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THE NAMING OF ISAAC: THE ROLE OF THE WIFE/SISTER EPISODES IN THE REDACTION OF GENESIS

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THE patriarchal narratives of Genesis contain three accounts of a patriarch passing his wife off as his sister out of fear for his own life (Gen 12:10-20; 20:1-18; and 26:1-11). For the source critic, this is a classic example of multiple versions of the same original story, demonstrating a multiplicity of sources underlying our present book of Genesis.¹ For the OT form critic, they provide a rare opportunity to compare three parallel accounts and postulate an origin and development in the oral and literary tradition.² For the redaction critic, they present a challenge to explain how the accounts function in their present contexts; i.e., not as variant versions of one event, but as different episodes in the lives of Abraham and Isaac.³

1 G. Spurrell, *Notes on the Text of the Book of Genesis* (London: Clarendon, 1896) xvi; J. Skinner, *Genesis* (ICC; New York: Scribner, 1910) vi-vii, 315; J. Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984) 46.

2 The work of K. Koch (*The Growth of the Biblical Tradition: The Form Critical Method* [New York: Scribner, 1969] 115-28) will be described as an example, though his methods and conclusions have been criticized by other form critics. In particular, the view that the three incidents came to their present form due to changes in one prototype in the process of oral transmission has been challenged by others who see clear evidence of literary dependence. E.g., T. Alexander ("The Wife/Sister Incidents of Genesis: Oral Variants?" *IBS* 11 [1989] 2-22), building on the more detailed work of P. Weimar (*Untersuchungen zur Redaktionsgeschichte des Pentateuch* [Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1977] 4-111), on J. Van Seters (*Abraham in History and Tradition* [New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1975] 167-91), and others, concluded, "Unfortunately, in the past, many scholars have jumped too quickly to the assumption that the wife/sister episodes must all relate to one original incident, and that the differences between them are due to the process of oral transmission. . . . The task of reconstructing the oral and redactional history of these accounts is much more involved than is generally acknowledged" (p. 19). For other form critical approaches and bibliographies, see C. Westermann, *Genesis 12-36: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985) 159-68; G. Coates, *Genesis: With an Introduction to Narrative Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 109-13; 149-52; 188-92; D. L. Petersen, "A Thrice-Told Tale: Genre, Theme, and Motif," *BR* 18 (1973) 30-43.

3 Methods bearing some resemblance to those of redaction criticism can be seen in the works of defenders of the unity of authorship of the book of Genesis. Perhaps the most detailed and comprehensive of these (at least in English) is W. Green, *The Unity of the Book of Genesis* (New York: Scribner, 1897) 182-85, 250-62, 322-28. Both Van Seters (*Abraham*, 183-91) and Weimar (*Redaktionsgeschichte*, 43-55, 75-78, 95-102) discuss the relation of the episodes to their contexts, but their acceptance of the multiple-source hypothesis prevents them from trying to

For ease of reference, K. Koch's annotation will be followed, so that the three accounts will be A, B, and C, referring to the first, second, and third, respectively, in the order in which they appear in Genesis. The names Abraham and Sarah will be used throughout, even when referring to passages prior to their name change (Genesis 17).

I. *Conclusions of Source Criticism*

Numerous apparent inconsistencies with the respective narrative contexts, as well as the seeming redundancy of the accounts, are explained by source critics as due to the redaction of three sources containing variants of one story during the formation of the book of Genesis. Thus in A, where Sarah's beauty puts Abraham in fear of his life in Egypt—a plausible theme in the story itself—the overall chronology imposed makes the whole episode incongruous; for we learn from comparing Gen 17:17 and 12:4 that Sarah had to have been at least 65 years old! There is a similar chronological problem in C, where, though we do not know Rebekah's age, she must have been married for at least 35 years,⁴ and therefore presumably not one who would be looked at as a great marriage prospect. Furthermore, the same chronology indicates that Jacob and Esau were already born,⁵ so how could the parents feign brother and sister for "a long time"? Worse yet, we have the same king Abimelech and his general Phicol, who appear also in B, *at least 76 years earlier!*⁶ The most serious difficulties, however, occur in B. There, not only does the context require Sarah to be 89 years old (17:11, 17), compounding the same problem as in A and C, but two chapters earlier Sarah has described herself in terms that are clearly incompatible with the situation presumed in B. Did she not laugh, saying, "After I have become old, shall I have pleasure [*'ahare beloti hayeta li 'edna*], my lord being old also?" (Gen 18: 12)?⁷ Is it plausible then, that Abraham should fear for his

solve the apparent contradictions with respect to those contexts. E.g., Van Seters rules out the possibility that three such episodes as we are considering here could come from one author (*Abraham*, 154-55).

4 C takes place after the death of Abraham (26: 18), who died at the age of 175 (25:7). Isaac married Rebekah when Abraham was 140 (25:20; 21:5), making their marriage 35 years old when Abraham died, thus a minimum of 35 years old when C takes place.

5 The twins were born when Abraham was 160 (Gen 25:26; cf. n. 4).

6 Abraham would still have been 99 years old in B (17: 1; 21:5), and he died 76 years later (n. 4). It is not plausible to suggest that B is a chronological regression, since it is closely linked with chap. 21 (20:15; 21:22) and is explicitly linked to the chapters before it (v. 1).

7 Most interpreters view v. 12 as indicating that sexual intimacy was out of the question, understanding *'edna* (*a hapax*) as sexual pleasure. In my opinion, this needs to be reexamined. For one thing, it seems to make the connection between Sarah's words and the Lord's repetition of them a bit remote (v. 13 quotes her as scoffing, "shall I give birth?"). A. Millard ("The Etymology of Eden," *V/T* 24 [1984] 103-6), arguing for the possibility of a West Semitic origin for *'eden*, from a root with "the common idea of 'pleasure, luxury' " (p. 104) as opposed to an Akkadian derivation with the idea of "steppe, plain," which he finds problematic, cites a

life because of this old woman, or that the king would want to marry her? Furthermore, only a few months may be allowed between chap. 18 and the end of B, or else Sarah would be visibly pregnant with Isaac. But 20:18 seems to require an extended period of time to elapse within B itself in order to notice the infertility of Abimelech's household since the time he took Sarah.

Unfortunately for source analysis, the three accounts cannot be assigned to the three sources of classical Wellhausenism. While B is assigned to E (on the basis of its use of Elohim; vv. 3, 6, 11, 13, 17 [twice]; Yhwh in v. 18 is ascribed to the redactor), and indeed is said to be the first extended narrative of that source,⁸ both A and C are assigned to separate J sources. C. Westermann summarizes the earlier views on whether A or C was the older of the two, and concludes, "the question can now be considered as settled: Gen. 12 is the earliest of the three variants."⁹

II. *Conclusions of Form Criticism*

Form critics accept that the difficulties mentioned above are due to the redaction of different source documents; the casting of individual narratives into contexts originally foreign to them. They concentrate their study on the content and history of the stories themselves, studying the episodes in relation to each other, more than in relation to their respective contexts. Since the focus of this paper is on redaction criticism, I will outline the approach only of Koch as representative.

Koch discusses "The Ancestress of Israel in Danger" under the headings, "Defining the Unit," "Determination of the Literary Type," "Transmission History," "Setting in Life," and "Redaction History." He concludes that they were all originally independent narratives based on the relation to their present contexts. For example, A is felt to be an intrusion on its context, since it is "odd" that Abraham would leave the promised land right after receiving the promise of the land.¹⁰ Gen 13:2 is really a continuation of 12:9, with 13:1 being added to compensate for the intrusion. Gen 12:10

mid-ninth-century BC bilingual inscription where the Aramaic uses a verbal form of *dn*, which corresponds to the Akkadian *mutahhidu*, "to enrich, make abundant." This idea of abundance would give a closer parallel to giving birth than would sexual pleasure, since offspring are associated with "fruitfulness" (Gen 1:28, etc.). M. Jastrow cites a later Hebrew verbal usage of the root with the idea of rejuvenation, which would thus provide an opposite to *blh*, and would have interesting implications for the thesis of this paper (*A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature*, [2 vols.; Brooklyn: Shalom, 1967] 2.1045). Such a usage, however, might seem just as remote from "give birth" as is the concept of sexual pleasure. The *NIV* ("will I now have this pleasure?") seems to refer the pleasure to the giving birth just promised, i.e., the joys of motherhood.

⁸ So E. Speiser, *Genesis* (AB 1; Garden City: Doubleday, 1964) 150; Skinner, *Genesis*, 315.

⁹ Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 161. Alexander ("The Wife/Sister Incidents," 22 n. 31) lists 10 scholars who argue the opposite.

¹⁰ K. Koch, *Growth of Biblical Tradition*. 116.

is satisfactory as an introduction to an independent unit, and vv. 19-20 are a fitting conclusion since "the Hebrew often ends a tale with a speech which is intended to abate the suspense, and a subsequent short narrative remark on the future fate of the hero."¹¹ Similar conclusions are reached for B and C. The mention of famine was left out of B because "he did not want to mention it too often."¹² In the introduction of C, a later writer inserted "beside the previous famine that was in the days of Abraham," as is evident from the fact that it "has a clumsy ring to it in the Hebrew."¹³ What betrays it as clumsy Koch does not tell us.

As for literary type, Koch assigns the narratives to Gunkel's category "ethnological saga," in which

The position of the nomadic Abraham and Isaac, including their strikingly beautiful women and their people, is contrasted with the soft, lascivious people of an established land. . . . In such sagas the predominant fact for the Israelite is that his God, the God of Israel, has influence on what happens between nations, and reveals himself as a divine leader.¹⁴

Various smaller component types are used, such as the simple command from God (26:2-3a), a divine benediction (26:3b-5), divine communication in a dream (20:3, 6-7), a lament of a king (20:4-5), etc.

Under "Transmission History" Koch compares the content of the three narratives and seeks to reconstruct the content of the original story. A is thought to be the most archaic of the three. What happened to Sarah in Pharaoh's palace is only hinted at (he assumes she was involved in adultery); "the delicacy of the situation has been least noticed by the writer of this version."¹⁵ In A, it is not a bad thing that Abraham should induce his wife to lie. No explanation is given as to how Pharaoh knew the plagues were because of Abraham's wife-Koch suggests that an account of Pharaoh divining the reason by a soothsayer consulting his gods was removed later. Episode B is supposed to reflect views of a later period. In it, Abraham is a chosen man of God, a Nabi. Here, he does not lie (thanks to an editor who obviously inserted the explanation of the half truth in v. 12). The account has been modified so that Sarah has not been defiled, since v. 9 ("you have brought great sin on me") presumes that adultery took place; v. 6 of course is a clumsy later addition to remove the offense. The description of Sarah's beauty has also been removed since it is contrary to the context. The chief difference between A and B, however, is in the long conversations in B. Episode C is scarcely even a story anymore, as it is broken up by

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 117.

¹³ Ibid., 118.

¹⁴ Ibid., 120. D. Petersen calls Koch's assertion that all three stories are the same type "rather puzzling," and notes that Gunkel himself did not identify them with the "ethnological saga" type ("A Thrice-Told Tale," 30).

speeches. There is nothing dangerous in the story, no direct threat from the king, no need for divine intervention. "Everything points to a later stage in the development of the saga, where the story has lost its original form."¹⁶ The blessing of vv. 3-5 was taken almost word for word from other J passages. As to who the original characters were and the original setting, the conclusion is that the less well known should be the original. Thus, contrary to the rule, C, which is supposed to be the most modified and the latest, retains the original characters and setting, while A, the most archaic, which has no later additions, has undergone modification from Isaac and Rebekah to Abraham and Sarah, and from Abimelech king of Gerar to Pharaoh king of Egypt. The original version is reconstructed as follows:

Because of famine Isaac travelled from the desert in southern Palestine to the nearby Canaanite city of Gerar, to live there as a 'sojourner', i.e. to keep within the pasturage rights on the ground belonging to the city. He told everyone that his wife was his sister so that his life would not be endangered by those who desired her. However, Rebekah's beauty could not pass unnoticed. The king of the city, Abimelech, took Rebekah into his harem, amply compensating Isaac. As a material sin was about to be committed, God struck the people of the palace with a mysterious illness. Through the medium of his gods, or a soothsayer, Abimelech recognized what had happened. Abimelech called Isaac to account: "What is this that you have done to me?" He then restored him his wife and sent him away, loaded with gifts.¹⁷

Comparing this reconstruction with the three versions in Genesis, Koch then proposes a "history of the literary type of the ethnological saga." Four points are observed: (1) narratives become elaborated by speeches; (2) moral sensitivity becomes gradually stronger; (3) God's intervention is less tangible in later versions; (4) there is a tendency to transfer the action of the story to more familiar people and powers.¹⁸

The setting in life of this original story is said to be the desert of Southern Palestine before the conquest, told by those tracing their descent from Isaac. "Such a story would perhaps have been related by men before the tents, when it was evening, after the herds had been settled and the children slept."¹⁹ These people felt themselves superior to those of the city, to whom they sometimes had to turn for permission to graze in hard times. As the story changed, the setting in life changed; Isaac was supplanted by Abraham when the tribe of Judah was formed by the union of Isaac's people with

¹⁶ Ibid., 124.

¹⁷ Ibid., 126. This appears to contradict his earlier assumption that adultery did occur in the most primitive version.

¹⁸ Ibid., 126-27. R. Polzin (" 'The Ancestress of Israel in Danger' in Danger," *Semeia* 3 [1975] 82) says of Koch, "A particularly circular aspect of his analysis consists in describing the evolutionary development of this particular 'ethnological saga' largely by means of general assumptions about how such stories developed in Israel, . . . and then using this analysis as a basis for tracing 'a history of the literary type of the ethnological saga.'"

Abraham's. Nomads became farmers (see 26:12). Narrative B is taken up by prophetic circles, and becomes a "legend about the prophets."²⁰

III. *Redaction Criticism*

1. *The Redaction-Critical Procedure*

Though Koch's conclusions have been criticized by a number of scholars, some of whom we have cited in the accompanying notes, they have in common with him what seems to be an automatic assumption that the object of study is to find out how the three episodes relate to each other, more than to their differing contexts. Our disagreement is more fundamental. The only relationship that we positively know existed among the three accounts is the one that now exists in the book of Genesis: a literary one, where they are three different episodes in the lives of the patriarchs, separated from each other by many years and considerable narration. Any other relationship among them is, and can only be, hypothetical, and the wide divergence of opinion as to such hypothetical relationships does not give much confidence in the certainty of anyone position.²¹ We will attempt to demonstrate here that the critical emphasis on studying the narratives in relation to each other at the expense of their relevance to their respective contexts and to the themes of the patriarchal narratives has obscured the literary genius of the one responsible for giving us the patriarchal narratives in their present form. Our procedure was well described by Van Seters, who did not carry it out to its logical conclusion because of his acceptance of source criticism:

The stories about the patriarch's beautiful wife in a foreign land should not be treated in isolation from other episodes connected with the same *dramatis personae*. The reason for many doing so in the past is the presupposition that the stories in Genesis are virtually all based directly on specific folktales and were put into their present form by narrators working quite independently of each other. Since such a proposition has been rejected in this study there is every reason why they should be treated together.²²

To begin, we will focus on some of the difficulties mentioned by source critics and ask the question, "What would a reader presuming the unity and integrity of Genesis 12-26 conclude?" One difficulty that has been ade-

²⁰ Ibid., 128.

²¹ Alexander lists 24 different possibilities for the dependence (or lack thereof) among the three narratives ("The Wife/Sister Incidents," 2-3), enough to keep scholars occupied for several more centuries.

²² Van Seters, *Abraham*, 183-84.

quately dealt with in the past is the age of Sarah in A.²³ She is at least 65 years old, yet she is so attractive that she is taken into the harem of Pharaoh himself. This attractiveness is certainly remarkable-but why is it felt to be problematic? Why should we exclude the possibility that the placement of this account in its chronological framework is intended to convey meaning-that from it we are to understand that Sarah, "our ancestress," was indeed remarkable not only for her beauty, but for the prolonging of her beauty? The lives of the patriarchs were long; would this fact not make probable a delay in the aging process, a lengthening of the time of youthful beauty? And such a prolongation of life would remind readers that God had made provision for Adam and Eve to enjoy eternal youth. The same analysis pertains to the age of Rebekah in C.

Another source of comment by critics in A are two things that appear to be "left out." Much is made of the fact that there are two major, unanswered questions: (1) What happened to Sarah in Pharaoh's house-was she defiled or not? (2) How did Pharaoh find out that the plagues came upon him because Sarah was married to someone else?²⁴ As for the first question, the ancients affirmed that Sarah could not have been defiled because righteous Abraham would not have taken her back.²⁵ Most moderns presume that she was defiled, supposing that this conclusion is the natural implication and that we would have been told if it were otherwise. This disagreement reveals the obvious: the text does not say. As for the second question, we have already observed Koch's conclusion that the method used to divine the reason for the plagues was left out because it demonstrated efficacy of pagan methods of divination-thus revealing the primitive character of the prototype of A. A much simpler reason was suggested by H. Ewald: the author intended the reader to get the answer to both of these questions from B.²⁶ The paternalism of the notion that the ancient Hebrews would not have cared (or even would have gloated at the successful trick) whether or not the wife of Abraham was involved in adul-

23 E.g., W. Green, *Unity of Genesis*, 166-67: "The only point of any consequence in this discussion is not what modern critics may think of the probability or possibility of what is here narrated, but whether the sacred historian credited it. On the hypothesis of the critics, R believed it and recorded it. What possible ground can they have for assuming that J and E had less faith than R in what is here told of the marvelous beauty and attractiveness of the ancestress of the nation?"

24 Alexander ("The Wife/Sister Incidents," 7) adds a third, "Did Abraham actually allow Pharaoh to take Sarah without objecting?" But Abraham's own words in Gen 12:11-13 certainly imply that this was part of the plan.

25 M. Weinfeld cites the Genesis Apocryphon, Philo, Josephus, and rabbinic literature to this effect ("Sarah in Abimelech's Palace (Genesis 20)-Against the Background of Assyrian Law and the Genesis Apocryphon," *Tarbiz* 52 [1982/83] 639-42; and in English in *Melanges bibliques et orientaux en l'honneur de Monsieur Mathias Delcor* [ed. A. Caquot et al.; AOAT 215; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1985] 433-34).

26 H. Ewald, *Die Komposition der Genesis kritisch untersucht* (1823) 228f., quoted by Green, *Unity of Genesis*, 257 n. 1.

tery may account for its popularity among moderns,²⁷ but from a perspective of overall unity, it cannot survive comparison with chap. 20. There we have an unambiguous answer in universal terms in God's words to Abimelech: "Yes, I know that in the integrity of your heart you have done this, and I also kept you from sinning against me; therefore I did not allow you to touch her. Now therefore restore the man's wife" (vv. 6- 7a). The same circumstances prevailed in A, since Pharaoh, too, acted in ignorant integrity. Should we not therefore conclude that God should have also kept Pharaoh from touching her? The logic is compelling; the same Abraham and Sarah, the same conditions, the same God.²⁸ If the answer to this major question in A is not to be found in B, then we must conclude that it is not answered at all, and we would have no clue as to why such a major question is left unanswered.²⁹ Additionally, to assume that adultery was committed in Pharaoh's palace would make the purpose of divine intervention in A much different than in B, i.e., the purpose of God's intervention in A would not have been to prevent Sarah from being defiled, as in B, but rather to punish Pharaoh because she was defiled. Perhaps implied also from B, then, is that Pharaoh found out the same way Abimelech did: in a dream. Why narrative A should be dependent on B like this will be explained later.³⁰

27 S. Warner ("Primitive Saga Men," *VT* 29 [1979] 325-35) cites two works that demonstrate Gunkel's dependence on anthropological views of his time (p. 325 n. 3) which Warner summarizes as follows: "Modern man was not only different from primitive man, he was superior. Compared to modern man, primitive man was a child. And, like a child, primitive man was incapable of thinking complicated thoughts, of reasoning in any great depth, or of developing any sophisticated moral awareness" (p. 326). He goes on to show that without this view of "primitive" man, which no anthropologist holds today, "Gunkel's conception of the oral transmission process, . . . has no meaning, and should be abandoned" (*ibid.*). He concludes, "At present we see no reason to assume that the narratives of Genesis bear any close resemblance to orally transmitted data at all" (p. 335). His comments are also applicable to Koch's procedure.

28 J. Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses, Called Genesis* (2 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948) 1.363: "When he was in similar danger, (Gen. xx. I.) God did not suffer her to be violated by the king of Gerar; shall we then suppose that she was now exposed to Pharaoh's lust?" As discussed later, another reason for making it clear that adultery did not occur in B concerns the legitimacy of Isaac's birth, which of course was not of concern in chap. 12. This does not make Calvin's reasoning any less valid, however.

29 Van Seters (*Abraham*, 171-75) argues for a literary dependence of B on A, saying, "The only way in which the cryptic character of v. 2 can be explained is that the other story [A] is known and can be assumed, and therefore Abraham's plan and its execution need not be recounted again in full" (p. 171). But methodologically it is equally compelling to argue that A is literarily dependent on B because of the "cryptic character" of the former. This Van Seters does not do. He assumes without discussion that adultery occurred in A (p. 169), whereas the opposite is inferred from B.

30 Polzin argues strongly for a synchronic study of the three accounts but is immediately led astray by the assumption that adultery occurred in A, resulting in a moral improvement from A to B and the blessing of God in B as opposed to A ("The Ancestress of Israel," 81-98). There is a strange implication here: Abraham is rewarded in chap. 20 because God intervened *before* the adultery occurred, whereas in chap. 12 he is punished because God did not intervene until *after* the adultery. Abraham's behavior was the same in both cases.

The setting of B is more problematic. Here, Sarah is not 65, but 89 years old. In principle, the objection of her age might be dealt with in the same way as in A—that the preservation of Sarah's beauty is indeed even more remarkable than as portrayed in A. And this is how other writers have explained the problem.³¹ This resolution is excluded, however, by Sarah's own comments in 18:12. When Yhwh announces the coming birth of her son, Sarah scoffs, saying, "after I have become worn out [*blh*], shall I have pleasure [*edna*], my lord being old also?" Her use of *blh* suggests physical deterioration, not just chronological advancement.³² The majority of uses of the root *blh*, which occurs 11 times in the *qal* and 4 times in the *piel*, refer to worn-out clothing, or something being compared to worn-out clothing, with such parallels as cracked wineskins and moth-eaten garments (e.g., Josh 9: 13; Job 13:28; Isa 50:9). Her use of *edna* suggests to most interpreters that she considers herself too old for sexual intercourse (see n. 7). Either one of these considerations precludes the situation suggested in B, that Abimelech would be attracted to Sarah and add her to his harem of beautiful women. But actually, we notice that in B the author does not quite come out and say anything about Sarah's beauty. Was it omitted, as Koch suggests, because it was too ridiculous in this context? That does not solve the problem, for no reason is given in its place. The redaction critic must ask the same question that any reader would: "Why did Abraham pass off his wife as his sister? What was he afraid of?" If we follow the previous establishment of dependence of A on B, in which we allowed B to provide answers to questions raised in A, then perhaps we should now let A provide the answer to this great, unanswered question in B. The answer from A would have to be that Abraham feared for his life in Gerar because of the surpassing beauty of Sarah, his 89-year-old wife fit to be a queen: "See now, I know that you are a beautiful woman. . . . they will kill me, but will let you live; so say that you are my sister, so that it may go well with me." As in the former case, if we do not let A explain B, then we will have no answer to our question. But how can such a conclusion be reconciled with Sarah's own self description just two chapters previously? And why were the accounts constructed so that neither is complete or can be understood without the other?

2. *The Naming of Isaac*

As everyone knows, Isaac got his name from his parents' laughter at the pre-announcement of his birth (17:17; 18:12); but the reason for their laughter is generally misunderstood. The apostles assure us that the reason

³¹ E.g., Green, *Unity of Genesis*, 254.

³² Cf. BDB, 115, "After I am worn out"; Speiser, *Genesis*, 128, "withered as I am, am I still to know enjoyment?"

was not unbelief (Rom 4:19; Heb 11:11), but what else could it be but unbelief, considering their words? Let us consider their respective cases of laughter, one at a time. In Genesis 17, Abraham is currently laboring under his third incorrect interpretation of who his heir is going to be. The identity of this heir is important, since the promises of Gen 12: 1-3 require an heir for their fulfillment. The first false candidate was Lot; and the separation of Lot from Abraham indicated that he was not the promised heir. That he is not the heir is shown in the timing of the repetition of the divine promise to Abraham—"after Lot had separated from him" (13:14). That is, the promise is unaffected by his departure; its fulfillment is elsewhere.³³ The next candidate is Eliezer of Damascus. When Abraham expresses this understanding to the Lord, Eliezer is excluded by the additional revelation that Abraham will in fact have an heir "who shall come forth from your own body" (15:4). The next chapter narrates the birth of Ishmael by Sarah's servant girl Hagar. Ishmael would naturally be thought of as the fulfillment of the promise of an heir from Abraham's own body in 15:4, especially since the promise of innumerable offspring given to Abraham (Gen 13:16) is applied to Ishmael (16:10). And as is clear from Sarah's own words ("perhaps I will be built from her"; 16:2) Ishmael was also considered Sarah's son.³⁴ When the vision of chap. 17 occurs, then, Abraham interprets the promise there received in light of his incorrect interpretation that Ishmael is the heir through whom the promises will be fulfilled. He would interpret these promises as, "I will multiply you exceedingly [through Ishmael]" (v. 2), etc. In vv. 1-14 there is not the slightest hint that Ishmael is

33 This is argued at greater length by L. Helyer, "The Separation of Abram and Lot: Its Significance in the Patriarchal Narratives," *JSOT* 26 (1983) 77-88.

34 T. L. Thompson (*The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives: The Quest for the Historical Abraham* [Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1974]) discusses Genesis 16, 21: 1-21, and 29:31-30:24 under the heading "Nuzi and the Patriarchal Narratives" (pp. 252-69). In the course of his discussion he says: "contrary to the opinion of the commentators, the children that are borne by the maids are not attributed to the wives. In Gen 30:20 Leah says: 'I have borne him six (not eight) sons;' it is not until the birth of Joseph by Rachel herself that Rachel's disgrace is removed (Gen 30:23), and the children of Rachel are the children she herself bore: Joseph and Benjamin. In Gen 21:10f., Sarah could hardly be more explicit that she did not consider Ishmael her son" (pp. 256-57). This conclusion, however, is based on a selective listing of the evidence, since he does not provide an explanation for what Sarah meant when she said, "Perhaps I will be built from her," and since Rachel's explicit statement at the birth of Dan through the surrogate Bilhah ("God. . . has listened to my voice and given me a son"; 30:6) so clearly establishes the fact that Rachel considered Dan to be her son. Nor does he explain in what sense Rachel "prevailed" over Leah when Bilhah bore Naphtali (30:8), or why other women would count Leah blessed because of the birth of Asher by Zilpah (30: 13). These passages are meaningless unless we see that some type of vicarious participation in motherhood was recognized by the nonbearing wives in these situations. In this regard, Gen 21:10 constitutes a clear repudiation by Sarah of her former views. Additionally, there is the subjective argument that a much more satisfying exegesis of Genesis 17 and 18 is arrived at by postulating that Sarah did consider Ishmael her son—not exclusively hers, but at least to the extent of remedying her barrenness. The validity of this inductive argument, of course, depends on the persuasiveness of the exegesis presented in this essay.

not the heir of promise that Abraham assumes him to be; thus he is being further "hardened" in that interpretation. In v. 15, Sarah is mentioned for the first time in any of the promises: she too will have a new name. Then God says, "I will bless her, and indeed I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her" (v. 16). This promise of a son to be born to Sarah presents a challenge to Abraham to abandon his current interpretation of God's promises which identifies Ishmael as the promised heir. What is not clear in the translations, however, is that the promise leaves some room for maneuvering, allowing Abraham to cling to the interpretation to which he is already predisposed. The verbs used in the series of promises concerning Sarah are *uberakti*. . . *natatti*. . . *uberaktiha wehayeta*. . . *yihyu* (v. 16). We normally would expect the imperfect to be used in such a series when the *waw* is not joined to the verb (thus *yihyu*, not *hayu* at the end of the verse). But "I will give you a son by her" is translated not from *'etten*, but from *natatti*. This usage is really not surprising, since the form *natatti* without *waw* has already been used with a future sense in this chapter (v. 5; cf. v. 6, *unetattika*; also in Gen 15: 18; 23:11, 13). But one who is inclined to interpret divine revelation according to a certain paradigm will try to fit any new revelation into that same old paradigm. Thus Abraham could seize on the word *natatti* and force the promise into fitting an "Ishmael interpretation": "I will bless her-indeed I have already given you a son by her [Ishmael, who was her son, according to their way of thinking], and I will bless her [the same way I will bless you, by blessing Ishmael her son]" etc. That he recognizes there is another interpretation is clear from his thoughts which are revealed in v. 17; "Abraham fell on his face and laughed, thinking, 'Shall one be born to a 100 year old man? Or Sarah-shall a 90-year-old woman give birth?' " The inertia of 13 years of misinterpretation, combined with the seeming impossibility of the latter interpretation, cause him to cling to his identification of Ishmael as the heir of promise. Abraham's laughter should thus be seen as a rejection of what he thought was just one possible (even if more probable) interpretation; and his statement "May Ishmael indeed live before you" (v. 18) should be viewed not only as the expression of his choice of interpretations, but also as a seeking of affirmation from God that his interpretation is correct. Having succeeded in getting him to laugh, the Lord then gives him the promise in a manner that cannot be misunderstood: "Sarah your wife is going to bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac" (v. 19). This cannot be misinterpreted; only believed or disbelieved. We can imagine Abraham feeling that he was "set up" to laugh. If he had been told outright in the beginning of the vision that the promised heir would be born by Sarah (literally), he would have believed-as in Gen 15:6. As it was, however, he was led into a trap by a promise that left some room for his old interpretation, and he ended up laughing at God's announced intention. But perhaps the point is, Abraham set himself up for this trap. If he had not resorted to the Ishmael solution contrary to God's

standards for man and wife, set in the Garden of Eden (Gen 2:24, a man "shall cling to his wife, and they shall become one flesh"), there would have been no ambiguity in the promises of chap. 17, for there would not have been any Ishmael to whom to refer them. They would have to refer to a son yet to be born to Sarah. Abraham is thus being taught to interpret God's promises according to God's nature, and not to laugh at their implications in preference to interpretations derived from pagan cultural assumptions.

Sarah learns the same lesson in chap. 18. She, like her husband, does not see any conflict between her barrenness and God's promises. She has already "solved" that problem; she has a son, Ishmael. One day, three strangers happen by, for whom Abraham and Sarah prepare a meal. The three sit down to eat, with Sarah at the tent door behind them, so that they cannot see her (v. 10). Then comes the set-up: "Where is Sarah your wife?" This question does two things. First, the mention of her name ensures her complete attention to what is about to be said. Second, the question continues the pretense of the visitors that they are mere human beings—were they otherwise there would be no need to ask where Sarah was. After Abraham points her out, the promise comes from one stranger: "I will surely return to you at this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son" (v. 10). Unlike the promise to her husband, the meaning of this promise is not ambiguous. But she is not aware of the identity of the one giving the promise—it's just a stranger who happened by, as far as she knows. Predictably, she laughs; under such circumstances, who wouldn't? As far as she is concerned, the promise of an heir for Abraham has been fulfilled, for she already has a son. After 13 years, the correctness of the Ishmaelite interpretation would seem to have been validated by her progression from barrenness to the post menstrual phase of her life. So if a man comes by and gives a crazy promise, why shouldn't she laugh? Only after she laughs does she learn that it was not a mere man who has just made this promise. He knows she laughed, even though she did so silently, and he can read her mind and tell her her thoughts (v. 13). And the one who can read her mind asks, "Is anything too difficult for Yhwh?" (v. 14).³⁵

Sarah was set up to laugh in a manner different from her husband, appropriate to her different position. Abraham the prophet received God's word directly—thus he was set up to laugh directly at God's word. Sarah received God's word indirectly, through a man, her husband. Consequently she is made to laugh at the words of a mere man (apparently). The suggestion is that she is just as much to blame for doing so, for not correctly responding to her barren condition by patiently waiting for the fulfillment of the promise. For if she had not resorted to the Ishmael solution, faith in

³⁵ The narrator likewise does not identify Yhwh as one of the three men until v. 13, when he reveals himself to Sarah by reading her mind. The NIV translators, following their occasional practice of inserting the subject's name when it is not in the original, undo this literary device in v. 10.

God would have led her to believe even a stranger who came by and announced the impending and long-expected fulfillment of the promise. There is a third group that receives the word of God: neither prophet (Abraham), nor audience of a prophet (Sarah), but those who merely read God's word handed down to them. They, too, will be caught laughing. The set-up for this group occurs in our second wife/sister episode: "Abraham said of Sarah his wife, 'She is my sister.' So Abimelech king of Gerar took Sarah" (Gen 20:2). Can anything be more worthy of laughing at than the thought of a king taking this withered old woman into his harem, to join the most beautiful women of his realm? And so multitudes have laughed (or scoffed) at this report down through the ages. But we should know better by now not to be caught laughing. For a little reflection shows that the reader who laughs at the idea of Sarah being desirable to Abimelech has not laughed at anything different from what Abraham and Sarah laughed at. Sarah said, "After I am old, shall I have pleasure?" for which she was rebuked by Yhwh, who said, "Is anything too difficult for Yhwh?" And now we see Abimelech anticipating the very thing Sarah laughed at. How dare we laugh, too? The question not answered in B would be readily supplied to the mind of the reader who read A: "See now, I know that you are a beautiful woman; and it will come about that when [they] see you, they will say, 'This is his wife'; and they will kill me, but they will let you live. So say that you are my sister, so that. . . I may live on account of you" (Gen 12: 11-13). The paging back and forth between chap. 12 and chap. 20 which is necessitated by the incompleteness of each episode leads us to conclude that Sarah is the same in both cases. She is no longer the wrinkled old lady of chap. 18, but rather the exceptionally beautiful Sarah of some 24 years earlier when she entered the promised land. The reader of chap. 20 is to refer back to chap. 18 not to see what Sarah is like, but to see what she has been changed from. And he refers to chap. 12 and its description of her beauty to see what she has been restored to. Rather than stating that fact outright, the author has abruptly presented the reader with a seemingly incongruous and impossible situation; the brief statement of v. 2 would instantly let the reader remember the previous account and let it fill in the details, causing him, after sitting in judgment on Abraham and Sarah for their laughter, to join them in being caught laughing at the word of God. Isaac is indeed well named! The implication should not escape us that the author is teaching us to treat his written words as equivalent to God's words spoken directly to Abraham. Abraham is taught not to laugh at the direct pronouncements of God; Sarah at the word of God pronounced by man. Then future generations are taught not to laugh at the written word of God. From a redaction-critical perspective, then, the genre classifications of the form critics, such as "Tale told to entertain" and "Legend," must be rejected. The one responsible for placing the accounts in their present context wants us to treat them as the written oracle of God. And we would do well to remember that there is no hard evidence that they ever existed in any other form or context.

Also highly dubious is the source-critical contention that Abraham's and Sarah's laughter indicates two different sources' explanations for how Isaac got his name. For the text has been clearly so set up that not only Abraham and Sarah laugh, but multitudes down through the ages laugh as well.

At this point one might wonder whether such an important matter as the rejuvenation of Sarah should be recognized without an explicit mention of it in the text. Is there anything else in the context to support this interpretation besides the mutually interdependent construction of A and B? At least two lines of evidence support this interpretation. First is the case of Abraham himself. In Gen 17:17 he regarded himself as too old to father a child. For Isaac to be conceived, then, what happened to Abraham? Was he given a one-time ability to generate offspring, or was his bodily state rejuvenated, as I suggested Sarah's was? The answer to this is made clear in Gen 25:1-2, where we read that after the death of Sarah, long after describing himself as too old to father a child, he takes another wife and fathers six more children!³⁶ Rejuvenation is thus clear in the case of Abraham, and this lends credence to the same conclusion for Sarah.

A second line of evidence comes from proposing a test to the rejuvenation hypothesis. If Sarah were made 24 years younger at the age of 89, then, all other things being equal, she should live at least another 24 years after that point to get back to the same place she was when she laughed. But if she died just a few years after Isaac was born, that would cast doubt on the whole rejuvenation hypothesis. But how can we apply this test, since Scripture does not indicate the life span of women? We know how long Adam lived, but not Eve; Isaac, but not Rebekah; Moses and Aaron, but not Miriam; etc. Never does the Bible give us the age at which a woman died. With one exception, that is. Sarah just happens to be the only woman in the Bible whose life span is recorded; she lived another 38 years after the events of chap. 20 (Gen 23: 1). And because she is the only woman so treated, we have a means of testing the rejuvenation hypothesis. Perhaps, then, that is the reason we are told how long she lived. If one rejects this explanation, then he should come up with some other one in its place for why Sarah's life span is given, while no other woman's is.

The suggestion that Sarah was rejuvenated was made by some of the rabbis, according to M. Zlotowitz.³⁷ It has also had at least two proponents in modern times: J. Kurtz and G. Aalders.³⁸ Neither offered any evidence

³⁶ Predictably, this has been taken as another contradiction indicating multiple sources behind Genesis; see, e.g., Spurrell, *Text of Genesis*, xvi.

³⁷ "It may be that, as the Rabbis assert, . . . her youthfulness returned in preparation for conception (*Radak, Ramban; . . .*). . . . Cf. *Bava etzia* 87a: . . . her skin became smooth, her wrinkles disappeared, and her former beauty was regained" (N. Scherman and M. Zlotowitz, *Bereishis / Genesis: A New Translation with a Commentary Anthologized from Talmudic, Midrashic and Rabbinic Sources*, vol. 1(a) [The ArtScroll Tanach Series; Brooklyn: Mesorah, 1986] 722).

³⁸ J. Kurtz wrote, "The matter admits of ready explanation. Since the visit of the angels in Mamre when Sarah was *set apart* to become mother, and through the creative agency of God

for the view, except that it seemed like an obvious way out of the difficulty. Kurtz's view was rejected without explanation by Keil, who said that Abimelech wanted to marry Sarah not for her beauty, but in order to make a marriage alliance to gain favor with the great prince (per Gen 23:6) Abraham.³⁹ But this view, which also goes back to the rabbis,⁴⁰ is incredible, since it ignores the fact that Abraham lied because he was afraid of something. Keil's view leads to the conclusion that he was afraid that Abimelech would kill him to make an alliance with him to gain his favor, which of course is ridiculous.

Another support for this interpretation is that it dovetails with another theme of promise-fulfillment in the Abraham cycle. In addition to the promise of offspring, Abraham received the promise of land. The incongruity of this promise is brought out in the juxtaposition of the situation and the promise in Gen 12:6b-7a, "Now the Canaanite was then in the land. And the Lord appeared to Abram and said, 'To your offspring I will give this land.'" He had not been brought to inherit a vacant lot; this land was already inhabited. In Gen 13:15 the promise of land is both "to you. . . and to your offspring." In chap. 15 Abraham is again promised the land, "I am Yhwh who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess it" (15:7). Does this mean that Abraham is personally going to inherit the land, not just indirectly through his offspring? Since it seemed quite unlikely for a single nomad, powerful though he was, to dispossess an inhabited land, he asks, "how may I know that I will possess it?" (v. 8). He is then instructed to bring some animals for sacrifice. What follows is a covenant ceremony, with a solemn promise of the land as Yhwh passes a flaming torch between the carcass pieces. The references to time of day require some comment. The promise of v. 7 occurs while it is very dark,

rendered capable of it, her youth and beauty had returned: this new life would manifest itself in her appearance, and lend it fresh beauty and new charms" (*History of the Old Covenant* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1870] 250). Similarly, G. Aalders: "We believe that Sarah experienced a physical miracle that enabled her to bear a child at an extremely advanced age. This miracle of physical rejuvenation could well have caused Sarah also to retain or, if need be, to regain her physical attractiveness to such an extent that she would draw the attention of Abimelech" (*Genesis* [2 vols.; Bible Student's Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981] 2.27). J. Quarry suggested, "perhaps this story is introduced to indicate that. . . she had acquired such a renewal of the natural concomitant physical attributes, as would render her childbearing a matter of less curiosity" (*Genesis and its Authorship: Two Dissertations* [London: Williams & Norgate, 1866] 449 n. 1). G. von Rad did not know the truth of what he wrote: "Obviously the narrator imagines Sarah to be much younger" (*Genesis: A Commentary* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964] 222).

³⁹ C. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament. Vol. 1, The Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949) 239. Also note the bewildering statement by H. Leupold (*Exposition of Genesis* [2 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1964] 2.583): "A kind of rejuvenation in connection with the impending birth of a son could have made no appreciable difference."

⁴⁰ "According to *Ran*, Abimelech took Sarah, not because of her beauty, but because she was Abraham's 'sister' and he wished to marry into so distinguished a family" (Zlotowitz, *Bereishis*, 722).

since the stars can be seen well (v. 5). In v. 12, however, the sun has not yet set, and in v. 17 it is dark again.⁴¹ What has happened, then, seems to be that in the early morning darkness Abraham is given the promise, then told to bring the animals. When he does so, nothing happens. He waits around all day, and nothing happens except that some vultures try to get the animals. Finally, the sun sets and he falls into a deep sleep. Then comes the covenant ceremony and a revelation of the future. The rest of Abraham's life will be spent just as this day has been; he will wait, and nothing will happen as far as inheriting the land. Then he will fall asleep (die; v. 15).⁴² After 400 years of exile and oppression of his descendants, they will return and inherit the land.

First he is told he will inherit the land. Then when he asks how he can know for sure, he is told he will die before it is inherited by his offspring. So will Abraham inherit the land or not? Is the Lord less able to reward his servants than the kings of that age, who in the style of Genesis 15 gave grants of land to their faithful servants which were effective while they were still living?⁴³ Genesis 15 makes it clear that if Abraham is going to inherit the land, it has to be in the resurrection. If he is not going to inherit it, then what is God's promise worth to Abraham? To imply a resurrection from Genesis 15 may seem like reading into the text, but some meaning must attach to the fact that Abraham is made to wait all day, doing nothing, and to the sequence of events in chap. 15. A source-critical explanation of sloppy editing strikes us as the lazy way out.

The two themes of son and land parallel each other. When Abraham and Sarah entered the promised land with a promise of offspring they were "alive" with respect to being able to have children. This is shown on the one hand by Abraham later fathering Ishmael, and on the other by the fact that Sarah, though barren, did not give up hope of giving birth until 16:2 (and her youthful beauty surely gave her reason to hope). But while waiting for the promise, they both "died" with respect to being able to have children (17:17; 18:12). After they "died" they were "brought back to life" so that Isaac could be born and the promise fulfilled. This sequence forms a paradigm of the promise of the land. They entered the land and received a promise to inherit that land. Then they wait the rest of their lives, the promise unfulfilled, and die without receiving it. It is only in the resurrection that they can receive it. Rejuvenation is thus a token, or type, of resurrection. This link between the two was evidently on Paul's mind when he penned Rom 4:17-19, "in the sight of Him whom [Abraham] believed, even God, who gives life to the dead. . . he believed, in order that he might

41 Not surprisingly, this is held to indicate a multiple-source background to the account. See Speiser, *Genesis*, 114-15. Discrepancies in time of day are one factor which led him to say, "the whole is clearly not of a piece, though now intricately blended,"

42 G. Wenham also notes this symbolic meaning of Abraham's sleep (*Genesis 1-15* [WBC 1; Waco, TX: Word, 1987] 335).

43 M. Weinfeld. "Covenant of Grant" *JAOS* 90 (1970) 184-203.

become a father. . . he contemplated his own body, now as good as dead, and the deadness of Sarah's womb" (also see Heb 11:12-13).

Paul seems to have been preceded as a witness to the rejuvenation interpretation by Isaiah the prophet. In Isa 51:2-3, the only OT passage outside of Genesis that refers to Sarah, the righteous remnant is exhorted to consider the example of their ancestors:

Look to Abraham your father,
 And to Sarah who gave birth to you in pain;
 When he was one I called him,
 Then I blessed him, and multiplied him.
 Indeed the Lord will comfort Zion;
 He will comfort all her waste places.
 And her wilderness he will make like Eden,
 And her desert like the Garden of the LORD;
 Joy and gladness will be found in her,
 Thanksgiving and sound of a melody.

The example of Abraham and Sarah seems especially appropriate once we recognize a rejuvenation, a physical transformation analogous to changing a desert into a paradise. Rejoicing also followed that transformation (Gen 21:6). It is also appropriate to cite Eden [^c*eden*], since Sarah had said, "Shall I have ^c*edna*?"

There is therefore no problem in viewing chap. 20 as properly following chaps. 18 and 19. Likewise, there are two features of chap. 21 which are incomprehensible without chap. 20. The first of these is the emphasis with which Isaac is said to be the son of Abraham in Gen 21:2-5 (four times using the verb *yld* with the preposition *le*; three times using the possessive suffix with *ben*). Zlotowitz explained this redundancy as follows: "The repeated emphasis on *born to 'him'* testifies against the scoffers that the child was born of *Abraham's* seed and none other."⁴⁴ The "other" would obviously be Abimelech, since Sarah had just been in his harem. Zlotowitz cites Rashi to this effect in the latter's commentary on Gen 25:19: "Cynics of Abraham's generation had been saying that Sarah, who had lived so long with Abraham without bearing a child, must have become pregnant by Abimelech."⁴⁵ This leads to the second feature of chap. 21 explained by chap. 20. It was clearly not "cynics" in general asserting Isaac's illegitimacy, but Ishmael, as is clear from the following context, where we find Ishmael mocking Isaac with some taunt not mentioned, but which deeply offends Sarah and is so serious an offense that Ishmael is disinherited by divine

⁴⁴ Zlotowitz, *Bereishis*, 747.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 1044. The citation reads, "*Tanchuma; Rashi* as explained by Mizrahi." Cf. A. Levene, trans., *The Early Syrian Fathers on Genesis* (London: Taylor's Foreign Press, 1951) 92-93: "But in the case of Abimelech, he mentions explicitly that he did not draw near unto her, because as she was already pregnant with Isaac, it should not be thought that it was from another and not from Abraham."

decree. What could offend Sarah more than to assert that Isaac was Abimelech's son? Ishmael's interest (also Hagar's) in asserting such a claim would be obvious, since it would involve a denial of Isaac's legitimate inheritance rights in favor of his own, contrary to God's revealed will. The punishment imposed (loss of his own inheritance) is quite appropriate to the offense.⁴⁶

The more trivial contextual "discrepancies" of B can now be dealt with. Some critics cite the implausibility of Abraham twice falling into the same error. But in whose opinion is it implausible? Certainly not the author's; to maintain that he was merely in the business of collecting variant traditions would contradict the "evidence" cited by critics to indicate that the redactor has edited the material precisely to present the accounts as two different episodes in the life of Abraham. Besides, we should know by now that we should not label what we read as "implausible," lest we be caught laughing again.

This is not to say that no conclusions should be drawn from the fact that Abraham erred in this way twice. Though outwardly the offense appears the same in both cases, several considerations indicate that the second lapse was much more blameworthy than the first. It was suggested earlier that in A the promise of the heir could have been considered as being fulfilled through Lot, so that it did not depend on Abraham's continued existence. Likewise no mention had been made of Sarah's involvement in the promise. These factors mitigate Abraham's actions somewhat; he failed to do what is right no matter the consequences, which could have been death. In B, however, the same error indicates flat unbelief in God's explicit promise; he had by now received the promise that he would die "in peace" (15:15), yet he fears that he will be murdered. And God had just told him that in a year's time Sarah will bear him a son. Finally, the experience of God's intervention in plaguing Pharaoh's house on his behalf in a similar situation gives him even less excuse for unbelief. Even if he just proceeded in the same way because he knew God would rescue him again, then he was guilty of testing God. These considerations make very dubious Polzin's view that the situation in B is transformed into a morally better situation than A (see n. 30; his reason for this is the erroneous assumption that adultery occurred in A).

Another objection was that it must have taken quite some time to discover that "the Lord had closed fast all the wombs of the household of Abimelech" (v. 18), whereas only a few months could conceivably be involved in chap. 20, according to the chronological framework. But those who presume that a period of years was involved run into trouble in the story itself. We are told that Abimelech had not approached Sarah (v. 4); but that was obviously the purpose for which he had taken her. Would he

⁴⁶ As my wife Linda pointed out to me, John 8:41 might be a NT counterpart to this, if it is in fact a slur on the legitimacy of the birth of Isaac.

wait years to do so? The more likely explanation is that, as in A, there were "plagues"; here Green suggested some kind of physical affliction preventing intercourse, requiring healing.⁴⁷

We have shown how A and B are interdependent, and this militates against Koch's treatment of them as independent units. But an even greater dependence on the Exodus narrative can be shown for A. It was well known to the ancients that Gen 12:10-20 is typologically related to the account of the Exodus, a fact that has not been dealt with by most moderns. If Abraham went down to Egypt because of famine; the sons of Israel went down to Egypt because of famine, where they became the nation of Israel. Abraham prospered in Egypt; Israel prospered in Egypt. Abraham feared that he would be killed, while Sarah would be spared; Pharaoh commanded that the Hebrew male children be killed, while the females should be spared. Yhwh sent plagues on Pharaoh because of Sarah; Yhwh sent plagues on Pharaoh because of his treatment of Israel. Pharaoh sent away Abraham and Sarah with much property; Pharaoh sent away Israel with much property. Abraham and Sarah returned to Canaan; Israel returned to Canaan. Additionally, though he let Abraham go to Egypt, God told Isaac not to go (Gen 26:2); likewise Israel was told not to return to Egypt (Deut 17:16), thus involving C in the typology as well. It is evident, then, that virtually every detail of A has a typological connection with the Exodus narrative. That being the case, one has to wonder what is the justification for and the value in studying it primarily as an independent unit, as the form critics do. It is thoroughly dependent on the Exodus narrative and interdependent with Genesis 20, and its unique features are explained at least in part by these dependencies.

So far little has been said about C. It certainly lacks the drama of the other two passages, since no one tries to take Rebekah away from Isaac, and there is no divine intervention to save her. It does look like it could be another version of B, since Abimelech (and Phicol immediately following) reappears here, over 76 years after B. And the line of reasoning that says Abraham would not make the same mistake twice, concludes likewise that Isaac would not make the same mistake as his father.

⁴⁷ Green, *Unity of Genesis*, 257. He says such a plague is implied in the fact that Abimelech required healing as well as his wife and servant girls (20:17).

⁴⁸ U. Cassuto, *The Documentary Hypothesis and the Composition of the Pentateuch* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1961) 78-83. R. Pratt has rediscovered this "parallelism" without calling the connection typological ("Pictures, Windows, and Mirrors in Old Testament Exegesis," *WTJ* 45 [1983] 156-67). Wenham notes the typological connection, and suggests it is the basis for the typology of Matt 2:15 (*Genesis*, 291-92). Cf. *Gen. Rab.* 40.6.1. Weimar (*Redaktionsgeschichte*, 18 n. 56) mentions R. Kilian as opposing the view that Gen 12:10-20 forms a parallel with the Exodus narrative (*Die vorpriesterlichen Abrahams-Oberlieferungen: Literarkritisch und traditionsge-schichtlich Untersucht* [BBB; Bonn: Hanstein, 1966] 212-13). But Kilian's reason for denying such a typological connection is solely that he views the three accounts as arising from one basic tradition.

Let us begin a redaction-critical approach by agreeing that it is indeed a remarkable thing that this Abimelech should have such a long reign. The difficulty cannot be avoided by supposing that "Abimelech" is a dynastic title such as "Pharaoh" (appealing to Psalm 34, title), or that it is the same name given to a son or grandson. While such a solution might be plausible for the king himself, the same could not be maintained for his general Phicol, who is with the king after both accounts. The question to ask is, what would account for such a remarkably long reign?

Here we can again profit from a comparison of the three accounts. In A, Pharaoh expelled Abraham from his country. The gifts given to Abraham were because of his (supposed) relation to Sarah, not because of his relation to the Lord. Abimelech, however, gave gifts to Abraham after God intervened for him, and he told Abraham to settle wherever he wanted in his land (Gen 20:14-15). In the next chapter, Abimelech and Phicol say to Abraham, "God is with you in all that you do; now therefore swear to me by God that you will not deal falsely with me, or with my offspring, or with my posterity; but according to the kindness that I have shown to you, you shall show to me" (21:22b-23). Recall that God had said to Abraham, "I will bless those who bless you" (12:3). Would it be surprising to find recorded the fulfillment of that promise? Abimelech and Phicol certainly fit the category of those who blessed Abraham. And in chap. 26, we find it was not only Abraham who honored the request "according to the kindness that I have shown to you, you shall show to me," but God honored it as well, blessing them with very long lives and reigns. This is just another example of God exercising his sovereignty and creative power over the aging process. Clearly the Abimelech of C has changed since the one of B, inconsistent with the notion of duplicate versions. The Abimelech of B is a harem-building king eager to acquire Sarah. But in C, where the whole town is stirred over the beauty of Rebekah, Abimelech is not interested. He seems to spend his time peeping through windows (v. 8), consistent with the idea of a much older man. The title "king of the Philistines" rather than "king of Gerar" may indicate some blessing of a greater kingdom as well. Another objection has been that C presumes that Isaac and Rebekah are childless-for how could they pretend to be brother and sister with their two boys there? Yet the chronology places the event after the death of Abraham (26:18), making Jacob and Esau at least 16 years old. But this objection assumes what is plainly false-that only the family of four entered town, so that the boys would have appeared conspicuously without parents. Like his father, Isaac had many-perhaps hundreds-of men working for him and travelling with him (26:14-15, 19; see 14: 14), some no doubt with families of their own. Surely we can credit Isaac with enough intelligence to figure out a way to pass off his sons (who may have been fully grown anyway) as someone else's. Bible scholars likewise ought to be able to figure it out.

Having shown that C suitably fits its context, we still need to ask what contribution it makes to the development of the great themes of Genesis. If the only purpose were to show God's blessing on those who bless Abraham it could have been omitted, since Abimelech and Phicol are mentioned in the following narrative. Perhaps a clue to the importance of the story can be obtained from the critics' observation about the son repeating the mistake of his father. Certainly any reader of C would instantly realize that Isaac is following in his father's footsteps, and the narrative itself points back to A in v. 1: "there was a famine in the land, besides the previous famine that had occurred in the days of Abraham," referring back to 12:10. But the references to Abraham's life do not stop with C. Through the rest of chap. 26 we see Isaac doing what his father did. "Isaac dug again the wells of water which had been dug in the days of his father Abraham, . . . and he gave them the same names which his father had given them" (v. 18); "The Lord appeared to him the same night and said, 'I am the God of your father Abraham' " (v. 24). Also like his father he grew wealthy (vv. 12-14), and made a covenant with Abimelech and Phicol at Beersheba (vv. 26-33). "Like father, like son" is an obvious inference, and the inclusion of the wife/sister motif lets us know that Isaac is like his father in every respect, including his failings.⁴⁹

The significance of this duplication can be seen in considering the development of the promises of the new Adam in the book of Genesis. The reason for the new Adam, of course, is the failure of the first Adam. The commission given to Adam was to be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it as man in the image of God. The result of Adam's sin was that instead the earth was filled with wickedness and then destroyed (6:11-13). After the flood, the commission is given anew to Noah (9:1-7), leading us to think of him as another Adam, the father of the race that will fulfill God's purpose in creation. Disappointment soon comes, however, as the sin of Ham, the cursing of Canaan, and the tower of Babel incidents are narrated. It seems that things are going to turn out just as the first time; that Noah is not the new Adam after all. Then the commission of Adam is given to Abraham in the form of a promise (the aspects of fruitfulness and dominion can both be seen in 17:2, 4, 6). Here there is not a command for men to fulfill, but God's declaration of his intention to make Abraham the new Adam, the father of the righteous seed (which is why Paul said that Abraham received a promise that he would inherit the world; Rom 4:13). But here again there is disappointment: Abraham the father of the righteous fathered Ishmael the wicked, who is expelled from the family and his inheritance because of his persecution of Isaac, who inherits the promise of Abraham. If Abraham is not the new Adam, then maybe Isaac is. That would certainly explain all the attention given to him: his conception from

⁴⁹ Green (*Unity of Genesis*, 325) also noted, "Isaac's life was to such an extent an imitation of his father's that no surprise need be felt at his even copying his faults." But the significance of the repetition requires explanation.

his rejuvenated parents, the stress on the covenant passing to Isaac, not Ishmael (17:19-21), and the expulsion of Ishmael for mocking his younger brother (21:9-12; see p. 17 for a suggestion as to the content of this mocking). Will the promise of the new Adam then be fulfilled through the miracle son, Isaac? Will he be what his father was not? The phrase "she is my sister" (26:7) is enough to dispel that notion, along with the previous narrative of Jacob and Esau, another Isaac and Ishmael pair. "Like father, like son" thus has an important function in the development of the messianic promise. It continues the cycle of expectation/disappointment which points the faithful reader toward a future fulfillment, the coming of the true new Adam who will be greater than Abraham and Isaac, who only symbolically represented him. This cycle of expectation/disappointment is encapsulated within C itself, which records the giving of the messianic promise to Isaac (vv. 3-5), followed immediately by Isaac's moral lapse (vv. 6-7). Note also the irony of juxtaposing v. 5, "because Abraham obeyed me and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws," with vv. 6-7, "so Isaac. . . said 'she is my sister,' for he was afraid" (the full irony of this would not be present without the knowledge that Abraham who "obeyed me" had lapsed as Isaac did). Likewise the first lapse of Abraham in A occurred right after the giving of the promise (12:7).⁵⁰

The interpretation of these accounts as showing that Abraham and Isaac were really like the first Adam, though spoken of as the new Adam, is corroborated by W. Berg, who calls A "The Fall of Abraham," pointing back to Genesis 3.⁵¹ Among other clues is the recurrent question, "What is this you have done?" in 3:13 (God to Eve), 12:18 (Pharaoh to Abraham), and 26: 10 (Abimelech to Isaac). Berg's essay on A followed an earlier analysis of Genesis 16 with similar conclusions.⁵² In both cases, Abraham's lapse is a violation of the Edenic ordinance of marriage. Such an analogy with the fall of Adam in Genesis 3 would make the lapse in B even more significant, since in that case Abraham and Sarah had been restored to "Eden" (Isa 51:3), yet fell again. The point to observe is that their rejuvenation did not undo the effects of the fall of Adam, and so they just grew old again and died. It is also noteworthy that the "Fall of David" (perhaps another "new Adam," for the promise of fruitfulness and dominion given to Abraham are also found in 2 Samuel 7) is ironically reminiscent of B (as P. Miscall has noted),⁵³ since king David did to the foreigner Uriah what

50 As noted above, Koch felt that it was "odd" that this sequence would occur. It has a theological, not form-critical, explanation.

51 W. Berg, "Nochmals: Ein Sundenfall Abrahams-der erste-in Gen 12,10-20," *Biblische Notizen* 21 (1983) 7-15.

52 W. Berg, "Der Sundenfall Abrahams und Saras nach Gen 16,1-6," *Biblische Notizen* 19 (1982) 7-14.

53 P. Miscall, "Literary Unity in Old Testament Narrative," *Semeia* 15 (1979) 27-44. "What the patriarch, the elect, fears of the foreigners because of his wife is just what David, the elect, the Israelite king, does to Uriah the Hittite because of his wife" (p. 39).

Abraham was afraid the foreign king Abimelech would do to him (2 Samuel 11). The irony is not only in the role reversal, but that Abraham's fears were unfounded. Abimelech the pagan protested his innocence and rebuked Abraham for exposing him to God's wrath by his subterfuge; Abraham responded that he did it because he was sure there was no fear of God in that (pagan) place (20:9-11). What does that say when such a thing actually did happen in Israel, under its greatest king, the one after God's own heart, the one who did more to fulfill the Adamic commission than Abraham or Isaac? Such a series of lapses in the "new Adams" would certainly create a realization that a "greater" new Adam was required to fill the role. When the true new Adam came, instead of exposing his bride to defilement to save his own life, he "gave himself up for her to make her holy" (Eph 5:25-26).

When Paul goes on to say, "This is a profound mystery" (Eph 5:32), perhaps he means for us to make this comparison with the patriarchs. John 4, following John the Baptist's designation of Jesus as the bridegroom (John 3:25-30), certainly provides the basis for such a comparison, since a man meeting a woman at a well is the classic OT courtship scene (see Genesis 24; 29; Exodus 2). The most detailed of these accounts, Genesis 24, finds a number of striking parallels in John 4. (1) A man is by a well when a woman comes along to draw water, and he asks her for a drink (Gen 24:33; John 4:7). (2) The woman runs back and tells her family (Gen 24:28), or her townspeople (John 4:28-29). (3) The man is met and invited to the home (Gen 24:29-32), or the town (John 4:30, 39-40). (4) The man refuses to eat (Gen 24:33; John 4:27, 31-32). (5) The man stays overnight (= 2 days; Gen 24:54; John 4:40). The overall theme, brought out in the conversation between the man and woman, may also be compared: in Genesis 24 a father is seeking a virtuous bride for his son; in John 4 the Father seeks true worshipers (v. 23).⁵⁴

Once the parallels are accepted, the contrasts between the two brides are equally striking. Rebekah was from a good family, not a Canaanite; a Samaritan woman would be off-limits as a bride for a Jew. Rebekah was a virgin; her NT counterpart had been married five times, and was currently living with a man to whom she was not married. Rebekah was in every way the model bride, but Isaac compromised her virtue, "because I thought I might lose my life on account of her" (Gen 26:9), reflecting a value system he learned from his father. The one greater than Isaac willingly gave up his life for his most unworthy bride.

⁵⁴ A detailed comparison between the two accounts might yield further parallels, as might analysis of the other OT courtship scenes. For example, J. H. Bernard notes a "striking parallel" with Josephus' account of Moses at the well, where Josephus specifies the time as noon, as in John 4:6 (J. H. Bernard, *A Critical & Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John* [2 vols.; ICC; New York: Scribner, 1929] 1.136).

3. *Confirmation from Another "Contradiction"*

Examination of another apparent contradiction in Genesis, while not directly related to the wife/sister episodes, will aid the thesis presented here by showing that apparent contradiction is a means of bringing out recurring themes of the patriarchal promises. The apparent contradiction deals with the scene of Isaac's blessing of Jacob. In Isaac's instructions to Esau of Gen 27:1-4, he made it clear that he considered his death to be imminent (as did Rebekah and Esau; Gen 27:41-45). Yet the patriarchal chronology indicates that Isaac did not die soon after, but lived at least 40 more years.⁵⁵ Before rushing to the conclusion that this is a contradiction, perhaps we should first try the assumption that the apparent contradiction is simply meant to cause us to inquire as to what happened that gave Isaac a new lease on life. Once we ask such a question, the answer is not far away. Something indeed did happen which would explain such a lengthening of life. We are told that of his two sons, Isaac favored Esau, which was to the detriment of Jacob, whom God favored (Gen 25:23, 28). The Lord said to Abraham, "I will bless those who bless you, but the one who curses you I will curse" (Gen 12:5). The same thing is spoken to Isaac himself, then later to Jacob. While Isaac certainly does not fit into the category of a wicked man, persecuting Jacob, it is reasonable to infer that his favoring of (the rejected) Esau over Jacob would not be without penalty. And what would be a suitable penalty for Isaac treating Jacob like he should have treated Esau, and vice versa? Would it not be for God to treat Isaac as Ishmael? That is in fact what he did, for the patriarchal chronology indicates that Isaac was about 137 years old when this incident took place (see n. 55). His older brother Ishmael had died at the age of 137 (Gen 25:17), and it looked as if Isaac would do the same. Since Isaac treated Jacob like he should have treated Esau, God was treating Isaac like he treated Ishmael in terms of life span. He was going to die "young." And we would not know that unless Ishmael's life span were given, contrary to the pattern of Genesis, where as a rule only men in the line from Adam to Joseph have their life span given. As we saw earlier, Sarah is an exception to this pattern, and there was a definite reason for that. Likewise in the case of Ishmael some explanation seems to be called for as to why his life span should be given. The explanation offered here is that it shows how and why Isaac's life was going to be cut short. Isaac said to Jacob, thinking he was speaking to Esau, "Cursed be those who curse you, and blessed be those who bless you" (Gen 27:29). How ironic that he himself was under penalty for blessing the wrong one up

⁵⁵ Jacob went to Egypt when he was 130 years old, when Joseph was about 39 (compare Gen 45:11 and 41:46; assuming that the years of plenty began immediately after Pharaoh's dreams). Thus Jacob was about 91 when Joseph was born, and this was about 14 years after he was blessed by Isaac (Gen 29:18, 30, 30:25), making Jacob about 77 years old when he left home. This would make Isaac 137 years old at the time (Gen 25:26), give or take a few years, and he lived to be 180 (Gen 35:28).

to this point. Ironic also that the physical degradation he experienced (his blindness) was what prevented him from recognizing that he was blessing the "wrong" (actually right) son. It is only now when he comes to understand that it is God's will to bless Jacob, and he willingly does so (Gen 28:3), that he is released from this penalty and given an extension of life. In this episode, then, we have reinforced several themes dealt with earlier. First, as already mentioned, we see the use of apparent contradiction to cause the reader to ask certain questions. Then, we see the answer to that contradiction in terms of God's exercising control over the aging process in fulfilling the patriarchal promises. In connection with this, we also see the deliberate departure from a general pattern in terms of giving life spans to assist in the elucidation of the theme. All of this reinforces the conclusions reached earlier.

4. *Structural Considerations*

G. Rendsburg has recently shown⁵⁶ how our three narratives fit into the framework of the "Abraham cycle" and the "Jacob cycle." In the former he builds on the work of U. Cassuto, who identified ten trials of Abraham that are in a basically chiasmic order of five pairs. Rendsburg combined two pairs into one in order to form a more perfect chiasm, then included the genealogies at the beginning and end as framing the cycle. The structure is as follows:

- A Genealogy of Terah (11:27-32)
- B Start of Abraham's Spiritual Odyssey (12: 1-9)
- C Sarai in foreign palace; ordeal ends in peace and success;
Abram and Lot part (12:10-13:18)
- D Abram comes to the rescue of Sodom and Lot (14:1-24)
- E Covenant with Abraham; Annunciation of Ishmael (15:1-16:16)
- E' Covenant with Abraham; Annunciation of Isaac (17: 1-18: 15)
- D' Abraham comes to the rescue of Sodom and Lot (18:16-19:38)
- C' Sarah in foreign palace; ordeal ends in peace and success;
Abraham and Ishmael part (20:1-21:34)
- B' Climax of Abraham's Spiritual Odyssey (22:1-19)
- A' Genealogy of Nahor (22:20-24)⁵⁷

This does not leave chap. 26 as an orphan, for that is part of the Jacob cycle, for which Rendsburg essentially reproduces M. Fishbane's work.⁵⁸ Again, there is a multimember chiasm, in which chap. 26 ("Interlude: Rebekah in

⁵⁶ G. Rendsburg, *The Redaction of Genesis* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1986).

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 28-29. For other chiasmic arrangements of the Abraham cycle, see I. Kikawada and A. Quinn, *Before Abraham Was* (Nashville: Press, 1985) 96 (based on E. Bullinger, *Companion Bible* [part 1; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1911] 18); and C. Westermann, *The Promise to the Fathers* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980) 58.

⁵⁸ M. Fishbane, *Text and Texture* (New York: Schocken, 1979) 40-62.

foreign palace, pact with foreigners") corresponds to chap. 34 ("Interlude: Dinah in foreign palace, pact with foreigners").⁵⁹

While not wanting to minimize the importance of this type of analysis, which suggests solutions to a number of important critical problems, it seems to me that it is quite incorrect to conclude from it, as Rendsburg does (quoting Cassuto): "all this shows clearly how out of the material selected from the store of ancient tradition concerning Abraham a homogeneous narrative was created in the text before us, integrated and harmoniously arranged in all its parts and details."⁶⁰ This seems to presume that if a narrative can be fit into a chiasm, then it is "harmonious." But it is clear that the chiasm does not solve the chronological problems identified at the beginning of this paper, problems which gave credence to the multiple source hypothesis. Such a statement also seems to imply that an ancient Hebrew reader would tolerate the most blatant contextual discrepancies as long as they were due to a chiastic order being followed. In fact, instead of concluding that the redactor was a genius for constructing this chiasm, we might rather conclude that he was so superficial, driven only by a desire to arrange his material into a chiasm, that he would tolerate the most illogical and incongruous chronological sequences. In short, the structural analysis and the thematic analysis must complement each other.

Two other points should be made about Rendsburg's analysis of the Abraham cycle. First, the consistent chiasm is achieved only by combining sections which seem to be thematically distinct, but which taken separately would not follow the chiastic order (*C/C'* has three parts and *E/E'* has two parts, where the inverse order is not followed where it "should" be). This departure from chiasm is somewhat masked by combining the elements under one head, though Rendsburg does discuss the reasons for the varying orders. Perhaps the structure departs from chiasm precisely because Lot and Ishmael depart! Second, such a structural analysis puts the emphasis on finding parallels between members. But as we saw, a key to understanding the relationship between chaps. 12 and 20 is that one left out what is found in the other. Rendsburg is interested in what is common to both, i.e., their redundancy. Overzealousness for parallels can perhaps also be seen in the title, "Rebekah in foreign palace"; Rebekah was not in a foreign palace. As suggested by T. Longman,⁶¹ perhaps the "parallelism" of chiasm should be understood along the lines suggested by Kugel for poetic writings: the A and B lines are not parallel in the sense of equivalent, but complementary, supplementary, etc.

The structure revealed by Rendsburg tends to support the thematic development of this paper in one important respect. I argued that the

⁵⁹ Rendsburg, *The Redaction of Genesis*, 56.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁶¹ The suggestion was made in a "Critical Methodologies" class at Westminster Seminary, for which this paper was originally written.

rejuvenation of the patriarchs was due to a connection between the themes of the promise of Isaac and the promise of the land. Both depend on a kind of resurrection for their fulfillment, and the rejuvenation resulting in the birth of Isaac is therefore a token or type of the resurrection in which the land will be inherited. Significantly, in Rendsburg's analysis, the counterpart to the birth of Isaac is not the birth of Ishmael, but the promise of the land.⁵²

IV. Conclusion

The three wife/sister narratives fit in their contexts and play a significant role in the development of the themes of the patriarchal narratives. Apparent contradictions, instead of leading to an exegesis that despairs of trying to make sense out of the narratives as they are, have been shown to bring out these themes. Acceptance of the source and form-critical explanations for these data tend to prevent discovery of their true role. We seem to have reached the point feared by the orthodox redaction critic (one who accepts the results of source criticism as the basis for his work). As J. Barton noted, if redaction criticism is too "successful," it can undermine its own foundations:

The more impressive the critic makes the redactor's work appear, the more he succeeds in showing that the redactor has, by subtle and delicate artistry, produced a simple and coherent text out of the diverse materials before him; the more he also reduces the evidence on which the existence of those sources was established in the first place. No conjurer is required for this trick: the redaction critic himself causes his protege to disappear. . . . if redaction criticism plays its hand too confidently, we end up with a piece of writing so coherent that no division into sources is warranted any longer, and the sources and the redactor vanish together in a puff of smoke, leaving a single, freely composed narrative with, no doubt, a single author.⁶³

In the present case, if our understanding of the laughter in connection with the birth of Isaac is correct, we have done more than simply uncover coherency amid apparent chaos; we have uncovered an author who has played a highly successful joke on readers and scholars down through the centuries.

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62 Rendsburg, *The Redaction of Genesis*, 37-38.

63 Barton, *Reading the Old Testament*, 57.

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