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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Translating the Aqedah: Transitivity Patterns and the Construction of Agency in English Renderings of Genesis 22

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Abstract

The Aqedah, the binding of Isaac narrated in Genesis 22, is one of the Hebrew Bible's most theologically charged and linguistically dense passages. This study offers a systematic philological analysis of the Masoretic Hebrew text of Genesis 22:1–19 (BHS, 5th ed.), focusing on verbal morphology, participant marking through the accusative particle ʾet (אֵת) and its discourse functions, the waw-consecutive narrative chain, and the lexical semantics of key verbs, especially nissāh (נִסָּה), with attention also to šāḥaṭ (שָׁחַט) and ʿāqad (עָקַד). Building on this philological foundation, the study applies Halliday's transitivity system within Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), together with van Leeuwen's social actor theory, to examine how agency in the Hebrew source text is preserved, reshaped, or reassigned across six major English Bible translations: the KJV (1611), RSV (1952), NIV (1978), NRSV (1989), ESV (2001), and NLT (2004). The analysis shows that the Hebrew text's grammaticalisation of agency, through verbal stems, participant marking, and narrative sequencing, constrains and helps explain the divergent agency constructions found across the translations, with implications for moral responsibility, divine sovereignty, and human volition. The findings demonstrate that close philological attention to the Hebrew original is essential for understanding how translation participates in theological and interpretive meaning-making.

Keywords: Genesis 22; Aqedah; Bible translation; Hebrew Bible; systemic functional linguistics; transitivity; agency; social actor theory; reception history

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1. Introduction

Genesis 22 has long attracted philological attention because of the remarkable density of its verbal forms, lexical choices, and syntactic sequencing within a mere nineteen verses. The narrative of the binding of Isaac (the Aqedah, from the Hebrew root ʿqd (עקד), "to bind") has generated a vast body of interpretive, homiletical, and philosophical commentary across Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Yet despite this extensive reception history, relatively little scholarly attention has been devoted to grounding the study of that reception in a sustained philological account of the Hebrew source text itself, or to tracing systematically how English Bible translators have handled those specific Hebrew features. The semantics of the Piel verb nissāh (נִסָּה), the imperative chain of verse 2, the repeated wayyiqtol narrative sequence, the accusative particle ʾet (אֶת) that marks each affected participant, and the semantic range of šāḥaṭ (שָׁחַט), including its possible sacrificial associations, all present translation challenges whose resolution shapes subsequent theological readings.

Who acts upon whom, and how does the Hebrew grammar itself encode this? How is divine command marked morphosyntactically, and how is it rendered in English? Is Abraham's response volitional, compelled, or instrumental, and what does the Hebrew verbal system permit or foreclose? How is Isaac represented as the affected participant through the Hebrew system of participant marking, and how is that representation reproduced, softened, or intensified in translation? These are not merely stylistic questions; they are philologically grounded and theologically consequential choices embedded in every act of translation.

This study proceeds from the foundational premise of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) that language does not simply reflect reality but construes it, and from the parallel premise of Biblical Hebrew philology that the grammatical system of the source text is the primary evidence against which any translation must be assessed. As Halliday (1994, p. xiii) argues, grammar "is a theory of human experience," a system through which speakers and writers construe their worlds.

This is true of Biblical Hebrew as the source system and equally true of each target-language rendering. When translators render nissāh (נִסָּה) in Genesis 22:1 as "tempted" (KJV), "tested" (RSV, NIV, NRSV, ESV), or "tested Abraham's faith" (NLT), they reflect differing translation philosophies and historical stages of English usage. These choices may be evaluated in light of

the Hebrew verb's morphology, attested semantic range, and the historical semantics of the English renderings.

Two analytical terms require definition at the outset. Foregrounding refers to the SFL concept of making a participant or process more linguistically salient through naming, activation in a process role, or selection of process type, in contrast to backgrounding, which refers to the grammatical elision or reduction of a participant's salience through pronominal substitution, passive voice, or omission (Thompson, 2004; Eggins, 2004). Activation refers to the representation of social actors as the active, dynamic forces in an activity; passivation refers to their representation as undergoing rather than performing an action (van Leeuwen, 1996, 2008). These terms are distinguished throughout from the related but non-identical concept of agency, which denotes the capacity to act, whereas activation/passivation describes the grammatical representation of that capacity, a representation that this study argues is already substantially determined at the level of the Hebrew source text before any translation decision is made.

The Aqedah presents a particularly rich site for integrated philological and transitivity analysis because it concentrates, within nineteen verses, the full range of Hebrew verbal stems, participant marking, and process types that both Biblical Hebrew grammar and SFL identify as central to the construction of narrative experience. The passage moves from a Piel verb of divine intention in v. 1, through a waw-consecutive imperative and narrative chain of command and dialogue in vv. 2, 7–8, 11–12, to the accusative-marked material processes of the sacrifice itself in vv. 9–10, and back to verbal processes of divine blessing in vv. 15–18. At each stage, the Hebrew grammar makes certain agency constructions available and forecloses others; translators then make further lexicogrammatical choices, within or against those Hebrew constraints, that subtly or dramatically reshape the distribution of agency among God, Abraham, and Isaac.

This study makes three principal contributions. First, it provides a sustained philological analysis of the Hebrew text of Genesis 22, integrating verbal morphology, participant marking, narrative syntax, and lexical semantics in close dialogue with contemporary Biblical Hebrew scholarship. Second, it combines this philological foundation with Systemic Functional Linguistics and van Leeuwen's social actor framework to analyse six major English translations, demonstrating how agency is preserved or reshaped through lexicogrammatical choice. Third, it situates these linguistic findings within the broader reception history of the Aqedah, showing

how translation philosophy interacts with the grammatical constraints of the Hebrew source text to shape theological interpretation.

1.1 Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What morphosyntactic and lexical-semantic features characterise the Hebrew source text of Genesis 22:1–19 at its key narrative moments, and what range of agency constructions does the Hebrew grammar itself make available?

RQ2: How do process type distributions in Genesis 22:1–19 vary across the six selected English translations at these same narrative moments, relative to what the Hebrew source text grammaticalises?

RQ3: How are the principal social actors (God, Abraham, Isaac, and the angel of the LORD) constructed through activation, passivation, and naming practices across the six translations, and how faithfully do these constructions track the Hebrew's own participant marking?

RQ4: What are the theological and ideological implications of the observed patterns of agency construction, with reference to the translation philosophies and theological traditions of the producing communities?

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 The Grammar of Biblical Hebrew Narrative

Biblical Hebrew narrative prose is organised around the wayyiqtol (waw-consecutive imperfect) form, the default narrative-sequential verb that advances events through a chain of temporally and logically ordered actions (Waltke & O'Connor, 1990, §§29.2–29.4; Joüon & Muraoka, 2006, §§118–119). Genesis 22 is particularly rich in such sequences. Verses 3, 6, 9, 10, and 19 each contain successive wayyiqtol forms in which the subject is named at the beginning of the chain and omitted in the verbs that follow, in accordance with standard Hebrew narrative syntax. Consequently, the explicitly named Actor at the head of the chain remains the understood Actor throughout the sequence. Thus, Abraham's naming in wayyišlaḥ ʾabrāhām

(וַיִּשְׁלַח אַבְרָהָם, “and Abraham stretched out”) anchors his agency across the subsequent coordinated verbs in verse 10.

A second grammatical resource central to this study is the accusative particle ʾet (אֶת), which typically marks a definite direct object and identifies the participant undergoing the action of a transitive verb. In Genesis 22, ʾet repeatedly precedes binkā (“your son,” v. 2), yiṣḥāq bənô (“Isaac his son,” v. 9), and, in verse 10, yādô (“his hand”), hammaʾăkelet (“the knife”), and bənô (“his son”). These markings consistently distinguish Isaac and the sacrificial instruments as affected participants rather than Actors within the climactic sequence of the narrative.

Traditional Hebrew grammars describe ʾet primarily as a marker of the Goal of a transitive verb (Waltke & O’Connor, 1990; Joüon & Muraoka, 2006). More recent scholarship, however, has shown that its distribution cannot be explained solely by syntactic function. Drawing on comparative Semitic evidence, Khan (1984) argued that object marking correlates with referential prominence, particularly definiteness and animacy, rather than with syntactic case alone. Aissen (2003) extended this insight cross-linguistically through Differential Object Marking (DOM), proposing that languages preferentially mark objects that are unusually prominent in definiteness or animacy.

Applying these insights to Biblical Hebrew, Bekins (2014a) demonstrates that although ʾet is associated with definite objects, its distribution correlates more closely with affectedness, that is, the extent to which a participant undergoes a discernible change of state, than with definiteness alone. Zewi (2013) further observes that object marking interacts with discourse structure and information packaging, indicating that ʾet reflects both semantic and discourse-pragmatic considerations.

Evidence from Biblical Hebrew poetry, prose, and the closely related Moabite Mesha Inscription shows that object marking is systematic but not mechanically obligatory. Genre, discourse structure, and the semantic properties of the object all influence whether ʾet is realised. These findings suggest that an affectedness-based account provides a broader explanation of the distribution of ʾet than a purely syntactic Goal analysis.

For the passages examined in this study, however, the Goal and affectedness analyses converge in Genesis 22:9–10. Isaac and the sacrificial instruments are definite referents occurring in narrative prose and undergo clear changes of state as the events unfold. Under both frameworks, they are predicted to receive overt ʾet marking, precisely as they are marked in the Hebrew text.

Accordingly, this study retains Goal as the descriptive category for the transitivity analysis in Section 4, ensuring consistency with Halliday's SFL framework, while recognising the affectedness and DOM literature as providing the more comprehensive explanation for the broader distribution of ʾet in Biblical Hebrew.

A third grammatical resource is the Hebrew verbal stem system. Biblical Hebrew verbs are organised into a limited set of stems (Qal, Niphal, Piel, Pual, Hiphil, Hophal, and Hithpael), each modifying a root's meaning through distinctions such as simple, intensive, causative, passive, or reflexive action (Waltke & O'Connor, 1990, §§21–27). Stem selection therefore contributes directly to the representation of agency.

In Genesis 22, nissāh (נִסָּה) in verse 1 appears in the Piel stem, commonly associated with intensive or factitive action, whereas wayyaʿăqōd (וַיַּעֲקֹד) in verse 9 and lišḥōṭ (לִשְׁחֹט) in verse 10 occur in the Qal stem, presenting the binding and intended slaughter as straightforward transitive material processes rather than causative or intensified actions. These grammatical properties are established independently of any translation and therefore provide the philological baseline against which the six English versions analysed in Section 4 are evaluated.

2.2 Systemic Functional Linguistics and the Transitivity System

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) is a framework developed principally by Halliday (1985, 1994) and further elaborated through collaborative work with Hasan (1989) and Matthiessen (2004), as well as through subsequent theoretical developments by Matthiessen (1995), Eggins (2004), and Thompson (2004). The framework conceptualises language as a social semiotic system organised around three simultaneous metafunctions: the ideational (construing experience), the interpersonal (enacting social relationships), and the textual (organising messages). This study focuses primarily on the experiential dimension of the ideational metafunction, through which language represents processes, participants, and circumstances.

Within this framework, the transitivity system provides the principal analytical resource. Halliday and Matthiessen (2004, p. 170) define transitivity not simply in terms of whether a verb governs a direct object, but as the grammatical system through which experience is construed. They distinguish six process types: material (doing and happening), mental (sensing), relational (being and having), verbal (saying), behavioural (physiological and psychological behaviour), and existential (existing). Each process type is associated with

characteristic participant roles. Material processes, for example, involve Actors and Goals; mental processes involve Sensers and Phenomena; verbal processes involve Sayers, Receivers, and Verbiage; while relational processes involve Carriers and Attributes or Tokens and Values.

This framework is particularly well suited to the analysis of Genesis 22 because it enables systematic comparison between the grammatical representation of agency in the Hebrew source text and its reconstruction in English translation. Although the Hebrew text establishes important participant relations through its verbal morphology, narrative sequencing, and ʾ**et**-marked objects, translators retain considerable freedom in how those relations are realised in English. A single Hebrew clause may therefore be rendered through different transitivity configurations, foregrounding or backgrounding participants, representing God's activity through different process types, or altering the salience of Isaac while remaining broadly faithful to the source text. The transitivity system thus provides a principled means of examining how translation choices reshape the distribution of agency without losing sight of the grammatical constraints imposed by the Hebrew original.

2.3 Van Leeuwen's Social Actor Framework

Van Leeuwen's (1996, 2008) social actor framework provides a complementary perspective on agency in discourse. Whereas transitivity analysis examines the grammatical organisation of processes and participants, social actor analysis focuses on how participants are discursively represented: whether they are included or excluded, activated or passivated, personalised or impersonalised, and identified by name, function, or relational role. In the context of biblical narrative, this framework is equally applicable to divine and human participants.

This study draws primarily on two dimensions of the framework: activation/passivation and identification. Activation refers to the representation of social actors as the dynamic performers of actions, while passivation represents them as the recipients or affected participants of those actions (van Leeuwen, 1996, 2008). As demonstrated in Section 2.1, the Hebrew text of Genesis 22 establishes many of these participant relations through its verbal morphology and ʾet-marking. English translations, however, may preserve or reshape these patterns through their lexicogrammatical choices.

Identification concerns the linguistic resources through which participants are represented. Social actors may be identified by proper name, pronoun, or relational designation, such as your son, your only son, or your beloved son. These choices influence narrative prominence,

interpersonal proximity, and the attribution of agency without necessarily altering the propositional meaning of the narrative.

The integration of Biblical Hebrew philology, Halliday's transitivity system, and van Leeuwen's social actor framework provides a comprehensive analytical model for this study. Philological analysis establishes the grammatical resources of the Hebrew source text; transitivity analysis examines how processes and participant roles are realised in translation; and social actor analysis explores how those participants are discursively represented across the translated narratives. Together, these complementary frameworks enable a systematic investigation of how agency is preserved, redistributed, or reinterpreted across the English translations of Genesis 22.

2.4 Translation Studies: Philosophy and Agency Encoding

Translation studies has long distinguished between approaches that prioritise close correspondence to the linguistic form of the source text and those that prioritise naturalness and communicative effect in the target language. Nida (1964) and Nida and Taber (1969) famously characterised this distinction as one between formal equivalence and dynamic equivalence, while later work has refined these categories to accommodate a continuum of translation strategies rather than a rigid dichotomy (Wilt, 2003). More recently, Strauss and De Waard (2011) proposed the concept of optimal equivalence, which seeks to balance fidelity to the source text with natural expression in the receptor language.

The classification of the six English translations examined in this study follows established scholarship (Nida & Taber, 1969; Wilt, 2003; Strauss & De Waard, 2011) and is corroborated by the translators' own prefaces and committee statements, which are summarised in Table 1. The KJV, RSV, and ESV broadly represent formal equivalence traditions, reflecting explicit commitments to preserving the lexical and syntactic structure of the Hebrew text (Norton, 2000; Crossway, 2001). At the other end of the spectrum, the NLT adopts a dynamic equivalence philosophy, emphasising natural communication and equivalent effect (Tyndale House, 2004). The NIV occupies an intermediate position, describing its objective as achieving the "closest natural equivalent" of the source text, an approach that corresponds closely to Strauss and De Waard's (2011) notion of optimal equivalence (International Bible Society, 1978).

These translation philosophies operate within particular historical moments of English usage. The KJV's rendering of nissāh (נִסָּה) as "tempted" (1611), for instance, reflects seventeenth-

century English semantics, where "tempt" could mean "test" or "try" without necessarily implying moral enticement. Subsequent translations, produced in twentieth- and twenty-first-century English, necessarily reflect shifts in lexical meaning. Evaluating translation choices therefore requires attention not only to translation philosophy and source-language meaning but also to the historical semantics of the receptor language at the point of translation.

Taken together, translation philosophy, historical language change, and the grammatical constraints of the Hebrew source text provide the interpretive framework for the present analysis. While translation philosophy influences the degree to which translators reproduce or restructure Hebrew grammatical patterns, historical semantics reminds us that lexical choices must be interpreted within their original linguistic contexts. The comparative analysis in Section 4 therefore evaluates agency encoding not in isolation, but in relation to the interaction of Hebrew grammar, translation philosophy, and the historical development of English.

3. Corpus and Methodology

3.1 Corpus Selection and Rationale

The study examines Genesis 22:1–19 across six major English Bible translations selected to represent a range of translation philosophies, historical periods, and ecclesiastical traditions. The Hebrew source text is the Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia (BHS, 5th ed., 1997), the standard critical edition of the Masoretic Text (MT).

Because all six English translations are based primarily on the Masoretic Text, the study does not investigate textual-critical variants. Differences observed across the corpus are therefore analysed as translational decisions rather than as consequences of divergent Hebrew source texts. Table 1 summarises the corpus.

Table 1: Corpus of English Bible Translations

Abbrev.	Year	Full Title	Translation Philosophy	Tradition / Sponsor
KJV	1611	*King James Version (Authorised Version)*	Formal equivalence	Church of England; widely used across Protestant traditions
RSV	1952	*Revised Standard Version*	Formal equivalence	National Council of Churches (USA)

Abbrev.	Year	Full Title	Translation Philosophy	Tradition / Sponsor
NIV	1978	*New International Version*	Optimal equivalence	International Bible Society
NRSV	1989	*New Revised Standard Version*	Formal equivalence	National Council of Churches (USA)
ESV	2001	*English Standard Version*	Essentially literal	Crossway
NLT	2004	*New Living Translation*	Dynamic equivalence	Tyndale House Publishers

Note. *Translation philosophies follow the classifications adopted in Section 2.4 and are supported by the translators' published prefaces (Nida & Taber, 1969; Wilt, 2003; Strauss & De Waard, 2011).*

The corpus is intentionally limited to widely used English Protestant and ecumenical translations in order to examine how agency is represented within the dominant tradition of English Bible translation. Although Jewish translations, such as the NJPS, would provide a valuable basis for broader comparative study, they fall outside the scope of the present investigation and are identified as a direction for future research in the concluding section.

3.2 Analytical Procedure

The analysis proceeded in five stages. First, the Hebrew text of Genesis 22:1–19 (BHS) was analysed independently of the English translations to identify verbal stems, tense and aspect, participant marking, and other philological features. Second, the corresponding passages from the six English translations were aligned with the Hebrew text for parallel comparison.

Third, each translated clause was coded for transitivity process type (material, mental, relational, verbal, behavioural, or existential) and participant roles (e.g., Actor, Goal, Senser, Phenomenon) following Halliday and Matthiessen (2004). Where classification was potentially ambiguous, particularly at the boundary between behavioural and material processes, decisions were guided by whether the clause encoded an action affecting an identifiable Goal or a non-transitive physiological behaviour.

Fourth, the principal participants (God, Abraham, Isaac, and the angel of the LORD) were analysed using van Leeuwen's (1996, 2008) social actor framework, with particular attention to activation, passivation, and patterns of identification through naming, pronouns, and relational

expressions. Finally, four narratively significant passages (Genesis 22:1–2, 9–10, 11–12, and 15–18) were selected for detailed qualitative comparison because they concentrate the principal grammatical and theological developments of the narrative.

To enhance analytical consistency, a random sample comprising approximately 25% of the coded clauses was independently annotated by the second author. Inter-coder agreement, calculated using Cohen's kappa, was **κ = .84**, indicating strong reliability. Any disagreements were resolved through discussion with reference to the established coding criteria. The Hebrew philological analysis was independently verified against HALOT, BDB, and the reference grammars of Waltke and O'Connor (1990) and Joüon and Muraoka (2006).

3.3 Hebrew Philological Methodology

The comparative analysis is grounded in a philological examination of the Masoretic Hebrew text (*Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, 5th ed.), following the methodological principles of Waltke and O'Connor (1990) and Joüon and Muraoka (2006). Rather than treating the Hebrew text as background to the English translations, the analysis establishes the grammatical and semantic properties of the source text before examining how they are represented in translation.

The philological analysis focuses on four complementary dimensions. First, each verb in the four focus passages is analysed for verbal stem, tense and aspect, and syntactic function, with particular attention to the narrative role of the wayyiqtol chain. Second, participant marking is examined through the accusative particle ʾet, pronominal suffixes, and nominal constructions in order to trace participant roles and referential continuity across the narrative.

Third, the lexical semantics of the principal verbs nissāh, šāḥaṭ, and ʿāqad, together with selected supporting lexemes, are examined using HALOT and BDB, supplemented where appropriate by recent scholarship on Biblical Hebrew philology. Particular attention is given to semantic range, contextual usage, and historical English lexical development where these bear directly on translation choices.

Finally, the analysis draws on recent research on Differential Object Marking (Khan, 1984; Aissen, 2003; Bekins, 2014a, 2014b; Zewi, 2013) to contextualise the function of ʾet beyond the traditional grammatical description found in standard reference grammars. While the transitivity analysis in Section 4 retains Goal as its descriptive category for consistency with Halliday's framework, the broader philological discussion evaluates this coding in light of affectedness-based accounts of object marking.

Patterns of participant activation, passivation, and narrative sequencing established in the Hebrew text are then compared with their representation across the six English translations.

4. Analysis and Discussion

Table 2 reports results (the frequency distribution of process types).

Table 2: Process Type Frequency Distribution Across Six Translations (Genesis 22:1–19)

Process Type	KJV	RSV	NIV	NRSV	ESV	NLT
Material	38 (64%)	37 (64%)	36 (61%)	36 (61%)	38 (64%)	33 (53%)
Mental	7 (12%)	7 (12%)	8 (14%)	8 (14%)	7 (12%)	9 (15%)
Verbal	9 (15%)	9 (16%)	9 (15%)	9 (15%)	9 (15%)	9 (15%)
Relational	4 (7%)	4 (7%)	5 (8%)	5 (8%)	4 (7%)	8 (13%)
Behavioural	1 (2%)	1 (2%)	1 (2%)	1 (2%)	1 (2%)	3 (5%)
Existential	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	59	58	59	59	59	62

Note: Counts represent the number of clause-level process tokens of each type across all 19 verses per translation. Percentages of total clause count are given in parentheses. Minor inter-translation variation in total clause count reflects differing syntactic segmentation choices: the NLT's higher total (62 vs 59) reflects its tendency to split compound clauses and introduce additional descriptive or explanatory elements not present in the Hebrew. For example, at Genesis 22:6 the NLT adds the clause 'as they walked on together' as a separate process unit, elaborating an implicit Hebrew circumstantial that other translations do not segment as a full clause. **Source: Authors' analysis.**

4.1 The Hebrew Source Text: A Philological Analysis

This section establishes the grammatical and semantic properties of the Hebrew text of Genesis 22:1–19 before examining how they are represented in the six English translations. Table 2 summarises the overall distribution of process types across the translations, while Table 2a identifies the principal Hebrew verbs discussed in the philological analysis.

Table 2a: Key Hebrew Verbs Analysed in Section 4.1

Hebrew Form	Root	Stem / Conjugation	Basic Meaning	Role in the Analysis
נִסָּה (*nissāh*)	נסה	Piel perfect	to test, to try	Divine agency toward Abraham (§4.1.1)
אָהַב (*ʾāhabtā*)	אהב	Qal perfect (2ms)	to love	Relational intensification of Isaac (§4.1.2)
וַיַּעֲקֹד (*wayyaʿăqōd*)	עקד	Qal *wayyiqtol*	to bind	Abraham's agency; Isaac as Goal (§4.1.4)
לִשְׁחֹט (lišḥōṭ)	שחט	Qal infinitive construct	to slaughter	Sacrificial process (contextual); Isaac as Goal (§4.1.4)
וַיִּקְרָא (*wayyiqrāʾ*)	קרא	Qal *wayyiqtol*	to call	Divine/angelic intervention (§4.1.5)
נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי (*niš-baʿtî*)	שבע	Niphal perfect (1cs)	to swear (an oath)	Divine blessing and oath (§4.1.6)

Note: Stem and conjugation identifications follow Waltke and O'Connor (1990) and Joüon and Muraoka (2006); glosses follow HALOT (Koehler, Baumgartner, & Stamm, 2001) and BDB (Brown, Driver, & Briggs, 1906). Full philological discussion, including syntactic context and semantic range, follows in §§4.1.1–4.1.6. **Source: Authors' analysis.**

4.1.1 Divine Intention: The Semantics of nissāh (נִסָּה) (v. 1)

The narrative opens with *wəhāʾĕlōhîm nissāh ʾet-ʾabrāhām* (וְהָאֱלֹהִים נִסָּה אֶת־אַבְרָהָם; 'and God tested Abraham'). *Nissāh* (נִסָּה) is a Piel perfect, third-person masculine singular, from the root *nsh* (נסה). HALOT (Koehler, Baumgartner, & Stamm, 2001, Vol. 3, p. 702) glosses the root 'to test, to try, to put to the test', and the related noun *massāh* (מַסָּה) is consistently distinguished in biblical usage from temptation toward sin.

The Piel stem here carries a resultative-evaluative force: God's action is directed toward producing a demonstrated outcome (Abraham's proven character) rather than toward inducing wrongdoing. Syntactically, God is the subject of a transitive verb with Abraham as direct object, marked by the accusative particle *ʾet* (אֶת), a construction that unambiguously activates God as Actor performing a directed process upon Abraham as Goal.

The Hebrew therefore grammaticalises, at the outset, a clear Actor–Goal relation between God and Abraham. This is a claim about the Hebrew verb's own semantic range; whether the English

gloss 'tempt' introduces epistemic uncertainty foreign to that range is a separate question about the historical semantics of the English lexeme itself, addressed fully in 4.2.1 below.

4.1.2 The Command: Imperative Syntax and Intensification (v. 2)

Verse 2 concentrates the narrative's most significant imperative syntax: *qaḥ-nāʾ ʾet-binkā ʾet-yəḥîdkā ʾăšer-ʾāhabtā ʾet-yiṣḥāq wəlek-lekā ʾel-ʾereṣ hammōriyyāh wəhaʿălēhū šām ləʿōlāh* (קַח־נָא אֶת־בִּנְךָ אֶת־יְחִידְךָ אֲשֶׁר־אָהַבְתָּ אֶת־יִצְחָק וְלֶךְ־לְךָ אֶל־אֶרֶץ הַמֹּרִיָּה וְהַעֲלֵהוּ שָׁם לְעֹלָה; 'Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering'). The chain *qaḥ...wəlek-lekā...wəhaʿălēhū* (קַח...וְלֶךְ־לְךָ...וְהַעֲלֵהוּ) is a sequence of imperative and cohortative-consecutive forms that drives the divine command forward as a series of material-process directives.

Isaac is triply identified before he is named (*binkā* (בִּנְךָ) ('your son'), *yəḥîdkā* (יְחִידְךָ) ('your only son'), *ʾăšer-ʾāhabtā* (אֲשֶׁר־אָהַבְתָּ) ('whom you love')) each noun phrase introduced by the accusative particle, so that the Hebrew grammar itself intensifies Isaac's relational significance precisely at the moment it marks him as the eventual Goal of the sacrificial act named in the following verses. The verb *ʾāhab* (אָהַב) ('to love') here appears as a Qal perfect with second-person suffix, a stative-affective verb whose selection at this structural position (immediately before Isaac's proper name) is itself a Hebrew-internal foregrounding device, independent of any translation choice.

4.1.3 Dialogue and the Sacrificial Lexicon (vv. 7–8)

The dialogue between Abraham and Isaac requires separate philological attention because it is the one point at which Isaac is activated as Sayer rather than passivated as Goal. Verse 7 reads: *wayyōʾmer yiṣḥāq ʾel-ʾabrāhām ʾābîw wayyōʾmer ʾābî* (וַיֹּאמֶר יִצְחָק אֶל־אַבְרָהָם אָבִיו וַיֹּאמֶר אָבִי; 'and Isaac said to Abraham his father, and said, My father'). *Wayyōʾmer* (וַיֹּאמֶר) is a Qal *wayyiqtol*, with Isaac explicitly named as Sayer, the only material or verbal process in the entire narrative in which Isaac, rather than Abraham or God, occupies the Actor/Sayer slot.

The vocative *ʾābî* (אָבִי) ('my father') is a construct noun with first-person singular suffix, marking the hierarchical relationship even within this moment of activation. Isaac's question in verse 7 is: *hinnēh hāʾēš wəhāʿēṣim wəʾayyēh haśśeh ləʿōlāh* (הִנֵּה הָאֵשׁ וְהָעֵצִים וְאַיֵּה הַשֶּׂה לְעֹלָה; 'Behold the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?'). Abraham's response in verse 8 is: *wayyōʾmer ʾabrāhām ʾĕlōhîm yirʾeh-lō haśśeh ləʿōlāh bənî* (וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָהָם

אֱלֹהִים יִרְאֶה־לּוֹ הַשֶּׂה לְעֹלָה בְּנִי; 'And Abraham said, God will provide for himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son'). The noun *śeh* (שֶׂה), which HALOT glosses broadly as 'a member of the flock, sheep or goat' rather than a lexeme specifying species, a semantic imprecision in the Hebrew itself, not an interpretive gap introduced by translation, that heightens the narrative's suspense over the sacrificial victim's identity.

4.1.4 The Climactic Action: Binding and Knife-Raising (vv. 9–10)

Verse 9 advances through a dense *wayyiqtol* chain (*wayyābōʾû...wayyiben...wayyaʿărōk...wayyaʿăqōd* (וַיָּבֹאוּ...וַיִּבֶן...וַיַּעֲרֹךְ...וַיַּעֲקֹד; 'and they came...and he built...and he arranged...and he bound')) culminating in *wayyaʿăqōd ʾet-yiṣḥāq bənô* (וַיַּעֲקֹד אֶת־יִצְחָק בְּנוֹ; 'and he bound Isaac his son'). *Wayyaʿăqōd* (וַיַּעֲקֹד), from the root *ʿqd* (עקד), is a Qal wayyiqtol, presenting the binding as a simple active transitive process and its object, *yiṣḥāq bənô* (יִצְחָק בְּנוֹ), is marked by *ʾet* (אֶת). This construction unambiguously activates Abraham (the subject carried forward from the head of the chain) as Actor while passivating Isaac as the affected Goal. The root *ʿqd* (עקד) is a hapax legomenon in this specific verbal form within the Hebrew Bible, occurring here alone in the binding narrative, though the later rabbinic noun *ʿăqēdāh* (עֲקֵדָה) (the traditional Hebrew title for the episode) does not itself occur in the Genesis text and is a post-biblical coinage (Levenson, 1993, p. 67).

Verse 10 intensifies this pattern: *wayyišlaḥ ʾabrāhām ʾet-yādô wayyiqqaḥ ʾet-hammaʾăkelet lišḥōṭ ʾet-bənô* (וַיִּשְׁלַח אַבְרָהָם אֶת־יָדוֹ וַיִּקַּח אֶת־הַמַּאֲכֶלֶת לִשְׁחֹט אֶת־בְּנוֹ). The clause-initial *wayyišlaḥ* (וַיִּשְׁלַח) ('and he stretched out') is a Qal *wayyiqtol* with Abraham explicitly named as subject; *wayyiqqaḥ* (וַיִּקַּח) ('and he took') continues the chain with the subject elided, as standard Hebrew narrative syntax permits once the Actor has been established.

The infinitive construct *lišḥōṭ* (לִשְׁחֹט) ('to slaughter'), from the Qal root *šḥṭ* (שׁחט), is frequently associated with cultic sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible, but its semantic range is broader than a cultic gloss alone would suggest. HALOT records the same root used of everyday animal slaughter for food or trade (e.g., Gen 37:31, where Joseph's brothers slaughter a goat to fabricate evidence of his death) and of large-scale, non-cultic killing of people (e.g., 2 Kgs 10:7; 25:7), alongside its more generic near-synonym *hrg* ('to kill') (HALOT, Vol. 4, pp. 1344–1345; BDB, p. 1006). The root therefore does not carry an inherent or exclusive cultic connotation; whether a given occurrence of *šḥṭ* evokes sacrificial ritual depends on its narrative and lexical context (here, the explicit framing of Isaac as the *ʿōlāh*, 'burnt offering,' in verses 2 and 7–8) rather than

on any cultic meaning intrinsic to the verb itself. In Genesis 22:10, it is this surrounding sacrificial vocabulary, and not *lišḥōṭ* in isolation, that establishes the cultic register of the act Abraham is about to perform. The threefold repetition of *ʾet* (before *yādô* (יָדוֹ) ('his hand'), *hammaʾăkelet* (הַמַּאֲכֶלֶת) ('the knife'), and *bənô* ('his son')) grammatically marks each in turn as the Goal of a successive material process, constructing an unbroken chain in which Abraham remains the sole Actor and Isaac the consistent, accusative-marked Goal.

From the affectedness perspective (Bekins, 2014a; Zewi, 2013), this marking is especially significant: Isaac and the sacrificial instruments are not merely marked as Goals but as maximally affected participants—they undergo an unambiguous, describable change of state (bound, laid on the altar, positioned for slaughter)—a semantic property that motivates the obligatory marking in Genesis 22 within broader DOM typology.

This is the decisive grammatical moment in the construction of agency in the Hebrew narrative, providing the baseline against which the English translations are evaluated.

4.1.5 Divine-Angelic Mediation (vv. 11–12)

The intervention formula in verse 11 employs the root *qrʾ* (קרא) ('to call') in the Qal *wayyiqtol*: *wayyiqrāʾ ʾēlāyw malʾak yhwh min-haššāmayim* (וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו מַלְאַךְ יְהוָה מִן הַשָּׁמָיִם; 'and the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven'). The subject *malʾak yhwh* (מַלְאַךְ יְהוָה) ('angel of the LORD') is a construct phrase that grammatically distinguishes the divine intermediary from YHWH as a named entity, while the prepositional phrase *min-haššāmayim* (מִן־הַשָּׁמָיִם) ('from heaven') is syntactically embedded in the verbal clause and explicitly marks the spatial origin of the divine speech.

The subsequent direct speech in verse 12 employs the first-person suffixed preposition *mimmennî* (מִמֶּנִּי, 'from me'), which grammatically assigns the speaker's identity to the first person even though the angel is the grammatical Sayer of the introductory verb. This ambiguity between angelic and divine speaker is not resolved syntactically in the Hebrew but is a structural feature of the text itself, reflecting a recognised Biblical Hebrew narrative technique of mediated divine presence (compare the *malʾak yhwh* (מַלְאַךְ יְהוָה) formulae elsewhere in the patriarchal narratives).

4.1.6 The Blessing (vv. 15–18)

The concluding divine speech, introduced a second time by *wayyiqrāʾ malʾak yhwh* (וַיִּקְרָא מַלְאַךְ יְהוָה) (v. 15), repeats the Qal *wayyiqtol* pattern of verse 11 and is followed by a verbal-process chain of divine oath and blessing (*niš-baʿtî* (נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי), 'I have sworn', a Niphal perfect with reflexive-declarative force appropriate to an oath formula). God (through the angel) remains Sayer throughout; Abraham is Receiver rather than Actor in this closing movement, a grammatical reversal from his sustained Actor role in verses 3–10 that formally marks the narrative's resolution.

4.2 Comparative Translation Analysis of the Six English Renderings

Having established what the Hebrew text itself grammaticalises, this section examines how each of the six translations handles these specific features, and where translation choices preserve, soften, or depart from the Hebrew's own construction of agency.

4.2.1 Testing, Tempting, or Evaluating Faith? (v. 1)

The KJV renders *nissāh* (נִסָּה) as "*God did tempt Abraham*," a rendering that requires historical-semantic evaluation, since the English verb 'tempt' has undergone significant semantic narrowing since 1611. English *tempt* possessed a broader semantic range than the contemporary verb, encompassing the senses "test," "try," and "prove" as well as moral enticement. Evidence from the *Middle English Dictionary*, Webster's (1828) *American Dictionary of the English Language*, and modern lexicography demonstrates a clear semantic narrowing of the word over time. Consequently, the KJV's wording must be interpreted within its seventeenth-century linguistic context rather than through present-day English usage. The translators selected a lexeme whose established Scriptural sense corresponded closely to the resultative-evaluative force of the Hebrew Piel verb, whereas the RSV's substitution of "tested" in 1952 reflects changing English semantics rather than a different understanding of the underlying Hebrew.

This historical qualification does not eliminate the rendering's interpretive consequences for a modern readership, however. Regardless of the translators' seventeenth-century intent, "tempt" functions differently for contemporary readers than it did in 1611, and a present-day reader encountering "God did tempt Abraham" is liable to import the modern sense of enticement toward wrongdoing, producing a reading effect at the point of reception that the Hebrew Piel form itself does not license (4.1.1). The interpretive gap that many readers now perceive between "tempt" and "test" is therefore substantially a product of subsequent semantic narrowing in English, rather than of a translational choice that departed from the Hebrew at the

moment of rendering. The RSV's 1952 revision of the KJV at this exact point, substituting "tested" for "tempt", can be read as a recognition, within the translation tradition itself, of precisely this widening gap between the archaic and present-day senses of the English word.

The RSV, NIV, NRSV, and ESV all render *nissāh* (נִסָּה) as 'tested,' which tracks the Hebrew verb's Actor–Goal structure and resultative-evaluative force described in 4.1.1 far more closely. This choice construes God's action as a material process—an external application of evaluative pressure—and remains faithful to the Hebrew verb's Actor–Goal structure and resultative-evaluative force described in Section 4.1.1. Although such a rendering is compatible with theological traditions that emphasise divine sovereignty, it is the Hebrew grammar itself, rather than any particular theological framework, that directly motivates this material-process interpretation.

The NLT's rendering ("God tested Abraham's faith") introduces a relational element absent from the Hebrew clause. Instead of presenting Abraham himself as the accusative-marked Goal, it makes *faith* the object of testing. This shift foregrounds the believer's inner disposition rather than the Actor–Goal relationship explicitly encoded in the Hebrew, reflecting the translation's dynamic equivalence orientation.

Beyond the lexical choice in verse 1, the translations converge more closely in verse 2. All six render God as the Sayer who initiates the imperative sequence described in Section 4.1.2, with Abraham functioning as the implied Actor of the commanded material processes. The differences emerge in register and in how faithfully each translation reproduces the Hebrew's triadic intensification of Isaac's relational identity (*binkā...yəḥîdkā...ʾăšer-ʾāhabtā*; בִּנְךָ...יְחִידְךָ...אֲשֶׁר־אָהַבְתָּ).

The KJV's 'thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest' preserves this triadic structure closely; the ESV preserves it faithfully, and the NIV and NRSV retain it with minor modernisation. The NLT renders the passage as 'Take your son, your only son (yes, Isaac, whom you love so much') an addition ('yes') and an intensification ('so much') that heighten emotional register beyond what the Hebrew's own construct-and-suffix intensification supports, in service of the dynamic equivalence goal of equivalent emotional impact.

4.2.2 Abraham's Agency: The Grammar of Obedience (vv. 3–10)

One of the most analytically revealing features of Genesis 22 is the sustained activation of Abraham as Actor across the long *wayyiqtol* chain of verses 3–10 described philologically in

4.1.4. The aggregate counts in Table 2 show that material processes are the dominant process type in all six translations, consistent with the Hebrew's own material-process-dominant narrative sequencing.

The distribution of these material processes among participants (and specifically, whether Abraham is named or pronominalised at key moments) reveals the most significant cross-translational divergence from the Hebrew baseline.

Table 3: Clause-Level Transitivity Coding of Genesis 22:10 Across Six Translations, Relative to the Hebrew

Trans.	Clause	Process Type	Actor	Goal	Analytical Note (relative to Hebrew *wayyišlaḥ ʾabrāhām*; וַיִּשְׁלַח אַבְרָהָם)
KJV	Abraham stretched forth his hand	Material	Abraham (named)	his hand	Full named activation, matching the Hebrew's named Actor at the head of the chain
KJV	and took the knife	Material	Abraham (elided)	the knife	Co-ordinated chain; agency continuous, as in the Hebrew
KJV	to slay his son	Material (purpose)	Abraham (implied)	his son [=Isaac]	Purpose clause; Isaac as implicit Goal
RSV	Abraham put forth his hand	Material	Abraham (named)	his hand	Named activation, matching the Hebrew; slightly restrained register vs KJV
RSV	and took the knife	Material	Abraham (elided)	the knife	Co-ordinated; agency preserved
RSV	to slay his son	Material (purpose)	Abraham (implied)	his son	Isaac as implicit Goal
NIV	He reached out his hand	Material	He [pronoun]	his hand	Pronominal; departs from the Hebrew's named Actor at the peak moment

Trans.	Clause	Process Type	Actor	Goal	Analytical Note (relative to Hebrew *wayyišlaḥ ʾabrāhām*; וַיִּשְׁלַח אַבְרָהָם)
NIV	and took the knife	Material	He [elided]	the knife	Agency continuous via pronoun; reduced salience relative to Hebrew
NIV	to slaughter his son	Material (purpose)	Abraham (implied)	his son	'Slaughter' preserves the cultic register of Hebrew *šḥṭ* (שׁחט)
NRSV	Abraham reached out his hand	Material	Abraham (named)	his hand	Named activation; restores the Hebrew's named Actor vs NIV
NRSV	and took the knife	Material	Abraham (elided)	the knife	Chain preserved; named agency continuous, as in Hebrew
NRSV	to kill his son	Material (purpose)	Abraham (implied)	his son	'Kill' reduces the cultic register of *šḥṭ* (שׁחט) relative to 'slaughter'/'slay'
ESV	Abraham reached out his hand	Material	Abraham (named)	his hand	Named activation; closest to Hebrew syntax
ESV	and took the knife	Material	Abraham (elided)	the knife	Chain; agency fully continuous, as in Hebrew
ESV	to slaughter his son	Material (purpose)	Abraham (implied)	his son	'Slaughter' preserves the cultic weight of *šḥṭ* (שׁחט); formally equivalent
NLT	He reached out	Material	He [pronoun]	,	Pronoun; 'reached out' separated from object, departing from the Hebrew's tight *ʾet* (אֶת)-marked chain
NLT	and took the knife	Material	He [elided]	the knife	Agency diffused by pronoun and colloquial split, relative to Hebrew

Trans.	Clause	Process Type	Actor	Goal	Analytical Note (relative to Hebrew *wayyišlaḥ ʾabrāhām*; וַיִּשְׁלַח אַבְרָהָם)
NLT	to kill his son	Material (purpose)	Abraham (implied)	his son	'Kill' is colloquial; reduces the sacrificial register of Hebrew *šḥṭ* (שׁחט)

*Note: SFL notation: Actor = dynamic participant performing the material process; Goal = participant affected by the material process; Process = clause-level process type and sub-type. Pronominal subjects are identified as 'He [pronoun]' to distinguish from named 'Abraham' to track activation salience relative to the Hebrew's own named Actor (*wayyišlaḥ ʾabrāhām (וַיִּשְׁלַח אַבְרָהָם)*). The 'cultic register' language in the analytical notes for šḥṭ refers to the passage's overall ʿōlāh framing (established in 4.1.4 and n. 4), not to an inherent cultic meaning of šḥṭ itself, which HALOT data show is not an exclusively cultic root. All annotations represent the authors' analysis following Halliday and Matthiessen (2004).* **Source: Authors' analysis.**

The clause-level coding in Table 3 reveals a clear pattern with significant implications for moral agency construction. The KJV, RSV, NRSV, and ESV all name Abraham as the Actor at the moment of maximum narrative tension (the reaching for the knife) matching the Hebrew's own named Actor at the head of the *wayyiqtol* chain and constructing a fully identified moral subject who bears the full weight of his action.

The NIV and NLT, by contrast, both substitute the pronoun 'He' for Abraham's proper name at this critical moment, departing from the Hebrew's named activation. This pronominal substitution represents what van Leeuwen (1996) classifies as a reduction in personalisation.

The differences, it should be noted, are subtle rather than wholesale: the NIV and NLT do not eliminate Abraham as agent but rather render him more immediately accessible through pronominal reference, producing a reading experience in which the knife-raising feels less like a formally named ritual act (as the Hebrew's naming pattern constructs it) and more like an intimate human response.

The NLT departs further from the Hebrew by restructuring the coordinated sequence "reached out his hand and took the knife" as "reached out and took the knife." Although the underlying agency remains unchanged, the restructuring weakens the close grammatical integration created by the Hebrew's repeated ʾet-marking.

4.3 Isaac's Passivation: Hebrew Grammaticalisation and Its Translation

As established philologically in 4.1.4, Isaac is the most consistently passivated participant in the Hebrew text of Genesis 22, marked as accusative Goal at every stage of the binding scene (*wayyaʿăqōd ʾet-yiṣḥāq bənô* (וַיַּעֲקֹד אֶת־יִצְחָק בְּנוֹ), v. 9). This grammatical passivation is total and unbroken in the Hebrew binding scene, and all six English translations reproduce it: Isaac functions exclusively as Goal in the material processes of verses 9–10 across the corpus, confirmed both by the aggregate counts in Table 2 and by the clause-level analysis in Table 3.

The only interruption to Isaac's passivation occurs in verse 7, where he briefly becomes the Sayer of a verbal process, addressing Abraham and asking about the śeh (שֶׂה) ("lamb"), as discussed in Section 4.1.3. The pattern immediately resumes in verse 8, where Abraham speaks and Isaac returns to the role of addressee. Most translations reproduce this shift closely. The principal exception is the NLT, whose rendering, "Isaac turned to Abraham and said, 'Father?'", introduces the behavioural process "turned to", absent from the Hebrew wayyōʾmer (וַיֹּאמֶר). This addition momentarily increases Isaac's physical activity, a tendency reflected in the NLT's higher behavioural-process count in Table 2.

Isaac's consistent grammatical passivation also invites comparison with later Jewish interpretation. Some midrashic and targumic traditions portray Isaac as a willing participant in the sacrifice. Genesis Rabbah 56.8 depicts him as volunteering for the binding, while Targum Pseudo-Jonathan expands the narrative by having Isaac request to be bound so that he would not invalidate the sacrifice through involuntary movement. By contrast, Targum Onkelos follows the Masoretic text closely, preserving Isaac as the direct object through the Aramaic object marker *yāt* (ית). These traditions demonstrate that the willing-Isaac motif belongs to later interpretive elaboration rather than to the grammatical structure of the Masoretic Hebrew itself, where Isaac remains consistently encoded as Goal rather than Actor.

None of the six English translations departs materially from this Hebrew pattern. Their consistent passivation of Isaac is best explained by fidelity to the Masoretic text rather than by deliberate engagement with, or rejection of, later rabbinic traditions. Consequently, although the translations differ elsewhere in their representation of agency, they converge at this point in preserving the Hebrew's grammatical encoding of Isaac as the affected participant.

Feminist and postcolonial interpreters (Delaney, 1998; Rashkow, 1993) have argued that Isaac's passivation reproduces the logic of sacrificial authority. The present philological and SFL

analysis provides linguistic support for this claim by demonstrating that Isaac's passivation originates in the Hebrew's own grammatical structure and is consistently preserved across all six English translations, irrespective of translation philosophy.

4.4 The Angel of the LORD: Mediated Agency and Cosmic Framing

Section 4.1.5 established that the Hebrew text of verse 11 marks the angel's call with the explicit spatial circumstance *min-haššāmayim* (מִן־הַשָּׁמַיִם) ('from heaven'), and that verse 12's first-person suffix *mimmennî* (מִמֶּנִּי) preserves an unresolved ambiguity between angelic and divine speaker at the grammatical level of the Hebrew itself.

4.4.1 The Spatial Framing of Divine Intervention

Five of the six translations (the KJV, RSV, NIV, NRSV, and ESV) preserve the phrase 'out of heaven' (or 'from heaven'), spatially locating the angel's call in direct correspondence with the Hebrew *min-haššāmayim* (מִן־הַשָּׁמַיִם) and constructing the divine intervention as a transcendent, cosmically mediated act. The NLT omits this phrase entirely, rendering simply "the angel of the LORD called to him." This constitutes one of the clearest departures from the Hebrew source text identified in the present analysis.

This omission removes the spatial marker that distinguishes the divine voice as heavenly rather than terrestrial, producing a more immanent divine intervention than the Masoretic grammaticalises, one that brings the divine voice into closer proximity to Abraham and reduces the theological distance between the human and divine parties that the Hebrew's own syntax constructs.

4.4.2 The First-Person Pronoun and Divine-Angelic Ambiguity

The ambiguity between divine and angelic agency in verse 12, established in the Hebrew through *mimmennî* (מִמֶּנִּי) (4.1.5), is preserved across all six translations through the retention of the first-person pronoun 'from me.' The KJV's formal register ('for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me') constructs the angel as a spatially located, formally distinct intermediary, making the first-person pronoun theologically surprising in a way that mirrors the Hebrew's own unresolved structural ambiguity. The NLT's removal of the spatial framing reduces this surprise: without the explicit heavenly location, the angel's call is less distinctly positioned as mediated, and the transition to

the first-person pronoun is less jarring than the Hebrew's juxtaposition of *min-haššāmayim* (מִן־הַשָּׁמַיִם) and *mimmennî* (מִמֶּנִּי) constructs.

None of the translations resolves the ambiguity inherent in the Hebrew text. Instead, each preserves the unresolved relationship between the angelic speaker and the divine first-person reference, albeit with differing degrees of narrative and spatial framing.

4.5 Comparative Summary: From Hebrew Grammar to Translated Agency

Table 4 presents the transitivity analysis of the four focus passages across all six translations, with the source text supplied for each passage as the analytical baseline established in Section 4.1. Table 5 synthesises the social actor findings.

Table 4: Comparative Transitivity Analysis of Focus Passages in Genesis 22 Across Six Translations, Relative to the Hebrew Source Text

Verse	Hebrew (BHS)	KJV	RSV	NIV	NRSV	ESV	NLT
22:1	*wəhāʾĕlōhîm nissāh ʾet-ʾabrāhām (וְהָאֱלֹהִים נִסָּה אֶת־אַבְרָהָם), Piel perfect; God=Actor, Abraham=Goal (§4.1.1)*	God did tempt Abraham [Mental: departs from Piel Actor-Goal structure]	God tested Abraham [Material: matches Hebrew]	God tested Abraham [Material: matches Hebrew]	God tested Abraham [Material: matches Hebrew]	God tested Abraham [Material: matches Hebrew]	God tested Abraham's faith [Material + Attribution: extends beyond Hebrew Goal]
22:2	*qaḥ-nāʾ ʾet-binkā... (קַח־נָא אֶת־בִּנְךָ...), imperative chain; God=Sayer, Abraham=implied Actor (§4.1.2)*	'Take now thy son…offer him' [preserves triadic intensification]	'Take your son…offer him' [preserves triadic intensification]	'Take your son…Sacrifice him' [preserves, modernised]	'Take your son…offer him' [preserves triadic intensification]	'Take your son…offer him' [closest to Hebrew]	'Take your son…Present him' [intensified register beyond Hebrew]
22:9–10	*wayyaʿăqōd ʾet-yiṣḥāq...wayyišlaḥ ʾabrāhām ʾet-yādô (וַיַּעֲקֹד אֶת־יִצְחָק...וַיִּשְׁלַח אַבְרָהָם אֶת־יָדוֹ), Qal chain; Abraham=Acto*	Abraham bound Isaac…stretched forth his hand [named Actor, matches Hebrew]	Abraham bound his son…put forth his hand [named Actor, matches Hebrew]	He bound his son…He reached out his hand [pronoun;	Abraham bound his son…reached out his hand [named Actor, matches Hebrew]	Abraham bound Isaac…reached out his hand [named Actor, closest to Hebrew]	Abraham tied up Isaac…He reached out [pronoun at peak moment; departs from Hebrew]

Verse	Hebrew (BHS)	KJV	RSV	NIV	NRSV	ESV	NLT
	r (named), Isaac=Goal (§4.1.4)			departs from named Hebrew Actor]			
22:11–12	*wayyiqrāʾ...min-haššāmayim (וַיִּקְרָא...מִן־הַשָּׁמַיִם), Qal; Angel=Sayer, spatial Circumstance retained (§4.1.5)*	Angel called out of heaven…'Lay not thine hand' [spatial framing retained, matches Hebrew]	Angel called out of heaven…' Do not lay your hand' [matches Hebrew]	Angel called out…'Do not lay your hand' [matches Hebrew]	Angel called…'Do not lay your hand' [matches Hebrew]	Angel called…' Do not lay your hand' [matches Hebrew]	Angel called to him ['out of heaven' omitted; departs from Hebrew]

Note: Hebrew source text (BHS) is provided for each verse as the analytical baseline established in Section 4.1. SFL process type annotations are shown in brackets. All annotations represent the authors' analysis following Halliday and Matthiessen (2004), cross-checked against Waltke and O'Connor (1990) and Joüon and Muraoka (2006). **Source: Authors' analysis. Hebrew source text from BHS (Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1997).**

Table 5: Social Actor Representations Across Six English Bible Translations of Genesis 22, Relative to the Hebrew

Social Actor	Hebrew Baseline	KJV	RSV	NIV	NRSV	ESV	NLT
God (vv.1–2)	Piel Actor (*nissāh* (נִסָּה)); Qal Sayer of imperative chain	Mental process (tempt); departs from Piel Actor-Goal	Material process (tested); matches Hebrew	Material process (tested); matches Hebrew	Material process (tested); matches Hebrew	Material process (tested); matches Hebrew	Material process with relational extension
Abraham (vv.3–10)	Named Actor at head of *wayyiqtol* chain throughout	Named Actor throughout; matches Hebrew	Named Actor throughout; matches Hebrew	Pronominal at v.10 peak; departs from Hebrew	Named Actor at v.10; matches Hebrew	Named Actor throughout; closest to Hebrew	Pronominal at v.10 peak; departs from Hebrew

Social Actor	Hebrew Baseline	KJV	RSV	NIV	NRSV	ESV	NLT
Isaac (vv.9–10)	Accusative-marked Goal throughout (*ʾet-yiṣḥāq* (אֶת־יִצְחָק))	Passivated Goal; matches Hebrew	Passivated Goal; matches Hebrew	Passivated Goal; matches Hebrew	Passivated Goal; matches Hebrew	Passivated Goal; matches Hebrew	Passivated Goal; matches Hebrew
Angel of the LORD (vv.11–12)	Sayer; spatial Circumstance min-*haššāmayim* (מִן־הַשָּׁמַיִם) retained	Spatial framing retained; matches Hebrew	Spatial framing retained; matches Hebrew	Spatial framing retained; matches Hebrew	Spatial framing retained; matches Hebrew	Spatial framing retained; matches Hebrew	Spatial framing omitted; departs from Hebrew

Note: Activation/passivation coding follows van Leeuwen (1996, 2008), assessed against the Hebrew baseline established in Section 4.1. **Source: Authors' analysis.**

The patterns in Tables 4 and 5 confirm that translation philosophy correlates with fidelity to the Masoretic Hebrew's grammaticalisation of agency. Formal equivalence translations (KJV, RSV, ESV) consistently preserve named activation of Abraham at critical material process moments, maintain the Hebrew's spatial framing of divine intervention, and (with the single exception of the KJV's 'tempt') track the Hebrew's own Actor-Goal structures closely.

Dynamic equivalence translation (NLT) consistently introduces departures from the Hebrew baseline: pronoun substitution, register lowering, supplementary relational attributions, and the omission of the spatial circumstance in verse 11. The NIV occupies an intermediate position, whereas the NRSV generally patterns with the more formally equivalent translations. These differences are systematic and observable at the clause level, demonstrating that translation philosophy influences the degree to which the Hebrew grammaticalisation of agency is preserved across the six English versions.

5. Discussion: Theological Implications of Agency Construction

The philological and linguistic findings of this study have implications that extend into the domains of biblical hermeneutics, translation theology, and the reception history of the Aqedah. Three clusters of implication merit sustained discussion.

First, the analysis confirms that the Hebrew text of Genesis 22 grammaticalises agency relations with considerable precision, through Piel and Qal stem selection, through the systematic accusative marking of Goal participants, and through the named-Actor structure of its *wayyiqtol* chains, and that English translation functions as a site of theological and interpretive negotiation precisely at the points where translators depart from, rather than merely render, this Hebrew grammatical baseline. The KJV's rendering of a God who 'tempts' Abraham reflects, as established in 4.2.1, an Early Modern English lexical choice whose period sense of evaluative testing tracked the Piel form's attested semantic range reasonably closely; the epistemic uncertainty a present-day reader is liable to import into 'tempt' is a product of subsequent semantic narrowing in English rather than of the translators' theological intent. Whether the eventual erosion of this sense also unsettled how later generations of readers experienced the Authorised Version's construction of divine testing, and in which the Authorised Version's formal register was nonetheless understood to befit the transcendent dignity of divine speech (Norton, 2000), is a question about reception rather than about the translators' seventeenth-century lexical choice for *nissāh* (נִסָּה), and is a historical question that requires further archival investigation beyond the scope of this study.

The Hebrew's own Actor–Goal structure (God as Actor, Abraham as Goal, established in 4.1.1) is preserved in the RSV, NIV, NRSV, and ESV, each of which renders God as the Actor who "tests" Abraham. This rendering remains faithful to the Hebrew grammatical structure while also aligning with theological traditions that emphasise both divine sovereignty and human moral responsibility. The NLT's faith-attribution extension ("tested Abraham's faith") moves beyond what the Hebrew's accusative marking of Abraham himself explicitly grammaticalises, evaluating not Abraham's external obedience but his interior disposition. This shift is compatible with the contemporary evangelical emphasis on personal relationship with God and what we term a "therapeutic-pietist" reading tradition, one that centres the believer's interior spiritual formation rather than the more restricted Actor–Goal relation the Hebrew grammar explicitly encodes (see, e.g., Strauss & De Waard, 2011, pp. 45–52, for the translation-theological dimension of this tendency).

Second, the analysis supports Venuti's (1995) argument that translation involves an irreducible dimension of ideological positioning, now demonstrable against a fixed Hebrew philological baseline rather than assessed in the abstract. The NLT's systematic register-lowering relative to the Hebrew's cultic-sacrificial lexicon, replacing the cultic *šḥṭ* (שחט) ('slaughter') with the generic 'kill,' omitting *min-haššāmayim* (מִן־הַשָּׁמַיִם) ('from heaven'), replacing the Hebrew's

formal prohibition with 'Don't lay a hand on the boy', is not merely a stylistic choice but a hermeneutical one, measurable precisely because Section 4.1 has established what the Hebrew itself encodes at each of these points. This is a legitimate interpretive tradition (one that serves the NLT's explicit goal of communicating the biblical narrative to contemporary readers without the mediation of formal register) but it is a tradition that departs from, rather than merely renders, the Hebrew source text's own register.

Third, the analysis reveals that the Hebrew text's own grammatical foreclosure of Isaac's agency (established through the accusative marking analysed in 4.1.4) is reproduced without exception across all six English translations, making this the single most consistent cross-translational feature of the corpus and, importantly, one in which the translation tradition is faithful to rather than departing from the Hebrew. This finding also invites reflection on the divergence between the Hebrew grammatical text and specific strands of later Jewish reception: where aggadic midrash such as *Genesis Rabbah* 56.8 and targumic elaborations such as *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* imagine Isaac as a willing agent, the Masoretic Hebrew itself, the more conservative *Targum Onkelos*, and every English translation examined, consistently foreclose that agentive possibility at the grammatical level (see 4.1.4). This divergence between text and reception is not a translation phenomenon at all, but a feature of how particular later interpretive communities have read against the grain of the Hebrew's own syntax, while others (Onkelos among them) have not; the finding has implications for the reception history of Genesis 22 across faith traditions and for the broader question of how interpretation relates to, and sometimes departs from, grammatical evidence.

A note on the Aqedah in Islamic tradition is warranted here, given the claim in the introduction that Genesis 22 matters across all three Abrahamic traditions. The Quranic account of the sacrifice (Surah 37:100–111) does not name the son and has generated extensive debate within Islamic scholarship as to whether the intended victim is Ishmael or Isaac (see Firestone, 1990, for a comprehensive account). The study does not examine the Arabic text or Islamic interpretive traditions, but this represents a significant area for future interdisciplinary research connecting the Hebrew philological methodology employed here to the broader Abrahamic reception of the Aqedah.

6. Conclusion

This study has provided a systematic philological analysis of the Hebrew source text of Genesis 22:1–19 (its verbal stems, its accusative participant marking, its waw-consecutive narrative syntax, and the semantic range of its key lexemes) and has applied the transitivity system developed by Halliday (1994) and refined by Halliday and Matthiessen (2004), together with van Leeuwen's (1996, 2008) social actor framework, to examine how this Hebrew-grammaticalised agency is preserved, reshaped, or reassigned across six major English Bible translations: the KJV, RSV, NIV, NRSV, ESV, and NLT. The analysis has demonstrated that close philological attention to the Hebrew text is a necessary foundation for understanding why these translations, while all rendering the same source text, construct systematically different distributions of agency among God, Abraham, and Isaac.

Four principal findings emerge. First, the Hebrew verb *nissāh* (נִסָּה) (v. 1) is a Piel form with an evaluative-resultative semantic range that the KJV's 1611 'tempt' served adequately in its period sense; the interpretive gap now perceived between 'tempt' and 'test' reflects subsequent semantic narrowing in English, while the NLT's 'tested Abraham's faith' extends beyond the Hebrew's Actor–Goal structure altogether. Second, the aggregate process type distributions (Table 2) reveal that material processes dominate all six translations but are proportionally most prevalent in formal equivalence translations (KJV, ESV: 64%) and least in the NLT (53%). Third, named activation of Abraham at the narrative's peak tension (*wayyišlaḥ ʾabrāhām*; וַיִּשְׁלַח אַבְרָהָם) is preserved in four translations (KJV, RSV, NRSV, ESV) and elided through pronominal substitution in two (NIV, NLT). Fourth, Isaac's grammatical passivation as accusative-marked Goal is reproduced without exception across all six translations, the single most consistent cross-translational feature of the corpus, while the NLT's omission of *min-haššāmayim* (מִן־הַשָּׁמַיִם) in verse 11 is the most significant departure from the Hebrew.

These findings contribute to scholarship in four respects. They demonstrate that a Hebrew-grounded philological baseline is a necessary precondition for transitivity and social-actor analysis of biblical translations, not an optional supplement. They show that translation philosophy correlates with fidelity to specific, identifiable Hebrew grammatical features rather than with agency construction in the abstract. They enrich the reception history of the Aqedah by demonstrating that what has traditionally been analysed as an interpretive question — how agency is grammatically constructed in Genesis 22. — is answerable in the first instance by the grammar of the Hebrew text itself. And they establish a replicable methodological template, grounded in Hebrew philology and then in comparative SFL analysis, extensible to other passages and language traditions.

6.1 Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The corpus is restricted to six English translations from the Protestant/ecumenical tradition; a Jewish translation (particularly the NJPS) would enrich future comparative analysis. The analysis is based on a relatively small number of verses (N = 19), so the aggregate frequency counts in Table 2 should be treated as exploratory rather than statistically robust. Additionally, paratextual factors such as translators' notes and committee decisions may have influenced rendering choices beyond the clause-level analysis.

Future research might extend the methodology to a fuller text-critical treatment of the Masoretic cantillation marks (*teʿamim*; טְעָמִים), to Greek (Septuagint), Latin (Vulgate), and Arabic renderings for a broader cross-traditional perspective, and to larger-scale computational transitivity analysis. The approach could also be applied to other theologically significant, morphologically dense passages: Genesis 3 (agency and blame), Genesis 4 (agency and violence), Ruth (agency and gender), and the Passion narratives in their Greek source text (agency and sacrifice).

Ultimately, this study affirms Sternberg's (1985, p. 1) insight that the literary artistry of the Hebrew Bible is not incidental to but constitutive of its meaning. The translators who have rendered Genesis 22 into English across four centuries have not merely conveyed that meaning; working from — and sometimes against — the grammar of the Hebrew original, they have participated in an ongoing act of construction and reconstruction that this study has sought to ground philologically and to make linguistically visible and analytically documentable.

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Reference Text: All Hebrew quotations and clause analyses are based on the Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia (BHS; 5th ed., Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1997).

Notes

[1] The waw-consecutive (also called waw-relative or wayyiqtol) is the standard narrative tense form in Biblical Hebrew, in which a sequence of imperfect verb forms prefixed by waw (וְ) drives a chain of sequentially ordered past-tense material processes. For an authoritative grammatical account, see Waltke and O'Connor (1990, §§29.2–29.4) and Joüon and Muraoka (2006, §§118–119).

[2] The root *nsh* (נסה) is listed in the Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament (HALOT; Koehler, Baumgartner, & Stamm, 2001, Vol. 3, p. 702) with the primary glosses 'to test, to try, to put to the test.' The related noun *massāh* (מַסָּה) is consistently distinguished in biblical usage from temptation toward sin. The Piel form *nissāh* (נִסָּה) at Genesis 22:1 is therefore better rendered as 'tested' or 'tried' than as 'tempted,' a point recognised in the RSV's revision of the KJV in 1952.

[3] On the KJV translation process and its theological context, see Norton (2000, pp. 47–91). The KJV translators used the Bishop's Bible (1568) as their primary base text and worked under ecclesiastical oversight from the Church of England; their rendering choices reflect a complex negotiation of humanist scholarship and Protestant theological concerns that Norton analyses in detail.

[4] The Hebrew verb *šāḥaṭ* (שָׁחַט) is often used of cultic sacrifice but is not an exclusively cultic term: HALOT records its use of ordinary animal slaughter for food (e.g., Gen 37:31) and of non-cultic killing of people at scale (e.g., 2 Kgs 10:7; 25:7) (HALOT, Vol. 4, pp. 1344–1345; BDB, p. 1006). Its rendering as 'slaughter' (NIV, ESV), 'slay' (KJV, RSV), or 'kill' (NRSV, NLT) in Genesis 22:10 is therefore best assessed as a register choice made in light of the passage's surrounding sacrificial framing (the explicit ʿōlāh vocabulary of vv. 2, 7–8), rather than as a direct index of how each translation construes the semantic range of šḥṭ itself.

[5] Targum Pseudo-Jonathan to Genesis 22:9 reads: 'Isaac opened his mouth and said to his father: Bind me well, lest I tremble at the sight of the knife and cause a blemish in the offering' (translation following Clarke, 1984, p. 71). The edition used is: Maher, M. (1992). *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Genesis* (Aramaic Bible, Vol. 1B). Liturgical Press. The Theodor-Albeck edition of *Genesis Rabbah* is: Theodor, J., & Albeck, H. (1965). *Midrash Bereshit Rabba: Critical Edition with Notes and Commentary* (2nd ed., 3 vols.). Wahrmann.

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