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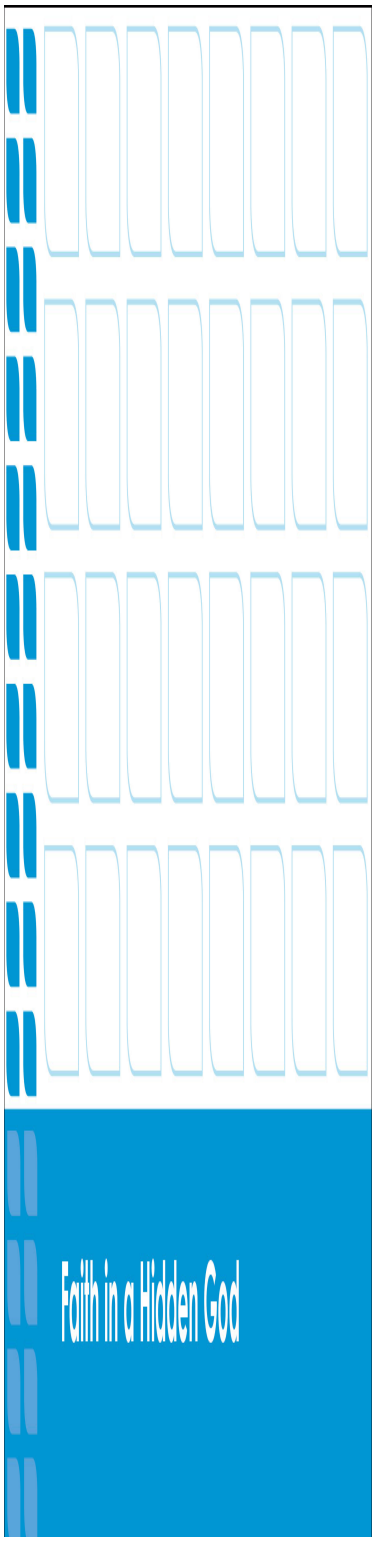

Faith in a Hidden God

Luther, Kierkegaard, and the Binding of Isaac

Elizabeth Palmer

Emerging Scholars

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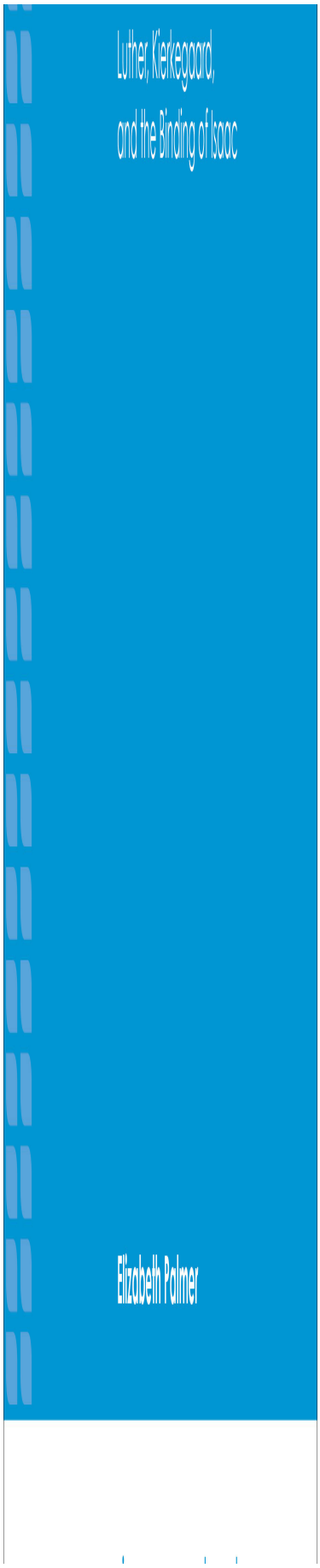
Review

Among the most theologically beguiling and morally challenging scenes in all of the Hebrew Bible are the words that God says to Abraham at the beginning of Genesis 22: “Take your son, your only [son], whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt-offering on one of the mountains that I will say to you.” This story began to be interpreted already within the corpus of the Hebrew Bible itself. Later, in the New Testament, it perhaps formed part of the archetypal basis for the story of Jesus’s death and resurrection. It also influenced passages in the Qur’an. And from the closing of the canons it has continually occupied the minds of theologians, ethicists, and storytellers. Based on a mystical tradition, the entirety of Genesis 22 is read each morning by many religious Jews, as if by sheer force of enigmatic, confrontational repetition the story itself becomes a form of revelation.

In her new book, *Faith in a Hidden God: Luther, Kierkegaard, and the Binding of Isaac*, Elizabeth Palmer uses the narrative of Genesis 22 to investigate what she calls “a form of [theological] exegesis simultaneously *pedagogical* (engaging biblical texts with theological questions concerning faith) and *anagogical* (moving its reader to participate in the faith that it examines)” (xiii-xiv, italics in original).

In other words, reading Martin Luther and Søren Kierkegaard on Genesis 22 allows Palmer to engage with a philosophical question that is many times larger than the one uncovered by more conventional exegetical history. Layered atop the discussions of Luther and Kierkegaard is a broader examination of how theology—and, she wants to contend, good theology—requires that the theologian not only teach *about* an aspect of God but do so in a way that *moves* the reader/listener toward that understanding of God. (In Judaism this is called *kiruv*, bringing someone in toward God, derived from the word *karov*, to cleave or hew to God. This overlap with Palmer’s anagogical vision of theology is striking and would make for an interesting cross-religious discussion.)

Palmer’s argument about the importance of anagogical theology plays out through two case studies, which form the bulk of the book: close readings of Luther’s *Lectures on Genesis*and Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*. After the first chapter, the next four are structured in pairs, the first two on Luther and the second two on Kierkegaard. The first chapter in each pair is a close contextualized reading of the theological writings related to Genesis 22. The second chapter is an examination of the anagogical components of that



theology. (I will admit that I found the second chapter of each pair less convincing that I'd hoped.) Palmer focuses the bulk of this analysis on the question of "faith," and specifically on how one can have faith in a God that would ask a man to murder his own son. Though a larger philosophical argument about the importance of anagogical theology is ultimately the backbone of the book, this thread (which is what lends the book its title) is fascinating in its own right, and, as Palmer points out in a brief but important concluding chapter, intimately tied up with what sort of theology, anagogical or otherwise, has enough complexity to encounter a hidden God.

This review does not have the time to engage with Palmer's first chapter, but it would be remiss if it did not point readers toward it. Couched as an overview of different modern readings of Genesis 22, Palmer lays out a beautiful reading of the normativity inherent in all biblical commentaries—theological and academic—and argues for the serious consideration of a diversity of exegetical traditions when we attempt to understand the Bible's most inscrutable passages. For a similar discussion (though at greater abstraction) see Thomas Lewis, ***Why Philosophy Matters for the Study of Religion—and Vice Versa (http://readingreligion.org/books/why-philosophy-matters-study-religion-and-vice-versa)*** (Oxford University Press, 2016).

Though *Faith in a Hidden God* can—and should—be read by scholars of religion regardless of their personal religious commitments, Palmer is, in the end, a theologically interested party, and this turns out to be one of the book's greatest strengths. While she nowhere makes the claim outright, the book's dialectic between Luther and Kierkegaard feels (to this reviewer, at least) like a diagnosis of the achievements and failures of modern Christian theology itself. On the one side is Luther, whose "exegesis is drawn toward a safe and trustworthy God" (xvii), and on the other is Kierkegaard, whose "exegesis confronts directly … a hidden God … the God whom Abraham faced and Christians must face in the honest, terrible subjectivity that constitutes the movement of faith" (xvii). What makes this book important in our contemporary moment of moralizing absolutes (be they relativism or fundamentalism, radical acceptance of difference or intransigent ahistorical parochialism), is Palmer's willingness to hold, as she writes, that "faith is a constant movement between understanding and bafflement, between horror at God's hiddenness and joy in God's revelation" (282). Her interest in the anagogical elements of Luther and Kierkegaard results in what is ultimately a redemptive project. Luther and Kierkegaard still have much to teach us, she argues, not because we can dissociate them from their historical circumstances, their biases, or their personal failings (we cannot, Palmer is clear, and throughout the book she never does), but because in the religious life what matters more is "the understanding of faith as a continual perceptual movement in relation to God … the continual transformation it effects in the believer" (278). This conclusion mirrors another great theologian of the twentieth century, Abraham J. Heschel, who in his own book on Kierkegaard wrote, "the meaning of faith is not to believe in an idea because it is incontestable. To believe is to contend against impediments, to defy refutations, and to accept embarrassment" (*A Passion for Truth*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973). In her valuable new book, Palmer is an anagogical scholar herself, asking her readers to come closer to her subjects out of desire to follow their arguments and see what sort of world—of faith, of mystery, of perpetual nuance—might result.

About the Reviewer(s):
Samuel J. Kessler (http://samueljkessler.com) is Postdoctoral Fellow in Judaic Studies in the Department of Religion and Culture and Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. Beginning in Fall 2018 he will be Assistant Professor of Religion and Bonnier Family Chair in Jewish Studies in the Department of Religion at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minnesota.

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Elizabeth Palmer is the books editor at Christian Century magazine. An ordained minister in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, she served as the Lutheran campus pastor at the University of Chicago for eight years and has also worked as a hospital chaplain. She has a PhD in theology from the University of Chicago Divinity School.

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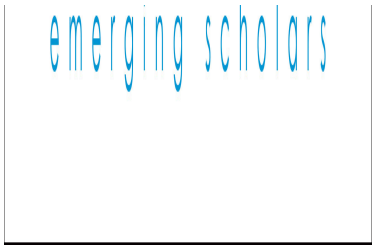

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