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August 9, 2008: Susan Neiman's Theological Error

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Title: Susan Neiman's Theological Error

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8/9/2008--In my last post, I mentioned a theological error by Susan Neiman, who is the author of *Moral Clarity: A Guide for Grown-Up Idealists* (Harcourt 2008). I am a great fan of Neiman, whose prior book, *Evil in Modern Thought* (Princeton 2002) was a very influential book. Neiman is now the Director of the Einstein Forum. Neiman is not a cheap anti-religious thinker, like the New Atheists. She is an admirer of religion. Nevertheless, her new book is a defense of secular Enlightenment values. Neiman opens the book with a contrast of two episodes in the biblical life of Abraham. At Sodom, Abraham speaks to God in the name of universal reason to essentially criticize God's planned punishment of the two cities. In contrast, Abraham asks no questions at Mt. Moriah, where he is told to sacrifice his son, Isaac. The contrast is between reason in the first episode and faith, in the second. This contrast, however, no longer applies. Yes, Abraham showed faith in his willingness to sacrifice his son. But the same revelation—the Bible—supports Abraham's willingness to question God at Sodom. And now, post-Mt. Moriah, we know that God does not desire the death of the innocent at any time. In other words, aside from Abraham's faith, we learn the same lesson from the two episodes—the judge of all the world will do right. To put this more plainly, what should a present Abraham say when told by God to do something "wrong"? Now we know that God would want to be questioned. Now we know, as Abraham perhaps could not, that an unjust command could only be a test, and not something God actually wants to see done. But, a test you know is a test, is no test. Thus, even in the Bible itself, the age of Abrahamic faith is over. (I could tell this same story with regard to Jesus and the resurrection. Jesus could feel abandoned, but the Christian believer no longer can, because of what ultimately happened to Jesus.) So, to use this contrast today is an error. We are not supposed to be the Abraham of faith anymore.