



The Birth of Isaac: Genesis 21:1-7

WENDELL W. FRERICHS

Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota

A call by the editor a year ago for papers on Genesis seemed an opportunity to pursue in print ideas tried in recent Pentateuch classes. Three decades of Jewish-Christian dialogue have begun to make a difference in the reading of texts, including Gen 21:1-7 on the birth of Isaac. Commitment to the people of God who survived the Holocaust seems to demand the births of many more Isaacs in our own day if God's promise in Genesis 12-20 is still to mean anything. This is the issue pursued in this article. In the light of the contexts of Genesis and the rest of the Bible, can we make a case for this contemporary interpretation? Are the births of Jewish children today a fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham and Sarah? Must Genesis 21 go on being fulfilled over and over again, in continuous succession, without break until the end of time? Is it of ultimate significance if God should ever break faith with Abraham and Sarah?

First, let me make a case for not writing another commentary on these verses. Enough good commentaries on Genesis already exist.¹ Our present task presupposes their careful linguistic, literary, and theological work.

¹I would point especially to Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982); Robert Davidson, *Genesis 12-50* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1979); Peter F. Ellis, *The Men and the Message of the Old Testament* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1963); Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis*, vols. 1-8 of *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1958-1966); Martin Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1972); Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972); E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1964); Bruce Vawter, *On Genesis: A New Reading* (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1977); Claus Westermann, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 3 vols. (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1974); Claus Westermann, *Genesis: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1992); Claus Westermann, *The Promises to the Fathers: Studies on the Patriarchal Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980).

Second, let me make a case for choosing *this* text. There are many wonderful stories in Genesis, any one of which might be usefully studied. But only a few of them are so crucial that without them there is no Genesis at all. This is one of them. Without the birth of Isaac, there is no Israel, there is no fulfillment of the promises of Genesis 12:1-3 and its subsequent repetitions. For biblical history to proceed from creation to the founding of the church there is no way around the birth of Isaac. The same can be said for the call of Abraham and Sarah, the survival of Isaac, the birth of Jacob, and a few later events such as the exodus and the gift of the land. Any one of these texts (at least those in Genesis) might be chosen. This one was chosen because of my previous work on it and because it seems so tied to Jewish survival.

I. CONTEXTS

The first of several contexts to which the birth of Isaac belongs is that provided by the promise or command of Genesis 1:28 and the births, genealogies, and blessings which follow, all the way to the end of the book. If Genesis 2 suggests companionship as the main purpose of the male/female relationship, then Genesis 1 (an exilic, priestly text) suggests procreation. Neither should exclude the other. Despite such tender scenes as the arrival of Rebekah to live in the tent of Isaac's mother after the death of Sarah, there do not seem to be overarching structures to tie such companionship stories together. This is not the case with the promise or command to multiply.

"Be fruitful and become many!" (1:28) is not an isolated phrase. It is soon followed by begettings, family stories, tables of nations, and numerous genealogies. Seeing all these as parts of one whole may not be the only way to read Genesis, but it surely is one. The blessing or command is not merely given; it is followed up in considerable detail to show the fulfillment of God's procreative intent. The world of the writers of Genesis contains many nations; yet the overpopulation of today is by no means their problem. Written from the perspective of a decimated Israel, in exile among numerous and powerful Babylonians, it is a word of hope and promise. All the people of the earth are creatures of Israel's creator God. While these people seem to determine Israel's fate, it is actually God who has made Israel and other people fruitful and capable of producing many offspring. Israel can in time not only survive but become numerous again. God's people have a purpose to exist and continue. They are, in fact, the ones who know what God has blessed them to accomplish. Just like the few people of earlier days they can do their part to populate the earth. That is what God intended for them.

There is no prudishness in the stories of Genesis that tell of the need for and the means of increasing and multiplying. All people seem to be busy carrying out the divine intent. Only occasionally, and perhaps as an aside, are we told of the livelihood and other activities of the participants. The stories are most interested in showing how one generation of humans leads to another. That we are supposed to go back to Genesis 1 to understand this is clear in Gen 5:3 where Adam is said to have had a son in his "likeness and image," the precise words of Gen 1:27. The

words of Gen 5:1-2, the prologue to Seth's birth announcement, are also directly taken from Gen 1:27. Old Testament theologians, incidentally, are correct in pointing out that the "image of God" is not lost after the so-called fall. It can hardly be the case, then, that the urge to reproduce is the evil result of disobeying God. Rather, the original intent and blessing of God are consummated in reproduction. God's blessing is effectual. Once made and sometimes repeated in family or parental blessings of children, it continues to work its way out in human history. The same is also true of God's blessing of the rest of creation. Everything from plants to the animals of land, sea, and air is created to multiply and bring forth after its kind (Gen 1:11-25).

We recall that all this conversation about fertility in family, flock, and field is held in the context of the fertility religions. Israel's neighbors practiced their religions using sympathetic magic to guarantee fruitful outcomes. By contrast, Genesis 1 traces the ability to reproduce to the creative word of Israel's God. Fertility is a blessing of God, created and not divine. Fertility is not to be worshiped or coerced by rituals but thankfully received as God's gift. Even the nations

whose gods are the fertility gods are creatures of Israel's God. They descended from a common ancestor whom Israel's God called forth.

Genealogies are another important part of the context of Genesis 21. They may have come from diverse sources, but they serve a common purpose in their present context. They are a prelude to Israel's family tree. By Genesis 21 we are well on the way to developing Israel's genealogy. We have been shown how God's people can be traced from Adam to Noah to Abraham. While the Bible's main interest is, of course, Israel, the other nations are by no means excluded. Israel lives among them and, for most of its history, is but one of many little nations. But these other people issued from the procreative gift of God too. They were not created by Ptah or Marduk or some other fertility god. Yahweh blessed them so they became great, and their ancestors' names are included in Genesis. We are supposed to see the common descent of all nations, first from Adam and Eve and later from Noah and his wife. The same promise or command made at the beginning (Gen 1:28) is repeated after the flood (Gen 9:1). Other texts seek to show how numerous earth's inhabitants have become in a very few generations as a result of God's blessing.² Following the flood the three sons of Noah and their wives have the enormous task of again filling the earth with people (Gen 9:1). Within a relatively few generations the earth is once more populated. Nor are these only fictitious lists. Nations well known in the second millennium B.C. are included (see Gen 10:1-32).

At this point the interest in Genesis narrows to the descendants of Shem (Gen 11:10-32), because God selected for blessing one of the families of this line. This explains why we find in the genealogies, from here on, only relatives of Abraham.³

²Examples are Cain's descendants (Gen 4:17-22) and Seth's (Gen 4:25, 26; 5:3-32).

³Included are the family tree of Ishmael (Gen 25:12-16); that of Keturah (Gen 25:1-4), the last wife of Abraham; of Lot (Gen 19:30-38), Abraham's nephew; and Nahor (Gen 22:20-24), Abraham's brother. Beyond these we have only those of Abraham's direct descendants (Gen 26:24; 27:41; 28:1-3, 36:2-5, 9-29, 31-43; 46:8-27; 49:3-27).

Genesis no longer focuses on the fruitfulness of all humanity. Stories and oracles about other nations turn up at many places in the Bible, but only because these nations have a relationship to Israel. Modern readers, inhibited in their reading of Genesis because of these lists of persons and nations, should take heart: there could be more of them than there are. Even Israel apparently saw no need to recite their neighbor's ancestry into what was for them the modern era. Only the early history of these other people, a few generations beyond their eponymous ancestors, was of interest. But Genesis continues to promise⁴ that great numbers of people will be born, and it follows their progress in fulfillment of the promise.⁵ Exodus then tells the story of Israel's oppression in Egypt and God's mighty acts to set them free. The promise of a land of their own is interwoven with promises of increased numbers and power. After forty years in the wilderness they are led back to conquer and dwell in the land where God had led Abraham to wander as an alien. There they grow more numerous until they become one of the kingdoms of that part of the world. It is a land "flowing with milk and honey," a description which keeps the promise of abundance that God made to the ancestors. The rest of the Old Testament follows Israel through the centuries. In times when Israel is faithful to God they prosper and multiply. When they are unfaithful, they suffer reverses—numerical decline and the loss of homeland and possessions.

But even at their lowest point, when in exile in Babylon, God continues to look out for their welfare. Wonderful promises of return and restoration are spoken by the prophets of that era. The finished book of Genesis spoke profoundly to these same people as it recited for them the past of all humanity and especially of their own beginnings. One of the very pivotal texts in that history was Genesis 21.

II. TEXT

Commentators agree that Gen 21:1-7 is one of the key texts of the book. For all its brevity, it is the goal of God's promises to Abraham, the story toward which the prior texts have been moving. No human resources remain for Abraham and Sarah to produce a son and heir. The text immediately makes clear that it was the LORD who "did for Sarah as he had spoken." (Is "promised" an overtranslation?) Nothing is even said about Abraham's role in the conception. It is the LORD who "visited" Sarah. She is named twice in the first verse, underscoring the fact that the LORD intends to limit future interest to this child, her son. This is further emphasized by the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael in the next pericope (21:8-21). The major interest in Sarah in verses 2, 6-7 is continued there. Sarah is the one who

⁴Gen 12:1-3; 15:4-5; cf. 24:60.

⁵Gen 16:15; 21:2; 25:1-4, 13-16, 24-26; 29:32-35; 30:4-13, 17-24; 35:16-18, 23-26; 36:2-5, 10-43; 38:2-5, 18, 27-30; 41:50-52; 46:8-27. In addition to these passages, the promise of increased possessions, especially livestock, continues for the descendants of Abraham. That promise is fulfilled too (Gen 12:16; 13:2, 6; 26:12-14; 27:27-28; 30:29-43; 31:1-16; 32:9; 39:4-5; 41:47-49, 56; 47:1, 27; 50:11-12, 20, 22, 25-26). This should also be traced back to God's promise/command in Genesis 1 that the living creatures and plant life on earth would increase and multiply. Abraham and Sarah not only multiply numerically, their flocks and servants do as well during all the generations they are followed in Genesis.

decides that Ishmael cannot be allowed to inherit with her son (21:9-10). She becomes the initiator of the divine intent already expressed to Abraham (17:19-21). God, after Sarah insists on the expulsion to Abraham, confirms the decision of Sarah (v. 12). Hagar and Ishmael must go.

The limited role assigned to Abraham, until the naming and circumcision of Isaac, is underscored by the subjects and verbs in verse 2: "She became pregnant and Sarah bore a son...to Abraham." Abraham is the father, but Sarah and God are the major participants. Verse 3 continues this trend even after Abraham begins to act in naming his son: Isaac is "the one *whom Sarah bore* to him." One could also draw attention to the divine role assumed by two Hebrew words translated as "a son of his old age" (verses 2, 7). Abraham and Sarah have been trying to have a child by natural means for many years. God, who has been promising them a son for such a long time, finally intervenes and makes it so. The human improbability of this is expressed also in verse 7: "Who would have said to Abraham, Sarah has suckled sons?" Abraham is even identified as a man 100 years old (v. 5).

This is a promised event, like so many biblical acts of God. These two people have been going around for years telling others that God has promised them a son. No wonder Abraham was said to be a prophet (Gen 20:7). The text is full of acknowledgment that God has worked this unusual birth. It also makes Sarah the focus of this divine activity in giving birth to Isaac.

Another facet of this text will be clear if one counts the occurrences of the root "to laugh." It appears of course every time Isaac ("he is laughing" or "he will laugh") is named

(verses 3, 4, 5). Twice in verse 7 Sarah speaks of the “laughing” this birth has produced for her and for everyone who hears of it. Further, in the text immediately following (verse 9), the son of Hagar (not named) is laughing (the piel participle), or is it playing, with Isaac? We recall that, earlier, when God promised him a son, Abraham laughed (17:17) at the very impossibility of such a thing. Sarah does the same when she overhears the divine visitors make this promise to Abraham (18:12). Though she later denies it (18:15), one visitor confirms that she did laugh (18:15). Considerable punning on this word has been going on then prior to the Isaac birth event. God initiates the laughter by telling Abraham to name his promised son Isaac (17:19). It is apparently God’s joy to announce in advance the child’s birth and finally to make good on the promise. Everyone is invited to join in on the laughter, and the last one to do so is Ishmael (21:9)—though he who laughed last did not laugh best. Later in the same pericope both Ishmael and Hagar weep (21:16, 17). One may also be permitted to try following the laughter beyond our text. Those who heard of the event may have laughed in disbelief, as Sarah and Abraham did earlier. Such a birth would have been as unbelievable in the ancient world as in our scientific age. Considering the number of dirty-old-man stories circulating today, one can imagine rude jokes and ribald laughter associated then with the story of an extremely elderly couple making love and successfully begetting a child. Were the people laughing *with* Sarah or laughing *at* her? Was there satisfaction over her good fortune or incredulous giggling over the anomaly of a

nonogenerian bearing a child? Sarah’s God is the ultimate fertility God, though one who prescribes no sacred sex rituals.

Abraham is active in our text at the naming and the circumcision of his son. We have already discussed the name given by Abraham; now we look at the formality of naming. Like Zechariah, who was told by an angel that he should name his son John (Luke 1:14) and who later obediently did so (Luke 1:60), Abraham is told by God what to name his son (17:19) and he does so (21:2). A comparable message was delivered to Joseph (Matt 1:21, 25) who then named Mary’s child Jesus. One ought not to conclude from these examples that the men always named the children, for we have examples of women doing it as well.⁶ Ben-Oni, the last son of Rachel, after her death was renamed Benjamin by Jacob (39:18). The texts do not say what ceremony attended the naming or when it was done, though it is associated with circumcision in the case of John the Baptist (Luke 1:59-63). The naming and the circumcision, both credited to Abraham in our text, appear in successive verses but are not necessarily connected. (It depends upon how one translates the *waw* consecutive that begins verse 4.)

While more than one of the traditional pentateuchal sources are usually seen in the total Isaac birth story, all seem agreed that the account of the circumcision is priestly. This is true of the covenant between God and Abraham in chapter 17 as well. There, where circumcision is first prescribed as the sign of God’s covenant, it is explicitly commanded on the eighth day. It is already too late for Ishmael, for he is several years old, but Abraham dutifully circumcises him as soon as he is told. Furthermore, he circumcises all the males in his household and undergoes the rite himself as well. Isaac is the first descendant on whom the surgery is performed, precisely as prescribed (21:4). Can one then trace this ceremony in unbroken succession from Isaac to the present time? The priestly authors would like us to think so, but a couple of troublesome texts suggest otherwise: Even the great Moses seems to have omitted circumcising his son (Exod

4:24-26) and was perhaps uncircumcised himself. Had he been as firmly in command during Israel's wilderness wanderings as the texts suggest, it is hard to understand why circumcision was neglected during the forty-year stay there. Perhaps Moses was not as acquainted with the practice as we are meant to believe. Joshua had all Israelite males circumcised just prior to the conquest (Josh 5:2-5). Yet Jacob's sons were insistent upon its observance much earlier (Gen 34:14-24). What is the truth about it? Historically, we cannot be certain about such ancient times, though there are a few words regarding the ceremony at specific times along the way. Jeremiah apparently assumed all his compatriots were circumcised (Jer 4:4). Ezekiel considers uncircumcised neighbors contemptible (Ezek 32:19-30; 44:9). Priestly texts such as Exod 12:43-44 and Lev 12:3 stress the importance of circumcision. It apparently became one of a few special signs of faithfulness to God during the exile. It proved

⁶Samuel by Hannah, 1 Sam 1:20; Reuben, Simeon, Judah, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, and Dinah by Leah, Gen 29:32, 33, 35; 30:11,12, 18, 20, 21; Dan, Naphtali, Joseph, and Ben-Oni by Rachel, Gen 30:6, 8, 23; 35:18).

page 160

to be so as well during the second century B.C. reign of Antiochus Epiphanes who proscribed it (2 Macc 6:10). Yet Jubilees (15:33-34) suggests that some Jews neglected it at that time.

Passover, sabbath, dietary laws, and prayer times, as well as circumcision, were given added stress during and following the exile. It was a time when the Jewish people were in grave danger. Their most important community was far away from Jerusalem in Mesopotamia. Apostasy and amalgamation into the major culture could have taken a toll from an already decimated people. But if the people faithfully observed these few rituals, they would be preserved. God could then rebuild them into a strong people in the future. Giving circumcision an ancient origin was intended to heighten its importance. It was legitimated by tracing it to a special covenant with Abraham passed on through but one of his progeny, namely Isaac. Sabbath was traced even farther back to the day God rested at the conclusion of creating the universe (Gen 2:2-3). Passover and dietary laws were credited to Moses or even Noah (Gen 9:4; Exod 23:19b; Lev 3:17, 19, 26, 27). Of all these observances, only circumcision is actually said to have been kept by humans as early as this. Those who traced their lineage to Isaac and Abraham would naturally seek to keep covenant as they did. This is a covenant without stipulations apart from the performing of the surgery itself. All with this sign are assumed to be Isaac's progeny.

One ought not conclude that the birth story simply dates from exilic times because much of the passage is from the late priestly source. Verse 1 is attributed to J by some scholars, as are the opening promises to Abraham in Gen 12:1-3. The promises would not have been repeated or preserved had there been no fulfillment through the birth of Isaac. So, unless we agree with recent attempts to date the Yahwist source late, we are able to trace the birth of Isaac in a written source to early monarchical times. Those who have tried to investigate this period have not been able to help us much. It is possible that the Isaac stories were preserved at the ancient site of Beersheba. All we can know for sure is that later generations preserved traditions they believed were genuine.

III. CONCLUSION

We have seen how the Bible moves quickly from the promises of many people in general

to many descendants of Abraham. While the former was achieved easily in spite of the need for a second start after the deluge, the latter gets off to a slow start. In the Isaac birth text we are finally on our way, but one child is scarcely a guarantee that multitudes will follow. A good increase is not made until the next generation when Jacob becomes the father of twelve sons. The rest of the Old Testament follows these twelve, and the tribes they founded, until ten of them and then the last two wend their way back to exile in Mesopotamia, from which Abraham and Sarah once came. So far as we know, the first ten tribes never did return to Palestine, and the remnants of the two only trickled back over a long period of time. Their fate in the last pre-Christian centuries is scarcely revealed in the Bible; it is, so far as we know it, often painful. Their numbers might now be

page 161

sizable nonetheless, had intervening numerous wars and enemies not taken their toll. Modern Jews still celebrate Passover, Purim, and Hanukkah as occasions when deliverance from potentially fatal decrees of tyrants might have destroyed them. Yom ha-Sho'ah, commemorated each spring, is much more somber, honoring the lives of one-third of the world's Jews taken by the Nazis in living memory. Jewish births, circumcisions, bar and bath mitzvahs and weddings are joyous, hopeful events, but in many places they are far too few. We cannot escape thinking that God's promises made to the ancestors and their initial fulfillment in Isaac's birth contain but the earliest chapters in a story that needs to be followed to the end of time. Christians have too often celebrated Jesus' birth as the last Jewish birth of any concern to them. But, for some of us, the continued thriving of the Jewish community is of more than academic interest. We want Jewish neighbors both in our country and around the world. That God continues to keep promises made millennia ago is the one essential ingredient in our faith, just as it was to Abraham and Sarah.

WENDELL FRERICHS, who teaches Old Testament, is a member of the planning committee of the annual Jewish-Christian Seminar at Luther Northwestern and of the ELCA Region 3 Task Force on Jewish-Christian relations.