

**Isaac in the Old Testament:  
a new interpretation from Genesis 22,  
based on hermeneutical-methodological  
and exegetical investigations**

by

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*It would probably not be worth the trouble of making books if they failed to teach the author something he hadn't known before, if they didn't lead to unforeseen places, if they didn't disperse one toward a strange new relation with himself. The pain and the pleasure of the book is to be an experience.*

– M Foucault

[in Rabinow, P (ed.) 1984. *The Foucault Reader*. New York: Pantheon, 339]

## ABSTRACT

Isaac, the least of the patriarchs in the texts of the Old Testament and in the eyes of its readers, offers a surprising number of possibilities for new avenues of interpretation of the Pentateuch and related texts. These are arrived at in this study by first tracing a number of historical-developmental trajectories relevant to the author, namely from philosophy of science, through the main points from the history of Pentateuch studies in South Africa, via an argued choice for historical exegesis over against a-historical methods, and by means of a brief overview of the major insights that had shaped the scholarly study of the Old Testament patriarchs. The central part of the study is exegetical, with the main focus on Genesis 22, which has proven to be a key text. An overview of the historical issues related to this text is offered. Illustrating the limitations of a-historical exegesis, a narrative reading of Genesis 22 is undertaken, followed by a new historical interpretation of the same text, which draws on all of the foregoing. In the light of this new Genesis 22 interpretation, the other Isaac texts in the Old Testament are reviewed, as they would have been understood in post-exilic inner-Judean identity politics, namely between the traditions of the patriarchal traditions. Drawing throughout on an anecdotal view of Old Testament historiography, a theory proposed on the multiplex or composite nature of the personages of the patriarchs, though of Isaac in particular, and on the idea of the post-exilic inner-Judean identity politics, a creative, critical, historical retelling in almost narrative mode is offered of the history of Isaac in the Old Testament as a conclusion to the study.



## Keywords and phrases

- Isaac
- Genesis 22
- Pentateuch
- Exegetical method
- Pentateuch interpretation in South Africa
- The patriarchs
- The spelling of Isaac's name
- Identity politics
- Textual reinterpretation
- Dating of Old Testament texts

## PREFACE

### How this dissertation came into being

As the research on my chosen theme here progressed, I followed the methodology of testing my findings and insights by means of papers read at research conferences and seminars, and publishing articles and chapters in academic volumes. This means that many of my insights here have grown over time, and have already been through some system of peer evaluation in the to-and-fro of hermeneutical and exegetical debate. Though all the persons involved in a more informal way in such processes, by means of discussions and comments, cannot be named here, I can list the gatherings and publications involved as a means of acknowledging these influences on my studies:

- Conferences and seminars: Pro Pent (Project for the Study of the Pentateuch) pre-seminar, January 2007, Pretoria, and Pro Pent seminars: August 2006, Bass Lake Country Lodge, August 2005, Hammanskraal, and July 2004, Munich; IOSOT (International Organization for the Study of the Old Testament) congress, July 2007, Ljubljana; SBL (Society for Biblical Literature) congress, Vienna, July 2007; OTSSA (Old Testament Society of South Africa) congress, Pretoria, September 1997;
- Publications involved: *Journal for Semitics / Tyskrif vir Semitistiek*, 2008 & 2006; *HTS Theological Studies*, 2008; Le Roux, J & Otto, E (eds) 2007. *The Pentateuch between synchrony and diachrony*. New York: T & T Clark; *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, 2007; Otto, E & le Roux, J (eds). 2005. *A critical study of the Pentateuch. An encounter between Europe and Africa*

(Altes Testament und Moderne, Band 20). Münster: LIT Verlag; *Old Testament Essays*, 2004 & 1998.

### **How this dissertation should be read**

Above all, when undertaking this study, I had wanted to be new: to say something different; to make a thoroughly creative contribution to the field of Old Testament scholarship. In order to do so, the initial, avowed intention with this study was that it should therefore not be cast in the South African mould, namely of intense methodological awareness and debate. Rather, I had wanted it to be a dissertation in the German tradition, where everything relevant and more is said in intensely referenced text, with excurses and finely nuanced debate in the footnotes, to cover all angles. However, that did not render the novel insights I above all longed for. The dissertation was then reconceptualised as one in the British tradition, in which much is assumed on the part of readers: everything is not said, but much is implied, in such a way that only the informed, specialist reader one would expect with a monograph would grasp the finely-aimed allusions, but with the writing style more elegant, more prosaic. Here too, however, an original insight into my subject matter was not forthcoming; another rewriting was required. Reinvestigating my own academic roots, which meant placing my intellectual identity in explicit discourse with the primary and secondary texts on Isaac, somehow, though, *did* render that “aha”-moment (as meant by Bühler 1907:14); in fact, more than one, and these have been taken up in this study. This is, after all, then, a thoroughly South African study: it was the methodological heritage of South African Old Testament scholarship that had unexpectedly provided the shafts of insight I had hoped for.

Readers with an eye for *Kompositionsgeschichte* will thus be able still to detect all three these ways of writing a dissertation in this, the end product: the at times energetic source referencing (though now *sans* the detailed footnote debates, for the most part edited out); the at times finer nuances (though now often with the references again inserted); the ever-present methodological self-awareness. As was the case with the Pentateuch editors, however, these “uneven edges” are deliberately left in here, by authorial decision, as an acknowledgement of the ways by which I have come to this station, and as an indication too, to readers, of the route that was taken.

The early expectations by some of the academic discussants on my topic was that, most probably, a study on Isaac would simply teach us that Isaac cannot teach us anything new on the patriarchs of ancient Israel. This would have gone against my instinct to be innovative; however, I could made peace with that, in the light of the contributions of the most influential Old Testament scholar of the previous century, Gerhard von Rad, now being regarded as, mostly, “fruchtbare Mißverständnisse” (as Smend 1989:226 characterised him). Another of von Rad’s characteristics, though, was his drive to be new, which had great influence on me (cf. Lombaard 1994). To that initial impetus I have remained true, with the insights offered here. Even if they should in time turn out to be *Mißverständnisse*, the best any scholar could hope for is that they would be, at least in some form, *Fruchtbar*.

## Those to whom I am indebted

Among all the persons who have had an impact on my academic work, I would like to thank, in chronological order, those whose influence I still feel most directly: JA du Rand, from whom I first learnt the importance of research, and the narrative method; AB du Toit and WS Prinsloo, who taught me structuralism and tied me to the text; W Vosloo, with whom I saw in practice the movement between ancient text and modern interpretation; JH le Roux, from whom I learnt historical exegesis, philosophy of history, proper theologising, a deep intellectualism and – based on these four – a piety drenched in these and other aspects of life *coram Deo* which has the strength to weather storms; and E Otto, from whom I learnt the importance of vigorous debate, both among colleagues and within the Old Testament texts.

Academic work is always highly individualistic; at the very same time, it is always a social event of sorts, with all the voices in one's reading history influencing, in ways that cannot ever be described, the words that flow from one's fingers. Then again, a writing such as this remains the responsibility of the individual author. Few things can be as rewarding as the academic loneliness of the long distance author...

To my wife, Dr Marlize Rabe (Sociology, Unisa), our children Stephan and Maria (our personal 9/11, though in age only), my parents, Maans and Anna Lombaard, my supervisor, Prof. Jurie le Roux, colleagues and friends, who have all shown their support in so many ways, my sincere thanks.

11 March 2009



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## CHAPTER 1: THE QUESTIONS AT STAKE

"The determinative lineage defining the people of Israel comprises the series of the three Patriarchs – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" (Malamat 1994:195). Yet, among these three father figures, Isaac is the foster child – in the Old Testament itself<sup>1</sup>, in Old Testament scholarship, in religious circles and in the public mind (so too Boase 2001:312). Apart from the Genesis 22\* account of Isaac's near-offering by Abraham – the popular renown of which may well be attributed to the psychologically disturbing, hence narratologically evocative idea of child sacrifice – Isaac remains largely disregarded. The surprising scarceness of references to Isaac in the Old Testament and the associated relative dearth of research into this patriarch thus run parallel to the public and ecclesial lack of attention to this figure. Such a state of affairs alone would merit investigation into the subject of Isaac in the Old Testament.

However, on theoretical grounds too a study of Isaac is warranted. The relative theoretical stability for almost a century since Wellhausen's influential theory on the composition of the literature of the Old Testament, particularly the Pentateuch, has been upset since the 1970s. None of the current rival theories has however gained such broad acceptance as to be regarded as, now, "normal science" (in the Kuhnian sense - cf. Kuhn 1962). In Isaac one finds a theme of manageable proportions, when compared to e.g. the Abram / Abraham or Jacob / Israel cycles in the Pentateuch, by means of which to reflect on the validity of approaches to the

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<sup>1</sup> As e.g. Andersen 1994:250-251 indicates on genealogical grounds only, Isaac is offered greater prominence than most characters encountered in Genesis. Yet, compared to the extent of the material devoted to the other two patriarchs, Isaac features poorly.

Pentateuch. Isaac is thus diminutive enough a figure or theme in Old Testament literature – both primary and secondary – to serve as a not too unwieldy test case for reviewing the extent to which Pentateuch theories can lead to an understanding of the patriarchs. Underlying this aspect, and thoroughly determinative of it, is the philosophical view of history subscribed to by scholars, often as an unrecognised or under-recognised influence.

Indeed, with each of the Pentateuch theories, the devil remains in the details. The validity each theory holds in its broad brush strokes across the Pentateuchal canvas seems less forceful, however, once detailed, penetrating questions are asked<sup>2</sup>. Precisely such exercises have over the past few decades given rise to a number of substantially altered pictures of how the Pentateuch had come into being. A theme such as Isaac holds promise of possibly being a helpful interpretative key within this recurring debate on the compositional history of the Pentateuch.

It is for these reasons that this study, as presented here, is structured first to trace the underlying influences – philosophical, historical, exegetical – which led to the insights in the subsequent exegetical and interpretative parts of the study. Academic integrity demands a laying bare of presuppositions too: scholarship is always co-determined by the intellectual spirit of the times the researcher either accepts or reacts to. These hermeneutical-methodological considerations will be followed by fresh exegetical investigations into the Isaac texts in the Old Testament, with the text

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<sup>2</sup> Zenger 1995a:102 formulates this point as follows: "...die planvolle Komposition der Endgestalt der Tora/des Pentateuch ... war ein Blick aus weiter Ferne. Aus der Nähe betrachtet ist alles viel komplizierter."

of Genesis 22\* proving to be the key passage in this regard. In closing follows a critical retelling of the story of Isaac, as far as it could be traced in the exegetical sections, summarising the conclusions, and hinting at further implications the interpretation on offer here can have for the understanding of the patriarchs in the first instance, but also for other figures in the Old Testament.

The main parts of the dissertation therefore are:

- Argued acknowledgement of the influences that have informed this study;
- Investigations into the Isaac texts, with Genesis 22\* as the prime pericope;
- A critical retelling of the Isaac tradition we encounter in the Old Testament.

Let us then turn, as a start, to four points of orientation which have guided the rest of this study.

## **CHAPTER 2: FOUR POINTS OF ORIENTATION: PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE; PENTATEUCH SCHOLARSHIP IN SOUTH AFRICA; A METHODOLOGICAL CHOICE; THE PATRIARCHS IN CRITICAL RESEARCH**

Insights, though always born afresh through a creative process the dynamics of which cannot with any validity be precisely determined, are also, at the very same time, borne by a series of external influences which have become internalised in an investigator. Though such influences, which may be described as the spirit of the times or the intellectual climate within one works, cannot ever be fully acknowledged, the main influences often can be teased out. That is what is attempted in this chapter. Four of the main series of influences which have formed and informed, in other words: which in very concrete ways have made possible the exegetical insights on offer in Chapter 3, are acknowledged here in Chapter 2. Naturally, in the scholarly enterprise, such shaping influences are not merely confessed to, but are argued. Either in explicitly building forth on what has gone before, or in reacting against past and present contexts by critical rejection, the own “intellectual innards”, that is: the determinative undercurrents which give rise to the scholarly identity of the researcher, are to the extent possible layed bare.

This is done not because of an inherent sense of insecurity, as post-modernist scholarship has often been accused of, but for the exact opposite reason; that is: for the sake of intellectual openness – so that the interpreter may be interpreted. This section is thus an attempt at giving voice, to some extent at least, to the communal aspect of the academic enterprise.



The four most prominent aspects acknowledged here, are:

- The philosophy of science which has fundamentally determined my studies;
- The main points of local Pentateuch scholarship, which are both reacted to and built forth on;
- The deliberate and argued methodological choice in favour of historical readings of biblical texts; and
- The main turning points in modern research into the Old Testament patriarchs, in overview.

## **2.1 Considerations from philosophy of science**

Not to beg the always-present implicit questions, the reasons for the preponderance of historical-critical theories (as opposed to text-immanent readings), as well as the reasons for the number of divergent historically-oriented theories on the composition of the Pentateuch, call for discussion. Why do historical theories dominate the scene? Upon which follows directly: why do the historical theories differ so dramatically? These two matters are inherently connected, since both relate fundamentally to underlying philosophies of science that, though seldom indicated, are determinative of what has happened to date in critical Pentateuch scholarship.

### 2.1.1 History as scholarly paradigm

The tradition of science that has developed most strongly in the Western(ised) world, and as far as - for our purposes here - Old Testament scholarship is concerned, most influentially in and from German circles, is a thoroughly historical enterprise. By this is meant that, whatever the subject matter under investigation (be it the universe, *homo sapiens*, language, political theory, philosophy, literature, and so forth), it is considered to be understood and explained once the way<sup>3</sup> it has developed into its present form is made clear. The purpose of scholarship, in this model of science, is that we gain knowledge of how our subject matter came into being – differently put: how it evolved to reach its present state. Much of modern Western theology can be understood in this way: from the basic *ad fontes* call of the Reformation (cf. e.g. Tracy 1987:252-267), to the search for *ipsissima verba* of Jesus or the Old Testament prophets (cf. e.g. Soulen 2001:40-41, 88), to the recurring *religionsgeschichtliche* interest (cf. e.g., most recently, Albertz 1992), to the demythologising quest in the biblical sciences (for which Bultmann is most famous; cf. e.g. Bultmann 1984). This historical approach to science has often been accompanied by what may be characterised as optimistic expectations (cf. le Roux

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<sup>3</sup> This “way” involves not only the trajectory along which something had developed, but also the factors that had been determinative in steering a phenomenon in this direction and that. These factors may include almost haphazard historical confluence (for example, how relatively unknown Old Testament scholars come to influence Old Testament scholarship, namely via the work of Max Weber - see Otto 2001: e.g. 3 & 8-9, 139-143), or may include factors regarded by Old Testament scholars as fundamentally influential, such as ideas (Hegel, influencing Old Testament scholars such as Wellhausen 1963) or the economy (Marx, influencing Old Testament scholars such as Gottwald 1983).

1993:114-140), namely that the application of (positivist) scholarship would yield truth, and (romanticist) ideals of laying bare “facts” about what had “really” happened, or, for the sake of the present study, the “true” identities of the person(s) referred to in a biblical account.

### **2.1.2 Idealisms disappointed**

Such optimistic expectations of the pioneering stage of scholarship within this philosophy of science were difficult to sustain for later writers, mainly because almost all findings came, in time, to be contested. In the case of Pentateuch scholarship, substantial variations within the widely accepted Wellhausenian approach to solving the riddle of the evolution of the Pentateuch texts were concluded to. Within a philosophy of science which seeks truth, and seeks truth via controlled method, this indicated to some that new methods were called for. Those who grew disillusioned with the inconclusiveness of the proposed historically-oriented answers or theories, therefore proposed alternative approaches, often still with the optimistic assumption that, now, “solutions” would be found. Yet, as will be set out more fully below, approaches such as narrative and structural analyses of the texts of the Old Testament ultimately failed the positivist requirement of unanimity of results, a unanimity which would then have served as a guarantor of “truth”.

In addition, and vitally important, these non-historical approaches could not answer the research problems which historically-oriented research into the biblical texts had uncovered. Once opened, the Pandora’s box of historical questions cannot be closed: the European mind and, hence, science as it to a great extent remains

understood among scholars internationally, have a strongly evolutionistic, that is, historical slant<sup>4</sup>. This applies no less to theology as a scholarly activity. The alternative approaches to reading the texts from the Bible provided fruitful new pathways, both as avenues in themselves<sup>5</sup> and in time as enrichment to the established historical approaches<sup>6</sup>, but by no means have the older roads been made redundant<sup>7</sup>.

The latter may be ascribed to at least two reasons. First is the already mentioned feature that non-historical approaches could not solve the penetrating and fundamental questions raised by historical-critical research. Second and equally

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<sup>4</sup> This approach has been given a thoroughly different, and to my mind theologically very productive (cf. Lombaard 2007c:1-10), life with the recent publication of van Huyssteen 2006.

<sup>5</sup> These avenues never truly attained the Kuhnian status of “normal science”, though: even in their rejection of the historically-oriented readings of the Pentateuch, the non-historical readings retain both as their point of departure and as their constant partner for dialogue the historical readings. In this respect, at least, it could be argued that the historical readings remain the mainstream of Old Testament scholarship, trends to the contrary (cf. e.g. Prinsloo 1995:459-469) despite.

<sup>6</sup> For instance, the use of narratological language within historical-critical research has always been common, and remains so after the rise in popularity of literary (i.e. text-as-literature) interpretations, albeit now with the literary/narrative concepts having gained greater depth of meaning. Westermann's extensive use of narratives in his Genesis commentary - certainly one of the high points in the history of critical scholarship - provides a good case in point (cf. e.g. Westermann 1974:24-89).

<sup>7</sup> *Contra* a “shift... from history to story” (Stendahl 1983:4) perceived earlier; cf. Norton 1993:350<sup>3</sup>. See also Ryken 1984:11-12. Complementarity - of different sorts and to differing extents - is usually accepted of historical approaches, on the one hand, and on the other, synchronic / rhetorical / canonical (à la Childs 1979) / new literary approaches (cf. Wenham 1987:xxxiv; Coggins 1984/5:9-14; Muilenburg 1969:18; Alonso Schökel 1985:7; Schmid 1991:1, 84-88; Jonker 1997). On complementarity across this divide, though, see below.

important are theological reasons: once doubt had been raised – to employ for the moment here the language of positivism – about the factual accuracy (i.e. the historical reliability) of the biblical narratives and about the textual integrity (i.e. the compositional unity) of the biblical texts, historical-critical research *had* to be sustained. The “truth” about these matters simply had to be uncovered. The insight that philosophical assumptions about the nature of truth (objective *versus* relational *versus* subjective), the nature of historiography (positivist *versus* perspectivist) and the nature of the biblical text (“inerrancy” *versus* “humanity”) were more determinative of both the problem and its proposed solutions than were the historical approaches to biblical exegesis themselves, took some time to gain acceptance. Beside such insights, historical-critical readings of the Bible with changed philosophical underpinnings (often implicit) had become less intimidating and, surprisingly for many, had become theologically edifying. For a Western cultural conscience in which history is fundamental, researching the involvement of God in the *history* of humanity as reflected upon in the biblical texts seems innately appropriate; hence, the historical-critical methodologies gained theological legitimacy, even urgency<sup>8</sup>.

From a broad perspective such as this, hence, the existence of historical-critical theories on the Bible is thus mandated culturally, theologically and scientifically. This

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<sup>8</sup> This, to the point that classical historical-critical exegesis can become a refuge for evangelical concerns (e.g. Koster 2000:130-140), in the face of the theologically uncomfortable assumptions and implications related to the non-referentiality of texts in other approaches (see Thiselton 1992:597-604). To some extent now, again, as was the case when the historical-critical exegetical enterprise took root, *apologetic* reasons thus lie at the heart of this exegetical approach (cf. Barton 2007).

explains, to some extent at least<sup>9</sup>, both the preponderance and the endurance of historically-oriented work on the biblical text, when considered in relation to, for example, structural and narratological studies.

### 2.1.3 More-than-one-ness as customary theoretical state

The problem of the variety of mutually exclusive theories on the Pentateuch (among other biblical *corpora*) remains, though.

At present, for instance, at least half a dozen historical theories on the composition of the Pentateuch vie for scholarly attention (cf. e.g. Zenger 2006:86-88, 92-123). This number of theories, all of which but one postdate the 1970s, show a kind of response different from those of the non-historical reactions against the Wellhausenian approach during the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the uncertainties of results yielded in the Wellhausenian tradition does not lead within these historical proposals to a search for a different kind of method, but to a search for a better, yet still wholly historical explanation. The evolution of the Pentateuch into its present shape remains the primary focus.

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<sup>9</sup> Other reasons may be posited too, such as the nature of – for our purposes here – the Pentateuchal material in particular. As a point of comparison, the Pretoria school of structuralism (cf. Lombaard 2001a:468) finds its primary field of textual application in the Psalms; to a significant extent, this is because the Psalms lend themselves better to such analyses than does, say, the Pentateuch. Similarly, the Pentateuch by its very nature calls forth historical questions. The nature of the texts elicit certain readings more readily than others.

Naturally, this theoretical diversity implies that no firm consensus exists in contemporary Pentateuch studies. Precisely this state of affairs has been a much maligned aspect of this field of study (cf. e.g. Fohrer 1988:243-254; Lohfink 1988:638-641; Schmid 1991:87-88). However, another perspective on this variety of Pentateuch theories may carry greater validity: that any number of competing theses indicate the *healthy condition* of the discipline, with lively – at times even harsh (cf. Lombaard & le Roux 2002:1857) – debate, and ongoing primary research into a problem that certainly escapes simple solution.

Perhaps, then, the despair expressed at times at the state of Pentateuch theory has less to do with the variety of rival theories on offer than with a combination of the demanding complexity of the subject matter itself, dishearteningly so for many, on the one hand, and on the other hand, more fundamentally, the continuing underlying philosophical assumptions in much of the academic world about the end<sup>10</sup> of science – that a final answer, and if not that, then at least a “best answer” must be concluded to. Whereas the former point on the complexity of the Pentateuch as subject matter requires no proof, the latter point requires further exposition.

Science under its modernist cloak (cf. Lombaard & Froneman 2006:152-256, 2004a:2-9; 2002a) does not accept as part of its outer apparel a fundamentally existential engagement with a chosen subject matter, namely, quite simply,

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<sup>10</sup> The dual meaning of “end” is intentional: both the idea that science has a purpose, namely to unveil the “truth”, and the consequent implication that, should that be done, the purpose of science would have been served to conclusion, are referred to here.

"because" - like Mount Everest - "it is there!"<sup>11</sup> Engagement with a topic for the sake of intellectual challenge, or joy, or calling, or chance, may at best – and then only grudgingly – be donned by modernist science as an undergarment, which is for the sake of propriety covered by more acceptable outer garments ("objectivity", "method", "control", and other protocols of science) without ever being discussed in polite academic society. Science in this way of thinking is, above all, about discovering the truth by means of certain accepted rational endeavours – though precisely what constitutes rationality is hardly ever considered outside of Philosophy.

Such a model of science admits of no limits: it is utterly positive that given enough resources and the diligent application of its protocols, solutions to problems of understanding will be found. As a corollary, this model of science cannot bear the existence of more than one acceptable theory, all mutually exclusive, as a solution to a problem. Furthermore, an accepted theory is regarded as a vessel of truth – the latter understood more or less as correspondence between what occurs in "reality" and our understanding of these occurrences. Hence, much literature has been devoted to the formulation of criteria for choosing a single best theory, in the eventuality that multiple theories propose concurrent solutions. The criteria to decide on such a theoretical guarantor of truth include the internal coherence of a given theory, its explanatory width, concord with other theories in related fields, its heuristic value, and its relative simplicity (cf. e.g. Hempel 1965; Stegmüller 1976:53-54, 122-133; Weimer 1979; Dilworth 1981; Kitcher 1988:167-187).

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<sup>11</sup> This was the response of Alpinist George Mallory (1886-1924) to the question of why one should want to climb the highest mountain on earth.



These very criteria themselves reveal a model of science not devised to deal with unmanageably complex subject matter, such as human beings and their enterprises, except in reductionist ways, such as behaviourism, or – the ultimate power play of positivist science – by ejecting fields of scholarship, such as theology, philosophy and ethics from the precincts of legitimate science. Multiple truths are anathema in this model of knowledge. Order, the hallmark of such science, cannot bear contradiction. Truth is, simply, singular.

A different, less objectivist and more humanist approach to science, is to view theory not as a vessel of truth, hence supra-human, but as giving expression to substantial understanding of, and an aid to, further insight into a given subject matter by an individual scholar or, intersubjectively, by a group of scholars. Not the theory, but the persons involved are the carriers of science. Simultaneously, science is not constituted by series of single facts which are now above human elucidation, but by series of coherent insights by a scholar or within a scholarly community. This approaches even an existential view of science, and is applicable to all pursuits of knowledge, with science understood in its simplest form as intellectual engagement with one's subject matter (and the subject matter would be come by in any number of ways, not thrust "objectively" on one).

#### **2.1.4 The scholar and the scholars**

Despite the importance of the intersubjective dynamic of a scholarly community, as mediating factor in scholarship, science in this approach remains also an individualistic affair. No two scholars are in complete agreement. I offer my insights

along with, or in the face of, extant interpretations, and my analysis may or may not find a certain degree of acceptance or resonance within my scholarly community. Even when acceptance of a proposed insight or sets of insights (that is, theories) occur, by me or by colleagues, this too constitutes either an individual's or individuals' acceptance. Though broader society may be much affected by a proposed insight or theory, the theory remains an utterly individualistic affair to each who – in each case, for different sets of reasons – accepts it.

Such a model of science allows scholars to find meaning in different and competing theories, such as has become the case with the Pentateuch, since each theory constitutes a certain individual's understanding, or a group's, within a given set of circumstances. Science is thus perspectivist (cf. Lombaard 2004a:2-9; Lombaard & Froneman 2006:151-158), in a dual sense: theories offer broad interpretational perspectives, *and* engagement with a field of scholarship includes taking cognisance of those interpretational perspectives extant in the field. The existence of a variety of competing theories is therefore no detractor from science, in this model, but its *essence*. The way in which the individual scholar engages with the theories – the *process* of science – is not scientific because of some set of criteria for judging any variety of theories, but because the engagement is *intellectual*. The mind has been applied with specialist dedication. The subject matter is scrutinised; the widest possible range of applicable literature is reviewed; arguments are weighed and conclusions evaluated; in this critical process, some propositions are found acceptable and others not; during the course of this critical engagement one or more theories may seem more attractive than others, or if none such is found, a new

thesis may be formed; conclusions are left for others to review in recurring scholarly engagement.

A broad (that is, popular) culture and a smaller, scientific culture that can accept this kind of view of science will not seek to restrict the areas of scholarly engagement, but would welcome all spheres of investigation academics find themselves drawn to. Academics are, in this line of thinking, never managed; only encouraged<sup>12</sup>. Relevance cannot be prescribed (cf. Lombaard 2006a:144-155), in much the same way as certain fields of inquiry and research results may for the sake of academic freedom not be proscribed. In this view of academia, science is science not because society (or perhaps more accurately: influential sectors of society, such as politicians, state bureaucrats, or leaders of “big business”) allows it or defines it or requires it, but only because the broader culture implicitly values the existence of intellectuals and their scholarly engagements as part of the art of living well. Like superior cuisine, fine wine, good music and engaging company, exceptional intellectual rendezvous enrich life.

Hence, even competing theories may be appreciated by an individual researcher for their value, and may be weighed, apart from their explanatory value, in aesthetic terms too. The elegance of a theory becomes as much a criterion for its acceptance, or not, in such an existentialist or humanist view of science, as does the intellectually satisfactory nature of it. The explanatory and, where applicable, predictive powers of a theory are however not the full measure of the value of that theory. Very often, a

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<sup>12</sup> Herein lies, to my mind, the heart of the problem at many universities worldwide, where a managerialist approach to university leadership dominates – cf. Lombaard 2006b:71-84.

theory fully comes into its own only when one encounters what it renders interesting, that is, what is left *unexplained* (cf. Burawoy 1991:3). It is precisely these unexplained areas that form the arenas of contestation between different theories, and in the Kuhnian model of science (cf. Kuhn 1962), provide the possible seeds of an imminent paradigm shift, and in the Popperian model of science (cf. Popper 1968), fundamentally constitute the status of a theory as truly scientific. Naturally, following this line of reasoning, one finds oneself pushed in scholarship towards the spheres of deep-seated uncertainty and relativity, even relativism. That is appropriate. These states of insecurity are inherent both to existentialism and the continued pursuit of science. Since the latter entails the advancement of understanding, it inherently implies rendezvous with uncertainties. In this respect, scholarship equals life itself: vitality acquires its vigour most clearly on the brink of death. The need for scholarship is most clearly felt where the boundaries of extant knowledge have been reached.

#### **2.1.5 On to the next...**

Although this would in one sense be the perfect point at which to move on to the text of Genesis 22, in which being on the brink of death is the issue at stake in another way, three further matters of orientation remain to be discussed in this chapter devoted to primary issues of scholarly points of reference. The first of these concerns an interpretation of the history of Pentateuch scholarship in South Africa.

## **2.2 Of serpents, reeds, understanding, and turns. Some perspectives on implied apologetics and recent Pentateuch theory**

The matter of some local (that is: South African, though in a somewhat loose sense) Pentateuch interpretations is brought to the fore in this part of the study. Though, certainly, the whole of local Pentateuch scholarship is by no means taken into review here (for that, see le Roux 1993:88-203), some influences of the past half-century are described in order to help draw some of the intentional parameters of the present study.

### **2.2.1 A continuation of a history...**

The history of the churches in South Africa has to a substantial extent, and in various ways, also been a history of the scholarly interpretation of the Bible. Where the latter has on occasion not sat well with church authorities, far-reaching conflict had ensued. The most prominent earlier cases in this regard include the figures of John Colenso (see e.g. Erasmus 1986) and Johannes du Plessis (see e.g. Nicholls 1997). In two substantial works, but in quite different ways, the later historical repercussions of these earlier impulses have been traced, namely in le Roux's *A story of two ways. Thirty years of Old Testament scholarship in South Africa* (1993) and in Deist's *Ervaring, rede en metode in Skrifuitleg. 'n Wetenskapshistoriese ondersoek na Skrifuitleg in die Ned. Geref. Kerk 1840-1990* (1994). Building forth on these two works of socio-theological history, and advancing their time frame from the early 1990s to include also the present, the way in which particularly critical Pentateuch

theory in South Africa has had to be accompanied by something of an apologetic tradition, is outlined in its major points here.

### **2.2.2 The five-headed serpent**

In *The Old Testament according to Spike Milligan*, a single note (Milligan 1994:5) relates to South Africa:

Now the serpent was more subtle than beasts of the field; he said unto woman: 'Come and eat the fruit of this tree.' Woman said, 'Nay, if we eat or touch it we die.' And the serpent said, 'Fear not, they are not from South Africa,' whereupon she ate and gave of it to her husband.

British comedian Milligan's parody may, for our purposes here, be used as a metaphor of sorts, in which the wily Pentateuch invites its readers to try to come to an understanding of it. Scholars may recoil, as hinted at above already, in trepidation at its complexity. Yet, this five-headed beast, the Pentateuch, does after all assuage our fears; we will – in either prophetic or apocalyptic mode – eat from this book. To recoup here the earlier metaphor: though we know that, always with Pentateuch theory, the devil remains in the details, Pentateuch scholars remain keen to pass on to others (uninterested spectators, or willing initiates) their broad understanding, inviting those attracted to share in the intellectual feast.

Leaving this now strained, and mixed, metaphor aside, the point remains: the Pentateuch continues to challenge our theories of its composition (cf. e.g. Wellhausen 1963, Blum 1990, Houtman 1994, Carr 1996, Braulik 1998:125-141, Van

Seters 1999, and Otto 2000). However, taken as a group, Pentateuch theorists have had another front on which to defend their enterprise, namely that of criticism of their critical work. Though not always experienced as directly as overt rejection of the historical enterprise, still, a sense has often remained with critical Pentateuch scholars that they have some explaining to do...

In what follows, three ways are indicated in which this has been done by influential Old Testament scholars<sup>13</sup>, all of whom either are from or have a strong South African connection. Drawing on this synopsis, a few concluding remarks are made on – unintentionally – again three possible ways this could develop over the next decades.

### **2.2.3 The reed that has been bent**

AH van Zyl, University of Pretoria Old Testament professor from 1966, followed a very specific technique in conveying, to his students mostly, his views of the layeredness of the Pentateuch texts (van Zyl 1975:73-98). While his strongly confessional style has been analysed (le Roux 1993:141-152), which included stressing by repetition the divine inspiration of the human authors of the Pentateuch texts, little has been said of his rhetorical style. It is through precisely this aspect, though, that one is alerted to van Zyl's sense that he has had to tread carefully, not only because of what may well have been personal convictions (Brown 1979:146; le

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<sup>13</sup> It would be difficult to include here the work of the at present most influential Old Testament scholar in South Africa, JH le Roux, since he is also the supervisor of this study. Cf. however my article on him: Lombaard 2006f:912-925; also Lombaard 2001a:467-478.

Roux 1993:144), but most particularly because the ideas he had wanted to convey were what may be termed "a difficult sell" to his intended audience.

Van Zyl's rhetorical strategy operated as follows: in the conclusion to his three editions of *Gods Woord in mensetaal*, van Zyl uses the example of certain Boer generals from the Anglo-Boer War (now also called the South African War) and how stories about them were circulated differently in different rural Afrikaner circles, to explain the uneven emphases found in the textual layers of the Pentateuch (van Zyl 1971:138, 1975:239, 1976:239). In addition, van Zyl employs another metaphor, namely that of reeds. In a personalised, almost intimate style, he briefly explains how as a youth he had woven reed whips, and how the tiny reeds were plaited together, one into the other, almost seamlessly, to create the end product (van Zyl 1971:74, 1975:101, 1976:101; van Zyl then repeatedly continues to allude to this imagery in the relevant sections of these works). With this, then, van Zyl provides his students with an analogous explanation of how the Pentateuch's textual layers had been intertwined.

Apart from the fact that such imagery seems somewhat quaint to later generations of Old Testament scholars, the metaphor is by no means innocent; as novelist Primo Levi (1988:77) warns: "Beware of analogies"! Van Zyl, with both the more elaborate reed-weaving image and the nationalistic military illustration, plays on the Afrikaner's primarily small town / rural-oriented sense of identity at the time (this can also be seen in other cultural activities of that period – cf. Coetzee 2000). Whether by unreflected impulse or by carefully thought-out design, van Zyl in this manner speaks to the "soul" of his Afrikaans readership: romanticised associations of cultural



heartland values are played upon. To try for a moment to formulate an understanding as it may have been experienced by Afrikaans students in the 1970s: the Word of God came into being in a safely homely way.

The point here is not that this rhetorical strategy is in any sense "bad"; however, van Zyl experiences within a conservative socio-theological climate (cf. le Roux 1993:16-26) the need for a kind of apologetic which will circumvent any possible strong reactions against critical theory, in which he himself was versed well enough. The Pentateuch texts thus could not just be analysed and presented as such to students; more was required: the case had to be explained with care; defended, even.

#### **2.2.4 Minding the mind**

FE Deist may be used as an example from the next generation of Old Testament scholars who has had to develop a strategy with which to coat, or even: to justify his historically-oriented views on the textual composition process of the Pentateuch. Although a freer academic climate than van Zyl's may be posited for Deist, aided also by the fact that he never held a church-funded university chair, the general religious climate within which Deist lived certainly was still (and to a significant extent remains so) conservative, even fundamentalist (cf. Deist 1994:7-24, 355-365). To the latter audience, Deist communicated through a great number of popular or popular-scientific publications on theological matters (e.g. Deist 1986), with his literary work (e.g. Deist 1987) assisting in establishing his credentials as a theologian with a "common touch". With his theologically trained readership, though, Deist engaged by means of an entirely different strategy – through "mind games"; put

differently: by analysing what it means to understand. Through an *intellectual* pathway, Deist could waylay fears and criticisms of his historically-oriented views. Formulated in an alternate way: Deist "minded" his own business and that of the elite who would read his scholarly publications. It is noteworthy therefore that in the same year as Deist's history of Pentateuch theory, under the characteristically inventive title of *Mosaïek van Moses*<sup>14</sup>, appears, namely 1976, his first hermeneutics book, *Historiese heuristiek, teologiese hermeneutiek en Skrifgesag*, is also published<sup>15</sup>.

This sets the trend for Deist's publications along these lines: fully-fledged historical-critical studies (e.g. Deist 1988b), along with contextually-oriented theologico-political publications (e.g. Deist 1983), complemented with at times painstakingly detailed analyses of what it means to "understand" (e.g. Deist & le Roux 1987; Deist 1994<sup>16</sup>). Deist's apologetics was thus an affair of the mind. "How the mind works" was his buffer, implicit or covert in many instances, in protecting him against reactions to his ideas on "how the Old Testament works"; that is, on how he understood the coming into being of the Old Testament texts (the historical or evolutionary form of

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<sup>14</sup> An English translation of this work was only to appear twelve years later – Deist 1988a.

<sup>15</sup> It has been brought to my attention that Deist's 1976 *Historiese heuristiek, teologiese hermeneutiek en Skrifgesag* was in fact written as a direct response to criticisms from church circles on what he had been teaching his students at the University of Port Elizabeth (now renamed the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University) at the time, which further strengthens the case that Deist's writings on hermeneutics were to a substantial extent at least, if not wholly so, an apologetic strategy.

<sup>16</sup> Along with Deist's 1988b textual criticism work, I regard this 1994-book – *Ervaring, rede en metode in Skrifuitleg* – as the crown of Deist's publications, even if it was – in his own words to me – "killed by silence" ("doodgeswyg"), and in my view also by very poor marketing; cf. Lombaard 1998a:645-646; 2001:471<sup>8</sup>; 2005b.

scholarship referred to earlier). Though this approach did not save Deist from cases being brought against him in church quarters, his literary output on hermeneutics was such that it simply had to be respected by the church leadership and by less historically-oriented academic colleagues.

For Deist, then, it was in a certain sense a case of mind over against matter: the difficulty of understanding runs parallel to the difficulty of the Old Testament text. Namely: understanding understanding and understanding the Pentateuch are both thoroughly theoretically embedded enterprises<sup>17</sup>. This "theoretical approach" was Deist's practice of scholarship (cf. le Roux 1992:4-5, 9-10).

### 2.2.5 Otto's turn

The Munich Old Testament scholar E Otto has, through his association with J le Roux and as *extraordinarius* for Old Testament at the University of Pretoria, become the most prominent influence within the present generation of South African Pentateuch scholarship (cf. le Roux 2005:1-21). His theory, that the beginnings of the Pentateuch should be sought in pre-deuteronomistic Deuteronomy's reaction to neo-Assyrian imperial law (cf. e.g. Otto 1999:364-378; Lombaard 2008e:119-138), and that this is played out in an exilic–post-exilic debate between the Pentateuchal authorial groups of D and P (cf. e.g. Otto 2004:23-35), has become one of the leading contenders on the at times highly contested international marketplace of compositional theories on the Pentateuch. However, as had happened exactly 200

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<sup>17</sup> In this respect, the thoughts of Deist and of his long-time colleague and friend Jurie le Roux (cf. e.g. le Roux 2001:444-457) run along the exact same lines.

years previously, in 2005 (with precursors in e.g. Otto 2004:14-35), again everything changed: in a University of Pretoria lecture (Otto 2005) memorialising WML de Wette's 1805-published theory, that the law book the discovery of which is reported in 2 Kings 22 was proto-Deuteronomy, Otto put forward what may be called the Pentateuch's theory of the Pentateuch (cf. Otto 2007:19-28).

Breaking with the established scholarly analytical tradition that the Pentateuch redactor-authors either had little insight into the roughshod nature of the editorial work they were doing, or that they were for various proposed reasons too timid to conceal their sources and their work on them, Otto proposed that the textual inconsistencies were purposeful signs (Otto 2005:5-8; 2007:23-25). These "signs" were left in the text, even introduced, by the editors, in order for their intended readers to note the way the text had been put together. Assumed, thus, are both highly gifted redactional craftsmanship and a decidedly intellectual, textually vigilant readership. Though the former has often been asserted, most notably over the last three decades by a-historical exegetical approaches (cf. Lombaard 2007a:61-70 / 2006c:18-31), the emphasis that the textual tensions are deliberate "writerly"<sup>18</sup> attributes, is something of an about-turn.

This turn of Otto's, from his first major Pentateuch theory to this, his second, has its own apologetic motivation too. In the quest for greater interdisciplinarity in our time, but in which it has become increasingly difficult for theologians from outside the discipline of Old Testament scholarship to understand the issues, theories and

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<sup>18</sup> I appropriate here a term from the hermeneutics of Thiselton (1992:98), which denotes that an author deliberately writes in order to invite the reader to ascribe meaning.

debates surrounding Pentateuch composition, Otto (2005:2, 8; 2007:20, 28) proposes his theory, namely the Pentateuch's theory of the Pentateuch, as a simpler, more manageable alternative to follow for scholars in other disciplines, for students, and for Old Testament exegetes outside a primarily European frame of reference and debate. The historical Midas touch, the touchstone of modern scholarship, thus remains intact (cf. Otto 2005:4; 2007:23); however, the plurality of complex modern compositional theories that detracts from the accessibility of Old Testament studies to non-specialist interested parties is replaced with an ancient, inner-Pentateuchal historical approach.

Another advantage of this approach is educational: for students from mostly conservative or even fundamentalist theological backgrounds, an analysis of the Pentateuch's own theory of its composition is bound to seem less threatening. Otto's turn would thus not "lead us away from the Bible", as is at times complained, since an inner-biblical, yet at once intellectually satisfying compositional theory may be studied. Only after an initial exposure to such an approach – shall we call it "Otto II" or "Otto light"? – would follow advanced study of what may now be termed "Otto *maior*" and the other historical Pentateuch theories on the scholarly marketplace.

Otto's turn is thus an apologetic of Pentateuch theory meant for the ears of the theologically schooled community. Put differently: Otto has now become the missionary of Moses to the devotees to other scholarly disciplines and to the initiates into the exegetical mysteries of the Hebrew Bible.

### **2.2.6 Three apologetics, taken together**

We see, here, in three different periods of South African Pentateuch scholarship, three different examples of expression being given to an experienced need not just to analyse the biblical text, but to do more. Somehow, something additional is required in order to make Pentateuch criticism acceptable. The strategies could hardly have been more diverse: van Zyl relies on a personal memory that will resonate with the psyche of his Afrikaner audience; Deist's appeal is to the head, by introducing philosophical hermeneutics; Otto turns to the Bible, devising a completely new "ancient Pentateuch theory" from the Pentateuch texts themselves. Whether by personality, philosophy or exegesis, respectively, reliance on some additional resource is shared by these three figures, in order to ensure the broadly perceived legitimacy and integrity of this scholarly project of studying the composition of the Pentateuch. An enterprise that is often perceived with apprehension, either because of its complexity or because of its perceived potential for undermining certain religious ideas, seems in need of mediating instruments. The serpent, which we know from Ancient Near Eastern mythology is really a wise animal, must be presented as tamed to audiences who perceive it as, only, dangerous.

### **2.2.7 The future...**

This situation, of a perceived need for an instrument for apologetics, is not likely to change. South African society is, with small pockets of exception, not becoming more theologically literate: between growing fundamentalisms, nationalisms and

secularisms, Pentateuch theoreticians will continue to feel the vague urge to, please, explain.

Naturally, the future in this regard too can only really be predicted *ex eventu*. Still, from recent developments among those interested in the Bible as a book of some importance, at least three likely trends, quite possibly to run concurrently, may be identified:

- A growing rationalism, among an intellectual few, who perceive truth in modernist categories, and who will, for a Pentateuch theory to be acceptable, demand strict historical veracity, not in the service of religious convictions, but more oriented towards exposing religious conservatism (cf. Muller et al. 2002; Lombaard 2007d:206-208 / 2006d:251-253);
- An orientation towards the spiritual, even the mystical, in which experiencing God becomes of growing importance, not by means of a return to pre-critical faith, but as what Ricoeur (1967:350-352) had termed a second naiveté, in which thorough historical scholarship, such as that on the Pentateuch, and meaningful religious commitments serve one another (cf. de Villiers 2006:99-121; Lombaard 2003:433-450; Sheriffs 1996; Bosman 1990:45-56);
- An interest in "biblical archaeology" and Ancient Near Eastern culture, not in the sense either to prove or disprove the veracity of Bible or views around its inspiration or inerrancy, but simply as a way of furthering knowledge, either related to faith or not, but in so doing creating an informed frame of reference within which Pentateuch theory will have to ring true for it to be noteworthy (cf. Scheffler 2000; Deist & Carroll 2000).

As the small group of academics interested in the Pentateuch often stumble as we tread around the very borders of science, we are – to reiterate the earlier conclusion from my philosophy of science section, above – forced to face and accept the uncertainties of our insights (le Roux 2005:277). Hence, again, precisely, the need for scholarly theories. Still, though, hubris is a dragon easily, and repeatedly, slain by the Pentateuch as subject matter. What is more, assuaging the various misgivings of the audiences of Theology – in the academy, church and society (Tracy 1981:3-46) – will also have to be contended with, by developing certain strategies to accompany the endeavour of the scholarly interpretation of the Pentateuch.

Drawing on the three selected important figures in the history of South African Pentateuch scholarship, the impulses which will show most clearly in the exegetical investigations later in this study are: the strongly historical orientation we see in all three the figures discussed; the influence of hermeneutics and philosophy of history from, most particularly, Deist; and, lastly, taken most directly from Otto, the active interplay between text and history, and especially the active intertextual interpretative play of related Old Testament texts.

### **2.2.8 Again, on to the next...**

Perhaps, on the never-ending enterprise of interpreting the texts of the Old Testament anew, yet never with a conclusive finality, some solace can be found in the mythical Scheherazade in *The Book of One Thousand and One Nights*. Each night she had for the sake of her continued existence to tell a story; each story had



to be at least as engaging as the previous. Transposed to the field of Pentateuch studies, it is a task of which scholars may grow both weary and wary. Still, like Scheherazade, it is in the telling of the story that one finds life...

These remarks lead us back again to the opening section of this chapter, on the philosophy of science that forms the underpinnings of this study. Both the lines of thought explored thus far in this chapter, namely on philosophy and history, belie any supposed positivistic firmness of scholarly method, both to academic investigations in general and as it applies to Old Testament studies in particular. This line of thought will be continued below, but will then be related directly to one of the most distinctive features of the study of the biblical texts in South Africa, namely the choice of exegetical method. Within this decades-long local debate, my choice for a historical method is argued on two fronts: methodological soundness, and theological validity. Not to leave these theoretical arguments hanging in the air, though, the choices argued for will be demonstrated practically by the exegetical studies offered in Chapter 3 of this study, on Genesis 22\* in particular.

However, before the exegetical concretisation is offered, the two further points of orientation which constitute the substance of this chapter will now be taken into view, the first of which is the matter of exegetical methodology.

## **2.3 The Old Testament between diachrony and synchrony: two reasons for favouring the former**

The identity of an exegete, the more so in the South African Bible disciplines of the last almost four decades than in most other contexts, is to a large extent decided by where one finds oneself within the debates on exegetical methodology. Hence, for this study too it seems there is no escape from that heritage: the insights and decisions arrived at within these debates have contributed fundamentally to the exegetical conclusions reached below on Isaac in the Old Testament.

### **2.3.1 A personal route**

It is a by now centuries-long convention in the elite centres of theological scholarship internationally for exegetes to be trained in the historical-critical methods of Bible interpretation (cf. Lombaard 2008c:289-305). In South Africa, at least among the Afrikaans language churches, the tradition has been since the 1970's (but before that time too in a different way), to train students in non-historical methodologies. Dominant has been what I refer to, somewhat imprecisely, as the Pretoria school of structuralist exegesis<sup>19</sup>. In this tradition the text is read, inflexibly, synchronically.

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19 In Lombaard 2001a:468 & Lombaard & le Roux 2002:1862 I distinguished the Pretoria school of structuralism from French structuralism (based on de Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale*; see however Thiselton 1992:100-101, Deist 1995:37-42 and Tallis 1988), the Amsterdam school in the Netherlands (cf. Oost 1986), the Richter Schüle in Germany (cf. Richter 1971), and the Claremont school in the USA (cf. e.g. Knierim 1992).

My exegetical journey has however been on a road less travelled: I was trained initially in the narratological exegetical methodology (cf. e.g. du Rand 1985:18-36<sup>20</sup>), then in Pretoria's structuralist exegesis, most influentially by Prinsloo and du Toit (cf. e.g. Prinsloo 1992 & 1988:3-7 and du Toit 1980:119-136<sup>21</sup>, both mediating Louw, Vorster and Loader - see e.g. Louw 1979<sup>22</sup>; Vorster 1971:139-148; Loader 1978:1-40; cf. le Roux 1993:27-28, 216-245), and only then did I come into direct contact, formally at least<sup>23</sup>, with historical-critical methodologies (methodologically more explicit: Vosloo – e.g. Vosloo 1989 & 1995:63-68<sup>24</sup> –; broader and bolder: le Roux – e.g. le Roux 1995 –; in both cases, presented always and expressly as nurturing of the faith, and therefore as good Reformed theology – cf. Deist 1984:5-12, 158-164).

This non-traditional personal academic history has given me not only direct exposure to the "inner workings" of each of these approaches to exegesis, but has also afforded me something of a comparative perspective on the claims, value and

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<sup>20</sup> Most influential internationally have been works such as Alter 1981, Bar-Efrat 1989, Berlin 1983, and Sternberg 1985. See also the work by the South African New Testament scholar Tolmie 1999 for a good example of this methodology.

<sup>21</sup> Here one of the occurrences of the now classic "ten steps of exegesis" is to be found.

<sup>22</sup> This study is a good example of the accompanying "kerugma", the kind of enthusiastic optimism that was found in the 1970's and still persisted into the 1990's with regard to structuralism, namely that, once this method was employed, one would have no need of commentaries or other academic sources. Du Toit 2004:212 refers to this manner of thinking as "methodological imperialism"; le Roux 1996:44 calls it "hubris".

<sup>23</sup> My own reading had earlier been inclined toward the historical interpretations, simply because I found Westermann 1974 more interesting than anybody else on Genesis.

<sup>24</sup> A source-critical remark: these pages by Vosloo come from an earlier booklet, which has been taken up into this 1995-publication.

problems of each methodology. It is from this background that my remarks below should be understood.

### **2.3.2 The beauty in the pond of the text**

In the European and North-American contexts, some scholars trained in the historical-critical methodologies of exegesis seem over time to grow discontented with these approaches. I do not refer here to the conservative-confessional rejection of historical research on the Scriptures (e.g. Linnemann 1990), but to serious and critical exegetes who become dissatisfied with what their historical research and others' have rendered (e.g. Fischer 2005:62-73).

Usually, this dissatisfaction lies on two levels:

- *Scientifically*, the open-endedness of historical research is often experienced as unsatisfactory. Results, it is found, are hardly ever conclusive. In time, even the firmest of most dearly held hypotheses are questioned, by an ever-expanding community of scholars and a volume of publications that can hardly be covered. Different, even contradictory, positions on any given exegetical issue are taken strongly and convincingly. This leaves some researchers, if not bewildered, at least disillusioned. The quest for "truth" (understood Platonically as singular, eternal, and incontestable) has been shown to be futile.
- *Spiritually*, this leaves some exegetes who are inclined towards matters of faith, at a loss. The sense – which may have been the motivation underpinning much study and research – of contributing to the church's

understanding of the Scriptures, is lost. In a way, a loss of the sentiments of calling, purpose and service are experienced. From a certain point onwards, uncertainty prevails, hindering both firm personal conviction and public kerugma.

Both these aspects create a need, perhaps founded as much scientifically as spiritually, psychologically and existentially, to seek new alternatives. The historical-critical exegesis, it is argued (or perhaps, really: felt), has to be amended, or – more strongly – replaced by an approach that will at once provide firmer and more apparently useful answers.

Although few exegetes dare express such underlying awarenesses in scientific publications, one finds these commitments in another way in the writings by exegetes (newly) converted to, for instance, narratological and structuralist exegetical practice. Rhetoric reveals the soul...

The argument in such publications runs, ideal-typically, as follows:

- Upon review, the historical-critical analyses of whichever text is under discussion have proven not only inconclusive, but have provided an array of answers so wide ranging as to be, ultimately, scientifically worthless. This creates the sense that the methodology itself is of dubious value. Hence, a new manner of reading the text is called for, which will provide an answer conclusively. The meaning of the text will now become clear.
- The next step of the argument is to provide an analysis of the *Text an Sich*, i.e. the text in its final, "canonical" form. Attempts may be said to be made to

incorporate historical perspectives; however, this is never truly the case (Lombaard 1996:106-113). Moreover, it is often either explicitly stated or strongly implied that this *Text an Sich* has not been taken seriously by the historical-critical methodologies.

The implied legitimating weight of the term "canonical" in this flow of argument is not to be overlooked. It provides, rhetorically, at least overtones of theological and pragmatic legitimacy. Moreover, this term is not used with a perfectly fixed meaning. It could refer to the "the text as we have it here before us", that is, in its final form, with little recognition given to its developmental history. This "final form" would, by implication, be the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* – a thoroughly composite text, of course, and of one textual tradition (cf. Deist 1988b, with the implications spelt out most clearly on pp 198-201; see also Barr 1995:5). There simply is no, nor has there ever been, a "final text" on which to call. Another, associated, denotation of the term "canonical" could be described as "the present text within the context of the canon, consisting of Genesis 1 to Malachi 4"; respectively: "... to Revelations 22" (cf. e.g. Childs 1985; Wright 1983:8-9). In Reformed circles, at least, this view is expressed with as implicit support (apart from the underlying interpretations of the meanings of *ad fontes* and *sola scriptura* indicated by Deist 1988a:1-7, 199) the erroneous and at times rather sloganish adaptations of the concepts of the *claritas scripturae* and, most particularly, *scriptura sui interpres* (cf. Rossouw 1963). Classically, however, neither of these confessions relate to exegetical technique. Rather, they are confessions based on the Reformation conviction that Scripture and Spirit are not to be separated. The existential communication of the Bible thus refers.

Both these denotations of the term "canonical", at times combined, have as their implicit rhetorical purpose that it would give theological legitimacy to *this*: a better, or the best, method. However, these connotations of a "firmer" text are misleading; the term "canonical" itself, as used to legitimate a-historical exegetical practices, is problematic, regarding both the values it confers on itself and those it disallows (cf. le Roux 1996:51) the historically-oriented approaches.

- The conclusion of this line of argumentation by proponents of a new, non-historical method is undertaken after the text has been divided into units, such as "episodes" in narratological exegesis or "cola" in structuralist exegesis. Almost without fail, a concentric build-up of the text is detected. This is taken as proof that what has been studied is a carefully constructed text. Usually the middle episode or colon, often also the opening and closing episodes or cola, are accorded greater weight, though precisely why symmetry would dictate meaning is never explained. It is simply deduced that *here* lies what is of exegetical and theological import. This matter is often rhetorically lent further support by remarks of an aesthetic and/or technical nature, namely, respectively, that the text offers us beautiful patterns of composition, and/or that this has been proven to be a finely-crafted, well-planned and well-executed piece of writing. The movement in the argument from the detection of patterns in the text to the aesthetic pronouncements is never explained. Wherein lies beauty? – No theory of aesthetics, either philosophical or comparative, is ever displayed (see for instance the essays collected in Levine 1994; cf. e.g. Loader 2004:252-266 & Deist 1989:36-52 for useful theological / exegetical strides in this direction). If, then, beauty lies in the eye

of the beholder, should this not provide a hint, at the very least, that what has been identified as pleasing is not the ancient work of writing art, but perhaps more accurately, the modern work of interpretative art? Could this then be called exegesis à la Narcissus: the beauty in the pond of the text as, simply, a reflection of the exegete's own profile?

This latter indication should not be taken as an indictment of the synchronic methods of exegesis. Rather, it is meant as a word of welcome to the world of science. Whereas the rhetorics of synchronicists of providing an alternate methodology would portray it differently, the reality is that we have merely been provided with *another* interpretation, and not *the* interpretation. The synchronically obtained answers initially may seem fresh and the conclusions firm, but that is not a state of affairs that can last for any substantial amount of time. As soon as a second, third, and so forth study from within the same approach (be it structuralist or narratological) is undertaken, again we have a proliferation of results. Again, the problem arises from which these methods sought to run: very soon, a multitude of competing, even mutually exclusive sets of results abound. This is the very nature of science; more radically: its purpose.

To clarify the last statement: if a series of scholars were to read a text and come to the exact same conclusions, time and again, one would have to ask the question whether it is indeed scholarship that is practiced here. Apart from the fact that to read such studies becomes, very soon, tedious, questions about the scientific validity will have to be asked of studies that seem to avoid the possibility of falsifiability (à la Popper – cf. Faure & Venter 1987:31-55).



The point is this: the sense one gets from many works on synchronic exegesis is that something of a holier-than-thou attitude is adopted over against the diachronic approaches<sup>25</sup>. This is combined with a kind of optimism that, having adopted a new method, the problems are past. As argued above, this is certainly not the case. The synchronic methods are characterised by the very same features of the diachronic methods they seek to avoid. Neither scientific nor spiritual enlightenment should be sought in method (Gadamer 1975; cf. le Roux 1996:45-46).

### **2.3.3 Two reasons for preferring diachronic to synchronic methodologies**

Having thus levelled the playing field a little, different arguments now have to be advanced for choosing between these two approaches. Of course, a whole host of arguments may be offered and counter-offered. For the moment, though, I would like to advance two arguments on a personal preference for the historical-critical methodologies – the one argument methodological, the other theological.

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<sup>25</sup> This is shown most clearly by the blunt argument that is at times employed, simply declaring historical-critical methods to be *passé*, and not arguing the issue, but calling as testimony the growth in literature on or employing these alternate methodologies. Another way this kind of thinking shows itself is the conviction among at least some structuralists that, by employing their methodology, not a structure, but *the* structure of a given text can be determined.

### 2.3.3.1 A methodological argument in favour of diachronic methodologies

The use of the Bible for concerns other than exegetical, such as for matters ethical (e.g. Wright 1983:4-11) or spiritual (e.g. Schneiders 1998:43), tends to have a greater appreciation for broad narratives, rather than detailed exegesis. However, I remain convinced that it is "the minutiae of biblical literature (which provide) the unexpected riches" (Lombaard 2003:440; cf. Houlden 1983:48). Whereas synchronic methods tend to offer easier access to larger story lines, these story lines remain limited to what is obvious on the text surface. If the text is dissected historically, a greater number of story lines unfold. Read properly diachronically, these various story lines in the different layers of the text should be related to one another – *Traditionsgeschichte* and *Redaktionsgeschichte* – which again offers its own story lines for interpretation<sup>26</sup>.

What is more, on each of the layers of the text, synchronic methodologies may be employed, as has been done within diachronic methodology. It is quite possible to read the respective layers of, for instance, the Genesis 11 / Tower of Babel account narratologically. Putting into relation to one another these different, layered accounts, and thus tracing the interpretative history, provides us with further interpretational lines. The latter would be a more valid application of the art of narratological analysis than is on offer with the usual synchronic narratological analyses, in that the comparative interpretation of different stories comes, to a

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<sup>26</sup> This was, incidentally, what Richter 1971 proposed to do with his *Literarkritik*; cf. Jonker 1996:335-342. However, the way he was applied, locally at least, gave no real recognition to the layeredness of the text.

greater extent, into its own. Outside of theology, in the fields of literature studies, narratological readings are more often than not comparative (a thoroughly historical enterprise; cf. Barr 1995:5-8) – a dimension sorely lacking in what is offered as narrative analyses of biblical texts locally.

To summarise: whereas synchronic methods fail to live up to claims that diachronic aspects are incorporated (Lombaard 1996:107-113), the reverse is true. Moreover, precisely because they trace history, the diachronic analyses offer fuller versions of, for instance, narratological interpretations than wholly synchronic narratological interpretations themselves can offer. Put differently, the diachronic exegetical approaches are, to my mind, methodologically stronger than the synchronic approaches: the former incorporates the latter without difficulty, and executes its methodology better. The historically comparative dimension of the interpretation of narratives in general, lost in its synchronic application to biblical texts, is returned to its historical state by diachronic co-option.

#### 2.3.3.2 A theological argument in favour of diachronic methodologies

Frequently, diachronic exegesis *on* the Bible has had to face the critique that it does not serve the church well: historical criticism has made it difficult to preach or, for that matter, to say almost anything with any certainty *from* the Bible. For a faith that takes the Bible as its prime source, this has proven to be distressing. The greater certainties promised by synchronic methodologies therefore seem attractive. On this impression, two brief comments.

First: the philosophical assumptions on which, for example, narratological interpretations are based, are much more disconcerting than those of diachronic methodologies, long since stripped of their earlier positivist underpinnings. The so-called New Criticism, influential to the point of being determinative of modern literary theory, holds as one of its central tenets the non-referentiality of texts (Thiselton 1992:471-514; Nel 1989:71; cf. Barr 1995:11-14). A text is a world unto itself; no reference to any reality outside itself is possible. The problems this creates for the theological and ecclesial use of the Bible is, clearly, much more serious than those of the diachronic methods (cf. Koster 2000:120-149).

Second: the problems experienced with historical approaches and with applying more broadly the results thereof, have more to do with a view of truth, namely Platonic, than with Christian theology. If the Platonic outlook on truth could be exchanged for a more relational view (both with respect to faith – cf. e.g. Gereformeerde Kerken Nederland 1981 – and reason – cf. e.g. du Toit 2005:52-63), the uncertainties (indecisions, hesitations, ambiguities, insecurities) with regard to the biblical text become theologically appropriate. If one assumes, from a religious vantage point, that the mystery of God is unfathomable in human terms, it should come as no surprise that the Holy Book of this God remains such too. The fact that the Bible is, at the same time, human, all too human, and continuously defies our understanding, is theologically apt too.

The theological match between the nature of the Bible as a book of faith is, therefore, closer with the diachronic methodologies, which seek these mysteries, than with the synchronic methodologies, which seek to circumvent them. Perhaps,

then, it is not surprising that Sheldrake (1998:9-10; cf. Deist 1995:46) warns that the language of postmodernism, within which narratological approaches too are couched, is at times employed for the sake of conservative theology. To allude for a moment to the language of the information technology industry of our time: a more open theology should not be averse to an Open Source. "The Bible critically studied and the Bible spiritually nourishing are not two notions at odds" (Lombaard 2003:439; cf. Schneiders 1989:19).

#### **2.3.4. Combining diachronic and synchronic methodologies?**

The most obvious question that would be posed on what is stated above, is: but why not combine synchronic and diachronic exegetical methodologies? Indeed, this has been a popular position of late – in different forms: Carr 1996, Jonker 1996, including previous attempts he reviews; Human 1999:355-362, and Groenewald 2003:6-10 / 2004:552-553. However, the nagging uneasiness with such conciliatory gestures remains: the way in which exegetes look at the text by means of their respective learned approaches, quite naturally call for different perspectives (cf. Gottcent 1979:xii; Vorster 1989:61-62; Nel 1989:71). Richter's 1971-distinction between *Literargeschichte* and *Literarkritik* remains applicable: respectively, they demand cognitive (that is, interpretative) frameworks that see the text as the product of developments, or as the product of an author. The former investigates writing history; the latter investigates writing skill.

As noted above, when a synchronic approach seeks to appropriate diachronic textual insights, it does not truly do so. It transforms what it takes over into just

another synchronic aspect (Lombaard 1996:106-113). Equally, when diachronic methodologies incorporate synchronic methodologies of biblical exegesis, it changes them into historical mode (cf. also Deist 1995:43). The pretence to co-operate, in both instances, merely conceals what has, fundamentally, been altered.

My preference would be that the inherent philosophical differences in the two broad approaches be recognised for how stark they are. This does not mean that either of these broad approaches is poor: for different reasons, which should in true scholarly style be argued reasons, individuals will choose one of these broad approaches. As long as exegetes are hermeneutically aware of both the strong and the weak points of the particular approaches they find themselves drawn to, meaningful exegetical discussion is possible. Blindness to one's own methodological presuppositions, nor veiling inescapable inherent differences between approaches, nor unfair characterisation of methodological positions different from one's own, would be helpful in such discussions.

### **2.3.5. Yet again, on to the next...**

The practical implications of this point will be made clear in the exegetical section below which employs, precisely, narrative methodology to indicate its synchronical limitations *and* its historical possibilities. However, before that can be done, a brief outline of the dynamics of historical research into the patriarchs is required. It is to this aspect, the last of the four primary areas of orientation under discussion in this chapter, that we turn to next.

## 2.4 Broad outlines of critical research into the patriarchs

As Albertz (1992:45) points out, the problem with research into the patriarchs of the Old Testament is not the dearth of literary material to work with, but the abundance thereof. This stands in contra-distinction with the archaeological material available to us, which leaves us with some broad insights into the historical time frame the patriarchal narratives are set in (that is, the narrated time), but with little material for any detailed analysis of the kind that would aid a thorough understanding of the patriarchs. As to the texts, though, detailed analysis has been precisely the forté of historical-critical work on the patriarchal narratives. Apart from those readings which regard the biblical texts as simple mirrors of past events, thus ignoring both the nature of historical sources and the problem of historiography, the foundational insight that the times of narration of these narratives are vastly different from the narrated times has been perhaps the most fundamental impetus in modern scholarly understanding of these texts and of the figures of whom they tell. In the pre-Wellhausenian era, a simple, or simpler, continuation between patriarchal religion and Mosaic Yahwism could be assumed, even within critical scholarship, based on the representation within the Old Testament texts themselves of this historico-narrative line. However, Wellhausen, drawing on his precursors, most influentially broke with this naïveté, and thus altered the whole of Old Testament scholarship, by showing the vast distance between the patriarchal period (narrated times) and the times during which these accounts were put to text (times of narration). Because of this distinction, increasingly, nothing much could be said from the biblical texts about the patriarchs themselves or their time; however, as a corollary, now much more could be said of the last millennium BCE within Israel-Juda, the time of narration. It

took, most influentially, Alt, with his famous *Gott der Väter* hypothesis and Gunkel, with his form-critical method (e.g. Gunkel 1917), mediated later by Noth and von Rad, to recover some kind of middle ground: that the rather late texts preserve rather older traditions, so that it becomes both possible and necessary at once, in the analyses of the patriarchal texts, to say something about both time of narration and narrated time (cf. Lombaard & le Roux 2002:1855-1867 & Lombaard 2004b:261-276 on the problem of dating).

Subsequent scholarship has been, for the most part, different configurations of these three antecedent positions. None of the three views has seen its end, though: while reconfigurations of the position from Alt, Gunkel, Noth and von Rad may constitute the most common strand of thinking within scholarly circles over the past century, Wellhausen's opinion still echoes in for instance the Copenhagen school of Pentateuch exegetes, controversial for its insistent late dating of the texts (though its more direct impulse is a reaction against the Albright school in the USA; cf. van Seters 1999:53), while the broadly pre-Wellhausenian view has much in common with a-historical, usually narratologically inclined, studies since the 1970s. This underlying debate on the relationship between the story told and the telling of the story – that is: the narrated time and the time of narration – leaves its traces still in all diachronic and synchronic analyses of these biblical texts, and can be noticed in all introductory works.

The distinction between narrated time and time of narration is thus of fundamental importance, namely for the entire endeavour of studying the biblical library and, hence, to the whole of the theological enterprise based on these texts. In the case of



the patriarchal narratives, though, such insights were in addition prised via another important breakthrough, also the brainchild of Alt, which has been highly influential in critical research on the patriarchs.

This is namely the insight that the existence of familial relations between the figures of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, is an idealised reconstruction of later Israel (more specifically: Juda), as part of the fluid processes of constructing an own, in broad respects unified identity in the face of certain historical impulses and / or existential threats (cf. e.g. Ruppert 2002:23-30, 40, with Noth 1948:112-127 the classic source in this regard). These three patriarchal figures thus constitute the identifying, and to a certain extent unifying, iconic figureheads of families, clans and tribes, which were probably constituted differently, socially, at different times (cf. Lombaard 2006e:148-149, following particularly Wilson 1994:200-223, on such genealogical fluidity). Although the social identities of the adherents to these iconic patriarchs are untraceable in any detailed manner, as are the details of the patriarchs themselves, the consensus within this line of thinking is that the patriarchal traditions reflect later social cohesion around relatively strong earlier figureheads who, importantly, were initially independent, that is: familially unrelated figures. However, through the processes of merging and thus newly emerging identities, as the separate adherents to these familial figureheads intermingled and exchanged founding and / or identifying traditions, which had attained the status of myth (not in the popular sense of untruthfulness, but in the technical sense giving existential meaning), new storylines were forged to reflect the new social relations. The patriarchs were imagined as kin, in such a way that none of the tradents of the three patriarchal traditions felt themselves unaccounted for. This served to solidify new structures of

social cohesion within the emerging identity of Israel (the case being different for the figures of Lot, Ishmael and Esau, who in the respective generations essentially fell to the wayside). Imagining bloodlines between the originally unrelated patriarchs thus enabled a more closely felt kinship to be experienced between the latter-day groups who had traditionally identified with these figures independently of one another. As the patriarchs become one family line, so their adherents became as if a family.

This situation of latter-day forged communal identities within Israel based on, now, a shared, re-imagined past of a familial line of founding fathers, had become the centrally communicated vision of the Old Testament texts as we have them. This was the view, in scholarly circles too, and in popular circles still, which prevailed until the dawn of critical scholarship.

However, two problems developed which persist still. First, the trend made possible by the “narrated time” – “time of narration” distinction towards an ever later dating of the Old Testament texts, had stretched the time between “related event” and “relation of event” towards a millennium. The question as to whether any historical value could at all be attributed to the “narrated time” dimension of these texts, as far as the figures of the patriarchs were concerned, was placed ever more forcefully on the exegetical table. Second, the twin issues of the historical referentiality of the patriarchal texts, namely to either the figures of the patriarchs themselves or to the much later communities who related to these narratives as existentially meaningful, has become such an engrossing debate, that too simple a referentiality has been accepted on all sides. That is: irrespective of whether the patriarchal texts are regarded as, on the one hand, primarily descriptions of the lives of the fathers or, on

the other hand, as primarily later identity-creating narratives, the value of which lie for us more in coming to grips with exilic / post-exilic Judean identity politics, a too harmonious picture is presented by ourselves of the figures to which these accounts refer, or more accurately: of the way in which these accounts refer to the respective patriarchal figures. The possible dynamics of the confluence of patriarchal traditions, along with the figures to which they refer, has not been adequately explored<sup>27</sup>. The debates about time (dating) and referentiality have assumed a simplicity of identity as regards each of the patriarchs.

As to referentiality, at the moment, therefore, three broad positions on the historical value of the patriarchal narratives may be identified. These are:

- Despite the complexity of the transmission processes from an oral phase to a written phase to redactional activities<sup>28</sup>, we can glimpse behind these processes still something of the life of an individual figure from whom originated, even if just as a kernel, these traditions. The figure of the patriarch is, albeit vague and distant, a historical given.
- Both the texts themselves and the complexity of the transmission processes just referred to prevent us from making any firm deductions about the existence or not of the patriarch concerned. Yet, based on the contents of the texts and, frequently, their placement within the Pentateuch, we can at least

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<sup>27</sup> I refer here to the confluence of traditions as they relate to an individual patriarch too, namely as a composite / multiplex figure, a position I explain in greater detail below. Noth (1948:109) had suggested such a position regarding patriarch Jacob, though without much influence (Ruppert 2002:25).

<sup>28</sup> See Schniedewind (2004:3-23) for a recent discussion of the writing / editing process.

find some socio-cultural material deposited in them, within which a patriarchal figure might have existed.

- The contradictions between the respective patriarchal texts, among other difficulties with them, as well as the complexity of the transmission processes, make it impossible to say that these texts attest to any historical reality in the form of a patriarch, except as a literary creation. There were no real patriarchs. There was, however, a figment or some sort, a literary imagination, the purposes of the creation of which are open to historical investigation<sup>29</sup>.

As stated above, though, all three these positions still simplify what was clearly a most complex situation. While any one of these three options may to some extent be correct when applied to any given patriarchal account, none would apply to all cases. The reason for this is that the underlying assumption is always found that the traditions relating to a certain patriarch – Isaac, for the purposes of this study – refer to *an* Isaac. I hold the view, however, that all of the patriarchs are composite figures. Even if it could be said, thus, that the Isaac references we find in the Old Testament refer to a historical ancestor Isaac, I would argue that they do not refer to the same individual. An identical position could be taken on traditions related to patriarch Isaac in instances where he is viewed as a purely literary creation: the diversity of Isaac passages do not enable us to link them together to come to a broad vision of

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<sup>29</sup> An interesting local example of this point of view, because it is based most explicitly on archaeological considerations, is that expressed by Scheffler (2000:98), namely that the absence of 18<sup>th</sup> century BCE, that is, patriarchal-age human activity at Tel-Beersheba, supports the view that the patriarchal narratives are family legends, to be dated much later and intended to add legitimacy to the contemporary cult, rather than being primarily historical material.

the shared figure of “Isaac”, singular. More accurately, one would always have to refer to this composite or multiplex character in the plural, as “Isaacs”<sup>30</sup>. This view holds even greater validity within the Alt – Gunkel – Noth – von Rad line of thinking referred to above, complicating matters exponentially as regards the “who” and “what” of the patriarch in question.

The move we have seen in recent decades of Old Testament scholarship away from the minute exegetical analyses of texts to the greater compositional *corpora*, have also had the effect that it enticed us to look past the fact that all historiography, in the Pentateuch, is episodic too. Whereas initially the historical-critical methodology had to a large extent been preoccupied with what may be called the most intimate details of the text (such as the placing of letters within words; words within verses; verses within episodes; and hence: episodes within accounts – in each instance with painstaking attention paid to detail), the recent emphasis on the broader compositional units has, to some extent at least, overcompensated, namely as a reaction to criticisms on these earlier “atomising” tendencies. Between these two extremes, less attention has been paid to the “middle ground” than could have been done, namely to the different Old Testament accounts as, quite often, more or less independent units<sup>31</sup>. Pericopae, thus, form – following here Frykenberg (2001:116-137) – valid anecdotal units<sup>32</sup>. This move to the “middle ground” does not mean that

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<sup>30</sup> This view of mine runs in some ways parallel to my views on Bible translation: cf. Lombaard 2002f:754-765 & 2002g:1-12.

<sup>31</sup> The methodology of Gunkel (cf. Gunkel 1921) remained perhaps closest to these textual units.

<sup>32</sup> Though I agree with their underlying understanding of the nature of historiography, I do not use this term here as do Gunn & Fewell (1993:6), in their sense as something historically more reliable than sagas, legends and novellas in the Old Testament, categories which they view negatively. Rather,

looking either at the minutiae of texts (text-critical aspects, for instance) or at the broad compositional layers (such as, currently popular in Pentateuch analyses, P and non-P) is in any sense unimportant. However, in both these approaches Old Testament scholars, having completed these analyses, have been led to assume that, for instance, all the Isaac stories encountered denote the same referent (either as an actual historical figure or as a purely literary character<sup>33</sup>). My contention is that all the patriarchs are multiplex figures, referring not to single antecedents. Therefore, neither the relevant textual occurrences, nor within each of those, the different literary or compositional layers, may be assumed to relate to the same underlying “idea” of Isaac, as our case in point. Rather, a “next identity”, a new persona, as it were, composite in nature, is created by each end product; that is: by each editorial or interpretative layer which is added to the collection of Isaac texts. This, then, presents us in each instance, or in some instances at least, with another Isaac, and not one that can now without further consideration be read back into any one or across all of the constituent Isaac texts<sup>34</sup>.

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linking up with the philosophy of history of Frykenberg (2001:116-137), my view here is that, at least as far as the Pentateuchal accounts are concerned, there is value in also regarding each text / pericope / account as a text in itself, with its links to other texts a different matter altogether, which is to be considered *critically*. A link between, say, different Isaac accounts should thus not simply be assumed, as is usually done.

<sup>33</sup> The decision on this matter dare not be generalised either; rather, each anecdotal unit should be evaluated in itself, before deductions are made about the whole of the Isaac corpus, for instance. This is thus an operational modus which is quite at home within classical tradition history.

<sup>34</sup> This argument thus runs in some ways parallel to Davies’s on “Israel” in *In search of ancient Israel* (1995), though here filtered through Albertz’s *religionsgeschichtliche* approach (1992).

Of course, it is entirely valid to understand texts as they are reinterpreted in the newly-cast light, for instance to understand Genesis 22:1-14 & 19 in the light of the reinterpretation offered in Genesis

Based on these broad outlines of the interpretation of the patriarchal narratives in modern scholarship, and more particularly on what has been identified as an oversight within this research, namely the focus on either too small or too large a textual unit, to the detriment of a concurrent focus on the anecdotal unit, the decisions taken in the exegetical section of this study below are placed in perspective.

## 2.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, four major points of orientation that underpin what follows have been spelt out. The first of these was the philosophy of science which undergirds this study; second, a brief interpretation of the recent history of Pentateuch scholarship in South Africa was offered; then, the deliberate choice for historical-critical methodologies has been argued for; in closing, to this section, the perimeters of our understanding of the patriarchs, as formed by historical research, have been drawn. Though, in a sense, these four points taken together could be characterised as “too much introduction”, it remains necessary, for the sake of understanding what follows

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22:15-18, or to rethink all the Abraham-Isaac texts in the light of Genesis 22, dated late, as will be argued below. It must be made clear, though, that that would then be to follow the thinking proposed by the later editor. That would be the later added layer of meaning. However, the text(s) as understood before the recasting of meaning by this later editor is an equally valid object of investigation, as its own anecdotal unit. To recoup here some of the methodological considerations raised earlier in this chapter: it is on precisely this last aspect that all approaches which stress the “final text” or “canonical text” falter: they simply “buy into” the ideas of whichever editor happened to have a hand in last.

and how the insights and perspectives offered were arrived at. Within the philosophy of science for which was argued here, it remains important that each interpreter is interpreted. To facilitate this, my own placement within the recent history of Pentateuch scholarship in South Africa, and my own choices against what had been the mainstream of exegesis<sup>35</sup>, had to be made explicit. In addition, the stream of historical patriarch research which lies behind me, and which has now pushed me in a different, own direction, had to be outlined. Now that this interpreter may be interpreted contextually more fully, the table has been set for the exegetical aspects of this study.

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<sup>35</sup> Signs are, though, that the tide is turning, so that historical scholarship may well become “normal science”, in the Kuhnian sense, with respect to the Old Testament discipline, at least, in South Africa. Cf. also Lombaard 2006f:912-925.



## **CHAPTER 3: ISAAC, EXEGETED – GENESIS 22\* AS MAJOR ISAAC TEXT**

The philosophical, historical and methodological aspects of this study having been discussed in the previous chapter, this chapter focuses on the exegetical work on the Isaac texts, with as primary text, Genesis 22. Many of the points made below will however refer back to what has been discussed thus far; these two sections – call them for the sake of brevity “theory of exegesis” and “practice of exegesis” – remain intrinsically intertwined.

### **3.1 Genesis 22\* – the major interpretative text on Isaac**

As mentioned in the opening chapter to this study, the figure of Isaac is best remembered, both in church circles and in broader society, because of his almost-sacrifice at the hand of his “father”, Abraham, in Genesis 22. To Christian sensibilities, drenched in the theology of a loving God, this remains a disturbing part of, precisely, the Word of God. Thematically, the highlight in the Christian tradition of God’s self-sacrifice, namely in Jesus Christ, finds a disturbing almost-exact opposite in the Genesis 22 account, when God instructs Abraham to sacrifice his only begotten son (that is, excluding the special case of Ishmael).

Not surprisingly, this is also the section among the Isaac texts in the Old Testament which has received the most exegetical scrutiny. Unforeseen, it has in addition

turned out to be the most determinative text for the new insights which are concluded to in this study.

The manner in which the Genesis 22 text is brought to discussion here is as follows: first, stock is taken of the historical issues related to this text. Then, linking up most directly with the section in Chapter 2 on exegetical methodology, a narrative reading of this text is undertaken in order to demonstrate the limited value it has as an explanatory aid to the questions it sets even itself to answer, and to indicate the good value it could hold for the historical interpretative enterprise in Genesis 22\*. This is followed by an analysis in historical mode of Genesis 22\*, from which then the interpretative implications for the rest of the Isaac texts are indicated.

### **3.2 What are the historical issues related to Genesis 22\*?**

In this section, stock is taken, briefly, of the historical questions encountered in the Genesis 22\* text. This is meant as a primer of sorts, a preparation, namely in order to highlight the historical issues as they are encountered below through references and allusions, in the two sections immediately subsequent to this one. Only once these issues have been pointed out, the full scope of the direct references and indirect allusions in these two following sections to the historical issues can be realised. The purpose here is thus not to discuss extensively the details of each historical point indicated, nor to trace the interpretative and research histories. The problems are merely pointed out, with the scholarly literature in the subsequent two sections which form the backdrop to this introduction.

- As an opening point, the question must be asked what the opening phrase אַחַר הַדְּבָרִים would refer to. Is it an editorial addition, to link herewith temporally this narrative with the preceding? The link between this Genesis chapter and the previous is rather tenuous, as is the link between the Genesis 22:1-19 pericope and the verses immediately following it, Genesis 22:20-24, with the latter pericope receiving the exact same introduction. Or are these indeed indications of not literary, but historical sequentiality?
- The setting of a test to Abraham in verse 1, which is followed up in verses 15–18, is a matter of grave moral and theological ambiguity. Moreover, it seems stylistically different from the main narrative (Genesis 22:2-14), in which, besides, the theme of a test being set is wholly absent. Are these indications of editorial activity?
- Can the highly stylised dialogue, in verses 1-2 and 11-12, between God and Abraham, and in verses 7-8, between Abraham and Isaac, be historically accurate, or are such discourses given here according to norms of literary (that is, story-telling) convention?
- The further difficulties in verse 2, namely the reference to Isaac as only son, and the reference to Moria, should not escape attention. The exclusion of Ishmael, Isaac's first-born, and the absence of information on precisely which mountain is indicated, are vexing questions. The silence in the next verse on Isaac's mother, Sarah, when all other parties and needs are listed, is none the less intriguing too.
- Can the discussion between Abraham and Isaac in verses 7-8 be regarded as a further breakdown of strictly moral behaviour, because Abraham clearly deceives his son by withholding vital information?

- The changes in the reference to God throughout this narrative draw attention to these reference. The references to respectively אֱלֹהִים , יְהוָה , and the מְלֶאךָ יְהוָה (as a reference to God), beg explanation.
- The magical appearance of a sacrificial ram in verse 13 will always be caught between a super-natural and a literary explanation. The latter-day literary genre of magical realism in novels (with Salman Rushdie as its most famous exponent) finds here a strange precursor: can it be characterised from a historical point of view as a mythological “lamb of God”, or is it, in true ancient (albeit Greek) dramatic convention, a case of *deus ex machina*? (Or should the latter perhaps be, with reference to particularly Genesis 22\*: *deus ex agnus*?)
- The connections between the different sub-sections of this pericope remain challenging. The relationship in Genesis 22 between verses 1, 2-13, 14, and 15-19, respectively, are oft debated, with characterisations falling somewhere between “inherently united” to “editorially developed”.
- The question, so disturbing to readers of this account through the centuries, apart from the fact that God would command a murder, is the possibility that child sacrifice may have been a part of ancient Israel’s cultic practices. Or could a merely aetiological need (verse 14) explain the whole narrative? Could other possibilities be suggested...?

These are the main issues which will find reference in the two sections below.

### 3.3 Problems of narratological analyses of Genesis 22

First, before a historical reading of the Genesis 22\* text is given below, an own narratological analysis of Genesis 22 is presented<sup>36</sup>, as indicated in the introduction to this chapter, above.

#### 3.3.1 False promises

In some respects, at least, narrative exegesis seems very appealing when one first encounters it, as had been argued in Chapter 2. Practically, though, on later reflection, this method is found to be interesting, but not of as much value as had initially seemed the case. As will become clear below, narrative exegesis has little of true substance to offer. Also, although this method seems democratic, namely in that many more “ordinary readings” now become acceptable, the question which goes to the heart of this presupposition dare for the sake of academic integrity not be avoided: can my utterly lay interpretation of, say, Shakespeare or Goethe, ever be said to be of the same quality, and have the same validity, as those of the scholars of such literary works? The valid and urgent interests of popularising theology and of understanding popular hermeneutics cannot be addressed simply by the assumption of an appropriate exegetical method. Narrative exegesis, though it no doubt has its

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<sup>36</sup> References to Genesis 22 without the asterisk is meant in this section as an acknowledgement that whereas historical-critical studies all agree that the text shows layers of development, narratological analyses tend to take the text as is a comprehensive unit and thus do not take into account editorial layers and developments.

attractions, however more often than not leads to disillusionment in interpreting the biblical text.

The move over recent decades<sup>37</sup> towards narrative and other modes of textual interpretation was, as alluded to in Chapter 2, conditioned by at least two factors (Ukpong 2004:23): a “push factor”, namely – in the by now formulaic phrase – disenchantment with the results of historical-critical methodologies (see e.g. Lombaard 2007a:63-66 / 2006c:19-21), and a “pull factor”, namely the cultural effects of post-modernism, with its emphasis on language, rather than history, as the all-encompassing framework of understanding.

To some extent at least<sup>38</sup>, narrative interpretations of the biblical texts had sought to return to pre-historical-critical, perhaps even pre-critical readings of the text. Within this ideological frame of reference, history would no longer be confronted in the biblical text; rather, the text-as-is and the narrative-as-is are identified with one another. Despite the fact that, classically at least within this framework (e.g. Powell 1990:19-21), the existence of historical settings for author, text and reader would be

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<sup>37</sup> The call for reading a text as literature goes back further, though, at least to Jowett 1860:330-433, who sought in this approach a solution for his day to the multitude of interpretations to biblical texts (cf. Moberly 1992:12) – a motive that sounds all too familiar.

<sup>38</sup> Gunn & Fewell 1993:7-12, for instance, represent a more moderate position: they criticise the historical-critical methodology for its adherence to modernistic ideals (somewhat unfairly, since much historical scholarship has been published which has loosened itself from this navel string, and then offer the narrative approach as a more democratic interpretative strategy. However, in their case, they clearly retain appreciation for the historical work, and they do not claim to find with their reading strategy *the* answer; rather, healthily, they offer *an* interpretation.

acknowledged, these aspects have no interpretative currency within narratological analyses. With narrative exegesis, implied author, narrative, and implied reader draw all the attention.

Interestingly, this is not far removed from a way of treating the biblical texts which is historical, but not critical. This is namely a view of text which may be termed “naively historical”: the text is viewed as conveying history directly; that is, the complexity of the relationship between a text and what it (purportedly) recounts, has not been accounted for. The text simply tells it as it was, in a “plain sense” (Tanner 1987:59-78). Such readings come close to narrative analyses of the text, which may not be interested in history, but is similarly concerned with telling us only what the text tells us. Apart from this difference as to the esteem in which history is held (cf. Schmid 1999:3), the alternatives of a naively historical approach to the text and a narratological engagement with the text thus lie not in the way the text is fundamentally dealt with, but rather in the grade of methodological awareness. Narratology is usually clear about its analytical tools (see below), whereas the naively historical approach tends to offer hardly anything in the form of methodological awareness.

In both these cases, taken together now, the main difference with the historical-critical readings of a text<sup>39</sup>, is what has been called “democratic” above, but could

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<sup>39</sup> For some of the differences between narrative and historical readings, see e.g. Powell 1990:6-10, 85-91 and Levenson 1987:19-59. Of course, as Moberly (1992:10-11) and others have pointed out, the two approaches of historical criticism and narrative analysis are not mutually exclusive; the results from one may feed into the other. This, however, this does not occur in the manner which is often assumed, namely as some almost romanticised cooperation or even agreement. As argued in

more accurately be termed populist. Whereas historical-critical readings seek out every possible problem and lay them bare, leaving all but the hardest-working exegetes at a loss on how to decide with some confidence among the possible interpretations, the narrative and naively historical approaches simply trust the text. What is valuable lies in the words before us. These words must (be brought to) speak to “the people”. With the latter sentiment, I certainly have no qualms (cf. Lombaard 2009a, 2009b, 2008e:119-138, 2008f:291-293, 2007b:358-359, 2005c:139-150, 2005d:295-305, 1999a:26-41, 1999b:22-46, Lombaard & Froneman 2006:141-150, Lombaard & Rabe 2005:412-431), while realising very well the difficulties of any religious discourse (cf. Lombaard 2008b:94-107); however, to execute this sensitivity in an a-historical way, serves thinking believers poorly, in Western(ised)<sup>40</sup> contexts at least. Such critically thinking believers’ questions remain unanswered by the results of this method; their faith, unfed; their trust, hence, weakened. These are not instances of having worked *through* the historical issues (as e.g. Craghan 1983 does; cf. Lombaard 2008a:140-141, 147, 149-150), of Brueggemann’s “postcritical reading” (Brueggemann 2002:7, cf. 3), or, again, of Ricoeur’s “second naiveté” (cf. Schneiders 1985:19); behind this urgency about narrative exegesis is, often, a search for something more-or-less: more faith-full, or less challenging; more soothing, or less troublesome. People who live daily in our informationed age, however, soon experience this as smoke and mirrors. One of the fundamental objects of narrative exegesis – getting the biblical message(s) across –

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Chapter 2, the views-of-text are just too different for that: the one will always usurp the other – as again below...

<sup>40</sup> Cf. however Colenso 1862, which shows that historical-critical questions occur quite naturally in a traditional African context too.



is thus self-defeating. People are not drawn to a greater trust of the biblical text, but are ultimately pushed away, with their questions unanswered, despite (or: precisely because of) initial promises to the contrary.

What is more, should a text that has incessantly captivated human (religious) interest for, perhaps, 24 centuries, and had done so on its own accord, now be “smoothed down” by narratological-interpretative means?

However, a text such as Genesis 22\*, our case in point here, contains a range of historical difficulties, as indicated above; almost every publication on the Aqedah explicitly points this out too. This already renders it attractive to many of the “pull factors” which accompany narrative methodology. What is more, though, Genesis 22 is a genuinely compact, gripping account, and as such lends itself quite naturally to interpretation as a narrative.

Let us then, as an experiment, submit just a little to this temptation, and see where narrative leads us...

### **3.3.2 To read a narrative**

Drawing on texts such as Bar-Efrat 2006/1989; Schmid 2004:271-300 & 1991; the 14 contributions collected in Noort & Tigchelaar 2002; Steins 2001:509-519; Tolmie 1999; Wénin 1999; Neef 1998:45-62; Seebass 1997; Berman 1997; Bekker & Nortjé 1995:454-464; Gunn & Fewell 1993:46-89, 101-128, 147-173; Janzen 1993; Gunn & Fewell 1993; Moberly 1992:39-56; Sailhamer 1992; Kruger 1991:187-200; White

1991 & 1979:1-30; Powell 1990; Cooper 1987:67-73; Crenshaw 1986; Deist 1986a:69-102/1986b:72-107; Alter 1985; Sternberg 1985; Blum 1984; Coats 1983:157-163 (drawing on Coats 1973:389-400); Brueggemann 1982; Westermann 1981; von Rad 1976:189-193; Gunkel 1917, though on none in particular explicitly, a narrative analysis of the Genesis 22-text would look at aspects such as these, with which to analyse the account:

- **Story**

- Realist
- Imaginary
- Combination (magical realism)
- Function: educational, subversive, legitimating, expository

- **The narrator**

- First or third person, or oscillating
- Point of view: evaluative / intrusive (e.g. gives moral “lessons”) or reclusive / descriptive (the drive is more subtle, in the story line)
- Power: imperfect or all-knowing
- Active (tells) or passive (shows)

- **Characterisation**

- Main and minor characters
- Round and flat characters (with the former multi-faceted, and often showing character development)
- Empathetic or repulsive

- **Events-in-plot (line-of-conflict)**
  - Line of tension
  - Turning point
  - Denouement / finale
  - Asides (purposeful digression)
  - Loose ends (with no purpose)
- **Mise-en-scène**
  - Time
  - Place
  - Changes in time and place
  - The manner in which such changes take place
- **Dialogue**
  - Pointed or detracting (quality of the narrative art)
  - Sparse or plentiful
  - Revealing or concealing (as set up by the author)
- **Stylistics**
  - Language
  - Metaphors
  - Themes
  - Structures

To employ all these aspects in a brief narrative analysis is of course not possible. Therefore just one aspect is chosen here, taking a cue from one of the most

influential works on narrative analysis, the 1959 Auerbach-volume titled *Mimesis*<sup>41</sup>. Central to this book is the idea that everything about narratives are meant to “draw the reader in”, as it were, so that the past is renewed in the present, that is, that the narrative is re-lived in practical ways by the readers (Auerbach 1959:9-14). Noted seldom, and never acted upon, is the important point made by Auerbach (1959:14) that in Genesis 22, everything about the narrative is driven by what remains *hidden*. Let us briefly trace<sup>42</sup>, therefore, this mimetic aspect of hiddenness – that is: silence, non-action, non-disclosure, secrecy, and related concepts – as a thread running

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<sup>41</sup> The sources listed in the opening paragraph to this analysis above are presupposed here in the narratological retelling offered. However, deliberately, in this retelling these sources are not continually acknowledged: it would break the narrative flow aimed at here – and narrative flow has, appropriately, become an inherent part of this exegetical method. This choice was thus made in keeping with the traditions of narrative exegesis, in order in this way too to demonstrate competence in this methodology.

<sup>42</sup> Even with this single theme I have had to exercise restraint, in order to keep the analysis brief. A qualifying methodological note (the need for which has been indicated by a seminar question by Prof. Hans van Deventer, Old Testament scholar at the North-West University, Vaal Triangle campus: it would have been possible to summarise here an extant narrative interpretation of Genesis 22, to avoid the possible accusation of setting up a straw doll. Three considerations led me to opt for creating an own narratological-exegetical account here: first, try as one may by qualifying one’s motives and by being as fair as possible, the *ad hominem*-accusation will always be made when one recounts a specific scholar’s work and then dismisses the method – a distasteful misunderstanding, best avoided; second, by this means it is shown that I am thoroughly at home within this exegetical approach, and that I understand its dynamics – that is, its joys *and* its problems – from the “inside”; third, it is an altogether more satisfying exercise to create something new, than to recount another’s recounting of the Aqedah narrative. The latter two considerations, and the way in which the narratological analysis has been done here, should, I hope, provide enough evidence to the contrary in countering concerns about setting up a straw doll.

throughout the Genesis 22-narrative. To highlight these aspects, the relevant concepts below are placed in italics.

### 3.3.3 A methodological illustration: Genesis 22 narratologically read

וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וְהָאֱלֹהִים נִסָּה<sup>1</sup>

אֶת־אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הֲנִנִּי:

In the opening four words already we encounter a narrative technique common to many stories: the date remains *hidden*. Immediately, the *vagueness* lures the reader; the *mystique* is engaging. Although some scholars debate whether these four words bind this chapter to the previous, or in fact indicate the exact opposite, namely a firm break, this is unimportant to us. This *non-descript* “once upon a time” has our ears pricked. This is an engaging narrative technique. We are ready to hear more...

The time and place are *not mentioned* either. The speculation and refutation by one or two debating commentators that the revelation must have taken place at night, is again an irrelevant detail. The fact that God speaks to, no, deliberately tests Abraham, *without reasons given*, has given rise to many other stories – that is the important part. These resultant stories have themes such as: a debate in heaven (à la the book of Job) that causes the test; or that it was not God after all who set such a monstrous challenge; or that God obviously knew that Abraham would pass the test; or that Isaac willingly submitted to being sacrificed; or that Sarah, strangely

*absent* from the Genesis 22 account (perhaps patronisingly, the matron is *silenced?*), was horrified by her husband’s *secretive* actions. *Stillnesses* in stories give rise to a multitude of further accounts.

וַיֹּאמֶר קַח-נָא אֶת-בְּנֶךְךָ אֶת-יִצְחָק אֲשֶׁר-אַהֲבָתָּ אֶת-יִצְחָק  
וְלֶךְ-לְךָ אֶל-אֶרֶץ הַמּוֹרִיָּה וְהַעֲלֵהוּ שָׁם לְעֹלָה עַל אֶתֶר  
הַהָרִים אֲשֶׁר אָמַר אֱלֹהִים:

In this verse, the *absence* of precise time and place indication in verse 1 are given a strange twist. Namely, the place remains *vague*; the time not. The place seems certain at first – Mount Moria –, but it is not. This is not the certainty of 2 Chronicles 3:1, where the city and mountain are unambiguously indicated:

בִּירוּשָׁלַם בְּהַר הַמּוֹרִיָּה. Here the location is imprecise – a generalised direction: merely the אֶרֶץ הַמּוֹרִיָּה.

God is sending Abraham to a *strange* place – in more ways than one!

Completely the opposite is true, however, of when this should happen: the implication is clearly “now”; also, to what purpose: for Abraham to kill his son (who is identified thrice over, as the *secret* is progressively revealed: אֶת-יִצְחָק – אֶת-בְּנֶךְךָ – אֲשֶׁר-אַהֲבָתָּ – until being fully exposed: אֶת-יִצְחָק!); an *unravelling* tension line stressed with three verbs: וְהַעֲלֵהוּ – וְלֶךְ – קַח. Here, no uncertainty. Paradoxically, this goes to heighten the supreme irony, namely on the *continued silence* as to why God would do this. The very same God who gave Isaac as concrete expression of

continued presence, *takes away* that “sacrament”: the concrete expression of care. Why the God of life – of everything – would condemn this sign of divine grace to death – *nothingness* – remains cloaked in a *tremendous mystery*.

<sup>3</sup> וַיִּשְׁכַּם אַבְרָהָם בַּבֹּקֶר וַיַּחְבֹּשׁ אֶת־חַמְרוֹ וַיִּקַּח אֶת־שָׁנִי  
וַעֲרִיו אֹתוֹ וְאֵת יְצַחַק בְּנֵוֹ וַיִּבְקַע עֲצֵי עֵלֶּה וַיִּקֶּם וַיִּלְדֹּךְ  
אֶל־הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר־אָמַר־לוֹ הָאֱלֹהִים:

Was there discussion? Why is no response recorded of Abraham to God’s “inhuman” command? This *silence on unsilence* breaks the expectation harshly by the simple opening words of this verse: Abraham just did. The one verb after the other. God tests: *why*, is *not said*; Abraham obeys: *why*, is *not said* either. These *suppressions of information* entice the reader, namely into Abraham’s shoes: vicariously, we live his obedience. He remains *unaware* that he is being tested; we the reader share with the narrator, and with God, that *secret*. Precisely this implicit shared *conspiracy* against Abraham, forced on us by the narrative, draws us into his life, *silently*.

<sup>4</sup> .. בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי וַיֵּשֶׂא אַבְרָהָם אֶת־עֵינָיו וַיִּרְא אֶת־הַמָּקוֹם מֵרְחֹק:

Why are we given this detail about time? As a historical indication? Or simply as a narrative technique? If the latter, is this detail given because we are wanted by the author to be reminded of another instance, in the Psalter, in which eyes are lifted to a mountain and the question asked, where will my help come from? Then, in Psalm

121, as now, is the mountain a place of evil, against which divine protection is required, or is that the place where God dwells, on high? Alternatively, is this detail given because, as with many good stories, the really important events occur on the third day? The *silence* of this verse on these issues is deafening; hence, precisely, its narrative effect. We now, soon, expect the story climax.

<sup>5</sup> וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָהָם אֶל־נַעֲרָיו שְׁבוּ־לָכֶם פֹּה עִם־הַחֲמוֹר וְאֲנִי  
וְהַנֶּעֱר נֵלְכָה עַד־כָּה וְנִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה וְנִשְׁוֹבָה אֵלֵיכֶם:

The *silence* is broken! Dialogue starts! For this first time during the whole journey, words are exchanged. But what do the words reveal? The purpose of the journey? Only *subterfuge*, it turns out. Contrary to the purpose of words – to reveal –, Abraham’s utterances here just push the real tension *below* the level of consciousness. What really will happen up ahead is *not revealed*. This is not fully a lie; it is not exactly wholly disclosive communication either. The first person plural form of וְנִשְׁוֹבָה has a sting: its meaning is singular (usually translated cleverly without numerical form as, simply, “and [then] come again”).

By what remains hidden behind the words, we the readers are drawn into *another conspiracy* here, this time with Abraham, against Isaac, and to the exclusion of the accompanying slaves. In reality, that is the exact power of these words. It is what is left *unsaid*, or is at best vaguely hinted at, that is the true power of this sentence. Here, *the conspiratorial silences are the meaning*.





וַיִּקַּח אֲבִרְהָם אֶת-עֵצֵי הָעֵלֶה וַיִּשֶׂם עַל-יִצְחָק בְּנֹו וַיִּקַּח

בְּיָדֹו אֶת-הָאֵשׁ וְאֶת-הַמִּאֲכָלֶת וַיִּלְכוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם יַחְדָּו:

וַיֹּאמֶר יִצְחָק אֶל-אֲבִרְהָם אָבִיו וַיֹּאמֶר אָבִי וַיֹּאמֶר הַנְּנִי

בְּנִי וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה הָאֵשׁ וְהָעֵצִים וְאֵינִי הַשֶּׁה לָעֵלֶה:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֲבִרְהָם אֱלֹהִים יִרְאֶה-לֹו הַשֶּׁה לָעֵלֶה בְּנִי וַיִּלְכוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם יַחְדָּו:

As an eerie precursor to the famous Anthony Hopkins movie, Isaac here breaks the *silence* on the lamb. That is, the sacramental meal himself – we know – breaks the quietude on the one *missing* element of the sacramental offering up ahead: that which will experience the cut-throat action most directly, most existentially. Ironically, he that will be killed – brought to *nothing* – asks the question about that which will be killed. Isaac remains *ignorant* that his question is self-referential, not in a Derridaian way of endlessly referring signs, ad infinitum, but the exact opposite: it is self-annihilating referentiality. Unknowingly, Isaac speaks a death sentence. The ultimate finality this holds for him, however, remains *concealed*.

Abraham's response to the question on / by the lamb-to-the-slaughter is *devastating* to all faith. He does not lie, directly, but uses piety to *quash* a question; namely, for Isaac, *unwittingly*, the question of life. In such an answer, though no lie, lies no honesty. Here we find no integrity in human-human communication; nor in the intimate, trusting familial communication – least of all because it exploits the most existentially meaningful relationship, namely with God, to *hide reality*. Here, faith *sublimates* truth. Isaac is *kept in the dark*, ironically, *destructively*, by Abraham's

pious utterance. Thus, Isaac is taken for a ride, further along on the journey which for him will be a road to *nowhere*...

<sup>9</sup> וַיָּבֹאוּ אֶל-הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אָמַר-לּוֹ הָאֱלֹהִים וַיִּבֶן שָׁם

אֲבָרָהָם אֶת-הַמִּזְבֵּחַ וַיַּעֲרֹךְ אֶת-הָעֵצִים וַיַּעֲקֹד אֶת-יִצְחָק

בְּנוֹ וַיִּשֶׂם אֹתוֹ עַל-הַמִּזְבֵּחַ מִמַּעַל לְעֵצִים:

<sup>10</sup> וַיִּשְׁלַח אֲבָרָהָם אֶת-יָדוֹ וַיִּקַּח אֶת-הַמֶּאֱכָלֶת לְשֹׂחַט אֶת-בְּנוֹ:

Suddenly, time, place and action *collapse* here, into an *almost-zero*: what took a whole period of time, and involved a substantial change in location, and should have taken much effort, is *concentrated* into a few words only. During precisely this *contracted* mise-en-scène, Isaac is brought almost to *non-existence*. Like a black hole in outer space, which *compacts* everything in its environs into *near extinction*, these two verses summarise the rush of events – for Isaac, up to the very point of his death. In sharpest focus, this is the cutting edge of narrative technique.

<sup>11</sup> וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹוֹ מִלֶּאֶךְ יְהוָה מִן-הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיֹּאמֶר אֲבָרָהָם אֲבָרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הֲנִנִּי:

<sup>12</sup> וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-תְּשַׁלַּח יָדְךָ אֶל-הַנֶּעֱר וְאֶל-תַּעַשׂ לוֹ מְאוּמָה

כִּי עַתָּה יָדַעְתִּי כִּי-יִרְאֵ אֱלֹהִים אַתָּה וְלֹא חָשַׁכְתָּ אֶת-בְּנֶךָ אֶת-יְחִידְךָ מִמֶּנִּי:

<sup>13</sup> וַיִּשָּׂא אֲבָרָהָם אֶת-עֵינָיו וַיִּרְאֵ וְהִנֵּה-אֵיל אַחֵר נֹאֲחָזוּ

בְּסֹבֵב בְּקִרְנָיו וַיִּלָּךְ אֲבָרָהָם וַיִּקַּח אֶת-הָאֵיל וַיַּעֲלֵהוּ לְעֵלָה תַּחַת בְּנוֹ:

Like the *deus ex machina* option in ancient Grecian theatre, when there is no longer for the leading characters any way to extricate themselves from a *hopeless* situation, suddenly, we have God's action, *out of the blue*: the miracle of Isaac's life being spared. Only now, and directly from the mouth of (the angel of) God, Isaac gets to hear the purpose of the *mystery* in the midst of which he finds himself; at the same time, Abraham is spared the most terrible act which he was about to commit. At this point, all that was hanging in the air, is cleared up.

וַיִּקְרָא אַבְרָהָם שְׁמֵהַמָּקוֹם הַהוּא יְהוָה יִרְאֶה אֲשֶׁר יֹאמַר הַיּוֹם בְּהַר יְהוָה יִרְאֶה:<sup>14</sup>

All...? No, here, one last *lacuna* is cleared up. Where does the name of this place come from? This place is related to an ancient memory, in a very clever way: “Yahweh-jireh” is a finely-stringed word play between “*seeing*”, “*to be let seen*” (the active and passive), and to “*foresee*”. The word play between *nothingness* and being shown something fits the story of Isaac's *near-death* experience perfectly. This last question is thus settled.<sup>43</sup>

וַיֵּשֶׁב אַבְרָהָם אֶל-נְעֻרָיו וַיִּקְמוּ וַיֵּלְכוּ יַחְדָּו אֶל-בְּאֵר שֶׁבַע וַיֵּשֶׁב אַבְרָהָם בְּבְאֵר שֶׁבַע:<sup>19</sup>

But where is Isaac? He who was kept in the *dark*, has *disappeared* from the narrative. A new question! – the *mystery* of the *missing* son, and along with it, the *missing* future... Saved by God, Isaac *is* in this narrative *no more*. Yet, it is to

<sup>43</sup> With very few exceptions, verses 15-18 are regarded by exegetes as a later interpretation. This interpolation should, of course, be analysed too; however, for this brief experiment, this is (for reasons of brevity, and because the points I am trying to make can already be amply demonstrated) not done.

Beersheba that Abraham goes to from here: the “home” of the Isaac traditions. The *strange plot* thickens...

This *open-endedness* calls forth a rereading; and yet another: have we *missed* something?

And here we are, having read it yet again...

### 3.3.4 (Self-)evaluation

In this example of a narrative analysis, done in but a circumscribed way here, we can see that the approach of narratological exegesis allows one to describe the story, or rather, to re-describe it, for the sake of elucidating its inner workings. The strong point of this kind of analysis, as with all text-immanent approaches, is that it *takes* the reader to the text; its weak point is, though, that it *keeps* the reader with the text. That is: the reader never gets past the text; the text becomes the reader’s universe. This non-referential aspect as the text-as-narrative, a central aspect within narratological theories in general (cf. Thiselton 1992:471-514), means that such exegesis still does not tell the reader *what the text means, outside of its own universe*. That is precisely, though, what readers refer to when they ask about the meaning of a text, either when they are interested in its currency in the ancient world or when they seek in some way to relate a text to their own lives (alternatively: as they seek in some way to relate their own lives to a text). By means of narratological analysis we do manage to understand the text itself better, of course, or rather: some aspects of it, in some senses. What it had meant to initial hearers / readers, and to

the generations following them, including us, has however not been made clear by such an analysis.

Much engagement with the text has thus been offered by this method, and – usually – in a most enjoyable way. Still, the questions everybody keeps on asking of this text have not been answered. The narrative approach cannot answer them; the nature of this method is not to *respond* to issues, but to *recast* the story.

People who ask the difficult questions about the text, however, will not long submit to such subterfuge. Meaning for them is not the same thing as hearing the story in other words. Meaning is for them, as far as Genesis 22 is concerned, coming to terms with the terrifying morality implied here (cf. e.g. Westermann 1981:433 on Immanuel Kant), among other issues. Exegesis which does not address this may suit certain kinds of pieties; the critical mind, not.

### **3.3.5 End of story**

Many stories such as this one above have been told about Genesis 22. Often aspects of the Aqedah account have, in the memorable terminology of Miscal (1983:140-141), remained “decidedly undecidable”. Narrative analyses, the re-storyings of the story, do not deliver on its self-expectation to simplify matters; they circumvent well, but answer little. When von Rad (1962:134) famously wrote that “(d)ie legitimste Form theologischen Redens vom Alten Testament ist ... immer noch die Nacherzählung“, he was working within a thoroughly historically-inclined paradigm. Von Rad’s exegesis, known for its narrative qualities, perhaps more so

than any other exegete over the past century, was indeed a retelling of the biblical texts, but then: *historically*.

The art of reading the Bible as narrative has yet to reach this point. Like much of earlier historical criticism, narrative analyses do not go far enough<sup>44</sup>. The story may be retold, beautifully even, but what is offered us, in the end, is primarily a phenomenology of that particular narrative. Such a study, even when indicating (all too) briefly a date (see e.g. the collection of Old Testament stories retold by McCarthy & Riley 1986), is not full narrative criticism yet. Telling us how the narrative works, is only step one (as I have also indicated in Lombaard 2007a:69-70 / 2006c:23-24, drawing on Barr 1995:5-8). Full narrative analyses of the Bible would now take a next step, and discern trends in writing, comparing the art of the narrative in different historical phases and socio-cultural contexts, which is among the standard procedures of the scholarly critique of literature in general<sup>45</sup>. This step, which would be so helpful, is never undertaken in narrative analyses of the biblical literature<sup>46</sup>.

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<sup>44</sup> I allude here to my recent chapter on Biblical Spirituality (Lombaard 2008a:150): "The point is not, as is often stated..., that historical criticism goes too far. Rather, the case is that historical criticism has tended not to have gone far enough! ... historical exegesis has often stopped at the point of coming to understanding of a given text in its ancient contexts.... The hazardous process of crossing the centuries to speak theologically and faithfully to the people and issues of our time is part of the core tasks of this discipline".

<sup>45</sup> My thanks for this insight to the recently deceased Prof. Elize Botha, the doyenne of the analysis of Afrikaans literature.

<sup>46</sup> Von Rad 1976:189 thinks in this direction with regard to the Elohist sources (albeit in a manner which would no longer be acceptable).

### **3.3.6 From retelling story to rewriting history**

The purposes of the above narratological analysis of the Genesis 22 account includes demonstrating practically what has been theorised about this method in Chapter 2. Narrative analysis, as entertaining, even, as it is, does not contribute in its usual guise to our understanding of the historical questions related to this text – questions which simply will not go away.

Much more productive, it will be shown below, are historical analyses of this text, despite what has become a kind of automatic reaction on such methods, based on the assumption that such analyses cannot further a fruitful relationship of a reader with whichever text is in question.

It is to such a historical interpretation that we turn next. However, a different twist is included in the analysis below, namely by drawing on, precisely, narrative analysis, but then in a more historical way than is undertaken by its proponents, as had just been pleaded for.

### **3.4 Isaac multiplex – Genesis 22\* in a new historical representation**

After the narrative reading of Genesis 22, which showed that method to be less than satisfactory, a historically-oriented reading of Genesis 22\* is now presented (cf.

Lombaard 2008d:907-919), which holds the possibility of placing this text in a new frame of reference for the modern reader.

### 3.4.1 Isaac multiplex

As complex as the interpretation history of the Aqedah text, Genesis 22:1-19\*, over the past two millennia plus has been the scholarly analyses of this pericope over the past two centuries plus (see Popović 2002:211-223 for recent bibliographic references). The main *redaktionsgeschichtliche* and *rezeptionsgeschichtliche / wirkungsgeschichtliche* lines identified during this period may briefly be categorised in six different groups:

- Interpretation within the Aqedah text, with as prime example the *Fortschreibung* already in the text as we have it (cf. Moberly 1988:302-323), namely the almost universally-accepted (van Seters 1975:229; Coats 1983:152; and Seebass 1997:200-201; 213-214 are among the few who differ from the majority on this point) editorial addition of Genesis 22:15-18;
- The early religious reinterpretations of this narrative within Judaism, Christianity and Islam (cf. e.g. Steiger & Heinen 2006; Garcia Martínez 2002:44-57; van Bekkum 2002:86-95; Leemhuis 2002:125-139; Bekker & Nortjé 1995:457-462; Berman 1997; Kruger 1991:190-191);
- Representations within art history (cf. e.g. van den Brink 2002:140-151; de Jong 2002:152-165; Berman 1997:137-149);
- Within scholarly traditions, the historically-oriented interpretations, about which more below;



- Within scholarly circles still, the narrative approaches to this text, which for our purposes here may be classified with structuralist and semiotic readings as a-historical approaches, all of which are interesting, but – as indicated again in the preceding pages – rarely offer us something “new”, despite claims to the contrary (often also in the title of such publications);
- Lastly, philosophical-ethically inclined interpretations, the most famous of which are those by Kierkegaard (1843), Buber (1953) and Derrida (1992), though these discussions certainly go wider, with the best treatment of this interpretational genre the recent paper by Sekine (2007).

In what follows, then, I remain firmly within the ambit of the fourth of these interpretational strands, namely the historically-inclined interpretations of Genesis 22:1-14, 19<sup>47</sup>. Within this historically-inclined interpretational strand on Genesis 22:1-14 & 19, though, the situation is not simple either.

### **3.4.2 Genesis 22\* in historical interpretations, related**

The historically-oriented interpretations of the meaning of the Genesis 22\* account may be divided, broadly, into two main streams<sup>48</sup>:

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<sup>47</sup> It is clear that the majority opinion is correct in this instance, that verses 15-18 are textual additions. This does not mean that these verses are to be disregarded: to the contrary, their effect on recasting the rest of the Aqedah narrative and the resultant effect on the interpretation history of this text are very important, for this study too, as will shown below.

<sup>48</sup> Two minor streams offer alternative historical interpretations: that the Genesis 22\* account reflects an earlier aetiology of the name of the mountain in 22:14 (יְהוָה יְרָאֵה), and that Genesis 22\* reflects an

- those that seek to understand the text within the cultic history of ancient Israel; and
- those that seek to understand the text within the theodicy discussion among Old Testament texts.

The former option, with Genesis 22\* placed within the cultic history of Israel, sees behind the text the ancient practice of child sacrifice, with this text seeking to put to an end such practices, by indicating God's strong preference for an animal. The fact that this prohibition is placed by the Genesis 22\* narrative at the very beginnings of Israel's faith history, namely as part of the experiences of God of the arch-patriarch Abraham, is a calculated strategy, namely to show to the intended audience of this text that from the father of their Yahweh-belief onwards (as they understood its historical construction in the post-exilic time), child sacrifice had been anathema.

The dating attached to the Genesis 22\*-narrative by proponents of this solution varies quite widely, from after 722/721 (so, recently, Noort 2002:19), to the time of king Manasseh (because of the reference to child sacrifice in 2Kings 21:6, and then usually as part of the Elohist's 7<sup>th</sup> century narrative; cf. e.g. Steins 2001:514-515), to shortly after the exile (the most popular suggestion at present), to – in the case of Stavrakopoulou 2004 – much later in Israel's history, since child sacrifice would have, according to Stavrakopoulou, continued as a part of Israel's practice of faith.

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initiation rite (only White 1991:187, 203, drawing on his earlier work, White 1979:1-30). Though some vague nods have been made in the direction of the former proposal, always with the qualification that even if it were true, that aspect now lies so far behind the text as to be essentially untraceable, the White-suggestion has found no audience.

With Genesis 22\* understood as a text within the clearly post-exilic theodicy controversy, this account finds itself understood among texts such as Job (a popular linkage made in scholarly literature; see e.g. van Ruiten 2002:58-85) and Qohelet, reacting against, for instance, some Proverbs-texts which, with the most observable connection to Deuteronomistic theology (cf. Lombaard 2002b:1-82 & 2002d:1-82; on problems with the concept of a Deuteronomistic movement, see e.g. Lohfink 1995:313-382), advocate a firm retributive ethical order. Against the latter, Genesis 22\* points to the mystery of God's ways. In the exilic / post-exilic period, while coming to terms with 587/6, Genesis 22\* would then be another representative of post-dogmatic piety within Israel. Genesis 22\* would argue in this debate that suffering, leading almost to death, and from which there is, after all, escape, are all part of the inscrutability of God's ways with Judah.

In the first of these two major historically-oriented interpretations, a pre- or early-Yahwistic element (though probably not a non-Yahwistic element) of Israel's faith, namely child sacrifice, is countered by Genesis 22\*; in the second such interpretation, a post-exilic ethical dogmatism is opposed. Both these interpretations have found common expression within the historically-inclined exegeses of the Genesis 22\*-text.

However, the most popular synchronic interpretation remains aligned to that which is provided in the text-as-is, namely that this narrative is a call to blind obedience to God. Either dehistoricised or read naively as a historically accurate account, Genesis 22 thus becomes an exhortation to faith in all circumstances; that is,

encouragement to trust that God will provide an escape from difficult situations, even though these cannot always be foreseen by human agents. Genesis 22 is thus, in this line of thinking, a pious, moral tale. However, the morality of a God that in fact created the almost-slaughter of Isaac in this narrative is left unconsidered by such readings (and usually by those within the historical line of exegesis, when this interpretation is offered, too), rendering such explanations wholly unfit to provide the model of trust they seek to impart. This is precisely the kind of weaknesses missionary anti-religious writings, such as that recently again by Dawkins (2006:242-243), have focussed on. Such narrow moralistic interpretations of Genesis 22 will not change, and certainly not answer, the questions popularly asked about this text. Neither can the philosophically-oriented discussions, which tend to offer conjectures on concepts and themes in this account (cf. Sekine 2007) – interesting enough, but not resolving much.

It remains for historical exegesis to open avenues of accounting for the existence of this text and its inclusion in the canon.

It is along these lines that another historical context for this account is now proposed.

### **3.4.3 Genesis 22\* and the relationship between the patriarchs**

This proposed alternate historical understanding of Genesis 22\* was induced directly by the text-as-anecdotal-history view indicated in Chapter 2. In this reading, Genesis 22\* retains the familiar themes: threat, saving grace, and subjugation; now, however, not related to either religious practice or to theological debate, as had been the case

with the respective major historical explanations summarised above, but related to inner-Israelite identity politics. Genesis 22\* can namely be read as a text reflecting the power play within ancient Israel (more specifically: Judah), in which the carriers of the Abraham traditions with this narrative either reflect on past events, or threaten imminent events, in their conflict with the carriers of the Isaac traditions.

It has for a long time been clear to historical scholarship from parallel texts such as the *אֲשֶׁתוֹ אַחֲתִי* passages – Genesis 26:1-11 (*יִצְחָק*), 12:10-20 (*אַבְרָם*), 20:1-18 (*אַבְרָהָם*) – that there was a competition of sorts between the respective tradents of the Isaac and Abraham traditions in ancient Israel. By the sheer weight of Abraham-texts included in the Pentateuch when compared to the few Isaac texts, it is clear who the winner in this power struggle was. The *אֲשֶׁתוֹ אַחֲתִי* passages show us something of the process of this rivalry. The one whose stories dominate, dominate history – and *vice versa*.

Following this line of interpretation, in Genesis 22\* we find Isaac, and thus per implication the Isaac tradents, at the mercy of both Abraham and God, and so per implication at the mercy of the Abraham tradents<sup>49</sup>. Isaac is cast in the role of family idiot: he has no inkling of what is about to happen. Isaac (and so the Isaacites) is in the power of Abraham (that is: the Abrahamites) and God: the latter two form a

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<sup>49</sup> Unintentionally, von Rad 1976:194 comes very close to this view, when he writes: “Das spätere Israel ... konnte wohl nichts anders als sich in Isaac verkörpert zu sehen, d.h. also auf den Altar Jahwes gelegt, ihm zurückgegeben und dann allein von ihm das Leben zurückempfangend, ... allein aus dem Willen dessen, der Isaac aus der Freiheit seines Geschichtswillen leben ließ.“

powerful union<sup>50</sup> in which Isaac (the Isaacites) is both clueless and powerless. The warning is clear: Isaac (the Isaacites) will from now on play a subservient role in the religious identity of the composite “tribe” of Israel in Judah. The אֱלֹהֵי אֲבֹרָהָם has come to dominate the פְּתָר יִצְחָק (cf. Genesis 31:42 & 53)<sup>51</sup>; the union of Israel, post-exilic, is being forged with power, that is, with both the threat of demise and with divine justification / compliance. Such power rhetoric is typical of ruthless “political scheming” (this terminology from Kruger 1991:193): that the threat of violence is combined with theological support. This is a claim which is always easy for a dominant group to make, and always almost impossible for the dominated to refute. The Isaacites in Israel have been overpowered by the Abrahamites. Isaac now fully plays the role of an insignificant middle child. To recontextualise the words of White (1991:190): “His role and identity thus are defined altogether with respect to the powerful bonds which tie him to Abraham”, and, I would add, to the alliance with God which Abraham claims.

Hence, Genesis 22\* here plays a role which can be said in some ways to parallel that which had been ascribed to Joshua 24 in the earlier widely-accepted amphictyony theory of Noth (1954:83-104), namely that we see in this text different groups being combined, if not unified; in this case, though ultimately peacefully, not without the threat of imminent, divine-sanctioned violence. It is but by the grace of

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<sup>50</sup> Davies 2000:21-40 refers with his typical humour to this alliance as “male bonding” between God and Abraham, which he interprets as two macho figures engaged in constant one-upmanship.

<sup>51</sup> Clearly, Alt’s 1929 *Gott der Väter*-hypothesis echoes here...

God that Isaac lives; had it been in the hands of Abraham, Isaac would be no more – this is clearly the implication the Isaacites should grasp<sup>52</sup>.

#### 3.4.4 Genesis 22:19

The two problems of Genesis 22:19, that Abraham returns from the mountain *alone*, and that he then goes to *Beersheba*, may now be resolved differently from the usual suggestions with this interpretation. The Abraham-alone reference is not a simple *pars pro toto* expression here, referring to only Abraham but implying that Isaac went along; nor is this the point where Isaac finds his own way, his own identity apart from Abraham. Rather, the opposite is the case here: Isaac counts no more; the Isaacites have been subjugated. It is therefore not without good reason that it is for, precisely, Beersheba, the home base of the Isaac traditions, that Abraham then departs. The geographical reference is not meant as a narrative link of this account to the out-of-place episode of the treatise between Abraham and Abimelech which immediately precedes Genesis 22 (i.e. Genesis 21:25-33, + 34; at best, the shared geographic reference may explain why these two texts were put next to one another by later

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<sup>52</sup> Miyamoto's interpretation, reading *וַתַּעֲלֵהוּ שָׁם לְעֹלָה עַל אֶתֶר הַהָרִים* in Genesis 22:2 as "lift up [Isaac] on the mountain in order to offer a burnt offering" (cf. Sekine 2007:11 on Miyamoto 2006:81–162) may be creative, and his resultant conclusion that Genesis 22 leads to "a tribe-conquering narrative identity" (Sekine 2007:11) appears attractive to my proposed interpretation here. However, Miyamoto apparently indicates a personal, existential element with this phrase (based on his cultural-philosophical background?), whereas the interpretation possibility offered here is that of an adversarial relationship between two different tradent *groups*, which is "resolved" by the one now finally and thoroughly coming to dominate the other, "with God on our side" (in the words of folk singer Bob Dylan, 1964).

editors). Beersheba too is now Abraham's domain. The Isaacites have been vanquished; the winner takes all.

### 3.4.5 Genesis 22:15-18 & 1

Soon after, however, a sugar-coating was needed. When power play has succeeded, it can be hidden, so that the powerful may be experienced (again) as "good people". This not only portrays the winner who took all in a more positive light; it also stabilises the power relation that has now been established. The act of subjugation is thus sublimated and reinforced, all at once. Thus, with theological flair, Genesis 22:15-18 does both: it gives new credence to the acts of Abraham (and thus the Abrahamites) by casting him now as "ein religiöses Ideal" (Gunkel 1917:240)<sup>53</sup>, rewarded in these verses by God's blessing; this is done in such a way that Isaac (the Isaacites) suffer(s) the inconsequence of instrumentalist reference only: for him / them, no reward<sup>54</sup>, except perhaps to count among those who are blessed in the arch-patriarch (Genesis 22:18)<sup>55</sup>.

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<sup>53</sup> Boehm 2002:1-12 & 2004:155-156 thinks in some ways along parallel lines to my reasoning on this point, but sees the heavenly intervention here as a later apology for Abraham who, in an older version of the events, sacrificed a sheep in stead of obeying the command of verse 1. He accepts, thus, concord between Abraham and Isaac – one of many such apologetic turns in both the academic and religious literature on the Aqedah. An interpretation which notices the inner-religious contest, however, requires no such interpretative turns.

<sup>54</sup> The harmonious interpretation of this narrative as that Abraham and Isaac are here given to one another, because of their shared obedience to God, as Kaiser (2003:224) would have it, does not take into account the minute, instrumentalist-only role Isaac is afforded here. In addition, one has to make sense of the given that Isaac is absent from verse 19, and Abraham moves alone to Beersheba, the



This earliest reinterpretation of the account by Genesis 22:15-18 is further cemented by employing the term נִסָּה (tempting / testing / trying) in Genesis 22:1 (cf. Gunkel 1917:238). Thus, the whole account is now recast, from the beginning, giving it from that moment a much stronger theological than political slant. From this instant onwards (in both the narrative *and* its reception history), the story is all about God and Abraham (reinterpreting here Westermann 1981:434, 436); the overpowering of Isaac has effectively been overlaid with a theological motif. Of course, as often happens with political interference in matters religious<sup>56</sup>, the results could not be foreseen: 24 centuries – and counting – of speculation on what could have been going on in the mind of the God of Genesis 22...

### 3.4.6 24 centuries...?

The dating of this text, as with so many others, is in the by now stock phrase, notoriously difficult. Despite misgivings expressed earlier on the possibilities

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home of the Isaac traditions, as stated above: symbolically with this narrative to take over both the locality and to some extent the Isaac traditions. The latter we see most clearly with the “my wife - my sister” passages.

<sup>55</sup> Moberly’s interpretation (1988:319-323) of the addition of verses 15-18, namely that Abraham would from now on (i.e. for Moberly, the 7<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> century) play an intercessory role in Israel’s faith, would have supported my argument here: Isaac is rendered powerless by God-and-Abraham-in-alliance. However, I do not find this Abraham-as-intercessory view of the Aqedah postscript by Moberly convincing.

<sup>56</sup> Remember: it is a white South African, born into the Dutch Reformed Church, writing here – cf. Lombaard 2009d, 2009c & 2001b:69-87.

narratology offers with the interpretation of the *meaning* of this text, higher hopes emerge on the promise it holds for *dating* Genesis 22\* – if, as indicated earlier, it is done historically.

I have namely argued above that:

...narrative analyses do not go far enough. The story may be retold, beautifully even, but what is offered us, in the end, is primarily a phenomenology of that particular narrative. Such a study ... is not full narrative criticism yet. Telling us how the narrative works, is only step one... Full narrative analyses of the Bible would now take a next step, and discern trends in writing, comparing the art of the narrative in different historical phases and socio-cultural contexts, which is among the standard procedures of the scholarly critique of literature in general. This step, which would be so helpful, is never undertaken in narrative analyses of the biblical literature.

The narratological-historical question to ask of Genesis 22\*, thus, is: when is the time of the short story in ancient Israel?

In classical Pentateuchal *Literarkritik*, the time of "the great narratives" (to appropriate Lyotard 1989:315) began with a Solomonic J, perhaps around 950. Now, much less impressive ages for a J are commonly accepted (on the J dispute, see Gertz, Schmid & Witte 2002 and Dozeman & Schmid 2006); yet, the point remains that *Literarkritik / Literargeschichte* and *Literaturkritik / Literaturgeschichte* ought not be that far removed from one another. On the less expansive than J,

though perhaps more coherent shorter narratives, such as first, Daniel and then, Joseph, the commonly accorded age has dropped equally dramatically, as the “carbon dating” of critical scholarship has continually been applied to these narratives. For the most part, “short stories” such as the books of Esther, Jonah and Ruth have long found a comfortable consensual home in post-exilic to late-post-exilic times. For a narrative such as Genesis 22 – a “short short story” – to be placed within the fourth century, or even the third, BCE is therefore a possibility not to be reckoned without, given that the literary genre of the short story finds an easy home in this period.

This would not mean that this late date would be the first time any hint of this story’s constitutive elements had existed. The possibilities of an aetiology (Genesis 22:14), an intra-religious polemic about child sacrifice, and a theodicy debate, all of which may have in some ways given impetus to what became “our” story, are not to be summarily discarded. All stories draw significantly, though not necessarily deliberately, on themes and ideas available within their birth culture – cultural “reverberations”, in the language of Boehm (2004:147).

It is for precisely this reason, namely that the theme of child sacrifice becomes more acceptable at some distance from the exile and the strong contemporaneous influence of Deuteronomistic theology, that a later dating for Genesis 22\* is more likely than an earlier dating. It seems highly unlikely that child sacrifice would have survived as actual practice in the Judean cult past the exile, or even past the prophets such as Hosea and Amos, simply because of the ethical impulses towards social justice from these prophets onwards (cf. Lombaard 2002c:83-140 & 2002e:83-

138). (That is, if actual child sacrifice, rather than just a cultural awareness, had been a significant part of Yahwism, or of the surrounding religions, about which doubts have been expressed.) The point is, however, that after the initially insular stances post-exilically, which we find particularly in Ezra-Nehemiah, the later, reactive, outward-looking stances in Judea tend to be more positive towards contact with outside cultures. Thus, in the developing literature of the time, Ruth goes to Moab, probably in the 5<sup>th</sup> century; Jonah to Nineveh, in the late 4<sup>th</sup> / early 3<sup>rd</sup> century; and Esther to Persia, during the 3<sup>rd</sup> century; the wisdom book Qohelet goes so far as to quote, both with approval and in dispute, Hellenistic philosophy, in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century (cf. Lohfink 2003). A growing trend towards openness can thus be detected in this cultural phase in Judaism towards employing “external” elements in order to make an “internal” point. The use of a theme from the religious environs of Yahwism, such as child sacrifice, would thus fit well with a later dating of the Genesis 22\*-narrative.

Based on these two considerations – literature type (the growing prominence of the ever shorter short story in Israel) and thematic orientation (the easier acceptance of “foreign” material) – the Aqedah could thus be dated with some certainty to no earlier than the fourth century, though precisely how long after 400 remains unclear. The earliest reinterpretation of the story, by means of the new frame of verses provided by Genesis 22:15-18 & 1, as indicated above, could have occurred within a very short period of time; precision, though, eludes everybody on this point. The latest possible dating for the text as a whole would be around 280 – 250 BCE (cf. e.g. Dines 2004:41-45), with the translation of the Hebrew Bible texts into Greek, that is, into the Septuagint, at which point the Genesis 22\* account as we have it had been fully established.

### **3.4.7 The remains of the day**

With this theory proposed, what remains to investigate is how the subjugation of Isaac in Genesis 22 is effected in the rest of the Isaac narratives; that is, how this “new Abraham” and “new Isaac” colour anew the other Old Testament references. Genesis 22 could thus indeed become a “centre” of sorts of the Pentateuch (as Steins 2001:516 would have it, but understood differently here). Such following investigations would not only provide further critical reflection on the possibilities, or none, this suggested interpretation offers, but could also aid in the relative dating of the Isaac texts.

These endeavours are undertaken in what follows.

### **3.5 Genesis 22\* as interpretative key to the Isaac texts**

To summarise the theory that has been proposed above: the Genesis 22\* account is a text incorporating earlier narrative elements and theo-ethical themes, which during the fourth or early third century BCE had been a key text in the inner-Judean identity politics. With this account, the tradents of the Abraham traditions subjugated firmly the tradents of the Isaac traditions, making the case resolutely that the Isaacites are to be found within Second Temple Judaic society but by the grace of God. The Abrahamites are their definite superiors in their contemporary society. By then recasting this account in religious, even pious terms, namely that the whole episode

had been a test of Abraham's faith, a test he had passed with flying colours, Abraham is thus no longer cast as a mere power player in the socio-political sphere, but he is now also the ultimate faith hero, to the extent that he becomes a kind of mediator of God's blessings to all. The case for Abrahamite superiority is thus made even more strongly, with this religious play. Socially, that is: theo-politically, the Isaacites have thus been effectively marginalised.

By casting the events Genesis 22\* recounts into early history, much authority is added to this power-play, for all – the victor and the vanquished – have now to accept that this is the way it had always been. The implication is clear: Abraham will always be the father; Isaac, always the son. However, this is a genealogical relationship of a special type, because, thoroughly unusually, Abraham had brought Isaac to the very brink of death. This had been done in express cooperation with the will of God. The suppression of Isaac is thus complete. For the Isaacites, there can be no deliverance, socially or theologically, from this lesser position. Father Abraham and his God keep Isaac in his place; the Genesis 22\* account demonstrates dramatically that the Isaacites have no hope of rising above their accorded status.

The question is, now, how much of this struggle, of these identity politics, can be detected in the other, less prominent Isaac texts of the Old Testament. Because the evidence is scant, the conjectures offered below cannot be related as firm conclusions. At best, vague hints which have to be teased out from the few Isaac texts that we have in the Old Testament, may be indicated.

## CHAPTER 4: INTERPRETATIVE IMPLICATIONS OF GENESIS 22\* AS READ ANEW ON THE OTHER ISAAC PASSAGES IN GENESIS

Two dangers must be guarded against in this chapter:

- First, that the usually independent, anecdotal nature of the different accounts, as indicated in Chapter 2 of this study, is forgotten. It remains with each of these texts discussed below the case that they recount often unrelated stories, “in episodic form” (Fretheim 1996:80).
- Second, that the interpretations offered here are understood as having been the meaning of these accounts throughout their existence. That is patently not the case. Each of these narratives indeed had had its own history (which may have been an extended history) of development in oral and/or textual phases, the meaning of which, true to the nature of most literature, changed in time, either through altered socio-historical contexts or by means of deliberate editorial processes. The latter constitutes either redactional work *within* the texts themselves, or redactional work *around* the texts, namely by altered framing. A new frame can speak a thousand words too...

What is offered below, in summary, is precisely that: the new shade of meaning cast by Genesis 22\*, as interpreted above, over the body of Isaac references. These accounts would (or more modestly: could) now have been understood (anew) by readers / hearers whose frame of reference has been fundamentally (re)formed by this interpretative key of Genesis 22\*. What is offered here should thus not be understood as an argument for the late dating of all of these texts, but (closer to the Alt – Gunkel – Noth – von Rad line of thinking indicated in Chapter 2) as an

exploration of additional meaning that may well have accrued to these often older accounts, in the light of the influence of the Genesis 22\* account.

In each instance below, then, extensive exegeses of the different texts are not presented. Rather, the implications of the hermeneutical effect of Genesis 22\*, as understood above, are simply described in brief.

#### **4.1 Isaac's birth narratives – Genesis 17:19-21 & 21:1-8**

The promise of Isaac's birth is embedded within the twin covenantal chapters of Genesis 15 and 17. The differences between these two chapters are both profound and well known, with the ensuing debate on comparative dating and theology. Drawing on the theory of the multiplexity of the patriarchal figures, along with the concurrent competition between the traditions of the different patriarchs, a different perspective emerges, related here specifically to the implication this has for the Isaac reference in Genesis 17:19-21.

In the Genesis 15 account (cf. e.g Ruppert 2002:235-293; Westermann 1981:247-275), a more traditional arrangement of a covenant is related, with animal sacrifice giving figurative expression to the agreement. The patriarch involved is Abram, and though no names are mentioned, the promise of an heir is a prominent part of the covenant arrangement; however, with as central importance here the giving of hereditary land. In Genesis 17, the scene is different (cf. e.g Ruppert 2002:331-362; Westermann 1981:301-328): the covenant entails a radically new symbolic act, namely the ritual of circumcision, which forms part of a covenant with Abram, who in



the process is renamed Abraham. Here, in Genesis 17, one may very well postulate a merging of two different patriarchal traditions, one associated with an Abram-figure, the other with an Abraham-figure (see also the accompanying Sarai-Sarah nomenclature), with the two identities being merged into one at this juncture, as part of an emerging collective identity of the respective traditions during the time of narration and later.

In a text which clearly has a complex literary history, the Isaac-references in Genesis 17 seem awkward. The sign of the covenant is, prominently, performed on Ishmael; however, it is clear from the text that a parting of the ways between the Ishmaelites and Isaacites is reflected here. The same is the case with Genesis 21 (cf. e.g. Scharbert 1986:160-164): although the text begins with the circumcision of Isaac, the remainder of the chapter deals with two other explicitly anti-Isaacite accounts. First, Abraham's love and God's care for Ishmael are amply demonstrated; second, Abraham's connection with Beersheba is related. From both these clues, and the apparent slant away from Isaac in Genesis 17 (cf. Boase 2001:314-315), it is clear that the Isaacite birth narratives as we have them in the present form do not swing any scales dramatically in Isaac's favour. Not even is land promised to Isaac, as one would expect (de Pury 1998:13). At best, the Isaacites remain within the ambit of the Abrahamic line. This is however, contrary to what is usually assumed by this scenario, not an altogether positive run of events for Isaac: compared to the love, care and freedom afforded the Ishmaelites (as with Abraham's sons from his concubines – Genesis 25:6), the negative undertones of the Isaacites being inescapably locked into a hereditary line with the Abrahamites show through too. In the same way as is the case in the closing verses to the Aqedah account in Genesis

22\*, Isaac is not only trapped in a hierarchical arrangement with Abraham-and-God, but is also deprived of a primary, ancient link to Beersheba. The vanquished loses all.

This argument would thus provide further support for the later dating of the Genesis 17 account vis-à-vis Genesis 15 (cf. e.g. Ruppert 2002:289); this however does not necessary imply a dating for Genesis 15 as early as, say, the pre-exilic period. Probably, both accounts spring from post-exilic times. Genesis 17, though, would reflect a later dating of the two, with the subjugation of Isaac within the Abrahamic covenant made more explicit – a subjugation which would have been made easier by a putative merging of the Abram and Abraham groups. Together, these two groups keep the Isaacites in line, within the covenant with God, and take over their ancestral location.

#### **4.2 A family for Isaac – Genesis 24, 25, & 27**

One of the peculiarities about the account of how Rebekah becomes Isaac's wife, is how little of Isaac is mentioned. He hardly features in the account. Moreover, though his wife is to come from Abraham's family, Isaac himself is not to visit the Abrahamic ancestral territory – both these aspects are expressly stressed. Seen from the perspective of the conflict in post-exilic times between the Abrahamites and Isaacites, both these aspects gain an additional hue. This is namely that Isaac is bound in still another way to the dominant Abrahamite clan, yet is denied any access to the ancestral area of Bethel. Taken together, these are rather strong strategies with which to convey the message of the Isaac group's subordination to the Abraham

group (cf. Boase 2001:333). The fact of the direct divine guidance in leading Abraham's emissary to the chosen wife, gives this further tying of Isaac to the Abrahamite clan an unmistakable air of theological legitimacy being added.

In the account of the birth of Isaac's children – Genesis 25:11, 19-34 – the same trend as with the finding of Rebekah is encountered (cf. e.g. Soggin 1997:333): Isaac himself plays but a minor role. The greater part of the account deals with the struggle between Jacob and Esau. Again, viewed from the post-exilic struggle for dominance between the traditions of the different patriarchal traditions, it becomes apparent that in the struggle of (the much more dominant) Jacob with Esau, Isaac is regarded as unimportant enough not to feature heavily at all. Even though Jacob and Esau are cast as the next generation after Isaac, it is in this case not the elder who is given the greater emphasis. The Isaacites are diminutive enough in stature in post-exilic Juda that Isaac is afforded the bare minimum of attention. To be sure, he is there. However, his role is far on the background, as the next generation struggles for prominence.

Isaac's being sidelined here may have much to do with the fact that he is perceived as aligning himself with the wrong party in the struggle for prominence between Esau and Jacob, as shown not only in the birth narrative of the twin brothers, but most explicitly in Genesis 27 (cf. e.g. Scharbert 1986:190-195). The alliance between the Jacob and Abraham, with here the Abrahamites represented strongly by their embedded agent Rebekah (cf. Genesis 25:28), manage to deceive Isaac (hapless again here, as in the Genesis 22\* account) into passing on the baton of leadership to Jacob. In the subsequent events, Isaac is ever more marginalised: Jacob is, as was

the case with Isaac, to take a wife from the Abrahamite clan associated with Bethuel (Genesis 28). The link between Jacob (the Jacobites) and the Abrahamites thus serves to lock Isaac in on all sides: his father, wife and most prominent son are all allied. Isaac retains only a very strictly circumscribed area of identity; the Isaacites have no area of independent influence.

#### **4.3 Isaac's prosperity found, prosperity lost – Genesis 26:12-33 and the “my wife - my sister” passages**

The Genesis 26:12-33 account is the only remaining Old Testament text which shows still something of Isaac's initial power. The text shows Isaac accumulating wealth independently, to the point that it even leads to conflict because of limited resources, and then shows the patriarch being associated with Beersheba as patriarchal territory, namely by Isaac naming the area.

However, even here, rather ill fitting references to Abraham show an attempt already within this text to play down Isaac's independent success. In two ways, mention is made by editorial means that Abraham had been in this southern area before, and that he thus had been the true pioneer – in Genesis 26:15 & 18, Abraham's antecedent actions are indicated, unnecessarily, and in verse 24 it is explicitly stated that all of Isaac's success had been through the grace of God, but then: because of Isaac's link with Abraham. The impression the text creates from the perspective of the post-exilic reader is that Isaac by himself is able to do no good; he is no pioneer; any blessing he receives is not by direct grace of God. In each instance, Abraham is

the mediator. The message hints delicately, but unambiguously: the Isaacites have a place only inasmuch as they are under the patronage of the Abrahamites.

This message is conveyed in another manner too, no longer by editorial means within the text, yet in this instance too with a view further to refute any claim Isaac may have on Beersheba. In Genesis 21:22-34 (cf. e.g. Ruppert 2002:487-503) we find a different version of the events recounted in Genesis 26:26-31. The former is not a harmless duplication of an account, with the patriarch innocently transposed from Isaac to Abraham, either during an oral phase or in the process of enscripturation. Here – refer to the remarks above on the closing verses of the Genesis 22\* account – is a deliberate commandeering of an Isaacite account by Abrahamites, in order to rewrite history in their favour: not with Isaac, but with Abraham Abimelech contracted on the ownership of the land of Beersheba. This is thus a deliberate case of the redistribution of the land, not here to the benefit of the poor, but rather following the dictum that ὅς γὰρ ἔχει, δοθήσεται αὐτῷ· καὶ ὅς οὐκ ἔχει, καὶ ὃ ἔχει ἀρθήσεται ἀπ’ αὐτοῦ (Mark 4:25).

These different ways of communicating this message is repeated, in a similar way, in the famous “my wife - my sister” passages – Genesis 26:1-11, with parallels Genesis 12:10-20 and 20:1-18. Mostly, doublets (or in this case, triplets) are explained in historical research as either literary motifs finding repeated application in different accounts, or that the same account comes to be associated with different figures (cf. Zenger 2006:78-79; Krauss & Küchler 2004:244; Gooder 2000:52, 56-57 summarises the main explanations that have been offered for the “my wife - my sister” trilogy). The process is thus viewed as non-deliberate, having something to

do with a natural growth in a culture's body of literature. However, taken from the threefold perspective of the multiplexity of the patriarchal figures, the competition for prominence between the patriarchal traditions, and the interpretative light of Genesis 22\* as understood above cast across all Isaac references, new emphases emerge here.

The Isaac version, in the opening verses of Genesis 26, serves mostly to recount how this patriarch's sojourn in the South had come about. There is an air of legitimacy to this account, not so much because of the pathos of the content, but most directly because of the traditional association of Isaac with the southernmost part of Juda. Not so the two Abrahamite accounts, in Genesis 12 and 20, which show respectively the as yet unmerged Abram and Abraham figures both independently competing with Isaac for the story – that is: for the geographical area, and by implication, for social prominence. From this my wife - my sister trilogy the strong possibility, within the theoretical lines as drawn above, emerges that the Abram-group and the Abraham-group had found, before their joining, already a common opponent in the figure and thus group of Isaac. Apart from the affinity that may well already have existed between groups respectively linked to iconic figures with such similar names, the old adage that one's enemy's enemy is one's friend could not have hurt their emerging unity.

Though from this perspective alone not much can be said about the relative dating of the Genesis 12 and 20 versions of these events, it is plain that the antecedent account is the Isaacite version of Genesis 26 (true to the interpretative tradition following Noth 1948:116). Rather than, *vice versa*, it being a case with these three

deception accounts that “Abraham passes the idea on to his son Isaac” (Davies 2000:27), the opposite is true: this account *itself* passes on from Isaac to Abraham. A literary deception of the readers is effected by the account being twice usurped by Abrahamites. Thus, the historical social geography of Juda is rewritten, for the sake of favouring the Abrahamite coalition in post-exilic Juda.

#### 4.4 Summary

From these Isaac accounts three strategies emerge by which the Abrahamite supporters appropriate identity-forming narratives to their own benefit:

- By editorial processes within an existing account, namely by adding references to Abraham with which to accentuate his primacy over Isaac;
- By character definition; that is, by placing Isaac only on the background in most accounts, he plays just a supportive role, which means that readers are not led to deduce that he is of any major import;
- By duplication of accounts, with such duplication deliberately being set up in order for the patriarch without power, Isaac, to lose ever more of what he had had: significance, land and – in the eyes of the text beholders – social influence.

These accounts reflect different phases through which this process of social exclusion by absorption had been effected. In the my wife - my sister passages, the as yet un-united Abrahamites each independently vie for the Isaacite southern influence. The existence of both an Abram and an Abraham duplicate account gives evidence to this three-way competition. By the time of the induction of the new

ceremony, attested to in Genesis 17, however, the merger of the Abrahamites is well under way. The circumcision is thus as much a symbol of a new divine covenant and a celebration of a newly created unity among the Abrahamites as it is, by implication, an indication of a firm movement towards the emasculation of the Isaacites. The Isaacite family accounts show this process being executed ever more fully, as Isaac finds himself encircled from all sides by representatives of the Abrahamic line. Of the once mighty Isaac encountered in the second half of Genesis 26, precious little has remained. Most of that chapter has been copied, by means of which the Abraham claims are made to supersede any Isaacite priority. In the other Genesis accounts, we also see Isaac sidelined by means of different strategies.

The way in which these perspectives can further be applied to come to an understanding of Isaac's history in the Pentateuch, is indicated in the closing chapter to this study. Next, though, our attention is drawn to three Isaac texts which together exhibit a unique characteristic related to this patriarch, which may add further light to the theories being pursued in this study.



## CHAPTER 5: THE *SĪN* IN ISAAC

One occurrence which has never received an explanatory proposition of a theoretical nature, is the dual spelling of “Isaac” in the Old Testament (cf. Lombaard 2005a:152-159). The spelling of Isaac's name in four Old Testament occurrences, in three Isaac texts, namely Psalm 105:9, Jeremiah 33:26 and Amos 7:9 & 16, is  $\text{יִשָּׂק}$  (with a  $\text{ש}$ ), rather than the more usual spelling of  $\text{יִצְחָק}$  (with a  $\text{צ}$ ). Isaac-with-*sĭn* is thus a very rare occurrence. What is of additional interest, is that this spelling occurs only outside of the Pentateuch in the Old Testament, and is not related to a specific time frame. Explanations should therefore be sought in a different direction than linguistic, and one of the proposed theories in this study may provide us with a possible solution.

The most widely followed and therefore most important proposal on this variation in spelling, made by van Selms (1965:157-158), and followed by for example Ackroyd (1987:197) and Schmid (1991:24; cf. Levin 1995:309), is of a linguistic rather than a theoretical nature. The interpretation attached to this phenomenon is that the spelling with  $\text{ש}$  is a later development, evidencing a simplification in speech patterns. The difficulty of pronouncing a *tsadeh* thus in time led, because of a natural laziness of the tongue, to the pronunciation being altered to a *sĭn*. The forms  $\text{צַחֵק}$  and  $\text{שַׁחֵק}$  may be called on as parallels for this development (cf. van Selms 1965:157-158).

Exactly the opposite is the view expressed in Hayes (1988:239-240), where it is argued that the spelling with *sĭn* would be the older version, since later spelling

would tend to be more formally correct. However, no further supporting argument is offered.

Both these treatments thus rest on a certain model of the development of language, with entails that over time pronunciation becomes, respectively, either less or more rigorous. Languages are replete with examples of both these tendencies, which means that an argument based on linguistics, at least when it is offered on its own, aids little in our understanding of this *sġn* – *tsadeh* variation.

While van Selms (1965:158-159) is probably correct that the  $\text{שִׁן}$  –variation may well be ascribed to an indication of an oral tradition at work, captured in literature, this may well be the case for any number of occurrences of the more usual spelling too. Orality on its own cannot provide us with a definite answer to this question either. Alternate avenues must be explored.

In what follows, therefore, the four occurrences of Isaac-with-*sġn* are analysed, grouped together in this chapter for no other reason than that these texts have this trait in common. Even if no clear solution to the issue of the variant spelling may be concluded to, at least this avenue will have been explored more fully, and the possibility of a theoretical solution in line with the theory of the multiplicity of the patriarchal references in the Old Testament proposed in this study, would have been investigated.

## 5.1 The rare find of Isaac in the Psalms

With a religion so heavily based on history and its reinterpretation (as was most influentially indicated by von Rad, especially in his two related works of 1957 and 1960), it would be expected that the historical traditions (cf. Mathias 1993:29-47) of Israel should find frequent expression in the cultic setting. As Kapelrud (1977:122) stated, the Psalms are "the great melting-pot of traditions in ancient Israel". It would therefore not be surprising if we found the patriarchs, themes from the exodus and wilderness journey and settlement in the land, creation and kingship and Zion often referred to in the Psalms. This would be in keeping with the ways in which the historical and prophetic books of the Old Testament constantly take up these themes from Israel's past and reapply them to altered socio-historical and religious circumstances. As Westermann (1984b: 79) puts it: "In Israel hatte die Geschichte Gottes mit seinem Volk eine so bestimmende bedeutung, daß sie auch die Anfänge umfassen mußte ... auch die Väterzeit..."

The Psalms, however, seem not to take up all the traditions of Israel as frequently as expectation might have it (with the exodus and wilderness themes, according to Bos 1977:129, being among the most frequently reflected traditions in the Psalms; cf. Mathias 1993:40-42; Day 1990:125). Notably, the patriarchs seem to feature very infrequently (cf. e.g. Mathias 1993:41), and then mostly in genitive constructions which refer to either God (cf. Mettinger 1987:50-74 for an overview of research into the "God of the fathers" theme) or the nation of Israel, rather than to the patriarchs themselves.

In this part of the dissertation, the references in the Psalms to the patriarchs will be investigated, after which a few remarks in this regard will be made on Psalm 105. The diminutive role of Isaac calls for special attention.

### 5.1.1 References to the patriarchs in the Psalms

In researching here the occurrences of the patriarchs in the Psalms, only direct references to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob-Israel were investigated (cf. e.g. Schmid 1999:79; Lisowsky 1958:1580, 1623-1624, 1627-1630); any possible allusions to the three fathers in the Psalms (as e.g. Kaiser 1978:44 11, 148, cf. 84, and Van der Ploeg 1974:203 suggest of the terms *נְבִיא* and *נְשִׂיא* in Psalm 105:15; so already Gunkel [1929] 1986:460; related to this, see also e.g. Booij 1994:235 on Psalm 105:14) are not taken into account, since the interest here is on the primary importance attached to the patriarchs. What follows, therefore, amounts to what may be called a "terminological census", in order to determine the significance of the patriarchs in general, and Isaac in particular, in the Psalms.

It is immediately clear that worst off of the patriarchs in the Psalms is Isaac, with only a single occurrence to be found in Psalm 105:9. It was therefore but a slight omission for du Toit (1963:21) not to include Isaac in his list of persons referred to in the Psalms (neither does Isaac reach Frost's 1963-list of "patriarchs and prophets").

Not much better off than Isaac is Abraham, with four occurrences - Psalms 105:6, 9, 42 and 47:10. On closer inspection, though, one finds that the genitive constructions using Abraham's name in Psalms 47:10 and 105:6 refer, respectively, to God and

the people of Israel, thus leaving only two direct references to the person of Abraham in the Psalms.

The case of Jacob-Israel is rather more difficult to investigate, not because of the two spellings accorded Jacob (namely יַעֲקֹב and יִשְׂרָאֵל, with only the former found in the Psalms), but mostly because Jacob may be referred to as "Israel". Therefore both these terms in the Psalms have to be investigated.

The term "Jacob" is found 34 times in the Psalms. While this may give one hope that at last we have found a patriarch which receives some substantial treatment in the Psalms, here too the news is worse than first impressions might lead one to expect. Of these 34 occurrences, 19 refer in various ways to the people of Israel (in absolute occurrences: Psalms 14:7; 24:6; 53:7; 59:14; 78:5, 21, 71; 79:7; 99:4; 135:4; 147:19; and in genitive constructions: "house of Jacob" - Psalm 114:1; "sons / children of Jacob" - Psalms 77:16; 105:6; "pride of Jacob" - Psalm 47:5; "seed of Jacob" - Psalm 22:24; "triumphs of Jacob" - Psalm 44:5; "dwellings of Jacob" - Psalm 87:2; "fate of Israel" - Psalm 85:2) and 13 refer to God by way of genitive contractions with the name of Jacob (with אֲבִיר - Psalms 132:2, 5; with אֱל - Psalm 146:5; with אֱלֹהֵי - Psalm 114:7; and with יִשְׂרָאֵל - Psalms 20:2; 46:8, 12; 75:10; 76:7; 81:2, 5; 84:9; 94:7). This leaves us with but two Jacob-references which indicate the person of Jacob, both of which are found in Psalm 105 (verses 10 and 23).

In these two instances (Psalm 105:10, 23) too, however, it would not be unsubstantiated to infer implied reference to the people of Israel as well (cf. e.g.

Booij 1994:235; Kraus 1978:895). 1Chronicles 16:13 does something similar, though more explicitly, with its parallel, Psalm 105:6, substituting "Israel" for "Abraham" (cf. Millard 1994:215 215f), implying a wider frame of reference. From the context of the rest of Psalm 105, the primary intention though seems to indicate the person of Jacob in the first instance.

An investigation into the occurrences of the term "Israel" in the Psalms leads one to the conclusion that, in this regard, "Israel" offers us no hope. Of the 35 absolute occurrences of "Israel" (Psalms 14:7; 25:22; 50:7; 53:7; 68:35; note that I regard the suggested textual emendation of Psalm 73:1 in BHS as likely because of the synonymous-parallelistic structure of the verse (cf. e.g. Berlin 2008:1-30) – there is thus no reference to Israel in this verse; Psalms 76:2; 78:5, 21, 59, 71; 81:5, 9, 12, 14; 105:10, 23; 114:1, 2; 115:9; 118:2; 122:4; 124:1; 125:5; 128:6; 129:1; 130:7, 8; 131:3; 135:4, 12; 136:11, 14, 22; 147:19; 149:2), all but Psalm 114:2 (which seems to be geographical indication) and - again - Psalm 105:10, 23 refer to the people of Israel rather than to the person of Jacob-Israel. As to the genitive constructions with the term "Israel" in the Psalms: 13 instances are related to the people of Israel ("young men of Israel" - Psalm 78:31; "house of Israel" - Psalms 98:3; 115:12; 135:19; "sons / children of Israel" - Psalms 103:7; 148:14; "seed of Israel" - Psalm 22:24; "redemption of Israel" - the two parallel Psalm 14:7 and 53:7, though with slightly different spelling; "from the fountain [or: convocation - cf. BHS footnote] of Israel" - Psalm 68:27; "scatterlings of Israel" - Psalm 147:2; "tribes of Israel" - Psalm 78:55; "praise songs of Israel" - Ps 22:4), with six such occurrences referring to God (with אֱל - Psalm 68:36; with קְרוֹשׁ - Psalms 71:22; 78:41; 89:19; with רֵעָה - Psalm 80:2; and with שׁוֹמֵר - Psalm 121:4).

The term "Israel" thus does not open up any new possibilities with regards to the patriarchs in the Psalms. At most it affirms the importance of Psalm 105:10 and 23 on this issue, but this is so because of the synonymous-parallelistic nature of the references to Jacob-Israel in these two verses (note that in v. 10 the order of reference is first to Jacob, then to Israel, with v. 23 reversing this order).

We may thus observe from the above that references to the patriarchs are indeed few, though not far between: Abraham is found in Psalm 105:9 & 42; Isaac is to be found in Psalm 105:9 only; Jacob and Israel both occur in Psalm 105:10 & 23, in synonymous parallelisms. We find ourselves thus led to Psalm 105 if we are to investigate further the theme of the patriarchs in the Psalms.

### **5.1.2 The patriarchs in Psalm 105**

This seems to be a somewhat neglected Psalm, if one takes into account how few volumes of *Ausgewählte Psalmen* or Selected Psalms contain studies on it. Psalm 105 may perhaps be best described (adapting Treves 1988:82 somewhat) as "a triumphal hymn of thanksgiving (with) historical and didactic contents" (cf. Seybold 1996:414-415; Allen 1983:42; see Mathias 1993:124f for a discussion of the *Gattung* of Psalm 105). Gunn (1956:124) also stresses this didactic intention of Psalm 105 when he states that this Psalm - along with Psalms 78 and 106 - "trace(s) the hand of God in the great events of the nation's past, *for the benefit of the younger generation* who either do not know or easily overlook the lessons of the past" (italics added).

Perhaps it is the didactic intentions (Weiser 1962:673 does not accept such didactic intentions because of his covenantal interpretation) of this Psalm which explain its incorporation of the references to the patriarchs<sup>57</sup>, noted above (cf. Haglund 1984:114), as counting among the *magnalia Dei* (Burden 1991:65, cf. pp 74-75). Psalm 105 would thus, as an expression of the “spiritualiteit van het Leerhuis” (Waaijman 1983:139) be similar in intention to the Joseph novella (cf. von Rad 1953:120-127, and locally: Loader 1987:100-107; Wessels 1986), namely in educating in some manner diplomats for the monarchy. Such a connection – oral, not literary (cf. e.g. Booij 1994:231-232) – between the Joseph narrative and Psalm 105 would not be altogether untenable, since the latter allows for it with the relatively large number of verses (i.e. Psalm 105:16-23) which refer to the Joseph narrative. Such an explanation would however not really be satisfactory, because it would leave open the question why neither any other didactic psalms (e.g. Psalm 78), nor the wisdom literature – which is precisely where such references would be expected, had the persons of the patriarchs become off-employed didactic figures for the monarchy – do the same. The usual dating accorded to Psalm 105 (cf. paragraph below) would also not support such a thesis.

An interesting facet of Psalm 105 is that it is, in a certain sense, a double twin Psalm: on the one hand, it is a *Zwillingspsalm* with Psalm 106, with these two Psalms

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<sup>57</sup> Based on his somewhat earlier dating, namely in the exilic period, Seybold 1996:416 regards this incorporation as later editorial additions. See however footnote 77 below. On a broad level, the whole of the collection of the Psalms may be viewed as having, among other purposes, didactical intentions – cf. Lombaard 2000:506-514.



focusing respectively on Israel's history of salvation and its history of sin (cf. Hossfeld & Zenger 2008:98; e.g. Millard 1994:19); on the other hand Psalm 105:1-15 finds, to a large extent, a parallel in the text of 1Chronicles 16:8-22<sup>58</sup>. With the latter thus as *terminus ad quem* for the dating of Psalm 105 (see however Booij 1994:242<sup>9</sup>), it is generally dated "late" by most researchers (Treves 1988:82, e.g., pinpoints it to the summer of 152 BC; Psalm 105 is however most often dated simply as post-exilic – see Booij 1994:232, 241<sup>7f</sup> and Mathias 1993:121<sup>58&59</sup> for lists of scholars according Psalm 105 this and alternative dates).

A broad thematic structure of Psalm 105 may for our purposes here be discerned as follows (cf. the division of this Psalm into constituent parts by e.g. Gunkel [1929] 1986:458; Kraus 1960:718-719; Van der Ploeg 1974:199; Kraus 1978:890-891; Allen 1983:40, 42-43; Weiser 1962:674-676; Mathias 1993:130-136; Schmid 1999:313-314; Hossfeld & Zenger 2008:98-102)<sup>59</sup>:

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<sup>58</sup> Van Selms (1965:157f), in line with his idea on pronunciation changes over time, described above, notes on the relationship between Psalm 105:9 and 1Chronicles 16:16 that the former "goes back ... to an oral tradition, the singing of the psalms in the cult (so too Weiser 1962:42-43); in this connection it is typical that the learned author of Chronicles who had the scroll of Genesis in his study, corrected the spelling of Ps. 105:9 when quoting it".

<sup>59</sup> As to the place of this psalm in the Book of Psalms: Psalm 105 fits uneasily into any of the large collections of the Psalms, which is why it is variously - and for a variety of reasons - grouped together with e.g. Psalms 103-107, because they are similar psalms of praise (Westermann 1984a:16); with Psalms 106 and 107, because of shared authorship and shared *Sitz im Leben*, similarities in introduction and length and contents, and because of a shared link with Third Isaiah (Treves 1988:81-83); with Psalms 78 and 106, because of their shared didactic intentions (Gunn 1956:67, 124), "historical" character (Day 1990:58) and relatedness to Pentateuchal narratives (Haglund 1984:115, who lists the chronological order as: Psalm 78, 105, 106, Pentateuch); with Psalm 79 (= 78?) and

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|-----------------|---|
| 1. Verses 1-7   | Introduction: call to praise  |
| 2. Verses 8-15  | Yahweh's promises to and protection of the patriarchs   |
| 3. Verses 16-23 | Joseph's history  |
| 4. Verses 24-38 | Life in Egypt, the plagues, the exodus  |
| 5. Verses 39-41 | The wilderness experience   |
| 6. Verses 42-45 | Conclusion: Yahweh's faithfulness, the gift of the land,<br>exhortation to keep to Yahweh's teachings |

Drawing on this brief analysis, it becomes clear that, as far as historical references are concerned, Psalm 105 both starts off and ends off with the promise of land to the patriarchs (Mathias 1993:132, 210, 212; cf. Fuglister 1989:41-42). The existence of the people of Israel is therefore, by implication, shown to be dependent on Yahweh's calling of the patriarchs (Psalm 105:6; Mathias 1993:209), even so - perhaps especially so - now after the exile (refer remarks on dating above). The "grondmotief" (states Booij 1994:230, 234; cf. Kraus 1978:893) of Psalm 105 is found in verses 7-11: that God remains true to his promises of land to the patriarchs (cf. on Abram - Genesis 15; on Isaac - Genesis 26; on Jacob - Genesis 28; see also as a summary Exodus 2:24; cf. Fuglister 1989:47-50, 53-59). Haglund (1984:102) is thus correct in stating that, in this case at least, "the patriarchal traditions are ... associated with the claims on the country..." (see also Wiseman 1980:150, 152).

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106, because of their common contents, i.e. lament which reflects the Deuteronomistic theology of those left behind in Judah after 586 (Steck 1977:207); with Psalm 106 and 107, because of their "common introductions" and their similar hymnic character (Allen 1983:xix-xx), etc. However, such concerns are not important for the purposes of this study.

The patriarchs for this reason seem to be accorded great importance in Psalm 105 (even though only in this Psalm, as shown above; cf. also Schmid 1999:78-79), an observation which is strengthened when one notes the *inclusio* of the reference to the person of Abraham in verses 9 and 42, which circles the references to the other themes. Despite this seeming indication of importance, though, more attention is paid in this Psalm to Joseph's history (verses 16-23), and especially to life in Egypt, the plagues and the exodus (verses 24-38), than to the patriarchs. In this respect Psalm 105 echoes the broader scene of the Hexateuchal composition: "Die eigentliche Israelgeschichte beginnt nicht mit Abraham, sondern mit dem Exodus" (Fuglister 1989:41); the former was only later on added to the latter (Kühlewein 1974:158), namely as a parallel history (Schmid 1999). In Psalm 105 we find this reflected in that, even with a simple "head count" of verses, the patriarchs do not receive pride of place.

Thus we see: with so few references to the persons of the patriarchs in the Psalter, even when such references do occur, other traditions seem to dwarf Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

### **5.1.3 Possible reasons for the paucity of patriarchal references in the Psalms**

In this section, a few brief remarks are made, with the intention of stimulating further thought, on the reasons behind the paucity of patriarchal references in the Psalms. Such reasons may be sought in aspects such as place in history, cultic setting and the "levels" of religious practice.

### 5.1.3.1 Place in history

"Der Gottesdienst in der Vaterzeit unterscheidet sich wesentlich von dem des seßhaften Volkes" (Westermann 1984a:14). With the experience of the monarchy, the division between North and South, the fall of both these kingdoms and the exile added in, one would expect not to be too far off the mark in stating that in post-exilic Israel, Israel's religion was something quite different from that of the patriarchal period.

However, matters are not that simple, since such differences do not seem to necessitate a breaking off in the line of tradition. Specifically, references to Abraham, generally scarce in the prophetic books, become more frequent in post-exilic literature under the influence of Deutero-Isaiah (Is 41:8; 51:2; 63:16) (Van der Ploeg 1974:202; cf. Fuglister 1989:44-46). This is because, in the post-exilic period, the patriarchs and Yahweh's promises to them became a guarantee of sorts regarding the land (cf. Mays 1994:337-339; Goldingay 1980:33-35; Kraus 1960:722). Psalm 105, dated shortly after the exile, would thus fit perfectly into this picture with its incorporation of patriarchal references.

These remarks do not, however, clear up the question as to why no other, older Psalms refer to the persons of the patriarchs. This becomes even more of a question when one considers that the Psalms, according to for instance Haglund (1984:117), generally represent older forms of traditions than those found in the Pentateuch.

These issues, amongst others, leave open the question on the Psalms: where have all the patriarchs gone, long time passing...?

#### 5.1.3.2 Cultic setting

Of course, "the cultus [*sic*] was the native soil from which the psalms sprang" (Weiser 1962:24). This holds true for Psalm 105 as well, as it was related, even if not originally, then at least later, to a cultic Yahwistic festival (cf. Weber 2003:190; Weiser 1962:673; Allen 1983:40; Booij 1994:232; Van der Ploeg 1974:199; Mathias 1993:115).

If we accept that the traditions to which we find the Psalms bound, show that these traditions had cultic relevance (cf. Weiser 1962:24), perhaps one could postulate that the tradition material attached to the patriarchs did not seem suited, for any number of reasons, to cultic use. This would then have had to be the case over many centuries' composition and editorial work on the Psalms, until finally we get a glimpse of the persons of the patriarchs in Israel's post-exilic worship, in Psalm 105.

Here too, however, question marks ought to be drawn. Why would the patriarchal traditions be such a poor fit with the cult? Why would use be made of patriarchs' names to refer to either God or the people of Israel (referred to above), but references to the persons of the patriarchs would not be made? These and related questions still beg answering.

### 5.1.3.3 Differences in "levels" of religious practice

The two possible reasons for the paucity of patriarchal references in the Psalms stated above, may perhaps be fruitfully incorporated here as well. Drawing on the thoughts of Albertz (1992:45ff), who postulates different groups within Israelite religion expressing their relationship to God in quite different ways, doing so concurrently and at times in competition, these "levels" of religious practice may provide an explanation as to the references to the patriarchs in the Psalms, as discussed above. The hint which we can draw for ourselves from Albertz in this regard may indeed prove fruitful.

Other, earlier works also seem to point in this direction for the most satisfactory explanation. Haglund (1984:102), for example, states the following: "It is ... possible that there has been an originally cultic poetry where the patriarchs have played a prominent role, but which disappeared at the centralization of the cult during the reign of Josiah and at the re-organization after the Exile. The connexion with the illegitimate cult-places (Shechem, Hebron, et al.) may then have made this kind of poetry impossible in the restored Israelite cult." Moreover, the increasingly clear separate origins of the exodus and patriarchal traditions find some form of reflection here (cf. Schmid 1999:79-81), in the poor representation of the patriarchs in the Psalms; quite possibly due to different social layers in society being the carriers of these traditions.

#### 5.1.4 The smallest among the small patriarchs in the Psalms

Let me end this part of the discussion by stating, by way of conclusion, that this approach seems to have the most potential for solving the issue of the few references to the persons of the patriarchs in the Psalms. Social stratification thus offers us the most satisfactory explanation in this regard.

At least the following implications have become clear:

- That a competition of sorts between different tradition strands may be postulated – a given in Old Testament scholarship since, most influentially, von Rad, and which included the traditions of the patriarchal traditions, of which Psalm 105 and its twin texts give some indication too;
- That the patriarchs here, in this Psalm, have some connection at least with identities tied to the land; and
- That among the patriarchs, Isaac is also in the Psalms a minor figure, driven to the margins by being, paradoxically, the middle child, with the least claim to prominence.

That having been established, we may now turn to Isaac-with-*sîn* amongst the Prophets.

## 5.2: The curious case of Isaac in Amos

Reference to Isaac occurs only thrice in the prophets. Leaving the simpler case until later, I shall in what follows pay attention to the puzzling dual references to the patriarch Isaac in the book of Amos. As has already been stated earlier, apart from Psalm 105 and formulaic references to Isaac, along with Abraham and Jacob / Israel, and genealogical references (in 1 Chronicles 1:28 & 34), the figure of Isaac is referred to by name outside the Pentateuch only in Amos 7 and Jeremiah 33. It seems, then, that Isaac was not a dominant figure in the religious and / or national life of ancient Israel, as found above with reference to the Psalms, nor as far as, we shall see here, the Prophets were concerned. The Old Testament, namely, reflects a situation referred to earlier already in which the Abraham and Jacob / Israel traditions had overpowered the probably older Isaac traditions (cf. Wellhausen 1927:317<sup>1</sup>; Noth 1948:112-127)<sup>60</sup>. Given this apparent circumstance, it is therefore rather unexpected that we should encounter Isaac twice in Amos 7. Why should it be that Amos 7:9 & 16 mention Isaac?

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<sup>60</sup> As another example of this, van Selms (1965:161-164), in typically independent style, postulates that the stories in Genesis 31-33 were originally not concerned with Jacob, but with Isaac. The reference to "Fear of Isaac" in relation to Padan-Aram in Gen 31:53, and the reference to Deborah, the nurse of Rebekah, in Genesis 25:8, give evidence that a suppressed tradition can still be detected here. The closeness of the long form of Isaac's name and the word "Israel" is for van Selms (1965:164) further evidence of a now hidden strong Isaac tradition. Too little evidence exists to support this interesting latter possibility, though.



### 5.2.1 Isaac references in Amos

Both Isaac references in Amos occur in the famous section of 7:9-17, which details the conflict between Amaziah and Amos. Though substantial agreement exists on the themes we encounter in this passage – first, that Amaziah versus Amos equates to the state's interests versus Yahweh's interests (cf. e.g. Jeremias 1969:108, 110-111 & Soggin 1987:131); second, that Amos's prophecy is afforded legitimacy here, particularly in 7:14-15; and third, that God's grace for Israel found in the first two visions of Amos 7 has now ended (Wolff 1969:340; Williamson 1990:115-116, also with reference to 2 Kings 17:22-23) – the details remain an open discussion.

A rather clear, broad editorial history of Amos 7 can be detected in the text; that is to say, that the Amos 7:9-17 section comes from a different hand at a different time than do the encircling vision reports (cf. Jeremias 1998:125<sup>8</sup>, 136-137). This is however not accepted by all exegetes, most particularly by those who prefer to replace historical exegesis with structural, narrative and rhetorical analyses; who consequently attribute most or all of the book to the prophet Amos himself; and, often, who engage in reader response criticism of historical readings to such a point that it hardly becomes possible to say anything of historical value on these texts (e.g. Möller 2000:515-517; Eslinger 1987:55). Such readings, as I argued in Chapter 2, cannot however answer the kinds of questions historically-oriented exegetes ask, nor the kind of question that interests me here, which go beyond the text but is given us by the text itself, on why Isaac should at all be named in these two verses.

It is, namely, clear that this section of the Amos text is quite different from its surroundings. Internally, the style is changed: the return, after the Amos introduction only, to a third person narrator<sup>61</sup>, clearly marks this pericope as something different. Words *on* Amos are given here, rather than, primarily, the words *of* Amos (cf. e.g. Williamson 1990:117; Mays 1969:12). Externally, 7:9-17 offers a transparent break in the argumentative flow of the second vision pair in Amos 7. We must therefore take it seriously that the text of Amos 7 has a developmental history: that 7:9 and 7:10-17 were written into the originally continual flow from 7:8 to 8:1 (cf. e.g. Levin 1995:308; Bergler 2000:466-467; Williamson 1990:101-102).

On a related matter: the role Amos 7:9 fulfils in the textual flow from 7:7-8 (the third vision) to 7:10-17 (the Amos-Amaziah account proper) is under some dispute. This is important for the theme of Isaac in Amos, since 7:9 contains one of the two references.

Three contenders on the role Amos 7:9 contest the arena here. They are the points of view:

- *That 7:9 is inherently part of 7:7-8.* Mays (1969:13), for instance, regards 7:10-17 as from the hand of Amos's "disciples". (or the "Amosschule", as e.g. Wolff 1969:131-132 calls it), who composed it in order to extend 7:9. Amos 7:9 is thus regarded as an older text than 7:10-17, and an inherent part of the previous verses (cf. also van Selms 1965:157; Landy 1987:228-230; Park 2001:4, 47).

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<sup>61</sup> Bergler (2000:467, translated) refers to 7:10-17 as a "pseudo-biographical he-report".

- *That 7:9 is inherently part of 7:10-17.* Williamson (1990:103-104) in particular argues on the basis of catchwords (cf. Jeremias 1969:107)<sup>62</sup> that Amos 7:9 should be regarded as a part of the 7:10-17 pericope. The pericope should thus be defined as running from 7:9 to 7:17<sup>63</sup>, and should be characterised as Deuteronomistic (so Williamson 1990:113-121<sup>64</sup>).
- *That 7:9 is a bridge of sorts, added while or after 7:10-17 was inserted here.* Amos 7:9 thus offers an interpretation<sup>65</sup> of 7:7-8, and 7:10-17 gives the supporting reasoning (Jeremias 1995:106-112; cf. Becker 2001:146; Schar 1998: 102, 116-120; Wolff 1969:131, 340-341; Bergler 2000:448).

Considering these three possibilities respectively, I would argue that:

- Amos 7:9 cannot be regarded as an original part of the preceding two verses, for a number of reasons, the strongest of which are (cf. Schar 1998:86, 101-104 ; Levin 1995:309):
  - 7:9 departs from the pattern in the visions thus far, in that now the punishment from Yahweh is announced directly;

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<sup>62</sup> Interestingly, taking a contradictory view, Paul (1991:238) uses catchwords to argue the first position listed here: with 7:9 thus read as part of the preceding verses, Paul argues that Jeroboam (7:9 and 7:10-11) is the catchword which leads to 7:10-17 being edited into the text at this point. Polley (1989:156) considers this link to have been made during the (oral / literary?) "collection stage of the composition" already.

<sup>63</sup> Soggin (1987:130) seems to be in accord with this view, but the formulation is ambiguous in this regard.

<sup>64</sup> Deuteronomistic influence in the prophets is however presently a matter in question – cf. Lohfink 1995:313-382.

<sup>65</sup> Soggin (1976:242; also Auld 1986:27) uses the language that 7:10-17 "interrupts" the visions.

- Whereas 7:7-8 does not refer to holy places, 7:9 interprets the threat of Yahweh in this way;
  - 7:9 interprets the reference to the city walls (of Samaria) as a reference to the whole dynasty of Yehud, of which Jeroboam<sup>66</sup> is the current embodiment;
  - the wrath of Yahweh against the people of Israel (by which should be understood the elite of Israel, presumably), is in 7:9 narrowed down to cult and king.
- Williamson employs the reason usually given for the placement of 7:10-17 at this precise point – namely that the catchwords provided the editorial cue for such a move – to argue in favour of a greater *redaktionsgeschichtlichen* unity for this pericope. However, on the one hand, the rhetorical flow of the verses preceding Amos 7:9 are such that 7:9 constitutes an interpretation or application of 7:7-8 (in particular); on the other hand, the narrative development of 7:10-17 indicates a closed component (if not a simple one; see below). Taken together, these two arguments seem stronger than Williamson's call on catchwords.
  - The most attractive role of 7:9 seems to be that of a bridge between the preceding and subsequent sections. Jeremias (1969:111-112), for instance, argues that 7:10-17 elucidates the third vision, and for this reason 7:9 interprets 7:8 in various ways, explaining, as it does, why grace has now ended (Wolff 1969:340). In 7:7-8 and in 8:1-2 it is clear, now, "daß die Geduld

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<sup>66</sup> Levin 1995:309-311 makes an interesting case, going against the more widely accepted view, that this is Jeroboam I.

Gottes am Ende ist" (Becker 2001:142; cf. Jeremias 1969:107), and 7:10-17 gives the reason why<sup>67</sup>.

### 5.2.2 And where is Isaac in all of this?

In all the readings using catchwords to prove opposing points of view on the "home" of Amos 7:9 (i.e. Williamson 1990:103-104 versus Paul 1991:238, to keep to the works already referred to), surprisingly, Isaac is not often used as such a catchword. In fact, Isaac is hardly ever referred to, and if such mention is made, it is usually a remark along the lines that Isaac is found only here in Amos, with nothing more made of it (e.g. Wolff 1969:340; Williamson 1990:103). Yet, as Rottzoll (1996:254) points out, Isaac would seem important: already the single reason of the sharing in Amos 7:9 & 16 of the rare spelling of Isaac's name should draw our attention.

What is more, it is only here in the Old Testament that "Isaac" refers not to the person, but to a nation / group, giving albeit small, nevertheless direct evidence of a group of people identifying themselves with the Isaac (with *śin*) figure, paralleling here what is the case with "Jacob" in particular (van Selms 1965:159-160; cf. Landy 1987:224). For these reasons, Amos 7:9 and 7:16 cannot be regarded as of independent origins (cf. Rottzoll 1996:254). With Isaac linking them in both orthography and denotation, 7:9 and 7:16 should be read together.

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<sup>67</sup> Amos 7:10-17 gives the grounds for the destruction of the high places announced in 7:9, namely that the words of Yahweh are now not only not proclaimed, but purposely prohibited – cf. e.g. Zenger 1995b:488; Bergler 2000:467.

Amos 7:16 and 7:17, on their part, are argumentatively linked together very strongly: the former offers the reason for the punishment proclaimed in the latter. Amos 7:16 offers the crux of the reason why the third and fourth visions (i.e., the second vision pair) are no longer followed up by grace, as had been the case with visions one and two in Amos 7. Amos 7:17 sketches the result. Mays (1969:140; cf. Hayes 1988:240) lists the things that Jeroboam will now have to face in what Paul (1991:250) calls a "fivefold curse": "The desecration of his wife, the end of his house, the loss of his inheritance in Israel, and his condemnation... His priesthood will be brought to a terrible and final end".

However, Mays errs: the priesthood is not mentioned in 7:17 itself. That is mentioned in Amos 7:9, following on which, the murder of Jeroboam<sup>68</sup>. However, could it be that Mays (albeit unwittingly) points us in a new direction here? Could it not be the case, that 7:9 is, in fact, a direct continuation of 7:17? The logical flow of these two texts thus ordered would certainly bear this possibility out. That is, except for one matter: the references to Isaac in these two verses.

Isaac, to be precise, fits poorly in these two verses (whether one accepts my proposed re-ordering of these verses or not) in two ways. First, stylistically, the references seem superfluous, out of place, uncomfortable<sup>69</sup>; and second, the Isaac

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<sup>68</sup> וְקִנְיֹתַי עַל-בֵּית יִרְבְּעָם בְּחָרֵב is thus read here more literally than the usually understood "dynasty", namely as his dwelling. Jeroboam's *palace* will thus be destroyed. Although the inclusion of בְּחָרֵב might in this interpretation seem strange at first glance, it should be understood as having been used for poetic reasons, to link with יִחְרְבוּ earlier in the verse.

<sup>69</sup> This parallelistic formulation leads Wellhausen (1927:316) to describe these references to Isaac as a collective name for the whole of Israel together with Edom. Mays (1969:133) simply states that in

tradition is accepted as being a thoroughly southern tradition<sup>70</sup>. These two considerations, along with the possibility that Isaac spelt יִשָּׂחָק could indicate a late oral tradition entering written record here, lead to the conclusion that the Isaac references here are later additions. Isaac is not an original part of the 7:9-17 pericope.

### 5.2.3 Amos 7:9-17: an editorial history

These considerations lead me to reconstruct the editorial history of Amos 7:9-17 in the following way:

- Amos prophesied in the court of Jeroboam.
- The traditions preserved and collected by the Amos disciples<sup>71</sup> were combined and written down, with the text here that would run from 7:8 to 8:1 directly.

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Amos 7:9 & 16 "Isaac is used as a name for the northern kingdom"; so too Wolff (1969:131). They give no indication as to why this should be the case, particularly since Isaac is a southern tradition.

<sup>70</sup> According to the Isaac traditions, this figure had been associated first with Beer Lahai Roi (Gen 24:62 & 25:11), and later with Gerar (Genesis 26:6) and Beersheba (Genesis 26:23). These are all locations in "the extreme south of Canaan" (van Selms 1965:160). According to Hayes (1988:240), this would imply that "house of Isaac" could be rebels critical of the house of David, upon whom God's wrath is now also proclaimed from Davidic circles. This theory calls for further investigation, since it points in roughly the same direction of a vague possibility that, underlying the Amos 7:9-17 text may be a tradition of southern priests unhappy with the centralising tendencies of the Jerusalemite establishment.

<sup>71</sup> In the understanding of the Amos tradents, Amos is the plumb line of 7:7-8 (Schart 1998:115). On the term יִשָּׂחָק, see e.g. Bergler 2000:457-460; Heyns 1997:28-29; Ouellette 1973: 321-331.

- For the reason to preserve another, as yet unenscribed Amos tradition, the 7:9-17 text was produced<sup>72</sup>, however, without any references to Isaac as yet, and with 7:9 not at the beginning of the text, but at the end. It (i.e., Amos 7:9-17) was inserted between the current 7:8 and 8:1<sup>73</sup>, because it offered a more explicit rendering of the reason why Yahweh's grace had now come to an end.
- After this tradition had reached the far South, thus after 722<sup>74</sup>, the need was felt to reinterpret or actualise anew this text, more precisely, its theology, in the new southern context. In the two instances where Yahweh's words against Israel are reported directly, that is Amos 7:16 and 7:9 (with 7:9 attached to 7:17), parallel formulations referring to Isaac were included. The re-actualised message was clear: those who sought their identity in the patriarch Isaac and worshipped at the holy sites attributed to him, stood to suffer the same fate as the North<sup>75</sup>, were they too to silence critical prophetic voices.
- Whereas the transition from 7:8 to 7:10 is not difficult or awkward, a later hand experienced it as such, and moved 7:9 from its initial place, as the conclusion

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<sup>72</sup> Wolff (1969:131) states that 7:10-17 comes from the hand of an older Amos school that would have had to be eyewitnesses of his activities, and were now preserving their master's voice. Amos 7:9 comes from a later but related hand, he believes.

<sup>73</sup> On the one hand, the insertion here seems rather awkward, since it breaks up the second vision pair. On the other hand, though, inserting it anywhere else would have been even more awkward.

<sup>74</sup> With Park 2001:50-53, I prefer a dating of the final Amos-redaction to between 722 and 587.

<sup>75</sup> Bergler (2000:467), for instance, points out that 7:10-17 warns the South that the same fate as that of the North (722) may befall them.



to the Amos-Amaziah narrative, to its present position, as the introduction<sup>76</sup>. This served the purposes of clarifying the meaning of visions three and four well, since, understood as an interpretation of 7:7-8 and as a preparation for 7:10-17, Amos 7:9 already directed the attention of hearers or readers in the right direction.

#### 5.2.4 The Isaacites rescue prophecy

Thus considered, the case of the strange reference to Isaac is no longer strange. Between the twin major exile events, North and South, of 722 and 586, and probably earlier in this period rather than later, the Amos message was given new voice. For a small group of people who found their common identity in patriarch Isaac, with *šîn*, the idea was preserved that prophetic activity is vital for their wellbeing. Without treasuring prophecy among them, they will incur Yahweh's wrath. Thus, Amos's views on prophecy apropos Bethel regain currency in Beersheba. The Isaacites take a lesson from the northern experience around 722, giving it continued meaning within prophetic and societal context.

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<sup>76</sup> This means that one cannot argue, as does e.g. Hayes (1988:231), that the 7:10-17 unit was inserted here because of the Jeroboam-reference in 7:11 linking naturally with that in 7:9. In this reconstruction, 7:9 was secondarily extracted from the unit and employed as an introduction (where it now serves all the purposes usually ascribed to it in its role as link between 7:7-8 and 7:10-17). The usual question on 7:9, whether it is "Abschluß der dritten Vision oder Brückentext zum folgenden Fremdbericht" (Rottzoll 1996:252-254), should thus be answered: both, and a little more besides.

In this way, the Beersheba Isaacites become the preservers of a tradition of prophetic independence, along with forming the social context within which the Amos words were maintained for posterity.

Whereas the question as to Isaac's appearance within the Amos book demanded a rather technical analysis, matters are much simpler with respect to Isaac's remaining manifestation among the Prophets, namely in Jeremiah. It is to this occurrence we turn next.

### **5.3 Isaac's Jeremiad – 33:26**

Although no detailed analysis is required here, it should be noted that the Isaac-with-*šîn* reference (noted by very few commentators on Jeremiah, with e.g. Mackay 2004:284<sup>126</sup> among the exceptions) finds itself here among a series of rhetorically refined collections of affirming sayings, attributed in the text to the prophet Jeremiah, but certainly dating from a later period. In addition, as is the case with the surrounding chapters, Jeremiah 33 too carries a heading implying that what follows is the result of a single revelation by Yahweh; the sayings placed within Jeremiah 33, however, as with the other similar chapters, are clearly not always directly related in the sense that these were words come by in a single setting. The relation between these sub-units is thematic. The frequent sub-introductions to pericopae indicate their relative independence most clearly, and are indications that each of the smaller sections ought to be regarded as units in themselves, with an own initial setting in history. Furthermore, textually, Jeremiah 33:26 constitutes the closing of a prose

expansion of the immediately preceding restoration poems found in Jeremiah 30:1 – 31:22 (Carrol 1989:65).

For Jeremiah 33:26, the sub-introduction can be found four verses earlier, in verse 23 (constituting the whole verse: **וַיְהִי דְבַר־יְהוָה אֶל־יִרְמְיָהוּ לֵאמֹר** – a classic prophetic introductory formula). As in the preceding sub-sections, the rhetorics are refined: first, the negative, accusatory doom saying against the people of Yahweh is recounted. This is then countered by giving an example of Yahweh's steadfast power, in verse 26 namely from creation, the assurances around which is then transposed onto the continued Davidic dynasty (cf. Carrol 2006:638; Brueggemann 2007:135; Clements 1988:175-201). The message is clear: the kingdom will last, and it will be the descendants of David who will rule over the three traditional patriarchal "houses", which implies all of Israel (McKane 1996:865). Not only is the assuredness of this matter underlined by this rhetorical strategy; the fact that the matter is stressed several times in this chapter is meant to clear away any doubts about the continued existence of Israel under, specifically, Davidic lineage.

It is this promissory character of these sayings which form the common theme, on the basis of which these sayings were grouped together here. The purpose of these sayings is assurance; the giving of hope (Holladay 1989:231 Brueggemann 2007:35-36). The historical context is clearly the very late exilic / early post-exilic period: the return from captivity referred to in the closing words of this verse give further support to such a Persian dating (Carrol 2006:638), as does the fact that the whole section of Jeremiah 33:14-26 is absent from the Septuagint version of this text (McKane 1996:861, cf. clxii-clxiii).

The emphasis in Jeremiah 33 and in this section of it is on the continuation of the Davidic lineage. An interesting feature of verse 26 is, however, not only the reference to the patriarchs, but also the stylistically rather awkward duplication of the reference to Jacob. Could it be that, here at the opening of verse 26, the name of Jacob was inserted again to give him and / or his adherents greater prominence, namely over against the other two patriarchs? Certainly, the occurrence of the singular noun – “my servant”, rather than what would be expected after the reference to both Jacob and David, namely “my servants” – would support such a position.

Within this pericope, thus, Isaac is included, in his usual position as middle patriarch, namely as part of the message of hope the Jeremiah “Trostschrift” conveys to its exilic audience (Backhaus & Meyer 2006:475-476). Clearly, though, in the jockeying for position, Jacob comes up in the prime position, as demonstrated by the overt connection between Jacob and David. Here the Jacobites can be seen between the lines to assert their power – a strategy which would prove highly effective in post-exilic Judea, when the group of tribes would come to be known collectively as Jacob or Israel, as synonymous names, whereas that would never be the case even for “Abraham” nor, most certainly, for “Isaac”.

What Mackay (2004:284) writes as an encouragement of faith, namely that the references here to the patriarchs “reminds the people of their true status in God’s sight”, is for Isaac, above all, a negative state to be in, though. *His* status is here merely emphasised as being minor. In Jeremiah 33:26 too we find Isaac in subjugated state.

## 5.4 Taken together: the occurrences of *sīn* in Isaac

The four instances of reference to Isaac-with-*sīn* reviewed above do not provide us with enough evidence to draw firm conclusions. Certain things must be noted, though:

- That all of these references are extra-Pentateuchal, which means they have escaped the heavier editorial processes on the “canon within the canon” that are (or more accurately: that increasingly became during such editorial processes) the Moses books;
- That no clarity can be gained from the respective dates of the Isaac-with-*sīn* texts about a certain period of time in which this spelling may have occurred (the Amos-references being decidedly pre-exilic, the Jeremiah-occurrence late exilic / early post-exilic, and the Psalm 105-reference decidedly post-exilic, as respectively concluded to above)<sup>77</sup>;
- That, however, all these references precede the strong editorial work on the Pentateuch during the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, which most probably

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<sup>77</sup> Dr. David Firth, in a personal communication dated 14 June 2005, points out that these four occurrences may well all have initially northern origins (the Deuteronomistic covenant language, which occurs in both Jeremiah 3:26 and Psalm 105, “is generally associated with the northern traditions from which Deuteronomy may have originated”, he writes). This seems possible, in the sense of the pre-history of the occurrences as we find them here. However, from the analyses undertaken above, the enscripturation of these verses are all probably southern activities (with the possibility of an exilic setting for the Jeremiah-text) which, given the dating accorded these activities above, may indeed have incorporated broadly Deuteronomistic influences.

would have smoothed away any difficulties caused by variance in the spelling of the Isaac name, had that been present within the Pentateuch, namely by deferring to the dominant form with *tsadeh*;

- That in none of the texts concerned are the patriarchs the dominant theme;
- That, however, where all three the patriarchs do feature, one predominates strongly: Abraham in Psalm 105; Jacob in Jeremiah 33. Only in the earlier text, in Amos, where the other two patriarchs have not yet impinged on Isaac's territory, does Isaac retain a place of prominence.

The conclusion that can be drawn from the Isaac-with-*sīn* texts regarding the theory of the competition between the patriarchs is not negative, namely: nothing in these occurrences decisively precludes the validity of this theory. In fact, although no strong case can be made, because of the paucity of evidence, certain slight indications of or hints at the patriarchal competition could be shown.

What is more important for the purposes of one of the theories of this study, though, namely that the Isaac references refer to not only a single entity, is this – in all three these texts “Isaac” serves as reference to something different:

- In the case of Psalm 105, the reference is to a constituent, albeit not dominant, part of Israel's heritage, with specific reference to the connection between the patriarchs and the land. Here the reference is thus ideological, coloured by the post-exilic context of return to Judah, drawing on the posited ancient land promises to the patriarchs. Not much indication is given of conflict between the patriarchal groups, despite Abraham's dominance. Here, unity is of prime kerugmatic importance (the unstated context of which may be

conflict with the people who had remained behind in Juda after 586 and had since taken possession of the land emptied by war and exile). Ideological Isaac is thus drawn into the game here of those who recount, reflexively, the history of God's path with Israel in their favour.

- In Amos 7, a small group in a specific region is quite clearly indicated by the reference to Isaac. Post-722, the message of Amos on particularly the importance of the continued existence of critical prophets was brought to a far-southern group (with which extant northern ties are indicated by Amos 5:5 and 8:12 – cf. van Selms 1965:161), who identified strongly both themselves and their area with an Isaac. The connection with Israel in both Amos-references to Isaac shows however no insular attitude, but possibly a position of security for these Isaacites within the broader social context, at the very least, a sense of identification with the broader group, secure enough to be open to the wider importance of these specific Amos-words. These Isaacites were thus in a sense the protectors of the prophetic tradition. The fact that no further reference to this group or their appropriated task is found in the Old Testament, indicates that the influence of this regionalised group remained limited. The fact however that prophecy went on to become a major dynamic within the life of Juda, before, during and after the exile, shows that at least some of the stimulus for this movement had to have come from this far-southern group.
- In Jeremiah 33, the usually expected reference, namely to Isaac as an identifying central figure for a substantial group within ancient Israel, is found. Together, the patriarchs here serve as rallying figures in not a Jeremiad of lamentations, but for the Jeremiah message of hope. To be sure, Jacob is

given clear prominence. However, their combined role here is to serve as rhetorical building blocks in an argument for the continuation of the Davidic dynasty over the whole of Israel.

Although the Isaac figures in the first and last of these three representations are in some ways related, they are not identical. Different in most senses, though, is the middle reference: an altogether different referentiality for “Isaac” emerges in Amos 7 – and Isaac found in no other of the Isaac texts in the Old Testament.

The implications of these conclusions will be drawn in the closing chapter of this study, when the history of Isaac in the Old Testament is retold.



## **CHAPTER 6: INCIDENTAL AND FORMULAIC ISAAC REFERENCES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT**

In this chapter, but the briefest notice is taken of the remainder of the Isaac references as we find them scattered throughout the Old Testament, though with a pronounced concentration in the Pentateuch. These references have been grouped together according to the thematic context in which they are found, which is given in each of the headings below, along with the pertinent verse indications.

### **6.1 The God of Abraham and / or Isaac in Jacob / Israel references – Genesis 28:13, 32:9, 46:1-3, 48:15-16; 1Kings 18:36; 1Chronicles 29:18; 2Chronicles 30:6**

In the epiphanies Jacob and Israel respectively experience in Genesis 28:13 and 46:1-3 (cf. Schmid 1999:62-63; Ruppert 2002:35), it is made clear that the God of Jacob / Israel is indeed the same as that of his two preceding forefathers (cf. de Pury 1998:5-6). Whereas that lineage is given voice to in both these accounts from the mouth of God, in Genesis 32:9 (Scharbert 1986:219-220) the same matter is taken in the mouth of Jacob. The case is similar with the blessing of Genesis 48:15-16 (Scharbert 1986:288), where the identical personage is encountered, though now under the name of Israel. These references served, clearly, to reaffirm the ideology of the family ties, by tying Jacob / Israel into the foregoing genealogy. The explicitly religious context of each of these references indicates too that this lineage has overt connections with the living faith tradition of Juda.

This unity under Yahweh is given further legitimacy in the prophetic invocation by Elijah in 1Kings 18:36 (cf. e.g. Leithart 2006:136), the royal plea to God by David in 1Chronicles 29:18 (cf. e.g. McKenzie 2004:216), and the royal decree by Hezekiah in 2Chronicles 30:6 (cf. e.g. McKenzie 2004:344-345). Situations such as these, all of which employ the Israel-name for the third patriarch, are projected back into a romanticised past, and as such are intended to show to post-exilic Juda the idealised stability of the patriarchal union under God throughout the (hypothesised) history of Israel-Juda. None of the post-exilic strife between the patriarchal tradent groups is reflected; the nature of the material is such that it cannot; the result is that the subservient position of Isaac is reflected as having been stabilised for centuries.

## **6.2 “God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” – Exodus 3:6, 3:15 & 16, 4:5, 6:2-3, 32:13**

The above social project of identification is intensified in these verses, where at one of the epiphanical highpoints of the faith of Israel, namely during Yahweh’s self-revelation to Moses, explicit reference to Yahweh’s identity as the God of the three patriarchs is made, stressed by repetition to the point of stylistic awkwardness – Exodus 3:6, 15 & 16 (cf. e.g. Houtman 1993:349-353, 367-371; cf. Schmid 1999:7-8 on the implications for the relationship between Genesis and Exodus). The identification here of the patriarchs’ ancestral deities with Moses’ Yahweh not only aims to unify the three different religious strands under a “neutral” (that is: a non-patriarchal) divinity, but also serves to strengthen the now implicitly accepted idealised familial relationship between Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

The exact same situation is found in the divine words in Exodus 4:5 and 6:2-3 (cf. respectively e.g. Houtman 1993:394 & 500), on which Moses can be made to draw rhetorically in Exodus 32:13 (cf. e.g. Houtman 2000:650-652). (Strongly akin to this is the parallel reference in Jeremiah 33:26; however, now, with a preference expressed for Jacob, as indicated previously.)

**6.3 Land of Abraham and Isaac... and Jacob – Genesis 35:12 & 50:24; Exodus 6:8 & 33:1; Numbers 32:10-11; Deuteronomy 1:8, 6:10, 9:5, 9:27, 30:20 & 34:4; Joshua 24:2-4**

Still more intensifying these familial relationships, are references which not only tie the patriarchs to one another under God, but also add the dimension of the now shared land. In Genesis 35:12 (cf. e.g. Scharbert 1986:232), God is found linking Jacob to the Abrahamite and Isaacite territory, thus still establishing the patriarchal unification process. However, that union is accepted and has thus already been effected in a series of other texts: Genesis 50:20 (the last monologue of Joseph; cf. e.g. Scharbert 1986:301), Exodus 6:8 & 33:1 (cf. e.g. Houtman 1993:505 & Houtman 2000:687), Deuteronomy 1:8, 6:10 & 34:4<sup>78</sup> (cf. e.g. Nelson 2000:18, 92-93, 395-396) and Numbers 32:10-11 (direct divine communications to Moses; cf. e.g. Jagersma 1988:151-152), Joshua 24:2-4 (indirect divine communication via Joshua;

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<sup>78</sup> The question, reviewed in Schmid 1999:75-77, on whether references to the fathers (אבות) in Deuteronomy were indeed initially related to the Abraham-Isaac-Jacob trio, remains unsure (cf. de Pury 1998:9). In the socio-historical phase of Juda analysed here, such an identification would already have been accepted.

cf. e.g. Görg 1991:105-106), and Deuteronomy 9:5, 9:27 & 30:20 (words of Moses, espousing deuteronomistic theology; cf. e.g. Nielsen 1995:110-111, 115-116, 169-271; see again Schmid 1999:7-8 on the implications for the relationship between Genesis and Exodus). By not only connecting the patriarchs to one another, and by not only connecting the three patriarchs to God, but by also adding in the very concrete dimension of geography, the implication for a united people in Juda would speak clearly to the contemporary reader or hearer.

**6.4 God's covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – Leviticus 26:42, Deuteronomy 29:12, 2Kings 13:23, 1Chronicles 16:15-18, Psalm 105:9-10, Jeremiah 33:26**

Less material and more directly connected with the patriarchs' relationship to God, are texts such as Leviticus 26:42 (a clearly post-exilic text, drenched in deuteronomistic theology; cf. e.g. Balentine 2002:201-203), Deuteronomy 29:12 (a Mosaic assurance; cf. e.g. Nelson 2002:340-341), 2Kings 13:23 (cf. e.g. Leithart 2006:232-236), 1Chronicles 16:15-18 (cf. e.g. McKenzie 2004:147-148) and the references in Psalm 105 and Jeremiah 33 discussed in the previous chapter. The aspect of covenant stands central in all these texts, thus tying God, patriarchs and land together within a single theological construct – a highly effective ideological technique through which to effect unity.

## 6.5 Burial and genealogical notices – Genesis 49:31 (& 25:7-11), 1Chronicles

### 1: 27-28 & 34

The reference to the burial of the patriarchs and their wives in the family grave (Genesis 49:31; see also 25:7-11; cf. e.g. Scharbert 1986:197, 181-182) serve to strengthen the idea of a single, natural blood lineage across three generations, the more so because death is such a natural part of life, and because the concept of a shared burial place for members of most particularly prominent families is such a natural part of Ancient Near Eastern cultural life. The idea of a shared family grave thus cements what is essentially fantasy as reality. By the time the Chronicler's introductory genealogy was written down, the familial bonds were certainly above doubt – cf. 1Chronicles 1: 27-28 & 34 – and the identification of Abram with Abraham and of Jacob with Israel had been accomplished. In both these instances – the burial and the genealogical references – what the editorial processes were intended to lead to, had indeed become. Distinct histories had been unified. Though the traces of the earlier “separate development” with regards to the patriarchal (and Mosaic) religions were still there to be seen, in the Old Testament texts as much as probably in the live oral traditions, in death and genealogy it is no longer history that matters, but *kerugma*. Here we are presented with a *fait accompli* – a united family, across three generations, forming subsequent identity – the implication is – for all eternity (cf. Westermann 1981:274).

## 6.6 A case of special interest: the Fear of Isaac – Genesis 31:42 & 53 (+ 18)

The “Fear of Isaac”, the rare divine appellation usually understood to refer to a kind of *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* experience (classically related to Rudolf Otto; cf. e.g. Otto 1917) that characterised patriarch Isaac’s encounter with the divine (later associated with Yahweh), can from the perspectives taken in this study now become not primarily a sense of awe in the presence of God, but – in post-exilic inner-Judean identity politics – a genuine fear, borne for the Isaacties from the experience of being at the mercy of God-and-Abraham. It is instructive to note that, apart from the two verses of Genesis 31:42 & 53 being the only occurrences of the  $\text{פֶּחַד יִצְחָק}$  terminology, in both cases this designation is set within the immediate context of reference to Abraham and God. The “God of Abraham”, as a phrase combining Isaac’s two intimidators – one divine, one human – has at least the possibility of overtones here, namely that it cowers Isaac, showing him within a relationship with the divine, via the arch-patriarch, that is characterised primarily by terror. Not just respectful adoration-with-trepidation before the mystery of the divine is then alluded to by the “fear of Isaac” (the usual idea taken from Alt’s *Gott der Väter* hypothesis), but, later, genuine dread. Thus understood, the defeated Isaac is in the hands of the victorious God-*cum*-Abraham; the Isaacites remain at the mercy of the Abrahamites.

Interesting too is that this language occurs in the mouth of Jacob, certainly one of the victors in the post-exilic competition for social primacy, namely after identification / unification with the figure Israel. A unique “fear factor” is thus incorporated here into Jacob’s speech. At the very least, he too does not draw into question a by now

established pecking order. Could it be, though, that taken from the current perspective, Genesis 31:18 may indicate that, in the event of conflict ensuing between Jacob (the Jacobites) and Laban (representing here the Abrahamites), the former would seek an alliance with Isaac (the Isaacites)?

Though there is every probability that the terminology of the “fear of Isaac” has some kind of minor antecedent tradition, prior to being incorporated here into the Genesis 31 account, the connotation now, under the influence of Genesis 22\* as interpreted above, carries at least hues of actual, rather than numinous, fear.

## 6.7 Conclusion

Six loose groupings of relatively minor Isaac references have been indicated in this brief chapter. What has become clear from this is that, although these Isaac references are more or less formulaic and incidental, in the sense that they are not related directly to larger narratives of the Isaac figure, they still convey some value to the theories being proposed in this study:

- First, that the intensity of these formulaic and incidental references differ. Whereas some may refer to patriarchal figures only, others draw in directly reference to God, the land, and covenantal relationships, presenting by such “thick descriptions” the proposed vision of a unitary family as all the more compelling to the intended reader or hearer.
- Second, that the scattering of these references throughout a range of Old Testament texts subtly furthers the notion that the editors had wanted to portray, namely that there was in actual fact a family. From these references

particularly, it would hardly be possible to find indications of a pre-history to this smoothly-presented concept.

The obvious exception to the latter is the unusual “Fear of Isaac” expression, which has in the research history on the Old Testament proven to be an important divine name. Whereas this expression could on its own perhaps have rendered us some inkling that a different, antecedent faith expression may lie behind the text, the rare Abram – Abraham and Jacob – Israel variances in these texts would aid further curiosity in this direction. Yet, without the rest of the Pentateuchal Isaac references, some kind of viable historical reconstruction would remain impossible. Not enough material is available in these scattered references alone to provide for a meaningful alternative, critical history to be proposed, in which both the multiplexity of the patriarchal figures and the competition between their adherents in later Judaic society could be postulated. For that, the larger narratives would be required; the more so when such a diminutive figure as Isaac is pursued, as is the case in this study. Certainly, no such a critical retelling of Isaac’s history could have been attempted in the light of the Genesis 22\* interpretation offered above, in Chapter 3, as is attempted here, based solely on these incidental and formulaic Isaac references in the Old Testament.

However, accepting then that the scattered minor Isaac references indicated in this chapter help us but a little, namely in indicating to its post-exilic readers / hearers a seemingly long-term stability in the relative importance of the patriarchs in the relation to one another, it is more in the light of the previous chapters that such a critical retelling of Isaac’s history in the Old Testament may now be attempted. By



taking together all that has gone above in a creative, historical narrative, we may now attempt to outline the possible storyline of Isaac in the Old Testament.

## CHAPTER 7: THE STORY OF ISAAC IN THE OLD TESTAMENT, CRITICALLY RETOLD

*Philosophical friendship would be the passion of understanding  
the difficulties of others in terms of one's own,  
and one's own in relation with others.*

– Rajchman 1991:27

### 7.1 Up to this time...

To come to the present point in this study, many aspects have had to be considered. In Chapter 2, acknowledgement was given to the philosophical, methodological and historical impulses which fundamentally informed the rest of the study. After that, a detailed analysis of the Genesis 22\* text was undertaken, making the point practically that had been argued theoretically in the previous chapter, that historical interpretation offer us more fruitful avenues than does a-historical exegesis. The implications of the new interpretation of Genesis 22\* concluded to were then applied in brief to other Isaac accounts in the Pentateuch. Because this had never been done in such an extensive way, much attention was paid to the three Isaac texts in which this patriarch's name is spelt with a *ś'n*. Lastly, the rest of the succinct Isaac references spread throughout the Old Testament were briefly touched upon.

Frequently in the exegetical accounts, aspects touched upon in Chapter 2 were incorporated in the subsequent chapters. Moreover, the whole of the exegetical section of this study was undertaken from within three theoretical perspectives:

- first, a further development of Alt's *Gott der Väter* hypothesis, namely in combination with, most recently, Albertz's perspectives on inner-Israelite identity politics, in order than cognisance may be taken of the conflict this would have entailed amongst the tradents of the various patriarchal accounts in, most particularly, post-exilic Juda;
- second, a new vision of the multiplexity of the patriarchal figures, which draws on an anecdotal view of the Old Testament accounts, as a middle ground between (and not as an exclusionary alternative to) focussing only on the smallest possible or on the largest possible textual units, respectively; and
- third, a new historical interpretation of Genesis 22\*, and the different light this would cast on other Isaac texts when viewed from this fresh perspective.

Not all three of these theoretical approaches have proven equally fruitful. The first, on the inter-patriarchal identity conflict, proved itself to be a valuable analytical tool throughout. The theory of the multiplexity of the patriarchal figures has been proven to add interesting interpretative possibilities too. It had, however, to be understood in a soft sense, namely that at certain times, at least, different aspects or sides of patriarch Isaac were indicated by the texts concerned, rather than that each and every reference had been to initially unrelated figures. That a number of antecedents – either historical indications or literary creations – found reference, though, is by no means beyond the scope of possibility, and indeed seemed likely in many of the cases, most particularly so with the more extensive Isaac accounts.

Further work on the other two patriarchs, and as a next step, on other major Old Testament figures would be required, in order to ascertain more clearly the borders of the applicability of this theory. On Isaac, though, it has indeed proven insightful.

The third theory, namely the new historical interpretation of Genesis 22\*, has proven to offer exegetically the most productive insights of the three (to some extent also because it incorporates important elements of the other two theoretical standpoints just reviewed). This new historical interpretation of Genesis 22\* namely offers something entirely different, in three respects:

- The interpretation itself is fresh, and stands a number of tests on the Genesis 22\* text that other interpretations do not pass, particularly in explaining more of the different aspects of the editorial history of the text than any of the other explanations available, as had been indicated;
- The interpretation also makes a substantial contribution over against aspersions that are from time to time cast on the Bible as religious source book. With this interpretation, communicated popularly (which will be done in research communications to flow from this study), religious communities could be substantially served, namely the better to handle at times highly unfair, not to say uninformed, criticisms levelled against the Bible and, hence, religion. It in this concern of mine which, in my interpretation on Genesis 22\*, stands most directly as a continuation of what I had called the apologetic trend which goes along with Pentateuch readings in South Africa, some points of which were indicated in Chapter 2.
- Lastly, within the debate in recent years on the late dating of almost the entirety of the Old Testament texts, the approach followed here provides a

different route. Picking up impulses from the history of Old Testament patriarch studies, these are applied in a different way, related here to the influence of Genesis 22\* on the understanding of other Isaac texts. Clearly, these other texts all had had a separate, and in some cases probably a centuries-old previous history of being told, read and understood. Simplistically to date such texts late do them no justice. However, it is entirely legitimate to investigate what the understanding of an older text could be within a later age. When a text or theme is recast in a later age by means of a new interpretative frame, the new meaning is a legitimate object of study. This however does not mean the text should now be dated young. It simply means that the meaning of the text in a later phase of history is explored – a meaning which had been super-imposed over extant denotations. Of this, in the treatment of Genesis 22\* as an anecdotal Isaac account, and in then suggesting its hermeneutical ramifications in recasting the understanding of other such Isaac accounts and references in the Old Testament, this study has given an example.

Such scholarship must acknowledge its philosophical indebtedness. Once the philosophical move has been made to accept that science cannot and ought not to sell its soul to the ideals of modernist objectivity, a different way of reading texts academically becomes possible. The relationship between scholar and subject matter, here played out as the relationship between exegete and text, becomes up-close and personal. Apart from the inherent theological dynamic as this relates to the biblical texts, namely that the reader not only reads the text but is at once also read by the text, in a hermeneutical spiral of interpreting and of being interpreted, in

a give-*and*-take of meaning, this has enlightening methodological implications too. These include that one acknowledges one's personal make-up, one's socio-intellectual situatedness, in interpreting the object of one's study. The Rajchman-quote as the opening words of this chapter illustrates this perfectly, as do the words from Foucault, quoted at the very beginning of this study, which characterise my experience of studying the Isaac texts in the writing of this dissertation.

In conclusion, now, remains but one aspect: based on all that had gone above, to retell the story of Isaac in the Old Testament.

## **7.2 Once upon a time...**

Once upon a time there was a man. We do not know exactly when this time was – it may have been around 1200 BCE; some guess it may even have been a millennium earlier, but that is improbable. In reality, it may well have been around the 9<sup>th</sup> century BCE; even later. We do however have a general idea of his whereabouts when we encounter him, namely in the southern parts of Palestine, with quite possibly an oasis of sorts, called Beersheba, as one of the most important geographical points of reference for him.

His name was Isaac, which in European and European-influenced languages seems simple enough, but in Hebrew a little variation in the spelling of his name is found. Although this could simply be a linguistic quirk, there may well be more to it, especially if one considers that the body of stories about and references to this Isaac figure do not always add up, as a history should, or a collection of short stories

would. These editorial rough edges enable a different conclusion: chances are that underneath this one name, Isaac, lays hidden a series of figures, some historic, some fictive, that in time were understood really to be referring to one and the same figure. Isaac thus becomes a composition: a composite figure, who at the very same time now himself tells the story of the people who identify with him. It is this story that we may, albeit tentatively, well aware of the pitfalls of historical reconstruction, trace further.

We do know that he – this “multiplex” Isaac of our narrative – became quite rich, as a successful farmer. Genesis 26:12-33\*, a text which rings true with what seems like much authentic memory of Isaac, gives us some indications in this regard. That did not make his life as easy as we would expect, though. Conflict with his neighbours ensued, as competition for scarce resources followed on the growth of his wealth. In fact, conflict would very much become associated with this figure Isaac...

As Isaac’s wealth and power increased, he became something of an icon to his family, his slaves and other hangers-on. His stature attained that of a patriarch to what we may call his extended family, or his clan. Like all people in his world, Isaac was probably highly religious – not in a pietistic kind of way, but in an earthy and existentialist way: every aspect of life was understood implicitly to be related to the divine. Chances are good that a number of gods were worshipped within the clan of Isaac. Perhaps, perhaps, though, the main divinity, associated most strongly with Isaac and his clan, was called the “Fear of Isaac”. That would mean, then, that the prosperity that Isaac and his people enjoyed would have been attributed most directly to them being blessed by this supra-human Being. For this, they paid Him

much respect, which is what his name – “Fear” – refers to most directly. In such circumstances, that is...

As always with a strong leader, other stories had begun to develop around Isaac. We are no longer sure exactly how these stories came into being. We also cannot know such stories which have in time quietly died out. One account that has been retained, though, tells of Isaac’s young days, when he moved into the area. He was still so poor and without power that, when the locals took a liking to his wife, Rebekah, Isaac feared that an enamoured Philistine would simply murder him, as an isolated sojourner who stands in the way of a more powerful Philistine’s romantic ideals. So they lied. Isaac and Rebekah pretended that they were siblings. Of course, such secrets have a way of coming out, and it was with much royal drama that Isaac was reprimanded.

Granted, the above is a rather strange tale, particularly about a man who in time had become rich and influential. However, that may well add to the authenticity of the bare outlines of the account – one does not go about making up bad stories about a big man! Now, if there *is* something to the story, though, that is another matter altogether...

It seems, however, that Isaac and his group never succeeded in becoming a hugely expansive clan. If they had, we would have heard much more about Isaac, his wealth, and his derring-do. We can gather, though, that some time during the late eighth century, the Isaac clan became a rescuer of an important part of the culture of that greater region: prophecy. A prophet named Amos had some years earlier gone



to the northern part of the country, to Israel, and had there proclaimed a divine message of compassion for the underclass. In a strongly hierarchic society such as a kingdom, however, a social consciousness is not always appreciated, and Amos along with his message was ignored. By a strange confluence of circumstances, though, prophet Amos's words of doom came true, and Assyria destroyed most of the North. Obviously, this was taken as a direct vindication of the prophetic message of Amos by his disciples, that is: by those who had remembered and treasured his words, so that when some educated refugees from up North found themselves, in their flight from the Assyrian aggressors, in the far South, their rendition of the Amos words came to be accepted in some way among the Isaacite group. When resistance against the power of the prophetic word was encountered among some Isaacites, these refugees recounted how the royal prophet Amaziah had given Amos the exact same kind of opposition. The deduction: silencing true prophets elicits divine wrath. By clever word play, this message was made applicable to the Isaacites: silence the true prophets here, and 722 could happen all over again...

Perhaps, thus, the Isaac clan became in this way a sort of rescuer for the tradition of true prophecy. This tradition was in time to become a major part of the religio-political life of the people in the broader southern territories, that is: in the country called Juda. So perhaps Isaac, spelt here for the first time we know of in a slightly unusual way, even became a kind of designation for a group larger than just the clan. "Isaac" may have become an icon of stature, a rallying point for those who sought to identify themselves over against others.

In a quite natural way, similar such groupings had been developing too, around figures with names such as Abram, Abraham, Jacob and Israel. Some grew close to one another, perhaps through marriage, for shared interests, against common enemies, and so forth. Equally naturally, therefore, alliances were formed and competition, even conflict ensued. That may well be why, when we find two other references to this Isaac with the unusual spelling, he already plays an inferior role to the other iconic figures. In the century and a half that had passed between the time when we found the connection between Amos and Isaac and the time another prophetic school, that of Jeremiah, refers to Isaac, Jacob had entered into the picture quite forcefully. When we find another such Isaac reference, more or less another century later, within a post-exilic Psalm, Abraham had become the strongest contender.

The post-exilic period in Juda sees a few centuries of intensified competition for social leadership among its constituent groups. What tricks those who aspired to prominence got up to in their social engagement with one another, we will never know. We do know, however, by the way that their conniving is reflected in their writings, that they were rather sly. Isaac seems never to have been particularly good at mastering this kind of game, since he always comes up short. Stories that refer to him are namely edited but slightly, by inserting another patriarch's name here and there, and suddenly poor Isaac has been relegated to a supporting role only in his own story. In at least some of the incidental and formulaic references to the patriarchs scattered throughout the Old Testament, the trend towards the marginalisation and / or disempowerment of Isaac may be surmised too.

Such subtleties were not the only strategy of Isaac's competitors. At times some of his stories were blatantly taken over and retold with a new central character – another patriarch. Where identification with land was at stake, the going got even tougher: real estate wrangles can bring out the worst in people. Hence, the story of Isaac's young days, when he thought he had to lie about his wife just to stay alive, and which had come to be understood as Isaac's claim to the southernmost territories, was twice usurped. In time, thus, the land which had been associated with Isaac was, in a sense, nationalised. The Abramites / Abrahamites came to dominate the religious identity within Juda; the Jacobites / Israelites, their national identity. Isaac had become ensnared on all sides of his family by Abrahamites. This is shown sharply in Genesis 17 – a text embedded within strong religious connotations. Yet here, with the introduction of circumcision, Isaac is to a large extent cut from the picture. Even, or perhaps: precisely at a theological high point, the figure of Isaac is being ex-communicated.

The *coup de grace* was yet to come, however. This would be the final nail in the coffin of, if not the figure of Isaac, then certainly of his tradents, the Isaacites, rendering them as if forever the subordinates of the Abrahamites. In the Aqedah account, by clever formulation and editorial manipulation, the end product leaves the fourth century reader / hearer of this story in no doubt: Abraham is the prime patriarch, is so with divine sanction, and is the one who exercises control over the very life of Isaac.

This appalling tale then casts its pall across all of the other Isaac accounts. The shadow of death will forever now fall backwards, to cover almost every aspect of the

memories about Isaac's existence in Juda. The very fact that the Aqedah story is placed in the early beginnings of Israelite history, as understood at this time, and moreover casts Isaac as a youth, cannot but lead those who now encounter this tale to deduce implicitly that Isaac is forever in the debt, even at the mercy, of Abraham-and-God. All of the other Isaac references are now redefined, with the most extreme being possibly the "Fear of Isaac" divine appellation, which can from this negative perspective now also be understood anew, as no longer reflecting a numinous experience, but a genuinely fear-filled orientation toward the divine. Subjugated to God-and-Abraham, the Isaacites now know no fearlessness.

Taken from this vantage point, and reviewing all of the above, the story of Isaac in the Old Testament is thus now an account of him being written progressively out of both the texts and, therefore, history, and not of developing him into a position of greater status, namely as a patriarch (so Boase 2001:334). For Isaac, thus, the Pentateuch in particular is for the greatest part not "a story of beginnings", as Gooder (2000:2) would have it, but, rather:

the end.

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