The passage from Kierkegaard relies on the reader’s prior knowledge of the story of Abraham and Isaac. Please read the following Biblical passage if you are unfamiliar with that story

**Genesis 22:1-15**

22 Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, “Abraham!”

“Here I am,” he replied.

2 Then God said, “Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you.”

3 Early the next morning Abraham got up and loaded his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. 4 On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. 5 He said to his servants, “Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you.”

6 Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, 7 Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, “Father?”

“Yes, my son?” Abraham replied.

“The fire and wood are here,” Isaac said, “but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?”

8 Abraham answered, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” And the two of them went on together.

9 When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. 10 Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. 11 But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, “Abraham! Abraham!”

“Here I am,” he replied.

12 “Do not lay a hand on the boy,” he said. “Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.”

13 Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram[a] caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. 14 So Abraham called that place The LORD Will Provide. And to this day it is said, “On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided.”

15 The angel of the LORD called to Abraham from heaven a second time[b] and said, “I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, 17 I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, 18 and through your offspring[c] all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.”
then I fear no danger, nor am I afraid of arousing a desire in people to be tried in likeness to Abraham. But to peddle a cheap edition of Abraham and yet forbid everyone to do likewise is ludicrous.

It is now my intention to draw out in the form of problems the dialectical factors implicit in the story of Abraham in order to see what a prodigious paradox faith is—a paradox that is capable of making a murder into a holy act well pleasing to God, a paradox that gives Isaac back again to Abraham, which no thought can lay hold of because faith begins precisely where thinking leaves off.

Problem 1: Is there a teleological suspension of the ethical?

The ethical as such is the universal, and as the universal it applies to everyone, which may be expressed from another angle by saying that it is in force at every moment. It rests immanently in itself, has nothing outside itself that is its telos, but is itself the telos for everything outside itself, and when the ethical has assimilated this into itself it goes no further. Defined immediately as a sensuous and psychical being, the single individual is the particular that has its telos in the universal, and it is his ethical task constantly to express himself in this, to annul his particularity in order to become the universal. As soon as the single individual wants to assert himself in his particularity over against the universal, he sins and only by acknowledging this can he be reconciled again with the universal. Whenever the single individual feels an urge to assert himself as the particular after having entered into the universal, he is in a state of temptation, from which he can extricate himself only by


55 στόχος, meaning end, goal, or purpose. 56 den Enkelke. This term can mean "the single individual," as in the previous reference, or "the particular," the latter referring to anything that is distinct or separate in contrast to the universal, which includes all particulars or the whole. Generally, the first meaning of the term predominates in this text, but in a few instances, as in the present case, the second meaning is appropriate for indicating the contrast between the particular and the universal being presented in the text.


58 For Hegel, the ethical life is expressed in three arenas: family, civil society, and the state. See Philosophy of Right, pp. 187-380, §§142-156.
logically deduced from them. Hegel should not have concealed this, for after all he had studied the Greeks.

One not infrequently hears people who become engrossed in clichés for lack of losing themselves in studies say that a light shines over the Christian world, whereas paganism is shrouded in darkness. This sort of talk has always seemed strange to me, since every more profound thinker, every more serious artist still rejuvenates himself in the eternal youth of the Greek people. Such a statement may be explained by one not knowing what one should say but only that one should say something. It is all right to say that paganism did not have faith, but if something is supposed to have been said by that, then one must be a little clearer about what one understands by faith, since otherwise one relapses into such clichés. It is easy to explain the whole of existence, including faith, without having a conception of what faith is, and one is not the worst calculator in life who counts on being admired when one has such an explanation, for as Boileau says: "A fool always finds a greater fool who admires him."^{6a}

Faith is precisely this paradox, that the single individual is not the universal and is justified over against the latter not as subordinate but superior to it, yet in such a way, mind you, that it is the single individual who, after having been subordinate to the universal as the particular, now through the universal becomes the single individual as the particular is superior to it; [faith is this paradox] that the single individual as the particular stands in an absolute relation to the absolute. This standpoint cannot be mediated, for all mediation occurs precisely by virtue of the universal; it is and forever remains a paradox, inaccessible to thought. And yet faith is this paradox or else (these are the consequences I would ask the reader to bear in mind at every point, even though it would be too prolix for me to write them down everywhere), or else faith has never existed just because it has always existed, or else Abraham is lost.


^{6b} in mente.

That for the single individual this paradox can easily be confused with a temptation is certainly true, but one ought not for that reason to conceal it. That many people may be wholly constituted in such a way that it repulses them is certainly true, but one ought not for that reason to make faith into something different in order to be able to have it as well, but ought rather to admit that one does not have it, while those who have faith ought to be prepared to post some criteria by which to distinguish the paradox from a temptation.

Now the story of Abraham contains such a teleological suspension of the ethical. There has been no lack of keen heads and thorough scholars who have found analogies to it. Their wisdom amounts to the pretty proposition that basically everything is the same. If one will look a little closer, I doubt very much whether one will find a single analogy in the whole world except a later one that proves nothing if it is certain that Abraham represents faith and that it is properly expressed in him, whose life is not only the most paradoxical that can be thought but so paradoxical that it cannot be thought at all. Abraham acts by virtue of the absurd, for the absurd is precisely that he as the single individual is higher than the universal. This paradox cannot be mediated, for as soon as Abraham sets out to do that he must admit that he was in a state of temptation, and if that is so, he never gets to the point of sacrificing Isaac, or if he has sacrificed Isaac he must then repentantly return to the universal. He gets Isaac back again by virtue of the absurd. Abraham is therefore not at moment a tragic hero but something entirely different, either a murderer or a believer. Abraham lacks the middle term that saves the tragic hero. That is why I can understand a tragic hero but cannot understand Abraham, even though in a certain demented sense I admire him more than all others.

Abraham's relation to Isaac, ethically speaking, is quite simply this, that the father must love the son more than himself. Yet the ethical has within its own scope several gradations. We shall see whether this story contains any sort of higher expression for the ethical that can ethically explain his behavior, ethically justify him in suspending the ethical duty to the son, yet without therefore moving beyond the teleology of the ethical.

^{6b} Perhaps an allusion to Jesus Christ.
When an undertaking of concern to a whole people is impeded, when such an enterprise is brought to a standstill by heaven’s disfavor, when the angry deity sends a dead calm that mocks all efforts, when the soothsayer carries out his sad task and proclaims that the deity demands a young girl as sacrifice—then the father heroically must bring this sacrifice. He must conceal his pain magnanimously even though he could wish he was “the lowly man who dares to weep,” not the king who must act regally. And however solitarily the pain penetrates his breast, he has only three confidants among the people, and soon the whole population will be privy to his pain but also to his deed, that for the welfare of all he would sacrifice her, his daughter, the lovely young maiden. “O bosom! O fair cheeks, flaxen hair” (v. 687). And the daughter will move him with her tears, and the father will avert his face, but the hero will raise the knife. Then when the news about that reaches the ancestral home, the beautiful maidens of Greece will blush with enthusiasm, and if the daughter was to be a bride, the betrothed would not be angry but proud of participating in the father’s deed, because the maiden belonged to him more tenderly than to the father.

When that brave judge who saved Israel in the hour of need binds God and himself in one breath by the same vow, heroically he will transform the young girl’s jubilation, the beloved daughter’s joy to sorrow, and all Israel will grieve with her over her maidenly youth. But every freeborn man will understand, every stouthearted woman will admire Jephthah, and every maiden in Israel will act as his daughter did, for what is the use of Jephthah having conquered by means of his vow if he did not keep it? Would not the victory be taken away again from the people?

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50 A reference to Iphigenia in Aulis by the Greek dramatist Euripides (480–406 BC). When the Greek fleet could not sail from Aulis to conquer Troy because of a dead calm, the soothsayer Calchas urged Agamemnon, king of the Greeks and commander of the Greek forces, to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia to the goddess Artemis in hopes of persuading her to grant them a fair wind.


52 Calchas, Odysseus, and Menelaus (ibid., p. 301, l. 105).


54 Jephthah. See Judges 11:30–46, where Jephthah vows to sacrifice the first creature that comes out of his house (which happens to be his daughter) upon his return from defeating the Ammonites with divine help.

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51 When the sons of Lucius Junius Brutus, consul of Rome c. 500 BC, r. took part in a conspiracy to restore Tarquin the former king, Brutus had them put to death. See Livy, The Early History of Rome, bks. 1–3, of The History of Rome from its Foundation, trans. Aubrey de Sélincourt (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1960), bk. 4, §§1–6, pp. 188–189. See also KSII 1256. The Latin Historian Livy, 1–9, ed. C. F. Jürgensen (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1831), bk. 11, §§1–6, pp. 119–129.

52 Minor Roman officials who went before the chief magistrate in public carrying the fasces of bundle of rods wrapped around an axe as a symbol of his authority.
sentiment that has its dialectic in its relation to the idea of the ethical life. Here, then, there can be no question of a teleological suspension of the ethical itself.

The case is different with Abraham. By his act he transcended the whole of the ethical and had a higher telos outside, in relation to which he suspended it. For I would certainly like to know how Abraham’s act can be brought into relation to the universal, whether any connection can be discovered between what Abraham did and the universal other than that Abraham overstepped it. It is not to save a people, not to uphold the idea of the state, not to appease angry gods that Abraham does it. If there could be any question of the deity being angry, then he was not angry only at Abraham, and Abraham’s whole deed stands in no relation to the universal, it is a purely private undertaking. While the tragic hero is therefore great by his ethical virtue, Abraham is great by a purely personal virtue. There is no higher expression for the ethical in Abraham’s life than this, that the father must love the son. There can be no question at all of the ethical in the sense of the ethical life. Insolar as the universal was present, it was still latent in Isaac, hidden so to speak in Isaac’s loins, and must then cry out with Isaac’s mouth: “Do not do it, you are destroying everything.”

Why does Abraham do it then? For God’s sake, and what is altogether identical with this, for his own sake. He does it for God’s sake because God demands this proof of his faith; he does it for his own sake so that he can prove it. Hence the unity is quite rightly expressed in the word always used to denote this relation: it is a trial, a temptation. A temptation; but what does that mean? That which ordinarily tempts a person, to be sure, is whatever would keep him from doing his duty, but here the temptation is the ethical itself, which would keep him from doing God’s will. But what then is the duty? Well, the duty is precisely the expression for God’s will.

Here the necessity of a new category for understanding Abraham becomes apparent. Such a relationship to the divine is unknown in paganism. The tragic hero does not enter into any private relation to the deity, but the ethical is the divine and therefore the paradox in it can be mediated in the universal.

Abraham cannot be mediated, which can also be expressed by saying he cannot speak. As soon as I speak, I express the universal, and if I do not do that, then no one can understand me. As soon as Abraham wants to express himself in the universal, he must say that his situation is a temptation, for he has no higher expression for the universal that ranks above the universal he oversteps.

While Abraham therefore arouses my admiration, he appalls me as well. Whoever denies himself and sacrifices himself for duty gives up the finite in order to grasp the infinite and is secure enough; the tragic hero gives up the certain for the even more certain, and the eye of the beholder rests confidently upon him. But the one who gives up the universal in order to grasp something still higher that is not the universal, what does he do? Is it possible that this can be anything other than a temptation? And if it is possible but the single individual then made a mistake, what salvation is there for him? He suffers all the pain of the tragic hero, he destroys his joy in the world, he renounces everything and perhaps at the same moment blocks himself from the sublime joy which was so precious to him that he would buy it at any price. The observer cannot understand him at all, nor confidently rest his eyes upon him. Perhaps what the believer intends cannot be done at all since it is indeed inconceivable. Or if it could be done but the individual has misunderstood the deity, what salvation would there be for him? The tragic hero needs and demands tears, and where was the envious eye so arid that it could not weep with Agamemnon? But where was the one whose soul was so confused that he had the audacity to weep over Abraham? The tragic hero accomplishes his deed at a definite moment of time, but in the course of time he does something no less significant; he visits someone whose soul is enveloped by sorrow, whose breast cannot get air because of its anguished sighs, whose thoughts are pregnant with tears, weigh heavy upon him. The tragic hero appears before him, breaks the spell of sorrow, loosens the corset, and elicits the tears as the sufferer forgets his sufferings in the tragic hero’s. One cannot weep over Abraham. One approaches him with a religious awe, as Israel approached Mount Sinai.4 What if, then, the lonely man who climbs Mount Moriah, which at its peak towers sky-high over the plains of Aulis, what if he is not a sleepwalker who goes safely across the precipice while the one standing at the foot of the mountain looking on trembles with anxiety and out of respect and fright does not once dare call to him — what if he becomes flustered, what if he has made a mistake! — Thanks! Again thanks be to a man who offers the one who has
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been overcome by life’s sorrows and left behind naked, offers him the expression, the leaf of the word, with which he can hide his wretchedness.25 Thanks be to you, great Shakespeare, you who can say everything, everything, everything exactly as it is—and yet why did you never give expression to this torment? Did you perhaps reserve it for yourself, like the beloved whose name one cannot hear the world even to mention?26 For a poet buys this power of the word to tell everybody else’s dark secrets at the cost of a little secret he cannot divulge, and a poet is not an apostle, he casts out devils only by the power of the devil.27

But if the ethical is indeed teleologically suspended in this manner, how then does the single individual in whom it is suspended exist? He exists as the particular in contrast to the universal. Does he then sin? For this is the form of sin, viewed ideally, so that even though the child does not sin because it is not conscious of its existence as such, its existence, viewed ideally, is nevertheless still sin, and the ethical exacts its claim upon the child at every moment. If one denies that this form can be repeated in such a way that it is not sin, then judgment has fallen upon Abraham. How then did Abraham exist? He believed. That is the paradox by which he remains at the apex and which he cannot make clear to anyone else, for the paradox is that he as the single individual places himself in an absolute relation to the absolute. Is he justified? His justification is again the paradox, for if he is justified, it is not by virtue of being something universal but by virtue of being the particular.

How does the single individual assure himself that he is justified? It is easy enough to level all existence to the idea of the state or the idea of a society. If one does that, then it is also easy enough to mediate, for then one does not come at all to the paradox that the single individual as the particular is higher than the universal, which I can also express appropriately in a proposition of Pythagoras to the effect that the odd number is more perfect than the even number.28 Insofar as one occasionally

hears a reply tending toward the paradox in our age, it generally goes like this: “One judges it according to the outcome.” A hero who has become an offense or stumbling block29 to his age in the awareness that he is a paradox that cannot make itself intelligible cries out confidently to his contemporaries: “The outcome will indeed show that I was justified.” This cry is rarely heard in our age, for just as it does not produce heroes, which is its defect, so also it has the advantage of producing few caricatures. When someone in our age hears these words, “it will be judged according to the outcome,” then it is clear right away with whom one has the honor of speaking. Those who talk this way are a numerous lot whom I shall designate by the common name of “associate professors.” Secured in life, they live in their thoughts; they have a permanent position and secure prospects in a well-organized state; they have centuries or indeed even millennia between themselves and the earthquakes of existence; they do not fear that such things can be repeated, for what indeed would the police and newspapers say? Their task in life is to judge the great men and to judge them according to the outcome. Such conduct toward the great betrays a curious mixture of arrogance and wretchedness—arrogance because they feel called to pass judgment, wretchedness because they do not feel their lives are even remotely related to those of the great. Surely anyone with only a smattering of nobility of nature30 has not become a completely cold and clammy worm, and when he approaches the great it can never escape his mind that since the creation of the world it has been customary for the result to come last and that if one is in truth to learn anything from the great, it is precisely the beginning to which one must be attentive. If the one who is to act wants to judge himself by the outcome, then he will never begin. Even though the outcome may delight the whole world, it cannot help the hero, for he only came to know the outcome when the whole thing was over, and he did not become a hero by that but by the fact that he began.

Moreover, the outcome (insofar as it is finitude’s answer to the infinite question) is in its dialectic altogether heterogeneous to the hero’s existence. Or would it be possible to prove that Abraham was justified in relating himself as the single individual to the universal by the fact that he

26 See the dedication by T. T. (presumably the editor, Thomas Thorpe) that prefaced the first edition of the sonnets and A Lover’s Complaint by the English poet and dramatist William Shakespeare (1564–1616).
29 Cf. 1 Corinthians 1:23.
30 creatus autem ignoti
got Isaac by a miracle? If Abraham actually had sacrificed Isaac, would he therefore have been less justified?

But people are curious about the outcome, just as they are about the outcome of a book. They do not want to know anything about the anxiety, the distress, the paradox. They flirt esthetically with the outcome; it comes just as unexpectedly but also just as easily as a prize in the lottery, and when they have heard the outcome they are edified. And yet no robber of churches who toils in iron is so base a criminal as the one who plunders the holy in this way, and not even Judas, who sold his Lord for thirty pieces of silver, is more contemptible than the one who peddles greatness in this way.

It goes against the grain for me to speak inhumanly about the great, to let it darken into an indefinite form at a great distance, to let it be great without bringing out the human element in it, without which it ceases to be great. For it is not what happens to me that makes me great but what I do, and there is surely no one who thinks that a man became great because he won the grand prize in the lottery. Even if a person were born in humble circumstances, I would still insist that he not be so inhuman towards himself as to be unable to imagine the king's castle except at a distance, vaguely dreaming about its greatness and wanting thereby to elevate and destroy it at the same time because he elevated it in a base manner. I insist that he be human enough to step forward there with confidence and dignity as well. He must not be so inhuman as rudely to offend everyone by storming into the king's hall from off the street, thereby losing more than the king. On the contrary, he should find pleasure in observing every dictate of propriety with glad and confident enthusiasm, which is precisely what will make him frank and open. This is only a simile, for that difference is only a very imperfect expression for the distance of spirit. I insist of every person that he must not think so inhumanly of himself that he dare not enter those palaces where not only the memory of the chosen lives but where they themselves reside. He must not rudely push himself forward and impute his kinship with them. He must be happy every time he bows before them, but he must be frank and confident and always be something more than a nurse's aide, for if he does not want to be more than that, he will never be admitted there. And what will help him is precisely the anxiety and distress in which the great

81 Matthew 20:15.

are tried, for otherwise, if he has a scrap of backbone they will merely arouse his righteous envy. And what can be great only at a distance, what people want to make into something great by the help of empty and hollow phrases — that they themselves destroy.

Who was ever so great in the world as that favored woman, the mother of God, the Virgin Mary? And yet how does one speak of her? That she was favored among women does not make her great, and if it did not so oddly happen that those who hear can think just as inhumanly as those who speak, then every young girl must indeed ask: "Why was I not also favored?" And if I had nothing else to say, I would not at all dismiss such a question as stupid, for with respect to a favor, abstractly viewed, every person is equally entitled. One leaves out the distress, the anxiety, the paradox. My thought is as pure as anyone's, and the thought of one who can think this way will surely become pure, and if that is not so, he has something frightful to expect as well. For anyone who has once evoked these images cannot get rid of them again, and if he sins against them, then they take terrible revenge through a quiet wrath more frightful than the clamor of ten ferocious critics. Certainly Mary bore the child miraculously, but it still went with her after the manner of women, and this time is one of anxiety, distress, and paradox. The angel was surely a ministering spirit, but he was not an obliging spirit who went to the other young maidens in Israel and said: "Do not despise Mary, something extraordinary is happening to her." The angel appeared only to Mary, and no one could understand her. After all, what woman was more offended against than Mary? And is it not also true here that the one whom God blesses he curses in the same breath? This is the spirit's understanding of Mary, and she is by no means — which shocks me to say but is even more shocking that people have thoughtlessly and frivolously understood her in this way — she is by no means a lady who parades in her finery and plays with a divine child. When she then nevertheless says, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord," she is therefore great, and I think it should not be difficult to explain why she became the mother of God. She needs no worldly admiration, just as little as Abraham needs tears, for she was no heroine and he was no hero, but they both by no means became greater than these by being exempt from distress and torment and the paradox but became that through them.

It is great when the poet in presenting his tragic hero for public admiration dares to say: “Weep for him, for he deserves it.” For it is great to deserve the tears of those who deserve to shed tears; it is great that the poet dares to keep the crowd under control, dares to chastise people so that each examines himself as to whether he is worthy to weep for the hero, for the wastewater of blubberers is a debasement of the holy. Yet greater than all this is that the knight of faith dares to say even to the noble person who wants to weep for him: “Do not weep for me, but weep for yourself.”

One is moved, one returns to those beautiful times when sweet, tender longings lead one to the goal of one’s desire, to see Christ walking about in the promised land. One forgets the anxiety, the distress, the paradox. Was it so easy a matter not to make a mistake? Was it not appalling that this person who walked among others was God? Was it not terrifying to sit down to eat with him? Was it so easy a matter to become an apostle? But the outcome, the eighteen centuries, it helps; it lends a hand to that paltry deception whereby one deceives oneself and others. I do not feel brave enough to be contemporary with such events, but for that reason I do not judge harshly of those who made a mistake nor slightly of those who saw the right thing.

But I return to Abraham. During the time before the outcome, Abraham was either at every moment a murderer or we are at the paradox that is higher than all mediations.

The story of Abraham contains, then, a teleological suspension of the ethical. As the single individual he became higher than the universal. This is the paradox that cannot be mediated. How he entered into it is just as inexplicable as how he remains in it. If that is not the case with Abraham, then he is not even a tragic hero but a murderer. To want to continue calling him the father of faith, to speak about it to people who do not concern themselves with anything but words, is thoughtless. A human being can become a tragic hero by his own strength, but not the knight of faith. When a person sets out on what in a certain sense is the hard way of the tragic hero, many will be able to advise him; the one who goes faith’s narrow way, him no one can advise, no one can understand.

Faith is a miracle, and yet no human being is excluded from it, for that which unites all human life is passion, and faith is a passion.

**Problem II: Is there an absolute duty to God?**

The ethical is the universal and as such in turn the divine. It is therefore right to say that every duty, after all, is duty to God, but if no more can be said, then one is saying as well that I really have no duty to God. Duty becomes duty by being referred to God, but in the duty itself I do not enter into relation to God. For instance, it is a duty to love one’s neighbor. It is a duty by its being referred to God, but in the duty I do not enter into a relation to God but to the neighbor I love. If I say then in this connection that it is my duty to love God, I am really only stating a tautology insofar as “God” here is understood in an entirely abstract sense as the divine, i.e. the universal, i.e. the duty. The whole existence of the human race rounds itself off in itself as a perfect sphere and the ethical is at once its limit and its completion. God becomes an invisible vanishing point, an impotent thought, his power being only in the ethical, which completes existence. Insofar as it might occur to a person to want to love God in some sense other than the one indicated here, he is being

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80 Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–1781), German dramatist, essayist, and philosopher whose writings had a formative influence upon Schopenhauer.

83 Edward II (1312–1327) was king of England from 1312 to 1327.

84 Denis Diderot (1713–1784) was a French author and encyclopedist.

85 Lessing’s essay in that collection is retrieved in Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s ärztliche Schriften, 1, xxxii (Berlin: Nicolaischen, 1825–26), xxxv. p. 233. See KSKB 1747–52.

86 Cf. Immanuel Kant, Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason, ed. and trans. Allen Wood and George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 324, 204, 282, 3, where Kant also briefly addresses this issue with respect to Abraham and the moral law.