In Mark's story of the Syro-Phoenician woman, which I read as the central story of the larger narrative unit consisting of chapters 5-8, the ethical force of the pericope rests largely on the woman's Abrahamic bartering. If this is so, Jesus is by analogy a reluctant Yahweh – a stem, objective principle of justice that requires softening. And when the woman reinterprets Jesus's originally dismissive remark ("It is not fair to take the food of the children and throw it to dogs") and finds her place at his table, if only as a "dog" ("the dogs under the table," she says, "eat the children's crumbs"), we may well wonder whether she has won her point at the expense of our idea of Jesus.

For any inclination we might have to celebrate Abraham in Genesis 18:16-33, or the woman whose characterization he influences in Mark 7:24-30, depends upon a surprising opposition of ethics to religion. Introducing ethics in opposition to the religious perspective of the deity, Abraham bargains for a reduction of the requisite number of righteous from fifty to forty-five to forty to thirty to twenty and finally to ten, delineating a structure of compassion and ethical responsiveness that is narratively opposed to Yahweh's destructive justice. Although his ethical intervention on behalf of the people of Sodom is ultimately futile, Abraham's bargaining with Yahweh does two things: it qualifies the impulsive and wrathful nature of Yahweh, implying that he would be merciful, if it were reasonably possible; and it creates Abraham as the ethically heroic patriarch, favored enough to debate God and strong enough to correct his wrath. Abraham contests the idea of objective justice on which Yahweh's judgment is based and earns our favor largely to Yahweh's detriment. The result is almost absurdist. Forced to imagine Yahweh's motives and knowing that in the end destruction is not averted, the reader wonders whether Yahweh gives in little by little because he is confident in the scarcity of the righteous, or whether lacking such knowledge, Yahweh gives in to each of Abraham's negotiated reductions with disappointment, fearing he will no longer be permitted to destroy the cities. However we decide the matter, it is clear that this J narrative introduces ethical considerations into religious sensibility through a comical testing of Yahweh's patience and a hypo-
thetical negation of religious absoluteness, an absoluteness the Yahwist equates with God.

Although the E writer’s ethical sensibility is often understood to be quite different from the Yahwist’s (E’s sensibility more often associated with a profounder sense of piety and covenantal ethics), a similar tension arises in the binding of Isaac in Genesis 22. Only now the order has been inverted: religious obedience requires the rejection of ethics, or as Kierkegaard argues, the story’s celebration of Abraham’s heroic faith demands from its reader a teleological suspension of ethics. According to Kierkegaard’s strong reading of Abraham, the story writes its advocacy of faith on the palimpsest of the reader’s ethical sensibilities, and I would add that, rather than ignoring our ethical objections, the story plays on them, making Abraham a figure for our anxieties about God’s will for us. The Isaac story imitates a fearful view of God, representing an extreme view of God as adversary in order to resist the sacrificial logic of God’s request. By deliberately approximating a primitive religious logic only to substitute in 22:12 a more sympathetic or compassionate idea of the God who enters into covenant with Abraham, the story converts our idea of God. But one might still ask from whose perspective is this change introduced? Does the dramatic tension of Genesis 22 imply that God’s will is changed by the course of events? Or does this narrative imagine a self-correcting God who responds pitifully to the spectacle of the about-to-be-killed boy?

For in so much as the narrative pursues the boy’s sacrificial death, it also demands from us some accounting in ethical terms of how or why the murder has been prevented. In 22:10, we are told, “Next Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son” (my translation). The Hebrew verb “to slaughter” approximates the language of animal or human sacrifice and attributes to Abraham the intention of murdering his own child. Kierkegaard intuits the existential consequences of such a moment, first imagining in one speculative exordium the damage done to Abraham (“he could not forget that God had ordered him to do this. Isaac flourished as before, but Abraham’s eyes were darkened, and he saw joy no more”), and then, in a revised scenario, considering the devastation done to Isaac who has understood the intention of the drawn knife (“Then they returned home again, and Sarah hurried to meet them, but Isaac had lost the faith”). Kierkegaard recognizes the darker - if also, in his terms, salvific - content of this story as the ruination of ethics. The story may indeed imagine the conversion of a God who becomes compassionate, but such a conversion occurs at the expense of Abraham who has been made barbaric.