism of Gorianchikov, but this does not make us or Gorianchikov see right. Dostoevsky himself, however, may or may not subscribe to his narrator's anti-Semitic prejudice. He shows us more than his narrator understands. The Jewish character symbolizes too many things important for Dostoevsky himself for us to believe that this character is a mere caricature.⁴

But, even if very significant for Dostoevsky, Isai Fomich is at most a complicated Jewish role model for the writer. In what follows, I will discuss a case of Dostoevsky's own real and complete identification with an important—and sacrificial—act of faith by a Jewish character.

Isaac and Raskolnikov—What Is at Stake for Dostoevsky?

The Aqedah: Isaac and Dostoevsky

Following his own mock execution, Dostoevsky completely identified with a mortal Jew—not merely with the immortal Christ—who survived his own death. The Jew was Isaac, Abraham's first-born son, from whom all Jews, including Jesus Christ, were to descend, after he had survived the experience of

³ Ibid., 117–18ff.

⁴ In my most recent book, *Personalizm kak poetika: Literaturnyi mir glazami ego obitatelei* (St. Petersburg: Pushkinskii dom, 2009), chap. 9, 330–49, I investigate the same split between the actual author—in that case, Nikolai Leskov—and his anti-Semitic narrator, in Leskov's long short story (his *povest'*) “The Bishop's Judgment” (“Vladychnyi sud”).

his intended death. Like Isaac, Dostoevsky survived his own imminent death. Readers, admirers, and detractors have linked Dostoevsky's mock execution to the context of his discovery of Christ and His sacrifice. Although prefiguring Christ for Christians, including Dostoevsky, Isaac also matters as a role model on his own, for both Christians and Jews: Isaac was a mortal human, but, at the time of his imminent death, an innocent boy. For the Jews, the notion of him facing a sacrificial death was taboo, hence the "binding" (עקדה), not the "sacrifice" of Isaac.

As the biblical prototype of Dostoevsky's own survival of his mock execution, the episode of Isaac's binding (עקדה) has informed Dostoevsky's consciousness. It has also informed a very important subtext to at least one episode in Dostoevsky's fiction. To the best of my knowledge, Dostoevsky's readers have completely neglected this subtext. Yet in the case in question, the subtext provides an important clue to the meaning of both the episode and the whole novel it appears in: without this subtext, the novel's denouement appears somewhat puzzling. I mean the epilogue to *Crime and Punishment*. Dostoevsky, rather unexpectedly, likens Raskolnikov to Isaac, bound and about to be sacrificed by his father to God.⁵

The Aqedah: Isaac and Raskolnikov

Let us now examine this key episode in *Crime and Punishment* in the light of Gen. 22:1–13 as its subtext:

Again it was a clear warm day. Early in the morning, at about six o'clock, [Raskolnikov] went to work in the shed on the riverbank, where gypsum was baked in a kiln and afterwards ground.⁶ Only *three workers went there*. One of them took a guard and went back to the fortress to get some tool; the second began splitting firewood and putting it into the kiln.⁷ Raskolnikov walked out of the shed and right to the bank, sat down on some logs piled

5 Admittedly, Christians call this episode, from Gen. 22, the "sacrifice of Isaac." The sacrificial elements of this episode and its symbolism matter very much, to us and to Dostoevsky, but the Jewish name for the episode—the "binding of Isaac" (עקדת יצחק)—is also important. After all, Isaac was never sacrificed. So the Jewish name emphasizes his *survival* of his own death.

6 In the original, "Where a kiln was *built/arranged* to bake gypsum and grind afterwards" (устроена была обжигательная печь).

7 Literally, "piling it up in the kiln" (накладывать в печь)—so the image, in Russian, is a pileup of logs.

near the shed, and began looking at the wide, desolate river. From the high bank a wide view of the surrounding countryside opened out. A barely audible song came from the far bank opposite. There, on the boundless sunbathed steppe, nomadic yurts could be seen, like barely visible black specks. There was freedom, there a different people lived, quite unlike those here, there time itself seemed to stop, *as if the centuries of Abraham and his flocks had not passed.*

Raskolnikov sat and stared fixedly, not tearing his eyes away; *his thought turned to reverie, to contemplation; he was not thinking of anything but some anguish troubled and tormented him.*

*Suddenly Sonya was beside him. ... How it happened he himself did not know but suddenly it was as if something had lifted him and flung him down at her feet. ... They still had seven years more ... but he was risen and he knew it, he felt it fully with the whole of his renewed being.*⁸ (all emphasis is mine)

The episode itself seems to bear no relation to the story of Raskolnikov's alleged repentance or conversion, or to anything about his inner life. Furthermore, no details of this episode "belong" in the context of the epilogue story itself. Yet they are numerous, and meticulously narrated. Such details include the mention of the following:

1. a kiln—an outdoor hearth situated on a high place, so that one needs to climb up to it, really, very much resembling an altar for burnt offerings, and a necessary but forgotten tool;
2. firewood logs piled up and prepared for burning in this outdoor contraption;
3. three people, besides the main protagonist, mounting the high, relatively faraway place with the outdoor hearth;
4. two of them coming back down, or sent away, after only one other and the protagonist continue to go/remain up above;
5. one other person remaining on top, or making it to the top, besides the protagonist, who piles up and prepares the firewood;
6. the protagonist situated on top of the pile of logs;

8 *Crime and Punishment*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, 549–50, Kindle ed. (New York: Vintage, 1992), 1099–1100. All the citations for the Russian edition of *Crime and Punishment* are according to *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v tridsati tomakh* [PSS], ed. V. G. Bazanov et al. (Leningrad: Nauka, 1972–1990); hereafter cited as PSS by volume and page.

7. the protagonist being unaware of the significance of his being situated there; and
8. the mention of Abraham's flocks and his "centuries" (века Авраама и стад его);
9. the protagonist's resulting resurrection

Beyond some vague sense of a workday dragging rather slowly, and Raskolnikov's—or the narrator's—equally vague nostalgia for the long-gone biblical era, this passage seems to have no purpose in Raskolnikov's "story." It is not well embedded in the context of the narration. All the more imperative it then becomes for us to understand why this story is here, complete with so many details. The less they belong to the context of the story, the more apparently they belong to its biblical subtext, Gen. 22: 1–13, the sacrifice, or rather binding, of Isaac. We may, therefore, safely assume that the subtext of Isaac's binding—that is, the protagonist's intended and annulled sacrifice—appears for one and only one purpose—instead of "making sense" in the context, it makes sense *out* of the context—providing a valid clue to Raskolnikov's internal development at that point in the epilogue.

To further understand the significance of this clue, let us first try to locate all the relevant elements of the Genesis passage as we find them in the previously quoted passage from the epilogue to *Crime and Punishment*. I use the numbers from the list of these details in the enumerated list above (verse numbers are superscripted):

Gen. 22:1–13:

1. And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him, "Abraham": and he said, "Behold, here I am." 2 And he said, "Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering (1) upon one of the mountains (1) which I will tell thee of." 3 And Abraham (8) rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son, (3) and clave the wood (2; 5) for the burnt offering (1), and rose up, and went unto the place (3) of which God had told him. 4 Then on the third day Abraham (8) lifted up his eyes, and saw the place afar off (3). 5 And Abraham (8) said unto his young men, "Abide ye here with the ass; and I and the lad (3; 4) will go yonder and worship, and come again to you." 6 And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering (5), and laid it upon Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife (1);

and they went both of them together (4). 7 And Isaac spake unto Abraham his father (8), and said, "My father": and he said, "Here am I, my son." And he said, "Behold the fire and the wood (1; 2): but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" (7)

⁸And Abraham said, "My son, "God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering" (7): so they went both of them together (4).⁹

And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order (2; 5) and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood (6; 7).¹⁰

And Abraham (8) stretched forth his hand, and took the knife (1) to slay his son.¹¹

And the angel of the LORD called unto him out of heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham" (8): and he said, "Here am I" (8).¹²

And He said, "Lay not thine hand (9) upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him: (9) for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from Me."¹³

And Abraham (8) lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold behind him a ram caught in a thicket by his horns: and Abraham (8) went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering in the stead of his son (9). (KJV) (all emphasis is mine)

Verse 9 of Gen. 22:1–13 deserves a special mention for an interesting parallel between this verse, in the Russian synodal translation—which Dostoevsky was one of the first Russian writers to read and quote from,⁹ and Dostoevsky's own text: "and Abraham *built* an altar there" (устроил жертвенник).¹⁰ In the relevant passage in the epilogue, the narrator says about the arrangement for the kiln: "была устроена печь." Unfortunately, translators—not only Pevear and Volokhonsky—ignore the importance of conveying this rather marked participle invoking the equally marked verb "устроил" in the Russian synodal text of Gen 22:9. Of course, likening an outdoor kiln to an altar may seem a little far-fetched, but using a participle deriving from a rather marked verb for making an altar seals the parallel between that kiln and Abraham's altar.

9 Before it, the translation was not available, only the Church Slavonic text of the Bible, to be quoted in Russian. Russian writers, including Pushkin, read and referred to the Church Slavonic text alongside the French.

10 "и устроил там Авраам жертвенник, разложил дрова и, связав сына своего Исаака, положил его на жертвенник поверх дров."

Just as in verse 9, the word *there* (**там**) figures prominently in the relevant epilogue excerpt where the pronominal adverb is even repeated four times: “*There*, on the boundless sunbathed steppe, nomadic yurts could be seen, like barely visible black specks. *There* was freedom, *there* a different people lived, quite unlike those here, *there* time itself seemed to stop, as if the centuries of Abraham and his flocks had not passed.”¹¹

This repeated pronominal adverb **там** supports and reinforces the importance of the general tone invoking the Bible and its chronotope: the word points to a mystical realm.¹²

Back to Raskolnikov as Unrepentant Sinner: Why Isaac?

Having established the parallel between Gen. 22:1–13 and the relevant excerpt in the epilogue to *Crime and Punishment*, we can consider how this intertext clarifies the otherwise inexplicable aspects of the epilogue and of the novel as a whole. The epilogue indeed presents a stumbling block to even the friendliest and most supportive Dostoevsky reader. We all feel perplexed: Raskolnikov’s repentance seems belated, in relation to his actual formal confession, unmotivated and therefore artificial and unconvincing. He formally admits to his crime but feels no repentance. In the epilogue, Raskolnikov remains unrepentant despite all the ordeals that he undergoes and Sonia undergoes on his behalf. The reader feels uncertain about how and why Raskolnikov, who has been impenitent up to now, suddenly repents. What is so special about that moment, with the kiln, the firewood, and all the rest?

The narrator provides no plausible psychological motivation. In fact, the narrator seems to deliberately present Raskolnikov’s repentance as incomprehensible, both morally and psychologically. No words narrate it as a process of reason or anything logical. In the epilogue, Raskolnikov has nightmares

11 “**Там**, в облитой солнцем необозримой степи, чуть приметными точками чернелись кочевые юрты. **Там** была свобода и жили другие люди, совсем не похожие на здешних, **там** как бы самое время остановилось, точно не прошли еще века **Авраама** и стад его” (emphasis is mine).

12 A possible Hebrew etymology for the word “heaven,” or “sky,” or whatever was created in the beginning, matters. The word in Hebrew is “HaShamayim” (השמים), the dual for “sham” (שם), which means “there.” The dual number, in Hebrew morphology, especially in the biblical Hebrew, is a way to form abstract nouns. In that case, the word “heaven” literally means “the there,” or even “there-ness.”

about ideas as viruses, remains an unrepentant nonbeliever, patiently yet dispassionately endures the ensuing justified disdain of his fellow inmates—the same ones who love Sonia!—and then, one day, goes to sit on a bunch of wood logs on a riverbank, and gets up a new person, full of love and pity for Sonia, repentant for his crime, and even his ideas, visibly redeemed, aware of being resurrected, and capable of a new life. This does not sound too plausible indeed.

Why does Dostoevsky make no other path to repentance available to Raskolnikov—besides his sitting on a bunch of logs mounted on a riverbank, contemplating the olden days of Abraham and his flocks? Why would no other way, besides situating Raskolnikov in the position of Isaac, work for his sincere repentance? Why would his identification with Isaac lead to his reform?

Well into his prison term and almost through the whole epilogue, Raskolnikov persists in the idea that his main failure was not ideological or moral but in the fact that he, personally, was unfit for the task, being incapable of what truly great men are capable of—of killing cold-bloodedly. In his dialectic ruminations within himself, he claims that his “conscience is at peace.” He is even ready to pay for his violation of the law “with his own head,” but at no point then does he feel any connection between “the letter of the law” and his own conscience.¹³

The whole novel dwells on the difference and discrepancy between Raskolnikov’s conscience and the dictates of formal law, and, more importantly, on the difference between his seemingly impossible true repentance and his formal confession and subsequent punishment by Siberian exile. Instead of resolving this discrepancy, the epilogue, in fact, seems to exacerbate it. If, so late into the epilogue, Raskolnikov continues to insist, very consciously, that his conscience is at peace and all he is doing is serving term for violating a “mere” social law, the reader has difficulty believing that any sincere repentance is possible for such a person.

Until the Aqedah-like scene, Raskolnikov keeps reasoning. In this episode, however, he no longer reasons. The identification with Isaac’s binding makes him feel, not think. Like Isaac, he experiences being prepared for sacrifice, not thinking about it. The reader also can only experience the events described in the episode, without consciously realizing their significance. Up until that moment, the narration was also that of reasoning—it was Raskolnikov-centric. So much

13 See PSS, 6:417.

has this narration implicated us in both condemning Raskolnikov and thinking like him that, in fact, we tend to mistrust or ignore any type of discourse the same narrator may now adopt in the same epilogue. Although this new discourse may in fact suggest a sincere repentance, to the reader it sounds artificial and unmotivated. But to what end, in this specific case, does the narrator implicate *us* in the idea that Raskolnikov is incapable of repentance? Perhaps the only possible answer to this question is the specific nature of repentance that a rationalizing ideologue like Raskolnikov himself would require. To counter the ideological nature of the protagonist's crime, his repentance should probably not be contained in words or ideas but should be much more existential, perhaps consist of a sensory experience less conscious than his life hitherto, or unconscious altogether. But since Dostoevsky continues to implicate his readers in his protagonist's world, this implies that, on a rational level, the relevant passage would also sound illogical and unmotivated to the reader.

After so much show of Raskolnikov's moral callousness, the reader has been desensitized to any signs of his possible repentance. No rational explanation would affect the reader by now, just as no rational argument would liberate the character from his own prison of ideological labyrinths. After all, "Dostoevsky's reader is an implicated reader."¹⁴ In order to trust Raskolnikov's repentance as genuine, we also, like him, need to experience it rather than think about it. This river-bank passage, preceding rather than seeming to adequately explain Raskolnikov's repentance and regeneration, seems strange and inexplicable to the reader as much as, perhaps, to Raskolnikov himself. Such things can be narrated in one and only way—being shown rather than explained.

This passage, therefore, aims to affect our senses, not our intellect—aesthetically rather than ideologically. It is a sensory experience, rather than intellectual reasoning, which also leads the protagonist to repentance. To implicate us in the reality of sensory experience of Raskolnikov, an inveterate and self-manipulating intellectual, Dostoevsky models and narrates Raskolnikov's repentance on his own terms, namely, avoiding all notions inaccessible to his protagonist, or, in Bakhtin's terms, without "looking him in the back."¹⁵ Inevitably,

14 Robin Feuer Miller, *The Brothers Karamazov: Worlds of the Novel* (Boston: Twayne, 1992), 4. The idea is very important to our mutual teacher, Robert L. Belknap.

15 See, for example, Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Creativity: Problemy tvorchestva Dostoevskogo* (Leningrad: Priboi, 1929), 101–2.

then, in order to model the protagonist's switch from the speculative mode to the intuitive, Dostoevsky also switches the reader's mode in the same way.

Besides the nature of this specific, ideological crime and what is therefore imperative about "undoing" it, the reason for the protagonist's uncharacteristically nonintellectual repentance is the nature of true repentance itself. A crime can be done on intellectual grounds, but repentance cannot. Apparently, the main difference between a *formal act* of confession or penitence and the *experience* of true repentance is that the former may result from a thought process—such as a dialectically constructed argument—while the latter results from raw experience alone. Raskolnikov's dialectic can lead him, as an ideological murderer, into claiming the necessity of his own crime, but this same dialectic is powerless about leading him out of that trap. His crime may be ideological, but a *nonideology* is necessary for true repentance and for true liberation. Either for intellectuals or simpletons, repentance is an experience.

To sum up:

1. True repentance may not come as a logical conclusion to a logical or dialectical argument. One can kill for ideological reasons, but one cannot—no matter how hard one tries—feel or experience repentance merely because one has come to a logical conclusion that repentance is good and right.
2. In Dostoevsky, true repentance cannot even be presented as a logical argument—hence the necessity of an allusion, a subtext.
3. Repentance may mark the failure or bankruptcy of an idea, but repentance itself cannot be an idea but only a raw experience, which is granted, rather than experienced by one's own volition. Like faith, repentance is meta-dialectic. One can pray to the Granter of repentance for it, just as for Love, Faith, and Hope. But in order to do so, one has to believe in the Granter already.

There seems to be a vicious cycle: our protagonist is an intellectual who cannot feel anything unless he thinks it through. Moreover, the reader has been conditioned to perceive this intellectual protagonist in and on his own terms presented through dialectical reasoning. The only way to break this cycle for Dostoevsky, an Orthodox believer who read the Bible, is to introduce the

world of the Bible as a subtext to the events described. The reader may recognize the experience of repentance as such—an experience—by analogy with another such experience in the Bible. Against the contrasting background of Dostoevsky's usual dialogic dialectics, this analogy tells by showing, not by proving or arguing. The biblical subtext in question concerns an intended sacrifice.

In *Crime and Punishment*, there are two versions of the motif of sacrifice and sacrificing for the sake of humanity, the male and the female. The male version purports to save humanity as a whole; it is motivated by the Napoleonic idea: to save all, a truly great man is entitled to killing some. The conversation between the student and the officer, which Raskolnikov finds so attuned to his ideas—about killing a useless society member for the sake of many others—represents this kind of sacrifice. The female version is exemplified by Sonia and Dunia, who sacrifice *themselves*, with the goal—perhaps not condoned by Dostoevsky himself—of saving their siblings. Although Dostoevsky does not approve this type of sacrifice either, he more explicitly condemns the male protagonists' version of sacrifice, which entails an allegedly great man sacrificing *another* person—not himself!—for a worthy cause. This Napoleonic sort of sacrifice motivates all of Raskolnikov's thoughts, temptations, and actions. The temptation of sacrificing another for a worthy cause seems purely cerebral in its origin. Although Raskolnikov's spontaneous actions are often exempt from this Napoleonic motivation, throughout the novel, the idea of sacrificing *another* for the sake of general good reigns supreme and possesses the protagonist's intellect and imagination first, then it informs his actions. Isaac undergoes the experience of being offered as a sacrifice *himself*—not as sacrificing anyone else. It is Isaac's experience that Raskolnikov undergoes, albeit unconsciously. As opposed to Raskolnikov, a seasoned sacrificer of others, this experience was not as novel to Dostoevsky himself. Thus, there are reasons to believe that his inclusion of the passage invoking that subtext was not random or accidental.

Self-sacrifice, however, is not a valid redemptive option for mortals: unlike Christ, the Son of God for Christians like Dostoevsky, we mortals may not offer ourselves up to slaughter voluntarily: that would be suicide. To the extent that Dostoevsky's female protagonists like Sonia or Dunia sacrifice themselves voluntarily, their sacrifice has that suicidal element, and that is as wrong as the

idea of prostitution itself. What makes Sonia purer is that she is not conscious of sacrificing herself, she resembles someone led to the slaughter rather than one who goes voluntarily. As for the literally suicidal protagonists in *Crime and Punishment* and in Dostoevsky's works, in general, they are mostly, though not exclusively, male, and they often confuse the notion of self-sacrifice with legitimizing suicide. Dostoevsky, arguably, has more compassion for suicides than would be officially permitted by his faith. Yet, for our case, it matters that, with reference to the binding of Isaac, Dostoevsky is not offering any apologia for suicides, precisely because the analogy goes only so far: when sacrificed, men may imitate some qualities of Christ but not the voluntary nature of His death. They must, therefore, be sacrificed by another and must not consciously wish to die. Isaac is such a character. He is a mortal man led to slaughter, and is not a suicide.

Much as in a Greek tragedy, the main drama of *Crime and Punishment* consists of the irreversibility of its events and temptations. The protagonist can argue himself into a deed, but he cannot argue himself out of it and into any repentance about it. Generally speaking, no reasoned argument, not even a formal confession, may undo a sin morally and symbolically, in the eyes of God. The core of Raskolnikov's specific cerebral temptation is the nature of the sacrifice it promotes—killing another for a cause, rather than dying yourself for it. To “undo” this specific sin by Raskolnikov in his own conscience, three conditions must obtain:

1. the sacrifice's main fallacy must be corrected, so the protagonist may experience it as an act of *self*-sacrifice;
2. the experience must be immediate, noncerebral, and perhaps even unconscious;
3. to learn the lesson, the protagonist must survive his own self-sacrifice.

These three conditions require a drastic change in the poetics of the whole novel. The crime is argued for and described dialectically, so the repentance for it must be cast in much more immediate, noncerebral terms. Hence the new mode of description, so unlike the one chosen for the history of the protagonist's temptation and sin that the reader may not even notice it. The only marker of this shift's deliberate nature—a very significant one, however—comes at the end of

the fifth paragraph from the very end of the whole novel: "Instead of dialectics, there was life, and something completely different had to work itself out in his consciousness."¹⁶

The hardest problem is with the third condition: How can the ideological murderer experience his own sacrifice—which, in order to atone for his murdering another person, needs to be his own death!—yet survive it? Dostoevsky knew a precedent: Isaac bound and facing imminent death but surviving it. After his mock execution, Dostoevsky found himself in a unique position as an author—knowing, as Isaac, what it means to face and survive his own death, not as a possible risk or danger, the way we do on a battlefield or risking our lives otherwise, but an assured, sentenced, and scheduled death.

Dostoevsky's resulting views on capital punishment are known to us, through Prince Myshkin's philippic against it in *The Idiot*, most famously. What concerns us more here is Dostoevsky's view of such scheduled death as sacrifice—like the sentenced Crucifixion. However, in order to identify with Christ himself, or to identify another mortal man, albeit a character, with Him, he needed a mortal figure to mediate this identification—to avoid the self-sacrifice's distortion into a mere suicide. Hence Isaac. The link between the binding of Isaac and Christ's crucifixion figures very prominently, not only in the fifteen Old Testament readings during the Orthodox Holy Saturday liturgy, among other cases in the Church, but also, quite importantly, in the world of a very prominent Jewish artist—in at least one of Mark Chagall's many paintings of the Crucifix. Like Dostoevsky's case, Chagall's also concerns two very important questions: (1) To what extent does the artist identify with his or her characters' experience of genuine and sacrificial suffering, death, and resurrection? (2) To what extent does the artist identify with his or her own protagonists, mere mortal sinners?

Freedom: Back to the Jewish Leitmotif

Dostoevsky, who survived his execution and in its stead went to Siberian prison, was likely to consider his prison as his own liberation. This paradoxical association between outward prison and liberation from imminent death as inner

16 "Вместо диалектики наступила жизнь, и в сознании должно было выработаться что-то совершенно другое."

liberation is something Dostoevsky might have considered an important motif associated with the Jews. It is the Jew Isai Fomich who overtly draws a link between the Siberian prison and freedom—in his case, of speech, and perhaps even thought. Prisoners tease him: “Hey, Jew, you will get knout and go to Siberia.” “I’m already in Siberia.” “They’ll send you further.” “And is the Lord God there?” “That he is.” “Well, so what, then . . . As long as there’s God and money, it’s good anywhere.”¹⁷

This reply makes an unusual connection between God and money, which has historically been the main prejudice against the Jews among anti-Semites. But what seems interesting about the passage is that, given both these things, Isai Fomich is not afraid of prison or oppression. Albeit cast in terms of greed, his Jewish faith still liberates him from all fear of prison, exile, or oppression. Money or no money, the Jew is free inwardly. Like the prisoners around Isai Fomich, including the narrator Gorianchikov, Dostoevsky himself cannot help feeling fascinated by this Jew’s sense of freedom amidst the Siberian prison.

Just as with Isai Fomich, who symbolizes freedom for Dostoevsky, the “other river bank,” the “there” of it, also beacons Raskolnikov with a freedom that one may have while in prison yet may lack even when formally free: “*There was freedom, there a different people lived, quite unlike those here, there time itself seemed to stop*, as if the centuries of Abraham and his flocks had not passed.” (*Crime and Punishment*, epilogue; my emphasis)

Raskolnikov’s subjective and unconscious experience of the Aqedah takes him outside the this-worldly time and space (hence the “there”), thereby bringing him the liberation of the transcendent world. At least twice in his oeuvre, Dostoevsky casts this liberation in terms very relevant for the Jews—in *Notes from a Dead House*, using Isai Fomich to conjure up the imagery of the Passover, and in *Crime and Punishment*, with the Aqedah, by mentioning Abraham and his centuries, flocks, and, evidently, his bound son, who is liberated by God from his own imminent death.

17 *Notes from a Dead House*, 116–17.