Abraham and the Sacrificial Son: Transtextual Strategies in José Saramago’s *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* and Elias Khoury’s *As Though She Were Sleeping*

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The story about Abraham is remarkable in that it is always glorious no matter how poorly it is understood, but here again it is a matter of whether or not we are willing to work and be burdened.

*Søren Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling*

1 Abraham as a Cultural Sign

1.1 *The Akedah*

The biblical patriarch Abraham is an obscure figure. Similar to other narratives in the Bible, the story venerating him is not a coherent one, but rather a series of brief, freely connected, and often contradictory parts. The sacrificial universe of the Hebrew Bible has had an astonishing influence on the self-understanding of the other two monotheistic religions that carry his legacy: both Christianity and Islam also endorse Abraham with undisputed acclaim.

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*I wish to thank Professor Djelal Kader (Pennsylvania State University) for his astute criticism. I am also indebted to Stuart Reigeluth (Toledo International Center for Peace) for his editorial skills and his dedicated attention. I should also like to express my gratitude for Professor Assaad Khairallah (American University of Beirut) for his generous comments.*

Besides the covenant between God and Abraham in the Bible (Genesis, 17:1–7),\(^2\) Genesis 22:1–19 depicting “the binding of Isaac”—also known as the akedah—is regarded as a founding narrative, a fundamental cornerstone of pure faith, total submission and unconditional trust in God.\(^3\) The most striking aspect of the akedah lies in his being asked to sacrifice his son, here, the opaque imagery of the narrative and the dramatic power and incisiveness of the akedah episode overwhelm the reader who is invited to re-evaluate not only the narrative’s thrust, but also the very notion of the coherent individual upon whom meaning rests.

Much has been written about this biblical narrative and how the image of the biblical patriarch Abraham underwent various transformations and was shaped in great variety through its theological development down to the present day. The underlying pathos of the “legend”\(^4\) widens the generic focus from the specific domains of religious tradition to the ontological and existential dimensions of faith. The reception of the akedah captures this expansive idea of faith and its shifting shapes across different times and diverse cultures. This broader view of faith provided for numerous analyses in philosophy, theology, and literature. As a manifest symbol of expanding implications, Abraham is also a valuable trove for students of literature and cultural history.\(^5\)

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\(^2\) See: Küng, *Judaism*, 6–7, 62–65. Muslim tradition perceives Qurʾān 7:172–173 as a unique primordial covenant between God and man, see: Wadād al-Qāḍī, *The Primordial Covenant and Human History in the Qurʾān* (Beirut: American University of Beirut—The Margaret Weyerhaeuser Jewett Chair of Arabic, 2006). As her student, I have always been enriched by Professor Kadi’s erudite work, as well as by her genuine and noble-hearted spirit.

