



Reading Genesis with Faith and Reason

SEAN MCEVENUE

Concordia University, Montreal, Canada

Reading Genesis has once again become difficult because of the unending questions of scholars. Over the past twenty years our certitudes about the Pentateuch have been crumbling. Since Rolf Rendtorff launched a major attack on the tradition culminating in his 1977 book,¹ a growing stream of biblical research, particularly in Germany, has been directed to the task of questioning the identity, the sequence, and the dates of our familiar Yahwist, Elohist, and Priestly sources²—not to mention the growing diversity of opinion about sources and dates within Deuteronomy. This year, Fortress Press published a book we have needed for forty years: a presentation of the pentateuchal text sorted into continuous sources, following the source divisions of Martin Noth.³ But we cannot know whether this publication should be viewed as the opening salvo in a battle to restore the traditional documentary hypothesis or a case of locking the barn door after the horse is gone.

A very real question arises for those who want both to read the Bible as

¹Rolf Rendtorff, *Das Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Problem des Pentateuch* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1977).

²For an overview, see Albert de Pury, ed., *Le Pentateuque en question* (Geneva: Le Monde de la Bible, 1989); cf. also R. Whybray, *The Making of the Pentateuch, A Methodological Study* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1987).

³Antony F. Campbell and Mark A. O'Brien, *Sources of the Pentateuch, Texts, Introductions, Annotations* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

scripture and to interpret it critically. Amid all the tangle of hypotheses and theories, how are we to read responsibly, i.e., abandoning neither faith nor reason?

I would like to address this question at the level of cognitional theory, by showing, first, the paradoxical truth that, even if historical context is crucial for the meaning of texts, historical uncertainty does not prevent us from grasping that meaning; and, second, that, even if original literary context (whether J, E, P, or something else) is extremely helpful in enabling us to perceive the various points being made in a given chapter or pericope, we can still recover the voice of God without that elusive clarity. The breakdown in historical certainties has occurred just as literary theory has blossomed, asserting its own valid claims to truth. It is time that disciplined literary approaches begin to supplement (not to replace) critical historical methods in revealing the meaning of the Bible.

I. THE ROLE OF HISTORICAL CONTEXT

It is remarkable that so many scholars have welcomed the challenge to Wellhausen, even

though it could lead only into another century or two of arduous questioning, and how many others have joyfully struck out into the uncharted jungle of literary theory, even though one soon feels lost amid the subtleties. This joy and spirit of adventure may be symptomatic of a liberation from oppression—namely the oppression of rigid historical method. This method was imposed by the academic world, because academic or critical inquiry, in the place of naive belief, was understood to consist of exact historical method. It was oppressive because, with time and progress, historical method becomes ever more refined and precise, but its application to the Bible proves ever more inappropriate and impossible: inappropriate, because the more precisely we define meaning for a specific historical situation the less significant it becomes for another situation; impossible, because the history of ancient Israel is too remote, the data too scarce, the certitudes too few. The bold historical undertaking of the nineteenth century has made important contributions to our knowledge of the Bible, but at some point it has become arrogant and sterile.

What is right about historical research is, first, that it is truly attentive to the physical text of the Bible and truly obedient to the data. Thus it takes the Bible seriously as an authority, rather than using it as one's servant. Second, by searching for the historical contexts of biblical texts, it establishes in advance the existential nature of biblical messages, preserving interpreters from deriving simplistic doctrinal meanings. Third, historical research has won respect by its sheer brilliance—making inferences from what is often inadvertent in the text, detecting specific constraints and focuses in the horizon of the author, speculating about life situations that could evoke such a text, relating these to real moments in Israel's history, and so forth.

Historical research is deficient because, in its search for general historical dates and contexts, it loses sight of the author as man or woman of God driven by a unique and overwhelming faith experience. Consequently it is distracted from the only significant meaning of the text. The importance of this mistake cannot be

overstated. Historical research exhausts us with limitless trivia about language, conceptualization, archeological finds, geographic details, traces of historical data that can probably never be constructed into a sure picture of history, and endless controversy. None of this supports or permits the presentation of the powerful affirmations about God that are the essence of biblical literature.

II. LITERARY READINGS

The disciplined use of literary methods can serve as a corrective. I will try to show this by returning to the familiar trio of stories about the patriarch's wife, asking not the familiar historical-critical question, "Who said what to whom?" but the astonishingly challenging literary question, "What is this text about?"

1. *Genesis 12:5-13:7*

This text is a very strongly marked literary unit—the first experience of a divine program laid out in 12:1-4, according to which the nations of the world are to be blessed through Israel; God will bless those who bless Israel and curse those who curse Israel. As a literary unit, it is a story enclosed by an extensive frame with the following markers:

12:5-9 Lot and the Canaanites
 an altar to the Lord
 pitched his tent (between) Bethel and Ai
 toward the Negeb

 13:2-7 from the Negeb
 tent between Bethel and Ai
 an altar to the Lord
 Lot and the Canaanites

Historical research has tended to treat the story as taken over by the Yahwist (or some other redactor) from a tribal tale originally told around the fire to celebrate the female beauty and the male cunning of their ancestors. Other themes have been noted as well: how God intervenes when the matriarch, and therefore the tribe, is threatened; how God intervenes to save and enrich Israel when entangled with Egypt; how God fulfills Gen 12:1-4 by cursing Egypt when Egypt curses Israel; or how God intervenes to save a woman who is abusively abandoned by her husband. Erhard Blum, following a notion of von Rad that this trip to Egypt shows Abraham lacking in faith, sees the story as a digression from the promised land, a mistake that Isaac is instructed not to make (Gen 26:2-3) and that the exodus will definitively exclude.⁴ All these ideas can be found in the text, and they might all provide some data about the evolution of thought in ancient Israel. In canonical criticism, such ideas may be related to various levels of redaction, so that one articulates a first meaning for the original tale (pride in one's ancestors), another meaning within the

⁴E. Blum, *Die Komposition der Vätergeschichte* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1984) 311.

context of the Yahwist as a whole (tenth century? ninth? fourth? third?!: Israel's protected role in world history), a third meaning in the context of the Pentateuch as a whole (a Zionist message perhaps: return to Palestine enriched by the Greek or the Roman empire), and a fourth meaning in the context of the whole Bible (contrast with Christ who embraced death on behalf of others because he believed in resurrection?). But all these ideas appear only weakly to evoke faith. After formulating them, one is tempted to say: "So what?" Moreover none of these ideas embodies the text as a complex whole—for example, none gives any weight to the literary frame.⁵ Whereas the text when read roars from the throat, such historical commentary bleats like an electronically synthesized recording.

A literary reading of the text will see the text as a whole, and will then ask: what is it about? This question is never easy to answer.⁶ One could say that it is about Abraham, Sarah, and pharaoh; but clearly it is about something more complex and more subtle than that. I suggest that a useful way of moving toward an answer is to formulate the question: *In what realm of meaning, or in what social order, does the story's problem expect to have an answer?* Or more specifically, since it is a biblical story, one can ask: *In what realm of meaning is God expected to intervene, or revelation to occur?* The answer will be something like this: the realm of international relations involving God, the chosen people, and other nations. Thus the story is about God and international relations, not about Abraham, Sarah, and pharaoh at all!

How does the story envisage God and international relations? It is interesting, and maybe important, to note that many readers of the Bible would never dream of thinking of God involved in international relations. Such readers tend to look for moral meanings in this text, but they are disappointed because the last thing this text is thinking about is personal morals. For such readers, the story is a challenge. If we are to seek its meaning we must go back to Gen 12:1-4, the last verse of which is a transition to our unit. In this context, our unit tells that the land God promised to show Abraham is Canaan. The frame focuses on Abraham's accepting and consecrating the promised land and his possession of it; but at the very center of this acceptance and consecration there intervenes the mystery of Egypt. Israel's arrival there is inelegant and dishonorable (just as in the Joseph story); but it is followed by a hidden divine intervention and the return to Canaan of a prosperous Israel. This text presents in cameo an archetypal image of Israel's

⁵A recent article by Wolfgang Zwickel argues from the city-names in this frame (and a very few other texts) that this text focuses on the border between the Northern and Southern Kingdoms, that it must have been written shortly after the division in 926 B.C., and that the theology of the frame text was a political one: namely, that the promised land was forever to be a united and whole Israel, and that the lands annexed later by David are not part of it. Cf. "Der Altarbau Abrahams zwischen Bethel und Ai (Gen 12f)," *Biblische Zeitschrift* 36 (1992) 207-219. This is a perfect example of a precise historical kerygma, argued on the basis of historical methodology. But it treats the frame as an independent text rather than as a frame. So, whatever one might think of the validity of this historical argument, from a literary point of view it is not acceptable as an interpretation of the meaning of what we read in Genesis 12-13!

⁶Many literary critics take the position that a literary text is about itself, about a reality totally interior to the text and its reader. Since such a position makes no sense at all in the context of religious belief, there is no need of debating the issue here.

original and continuing religious experience: its beauty (expressed in Sarah), its corruption by human sin (both here and in Genesis 3 eating and male-female relations play an important role), God's hidden saving intervention, Israel's integrity and independence in its relations with a superior foreign culture. This unified image is just as true of Israel today as it was in ancient times, and just as true of Christian origins, or the arrival of Europeans on this continent, or the historical settlement of any ethnic group in the United States. The story is universal. It gives hope to those who find and respect the gift of God in their history.

If our reading is correct, we may further ask: what does the story say about all this? One then finds that it says many things, depending on our current wounds or needs on the one hand, and the vitality of our faith on the other. In fact, every literary text says what it says, using all its words. It is essential actually to read the story itself. Any resumé, or paraphrase, or abstract statement of "the whole point" of a literary text is inevitably a cheap deception. If someone asks what "The Star Spangled Banner" says, we must first hear it, and then we may weep some tears or blow a bugle or simply sing the anthem, but we should never imagine that a true answer to the question of meaning could take the form of a single sentence.⁷

This is the basic reason why attempts to define historical meanings of a text fail: they are never anything more than attempts to provide a paraphrase of the "original" meaning. They are even further falsified by an artificial limitation of literary meaning to some precise historical situation or time of writing.

2. Genesis 26

In introducing this story, the author is careful to refer to the earlier tale, with many explicit references to Genesis 12 and 15 in the opening verses:

- there is a famine in the land, but not the one experienced by Abraham (v. 1)
- Isaac is not to go to Egypt, but is to stay in Canaan (v. 2)
- Yahweh will bless Isaac and stand by the oath he swore of old to Abraham (v. 3)
- Yahweh will multiply Isaac's offspring like the stars, and all families of the earth will be blessed through his offspring (v. 4)
- this will come because of the merits of Abraham (v. 5)

An historical approach is tempted to dismiss this story as a mere repetition of the earlier one, making the same theological points with various emphases or explicitly extending the message to generations after Abraham. Von Rad's commentary, for example, offers little more than observations about changes in the historical situation that are evident in this chapter. Westermann's commentary notes that the stories about wells deal with the theme of peace and the story about

⁷Cf. Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1947), for a thorough presentation of this principle. One can see the error of attempting paraphrase in Claus Westermann's great commentary: *Genesis*, 3 vols. (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984-86). Dealing with Gen 12:10-20, Westermann refutes the attempts of Gunkel, von Rad, Thompson, and Coats to articulate paraphrases, in order to support his own attempt. It is all too clear that each of the five, accurate as they may be, offers no more than a single dimension of the multi-dimensional meaning of this powerful story.

the patriarch's wife with applying Abraham's blessing to Isaac. He shows how the two stories are editorially linked, but he does not attempt to read the chapter as a literary unit or find meaning in that unit.

The literary unity of this chapter is once again strongly marked by an inclusive form:

vv. 1-6:

- transitional verse
- vision of Yahweh: God tells Isaac to dwell in the land, that God will be with him and bless him and multiply his offspring because of Abraham
- Isaac dwelt there

vv. 23-25:

- transitional verse
- vision of Yahweh: God tells Isaac not to fear, that God is with him and will bless him and multiply his offspring because of Abraham
- Isaac settled there

Though this frame deals with geography and settlement in the promised land, as did the frame in the earlier story, and though the ensuing story repeats for Isaac much of what happened to Abraham, the two texts are so different in their subject matter that it is more a distraction than a clarification to point to similarities.

Just what is this text about? Let us ask our literary question: *In what realm of meaning is God expected to intervene, or revelation expected to occur?* As the earlier story, this one involves

international relations insofar as we are dealing with Israelites and Philistines, but here both the story of the wife and the several stories about wells are contained within the same frame. Moreover, now we have relations between ordinary citizens, in the case of both the wife (“supposing one of the people slept with your wife”—v. 10) and the wells (strife occurs between the servants and the herdsmen, not between Isaac and the king). Also the dimension of personal morality is evoked in v. 10. This is a far more domestic scene than the earlier story. Here God’s intervention is not disease for the Philistines and wealth for the Jews, as in the earlier story, but rather provides a way for both to get along peacefully: the Philistines must not be sexually involved with the Jewish man or woman; the Jews must keep their distance and dig wells only where Abraham has preceded them.

Can one paraphrase this text? It is not easy, and so, happily, one is less tempted to try. The story is about getting along with the Philistines next door, both at the interpersonal level and at the level of commerce. No moral lesson is to be drawn, beyond the very general message that God cares about this realm of racial relations and that a cautious strategy is required on both sides. What does the text mean? It means all that every word of it means, and nothing less; hence it is essential to read the actual text. The readers can respond with the resources at their disposal—certainly once again modern Israel is as truly represented in this text as ancient Israel, and any one of our North American cities can fill the bill as well. The text invites or demands that God’s love be admitted into our understanding of racial relations and affirms the power of that love to bless us with peace.

I am convinced that the Yahwist wrote this story as one of a series of theological reflections about the relations between the Israelites and the nations around them. And I still believe the Yahwist wrote this at the end of the tenth century, rather than after the exile when the series would be meaningless. It is important to ask historical questions, because the asking reminds us that the texts deal with real humans living in a real world. Still, my answers to those historical questions can be right or wrong without changing anything in the literary meaning, i.e., the biblical meaning, of the stories!

3. *Genesis 20*

The story of endangering the patriarch’s wife is also told in Genesis 20, a version traditionally ascribed to the Elohist. There is no inclusive frame in this case, but the unity of the text is clearly marked, both by its inner coherence and by the fact that it is preceded and followed by very different matters.

The story here signals the fact that it follows the original tale in chapters 12-13 by beginning with the otherwise meaningless mention of the Negeb (drawn from the earlier frame) and by having Abraham declare Sarah to be his sister (v. 2) with no explanation whatever. The reader is expected to have recently read the earlier chapters!

Much has been written about the narrative techniques of this text and about its historical contexts. But for the purposes of this article it will be sufficient to go immediately to our literary question: *In what realm of meaning is God expected to intervene or revelation to occur?*

All the elements of the tale are repeated here in similar or slightly modified form, and the same actual events occur presumably in the same order. However, the telling is entirely different.

Here we are not presented with a narrative that follows the sequence of events in time, but one based on a radically different sequence determined by the inner thoughts of the players. We have an extensive confrontation between the two men, with great emphasis on Abimelech's feelings of indignation and outrage and Abraham's feelings of confusion (his initial fears of being killed; his wandering caused by God; his bitter irony when he says, "This is the *fidelity* [*hesed*] you must have for me...say 'He is my brother'"). All this is followed by an extensive and sensitive speech of Abimelech to Sarah, taking care of her loss of dignity. The realm of meaning here appears to be the realm of individual human feelings, of human relationships of love and trust and truth. God has directly brought about a situation of deep human conflict (not any actual danger to Sarah, for we learn at the end that God had excluded any possibility of sin). This interior realm is equally shared by Jew and Philistine. This is where God intervenes and where revelation occurs.

Here, once again, we must note that some readers will not easily expect God to intervene in this realm (the realm of "mere" feelings), and the text will offer them a special challenge. Here, once again, no "whole point" of the story or paraphrase of meaning should be formulated. The story means precisely what every word of it, and no other words, mean. The precise historical contexts of the

page 143

story might give us further clues as to some elements in the text, but the literary message comes through powerfully even without them. God is present, and to be heard, at the heart of personal love and fidelity and at the heart of personal conflict and misunderstanding. This will be equally true in any human life today, just as it was in ancient Israel.

Other stories traditionally ascribed to the Elohist are told in this same realm of meaning. However, the reader can be open to this text and react to its voice with depth and faith, whether or not the Elohist described by traditional source criticism ever existed.

III. CONCLUSION

The story about the patriarch's wife is undoubtedly one story. We have seen that its three tellings were concerned with God's intervention in three diverse realms of reality. Does it matter whether the pharaoh or the Philistine king was historically involved in this way, or whether we can correctly identify the authors of these texts, or fix the date of writing and the historical contexts? Most of the historical facts are gone forever, just as the historical Jesus is gone forever, despite recent books attempting to recover him. As he himself told us: "Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go I will send him to you" (John 16:7). The reality we do have is the biblical text and the many aspects of faith affirmed in that text. Often, these affirmations of faith are overlooked or trivialized by historical questions and better recovered by literary questions.

Whatever disarray has occurred among historical scholars dealing with the Pentateuch and whatever the uncertainty of their theories, it remains possible to read the Pentateuch with both academic and religious seriousness. Academic objectivity and critical reflection can be applied within literary methodology just as they have been within historical methodology. Literary methodology leads more directly to theological discussions and conclusions. Instead of pursuing the historical question "Who said what to whom?" we must pursue the equally difficult

literary question “What is this text about?”

SEAN MCEVENUE is the author of *Interpreting the Pentateuch* (1990) and *Interpretation and the Bible: Essays on Truth in Literature* (1993).