More Than מצחק : The Consequence of Finding a Lost Pun for the Understanding of
Genesis 21:9

Tanya Ivy Hershon

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

Theological Studies

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts (Theological Studies) at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

December 2009

Abstract

The presence of Hagar and Ishmael in the Abraham narratives has posed many difficulties over the years. This research examines the text of Gn 21 with an aim of addressing these issues through macro-syntactical analysis, literary structure and keen attention to translation and wordplays. It is shown that Hagar and Ishmael are important literary figures, tied into the book of Genesis through numerous literary devices. The key to reconciling their banishment lies in a previously overlooked pun in Gn 21:9.

Acknowledgements

I would like to share my most sincere thanks to Dr. Marie France Dion for her encouragement, support and, most significantly, her patience, in guiding me throughout my graduate studies.

Dedication

To those whom I live with and love, and the friends who keep me.

Table of Contents

Abbreviations

Amsterdamse Cahiers voor Exegese van de Bijbel en zijn Tradities	*ACEBT*
Andrews University Seminary Studies	*AUSS*
Aula Orientalis	*AO*
Bangalore Theological Forum	*BTF*
Beit Mikra Quarterly	*BMQ*
Beit Mikra	*BM*
Bible Bhashyam	*BB*
Bible Review	*BR*
Bible Today	*BT*
Bible Translator	*BTrans*
Biblical Illustrator	*BI*
Biblical Research	*BR*
Biblische Notizen	*BN*
Brethren Life and Thought	*BLT*
Bulletin for Biblical Research	*BBR*
Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research	*BASOR*
Buried History	*BH*
Calvin Theological Journal	*CTJ*
Caribbean Journal of Religious Studies	*CJRS*
Catholic Biblical Quarterly	*CBQ*
Christian Century	*ChrisC*
Christian Ministry	*CM*
Christianity and Crisis	*C&C*
Concordia Theological Quarterly	*CTQ*
Conservative Judaism	*CJ*
Cross Currents	*CC*
Currents in Research	*CR*
Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses	*ETL*
Evangelical Quarterly	*EQ*
Evangelische Theologie	*ET*
Hebrew Union College Annual	*HUCA*
Hill Road	*HR*
History of Religions	*HRel*
Horizons in Biblical Theology	*HBT*
International Journal of Frontier Missions	*IJFM*
Irish Biblical Studies	*IBS*
Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations	*ICMR*
Jewish Bible Quarterly	*JBQ*
Journal for the Study of the New Testament	*JSNT*
Journal of Biblical Literature	*JBL*
Journal of Jewish Studies	*JJS*
Journal of Near Eastern Studies	*JNES*
Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society	*JETS*
Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center	*JITC*

Lumière et Vie	*LetV*
Methodist Review	*MR*
Near East School of Theology Theological Review	*NESTTR*
Notes on Translation	*NT*
Orientalia Christiana Periodica	*OCP*
Oudtestamentische Studiën	*OS*
Palestine Exploration Quarterly	*PEQ*
Perspectives in Religious Studies	*PRS*
Religious Education	*RE*
Review & Expositor	*R&Ex*
Revista degli Studi Orientali	*RSO*
Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament	*SJOT*
Science et Esprit	*SE*
Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers	*SBLSP*
Theologia Evangelica	*TE*
Theology Today	*TT*
Tyndale Bulletin	*TB*
Union Seminary Quarterly Review	*USQR*
Vetus Testamentum	*VT*
Zeitschrift für Altorientalische und Biblische Rechtsgeschichte	*ZABR*
Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft	*ZAW*

Introduction

"Ancient law ordinarily forbade the expulsion of a slave wife and her child, and no justification for it is indicated here...".[1] Over the years, many people have addressed several difficulties in the interpretation of the Hagar and Ishmael stories. The quote above refers to Gn 21:9 and alludes to Ishmael's seemingly unjustified banishment by the matriarch Sarah.

Genesis 21 opens with the ambiguous laughter of Sarah as she gives birth to Isaac at a very advanced age. The mood soon changes at the weaning feast of her son, where she sees something which causes her enough anguish that she demands the expulsion of Ishmael and of his mother Hagar, Abraham's slave-wife. Unless justified, this morally questionable request could place the matriarch in a decidedly negative light.

Although Abraham intercedes on behalf of the child, the mother's will is done through God's command and an unusual promise of lineage for both sons is made, especially extraordinary considering that one son is banished. The passage addressed here ends with Hagar wandering in the desert with her child facing death until an angel of God intercedes on their behalf.

Genesis 21 is replete with puns and wordplays. As well, the text seems to have some basis in ancient laws and customs. These details serve to convey texture and tradition, but often cause problems in translation. It is up to us as exegetes to try to contextualize the text and convey a faithful rendering of the nuances seen in the original Hebrew.

---

[1] R.E. Brown, J.A. Fitzmyer & R.E. Murphy, *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1990, p. 22.

Herein, we will attempt to reconcile the confusion that is caused by the presence of and roles that are played by Hagar and Ishmael in the Abraham cycle. We will do this with a focus on Genesis 21:1-18, particularly the banishment of Ishmael (vv. 9-13). It will be shown that the difficulties found in interpreting this text lie mainly within our inclination to redeem Sarah's harsh and self serving behaviour, while vilifying Hagar. By removing this tendency, we are able to recognize previously ignored wordplay and the passage becomes clear.

Chapter 1: State of the Question and Methodology

A great deal has been said on the potential translations and implications of laughter, but much remains speculation. One thing that cannot be ignored is that the story of Hagar and Ishmael holds a prominent place in the Bible and continues to strike a chord with modern audiences.

The significance of this text lies not only in its covering of two patriarchal narratives, but also the implications it has for our understanding of the cohesiveness of Genesis. We cannot just assume or brush off what we think of as trivial, since it may have consequences for the understanding of other passages of the Bible.

In our thesis we will explore the significance of Genesis 21 as it pertains to the banishment of Ishmael. Particularly, we will focus on detailed grammatical and linguistic analysis in order to determine the most likely purpose in writing, as well as to explore in more detail the nuances of language and poetry. An attempt at a clear understanding of who the characters are, why they acted and what the intended message was, is the goal of this research.

Secondarily, the story will be placed in context of its setting, so as to fill out the historical background and clear up some important misunderstandings that exist due to inferences and post-biblical expansions of the Isaac-Ishmael story.

1.1 State of the Question

Hagar and Ishmael have posed serious trouble for translators and interpreters. Their very presence creates unease, but more importantly, their tales are surrounded by ambiguous language. Furthermore, the purpose that they serve appears to upset the balance of the promise. Many complicated explanations have been put forth, but no

satisfying solution has been forthcoming. In this section, we will cover the most significant issues that scholars face when working with Genesis 21.

1.1.1 Difficulties in the Text

1.1.1.1 Parallel Account in Genesis 16

Gn 21:6-21 is often considered to be an alternate account of Hagar's wilderness flight, corresponding to Gn 16.[2] It covers similar themes, namely Sarah's jealousy, Hagar's subsequent expulsion, and God's care for her and her child (as yet unborn in Gn 16), yet there are many inconsistencies between the passages.[3]

According to some authors, Hagar's personality varies from a willful and haughty servant with tactless pride (Gn 16) to a passive observer (Gn 21).[4] Abraham's personality is also transformed from a compliant and submissive character, allowing his wife free reign over her servant, to a paternal figure who intercedes on account of his son.[5] In chapter 16, Hagar flees her mistress, while chapter 21 has her banished on account of her son.[6] A most notable difference is that the second account occurs after the birth of the two children, Isaac and Ishmael.[7]

1.1.2 Ishmael's Age

Another inconsistency suggesting two or more traditions is the confusion over Ishmael's age at the time of his expulsion. Within Gn 16:16, Abraham is indicated as being 86 when Ishmael was born, and according to the account in Gn 21:5, Abraham was

---

[2] V.P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 18-50*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans,1995, p. 77.
[3] R. Davidson, *Genesis 12-50*, New York: Cambridge University Press (The Cambridge Bible Commentary, New English Bible), 1979, p. 85.
[4] Davidson, pp. 85-86; Hamilton, p. 77.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Davidson, p. 85.

100 when Isaac was born, making Ishmael 14 years older than Isaac.[8] In addition, we should factor in that Ishmael's banishment occurred at Isaac's weaning celebration. Traditionally, this event would be held on the child's third birthday (or later), marking the survival of the infant past the critical high mortality period.[9] This would make Ishmael between 16-17 years old.

However, it seems likely from vv. 14-21 that the narrator considered Ishmael a small child or an infant.[10] The language used, such as the debated event of Abraham placing the child on Hagar's shoulder (v. 14),[11] his mother thrusting him under a bush (v. 15), and that Hagar was told to lift the child up (v. 18), alludes to a young boy not a young man.[12]

1.1.2 Source and Redaction Criticism

While the focus of this thesis will be on vv.8-14, they cannot be completely taken out of context of the entire passage, and indeed the rest of the Bible. We will give consideration to vv. 1-7 and vv. 14-21, and also to the narrative as placed within the whole of the Abraham narratives.

1.1.2.1 Positing Different Sources

Traditional source criticism has viewed this passage in terms of the Documentary Hypothesis (JEDP). Many classical authors posit that the narratives of Isaac's birth and

---

[8] Further explained in the following section on Source/Redaction Criticism.
[9] (1 Sam 1:23f, 2 Macc 7:27) G. von Rad, *Genesis: a Commentary,* Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961, p. 226; C. Westermann, *Genesis 12-36: A Commentary,* Minneapolis: Augsburg Pub. House, 1985, p.338; (2 Macc 7:27) G.J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50,* Dallas: Word Books (Word Biblical Commentary v.2), 1994, p. 61.
[10] This subject is more fully treated in the section "Difficulties with the Text".
[11] The wording of v. 14 could also mean placing the food on her shoulder, and entrusting the child to her, see Davidson, pp. 86-87.
[12] von Rad, pp. 228-9; Davidson, p. 87.

Ishmael's banishment originate from different sources,[13] however, there are a few who believe that the entirety of the chapter belongs to the Elohist "E" source.[14] These scholars cite vv. 6-7 as a triplicate (E version) etiology of the naming of Isaac (attributing it to the mother's joyful or sarcastic laughter). The two previous versions are found in Gn 17:17, where P (Priestly) authorship attributes the naming to the father's surprised laughter, and in Gn 18:12-15, where the J (Yahwistic) authorship connects the naming to Sarah's incredulous laughter.[15]

Overwhelmingly though, most scholars believe that vv. 1-7 were added on to vv. 8-21 by a redactor trying to bring the Abraham story to its conclusion.[16] Interestingly, according to this theory, it seems that vv. 6 -7 (J) complete vv. 1-2 (common to both J and P)[17] and unite the P genealogy of vv. 3-5 with the rest of the story.[18] One indication of this "suture" is the difference of what appears to be Sarah's explanation of the naming of Isaac (attributing the name to her laughter), in contrast to the paternal explanation given in v.3.[19]

Alternatively, a few commentators break up v. 6 into two segments:[20]

6a: Now Sarah said, "God has brought laughter for me;
6b: Everyone who hears will laugh with me."

These scholars posit that the fragments point to different sources. Verses 2-6a would be the Priestly sequel to Gn 17, and vv. 6b-7 evidence the Yahwistic sequel to Gn

---

[13] See, for example, E.A. Speiser, *Genesis*, Garden City: Doubleday (Anchor Bible Commentary), 1964, p. 156.
[14] Speiser, p. 157; Hamilton, p. 76.
[15] Ibid.
[16] For example, Westermann, p. 338; Brown, Fitzmyer & Murphy, p. 22.
[17] All four of these verses having to do directly with the birth of Isaac.
[18] Westermann, pp. 338-9.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Brown, Fitzmyer & Murphy, p. 22.

18:1-15.[21] In order to account for the new explanation for the naming of Isaac, it is hypothesized that previously it was a promise to a childless couple. However, now that the child is born, the redactor was drawing from a broad oral tradition (of parents naming their child), and chose the most appropriate formula for this story.[22]

Nonetheless, there is more concurrence concerning vv. 8-21. It is an "accepted axiom"[23] that these verses are a parallel account of the J version of Hagar's flight into the wilderness found in Gn 16:1-16.[24] Most commonly this is attributed to E.[25] Further support for this account being independent of the J and P traditions is the confusion over Ishmael's age, as previously stated.[26] This makes the passage incompatible with the timeline of J, and unlikely in the face of P's scrutiny and computations.[27]

In prior research, it is claimed that clues to E as an author are the similarities in phraseology[28] to other sources and the consistent use of Elohim.[29] Conversely, at least one author believes that when compared to other previously accepted E texts, this chapter seems to come from a different period.[30] Westermann suggests that it may be the work of an interpolator seeking to bring a conclusion to the stories of Isaac and Ishmael. Speiser illustrates that E tries to explain people with words, not deeds, and that his characters do more reasoning, and are less natural and impulsive (when compared to J).[31]

---

[21] Ibid.
[22] Westermann, pp. 338-9.
[23] Hamilton, p. 77.
[24] Ibid; Davidson, p. 85; Westermann p. 338; Brown, Fitzmyer & Murphy, p. 22; Wenham, p. 61.
[25] Westermann p. 338; Brown, Fitzmyer & Murphy, p. 22; Hamilton, p. 77; Wenham, p. 61-62.
[26] Speiser, p. 155; Davidson, p. 87; Hamilton, p. 82.
[27] Davidson, p. 87; Brown, Fitzmyer & Murphy, p. 22; Hamilton, pp. 82-3.
[28] S.E. McEvenue, "The Elohist at Work", ZAW 96 (1984) pp. 316-21.
[29] Wenham, pp. 61-2, Speiser, pp. 156-7; Hamilton, p. 83.
[30] Westermann, pp. 338-9.
[31] Speiser, pp. 156-7.

According to this theory, both J and E have different accounts of Ishmael's name, where in chapter 16, God "heeds" the mother's misery, but in chapter 21, God "hears" the cry of the abandoned child.[32] Other scholars see E as a source used by J, or as an expansion.[33] Westermann believes that both authors drew on the same underlying source that arose through different channels.

1.1.2.2 Rejection of the E Source

While classical scholarship has relied on the documentary hypothesis outlined above, the E source has been largely discredited.[34] Henceforth, the former E source will still be referred to as E simply to distinguish the group of writings that were previously attributed to the Elohist source, as distinct from the J and P sources.

While some scholars claim that the use of Elohim in this passage is indicative of E authorship, other scholars attribute the consistent use of that designation to the purposeful inclusion of both by the redactor, and that only J and P were used to compile the extant text[35] (i.e.: that there's no prophecy from the "E" source, which eliminates the problem of its existence or lack thereof). As for the rest of the passage, there are strong differences of opinion about the dating of the various sources, especially J and E. Serious questions have been raised as to whether J or E is the work of a single writer or school, and various scholars have contended that in fact there is a J1, J2, J3, and so forth.[36] And

---

[32] Ishmael has an etymology with the word "hear", for a more in-depth treatment, see the section on names and translations; also see Hamilton, pp. 83-5.
[33] Westermann, p. 339.
[34] Wenham, pp. xxx-xxi.
[35] Wenham, p. 61.
[36] As quoted in R. Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary*, NY; London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996, p. xli.

"[...] efforts to distinguish between J and E on stylistic grounds have been quite unconvincing".[37]

In light of recent developments, though, these disagreements need to be reconciled. To further complicate matters, at least one scholar suggests that E might make a comeback.[38] A decision as to specific authorship is outside the scope of this thesis and will not be essential to the final translation and commentary. We are including this summary here for an understanding that the text was most likely a compilation of various traditions that were purposely combined. This would seem to indicate that the redactor sought to portray a message that required the overlapping of Isaac's birth and Ishmael's banishment.

1.1.2.3 Impact on This Study

Genesis 21 has been delivered to us in a final, redacted form within the context of Genesis. This was a purposeful blending of narratives, done with care and specific intent, and so I will consider the text as a whole when reading the Hagar and Ishmael cycle. Analysis of assumed setting will be important in properly understanding what the intended reader would have had in mind with respect to social norms and customs, use of language, and legal references. Establishing the setting will allow the purpose of the narrative to surface.

1.1.3 Purpose of Genesis 21

Scholars propose that Genesis 21:1-18 serves two purposes.[39] It begins with the birth account of Isaac (v 1-7), and concludes with the banishment of his half brother Ishmael (vv. 8-21). Why would Biblical authors choose to overshadow the birth narrative

---

[37] Alter, p. xli.
[38] Wenham, pp. xxxi.
[39] See, for example, Westermann, pp. 331-2.

of a patriarch with a promise narrative to a competing nation? Each story in the Bible is there for a reason, so what were the authors and redactors trying to tell us?

In order to address the significance of Gn 21, many elements need to be considered. Following are the main points that factor into a complete understanding of the intricacies of this passage.

1.1.3.1 How do Hagar and Ishmael Fit into Genesis?

The purpose and significance of Hagar and Ishmael have been highly debated.[40] A certain popular theory states that they served as literary tools in several functions. Hagar affords an explanation for the naming of the well at Beerlahai-roi. They also provide an acknowledgement of relation for the Bedouins (known as Ishmaelites), while still maintaining a genealogical distance. Finally, the tension of rivalry grants a sense of heightened suspense to the story of the conception and birth of Isaac.[41]

However, as the purpose of birth narratives is to show the deeds of the parents and to demonstrate the special circumstances of the child's birth, why would the authors have put so much attention onto the antagonists, Ishmael and Hagar? Nikaido proposes that Hagar serves a dual status, both as Sarah's antagonist but also as a heroine and matriarch unto herself.[42]

According to this author, Hagar complements Abraham as a literary figure, and the banishment of Ishmael forms a parallel with the binding of Isaac on Mt. Moriah (Gn 22:1-19). Both stories begin with a message from God to Abraham regarding his son,

---

[40] T.J. Turnham, "Ishmael", *Biblical Illustrator* 14 (Fall 1987) pp. 15-17; J. Goldingay, "The Place of Ishmael", in P.R. Davies & D.J.A. Clines (eds.), *The World of Genesis: Persons, Places, Perspectives*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998, pp. 146-49; E.P. Chase, "Promises, Blessings, and Curses: Hagar and the Wild Ass", *The Bible Translator 50* (1999) pp. 214-19; S. Nikaido, "Hagar and Ishmael as Literary Figures: An Intertextual Study", *Vetus Testamentum* 51.2 (2001) pp. 219-20.
[41] Turnham, pp. 15-17.
[42] S.K. Nikaido, p. 235-6.

followed by the intervention of an angel.[43] Only in these two stories do we find the imagery of an angel calling out from heaven, which further highlights their similarity. The timing of the intervention is identical: at the critical moment before the death of the child.

There are also similarities in the wording and imagery of these stories. For example, Leviant finds a parallel between the wood and fire used in Gn 22 and the lack of water found in Gn 21. Additionally, the word לקח (took) is used in both accounts to indicate the grasping of the object symbolizing the sacrifice of each son, שים (put) and הלך (to go) are used to similar effect in each story. In both stories, the child is picked up by the parent, and similar sounding words are used for Hagar casting (ותשלך), and Abraham raising his hand (וישלח). The words קרא (fear), שמע (listen), אלהים (God), and קול (voice) are used for both parents.[44] Finally, the deaths of Ishmael and Isaac are described in identical words (Isaac, Gn 35: 29; Ishmael, Gn 25:17).[45]

There is no indication within the Bible itself as to why these similarities exist, but it is likely they arise from a literary form used to demonstrate the importance of a child and their parent, in this case, Hagar and Ishmael, which will be examined later in this thesis.[46]

The above parallel is not the only indication of Ishmael's special status. In Gn 21:20a, the author uses the expression "Yahweh was with him", which indicates prosperity and a positive outlook on Ishmael's separation from his family.[47] As well,

---

[43] C. Leviant, "Parallel Lives: The Trials and Traumas of Isaac and Ishmael", *Bible Review* 15 (2, 1999) pp. 25, 47.
[44] For a full treatment, see Leviant, pp. 20-25, 47.
[45] Leviant, pp. 20-25, 47.
[46] Detailed in Nikaido, 2001, pp. 219-42.
[47] Nikaido, pp. 219-42.

Abraham is promised that both Isaac and Ishmael will have numerous descendants.[48]

Additionally, we will see that Sarah giving Hagar to Abraham in order to have children in

Gn 16, marks the central position in a large-scale chiasm that is formed by the events in

Abraham's life.

A thorough examination of Hagar and Ishmael's place in Genesis will be essential

to our study, as their banishment fills the pivotal role in Gn 21. Moreover, the major

hurdle in interpreting this passage is our need to understand Sarah's motivation and

justification in casting out the pair.

1.1.3.2 Meaning of צחק

There has been a recent call in the study of Bible translation to preserve the

original flavor of the language it was written in, at least as much as possible. Puns and

wordplay form much of the humor of the Bible, and often they can be lost in translation

unless careful attention is paid to preserving them.[49] Raabe believes that "we have a

tendency to mislead readers with translations that disguise difficulties, obscure texts, and

gloss over wordplays and ambiguities."[50] He proposes that we render the text into an

English that is not easier nor harder than the original to understand, and that the

"intractable problems" of some grammar or vocabulary should be brought forth into our

translations. This is especially important in our case, as Sarah's wrath was elicited by a

form of laughter, and no translation yet has made us comfortable with her actions.

---

[48] J.M. Cohen, "Was Abraham Heartless?", *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 23 (1995) pp. 180-81.
[49] J.J.Pilch, "The Bible's Sense of Humour", *The Bible Today* 33 (1995) p. 353.
[50] P. Raabe, "The Problem of Facile Translations", in F.W. Knobloch, (ed.), *Biblical Translation in Context,* Maryland: University Press of Maryland, 2002, pp. 195-6.

The use of laughter throughout this pericope seems to be ambiguous, at least to our eyes, and, as mentioned, has led to widespread speculation.[51] The main issue in this text is the justification for Hagar and Ishmael's banishment, which relates directly to the translation of this word. Many authors have addressed this question, and I supply a representation of some of the proposed hypotheses here.[52]

Many scholars like to suggest that what Ishmael was doing and to whom, is irrelevant. The only reason Sarah needed was her concern for her son's inheritance, as the future of a woman lay only with her own son. Thus, she was merely acting for her very survival.[53]

However, blaming her outburst on maternal jealousy or self-interest, puts the matriarch in a rather negative and harsh light, and does not satisfy our questions about the intent of the author. Savigna Teubal states that "conventional interpretation of the passage, that is Sarah's maternal jealousy that excites her and prompts her cruel demand, is subverting a significant issue", but "(m)shk as a motive is unclear and difficult to translate."[54]

In order to give meaning to Sarah's actions, previous hypotheses tend to focus on putting a sinister spin on Ishmael's activity. On the mild end of this is the suggestion that

---

[51] W.G. Kendrick, "Selected Translation Problems in Genesis", *The Bible Translator* 41 (1990) pp. 425-6; Wenham, p. 63.

[52] To explore feminist readings of this subject, please see: R.D. Weis, "Stained Glass Window, Kaleidoscope or Catalyst: The Implications of Difference in Readings of the Hagar and Sarah Stories", in R.D. Weis, & D.M. Carr (eds.), *A Gift of God in Due Season,* Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996, pp. 253-73; P.T. Reis, "Hagar Requited", *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 87 (2000) pp. 75-109; W.A. Bailey, "Black and Jewish Women Consider Hagar", *Encounter* 63 (2002) pp. 34-44.

[53] Westermann, p. 339.

[54] S.J. Teubal, *Hagar the Egyptian: The Lost Tradition of the Matriarchs*, San Francisco: Harper, 1990, p. 136.

Ishmael was making fun of, teasing, or "mocking" Isaac,[55] possibly making fun of his special status or the circumstances of his conception or birth.[56] More severe accusations have Ishmael playing, but in a dangerous way, with Isaac, claiming that Ishmael was famous for his use of a bow and he may have been aiming it at Isaac in jest.[57] There are also scholars who believe that Ishmael had masturbated in front of, or sexually molested Isaac, and that Jewish redactors removed the words ("with her son Isaac") at the end of 21:9 to cover up what they considered a dirty secret.[58]

While each of these authors has detailed some support for their hypotheses, they are largely based on speculation and unrefined interpretation, sometimes even having their foundation in post-biblical writings. I will be relying on relevant grammatical cues to determine what the most likely interpretation would be, as translating צחק alone has proven to be awkward.

As we will see, צחק is an important lexeme in the Isaac narratives. It features prominently throughout the tradition, and Lichtenstein calls attention to its status as a "leitwort".[59] Particularly intriguing is that there lacks a common consensus on the interpretation and translation of this root in various contexts throughout the texts.

According to Botterweck, the roots שחק and צחק are synonymous, and probably originate from the biconsonantal root חק*, with the first radical of the root being unstable or even absent in Hebrew as well as other West Semitic languages.[60] It can be argued that it is a biconsonantal root with secondarily added prothetic element, as the onomatopoeic

---

[55] Bibles using this translation include: American Standard Version, New American Standard Version, New International Version, King James Version.
[56] Wenham p. 64.
[57] Hamilton, p. 79; J. Kirsch, "What did Sarah See?", *Bible Review* 14 (5, 1998) pp. 2, 49.
[58] Teubal, pp. 135-6; Kirsch, pp. 2, 49.
[59] A thematic word; A. Lichtenstein, "Isaac and Laughter", *Dor le Dor* 18 (1989-1990), p. 13.
[60] Botterweck, G.J., & H. Ringgren (eds.), *The Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament, vol. 12*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974-, pp. 60-61.

expression of laughing makes the monosylabic sound of laughing (as in the English ha-ha-ha).[61] A triconsonantal root has a much more complicated process of "progressive assimilation or dissimilation".[62] It belongs to the group (verbal root form) that refers to "laughing, laughter" as well as related ideas of "mockery".[63]

These synonyms appear a total of 179 times in the Hebrew Bible. The majority of appearances are in noun form, in the name Isaac (יצחק), followed by verbal patterns largely in the *qal* and *piel* forms, with a statistically frequent use of participles (14x). The majority of occurrences of צחק appear in Genesis. The *qal* form only appears therein, and always in connection with Isaac (17:17; 18:12, 13, 15 (2x); 21:6). The *piel* form is found in Gn 19:14; 21:9; 26:8; 39:14, 17; Exod 32:6, Jgs 16:25, and Ezk 23:32, and "popular etymology considered this phonetic variant of the root to be closely related to the name of the patriarch Isaac".[64] The root צחק normally indicates "openness, sincerity, unselfconsciousness, exuberance, and honest manifestations of glorious joy".[65] The root שחק and its derivatives are found mostly in the wisdom literature and thought to connote laughter, fun or jest in terms of "not-for-real" sporting.[66] Although this literature is mostly dated later, we can still reference it for basic biblical usage.

Typically, it is accepted that biblical use of laughter is as a cheerful, positive expression, or as an indication of helplessness.[67] If anything other than that is meant, it is indicated by the context. However, a few scholars disagree and argue that biblical laughter has nothing to do with "amusement", and that in fact, most associations are

---

[61] Botterweck & Ringgren, vol 12, pp. 58-9.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Botterweck & Ringgren, vol. 12, pp. 58-60.
[64] Botterweck & Ringgren, vol. 12, pp. 60-1.
[65] Lichtenstein, pp. 13-18.
[66] Lichtenstein, pp. 13-18.
[67] Botterweck & Ringgren, vol. 12, pp. 62-64.

unpleasant. To these individuals, laughter frequently denotes "surprised incredulity or derision", and should be translated as 'mock', 'deride', or 'deceive'.[68] According to Lichtenstein, English Bibles have translated it in such various ways as play, enjoy, fondle, insult, joke, laugh, mock, sport, rejoice, or scoff.[69]

This root used in *piel* form is commonly translated as an enjoyable activity with different, but pleasurable actions arising from it.[70] *Piel* is the most active form, does not take a direct object, and it typically characterizes durative action or could be meant factitively.[71] This topic will be elaborated later on in this thesis and is integral to our understanding of Ishmael's behaviour and Sarah's motivations.

1.1.3.3 Meaning of Ishmael

A short note on names is important for the Isaac and Ishmael traditions, as both names are the basis for wordplays throughout their respective traditions, and are integral to the full experience of their stories.

The name Ishmael (root שׁמע) can be translated as "God hears" or "may God hear", but has often been overlooked as a pun.[72] Instances of שׁמע in the Ishmael narratives are sometimes considered too subtle for some scholars and overlooked as genuine aetiologies.[73] However, there are at least 3 instances where word play can be argued to occur. The etymology of Ishmael's name is given in Gn 16:11,[74] where God heeds the

---

[68] See, for example, A. Richardson, *The Theological Word Book of the Bible,* New York: Macmillan, 1962, p. 122.
[69] Lichtenstein, pp. 13-18.
[70] Botterweck & Ringgren, vol. 12, pp. 61-2.
[71] B.K. Waltke & M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax,* Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990, pp. 396-404. We will explore this in more detail in our translation chapter.
[72] Turnham, p. 15.
[73] von Rad, pp. 228-9.
[74] Debatably, also 16:2, Abraham "hearkening" to Sarah can also be considered a play on Ishmael's name, although this seems to stem from Midrashic roots and is not a widely held consideration. See M. Garsiel, *Midrashic Name Derivations in the Bible,* Israel: Revivim, 1987, p. 214.

mother's misery as she wanders in the desert. In Gn 17:20, God hears Abraham (in relation to Ishmael). Finally in Gn 21:17, God hears the child's voice in the desert.[75] Significantly, each of these instances is in relation to the blessings of Ishmael.

Particularly of note, we find that in Gn 21, the association is slightly more complex. The author avoids referring to Ishmael by name throughout the passage, which serves to highlight the reference to his name when God *hears* (שמע) the voice of the abandoned child.[76] A short look at this theme surrounding Ishmael will help establish his place in interpretation.

1.1.3.4 Isaac

Isaac, with the root צחק, "has become a dominant motif, beyond its etymological meaning"[77] within the Isaac traditions. The root means "to laugh", and the name, like many Hebrew personal names, forms a statement.[78] In fact, some scholars believe that a theophoric (-*'el*) element was dropped from the original name, giving an unshortened meaning of "may the divinity smile (on the child)".[79] This can mean either that God should regularly bring about laughter, or (more likely) that God may smile upon the child, a sign of favour.[80]

In addition to many other instances of the word laughter in the Isaac traditions, the root is used three times in association with the announcement or actual birth (17:17, 18:12-15, 21:6), each with a unique twist on the naming of the child.[81] Both 21:6a (Sarah's laughter after the birth) and 21:6b (the laughing of others after the birth) are

---

[75] von Rad, p. 228; Garsiel, p. 215.
[76] S.R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis*, London: Methuen & Co, 1904, p. 212; Alter, p. 100.
[77] von Rad, p. 187.
[78] Ibid; Botterweck & Ringgren, vol. 12, p. 63.
[79] Botterweck & Ringgren, vol. 12, p. 63.
[80] Ibid.
[81] Ibid.

purely associative etymologies, and although fitting in with the theme of laughter, are not widely considered reasons for Isaac's naming.[82] Establishing this theme in the Isaac narrative may help explain Ishmael's banishment during Isaac's weaning feast.

1.1.3.5 Legalities

An area that has received quite a bit of attention is the legality/morality of Sarah's demand for the banishment of the slave wife and her child. It was a custom, in the Ancient Near East, for a barren woman to offer her husband a slave to bear a child, which she (the barren wife) would then raise as her own. This was a legal practice and gave rights to both the biological mother and the child.[83]

Keeping this in mind, Sarah's demand for banishment may be seen as unreasonable, immoral and possibly even illegal. Certainly, it is self-interested. Additionally, if we consider ancient customs as indicative, the parent and child would be given protection from banishment and could only be sent off in exchange for their freedom, and traditionally only with a large send-off.[84] While the setting of the story is before Torah law, even in light of ancient laws, these (or similar) protection seemed to be offered in most cultures in the ancient near east.[85]

According to the Nuzi tablets, which date from approximately the 15th century BCE, banishing a slave wife is prohibited,[86] and according to Sumerian law, it is only allowable to send off a slave wife and child if they were freed.[87] Similarly, the code of

---

[82] Ibid.
[83] Turnham, p. 16; N.M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis,* Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989, pp. 146-7; Hamilton, p. 79.
[84] Turnham, p. 16; Sarna, pp. 146-7; Hamilton, p. 79.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Turnham, p. 16.
[87] Ibid.

Lipit-Ishtar (19th century BCE)[88] states that if the father should grant freedom, the children forfeit their rights of inheritance, while Cuniform law claims that the son of a slave-wife had legal claim to the father's property.[89]

Having said all this, it is not often debated whether Ishmael was the legal child of Abraham. Both Abraham and Hagar call Ishmael a child ילד, which often denotes a biological relationship, while God refers to him as a lad נער.[90] Indeed, many scholars believe that the wording in the narrative implies that Hagar is referred to as a wife אשה rather than a concubine פילגש.[91] Supposing that he had taken her as his slave wife, it is possible that Abraham did divorce Hagar, as the word used (to drive out) in 21:10 also functions as the word for divorce.[92] In our thesis, we will examine whether these laws are applicable to our story, and if so, confirm what the relationship was between Hagar, Ishmael and Sarah.

1.1.3.6 Familial Disturbance

As previously stated, the source of the familial disturbance is referred to by the *piel* participle of the root "to laugh", מצחק, found at the end of 21:9. Essentially, the debate is over the connotations that this word has to justify sending a woman and her child out into the desert, or if there even *needs* to be any justification. The author chose to use the root for laughter, possibly as a play on Isaac's name, indicating that Ishmael was "Isaac-ing", or trying to make himself like Isaac, to be equal in family position.[93] Sarah may have seen Ishmael being a strong rival who will earn the larger share of the

---

[88] Mesopotamian compilation of laws.
[89] Turnham, p. 16; Sarna, pp. 146-7; Hamilton, p. 79.
[90] Turnham, p. 16.
[91] The author used the same term as referred to Sarah at the beginning of the verse: "The terminological equation of the two women is surely intended/and sets up an ironic backdrop [...]", Alter, p. 68.
[92] Lev 21:7, 14; 22:13; Num 30:10; Ezek 44:22, all in the passive *qal* participle form; See Hamilton, p. 79-80.
[93] Hamilton, p. 79.

19

inheritance,[94] which brings us back to her jealousy. Westermann defends her, stating that we cannot see her in terms of our own morals, but rather we should examine her with those of the ancient near east, where her very survival may have been at stake.[95]

Even if the banishment did not put the instigator, Sarah, in a negative light, it seems odd that Abraham would send his child into the desert with meager compensation. It has been suggested that the promise of a "great" nation, along with an assurance of the child's survival, could be viewed as enough compensation, and is in fact one of the messages of this story.[96] While this may be so, many elements must be taken into account before we can be satisfied that we have the best understanding possible.

1.1.4 Methodology

Why write a story about two sons, creating such a rich and interwoven back-story for one competing tribe, but none others? We wish to address the difficulties that are posed by the presence of Hagar and Ishmael featuring so prominently in the patriarchal narratives. A detailed examination of phraseology and translation will fill many of the gaps in our understanding. As well, we will need to explore the structure of the text on a small and large scale. Finally, we will supplement this information with an understanding of context, both inter- and extra-biblically.

In order to resolve some of the questions raised by the difficulties in the text, and also to understand the significance of the story in its final form, I will be using both diachronic and synchronic methodologies. A diachronic approach will help identify the setting while a synchronic approach will focus on the meaning of the text in its final

---

[94] Kendrick, pp. 425-6.
[95] Westermann, pp. 339-40.
[96] Hamilton, pp. 84-85.

form. These two levels of understanding will contribute to an integrated apprehension of the text.

Our methodology to answer our thesis question will comprise the following:

1.1.4.1 Textual Criticism

Textual criticism looks at and compares textual witnesses for corruptions and changes due to transmission. For the purpose of this thesis, we will be attempting to use the oldest version of the text, because it is most likely the closest to the original reading. While it is not possible to say that one reading is universally preferable, the Masoretic Text is often chosen over other texts when all else is equal.[97] Emanuel Tov stresses that this needs to be evaluated on a case by case basis.

This will be our first step, as it is essential to establish the text we wish to work with, and particularly one that we believe to be the most accurate. There are variant readings of Gn 21:9, and the later version may be indicative of interpretation.

1.1.4.2 Macro-Syntactical Analysis

Due to the structure of ancient Hebrew, a macro-syntactical analysis will be necessary. Usual grammars focus on the morphology of verbs with little or no consideration to context. However, it has been found that Biblical Hebrew syntax functions quite differently from modern languages. The tense of a verb relies not only on its morphology, but also on its position within the sentence and its relation to other verbs in a larger literary unit. Consequently, the grammatical constructions within the text will need to be analyzed to determine what belongs to the background or the foreground, the tense and mood of the verbs. It will also help clarify if presumed difficulties are not

---

[97] E.Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, Roftress Press; Minneapolis, 1992, p. 300.

rather due to the syntax. Accordingly, our interpretation and translation of the text may differ from past studies.

In conjunction with the textual criticism, this will form our second chapter and establish the text and translation that we wish to work with. We will attempt to provide the reader with the most transparent reading possible to allow for a feel of the Hebrew. The difficulties will be more easily addressed from this first hand view of the passage.

1.1.4.3 Difficulties in Translation

Due to the complexities involved in translating Gn 21 (particularly v. 9), a section will be devoted to word studies, particularly the roots of the names Isaac and Ishmael ("to laugh" and "to hear"), but also a short note on the root of Hagar's name. Additionally, considering the prevalence of wordplays involving laughter, we will devote some time to studying the meaning of laughter in the biblical world, including a linguistic study of the root צחק. The implications seem to be different than those we expect today and are integral to the Isaac tradition.

It will be necessary to look at wordplays and the role they play in Hebrew texts. We will seek to delve into any words that pose persistent difficulties in translation especially those that form distinct puns. A critical focus of this study is on Gn 21:9, particularly a *piel* participle of the root which has proven to be quite difficult in deciphering. While we have already seen that this is a play on Isaac's name, it is possible that our difficulties arise from overlooking relevant wordplay.

1.1.4.4 Form Criticism

Literary forms and story patterns will be examined in order to identify themes used in Hagar and Ishmael's narratives. While not looking specifically for origins, we will

look for traces of patterns and narratives evident within our text that we can then evaluate alongside similar stories. This part of the analysis will allow us to discover any subtle meanings that the author was wishing to convey through comparison with other texts.

1.1.4.5 Structural Analysis

To determine the place of Ishmael and Hagar, we will be looking at the passage as it is found within the greater scope of the Bible. The implications of a large-scale chiastic structure (macro-structure) found within the Abraham narratives are significant and will be explored. Smaller scale structural patterns will also be teased out of the passage itself, as this will often change the way a story is told and is essential for understanding the presentation, particularly if there is poetry or wordplay to be found.

1.1.4.6 Literary Devices

We will then look at literary devices used to tie our narrative into the rest of the Bible. Included in this section are wordplays and puns ties into the Hagar and Ishmael cycle, as well as relevant puns on laughter, pertaining to Ishmael. Having established their translation in Chapter 3, we will here look at their place and significance in the text.

1.1.4.7 Comparative Analysis, Including Form & Genre Analysis

For additional contextualization, we look outside the Bible for contemporaneous literary traditions found in the ANE similar to Hagar and Ishmael's. Evidence of this may allude to the author using known story forms to convey a certain message.

We will combine the previous four elements in chapter 4 to convey a sense of placement for our text. By looking at these constituents, we can see what tools the author used to establish Hagar and Ishmael's status and place in the greater corpus of Biblical writings.

Chapter 5 will focus on comparative customs and legalities in the Ancient Near East for slave release, surrogate motherhood, divorce, disownment of children, and traditions pertaining to those found in the pericope. While we do not presume the historicity of the characters or the story, we will treat the narrative as historical fiction, where the author was aware of and made reference to appropriate customs. In our examination, we will allude to the alleged patriarchal period as a reference in literature, rather than a true age in history.[98]

We will need to define the precise relationship of both Sarah and Abraham to Hagar and Ishmael and what his legal obligations most likely were. This will help establish the dynamics of the story in terms of ancient family relationships. A thorough knowledge of these customs (and their applicability) will help in our efforts to understand whether it is possible or even necessary to absolve Sarah for her seemingly harsh actions towards Hagar. Most importantly, we hope to free Hagar and Ishmael of the vilification that has plagued them for centuries.

1.1.4.8 Synthesis & Interpretation

Bringing these elements together, we will have a well-rounded view of Hagar and Ishmael, their relationship with Sarah and Abraham, and an idea of what the writer(s) and redactor(s) were wishing to convey and teach through this passage. We will be able to bring some resolution to the translation of Gn 21:9 through contextualization and understanding of wordplays. We seek a simple explanation that resolves some of the discomfiture that has surrounded this narrative for centuries.

---

[98] The establishment of the veracity of the patriarchs is well beyond the scope of this thesis and is irrelevant for the purpose of this research. All that we must assume is that a historical knowledge of laws and customs was present in the target audience, as well as a feel for the period of time in which the author presents his stories.

24

1.2 Conclusion

It is apparent from the literature that this text is more complicated than it first appears to be. The use of wordplays that enriched the Hebrew text to its original readers is somewhat lost to our modern sensibilities, especially in translation. Additionally, without historical contextualization, we are apt to misunderstand that which would have been self-evident to an ancient audience.

Chapter 2: The Text

When translating and interpreting Biblical Hebrew, it is necessary to take into account many factors. Below, we outline the major hurdles one faces in providing a satisfying translation, as well as the steps we are taking to ensure a close approximation of the original. The primary consideration is an accurate understanding of the original text and grammar. In this chapter, we will cover textual criticism and perform a macro-syntactical analysis of Genesis 21:1-18, with the aim of providing the reader with the most accurate and transparent translation possible, accompanied by a detailed commentary.

The first thing to consider is the syntactical nature of the language. One is required to consider the verb forms within the greater context of the passage in order both to translate the tense as well as to fully understand its function within the text.[99] Following each section, we will outline the patterns evident in the verb forms and the implications this has for understanding the pattern of storytelling.

The attempt here is to not only provide an understandable English translation of the pericope under examination, but also give the reader a feel for the challenges inherent in the original text. Where possible, we have provided annotations briefly illustrating or explaining issues to be covered later in this thesis, and indicated places where the translation will be further elaborated on. Additionally, care has been taken to preserve any puns and wordplay, as this is often imperative to understanding the nuances of a passage.

---

[99] A. Niccacci, *The Syntax of the Verb in Classical Hebrew Prose,* Sheffield Academic Press: Sheffield, 1986, p. 10.

As there are several witnesses that have variant readings, textual criticism is performed in order to determine what we believe to be the most original reading. Differences in manuscripts are indicated where they vary from one another with justifications as to our choice. Typically, we follow E. Tov's principles of *Lectio Difficilior Praeferenda, Lectio Brevior*, Harmonization & Interpretive Modification.[100] In this case, the Masoretic Text[101] meets Tov's criteria for most difficult reading, briefest reading, and it does not show the harmonization evident in other readings, therefore not adding interpretation, and so we are following it exclusively.

2.1 Isaac's Birth & Weaning Narrative: 21:1-8

v. 1 וַיהוָה פָּקַד אֶת־שָׂרָה (waw-x-qatal)
כַּאֲשֶׁר אָמָר (x-qatal)
וַיַּעַשׂ יְהוָה (wayyiqtol)
לְשָׂרָה כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֵּר: (x-qatal)

v. 2 וַתַּהַר (wayyiqtol)
וַתֵּלֶד שָׂרָה (wayyiqtol)
לְאַבְרָהָם בֵּן לִזְקֻנָיו לַמּוֹעֵד (SNC)
אֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּר אֹתוֹ אֱלֹהִים: (x-qatal)

v. 3 וַיִּקְרָא אַבְרָהָם (wayyiqtol)
אֶת־שֶׁם־בְּנוֹ הַנּוֹלַד־לוֹ (SNC)
אֲשֶׁר־יָלְדָה־לּוֹ שָׂרָה יִצְחָק: (x-qatal)

v. 4 וַיָּמָל אַבְרָהָם אֶת־יִצְחָק בְּנוֹ בֶּן־שְׁמֹנַת יָמִים כַּאֲשֶׁר (wayyiqtol)
צִוָּה אֹתוֹ אֱלֹהִים) (x-qatal)

v. 5 וְאַבְרָהָם בֶּן־מְאַת שָׁנָה בְּהִוָּלֶד[102] לוֹ אֵת יִצְחָק בְּנוֹ: (waw-SNC)

v. 6 וַתֹּאמֶר שָׂרָה (wayyiqtol)
צְחֹק עָשָׂה לִי אֱלֹהִים) (x-qatal)
כָּל־הַשֹּׁמֵעַ יִצְחַק־לִי) (x-yiqtol)

v. 7 וַתֹּאמֶר (wayyiqtol)
מִי מִלֵּל לְאַבְרָהָם (x-qatal)
הֵינִיקָה בָנִים שָׂרָה (qatal)

---

[100] Tov, pp. 302-10.
[101] The author acknowledges that the Masoretic Text is in fact a collection of manuscripts, which sometimes vary from one another, however this is irrelevant to the current study as no notable differences are present for the text at hand.
[102] Infinitive Niphal. Emphasizes that Abraham played a passive part in his son being borne to him. While not directly relevant to my thesis, it is interesting to note that in Hebrew, this may have indicated further emphasis of the theology of God's bestowment.

בֶן לִזְקֻנָיו[103] כִּי-יָלַדְתִּי (x-qatal)

v. 8 וַיִּגְדַּל הַיֶּלֶד (wayyiqtol)

וַיִּגָּמַל (wayyiqtol)

וַיַּעַשׂ אַבְרָהָם מִשְׁתֶּה גָדוֹל (wayyiqtol)

בְּיוֹם הִגָּמֵל אֶת-יִצְחָק (SNC)

v. 1 And Yahweh visited Sarah, as that which he had said,[104] and Yahweh did for Sarah that which he had decreed[105].

v. 2 And she conceived, and Sarah begot to Abraham a son in his old age, at the time which Elohim had decreed[106] to him.

v. 3 And Abraham called the name of his son, who was begot[107] to him, which Sarah had borne him, Isaac.

v. 4 And Abraham circumcised Isaac his son[108] when he was eight days old as Elohim had commanded him.

v. 5 Abraham was a hundred years old when Isaac his son was born to him.

v. 6 And Sarah said "Elohim made laughter for me,[109] and all who hear will laugh for[110] me."

---

[103] The Samaritan Pentateuch and the Pseudo Jonathan Targum add "לי". This seems to be a clarification inserted into the text, and so, as with elsewhere in this translation, we are following the Masoretic Text, which is the briefest and most difficult reading, as per Emanuel Tov's criteria mentioned previously.

[104] While this wording may seem slightly cumbersome in English, it does reflect the true sense of the Hebrew.

[105] By using "decree", we hope to convey the nuance of the *piel* verbal form used here, as well as the difference in wording between the previously used אמר (said) with דבר. Specifically, the implication is that God is making good on his word in a sense of a keenness of carrying out the action indicated by the stem.

[106] Again, using the, *piel* form of דבר.

[107] Using different word forms helps convey the *niphal* participle (vs *qal qatal* verb form used later in the sentence), and stresses that this is not merely repetition of the same words in a sentence, but enhances the emphasis that was most likely intended by the original writer. Possibly stressing that both God and Sarah's roles in the birth, where it foreshadows Abraham being put in a position between his wife (Sarah) and his son (Ishmael), but siding with his wife.

[108] Modern English would probably prefer the smoother translation of "his son Isaac", however, this passage revolves around poetry and word play, so I am leaving the unusual English word order to convey a rhythm and encourage the reader to have a closer experience to the original reading.

[109] Most likely made her laugh, however rather than interpret the text, I leave it to the reader (as it is left in Hebrew) to dwell on this.

[110] Commonly translated "with", but this is not a normal use of the preposition. "ל" is most commonly used in a spatial sense, and is relational to the subject. For example, the most common uses are to or for (as in, "to me"), while "with" signifies a relation in tandem (B.K. Waltke & M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax,* Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990, p. 205-12). Rather, this is likely an attempt at clarifying an interpretation of the ambiguous "for", or "towards me". Interpretations of this verse include mocking/derisive laughter, joyous celebratory laughter and incredulous laughter. While it can also be translated "at", I choose to leave the ambiguous "for" to preserve the poetic feel of the original Hebrew, however it does seem possible that the laughing towards Sarah may be derisive. Laughter will be covered in detail later in the thesis.

v. 7 And she said, "Who would have said[111] to Abraham that Sarah would nurse[112] sons? Just as[113] I have born a son in[114] his old age."

v. 8 The boy[115] grew and was weaned, and Abraham made a great feast on the day he had Isaac weaned.[116]

I begin my translation with Isaac's weaning celebration, as this is important to establishing Ishmael's chronology. Normally, we would expect the narrative to develop with a chain of *wayyiqtols*, which denote that the story is unfolding.[117] Any deviation from that pattern is to be taken note of since it indicates a change in the level of communication.[118] Having said that, this section opens up with a *waw-x-qatal*. According to Niccacci, this construction comprises a compound noun clause and communicates recovered information.[119]

In applying this information to the passage, we see that the author is simply reminding the reader, and emphasizing that God had done as he had promised, and that Sarah was pregnant. This serves to set up the stage for the narration that follows, and provides a transition from the previous story.

After this, the narrator unfolds the story with a series of *wayyiqtols* (beginning each sentence that follows), broken with simple noun clauses and x-*qatals*, inserting small commentary or background information within each sentence. This pattern is

---

[111] Expression appears twice, once as מלל, and once defectively written. Maybe included intentionally as it resembles the root מול (to circumcise, v.4) and continues the theme of repetition throughout the passage.

[112] Literally, suckle, however the use of this word in modern English would break the reader's concentration, where the original Hebrew provided a smooth reading.

[113] The preposition כי is normally used to denote an agreement in quantity or measure, or correspondence. Waltke & O'Connor, pp. 202-204. Here Sarah is comparing her old age and Abraham's in terms of the unlikelihood of bearing children.

[114] The Hebrew 'to' does not work in English, but the meaning is preserved with "in".

[115] I chose to distinguish between the use of נער (boy) and ילד (youth) in English to keep the variety shown in the text. This is also important later for understanding the confusion over Ishmael's age.

[116] Slightly awkward translation to preserve the causative meaning, as well as keeping Isaac as the object, rather than subject. English does not provide us with tenses indicating subtleties of causation.

[117] Niccacci, p. 30.

[118] Ibid.

[119] Niccacci, p. 35.

broken once, in v. 5, with a *waw*-SNC[120] construction. This is evidently an insertion of

background information by the narrator: an important reminder of Abraham's age. Also,

discourse punctuates the scene with a monologue from Sarah (vv. 6 & 7), indicated by

"and she said" followed by an x-*qatal*, indicating the opening of discourse, where "...the

variety of verb forms available...is greater than in narrative...".[121]

We tried to preserve and convey the smoothness or difficulty of reading found in

the ancient Hebrew in the translation to English, calling attention to the ambiguity in the

use of laughter, which could be on Sarah's behalf or in mockery, and seems to be a theme

in this passage.[122]

2.2 Sarah's Demand and God's Promise: 21: 9-13

v. 9[123] וַתֵּרֶא שָׂרָה אֶת־בֶּן־הָגָר הַמִּצְרִית (wayyiqtol)
אֲשֶׁר־יָלְדָה לְאַבְרָהָם (x-qatal)
מְצַחֵק[124] (SNC)
v. 10 וַתֹּאמֶר לְאַבְרָהָם (wayyiqtol)
גָּרֵשׁ הָאָמָה הַזֹּאת וְאֶת־בְּנָהּ[125] (imperative)
כִּי לֹא יִירַשׁ בֶּן־הָאָמָה הַזֹּאת (x-yiqtol)
עִם־בְּנִי עִם־יִצְחָק[126] (SNC)
v. 11 וַיֵּרַע הַדָּבָר מְאֹד בְּעֵינֵי אַבְרָהָם (wayyiqtol)
עַל אוֹדֹת בְּנוֹ (SNC)
v. 12 וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל־אַבְרָהָם (wayyiqtol)
אַל־יֵרַע בְּעֵינֶיךָ עַל־הַנַּעַר וְעַל־אֲמָתֶךָ (x-yiqtol)
כֹּל אֲשֶׁר תֹּאמַר אֵלֶיךָ שָׂרָה (x-yiqtol)

---

[120] Simple Noun Clause.

[121] Niccacci, p. 73.

[122] This will be covered in more detail later in chapter 4.

[123] Historically considered to be the root ראה (to see), may also be the root ירא (to fear). While this is a break from convention, it would make sense in light of the text as well as the poetic structure. If this is the case, many of the difficulties with this passage, particularly Sarah's demands of banishment, are removed. See Ch.4 for a more detailed treatment.

[124] The LXX adds μετα Ισαακ του υιου αυτης "with Isaac her son" which is possibly a harmonization with v. 10, or maybe just a clarification. Either way, the addition is unnecessary to the Hebrew syntax, and in fact, does not fit well with the use of the participle in this case. We will retain the simplicity of the Masoretic Text.

[125] The Samaritain Pentateuch and the Pseudo Jonathan Targum add את. Again, as with elsewhere, we are following the Masoretic Text for it's simplicity, as most inclusions found in alternate readings seem to clarify texts and are probably later inclusions.

[126] Repetition for intensification.

שְׁמַע בְּקֹלָהּ (imperative)

כִּי בְיִצְחָק יִקָּרֵא לְךָ זָרַע (x-yiqtol)

v.13 וְגַם אֶת־בֶּן־הָאָמָה לְגוֹי[127] אֲשִׂימֶנּוּ (x-yiqtol)

כִּי זַרְעֲךָ הוּא (SNC)

v. 9 When Sarah saw[128] the son of Hagar the Egyptian, that which she had born to Abraham, laughing.[129]

v. 10 And she said to Abraham "Cast out this maidservant and her son, for the son of this maidservant will not inherit with my son, with Isaac."

v. 11 And the matter was very displeasing in the eyes of Abraham[130] on account of[131] his son.

v. 12 And Elohim said to Abraham "Let it not be displeasing in your eyes on account of the youth and on account of your maidservant.[132] All that Sarah says to you hearken to her voice,[133] because through Isaac your descendants will be called.

v. 13 And also I shall make a [134]nation of the son of the maidservant because he is your descendant."

Verse 9 continues the narrative, within the context of Isaac's weaning celebration, but shifts the attention from Isaac to Ishmael. It continues with the chain of narrative *wayyiqtols*, followed by a *qatal* construction (providing background information) and ends with a simple noun clause, in the form of a *piel* participle. While participles can be tricky to translate, they are often used as adjectives, as seems indicated in this verse. This is important to note since most translations, as well as this one as it stands, imply a single

---

[127] Samaritan Hebrew Pentateuch, Vulgate, Syrac & LXX add "גדול". This seems like a probable harmonization with v. 18. As previously explained, we retain the reading of the Masoretic Text due to its simplicity.

[128] Possibly "feared", especially since the root reappears in v. 17, in keeping with the theme of repetition and wordplay in the rest of the passage. It would make an ironic twist with Sarah "fearing", and later the angel of God telling Hagar not to fear. Either way, it may have also served as phonetic world play for the Hebrew ear. For further consideration on this, see Ch. 3. For now, I retain the traditional translation.

[129] Debatable translation: also making sport, playing, etc., but I am staying with a more literal translation. This is a difficult passage for interpretation due to vagueness and misunderstandings in translation. I will cover this in more detail throughout the rest of this paper.

[130] Although not a common term in English, it conveys the stress on Abraham's perception accurately.

[131] Less awkward than 'concerning' in this case.

[132] Repetition left in for emphasis (Possibly as a rebuke to Abraham for ignoring the plight of Hagar).

[133] Hearken to her voice is an idiom equivalent to obey. Although this is difficult in English, I wish to keep the reader aware of the use of "hear" as a root, as this remains as important to Ishmael's narratives as laughter is to Isaac's.

[134] Samaritan Hebrew Pentateuch, Septuagint, Syriac & Vulgate adds "גדול" (great), possibly to harmonize the text. Due to this tendency, most probably the original text is that of the MT.

31

action causing Sarah's wrath, which could have been easily indicated by an active verb form.

Furthermore, the *piel* verb form is used to indicate the bringing about of a state, in a factitive sense, and that "the object experiences this action as an accident".[135] This implies that it was a state which Ishmael was in, rather than a discreet and conscious action that he was performing which angered or worried Sarah. This is important to indicate here, as it will have a direct impact on the rest of this study.

Verses 10-12 continue to unfold the story with narrative *wayyiqtols*, again breaking from this pattern to insert discourse or background information. Verse 13 continues the discourse begun in v. 12 with an *x-yiqtol* construction.

2.3 Hagar & Ishmael's Banishment: 21:14-18

v. 14 וַיַּשְׁכֵּם אַבְרָהָם בַּבֹּקֶר (wayyiqtol)
וַיִּקַּח־לֶחֶם וְחֵמַת מַיִם (wayyiqtol)
וַיִּתֵּן אֶל־הָגָר [136] (wayyiqtol)
שָׂם עַל־שִׁכְמָהּ *וְאֶת־הַיֶּלֶד (wayyiqtol) —
וַיְשַׁלְּחֶהָ (wayyiqtol)
וַתֵּלֶךְ (wayyiqtol)
וַתֵּתַע בְּמִדְבַּר בְּאֵר שָׁבַע (ayyiqtolw)

v. 15 וַיִּכְלוּ הַמַּיִם מִן־הַחֵמֶת (wayyiqtol)
וַתַּשְׁלֵךְ אֶת־הַיֶּלֶד תַּחַת אַחַד הַשִּׂיחִם (wayyiqtol)

v. 16 וַתֵּלֶךְ (wayyiqtol)
וַתֵּשֶׁב לָהּ מִנֶּגֶד הַרְחֵק (wayyiqtol)
כִּמְטַחֲוֵי קֶשֶׁת (SNC)
כִּי אָמְרָה (qatal)
אַל־אֶרְאֶה בְּמוֹת הַיָּלֶד (Jussive)
וַתֵּשֶׁב מִנֶּגֶד (wayyiqtol)
וַתִּשָּׂא אֶת־קֹלָהּ (wayyiqtol) [137]

---

[135] Waltke & O'Connor, p. 400.

[136] Compare with LXX and Syriac, where אֶל־הָגָר is transposed with וְאֶת־הַיֶּלֶד. While this arrangement does make more sense, the criteria calling for the more difficult reading prompts us to keep that found in the Masoretic Text.

[137] Note the feminine form. Some authors (for example, White) claim that this was in error and change it to the masculine to align with v. 17, where God hears the voice of the boy. God hearing the voice of the boy,

וַתֵּבְךְ: [138] (wayyiqtol)

v. 17 וַיִּשְׁמַע
אֱלֹ'הִים אֶת-קוֹל הַנַּעַר (wayyiqtol)
וַיִּקְרָא מַלְאַךְ אֱלֹ'הִים אֶל-הָגָר מִן-הַשָּׁמַיִם (wayyiqtol)
וַיֹּ'אמֶר לָהּ (wayyiqtol)
מַה-לָּךְ הָגָר (SNC)
אַל-תִּירְאִי (x-yiqtol)
כִּי-שָׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶל [139] -קוֹל הַנַּעַר בַּאֲשֶׁר הוּא-שָׁם: (x-qatal)

v. 18 קוּמִי (imperative)
שְׂאִי אֶת-הַנַּעַר (erativeimp)
וְהַחֲזִיקִי אֶת-יָדֵךְ בּוֹ (imperative)
כִּי-לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל אֲשִׂימֶנּוּ (x-yiqtol)

v. 14 And Abraham rose early in the morning and he took bread and a waterskin of water, which he gave unto Hagar set upon her shoulder, and the boy.[140] And he sent her away and she went and she wandered about in the desert of Beer-Sheba.

v. 15 And the water from the waterskin was finished and she thrust[141] the boy under one of the bushes.

v. 16 And she went and she sat herself opposite, about the distance of a bowshot, for she said "I wish not[142] to see the boy in death" and she sat opposite and lifted up her voice and wept.

v. 17 Elohim heard the voice of the youth and the angel of Elohim called to Hagar from heaven and he said to her "What's up Hagar?"[143] Do not fear because Elohim has heard the voice of the youth in that he is there.[144]

v. 18 Stand, lift the youth and take hold of him with your hand,[145] because I shall make of him a great nation."

---

contrary to Hagar's voice is more likely emphasis on the promise made in Ishmael's name: God hears. See H.C. White, "Initiation Legend of Ishmael", *ZAW* 87.3 (1975) pp. 287-8.

[138] Compare with LXX וַיִּשָּׂא אֶת-קֹלֹה וַיֵּבְךָ . For consistency, we retain the Masoretic reading, especially considering that there would be no change in the reading even if we reverted to the LXX.

[139] Compare with Targum Jonathan, Samaritan Hebrew Pentateuch and various Medieval Manuscripts, where we find את. We retain the current reading for consistency, and again, the meaning of the passage is not greatly affected by the difference.

[140] Very awkward passage. Again, I am leaving the difficulty here as it will show the reader the trouble in establishing Ishmael's age that is evident in Hebrew.

[141] Hiphil, denoting intensification.

[142] Jussive. Literally, "I will not see", with a volitive implication. Niccacci, p. 88-96.

[143] A modern colloquialism but stays closest to the meaning of the phrase "What to you Hagar?" while speaking to modern readers. This may not agree with a scholarly trained eye, but I feel that the familiarity in address is also important to keep when establishing the position of Hagar and Ishmael with the Hebrew narratives.

[144] Note that it is Hagar who cries out, but the voice of the boy that God hears.

[145] I am keeping the Hebrew wording here, even though it may cause some confusion in English, to draw attention to the ambiguity of reference to Ishmael's age.

Verses 14 to 18 follow Abraham, Hagar and Ishmael in the process of banishment. The phrasing of these lines is sometimes awkward in Hebrew, which I preserved in my translation here to prepare the reader in understanding subsequent issues in establishing Ishmael's age.

The syntax is relatively straightforward, continuing the chain of narrative *wayyiqtols* and unfolding the story. Some find difficulty in the text where Hagar lifts her voice, but God hears the voice of the child. As noted, the feminine form is clearly used, and this is very likely emphasis on the etymology of Ishmael's name. Discourse is indicated in vv. 16 & 17 and continues in v. 18 with a series of imperatives as God commands Hagar to rise, and concludes with a promise of posterity.

2.4 Conclusion

Through our inspection of this text, we noticed several key points, some of which will need further elaboration in the next few chapters. The syntax and language that were used provide clues to understanding the meaning of the text. While the narratives may have once belonged to different oral traditions, they have been united here in a purposeful manner, as is demonstrated by the syntax. Isaac's birth and Ishmael's banishment are tied together at the former's weaning feast, which we will later see is a clever move on the part of the author. The author makes several excurses to remind the reader of background information, ensuring that our attention is focused.

What is evident is that the root צחק plays an important role in the understanding of this passage. The rhythms of speech and wordplays that can easily be overlooked or simplified in a facile translation become unmistakable in the course of this analysis. Emphasis has been placed in subtle ways, such as allowing the laughter of Sarah to

remain ambiguous, thus necessitating the reader to dwell momentarily on v.6. The pun on Isaac's name has been often noticed in v. 9, but we also notice that there is another, complementary, pun that has been entirely overlooked but cannot be translated in relation to seeing/fearing. This will be covered in detail in chapter 4 & 6.

Further emphasis is placed on Hagar and Ishmael through the use of wordplays involving seeing and hearing, which we will see are themes throughout their stories. This is evident in the pairing of Sarah's seeing of Ishmael laughing with Hagar's refusing to see the child die. Also, we make note of the previously mentioned stress on God hearing the voice of the boy.

This concludes our first step in beginning to understand the text. We have established what we believe to be the most original reading of this text, analyzed the structure and grammar for a clear understanding, and identified key words and phrases that have posed difficulties over the years. Several features stand out, namely smoothness of the narrative and the abundance of wordplays, which gives us a platform on which to begin our analysis of purpose.

Chapter 3: Lost in Translation

Two of the greatest challenges in translation are dealing with humour and wordplays. Not only is it arduous recognizing them in a language that is not only not our own, but also of a culture so far removed from ours and "whose forms of humour might not be immediately clear to us."[146] We must evaluate the importance these factors play in the text. If found to be integral, we are then obligated to try to convey them in the least awkward way possible.

We have already looked briefly at some of the wordplays found in Gn 21. In this chapter, we delve deeper into the noteworthy linguistic features surrounding Hagar and Ishmael. Furthermore, we will discuss laughter, and by association, humour and wit, in the Ancient Near East. This short examination will help ascertain what significance wordplays held in Biblical writing, and therefore determine what emphases the writer and redactor wished to portray. What should be kept in mind is that while we take special care in explaining many of these features, they would have formed an immediate association within the ancient intellect.

3.1 Ancient Wit

Our first challenge in translating wit in another culture, particularly in one so far removed in time and space as ancient Hebrew, is recognizing it when we see it. Our style of reading is often that of silent study, yet "unvoiced reading is comparatively modern and ... ancient authors wrote for reading aloud."[147] Many instances of humour and wordplay are only evident aurally, and so a voiceless analysis may further distance us from the complexities within a text. Polysemy, or double-entendre, whether intentional or

---

[146] E. A. Russell, "Some Reflections on Humour in Scripture and Otherwise", *IBS* 13 (1991) p. 202.
[147] G.B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible*, London: Duckworth, 1980, p. 46.

unintentional, may be the cause for many textual problems.[148] In fact, it seems highly

likely that ancient wit was keenly dependent on wordplays, and that puns and linguistic

rhythms formed a great significance to the ancient Oriental mind.[149] Armed with this

knowledge, we have an excellent opportunity for enhanced understanding when

addressing seemingly ambiguous texts, such as ours.

Secondly, humour and wit are difficult to define. We think we know it when we

see it, but there has been such a call for seriousness in Biblical translation that subtleties,

particularly humorous ones, can be overlooked. The humour in one culture is often far

removed from another, and the function that it serves in social situations may be vastly

different.[150] We also often lack the reservoir of shared information that allows us to share

in the joke.[151] Once recognized, we find that humorous Biblical expressions can vary

from the burlesque to the sublime, being found in the form of wordplays, parody,

hyperbole and understatement.[152]

Samuel Johnson claimed that punning was "the lowest form of humour", and

many today find the form unsophisticated or simplistic. However, in the Bible,

"wordplays often provide linkage and cohesion, both between units and within one

unit."[153] This includes the use of *leitworts*, symmetry, repetition and sound patterns

within a text. In fact, there is much indication of the weaving together of episodes

---

[148] J. Ellington, "Wit and Humor in Bible Translation", *BTrans* 42.3 (1991) p. 308.
[149] See Russell for an in depth analysis.
[150] For example, while it may be appropriate to diffuse a situation with humor in North America, formal situations are taken much more seriously in Asia and cracking a joke could be wildly inappropriate.
[151] Ellington, p. 303.
[152] J.C. Exum & J.W. Whedbee, "Isaac, Samson, and Saul: Reflections on the Comic and Tragic Visions", in P.R. House (ed.), *Beyond Form Criticism: Essays in Old Testament Literary Criticism*, Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1992, p. 275.
[153] McKerras, p. 7.

through sounds to create a cycle of tales.[154] Mastery of language and playing with words was the very essence of biblical wit.

Further complicating matters, "to Westerners, the Bible's humour may seem strange, morbid, and not funny at all."[155] This may be true for wordplay found in such texts as the *Akedah*, but we should also remember that the presence of comic elements does not make it a comedy. Humour can ridicule people by pointing out truths they want to ignore, "breaking a taboo, undermining or reversing expectations, or making fun of discrepancies between convention and actuality."[156] Additionally, what was meant to be humorous then may not be so now.[157] So, it takes a particular discernment to comprehend Hebrew humour, and while there is a distinct flavour of morality in all genuine humour, this is particularly so in the Bible.[158] In this manner, humour can shed light on human foibles while avoiding heavy-handedness. Essentially, humour often serves as a "moral banana skin", tripping up those to whom lecturing might not work, but perhaps ridicule would.[159] In other words, it serves to knock one down a step or two.

Wordplays serve various purposes in the text. Not only do they provide unity as previously mentioned, but they also mark a climax, subtly evoke a hidden idea (through polysemy), supply humour, add to an effective, clear writing style, or enhance poetic

---

[154] M. Cogan, "The Expulsion of Ishmael: No Laughing Matter!", *CJ* 41 (1989) p. 30.
[155] J.J. Pilch, "The Bible's Sense of Humour", *BT* 33 (1995) p. 354.
[156] B.R. Foster, "Humor and Wit in the Ancient Near East", in J.M. Sasson & al. (eds.), *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East, Vol 4*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1995, p. 2459.
[157] Several scholars see the humor of the bumbling fool in Isaac's life, even suggesting that he was a little slow due to his parents' close relation. Whether that be the case or not, his life is riddled with laughter and ridiculous situations, beginning with his birth to an aged couple, his following his father to a mountain top like a sheep to the slaughter (pun intended), and his so easily being fooled by his son for inheritance. For a full treatment of this subject, see Foster, pp. 2459-2469.
[158] G.P. Eckman, "The Humor of the Bible", *MR* 93 (1911) pp. 521-2.
[159] Ellington, p. 302

effect.[160] Losing this in translation will cause confusion and misunderstanding. However, even if we were to attempt to render a text pun for pun (if this were yet possible), wordplays do not hold the same meaning for us as they did for them, and it may serve to make our translations peculiar to modern ears.

Our main goal is to recognize forms of wit when they appear, and determine what significance they maintain in the passage. To do this, it will help to keep in mind that as varied as the expressions are, we find that the common theme throughout all humour is the juxtaposition of incongruous elements and the clever use of language and elements that are not normally put together.[161]

3.1.1 Types of Wordplay

There are several manifestations of wordplay, and Ellington posits three levels of linguistic play:[162] Phonotactical, referring to words as sounds, including pure plays on words, puns, and rhyme. This is the most simplistic and most easily overlooked group. Morpho-syntactical, which deals with words as words, such as double entendre, ambiguity, word division, and blends. We will cover this below as we examine laughter, fear and seeing, and briefly, the roots of Hagar and Ishmael's names along with the themes that run through their stories. Finally, the most complex class is that of rhetorical play, including ideas, irony, hyperbole, meiosis/litotes, caricature/parody, and satire.

The most controversial form of wordplay is that which presents two or more similar sounding words occurring in the same context. It is problematic to determine the purpose of such instances, but, as McKerras suggests, it is evident that the Hebrew writers loved wordplay. This places the onus on the dissenter to prove that wordplay was

---

[160] R. McKerras, "How to Translate Wordplays", *NT* 8.1 (1994) pp. 7-18, for a full treatment of the subject.
[161] Ellington, p. 302.
[162] Ellington, pp. 301-13.

not intended, particularly in cases where it is smooth and adds richness to a reading.[163]

We should also bear in mind that in many of these cases, it would only have been after

the vocalization of the Masoretes that these words became a textual problem.[164]

3.1.2 Wit in Genesis 21

Having determined the significance of Biblical Hebrew wit and humour, we will

now recognize its value to interpreting Gn 21. In vv. 1-8, we see the matriarch, Sarah, in

a somewhat compromising position, giving birth at 90, and having to deal with a problem

of her own creation -- Ishmael. The passage abounds with both morphosyntactical and

phonotactical wordplays, and contains references to not one, but two *leitworts* (שמע &

צחק). A satisfying translation of מצחק, as well as justification for Sarah's behaviour, has

eluded scholars for centuries. However, once we allow for a little (albeit morbid)

humorous moral teaching, in addition to recognizing that understanding the passage relies

on a double-entendre, the matter begins to simplify. The rest of this chapter will explore

the specific instances of wordplay and themes in Gn 21:1-18, following a brief

consideration on the translation process.

3.1.3 Conveying Hebrew Wordplay in English

As our goal is to convey these nuances in English, we will look at current

paradigms in translation, of which there seem to be several. The first model consists of

rendering a text as literally as possible, with liberal use of footnotes and commentary to

explain any lost or hidden meanings and confusions, and has been the most popular

approach to date (particularly in scholarship). However, some feel that having to explain

a joke or any sort of linguistic play lessens its impact, and also that a literal translation

---

[163] McKerras, p. 10. I would also specify that it should simplify, not complicate the reading.
[164] Ellington, p. 308, specifically referring to Nahum 1:8, and "it's place" vs "those who rebel".

can only be done at the expense of symmetry and sound pattern.[165] The second option is to use creativity in finding close, if not exact, approximations of wordplays in the target language wherever possible. While this is ideal in theory, it is often difficult to match disparate languages, such as English and Hebrew, for example. Additionally, changing the names of places and people to reflect the puns might confuse or distract an audience already used to certain terms.[166] The third option is to paraphrase: using language in a creative way to add similar life and meaning for a modern audience, even if this means not being entirely faithful to the original language. Obviously, this is open to a great amount of subjectivity and is not acceptable for a scholarly translation.

The best solution, for our purposes, is to preserve the difficulties and use footnotes to indicate important aspects of context or wordplay. This might not necessarily bring the text to smooth English idiom,[167] but it does offer a more honest taste of the original. By making the text easier for our audience, we may be misleading the readers with our translations.[168] Instead, we can strive for intelligibility, but preserve the difficulty and foreignness to add flavour, transporting the audience into the world of the past. Combined with thoughtful commentary and a keen reader, we can begin to achieve a more transparent, if less simple, translation.

3.2 Laughter

Laughter is a uniquely human phenomenon and can arise for any number of reasons, including pleasure, relief or embarrassment. It serves as a sharing of mutual

---

[165] McKerras, p. 9.

[166] For example, who would be familiar with the "well of the living one who sees me"? While many would immediately recognize Beer-La'hai Roi, and renaming Isaac "He Laughs", Ishmael "God Hears", or Peter "Rock" or "Stone", for that matter, may not be the best idea. Also, certain plays on names, like Abram/Abraham, may simply not translate in any smooth way.

[167] M.V. Fox, "Translation and Mimesis", in F.W. Knobloch (ed.), *Biblical Translation in Context*, Bethesda: University Press of Maryland, 2002, p. 219.

[168] P.R. Raabe, p. 195.

experience between individuals and groups, facilitates freedom of expression and permits

the diffusion of tension. While it often signifies pleasurable experiences, it can also arise

from callous or cruel feelings,[169] marking derision, suggesting superiority, or masking

fear.[170] Whedbee claims that "mocking, sardonic laughter is more dominant in biblical

literature", and most often, we see the characters "laughing at, not laughing with".[171] As

we determined above, that the Hebrew mind did enjoy a different awareness of wit than

our own, but the essentials of arousing laughter have their roots in a similar sense of

oddity and rupture from the mundane.

Comedy, and by extension, laughter, "...exploits incongruity, stressing

specifically the ludicrous and ridiculous."[172] It is this perception of unease or absurdity

that seems to elicit Sarah and Abraham's laughter at God's promise of children, at so late

an age, and also at Sarah's amusement at her delivery of Isaac. In general, "laughter is

often complex and ambivalent",[173] and psychologists largely agree that expressions of

laughter arise out of a perception of the out of place,[174] and as we will see, there are many

instances of laughter surrounding Isaac's birth and life.

3.2.1 Important Note on Interpreting Laughter in Gn 21:9

Many authors attempt to validate Sarah's actions by envisioning a complex back-

story, often reading into one word (מְצַחֵק) various malicious actions, motivations or stories

that are not contained, nor even implied, in the text. For example, there is a Rabbinic

---

[169] C.W. Reines, "Laughter in Biblical and Rabbinic Literature." *Judaism* 21.2 (1972) p.176.

[170] P.K. Spiegel, "Early Conceptions of Humour: Varieties and Issues", in J.H. Goldstein & P.E. McGhee (eds.), *The Psychology of Humor: Theoretical Perspectives and Empirical Issues*, New York (1972), pp. 4-39.

[171] J.W. Whedbee, *The Bible and the Comic Vision*, Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002, p. 9.

[172] Exum & Whedbee, p. 275.

[173] Whedbee, p. 9.

[174] See, for example, A.K. Wesley, "Laughter the Best Medicine", *BTF* 33.1 (2001) pp. 198-217, for a complete treatment of the subject.

42

tradition of explaining that Ishmael was threatening Isaac with a bow, or even that he took his little brother out into a field and shot at him with a bow in order to kill him and steal his inheritance.[175] This sort of inference assumes that the story is a historical account as opposed to a literary teaching and, as such, that there is a story motivating Sarah's actions that could be recreated.

When we return to a literary level, we can see that this is not necessarily a fragmentary history, but rather a story for which the author provided us with all relevant cues needed to understand the message that he wished to impart. Any misunderstanding lies in our failure to apprehend the clues provided, not in absent elements of the story. We may supplement our knowledge to account for general information, with which an ancient audience would have been familiar. But we must not add anything into the text that was not indicated or at the very least, assumed as shared knowledge. With that in mind, we continue our analysis of laughter.

3.3 צחק

The basic *qal* meanings of the root צחק and its synonym, שׂחק, are to "laugh", as in "a loose, relaxed emotional disposition through nonverbal sounds".[176] In order to convey the sense of mocking, or to indicate superiority, similar to "laughing at", the preposition -ל or אל would be used,[177] or alternately, the prepositional phrase -ב to designate an

---

[175] J. Schwartz, "Ishmael at Play: On Exegesis and Jewish Society", *HUCA* 66 (1995) p. 210.
[176] See Jgs 16:25; G.J. Botterweck & H. Ringgren (eds.), *The Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament, vol. 14*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974-, p. 61.
[177] Furthermore, the root לעג (generally translated "to mock"), partially overlaps צחק in meaning in certain contexts, but is not completely synonymous. Botterweck & Ringgren, *vol. 14, pp. 62-64*.

object.[178] As well, we would see this meaning clearly indicated by contextual implications.[179]

The root seems to cover the entire scope of play instinct, so we can see how it refers to playing, laughter (in all its connotations) and even (to use an English idiom) "fooling around", referring to sexual play. However, while צחק has been translated in a sexual way elsewhere in the Bible,[180] we find that this is also normally indicated by the use of the preposition -ב, [181] or at the very least is used in conjunction with the direct object marker את, as in Gn 26:8 (Isaac "isaacing" Rebekah). While this instance, the text does use a *piel* participle, masc. sing., as in Gn 21:9, the context as well as indication of a direct object indicate sexual play in a lighthearted fashion, compared to Ishmael's situation where lighthearted play may still be indicated, but there is no hint of sexuality in the context. Furthermore, it seems unlikely that both context and the preposition or direct object marker would be absent if the author meant to convey that Ishmael was doing either something negative or sexual.[182]

What is present in Gn 21:9, is the *piel* participle of צחק; the *piel* form, which is "the most active verbal form",[183] occurs 10 times throughout Genesis without a preposition. While the exact nature of the activity in question is not normally specified, but denotes "a cheerful activity consisting of different, varying, and sequential individual

---

[178] Speiser, p. 155; Botterweck & Ringgren, vol. 14, p. 63.
[179] Botterweck & Ringgren, vol. 14, pp. 62-64.
[180] (Gn 19:14; 26:8; 39:17); Teubal, pp. 135-6.
[181] See Gn 39:14, 17, or with the preposition *'et* 26:8; Botterweck & Ringgren, vol. 14, p. 68.
[182] As an interesting side note, many of the implied negatives that have been read into Ishmael's activity, such as murder, malice and sexual abuse, also serve to sully Isaac's name as well (having its root in צחק). I am sure this is not what is intended by the interpreters, however, it serves us a lesson to be careful when getting too creative reading into a text.
[183] Botterweck & Ringgren, vol. 14, p. 62.

actions".[184] Finally, "the participle, which characterizes durative action"[185] is very common, and should be translated factitively.[186]

3.3.1 What Was Ishmael Doing?

Jewish Biblical tradition, for example, Jubilees 17:4, holds another account of Ishmael's stories, where there is no hint of anything negative on Ishmael's part; he is simply engaging in pleasant activity.[187] LXX translates playing as simply *playing*, using the word γελάω, indicating only pleasant self-amusement.

Schwartz implies that the nature of Ishmael's activity relies on his age in question[188]. This seems secondary, mostly for literary reasons. Chronology has been indicated in several places throughout the text, and it is not convincing that the ancient audience would have found the wording of the story as ambiguous as we do today. If an effortless interpretation is evident once we recognize wordplay in the text, then those proposing to complicate the situation have the responsibility of proving, without a doubt, that the more difficult and elaborate interpretation is justified.[189] There simply seems no indication that anything particularly negative was implied. Therefore, his age would be irrelevant to the story. It is the inability to identify literary techniques that has led to the interpretation that Ishmael's actions were reprehensible in order to defend Sarah.

---

[184] Ibid.

[185] Ibid.

[186] Botterweck & Ringgren, vol. 14, pp. 62-3.

[187] There is an additional account found in Galatians, but an examination of that text is beyond the scope of this paper and does reflect a later interpretation of this story.

[188] If he was young, his activity would have been more innocent than that of an older Ishmael, who may have had sinister intentions.

[189] For example, Lichtenstein suggests translating צחק as "exult" (pp. 13-18) and Reis proposes that מצחק means drunkenness, citing Lot in Gn 19:14, he was drinking, not jesting, at the feast. So, Ishmael was drunk at the weaning feast and his expulsion was justified (pp. 96-7.), and finally, some Rabbis even read מצחק as idolatry, as per Ex 32:6, saying that his expulsion was God's punishment for Ishmael's worshiping idols (Schwartz, p. 13).

As for Sarah, she was protecting herself and her son's future. Ishmael's action had only to remind her that he was first born and in a position to inherit over her biological son. Her concern was most likely for Isaac's inheritance as heir to the promise. On a literary level, she was acting in accord with the story to fulfill God's promise, which he had only revealed some time after Ishmael's birth.[190] Also, she was making certain that Isaac's position would never be questioned in anyone's mind. Finally, on a character level, the ambition of women in the Bible is well attested, and they are by no means above wishing to "be built up" by their children, and guaranteeing the best for them.[191]

Ishmael Isaac-ing is "enough to bring the boys' relative standings within the family to Sarah's attention."[192] This can mean something as simple as Ishmael imitating Isaac (we have all made baby noises back at a child), or playing older brother, by "acting in a manner of Isaac", the heir.[193] It also can not be ignored that laughter brings up other instances from the Isaac narratives, particularly the main protagonists, Abraham and Sarah's laughter surrounding the conception and birth of the child.[194]

3.4 ראה and ירא

It is also possible that Sarah may be projecting her own feelings of embarrassment onto Ishmael as per her previous laughter.[195] Ishmael's laughing echoed Sarah's laughter, in her oppinion, mocking her and as she mentioned before. This would bring her fears to

---

[190] This topic will be covered in more detail in the next chapter.
[191] In fact, Gn 16, Sarah gives over her maid with the express statement that "maybe I shall be built up through her", which will be explored in chapter 5.
[192] R.C. Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection: Ambiguity in Genesis 12-36 and Ethnic Boundaries in Post-Exilic Judah*, Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001, pp. 84-5.
[193] F. Mirguet, "Isaac et Ismaël en Gen 21,1-21: Quand l'entente (Shm) suscite le rire (Çhq)", *Science et Esprit* 55 (2003) pp. 84-5.
[194] Cogan, p. 30.
[195] Gn 21:6.

life, not only in Ishmael becoming primary heir, but also in terms of being a laughing stock herself, giving birth after so many years, and only to a second born.

See and fear (ראה and ירא) have been used elsewhere in paronomasia (puns, play on words), for example: "Ashkelon shall see (tere) it, and be afraid (tira)" (Zecharaiah 9:5). It is curious that the rather obvious pun in Gn 21:9 could have been overlooked until now. Due to the pattern of gutturals dropping out in certain verbal conjugations, as well as the complex system of vocalization, the conjugation of both ראה and ירא may present the form וַתֵּרֶא. While it would be difficult, and beyond the scope of this study, to prove that the sentence would read "And Sarah *feared*...", the pun alone seems self-evident and sufficient in light of the situation. Additionally, words of sight often had the connotation of understanding.[196] For example, in Gn 16:4, Hagar saw that she was pregnant, and consequently, her mistress became "slight in her eyes".[197] So, Sarah *seeing* Ishmael "Isaacing" was the dawn of realization that Isaac's place was still below Ishmael.

By reading this text emphasizing the puns on both צחק and ראה, we have a very elegant and easy solution to what has been considered a textual problem for many centuries, without resorting to creating elaborate explanations of behaviour. Sarah's simple ambition and possibly pride lead her to fear Ishmael usurping Isaac's position when she sees him playing. His laughter reminds her of her own disbelief, expressed several times, at her bearing a son at such an advanced age. This is sufficient to raise her ire and put to rights God's promise. However, this doesn't reconcile our discomfiture at

---

[196] P. Tribble, & L.M. Russell, *Hagar, Sarah, and their Children: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006, p. 44.
[197] An expression meaning she looked down upon her, the pregnancy elevating one's status while lowering the other. It may also indicate a sudden awareness (or understanding) of the situation, where now Hagar realizes that this is her opportunity for a better life. Note the emphasis on eyes, the vehicle for seeing. Later, Hagar is to be shown a "spring" of water (Gn 16:7), whose root is the same as "eye", עין, also perhaps adding to the emphasis on seeing; Tribble & Russell, p. 40.

seeing a woman and her child (by all rights, the heir by human custom) banished into the desert.

To further appreciate the complexity inherent in the text, we look beyond the morality of the situation to ask: What rights did Hagar have? This question necessitates a glimpse into the role Hagar played in the family drama.

3.5 Hagar's Relation to Abraham and Sarah

From what is explicitly stated in the story, we know that Hagar was Sarah's maidservant and that she was given to Abraham so that he may bear sons (and we may logically assume, heirs), and that she was (relatively) easily sent away from the household. She is referred to by three different terms at varying parts of her story, שפחה (shifha; Gn 16:1,2,5,6 & 8), אשה (ishah; Gn 16:3), and אמה (amah; Gn 21:10,12 & 13). We will begin here by exploring these roots to better understand her status and role within the house, then continue to explore the customs and legalities of her banishment in the following chapter.

Throughout Gn 16, Hagar is referred to as שפחה (with one exception, which we will discuss below), while the term אמה is used exclusively throughout Gn 21. Both of these terms refer to female slaves of differing ranks and roles. We will discuss these and the third lexeme before assigning them definitions in order to approach them without preconceptions.

שפחה occurs 60 times in the Old Testament, with the largest concentration in Gn 12-35. It is largely absent from the legal texts and "slave laws", which all use אמה.[198]

---

[198] Botterweck & Ringgren, vol. 15, p. 406.

Eleven texts use שפחה in syndesis with עבד[199], which allows us to conclude that it refers to "an unfree female dependent of comparable status"[200]. While אמה and שפחה are sometimes used interchangeably (LXX treats them as synonyms), אמה is less common, and seen mostly in legal texts. To complicate matters, פילגש[201] is alternated with אמה, but never with שפחה.[202]

Several theories have been offered, and particularly we note that a שפחה always belongs to the mistress, and is mentioned in conjunction with childless matriarchs. Most likely, the difference in terms is relational: שפחה denotes the relationship to the wife, while אמה relates to the man or the rest of the family and household.[203] It is suggested that שפחה is the more humble term, as it is used to denote a low status of servant participating in the more degrading tasks.[204] As well, in diplomatic conversations, a woman may refer to herself as שפחה, indicating a sign of humility[205], while אמה is used as private self-designation.[206] This switch shows a slight nuance in the degree of submissiveness involved in the respective terms.[207] There is no evidence that one or the other denotes an older strata, nor do we notice either associated particularly with one source or other, besides אמה's connection to legal texts. This does not seem to be stylistic, but rather

---

[199] For example, Gn 12:16; 20:14; 24:35... Entire reference can be found in Botterweck & Ringgren, vol. 15, p. 407. The root denoting enslavement. As a noun, used as "servant", meaning slave or one in a submissive, often owned, position. Also in polite address in a similar manner as referring to oneself as a superior's humble servant, for example, Botterweck & Ringgren, vol. 10, pp. 376-405.

[200] Botterweck & Ringgren, vol. 15, p. 407.

[201] פילגש is found 37 times in the OT, referring to concubine or mistress. However, the term is entirely absent from legal texts, implying that "...the OT gave little thought to the legal and social position of a [פלגש]." There are, however, some indications that the term may suggest a marriage-like relationship, but differing from ordinary marriage. See Botterweck & Ringgren, vol. 11, pp. 549-51.

[202] Gn 30:3-4; 1S 1:11, 166, 18; 25:24-41.

[203] Botterweck & Ringgren, vol. 15, pp. 407-8.

[204] See, for example: Ex 11:5; 2S 17:17; 1S 25:41. Botterweck & Ringgren, vol. 15, p. 408.

[205] Rather than in reference to actual station, see: 1S 25, 28; 2S 14.

[206] See: 2S 14, 20:17; 1K 1:13, 17, with a return to שפחה when addressing the king.

[207] Botterweck & Ringgren, vol. 15, p. 409.

contextual, meaning that it was a necessary descriptive term used by Priestly writers. We can then reasonably extrapolate that Hagar is of a higher status, if only marginally, in Gn 21 compared to Gn 16.

Finally, the third term that is used to refer to Hagar's status is a common term, אשה. The feminine form of the word for man or husband, it is used to convey one of three meanings: that of woman, wife, or to characterize cowardly men (as a derogative term).[208] For our purposes here, we can ignore the third meaning. The author had no reason to switch to using אשה for the single instance merely to call her a woman. What we will see is that this is part of a legal and customary formula, and that when used in conjunction with שפחה, it indicates the giving of a maidservant as a "slave wife" to the husband. The cultural implications of this are explored in more detail in the next chapter.

For now, we make note that the difference in terminology indicates the shift in focus between Gn 16 & 21. Genesis 16 emphasizes Hagar's relationship to Sarah, but 21 deals with Hagar as a part of the family, which is only natural as she bore a child to Abraham. Using the term שפחה is important in telling the story of a childless matriarch by involving the formula of surrogate motherhood that serves to add drama and suspense to the story. Once the formula has been completed, the shift to אמה aligns with the different purpose of posing as family drama.

3.6 Ishmael's Age

Although not directly relevant to the purpose of Gn 21, we will make a short digression to explore Ishmael's age, since the wording of Gn 21:9 & 14-18, within the greater context of Abraham's life, has posed a long-standing difficulty in the text. Here

---

[208] Botterweck & Ringgren, vol. 1, pp. 224-5.

we will take a closer look at the language used with a goal to decipher the implications, if any, of the phraseology of these sentences for the greater understanding of our text and characters. We will see if the denomers used to refer to Ishmael can give us any further clues to his age.

As outlined previously, it would seem self-evident to simply look at the chronology of the text, deduct the age at which Isaac was born (86) from the age at which Abraham begot Ishmael (100). We should then add on an approximate customary 3 years for which Isaac is to suckle and his weaning to take place[209] and come to the basic assumption that Ishmael was approximately 17 years old at the time of his banishment. Certainly, he could be no younger than 15. Either way, he would have been considered nearly a man at the least, and would likely have been of comparable or greater stature than his mother and no longer considered a child.[210]

Genesis 21 uses two different words to refer to Ishmael, but never calls him by name. The term נער is used in Gn 21:12, 17 (x2), 18, and also in vv. 19 & 20. Some believe that the noun נער derives from a root נער I (snarl, roar). Etymologically, the lexeme נער is uncertain; however, one theory is that it is an onomatopoeic sound of the "rasping, snarling...that arise from the throat",[211] such as that which occurs during puberty. However, Fuhs believes this to be inaccurate, as "...there are no nominal derivatives of נער meaning "boy" or "servant" in Aramaic, Arabic, or Akkadian."[212] Thusly, he dismisses this etymological connection. Instead, he believes that the noun נער

---

[209] As referenced in Chapter 1.
[210] In fact, he could have been no less than 14, as he is stated to be 13 at the time of circumcision, prior to Ishmael's conception (Gn 17:25).
[211] In Botterweck & Ringgren, vol. 10, p. 475.
[212] Ibid.

derives from נער III, with an unknown basic meaning.[213] Without knowing the proper etymology, we must rely on the text and contemporary literature to demonstrate the nuances of a word.

In the Ancient Near East, נער and related roots have a wide range of meanings including denoting a military unit, servants, individuals belonging to a paternal family, as well as a child or youth. Most of these can be paralleled to some degree with the noun נער in the Hebrew Bible. The root occurs 239 times in the OT, with 27 residing in the corpus of Genesis (none of which are in the P documents). In 100 of these cases, it is clearly indicated that it is a son in the context of his family, and never used with a possessive ("my" son)[214]. There are a great many synonyms for this root, each with a more specific age bracket (although none seem to have definite ages assigned to them). Additionally, antonyms to this word, particularly those used in examples of merism[215], indicate that while it is not a very specific root, it certainly does refer to the earlier stages of life when one is still considered young, i.e.: youth. Upper boundaries have been proposed ranging from 20 to 30 years of age, citing the beginning of accountability for sins as the cut-off, and retaining an implication of one possessing vigour and strength.[216]

Generally, נער is defined as a child, youth, young man, and even servant and very occasionally, steward. What we see here is that the root implies the vitality of youth as well as retaining implications of a certain amount of dependence. We can eliminate the possibility that the text is naming Ishmael as a servant because we see that נער is used in conjunction with ילד, and this is a pattern often seen elsewhere in the Bible to indicate a

---

[213] Ibid.
[214] Botterweck & Ringgren, vol. 10, p. 479.
[215] "A figure that expresses a totality by emphasizing its opposite extremes: "young and old", Botterweck & Ringgren, vol. 10, p. 480.
[216] Botterweck & Ringgren, vol. 10, p. 480.

youthful boy.[217] Evidently, נער covers a broad age range, from an infant (Moses found in the river, Ex 2:6), to growing boys such as Esau and Jacob (Gn 25:27), and even Shechem, who already has respect and honour and is negotiating marriage (Gn 34:19). We must rely on other clues in the text to figure out Ishmael's implied age.

Our first indication is that the roots נער and ילד are indeed both used. As mentioned previously, this usually refers to the younger end of the age spectrum, but this does not necessarily mean infant. As we saw, the same pattern of terms is used in the following chapter to refer to Isaac, who was able to follow orders, ask coherent questions of his father, and carry the wood for his own sacrifice.

The term ילד has the meaning of child, son, boy or youth. The root is most frequently used as a verb, meaning beget or to bring forth children. It is exceptionally common in Genesis, being used frequently in genealogies, but we do find it in noun form 89 times, in the context of child, boy.[218] Unfortunately, Botterweck and others do not go into great detail on this root, so we need to rely on context in establishing a more precise age.

Scholars who have claimed that the referents נער and ילד indicate Ishmael to be a very young child at this point in the story are misled. The combined use of these words neither confirms nor denies the mathematical timeline that we have already mentioned, although possibly implying it to be on the younger side (that Isaac was weaned earlier than 3 years, rather than later).

With language ruled out as a deciding factor, we will have to rely on syntax and context to resolve the problem of Ishmael's age. This presents a dilemma since, as we

---

[217] See, for example, Gn 22 (which follows a similar patter to Gn 21, as explained in Chapter 3 of this text), Ex 2:6; 2S 12:15, 18, 21; 1K 14:3, 17.
[218] Botterweck & Ringgren, vol. 6, pp. 76-81.

have seen, the grammar of vv. 14-18 is ambiguous and would initially appear to have connotations of a younger Ishmael. However, verse 14, although problematic in translation, is not irreconcilable. As we translated in chapter 2, it may simply be phrased in such a way that Abraham placed the water and bread upon Hagar's shoulder, "and the boy". Not indicating the boy upon her shoulder, but rather, entrusting the boy to her solely, thereby giving up his parental rights. Furthermore, Hagar's casting the boy under the bush to die may be a symbolic gesture, not that he was actually dying, but as a sign of hopelessness. Finally, the passage indicates that God heard the voice of the boy, but did not give indication as to whether the boy was calling out or crying. In conjunction with the feminine form, indicating Hagar was the one to raise her voice, this is most likely an accentuation on the promise in Ishmael's name "God hears".

Regrettably, the passage is ambiguous and arguments can be made to support either point of view. We choose this stance as it aligns with the theological message of the author, is equally compelling to the previous arguments outlined in chapter 1, and creates fewer problems in translation. Moreover, his age does not have direct bearing on the purpose of the text, so we have proposed an overview of this aspect of the text purely for comprehensiveness.

3.7 Names

What is in a name? Quite a lot if you live in the ancient world. Names formed sentences, told stories and were sometimes even predictive of a life to be lived. Whatever the case, transliterating the name cheats the non-Hebrew reader of yet more depth. This presents a problem to the translator, as we saw above that we cannot be expected to change names that have been known for thousands of years. However, altering the text by

adding explanations of names and puns is in direct opposition to keeping in line with the transparency most translators strive for. Finally, notes seem bulky and unnatural and are disruptive to a natural reading, but appear to be the best option. While it may not be possible or convenient to translate these names, they can certainly be helpful to us in understanding the thrust of the story.

3.7.1 Hagar

The etymology of Hagar's name is typically attributed to the verb גּוּר, to sojourn, stranger, dwell as a client, and likewise the noun גֵּר (n.m. sojourner). So, הָגָר can be thought of as "the sojourner". While this is never explicitly stated within the text, the sound of the name would have brought this impression immediately to mind to a native speaker of the language, especially in the context of Hagar's stories.

A sojourner is one who dwells temporarily, who claims hospitality of a foreign host, and has certain conceded, but not inherited rights. Again here, we see the descriptive and predictive power of names. We are left with the impression that Hagar is apart from Abraham's household, even as she dwells within it. Although this is no great epiphany from the perspective of those who know the story, it does lend some dramatic foreshadowing as we are all but told from the beginning that Hagar is not a permanent resident of the Hebrew world, and so not the mother of the promise, even when the characters themselves believe her to be. This heightens the suspense of the story, as the reader is given insight into Hagar's true place in the story before the characters themselves realize it.

In addition to the classical etymology, there are two more Hebrew verbs that may have given rise to Hagar's name. The root גָּרַע (to shave, to diminish or lessen, or to take

away) sounds similar to הגר. While this is not mentioned anywhere in related literature, it also correlates with her story. She does threaten to take away from Sarah the matriarch's place. Also, interestingly, the root is used to indicate that the Egyptians refuse to "lessen" the fixed number of bricks for the Israelites to make.[219] Considering Hagar's Egyptian heritage, this may form a theological link alongside those discussed in chapter 3. A final tie is that the Book of the Covenant indicates that a man is not to "lessen" food, rights or clothing of a first wife if he is to marry a second.[220] Whether she was considered a wife or not, Hagar was certainly a threat in Sarah's eyes, evoking fears of loss of station for Sarah and Isaac.

The third root that may hold the origins for Hagar's name is נער. The etymology of this lexeme has ties with Classical Arabic and Ethiopic (as well as related languages), comprising a general meaning of "to scream, cry out".[221] This is particularly interesting considering Hagar's motherhood of the Ishmaelites, or Arabs, and her crying out in the desert (Gn 21:16).[222] It would also form an interesting juxtaposition to her delivering a son whom "god hears". Secular usage within the OT typically conveys a sense of "rebuking", "rebuffing", "reprimanding" or "reproof",[223] however, religious use, concentrated mostly in lyric and prophetic literature, typically conveys "a threatening manifestation of the anger of God".[224] Caquot intimates that "the beast in the reed", appearing as the object of נער in Ps 68:31, refers to Egypt "or another historical enemy

---

[219] Ex 5:8, 19, Botterweck & Ringgren, vol. 3, p. 66.
[220] Ex 21:10, Botterweck & Ringgren, vol. 3, p. 66.
[221] Botterweck & Ringgren, vol. 3, p. 49.
[222] Although נער is not used specifically, the sense of calling out is similar.
[223] Botterweck & Ringgren, vol. 3, p. 50
[224] Botterweck & Ringgren, vol. 3, p. 51.

with Egyptian characteristics".[225] Could it be that Hagar is meant as God's reproof of

Sarah and Abraham? The theological implications of this may be extensive.

Lastly, we cannot ignore that Hagar, being Egyptian, may have had her name in

Egyptian or foreign roots. References to any significant root in Egyptian are absent from

the literature, however there are several extra-biblical cognates. *Hgr* appears in

Palmyrene and Sefaitic texts, and *hgrw* in Nabataen.[226] Additionally, "the term *hagar*,

meaning "town, city," but originally meaning "the splendid" or "the nourishing"" is seen

in Sabbean and Ethiopic traditions.[227] Similar names are found in other non-biblical

sources, such as *A-gar-rum*, from a second millennium inscription from Bahrain.[228] There

is also evidence of the name Hagar "from an Egyptian hieroglyphic inscription found at

the Persian city of Susa", which may allude to a country or people.[229] Despite all this,

Drey finds that the exact origin and meaning of "Hagar" is unknown, and so we should

rely on the Biblical account of her Egyptian heritage rather than in her name.[230]

Moreover, we can assume that since the stories were written by and for the Israelites, a

Hebrew root would have been more immediately recognizable, and therefore more

relevant, to the target audience.

3.7.2 Ishmael

While the etymology of Ishmael's name is not overtly significant for the purpose

of Gn 21, it does highlight Ishmael's status within the historiography. Additionally, the

author includes reference to and plays on שמע in the text. The etymology for Ishmael's

---

[225] Ibid.
[226] P.R. Drey, "The Role of Hagar in Genesis 16", *AUSS* 40 (2002) p. 181.
[227] Drey, p. 182.
[228] Ibid.
[229] See M. Roaf, found in Drey, p. 182.
[230] Drey, p. 182-3.

name is usually attributed to two instances in the Bible: God hears Hagar in the wilderness (Gn 16:11), and later hears the boy in the desert (Gn 21:17). This name may be a statement or signify a promise ("God hears" or "God *will* hear"). Alternately, one author sees it as a threat: "As hearing yields to laughter, so Ishmael will yield to Isaac."[231] Botterweck states that "suspension of hearing or refusal to hear is associated with chaos."[232] Having previously mentioned that laughter arises from a certain amount of chaos (at least a disruption of the expected order of things), we can make a connection between Ishmael and Isaac, in that Ishmael, if left unheeded, will cause chaos, while Isaac has chaos inherent in his life.

3.8 Conclusion

Combining what we have seen thus far, Ishmael forms an exceedingly important character in the Bible. His name alone indicates that God has paid special attention to him and his plight. Combined with Hagar's name, primarily interpreted as a temporary addition to Abraham's household, but secondarily indicating that she either could take away from or rebuke his family, we see conspicuous theological undertones.

The impact of this message is further underscored by the elaborate wordplay found in Gn 21. The ambiguity of laughter sets the stage for a complicated scene. Isaac's birth narrative is inexorably tied to Ishmael's banishment through the formers weaning feast. This celebration is one of life and survival, and coming into the world, much as a birth. The pivotal point in the story is marked by a sentence of dual meanings, punning on the *leitwort* of Isaac's life and on seeing, or perceiving, which has marked Hagar's survival and what little we are told of her interactions with Sarah (her seeing the well, Gn

---

[231] Tribble & Russell, pp. 43-44.
[232] Botterweck & Ringgren, vol. 15, p. 257.

16; Sarah becoming slight in her eyes). Concluding the scene, we find affirmation of God "hearing" the boy. Evidently, careful attention has been paid to the wording of these texts.

Chapter 4: Contextualizing the Text: Structure, Parallels and Extra-Biblical Literature

Having established the text and addressed the most problematic areas of translation, we will proceed to consider the episode within the rest of the Bible. We begin by looking at how Hagar and Ishmael fit into the structure of the Abraham narratives. After which, we will inspect the language and verbal techniques used in Genesis 21. We will then proceed to look for language, parallels and motifs used to further embed Hagar and Ishmael in the literary context of the Bible and contemporary writings.

4.1 Macro-Structure: The Abraham Narratives

To begin with, we will look at the macrostructure of the Abraham narratives relative to Hagar and Ishmael. We do find what appears to be a large-scale chiasm (or introverted parallel structure) that can be made out of the pattern of Abraham's stories.[233] As we find in chiastic structure, each of the pairings echo the events of one another, with the center holding the pivotal role and often indicating special status.[234]

---

[233] See for example, H. Gunkel, *Genesis,* pp. 159-62; R. Yudkowsky, "Chaos or Chiasm? The structure of Abraham's Life", *JBQ* 35.2 (2007) pp. 109-114; D.D. Sutherland, "The Organization of the Abraham Promise Narratives", *ZAW* 95.3 (1983) pp. 337-43. We would like to make note that while this structure is accepted, it is not a perfect chiasm, and so it is noted for interest, but not as a primary argument.

[234] Sutherland, p. 338.

A. The descendents of Terah (Gn 11:27)[235]

    B. *Lekh Leckha* (12:1)[236]

        C. 'Unto thy seed will I give this land' (12:7). Abraham nomadic, unknown.

            D. Sarai is taken in Egypt; Pharoah sends them away angrily (12:10-20)

                E. Sodom: Lot chooses to live in Sodom, is captured by and rescued from the four kings, returns to Sodom (14:1-24)

                    F. 'What will Thou give me, seeing I go hence childless?' (15:2)

                        G. The Covenant Between the Pieces (15:12-21): promise of descendents and land

                            H. Birth of Ishmael (16:1-16)

                        G'. The Covenant of Circumcision (17:1-27): promise of 'I will be their God'

                    F'. *Sarah is informed that she will have a child* (18:10)

                E'. Lot rescued from destruction of Sodom and leaves (18:16-19:38)

            D'. Sarah is taken in Gerar; Abimelech welcomes Abraham to settle where he wills (20:1-18)

        C'. Birth of Isaac, the promised seed,[Banishment of Ishmael][237] (21:1-21); treaty with Abimelech, Abraham respected and feared (21:22-34)

    B'. *Akeda* (22:1-19)[238]

A'. Nahor's descendents (22:20-24)

The surprising feature of this structure is that the Birth of Ishmael occupies the core position. Several hypotheses have been proposed to explain this.

One theory is that Ishmael was an artificial insertion into Abraham's life.[239] He was only introduced on the initiative of Sarah, and was also removed by her. Thus, if Ishmael were eliminated, the structure would revert to its true form, with the covenants taking key position and leaving everything else otherwise unchanged. The implication of this is that the covenants were supplanted through man (Sarah, in this case) taking matters into their own hands. There is one difficulty with this, however. The promise, as

---

[235] Fokkelman has noted that geneaologies serve to frame certain cycles, namely that of Jacob, but also characteristic of major sections of Genesis, and most likely that of the Abraham cycle. As such, there seems to be agreement with the authors cited here that the cycle closes not with the death of Abraham, but rather the Nahor geneaology. J.P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, Van Gorcum: Amsterdam (1975) p. 239. See also Sutherland, pp. 337-9 for a full treatment of this subject.

[236] Opening bookend to Abraham's life: the command to leave. R. Yudkowsky, p. 109.

[237] [ ] indicate my own inclusion.

[238] Closing bookend to Abraham's life, contains the phrase "*ve'lekh lekha*" (and get thee into), amongst other parallels. See R. Yudkowsky, p. 109-10 for full explanation.

[239] R. Yudkowsky, p. 111.

it was understood as of Gn 16, was that the heir was to be Abram's seed, with no mention yet made of Sarah, so she could still have been acting in accord with God's will. [240]

Another proposal is that Ishmael is at the centre of Abraham's life.[241] In support of this, the author indicates instances of Abraham's obvious attachment to Ishmael. After all, the boy was 13 years old before Abraham is told that he is not the child of promise. In Gn 17:18, when told by God that he is to have another son, Abraham pleas for Ishmael's status. Furthermore, the text clearly states that he was upset regarding Ishmael's banishment (Gn 21:11-12). While this conjecture is interesting, it only serves to call attention to the question of why the redactor would further stress Ishmael's status over Isaac's.

Thirdly, the author posits that Ishmael forms the pivot rather than the apex of the structure. His conception initiates a change where events begin to repeat themselves, thus correcting mistakes and moving back towards God's plan[242].

This last alternative is further elaborated on by Sutherland, whose outline differs in some details, but not enough in essence to concern us here. The basic structure remains the same, as does Ishmael's place in it. The main point that the author adds is the tension between obstacles and resolution throughout the structure. This would make Ishmael the threat to the promise personified, and thusly, Gn 21 would be the resolution to that obstacle in the form of Ishmael's banishment.[243]

---

[240] We can also say, God helps those who help themselves.

[241] R. Yudkowsky, p. 110-11.

[242] Yudkowsky, p. 112-13. The author delves into some imaginative reasoning to support this hypothesis, however, as there is no basis in the actual text supporting her theories, I retain only the information that is directly applicable.

[243] As an aside, Sutherland makes an interesting claim which will be important to keep in mind: "Arranging the material in this way suggests that the central concern of the redactors was not Abraham but a tension between promise and obstacles to promise.", p. 343. This would imply that the concern is not Ishmael, but the obstacle that he personifies which is important.

Since this structure is somewhat speculative, we cannot afford to give more weight to these arguments than is otherwise supported in the narratives. Still, it does corroborate with two elements that are supported in the literature itself. We see evidenced the displacement of the resolution to the obstacle that Ishmael poses as well as his importance to Abraham as a son. As well, it does seem to indicate purposeful organization to the Abraham narratives, with an emphasis on the giving of Hagar to Abraham.

4.2 Genesis 21

There are two curious patterns of reference to Ishmael in Gn 21:8-18. Although at the centre of the dispute, he remains nameless and is only referred to as either ילד or נער. Secondly, we see an alternating pattern of reference to Isaac and Ishmael at the end of each sentence, beginning in v. 8 and concluding in v. 13.[244] Isaac is weaned in v. 8, with a feast to be held on his behalf. Verse 9 has Ishmael as the focus of attention.[245] The spotlight returns to Isaac in v. 10, where even though Sarah speaks of banishing Ishmael, she punctuates her speech by ending with a reference to Isaac. Abraham was upset on account of his son, Ishmael (v. 11), but God speaks to him, telling him to listen to Sarah, and again the speech is punctuated by allusion to Isaac (v. 12). He concludes by promising to make a nation of Ishmael as well (v.13).

We propose an elaboration on this structure. The narrative actually takes on a more complex pattern than initially thought:

vv. 1-8 Isaac

v. 9 Ishmael

---

[244] Lyke, p. 644-6.
[245] Interestingly, the action itself is formed from the root consonants of Isaac's name.

v. 10 Isaac

> v. 11 Ishmael

v. 12 Isaac

> vv. 13-20 Ishmael

This appears to be a conscious symmetrical structure. Eight verses are dedicated to each boy, bracketing the back and forth shuffling of referents. This seems to indicate a purposeful intermingling of their stories, blending the transition and tying the two together.

Through this complicated pattern of reference, we may understand why Ishmael goes nameless. Ishmael is referred to indirectly as מהנער, your son, and your seed in vv. 9, 11 & 13, respectively. Each of these has Isaac as a secondary referent, having used 'the boy' and 'your seed' to refer to him.[246] This pattern creates a certain cadence and rhythm to the passage, establishing both a tension and a connection between the boys, and keeping the narrative focus on Isaac. So, while the quarrel revolves around Ishmael, the author cleverly keeps Isaac in the foreground.

In vv. 16, 17, and 19, we see a return to the symbology of seeing and hearing (ראה, עין & שמע) that is associated with Hagar in Gn 16, forming what appears to be a theme of perception. Hagar wished not to *see* (ראה) the boy die (Gn 21:16). God *heard* (שמע) the voice of the boy (v. 17), then God opened Hagar's *eyes* (עין) and she *saw* (ראה) a spring (עין) in v. 19. Compare this with Gn 16:4, where Hagar *saw* (ראה) that she had conceived then Sarah became slight in her *eyes* (עין). The angel of the Lord found Hagar next to a *spring* (עין; v. 7). *Ishmael* (שמע) was then named because God *heard* (שמע) of

---

[246] Lyke, p. 646.

Hagar's troubles (v. 11). In effect, the author uses language in this passage as a clever means of guiding our attention to the pertinent son: Ishmael.

4.3 Intratextuality

4.3.1 Genesis 16

There are many other similarities between Gn 16 and 21. As outlined in chapter 1, they are commonly considered parallel accounts of the same story, as told by different authors. Here we provide a short summary of the correspondences and differences.

Both passages address Sarah's distress at events that are the direct result of her own decision to have Hagar bear a son by Abraham.[247] This is followed by Sarah's (disproportionate) appeal to Abraham for justice.[248] These demands are met with Hagar's subsequent travels into the wilderness.[249] As mentioned above, there are numerous references and plays on the theme of perception (ראה, עין and שמע), including the occurrence of a spring (עין) in both episodes.[250] Finally, Hagar is twice the recipient of a theophany and promises of posterity for Ishmael.[251]

The main dissimilarities cited as proof of different authorship are that the narration has become more personal[252] and the characters of Hagar and Abraham have changed.[253] The minor variances include Hagar's pregnancy in Gn 16, versus Ishmael's

---

[247] In Gn 16:5, Sarah becomes incensed over Hagar's "haughtiness" following her impregnation (which Sarah initiated), while Gn 21:9 has Sarah angered over Ishmael, the fruit of the pregnancy.

[248] Gn 16:5 has Sarah appeal to Abraham with the words "may the lord judge between you and me" in reference to her troubles with Hagar, while in Gn 21:10, Sarah demands that Abraham banish his son and Hagar. Both times she seeks for Abraham to solve her problem.

[249] Gn 16:6 has her running away, Gn 21:14 banishes her. Ishmael is present in both accounts, whether in utero or as a child.

[250] Gn 16:14 offers an explanation for the naming of the well at Beerlahai-Roi, while the well in Gn 21:19 simply offers salvation for the dying Ishmael

[251] Gn 16:11,12; Gn 21:18.

[252] Please refer to ch. 1, source criticism for more detailed explanations.

[253] Hagar transforming from one who oversteps her role as servant and flees of her own accord in Gn 16 to a passive observer in Gn 21, and Abraham being passive in Gn 16 to standing up for his son in Gn 21.

boyhood/manhood.[254] in Gn 21. The resulting theophanies are different in particulars (but not essence). The revelation of the well serves different purposes in each text. Finally, Hagar returns to Abraham's household in the former but not the later version of the story.

We wish to make note, however, that the disparities remain unconvincing. There is no evidence that the narration is more or less convincing in either account. Furthermore, the characters do not seem as strikingly different as the claims make them out to be. Sarah remains difficult and demanding, struggling with the implications of her actions, Hagar only finds voice outside of the family (i.e.: in the wilderness), and Abraham gives in to Sarah, albeit more reluctantly once Ishmael was born. Finally, the deviations listed as minor can simply be due to their functions at differing points in the cycle.

It is our belief that when an overlapping of traditions occurs in the Bible, it does so because each version contains integral information that the redactor wished to retain.[255] Moreover, a single relation of Hagar or Ishmael's story would not have had the impact as the two told together, thus the inclusion of both tellings puts more emphasis on Hagar than previous tradition may have held. The parallels surpass mere repetition to take on a significant meaning, creating a theme of language and pattern unique to Hagar and Ishmael. While dual authorship may have originally been the case, they are now both incorporated (relatively) seemlessly into a single narrative.

4.3.2 Genesis 22

---

[254] See Chapter 4 for an analysis of Ishmael's age.
[255] We realize that this differs from the classical belief that two or more traditions were retained to include, for example, alternate tellings that certain groups were accustomed to hearing. It seems more likely that those could have been blended, rather than retained intact and thus inserting some significant difficulties into the text that we see throughout the Bible.

While not considered parallel accounts, Ishmael's near-death experience in Gn 21 holds significant resemblances with *Akedah*.[256] The pattern of the stories, as well as closely matched timing and language, seem to echo one another. Here we elaborate on the comparisons previously summarized in chapter 1.

In both divine discourses (Gn 22:2; 21:12), the verb אמר ("to tell") in an x-*yiqtol* construction (indicating a simple future) is used in instructing Abraham of what action he is to take. Identical phraseology is used to indicate both: that Abraham arose early in the morning וַיַּשְׁכֵּם אַבְרָהָם בַּבֹּקֶר (Gn 22:3, 21:14); and that salvation comes at the last minute in the form of an angel of God calling to the parent, מַלְאַךְ אֱלֹהִים אֶל־הָגָר מִן־הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיֹּאמֶר וַיִּקְרָא (Gn 21:17, using Elohim & 22:11, using Yahweh).[257]

The same or similar words are used throughout the two passages: The verbs לקח ("to take") and שׂים ("to put") are used as Abraham organizes the participants and implements and places them on each son (Gn 22:3,6; 21:14).[258] Each parent picks up the child and וַיִּשְׁלַח (casts) or וַתַּשְׁלֵךְ (sends forth; different roots, but similar sounding verbs) the child to the place of near-death (Gn 22:9-10, 21:15). In both stories, the boy is to die רחק ("afar"; Gn 22:4, 21:16). The response is for Abraham to נשׂא (lift) his eyes, and Hagar to נשׂא her voice (Gn 22:13, 21:16). In each case, the angel uses the terms ירא ("fear"), שמע ("listen"), אלהים ("God") and קול ("voice"; Gn 22:12; 18; 21: 17). Both angels accent the

---

[256] Gn 22:1-19. Indeed, in some Islamic traditions, it is Ishmael and not Isaac, who was to be the sacrifice on Mount Moriah See, for example: Bashear, S., "Abraham's Sacrifice of His Son and Related Issues." *Islam* 67.2 (1990) pp. 243-77. or A. Wessels, "Can the Children of Abraham be Reconciled? Ishmael and Isaac in the Bible and the Qur'an", in J.D. Gort, H. Jansen & H. M. Vroom (eds.), *Religion, Conflict and Reconciliation: Multifaith Ideals and Realities*, New York: Rodopi, 2002, pp. 134-144.

[257] "The verbatim repetition of this phrase at such crucial moments in these narratives indicates its formulaic character..." Additionally, we note that this exact phrase occurs only in these two places in the Hebrew Bible, thus emphasizing the importance of the repetition. White, p. 289.

[258] The wood for the burnt sacrifice is placed on Isaac, while the water (which runs out) is (debatably, see final analysis) placed on Ishmael, so each son has to carry the instruments of his own death.

words יד ("hand") and נער ("boy") (Gn 22:12; 21:18). Using the word עין ("eyes"), each

parent saw the alternative to death (ram or water), and הלך ("went") and to retrieve the

object to save the child; נער used for both boys after the danger has passed (Gn 22:13;

21:19).[259]

What's more, both children travel with their parent to the life-threatening

destination (Gn 22:6-10; 21:14-16). Following the ordeal is a reissue of God's promises

of progeny (Gn 22:17; 21:18). After the trials, the heroes settle down in their respective

lands (Gn 22:19; 21:20-21).[260]

In addition to the language used, we find that in Gn 22:3 and 21:14, the sequence of

grammatical elements is the same: verb, direct object (implicit or expressed, embracing a

duality), prepositional phrase, another direct object joined by ואת, with the last direct

object in each clause and referring to one of his sons (ילד), and taking last position in the

sentence.[261]

It is highly unlikely that this amount of correspondence is coincidental. This is

further verification that we are meant to make the connection between Abraham's two

sons, and proof that Ishmael is an important literary figure.

4.3.3 Exodus

Hagar's nationality is indicated twice in quick succession as she is introduced in

Gn 16 (vv. 1 & 3), indicating that the author (or redactor) wished to emphasize it.

Interestingly, it has been suggested that this would not align with historical data.

---

[259] Whereas it had not been consistently used previously.

[260] This is a short summary of C. Leviant's study as cited in Ch. 1. More parallels exist between the lives of Isaac and Ishmael, but this comparison is used as the most convincing example.

[261] Also, both Abraham and Hagar name the site of their theophanies using the same verb: ראה (Gn 16:13,14; 22:14). Nikaido also goes so far as to propose that Hagar's discovery of the well in Gn 21 may have originally been followed by a naming speech, rather than it having been in Gn 16, and follows with a convincing argument (p. 227), however it is far outside the scope of this study to determine such a hypothesis.

"The Abrahamic period in Israel is usually designated as lasting from 2000 to 1720 BCE. This is the time of Egypt's Middle Kingdom, during which period the areas of Damascus (Syria) and Canaan remained under the dominion of Egypt. This is also the time of the twelfth dynasty in Egypt. Since Egypt was in a strong military position at that time, it certainly would not have allowed its citizens to be held as slaves by those who were under its dominion. As a matter of fact, most of the slaves in Egypt during the Middle Kingdom were Asiatic."[262]

While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to establish the historicity of Abraham and his family, we can use this information in terms of setting. The author placed the characters in an assumed historical time frame, and so we can refer to that for understanding of customs and laws, or as here, the likelihood of a character's nationality.[263]

We may conclude from this that Hagar's alien status was indicated for literary or theological purposes, rather than an attempt at historical accuracy. This is important, because given that Hagar was an Egyptian, several aspects of her narratives create parallels with Exodus.[264] This purposeful inclusion increases the validity of the conscious inclusion of the following similarities.

Intertextual echoes are found in the vocabulary and themes used in Gn 16 & 21, surrounding Hagar's wilderness accounts, which are reminiscent of Exodus. Pharaoh cast out (גרש; Ex 12:39) the slaves, just as Sarah cast out Hagar (Gn 21:10). Whereas Pharaoh sends away (שלך) the slaves, thereby giving their freedom, but Abraham sends away Hagar, thusly banishing her. That "she departed" (21:14), in response to "he sent her

---

[262] J. Waters, "Who was Hagar", in C.H. Felder (ed.), *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1991, p. 189.
[263] This is also important to remember for chapter 5.
[264] For a full treatment of this subject, see, for example, T.B. Dozeman, "The Wilderness and Salvation History in the Hagar Story", *JBL* 117/1 (1998), pp. 23-43, or Sakenfeld, K.D., *Just Wives? Stories of Power & Survival in the Old Testament & Today*, Louisville; London: Westminster John Knox, 2003, p. 10.

away" foreshadow the Hebrew's desire to "depart" (הלך), and also 'flee'.[265] The word used 'to oppress' or 'afflict' Hagar (ענה), (Gn 16:6), is also used referring to the people of Israel in the same manner and meaning (Ex 1:11,12)[266]. Moreover, both the Hebrews and Hagar "flee" (ברח; Gn 16:6; Ex 14:5).[267]

It is possible that the author was indeed foreshadowing Israel's enslavement by the Egyptians in a twist of fate. While we do not make any direct claims as to mutual influence, it is still interesting to note the similarities and reversal of fortune between Israel's dealings with Egypt within the larger scale of biblical writings. Hagar sets the stage as the oppressed one living in the house of Abraham, both fleeing and being banished, only to have Israel later enslaved by Pharaoh and then both being cast out then fleeing bondage.[268] We also find that Hagar is the first to encounter God in the wilderness, and as such, sets a precedent.

4.3.4 Other Biblical Texts

There are additional small fragments within our text that reverberate with other passages in Hebrew Bible. Since no conclusion can be made from these, we merely make record of these similarities here for interest and thoroughness. We simply wish to make

---

[265] P. Trible, "The Other Woman: A Literary and Theological Study of the Hagar Narratives", in J.T. Butler, E.W. Conrad & B.C. Ollenburger (eds.), *Understanding the Word: Essays in Honor of Bernhard W Anderson*, Sheffield: JSOT Pr, 1985, pp. 231.

[266] J. A. Hackett, "Rehabilitating Hagar: Fragments of an Epic Pattern", in P. L. Day (ed.), *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*, Minneapolis: Fortress Pr, 1989, p. 14; Dozeman, p. 28.

[267] Trible, p. 231.

[268] Some authors have examined the biblical duality of love/hate for Egypt, analyzing the pattern of dealings with Egypt throughout the Bible. They use Hagar as an example of Yahweh's affinity for Egypt, highlighting the special place she seems to hold. See for example, N. Rulon-Miller, "Hagar: A Woman with an Attitude", in P.R. Davies & D.J.A. Clines (eds.), *The World of Genesis: Persons, Places, Perspectives*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Pr, 1998, pp. 60-89. However, an examination of such magnitude is outside the scope of this thesis, and while we do not discredit this theory, we believe it to be peripheral to the examination at hand; Although outside the scope and purpose of this essay, we would like to note that it is an intriguing possibility that a redactor may have purposely indicated Hagar's nationality as Egyptian and included these similarities in an effort to foreshadow the events of Exodus. It is even possible that there is a lesson in here somewhere.

the reader aware of the patterns found throughout the Bible that are used by the writers

and redactors for emphasis and appeal to the ancient audience.

- Adam was punished after he "hearkened to the voice" (קוֹל שָׁמַע; Gn 3:17) of his wife,[269] the exact words that are echoed in Gn 21:12, resulting in expulsion (גרשׁ) in both cases.
- Hagar is only one of three women to have more than one exchange with God or a divine messenger.[270]
- "God was with the boy and he grew" (Gn 21:20). This phrase generally denotes prosperity within the Hebrew Bible.[271]
- A few key phrases and similarities mark the lives of Ishmael and Joseph: Both were expelled based on a variant of the root צחק (Gn 21:9-12; 39:14,17), God was with both boys (Gn 21:20, 39:21), Ishmael was rescued in the wilderness by and angel, while Joseph was rescued by an Ishmaelite caravan (Gn 21:15-19; 37:20-28),[272] and finally the imagery of a wild ass in their personal description by a spring near Shur (Gn 16:12, 49:22)[273]

4.4 Motifs & Type-Scenes

In addition to the above parallels of language and theme, we also see evidence of

commonly repeated Biblical type-scenes in Hagar and Ishmael's stories. Below we

examine some of these motifs,[274] and also take a brief look at similar extra-Biblical texts.

4.4.1 Promise to the Patriarchs

A tradition that is common in the Pentateuch, and has been associated with clan

cults in and around Palestine, who were cantered around great "fathers", is that of the

"promise to the patriarchs".[275] Within these stories, we find several recurring concepts: a

promise of inheritance of land, abundant posterity to enjoy this inheritance, and finally

---

[269] This phrase has repeatedly been the indicator of trouble, as has been pointed out by various authors. See Tribble, p. 38-39.

[270] See also Eve in Genesis 3 and the wife of Manoah in Judges 13. Spitzer, p.18.

[271] C. Westermann, *The Promises to the Fathers*, Philadelphia, 1980, pp. 140-3.

[272] This is somewhat anachronistic, as Ishmael was hardly old enough at this time to have a people named after him: he was almost the same age as Joseph's grandfather, Isaac. Nikaido, p. 237.

[273] Nikaido, p. 232-40.

[274] In addition to these, Robert Alter also proposes "seven 'commonly repeated biblical type scenes': an annunciation, an encounter with the future betrothed at a well, an epiphany in a field, an initiatory trial, danger in the desert, the discovery of a well, and the testimony of a dying hero". Of these, Hagar and Ishmael embody at least four of these categories. p. 51

[275] M. Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions*, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1972, pp. 54-8.

fulfillment of the promise.[276] Set within context of a theophany, this tradition serves to establish a close, personal relationship with the deity.

As we have seen, in both Gn 16 & 21, Hagar is met with a messenger of the lord[277] who promises Ishmael numerous descendents and land (Gn 16:10, 21:18). This promise is fulfilled (Gn 21:20), as Ishmael becomes father to the Ishmaelites (Gn 17:20); "twelve princes will descend from Ishmael".[278] God's promise to Hagar uses the same wording as is used for the 'promise to the patriarchs', only this time it is given to a woman.[279] Twofold is the significance here: God rarely appears to anyone in the Bible, much less women, but he does so for Hagar, *twice*. Also, that the promise made in Gn 61:11 "...is the first occurrence in the Hebrew Bible of a [now] well-known annunciation speech."[280]

4.4.2 Form & Genre: Hero Narratives

We find a common theme of 'the birth of the hero' narrative, both within the Bible and without. This genre is quite widespread and "...tells how a hero is born despite many hardships and how he spends his early formative years."[281] The difficulties and miracles

---

[276] This is also seen in other ancient New Eastern religious traditions. Waters, p. 198.

[277] While it may be argued that this is not God himself, it is misleading, as "the tradition saw no distinction between "the angel of the Lord" and Yahweh." Waters, p. 198. Additionally, it is revealed in Gn 16 that it was in fact God himself when Hagar names him.

[278] Gn 17:20, Yet another of the many parallels to Isaac's life, Ishmael becomes father to 12 tribes, identical to those of Israel.

[279] It is important to indicate that in Gn 16, the promise is made that "*her* descendents will be greatly multiplied"; Hackett, p. 14-15.

[280] "Now you are pregnant and you will have a son and name him X" given by a messenger, who turns out to be Yahweh. (See also Jg 13:5, Isa 7:14) Hackett, p. 15.

[281] A. Brenner, "Female Social Behaviour: Two Descriptive Patterns within the 'Birth of the Hero' Paradigm", *VT* 36 (1986) pp. p. 257.

associated with the birth and survival of the child illustrate his and his parent's greatness.[282]

In summary, a story evidencing this pattern will contain most, if not all of the following traits: preconception difficulties, divine revelation/birth annunciation, reception of the revelation met with a variety of responses: incredulity, acceptance, etc., and eventually the child is born and survives to maturity despite extenuating circumstance.

Athalya Brenner posits several variations on this theme, with a focus on the mother(s) involved, but we will outline only the relevant points relating to one of the four models she proposes.[283] This comprises a pair of rival females, who each deliver an heir apparent, one of which will eventually be eliminated.[284] Each individual in the pair represents a polarity of situation and character, creating a tension dynamic. In essence, it becomes a struggle over ensuring economic status within the household through the son assuming his role after birth.[285]

Ishmael seems to fit well into this model. His mother was a slave who was used as a surrogate mother (in effect, making the child Sarah's[286]; Gn 16:3-4), who then suffered difficulties at the hand of her mistress and fled into the wilderness (v. 6). She then received a theophany (with acceptance; vv. 10-12), and Ishmael later faces persecution and near-death (Gn 9-18), but survives to adulthood and fulfils his destiny (v.20).

---

[282] See Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Samson, etc. Nikaido points out that "it is the parent, not the child, who determines the outcome of the story". The story serves two functions: to highlight the hero's special nature and also to tell the story of heroic deeds of the parent. p. 219.

[283] See Brenner, p. 257-273 for a thorough and interesting treatment on this subject.

[284] See, for example, Sarah & Hagar, Leah & Rachel, Bilhah & Zilpah, and Hannah & Peninnah.

[285] Brenner, p. 263-4. While not relevant to this section of the study, I will note that while I respect her model enough to use it here, I do not wholly agree with her conclusions as to the implications regarding females in the Bible. I regard the portrayal of characters in the Bible more in terms of a literary role rather than a feministic social commentary.

[286] See chapter 5 for a specific treatment of this.

4.4.3 Comparative Analysis

4.4.3.1 Wilderness Trial

As we have seen in the above section (as well as the relation to Exodus), Hagar and Ishmael are closely tied to the wilderness and encountered troubles therein. This wilderness trial, or "endangered child", is an important motif in many cultures, and shares a common thread with contemporaneous Greek literature. Particularly, we see a "...separation of the mother and/or child from the father and exposure of the mother and/or child to some kind of hazard.[287] Additionally, a common component is that of the naming of the child based on an event occurring during the exposure, as "naming was a customary part of rituals of initiation".[288]

4.4.3.2 The Difficult Female

As a final note, there is a familiar mythic scene that shows up in Gilgamesh, Aqhat from Ugarit, and lesser so in a Canaanite fragment written in Hittite that relates to Sarah's behaviour towards Ishmael in Gn 21:9. The pattern is that of:

> "...a young goddess, who, after being insulted in some way by a human or divine hero, storms into the king of the gods, usually her father, threatening him, and demanding that something outrageous be done to her antagonist. The wording, the plots, the characters are all different, but the basic pattern is the same, and furthermore they all contain some of the same incongruencies."[289]

As an example, Gilgamesh refuses Ishtar's advances in an insulting manner and she appeals to her father Anu, demanding the Bull of Heaven to be released on Gilgamesh. While she was provoked, she does show a disproportionate anger in her

---

[287] For example, Erechthonius, Perseus, Telephus, Antiope, Zeus and Zagreus were all threatened as children, but survived to adulthood and overcame their situations to fulfil their destinies. See White, p. 269-271 for further explanation. The commonalities are in underlying themes, as Greek mythology is based in the rather extraordinary and often odd feats of the gods, while Hebrew literature is based in the almost mundane reality of day-to-day life situations.

[288] White, p. 276, who indicates Oedipus' name as deriving from the "swollen foot" resulting from a piercing, Pelias ("livid") resulting from a horse's kick to his head (leaving a livid mark), and Telephus ("nipple of a doe") from his being suckled by a doe on the mountainside.

[289] Hackett, p. 17.

reaction to Gilgamesh. Additionally, in the legend of Aqhat and Anat, there is a similar example of over reaction. Aqhat refuses to give Anat his bow and does so in an insulting manner. She then turns to El, her father, threatens him, in order to have Aqhat killed. While this may seem tangential to the discussion at hand, I make note of it here as it is an interesting comparison to the two episodes of Sarah's disproportionate anger, deflected towards Abraham in Gn 16:5 and 21:10.

4.5 Conclusion

Biblical authors used language and story patterns that would have been familiar to their intended audience to convey an instantaneous sense of meaning and identification. This allowed the audience to draw comparisons within texts by subtly emphasizing certain themes that were commonly recognized, both within the Bible, as well as from contemporaneous extra-biblical literature. What we can surmise from the parallels that we have outlined is that Hagar and Ishmael are intricately woven into the text and form an integral part of the Abraham narratives and the Bible. Based on the motifs and patterns seemingly used, they form a sort of Matriarch-child duo comparable to other children of promise and their respective Patriarchs. They exist not merely to create tension in Isaac's narrative, but as important figures in their own right.[290]

---

[290] We would like to stress here that it is possible that this is the only instance of a promise to a Matriarch and their lineage.

Chapter 5: Contextualization and Comparison of Laws and Customs

The final aspect to understanding Gn 21 is an examination of the laws and customs surrounding the use and banishment of Hagar. Interpreting her story relies on an honest analysis of the language used in her dealings with Sarah. Following this, she needs to be placed in the context of ancient laws and customs that would have protected her rights.

In this chapter, Hagar's status in the household will be determined from a standpoint of customs and laws.[291] Her dealings with Sarah and the timeline of the promise will be appraised to resolve any questions of theological misdoings on the part of Abraham and Sarah.

5.1 Hagar's Status

In order to fully understand Sarah's motivations and Hagar's (and subsequently Ishmael's) place, we need to return to Gn 16, where Sarah gives Hagar to Abraham. Here we present Gn 16:2-3, followed by a brief survey of vv. 4-6.

Gn 16:2

וַתֹּאמֶר שָׂרַי אֶל־אַבְרָם הִנֵּה־נָא עֲצָרַנִי יְהוָה מִלֶּדֶת בֹּא־נָא
אֶל־שִׁפְחָתִי אוּלַי אִבָּנֶה מִמֶּנָּה וַיִּשְׁמַע אַבְרָם לְקוֹל שָׂרָי:

Gn 16:3

וַתִּקַּח שָׂרַי אֵשֶׁת־אַבְרָם אֶת־הָגָר הַמִּצְרִית שִׁפְחָתָהּ מִקֵּץ
עֶשֶׂר שָׁנִים לְשֶׁבֶת אַבְרָם בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וַתִּתֵּן אֹתָהּ לְאַבְרָם
אִישָׁהּ לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה:

"And Sarai said to Abram "Behold now![292] Yahweh has restrained me from bearing [children]. I pray now, come into my maidservant; perhaps[293] from out of her I will be built up." And Abram hearkened to the voice of[294] Sarai."

---

[291] To compliment the former linguistic analysis.

[292] An exclamation of revelation and/or imperative used to impart a solemn or important declaration, entreaty or exhortation (Brown, F., S. Driver, & C. Briggs, *New Brown, Driver, Briggs, Gesenius Hebrew-English Lexicon*, Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1979, p. 243). While this expression is not fully

"And Sarai Abram's wife took Hagar the Egyptian, her maidservant, after Abram had lived in the land of Canaan for ten years, and gave her to her husband Abram for a wife.[295]

In these two lines, we are given information pertaining to the two women's respective status in the household. Hagar is said to be a slave. There were, however, many degrees to slavery.[296] For example, the Hebrew slave lived under an entirely different set of rules than that of a foreign slave. However, most slaves, whether alien or domestic, were treated as part of the household. For our purposes here, we will ignore the Hebrew slave, as Hagar is very clearly indicated and treated as a foreign figure.

5.1.2 The Barren Wife and Surrogate Motherhood

As previously discussed, Hagar's status as a שפחה in Gn 16 is clear and so she is treated as a maidservant or handmaid to Sarah. It is noteworthy that the term שפחה is almost completely absent from legal texts in the Bible.[297] This is most likely because the legal codes are directed at a 'modern' Israel of the Post-exilic period and the customs of offering handmaids, polycoity, and other related procedures was no longer practiced and therefore regulations were not necessary.[298] That we see evidence of these events is a testimony to preservation of traditional or historical narratives. We do see this custom in other texts of the Ancient Near East that have been dated towards the end of the 2nd millenium BCE, which we will examine later in this chapter.

---

translatable, it is important to note that by beginning with these words, Sarai is making a formal and very important declaration to Abram concerning their future.

[293] Expressing hope, but also fear and doubt.

[294] "Hearkened to the voice of": a Hebrew idiom, meaning to obey.

[295] This is indeed translated as "wife", since the preposition לו and ל are both used, which commonly denotes the status of wife, rather than simply referring to woman. This does not mean that she is a full wife, as we shall see, but it does raise her status in some respects. My own translation, not for polished purposes, but to show the character and true intent of the original Hebrew.

[296] Botterweck & Ringgren, vol. 1, pp. 224-5.

[297] Only one instance: Lv 19:20. Botterweck & Ringgren, vol. 15, p. 406, 9. All other instances refer to אמה.

[298] Botterweck & Runggren, vol. 15, p. 406, 9.

Nevertheless, while helpful and informative, it is not entirely necessary to go outside the text in this case. The author has given us all the information that we need. A close examination of the Hebrew explicitly states that Sarai is barren and gives over her handmaiden to Abram. Her reason for doing this is clearly stated in the text, for *herself* to be built up.[299] We see that "...this particular means of obtaining children is for the woman's sake and not the man's..."[300], for example, Gn 29-30 has Rachel and Leah offering their servants to Jacob despite his already having sons (specifically, v. 3).[301] While the husband may always take another wife, the woman has limited alternatives if she is barren.[302]

In the Ancient Near East, and even in the Bible itself, it was not unusual for a patriarch or contemporary to have more than one wife.[303] A barren wife had the option to circumvent a second marriage by offering up their handmaid, or alternatively a slave bought expressly for the purpose, as a concubine to their husband.[304] The handmaid was considered to be wife, however, not in the same sense of a freewoman, or one bringing property and status into the marriage union. Once impregnated, this slave-wife (or concubine) has a dual standing in the household. With regards to the husband and rest of

---

[299] H. Gossai, *Power and Marginality in the Abraham Narrative*, New York: University Press of America, 1995, p. 8. But, we should not condemn Sarah for this, as a woman's identity within society was made through her children, and "This was the also the only way in which she could become a full and integrated member of her society." D.B. Sharp, "On the Motherhood of Sarah: A Yahwistic Theological Comment", *IBS* 20 (1998) p. 6, referring to Westerman, p. 239.
[300] J.C. Exum, "'Mother in Israel': A Familiar Figure Reconsidered", in L.M. Russell (ed.), *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985, p. 76.
[301] C. Gordon, "Hagar: A Throw-Away Character among the Matriarchs?", *SBLSP* 24 (1985) p. 273.
[302] J. Van Seters, "The Problem of Childlessness in Near Eastern Law and the Patriarchs of Israel", *JBL* ...( ) p. 403.
[303] For example, Jacob had Rachel and Leah.
[304] Thus, ensuring her own position and preventing potential displacement.

the family, she is raised above mere handmaid status,[305] yet still remains under the primary wife's control as a handmaid.[306]

Her pregnancy ensures that her rights are protected, and it is prohibited to send her away.[307] If she bears the oldest son, her child is considered the legitimate heir to the biological father and primary wife and he is not to be rejected, even if the primary wife eventually produces a son of her own.[308] Rachel had Bilhah "bear upon her knees", which is an adoptive practice whereby the maidservant is serving as surrogate mother, and the child is considered to be that of the primary wife.[309]

5.1.3 A Matter of Personality

At this point we would like to stress once again that Sarah's wording indicates that she gave Hagar to Abraham to build *herself* up, clearly indicating that the child was to be considered hers. There is no mistaking her wording.

Pursuant to this event, Sarai is confronted with Hagar's pregnancy and subsequent elevation of status and attitude. Indeed, the expression used to indicate what Sarah was upset over is "קלל" בעיניה, and only means to become slight in her eyes. This does not designate any action, or lack thereof, on the part of Hagar, as some suggest.[310] It only implies that Hagar knew that her place was now ensured in the household relative to

---

[305] Which, as we saw in chapter 3, is of the lowest rank in the house
[306] N. Steinberg, *Kinship and Marriage in Genesis: A Household Economics Perspective*, Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993, p. 16.
[307] W. Harrelson, "Law in the Old Testament", in J. K. Bruckner, *Implied Law in the Abraham Narrative: A Literary and Theological Analysis*, London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001, p. 15.
[308] Ibid.
[309] Botterweck & Ringgren, vol.15 , p. 407. See Gn 16:2 and 30:3. M.J. Selman, "Comparative Customs and the Patriarchal Age", in A.R. Millard & D.J. Wiseman (eds.), *Essays on the Patriarchal Narratives*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1980, p. 127.
[310] G.W. Coats, "Strife and Reconciliation: Themes of a Biblical Theology in the Book of Genesis", *HBT* 2 (1980) pp. 26.

Sarai, who felt this acutely. It is unnecessary to read further into this; Sarai's humanity in feeling jealous and threatened is enough.

She then appeals to Abram, seemingly blaming him for the consequences of her own actions, and invoking the debatably legal formula "may the lord judge between you and me",[311] or possibly appealing to him for permission, as Hagar's status is now dual,[312] to which he tells her to deal with her maid as she sees fit, thereby either returning the maid to her power or reminding her that she still retains control over the servant as well.[313] So Sarai "humbled" or "afflicted" (ענה) Hagar, whereupon she fled into the desert and God appeared to her, telling her to return and submit and promising her posterity. Following this, we are not told much about Ishmael other than that he was circumcised along with the household (Gn 17:25).

5.1.4 Chronology of the Promise

We will now briefly look at the chronology of God's promise to Abram concerning descendants. This will allay some presuppositions and misconceptions regarding Hagar and Ishmael's status as well as any potential theological implications thereof. We find that God initially appears to Abram in Gn 15:4 concerning heirs. He is promised that an heir will come from his own body. No mention is made of Sarai at this point, and so her offering her handmaid is a viable and sincere approach to circumnavigate the problem of her barrenness.[314] Offering a young servant is a logical solution that allows the couple to fulfill God's promise, well within the information

---

[311] This is tangential to the understanding of Gn 21 and so we will not delve into it now.

[312] Westbrook, p. 228.

[313] Her ownership of Hagar is now residual, and most likely she must appeal to Abraham to punish Hagar. Westbrook, p. 228. Any theological interpretation of this is outside the scope of this paper.

[314] While Sarai and Abram are both well advanced in age, a man may sire offspring indefinitely, while a woman of Sarai's age is past menopause.

available at the time.[315] There is no need to read into this as though man is attempting to overreach God's plan, like some authors are wont to do,[316] or making Ishmael into a punishment for Sarah's ambition.[317] The story is more straightforward than many wish to believe when approached without attempting to ascribe more to the characters than is presented. As with much of Genesis, the characters of individuals are flawed but generally honest in their approach.

It is only after Ishmael's birth, that Abram is told that Sarai (now Sarah) is to bear a child (Gn 17:16), and Abra(ha)m requests that Ishmael live under God's blessing (thus, the text tells us that Abraham has not forgotten Ishmael, and considers him his son; v. 18). God tells Abraham that Isaac, through Sarah, is to be the son of the covenant. This covenant is again expressed in Gn 18:10, at which time Sarah is surreptitiously a party to the information. Much laughing ensues.

5.1.5 Genesis 21:9-14 - The Banishment

This brings us to Gn 21, where Sarah sees Ishmael "מצחק" and demands Hagar and Ishmael's banishment. This entails a "violation of both custom and law."[318] We have seen that Hagar had a dual status of sorts,[319] being both subservient to Sarah and yet mother of Abraham's first born son, which is reflected in the term used to refer to her, "אמה".

---

[315] And as we said before, it also allows Sarai to be in control of the situation, building herself up and ensuring her own future, assuming that she raises the child as her own as per the initial agreement. While this is not an ideal situation, it is apparently the best option for her at the time. A. Gonzalez, *Abraham: Father of* Believers, New York: Herder and Herder, 1967, p. 67. Build, having the root for son in the word, has also been suggested as a form of wordplay.

[316] For example, it has been suggested that the word בנה, to build up, implies Sarah wishing to construct a monument to herself, and echoes the story of Babel in her attempt to achieve that which Yahweh had prevented her from doing. Gossai, p. 3.

[317] Exum, p. 77.

[318] Waters, p. 196.

[319] Westbrook, p. 215.

There are a couple of items here that should be elaborated on, primarily, the matter of inheritance. Some contemporary texts[320] indicate that inheritance is to be split equally amongst the (male) offspring, while in other areas, ultimogeniture prescribes that the youngest is to inherit the double portion.[321] As well, another practice was that the father named his favorite as the primary or sole heir, which could include an individual outside of the immediate family. Some propose that Biblical custom was indeed ultimogeniture, but this is incorrect.[322] We can clearly see that primogeniture was the case here and thus the firstborn is to inherit the double portion. Most importantly however, is that Sarah's explicit purpose in sending away Ishmael is that she does not wish him to inherit with Isaac. There is no denial within the passage that Ishmael is not treated as Abraham's son.

Placing aside God's promise of Isaac being heir for the time being, as well as our perceptions of Sarah's motivations, we will look at the implications of sending away a slave-wife. As we had said before, from relevant legal texts, we see that the sending away of a concubine who has born a son to a male of the family is not a decision to be taken lightly. Primarily, the woman, while still in control of the handmaid internally, is no longer able to send her away of her own accord. She must appeal to the head of the household, as he now has control over the slave-wife in the eyes of the outside world.[323]

---

[320] For example, see the Code of Hammurabi 167.

[321] E.W. Davies, "The Inheritance of the First-Born in Israel and the Ancient Near East", *JSS* 38/2 (1993), p. 177.

[322] Davies, p. 177.

[323] There is some ambiguity here, and there may be some indication that should the slave-wife and her child be sent away, and this should not be done lightly, then the servant-family members are to be granted their freedom; Gordon, p. 274. and provided with a gift of wealth, servants and asses. However, it is also explicitly stated that should a female slave have "...intercourse with her "owner" or his son, she may not be sold to another or sent away (Ex 21:7-1)." Botterweck & Ringgren, vol. 15, p. 409. This was to protect her as her virginity was now taken away and also in the case of pregnancy.

Since legally, the eldest son, whether of the favoured or hated wife, has the right to inherit, sending him off is no easy task.[324]

Abraham reluctantly does as she asks, despite his misgivings over his son. While some have claimed that this constitutes some sort of divorce proceedings,[325] it is difficult to say for sure. The root of the word that Sarah uses to demand their sending off is גרשׁ (v. 10), which does not seem to have any connection to divorce, while the root שׁלח may very well be used to indicate Abraham simply sending Hagar and Ishmael off. Westbrook notes that the term לנפשׁה would be more indicative of divorce.[326]

The placing of objects on Hagar's shoulder followed by הלך could possibly be a divorce formula, or at the very least some sort of ritualized release, but there is no indication of this elsewhere. Furthermore, it does seem odd that his provisions are so meagre, particularly considering his seeming attachment to Ishmael. Legally, he should have been required to outfit the pair with servants, and a share of wealth.

5.2 Contemporary Law Codes[327]

The author clearly set the stage in the patriarchal period, and the general consensus is that the Abrahamic period would have lasted, or at the very least, it seems as

---

[324] It is indicated that the patriarch may grant their freedom, with generous compensation (or none, depending on which text you are looking at), but this doesn't really take into account that as the primary heir, the son is technically free. This is a difficult matter to reconcile, and there may be no easy answer for it.

[325] See, for example, P.T. Reis, "Hagar Requited." *JSOT* 87 (2000) p.100. She cites Dt 22:19, 29; 24:1, 3-4; Isa 50:1; Jr 3:1, Mal 2:16, and also sees גרשׁ as pertaining to divorce, again citing passages from Lv 21:7, 14, 22: 13; Nm 30:10 & Ez 44.22. For our part here, we believe that these citations may have their roots in the lessons learned in the patriarchal stories, and that the patriarchs had not yet come into Israel's laws.

[326] Westbrook, p. 235. Literally, this means divorcing her unto herself, meaning that her status returns to be under her own protection.

[327] For a full treatment on ancient law codes, see M.T. Roth, *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor*, Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995.

it was most likely set, from 2000 to 1720 BCE,[328] which coincides with Egypt's middle

kingdom and the late Bronze Age II.[329]

While we do not presume that the author nor the redactor would have had access

to such ancient law texts, we proceed to examine some pertinent to the era in which the

story is set. We do this with the supposition that such codes would be somewhat

representative of the culture of the time and serve as a litmus for the traditions that we are

examining. This section of the study is not to build absolute proof of historicity or laws,

but instead to estimate some of the understandings or traditions in storytelling that carried

forth unto our present redaction of the narrative.

The relevant collections of laws include the Code of Ur-Nammu (2950 BCE),

which pre-dates the Abrahamic period by nearly 1000 years. Lipit-Ishtar of Isin (1850

BCE) was collected within Abraham's supposed lifetime, so likely represents some of the

customs of the time. Eshnunna (earlier than Hammurabi and maybe even Lipit-Ishtar) is a

tangental collection, not applicable in our case. The Code of Hammurabi (aprox. 1700

BCE) is the most commonly cited laws in reference to this passage, next to the Nuzi

tablets. Hittite Laws (13th C BCE, but compiled around 1500), which is a loose collection

of what was versus what must be done.[330] Finally, there is an extant collection of

Assyrian laws (1100 BCE) that may refer back to customs of the time, and constitutes a

book of the law, but not a general law of state.

---

[328] For a full analysis of the historicity of the patriarchal narratives, see T.L. Thompson, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives: The Quest for the Historical Abraham*, Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1974.
[329] Waters, p. 189.
[330] R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Social Institutions, Vol. 1*, Toronto: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1965., p. 145.

Interestingly, the Code of Hammurabi, which is Babylonian in origin, is especially applicable to Abraham considering the claims of his Babylonian birth.[331] But most of the specific laws we find therein refer to a priestess, and while it has been proposed that Sarah was a priestess,[332] there is no real evidence for this.

Although these collections are law codes, are not so in the sense that we think of them today. Rather, they serve more as reference books, recording specific instances and actions taken and are not to be considered an authoritative code. They should be thought of as descriptive rather than prescriptive and form "an ideal of justice".[333] "None of these collections is comprehensive or exhaustive, and it is clear that none attempts to set out a compete "law of the land"."[334]

However, we do find many similarities between these laws and the practices described in Genesis. These commonalities do not necessarily mean that Israel's law was based in these laws, but rather it reflects the influence of a widespread customary law.[335] It has been suggested that "the patriarchs followed a less stringent code of conduct than that which prevailed in Mesopotamia at the same time, but the latter too was soon relaxed."[336] Frymer-Kensky poses some compelling arguments as to why these texts should be taken seriously in combination with understanding the patriarchal narratives.[337]

---

[331] Waters, p. 196.
[332] Sarah the priestess, p.
[333] Westbrook, p. 216.
[334] Roth, p. 4.
[335] de Vaux, p. 146
[336] de Vaux, p. 24. This is evidenced by the occasionally conflicting practices described in Genesis, presumably with an eye to conveying a theological message, or possibly due to the development of modified laws, thus beginning the distinction of Israel from surrounding cultures.
[337] R., Westbrook, "The Female Slave", in V.H. Matthews, B.M. Levinson &T.S. Frymer-Kensky (eds.), *Gender and Law in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East*, 1998, pp. 214-238.pp. 209-14.

Childlessness was a serious issue in the ANE.[338] The ancient Hebrews practiced both polygamy and concubinage, though these practices were less common later in their history. Strangely, besides the Levirate law in Dt 25:5-10, there is a striking paucity of legal material in the Hebrew Bible dealing with childlessness. We do find that female slaves had special laws applied to them, presumably out of "respect of their sexuality and reproductive capacity."[339] Exodus 21:8-1 discuses the rights of a female slave in the owner's harem.[340] However, this differs from a slave taken with the specific goal of producing an heir. In comparison, there is a wealth of laws in the rest of ANE literature relating to this issue.[341]

The practice of a female slave bearing children for the husband was customary in both Egypt and Israel.[342] The Nuzi tablets actually required a barren wife to provide a surrogate to her mate,[343] then prohibited the expulsion of a slave wife and her son[344], Sumerian law, however, allowed it if the slave and her child were freed.[345] The Code of Hammurabi, #146[346] states that a mistress can give her female slave to her husband for reproduction. It does specify, however, #170,[347] that the mistress then is no longer entitled to cast out this woman once she conceives.[348] It also states that "...the husband may not take a second wife unless the first is barren, and he loses this right if the wife

<hr/>

[338] M. Callaway, *Sing, O Barren One: A Study in Comparative Midrash*, Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1979., p. 15.
[339] Westbrook, p. 214.
[340] R.de Menezes, "Social Justice in Israel's Law", *BB* 11 (1985) p. 18.
[341] For an in depth analysis, see Callaway.
[342] Callaway, p. 14.
[343] L. Katzoff, "From the Nuzi Tablets", *Dor le Dor* 13 (1985) p. 219.
[344] Callaway, p. 14.
[345] Turnham, p. 16.
[346] Roth, p. 109.
[347] Roth, pp. 113-4.
[348] Sharp, p. 9.

herself gives him a slave as a concubine."[349] The same customs were in place in Kirkuk (15th C BCE), only it was the wife's obligation to provide the concubine.[350]

The laws of the inheritance by the eldest safeguard the rights of a son by disallowing the father to show favoritism for the son of the preferred wife.[351] In our case, these laws are superfluous, as we see that Abraham does indeed care for Ishmael and expressed his desire for him to be the child of promise (Gn 16:18, 21:11), but even if he had not, Ishmael's rights were protected. Also, "it is interesting to note that both in Israel and in Mesopotamia, marriage was a purely civil contract, not sanctioned by any religious rite."[352] What this implies is that contracts can be broken if one or both parties fail to live up to their end of the agreement, while a promise before God is less easily ruptured.

5.2.1 Pros and Cons of the Comparative Model

There is some disagreement as to what extent we are able to use a comparative method. On the one hand, it has been said that these texts are not to be confused with Israel, and there are many decided differences that distinguish the Hebrew culture. On the other hand, while this is true to an extent and we acknowledge that the Hebrews did make attempts to differentiate themselves from outsiders, there is still a great amount of evidence for cultural and religious syncretism, and we cannot treat the stories in the Bible as existing in a vacuum[353]. Moreover, while later Israel did try to differentiate itself, the Abrahamic history is of a culture where the basis was indeed in ANE laws.

---

[349] de Vaux, p. 24.
[350] Ibid.
[351] (Dt 21:17; Assyrian laws at Nuzu and Mari); de Vaux, p. 53.
[352] de Vaux, p. 33.
[353] R de Vaux, p. 24.

5.3 Conclusion

An analysis of the language, customs and laws involved in Hagar being given to Abraham corroborate to indicate that she was given as a surrogate mother to benefit Sarah. By all rights, the child should have been considered Sarah's, and given legal rights to inheritance. The text indicates nothing exceedingly untoward in Hagar's behaviour, and certainly nothing significant enough to provoke Sarah's rage. Certainly, the demand for banishment was an exaggerated response. While it seems that Sarah used the law when it came to serve her own purposes, she equally flouted it when it stood in her way.

What is evidenced by this chapter is the consistency of Sarah's difficult personality in the face of adversity. Although her final demands are supported by the Deity, it does not absolve her of making decisions and being unable to live with the consequences. The conclusion reached from this is that the message that the author wished to convey was a theological one. This is further interpreted in the next chapter, Synthesis.

Chapter 6: Synthesis and Interpretation

Interpretations of this passage, and of the narratives surrounding Hagar and Ishmael often involve complex extrapolations that have little to do with what is actually found in the text. Biblical literature, particularly the patriarchal narratives, have been seen in too serious a light and this has clouded judgment when it comes to understanding the stories for their original intent. Throughout this thesis, Genesis 21 has been dissected and aspects of it were examined separately. In this chapter, that information is brought together to reveal a simplified and unified tale.

The composition of this pericope appears to be stratified from various traditions. It has been set within Genesis, which further positions it into complex layers of authorship and revisions. Analyzing and separating these divisions is an imprecise science, sometimes leaving more questions than answers. While it is helpful to have this background information, it only goes so far in helping us understand these writings.

In this thesis, the text is presented as a cohesive unit, as this is how it presently exists. Redactors have taken the time to amass what seems like earlier oral traditions into a single narrative. Rather than being a thoughtless agglomeration of stories, the compiler of Genesis has woven them together with thought and purpose, using various literary devices such as word plays, story patterns and structure. In Genesis 21, two distinct literary goals are apparent: the birth of Isaac and the banishment of Hagar and Ishmael, tied together within the account of Isaac's weaning celebration.

It is essential to be aware of the setting of the story, as Israel would have understood it. Additionally, it is important to be open to the depiction of the characters as literary tools bringing forth a message from the author and redactor. Finally, the target

audience was one of different sensibilities and discernment than our own. The subtleties of language, structure and inferences may supersede our immediate grasp.

6.1 Purpose of Genesis 21

In this text, there are two major themes found throughout Genesis: That God transcends man's laws, and that he is master of nature. Sarah gives birth at the age of ninety, despite the implausibility of pregnancy for an elderly woman. Subsequently, God intervenes and supports Sarah's demand to expel Ishmael. As has been shown through the wording of Gn 16 and the customs of man at the time, it is strongly indicated that by all rights, Ishmael was first born, and therefore primary heir. Legally and morally, he (and his mother) were not to be sent out, particularly not at the behest of the matriarch. Certainly, custom and humanity suggest that they should have been bestowed upon with gifts surpassing the bread and water that they were sent off with. These meagre supplies were not enough to last even a short trip into the desert.

As further emphasis of God's sovereignty over nature, he appears to Hagar in the wilderness, just as all hope is lost, providing not only water, but also prosperity. He provides for those under his protection, not leaving their fate up to the frailties of human existence. Additionally, here is further emphasis of God looking after the innocent. He had not indicated to Abraham who was to be the mother of his heir, and as such Hagar was implicated in the plan. When it was later revealed that it was Sarah, not Hagar, who was to be the mother of his people, he did not forget the promises he had made. Even while his plan must move forward, he looks after Hagar and Ishmael and they are rewarded and taken care of.

Similarly, the saga shares a theme with other narratives in the book of Genesis, (such as the garden of Eden, Cain & Abel & the Flood) whereby humans disrupt God's plan, and God must then attempt to restore it. Through Sarah's brashness and hostility, a warring nation is created, where the situation, diplomatically handled, may have ended on more companionable terms. She acted for herself instead of trusting in God's promises, as Eve did by taking the fruit and not trusting in God's wisdom. As punishment, he confirmed her banishing Hagar instead of reconciling the family, ensuring a lasting memory of her mistakes.

Finally, as lessons in the Bible are rarely one dimensional and straight-forward, references to the ongoing struggle with Egypt echo throughout the life of Hagar. This is, in all probability, a conscious inclusion, since, from historical data, the likelihood of Abraham having an Egyptian slave at the time the story was set, is extremely unlikely. With an inversed position to that found in Exodus, Egypt is enslaved within the house of the Hebrews, used to "build" up the house, and then later both driven out by affliction, thus forcing them to flee, (Gn 16) and also banished, sent away (Gn 21). First Egypt, then Israel is subjected to a struggle with life and death in the wilderness. The multi-layered complexity of parallels within the Bible serves to tie stories together and emphasize important themes and characters.

6.2 The Significance of Hagar & Ishmael

Although set within the story of Abraham, Hagar and Ishmael hold an importance unto their own right and are not simply disposable props for the Patriarchs to stand on. As we have seen, this is emphasized through several means, both subtly and overtly.

6.2.1 Structure

The organization of the Abraham promise narratives is such that Hagar's conception (Gn 16) appears at the apex of the chiastic structure formed from Abraham's life. In fact, as seen in Chapter 3, Hagar's own life forms significant parallels with Abraham's life, particularly her receiving a theophanic birth annunciation and divine naming of her child. God does not promise descendents to those he does not favor. Ishmael's conception and birth play a dual role: It follows a similar pattern to the "birth of a hero" narrative, marking Ishmael as a hero himself. As well, he plays the part of adversary for Isaac's own "birth of a hero" story. The birth of Isaac is then juxtaposed, perhaps even overshadowed, by the banishment of Ishmael.

The structure of Gn 21:1-20, particularly the alternating references to Isaac and Ishmael in vv. 9-13 serves to juggle the reader's attention between the two boys in transition from Isaac's birth narrative to Ishmael's wilderness plight. At the end of which, each boy was celebrated as he survived his trial (Isaac lived to weaning, and Ishmael did not die from thirst). Eight verses are dedicated to each boy, and their lives are tied together through these alternating references.

What is more, both of Abraham's sons face death in trials that parallel one another in structure and language. Finally, Ishmael is the father of twelve nations, a number which cannot be overlooked in respect to the weight which Hebrews bestow upon numbers and in conjunction with the twelve tribes of Israel.

6.2.2 Language

The use of wordplays further accentuates the emphasis placed on our duo. Hagar's name immediately alludes to her temporary status (sojourn), and, as we have seen,

possibly also to her position as adversary to Sarah. Ishmael is blessed with a name that serves as both a statement and a promise fulfulled: God hears.

While hearing is a theme in Ishmael's life, seeing seems to play an important role in Hagar's life. From Sarah becoming "slight in her eyes", Sarah being told to do what is "right in her eyes", to her ensuing rescue at a spring (further playing on the word עין) in Genesis 16. Genesis 21 continues the theme with her banishment due to what Sarah sees, despite it being displeasing "in the eyes of" Abraham, and her once again being saved when she is shown a well of water. The pair combine to form a theme of perception, which reaches it's apex to cause their banishment once Sarah perceives Ishmael threatening her position.

In contrast to Sarah seeing the boy מצחק, Hagar later refuses to see the boy die. The irony of this contrast is not lost. Puns are used in the text to call our attention, to point out truths, and often they reverse expectations. These elements are shown in the text to shed light on morality without heavy-handedness. The juxtaposition of Sarah's perception with Hagar's wilful lack of perception highlight one's wrath and the other's pain.

6.2.3 Promises, Blessings & Protection

Hagar (and thusly, Ishmael) is the recipient of not just one, but two theophanies. This is unheard of for females in the Bible. The pair is made the promise of descendents and delivered twice from the wilderness. It is evident that they are under the protection of God, despite their treatment by other people. Ishmael is foreseen as a "wild ass" of a man, which (in terms of ancient imagery) predicts not only his opposition to Israel, but also his freedom and independence, the inability of others to control him. This

combination of events and promises, along with the twelve tribes succeeding from their line, indicate a strong objective to call attention to Ishmael's status.

Also, we have seen that the general belief that Abraham did not care for Ishmael, nor considering him his son, is undoubtedly false. Not only is it explicitly stated in the text that he was distressed on account of his *son* (Gn 21:11), but he had already expressed his wish that Ishmael be the son of promise. This emphasis is disproportionate should Ishmael simply exist to add dramatic tension to the story of Isaac.

6.3 Sarah's Personality

Interpretation of this passage is greatly simplified when we take into account the literary clues we have been given. The text is tied into the patriarchal narratives and the difficulties that we find are of our own making or misunderstanding of this fact. We must first understand that the patriarchs were portrayed in a humanistic light, with foibles and faults, presumably to allow for identification, and certainly with a goal of teaching. If we try to exemplify their behaviours, we confound the purpose of the story and block our understanding. We are meant to laugh at the antics of the patriarchs and our lesson arises from their faults and mistakes.

6.3.1 Was Hagar to Blame?

The thrust of interpretation has been to vilify Hagar and Ishmael, while attempting to redeem Sarah with justifications for what would appear to otherwise be her consistently harsh and self-serving actions. It is our strong belief that this inclination has been the single cause of most difficulties surrounding Genesis 21. If we remove our motivations to extol her actions, and see the writing from fresh eyes, the author's true intent becomes clear.

There is no real evidence that Hagar was a haughty or arrogant woman, or that she had done anything wrong. It was simply her position that threatened Sarah. We are only told hat her perceptions of Sarah had changed after her conception, but nothing of her actions. Hagar is consistent in her voicelessness within the family milieu, and she only finds her voice in the wilderness with God. She acts as any one would act under slavery conditions: she is given as a concubine, treated harshly for seeing her own position raised, then flees. Later, she is banished and laments her fate. In contrast, we are informed that Sarah *afflicted* her and she subsequently fled. There is nothing that supports the outrageous inferences on her personality that have been set forth.

6.3.2 What's up with Sarah?

On the other hand, we find that Sarah's behaviour from the outset has been self serving and harsh. From the beginning of Hagar's pregnancy, Sarah had struggled with the implications of her own ambitions. Sarah's character is consistent in her attempt to build herself up, even while assuring Abram's succession. She is seeking to ensure her own future and later, her son's. That she could not deal with Hagar's ensuing pregnancy, and the new status that the woman enjoys, is evidenced by her harsh treatment. Once Hagar returns to the family, the matter is silent until some time after Isaac is born and Sarah is reminded of Ishmael's position by his מצחק.

This is the point that seems to cause the most problems for scholars. It is difficult to reconcile such harsh behaviour from a matriarch over such an innocuous and ambivalent term. We have already looked at the term itself for a better understanding and seen that the phraseology of Gn 21:9, taking into account the wordplays on צחק and ראה, seems to be justification of sorts for Sarah's actions, at least on a literary level, although

still not putting the matriarch in a very attractive light. Sarah both sees and fears, conveying perception, realization and understanding in a singular word, Hagar's son laughing (or playing). This activity, which is both innocuous and also distinctly relevant to her alone, refers to both boys simultaneously by punning on Isaac's name and also her own laughter. So, read one way, the sentence reads: " Then Sarah *saw* the son of Hagar the Egyptian, that which she had born to Abraham, *laughing.*" Recalling to her the laughter she ascribed to others, in a negative light. Read another, "Then Sarah *feared* the son of Hagar the Egyptian, that which she had born to Abraham, *Isaacing.*" In this case, "Isaacing" alludes to Ishmael taking over Isaac's role as heir.

Sarah chooses to undo the damage that she has done. She seeks to flush Ishmael out, perhaps in a similar vein of God helping those who help themselves (as she previously helped herself gain an heir through Hagar), or possibly because she simply cannot handle her own mistakes, as she couldn't in Gn 16. Either way, to Sarah's eyes, she was protecting her son's inheritance. This was unlikely about money, as Abraham, by all accounts, had plenty of wealth, and even the smaller portion would have had Isaac and her comfortable.[354] More likely (and explicitly stated) was that she did not want to see Ishmael share in the inheritance at all with Isaac. It seems simple to interpret this verse in a straight-forward way, yet few people are content with this. However, returning to her desire to "be built up" through Hagar, it seems perfectly logical that she was looking out for her own self-interests and wished to be the undisputed matriarch.

Superficially, this may show doubt towards God's promise and choice of Isaac being the heir of covenant, but it is not. To human eyes, and customs, Ishmael's continued

---

[354] Additionally, it is noted that Sarah likely came into the marriage with money of her own and was not fearful of being destitute or homeless after Abraham's passing, although nothing is said of this in the text.

presence in the house would be a constant reminder, and shed constant doubt, on Isaac's status, if even only subtly. Ishmael needed to be removed on both a literary and a character level in order for there to be no doubt about succession.

6.3.3 Implications

There is no real evidence for God's punishing Sarah or condemning the use of surrogate motherhood, as some have suggested. Nor was Hagar sent as a punishment for Sarah doubting God's word. In fact, every step of the way, his response has been to look after Ishmael, to provide Abraham and Sarah with Isaac and ensure that no one was worse for wear. Also, while Sarah has indeed been self-serving for the entire episode, she has not acted unfaithfully to God or his promise (as it was only revealed after Hagar's conception that Sarah was to bear a son of her own).

While we cannot reconcile Sarah's actions as those of the selfless matriarch we would wish her to be, she is also not portrayed as one acting out of line with God's will. Once we accept her as a flawed individual, prone to self-interested actions but not bad per se, the entire passage becomes much easier to bring together. It has been the attempt to ratify her behaviour, as well as difficulty in translating one language to another, that has prevented an otherwise uncomplicated account from being resolved.

6.4 Conclusion

As we have seen, misunderstanding can lead to over-complication, but as with the principle of Occam's Razor, it is best to seek the simplest explanation, if one is available. Interpretation of Genesis 21 is remarkably similar when we understand that the use of puns, ambiguities and double-entendres was an important aspect of Hebrew literature. Unfortunately, these are some of the most difficult aspects of translation to convey.

While we can footnote the relevant features of history and culture that we have discussed herein, it is awkward and clumsy to have to explain a joke. As scholars, we do expect to lose some character of an original text when reading in another language, but this may not be evident to the lay person who takes the translated word without question as the word of God.

It is our responsibility when presenting a text such as this that relies so heavily on untranslatable aspects, to bring the reader's awareness to the fallibility of the words they read and the origins of the text. We feel that supplementing a translation with footnotes, while cumbersome to a reader, is essential in providing the richness of experience of the text.

Genesis 21 presents the birth of Isaac, one who laughs, as a miracle to elderly parents. His birth is received with ambiguous laughter: both delight and trepidation, but he is celebrated as heir to God's promise. Once he is weaned and expected to survive, his older brother by a maidservant calls attention to himself by playing on the matriarch's weak spots: her ambition and her vanity. His laughter causes her to remember the unlikely circumstances of her own son's birth, as well as reminding her that her and her son's positions are weakened by the presence of this rival.

She appeals to Abraham to banish the pair and remove this threat. It is God's will that they should leave and present no obstacle, and so Abraham sends them away, but not without a final reminder that he does indeed care for and acknowledge the boy. In order to further emphasize God's superiority over nature and man, Hagar is sent with few supplies, allowing God to save her and the boy in the desert. The ambiguous age of Ishmael at this point seems a minor problem, but is as yet unresolved. Was he placed

upon her shoulder, or was the expression to indicate that he was now under her care alone? Was he crying or praying in the desert, which God had heard? Whatever the case may be, both he and Hagar were most certainly under God's protection and left with his blessings.

All of these themes are clearly presented in the text. Many may be unsettled by or dispute what may not sit well with modern morals, but the burden of proof lies with those who stretch their imaginations to explain the text.

Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis was to explore the difficulties that have prevented us from ascertaining the significance of Hagar and Ishmael in Genesis 21, with the aim of reconciling our discomfiture with the text. Most interpretations have relied on long, imaginative extrapolations woven into the biblical text, many of which have little to do with what is actually written. It is our proposition that these explanations are unnecessary and that with a little contextualization, everything the author wanted us to know is presented in the book of Genesis.

The first step in understanding the text was to perform a macro-syntactical analysis to find out what we could solve through an understanding of grammar. Once we established the unity of the text, at least as delivered, we were able to examine the wordplay inherent within. Performing this analysis is an important stage, as puns and wordplay were an integral part of storytelling for the Hebrews, providing emphasis and unity both within and between passages. This is particularly indicated where a passage seems overly ambiguous, as is the case here in v. 9, but also in v. 6 and 14.

Next, we investigated structure on both a small and large scale, and also looked at motifs found within and out of the Bible. This served to contextualize Hagar and Ishmael within the scheme of Genesis, the Hebrew Bible and also the Ancient Near East. We found several common motifs in the Hagar and Ishmael cycle, including a "birth of a hero" narrative and a "wilderness trial" that we see elsewhere in the Bible. Parallels with the *Akedah* and Exodus are evident, both in structure and language. Finally, Hagar forms the pivotal point in a chiasmic structure based on the Abraham promise narratives.

With all this attention on Hagar and Ishmael, it is difficult to maintain that they are not indeed very important characters. Indeed, it seems that they are in fact quite significant and much attention has been placed on their story. Genesis 21 displays rhythms of wording that serve to juxtapose the brothers, such as the alternation of references throughout Gn 21:1-20. It would almost seem that Isaac's birth and weaning are overshadowed by Ishmael's banishment.

In chapter 3, we took a closer look at translation problems in Gn 21. We found that Hebrew writing displays its humour and wit in ways that may not be immediately apparent to the unseasoned reader. Specifically, modern readers, who read silently, are prone to miss nuances that are meant to be recognized aurally. While punning on the sounds of words seems unsophisticated to us, the ancient Hebrews valued this form of wordplay and used it and other verbal witticisms extensively.

We explored the translation of various incarnations of צחק, and also what laughter means to different peoples. It can be confidently established that Ishmael was not doing anything negative to elicit Sarah's wrath. The fact that his activity echoes both Isaac's name and Sarah's own laughter presents a good enough reason to provoke Sarah's ire. This, in combination with what seems an evident play on the sounds of ראה and ירא (see and fear), when heard aloud, actually present a very clever and clear turn of phrase.

Moreover, this sentence provides sufficient motivation for Sarah if we are able to see her personality as it is presented in the text. It is necessary to let go of yearning to redeem her of her flaws by seeking to vilify Hagar. Sarah is presented as self-interested and unable to deal with problems of her own making. She uses laws and customs when they serve her purpose, but disregards them when they stand in her way.

Hagar is a maidservant of Sarah's, given over to Abraham as a slave wife, with the express purpose of bearing an heir as proxy for Sarah. The laws we found pertaining to this practice indicate that it was a common custom in the ANE and that there were indeed laws established to protect the mother and child. This is further reinforced by the change in language we see in Gn 21, relating Hagar now to the family rather than just to Sarah.

Once we have explored the text in a historical and linguistic manner, connecting evidence that is obvious if one brings their awareness to that of an ancient Hebrew, we find that Genesis 21:1-18 is relatively easy to appreciate. It is my opinion that to our modern mind, with centuries of interpretation to cloud our judgment, and that a lack of contextualization to base our understanding, imposes difficulties into this story. Allowing the characters and wordplay to shine through, we are presented with the story of a matriarch, having given birth at a ripe age, and after having performed the (now) regrettable act of giving her maidservant to her husband to bear children, laughs at herself and her situation. She is reminded of her son's secondary status (the fruits of her folly) by his actions reminding her of her laughter as well as her son's name. She fears the repercussions of her actions and so seeks to resolve the issue. We are reminded of Abraham's affections for his son, but told by a God whom is sovereign over man's laws and whims to let the boy go. In return, God reasserts his protection of the boy with a last minute miracle and reasserts his promises of prosperity. This allows the main thrust of the Abraham narrative to continue unhindered, and affirms a theme found throughout the Bible: Trust in God's will, he is sovereign over all.

Bibliography

Articles

Abécassis, A., "Le rire des patriarches", *LetV* 230 (1996) pp. 7-14.

Avigad, N., "A Seal of a Slave-Wife (AMAH)", *PEQ* 78 (1946) pp. 125-32.

Bailey, W.A., "Black and Jewish Women Consider Hagar", *Encounter* 63 (2002) pp. 34-

Bashear, S., "Abraham's Sacrifice of His Son and Related Issues." *Islam* 67.2 (1990) pp. 243-77.

Batto, B. F., "Hagar the Egyptian: The Lost Tradition of the Matriarchs", *CBQ* 55.4 (1993) pp. 783-5.

Benjamin, D.C., "Stories of Hagar", *BT* 35 (1997) pp. 27-31.

Benvenuto, C., "In the Wilderness with Hagar", *Tikkun* 14 (1999) pp. 62-3.

Bettenhausen, E., "Hagar Revisited: Surrogacy, Alienation, and Motherhood", *C&C* 47 (1987) pp. 157-9.

Brenner, A., "Female Social Behavior: Two Descriptive Patterns within the 'Birth of the Hero' Paradigm", *VT* 36 (1986) pp. 257-73.

Chase, E.P., "Promises, Blessings, and Curses: Hagar and the Wild Ass", *BTrans* 50 (1999) pp. 214-9.

Coats, G.W., "Strife and Reconciliation: Themes of a Biblical Theology in the Book of Genesis", *HBT* 2 (1980) pp. 15-37.

Cogan, M., "The Expulsion of Ishmael: No Laughing Matter!", *CJ* 41 (1989) pp. 29-33.

Cohen, J.M., "Was Abraham Heartless?", *JBQ* 23 (1995) pp. 180-81.

Cohen, M.S., "Ishmael at Sixteen", *CJ* 53.4 (2001) pp. 36-43.

Cooper, A., "Hagar in and out of Context", *USQR* 55.1 (2001) pp. 35-46.

Davies, E.W., "The Inheritance of the First-Born in Israel and the Ancient Near East", *JSS* 38/2 (1993), p. 177.

Deurloo, K.A. "Hagar En Ismäel (Genesis 16 En 21)", *ACEBT* 10 (1989) pp. 9-15.

Dozeman, T.B., "The Wilderness and Salvation History in the Hagar Story", *JBL* 117.1 (1998) pp. 23-43.

Drey, P.R., "The Role of Hagar in Genesis 16", *AUSS* 40 (2002) pp. 179-95.

Eckman, G.P., "The Humor of the Bible", *MR* 93 (1911) pp. 521-31.

Ellington, J., "Wit and Humor in Bible Translation", *BTrans* 42.3 (1991) pp. 301-13.

Fleishman, J. "The Expulsion of Ishmael." *BM* 157 (1999) pp. 146-62.

Fleishman, J., ""Cast Out this Slave Woman and Her Son" (Genesis 21:10) : Why was Abraham Commanded to Obey Sarah?", *BMQ* 44.157 (1999) pp. 146-62.

Fokkelman, J. P., "Time and the Structure of the Abraham Cycle", *OS* 25 (1989) pp. 96-109.

Gitay, Z., "Hagar's Expulsion: A Tale Twice-Told in Genesis", *BR* 2.4 (1986) pp. 26-32.

Gordon, C., "Hagar: A Throw-Away Character among the Matriarchs?", *SBLSP* 24 (1985) pp. 271-7.

Gordon, R.P., "On Humour and Comic in the Hebrew Bible", *VT* 42.1 (1992) pp.133-4.

Haygood, A.G,Bp., "Loaf and Bottle to Hagar", *MR* 41.3 (1895) pp. 301-15.

Hepner, G., "The Affliction and Divorce of Hagar Involves Violations of the Covenant and Deuteronomic Codes", *ZABR* 8 (2002) pp. 166-206.

Hohulin, R.M., "Was Hagar an Amazon?", *NT* 8.1 (1994) pp. 51-2.

Jarrell, R. H., "The Birth Narrative as Female Counterpart to Covenant", *JSOT* 97 (2002) pp. 3-18.

Jones, M.C., "The Spirit of Hagar: Living in an Unfriendly House", *JITC* 31.1-2 (2004) pp. 61-83.

Kendrick, W.G., "Selected Translation Problems in Genesis", *BTrans* 41 (1990) pp. 425-31.

Kirsch, J., "What Did Sarah See?", *BR* 14.5 (1998) pp. 2.

Leviant, C., "Parallel Lives: The Trials and Traumas of Isaac and Ishmael", *BR* 15.2 (1999) pp. 20.

Lichtenstein, A., "Isaac and Laughter", *Dor le Dor* 18 (1989-1990) pp. 13-18.

Lindemulder, P., "Hagar's Wilderness Sojourn", *Kerux* 15.3 (2000) pp. 19-25.

Lyke, L.L., "Where does 'the Boy' Belong?: Compositional Strategy in Genesis 21:14", *CBQ* 56 (1994) pp. 637-48.

McEvenue, S.E., "Comparison of Narrative Styles in the Hagar Stories", *Semeia* 3 (1975) pp. 64-80.

McEvenue, S.E., "The Elohist at Work", *ZAW* 96 (1984) pp. 315-32.

McKerras, R., "How to Translate Wordplays", *NT* 8.1 (1994) pp. 7-18.

Menezes, R.de, "Social Justice in Israel's Law", *BB* 11 (1985) pp. 10-6.

Meyer, L.H., "Hagar's Holiness: Genesis 16 and 21", *BLT* 37.3 (1992) pp. 145-57.

Mirguet, F., "Isaac et Ismaël en Gen 21,1-21: Quand l'entente (Shm) suscite le rire (Çhq)", *SE* 55 (2003) pp. 75-88.

Navone, J., "Elder and Younger Siblings", *BT* 41 (2003) pp. 108-111.

Neff, R.W., "Annunciation in the Birth Narrative of Ishmael", *BRes* 17 (1972) pp. 51-60.

Nikaido, S.K., "Hagar and Ishmael as Literary Figures: An Intertextual Study", *VT* 51.2 (2001) pp. 219-42.

Nowell, I., "Roles of Women in the Old Testament", *BT* 28 (1990) pp. 364-8.

Pilch, J.J., "The Bible's Sense of Humour", *BT* 33 (1995) pp. 353-58.

Reines, C.W., "Laughter in Biblical and Rabbinic Literature." *Judaism* 21.2 (1972) pp. 176-83.

Reis, P.T., "Hagar Requited." *JSOT* 87 (2000) pp. 75-109.

Reiss, M., "Ishmael, Son of Abraham", *JBQ* 30.4 (2002) pp. 253-6.

Roth-Rotem, J., "The Exposition of the Banishment of Ishmael Story (Gen 21,9-21)", *BM* 153 (1998) pp. 113-25.

Russell, E. A., "Some Reflections on Humour in Scripture and Otherwise", *IBS* 13 (1991) pp. 199-210.

Schwartz, J., "Ishmael at Play: On Exegesis and Jewish Society", *HUCA* 66 (1995) pp. 203-21.

Seters, J. Van, "The Problem of Childlessness in Near Eastern Law and the Patriarchs of Israel", *JBL* 87 (1968) p. 401-8.

Sharp, D.B., "On the Motherhood of Sarah: A Yahwistic Theological Comment", *IBS* 20 (1998) pp. 2-14.

Steinberg, N., "Kinship and Gender in Genesis", *BR* 39 (1994) pp. 46-56.

Sutherland, D.D., "The Organization of the Abraham Promise Narratives", *ZAW* 95.3 (1983) pp. 337-43.

Thompson, P.B., "Hagar's Wilderness Experiences", *CJRS* 15.1 (1994) pp. 21-7.

Turnham, T.J., "Ishmael", *BI* 14 (1987) pp. 15-17.

Wenham, G.J., "The Gap between Law and Ethics in the Bible", *JJS* 48 (1997) pp. 17-29.

Wesley, A.K., "Laughter the Best Medicine", *BTF* 33.1 (2001) pp. 198-217.

White, H.C., "Initiation Legend of Ishmael", *ZAW* 87.3 (1975) pp. 267-306.

Yudkowsky, R., "Chaos or Chiasm? The Structure of Abraham's Life", *JBQ* 35.2 (2007) pp. 109-114.

Books

Caird, G.B., *The Language and Imagery of the Bible*, London: Duckworth, 1980.

Callaway, M., *Sing, O Barren One: A Study in Comparative Midrash*, Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1979

Garsiel, M., *Midrashic Name Derivations in the Bible,* Israel: Revivim, 1987.

Gonzalez, A., *Abraham: Father of Believers*, New York: Herder and Herder, 1967.

Gossai, H., *Power and Marginality in the Abraham Narrative*, New York: University Press of America, 1995.

Heard, R.C., *Dynamics of Diselection: Ambiguity in Genesis 12-36 and Ethnic Boundaries in Post-Exilic Judah*, Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001.

Matthews, V.H., & D.C. Benjamin, *Social World of Ancient Israel, 1250-587 B.C.E.,* Peabody: Hendrickson, 1993.

Matthews, V.H., B.M. Levinson, & T.S. Frymer-Kensky, *Gender and Law in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998.

Niditch, S., *Ancient Israelite Religion*, New York: Oxford, 1997.

Noth, M., *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions*, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1972

Radday, Y.T., & A. Brenner, *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*, Sheffield: Almond, 1990.

Roth, M.T., *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor*, Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995.

Sakenfeld, K.D., *Just Wives? Stories of Power & Survival in the Old Testament & Today*, Louisville; London: Westminster John Knox, 2003.

Steinberg, N., *Kinship and Marriage in Genesis: A Household Economics Perspective*, Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993.

Teubal, S.J., *Hagar the Egyptian: The Lost Tradition of the Matriarchs*, San Francisco; New York; Grand Rapids: Harper & Row, 1990.

Teubal, S.J., *Ancient Sisterhood: The Lost Traditions of Hagar and Sarah*, Athens; Ohio: Swallow Pr, 1997.

Thompson, T.L., *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives: The Quest for the Historical Abraham*, Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1974.

Tribble, P., & L.M. Russell, *Hagar, Sarah, and their Children: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006.

Tribble, P., *Texts of Terror*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984.

Vaux, R. de, *Ancient Israel: Social Institutions, Vol. 1*, Toronto: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1965.

Westermann, C., *The Promises to the Fathers*, Philadelphia,1980.

Whedbee, J.W., *The Bible and the Comic Vision*, Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002.

Chapters in Books

Alexander, T.D., "The Hagar Traditions in Genesis Xvi and Xxi", in J.A. Emerton, (ed.), *Studies in the Pentateuch*, Leiden: E J Brill, 1990, pp. 131-148.

Exum, J.C., "'Mother in Israel': A Familiar Figure Reconsidered", in L.M. Russell (ed.), *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985, pp. 73-85.

Exum, J.C., & J.W. Whedbee, "Isaac, Samson, and Saul: Reflections on the Comic and Tragic Visions", in P.R. House (ed.), *Beyond Form Criticism: Essays in Old Testament Literary Criticism*, Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1992, pp. 117-159.

Foster, B.R., "Humor and Wit in the Ancient Near East", in J.M. Sasson & al. (eds.), *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East, Vol 4*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1995, pp. 2459-2469.

Fox, M.V., "Translation and Mimesis", in F.W. Knobloch (ed.), *Biblical Translation in Context*, Bethesda: University Press of Maryland, 2002, p. 207-221.

Goldingay, J., "The Place of Ishmael", in P.R. Davies & D.J.A. Clines (eds.), *The World of Genesis: Persons, Places, Perspectives*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998, pp. 146-149.

Hackett, J.A., "Rehabilitating Hagar: Fragments of an Epic Pattern", in P. L. Day (ed.), *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*, Minneapolis: Fortress Pr, 1989, pp. 12-27.

Harrelson, W., "Law in the Old Testament", in J. K. Bruckner, *Implied Law in the Abraham Narrative: A Literary and Theological Analysis*, London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001, p. 15.

Japhet, S., "The Laws of Manumission of Slaves and the Question of the Relationship Between the Collections of Laws in Pentateuch", in Y. Avishur & J. Blau (eds.), *Studies in Bible and Ancient Near East: Presented to Samuel E Loewenstamm On His 70th Birthday*, Jerusalem: E. Rubinstein's Pub House, 1978, pp. 199-200.

Raabe, P.R., "The Problem of Facile Translations" in Knobloch, F.W. (ed.), *Biblical Translation in Context*, Bethesda: University Press of Maryland, 2002, pp. 195-205.

Rulon-Miller, N., "Hagar: A Woman with an Attitude", in P.R. Davies & D.J.A. Clines (eds.), *The World of Genesis: Persons, Places, Perspectives*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Pr, 1998, pp. 60-89.

Selman, M.J., "Comparative Customs and the Patriarchal Age", in A.R. Millard & D.J. Wiseman (eds.), *Essays on the Patriarchal Narratives*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1980, p. 127.

Spiegel, P.K., "Early Conceptions of Humour: Varieties and Issues", in J.H. Goldstein & P.E. McGhee (eds.), *The Psychology of Humor: Theoretical Perspectives and Empirical Issues*, New York 1972, pp. 4-39.

Trible, P., "The Other Woman: A Literary and Theological Study of the Hagar Narratives", in J.T. Butler, E.W. Conrad & B.C. Ollenburger (eds.), *Understanding the Word: Essays in Honor of Bernhard W Anderson*, Sheffield: JSOT Pr, 1985, pp. 221-246.

Waters, J. "Who was Hagar", in C.H. Felder (ed.), *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1991, pp. 187-205.

Weis, R.D., "Stained Glass Window, Kaleidoscope Or Catalyst: The Implications of Difference in Readings of the Hagar and Sarah Stories", in R.D. Weis & D.M. Carr (eds.), *A Gift of God* in *Due Season: Essays on Scripture and Community* in *Honor of James A. Sanders*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Pr, 1996, pp. 253-273.

Wessels, A., "Can the Children of Abraham be Reconciled? Ishmael and Isaac in the Bible and the Qur'an", in J.D. Gort, H. Jansen & H. M. Vroom (eds), *Religion, Conflict and Reconciliation: Multifaith Ideals and Realities*, New York: Rodopi, 2002, pp. 134-144.

Westbrook, R., "The Female Slave", in V.H. Matthews, B.M. Levinson &T.S. Frymer-Kensky (eds.), *Gender and Law in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East*, 1998, pp. 214-238.

Zakovitch, Y., "Juxtaposition in the Abraham Cycle", in D.P. Wright, D.N. Freedman & A. Hurvitz (eds.), *Pomegranates and Golden Bells: Studies in Biblical, Jewish, and Near Eastern Ritual, Law, and Literature in Honor of Jacob Milgrom*, Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1995, pp. 509-524.

Commentaries & References

Alter, R., *Genesis: Translation and Commentary*, NY; London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996.

Botterweck, G.J., & H. Ringgren (eds.), *The Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974-.

Brown, F., S. Driver, & C. Briggs, *New Brown, Driver, Briggs, Gesenius Hebrew-English Lexicon*, Peabody: Hendrickson, 1979

Brown, R.E., J.A. Fitzmyer, & R.E. Murphy, *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J. : Prentice-Hall, 1990

Davidson, R., *The Cambridge Bible Commentary, New English Bible: Genesis 12-50*, Cambridge: University Press, 1973-

Driver, S.R., *The Book of Genesis*, London: Methuen & Co, 1904.

Fokkelman, J.P., *Narrative Art in Genesis*, Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 1975.

Gunkel, H., J. Blenkinsopp, C. P. Staton (eds.), *Genesis*, Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997.

Hamilton, V. P., *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Genesis. Chapters 18-50*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995.

Hamilton, V.P., *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 18-50*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans,1995.

Jenni E., & C. Westermann (eds.); M.E. Biddle (trans.), *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997.

Lust, J., E. Eynikel, & K. Hauspie (compilers), *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint: Chiefly of the Pentateuch and Twelve Prophets*, Louvain; Dudley: Peeters, 2002.

Niccacci, A., *The Syntax of the Verb in Classical Hebrew Prose,* Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1986.

Rad, G. von, *The Old Testament Library; Genesis: a Commentary,* London: SCM Press, 1970.

Richardson, A., *The Theological Word Book of the Bible,* New York: Macmillan, 1962.

Sarna, N., *Understanding Genesis,* New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1966.

Sarna, N.M., *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis,* Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989.

Speiser, E.A., *Anchor Bible Commentary: Genesis,* Garden City: Doubleday, 1964.

Strong, J., *The New Strong's Expanded Dictionary of Bible Words,* Nashville: Nelson, 2001.

Tov, E., *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible,* Minneapolis; Roftress Press, 1992.

Waltke, B.K. & M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax,* Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990.

Wenham G.J., *Word Biblical Commentary v.2: Genesis 16-50,* Dallas: Word Books, 1994.

Westermann, C., *Genesis 12-36: A Commentary,* Minneapolis: Augsburg Pub. House, Westminster Press, 1961.