



# "Let Ishmael Live Before You!" Finding a Place for Hagar's Son in the Priestly Tradition

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*“Let Ishmael Live Before You!”*  
*Finding a Place for Hagar’s Son in the Priestly Tradition*

A dissertation presented

by

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to

The Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations

in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
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**Abstract**

Since Julius Wellhausen’s synthesis of the Documentary Hypothesis—and no doubt owing in part to the Protestant Reformation—dominant portrayals of the Priestly material have described a self-interested legist with little or no concern for those outside the Levitical ranks. Though this negative characterization is recognized by some to be reductionist and misguided, none has undertaken to examine Ishmael’s critical role in what is better understood as a *universal* mode of thinking in P. Examining first the narratives that give indication of Ishmael’s status in J and E, I have contrasted Ishmael with the other non-chosen siblings of Genesis, concluding that he is favored in these sources in a way that the others are not; also, that Ishmael and his mother adumbrate not only the distress of Israel’s bondage in Egypt, but also their deliverance. With this background from J and E, I have sought to elucidate P’s relationship to these sources through its representation of Ishmael in the Abrahamic covenant. It appears that P has recast the promises that Ishmael receives in J and E so that Ishmael is more explicitly excluded from God’s covenant with Abraham, on the one hand; but P also identifies Ishmael with the blessing of fertility, invoking the divine injunction to all humanity through both Adam and Noah to “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen 17:20), on the other. P’s emphasis on fertility also relates to Ishmael’s own participation—though he is non-chosen—in circumcision as the sign of the covenant. Therefore P accounts for God’s

universal regard for humanity through Ishmael even in his particular covenant with Abraham.

I argue that even though Ishmael is not chosen, he nevertheless figures into P's larger theological outlook as one whom God favors outside the purview of the Abrahamic covenant. A correlative argument is that this new understanding of Ishmael gives him a more precise definition as a transitional figure between the universal covenant with Noah, on the one hand, and the particular covenant with Abraham on the other.

## Table of Contents

<b>Chapter One</b>	<b>1</b>
<i>Introduction</i>	
The problem of Hagar and Ishmael, and the question of the universal and the particular in P	
<b>Chapter Two</b>	<b>18</b>
<i>Patterns of Exodus: Hagar, Ishmael and Patriarchal Promise</i>	
The treatment of Hagar and Ishmael in J and E	
<b>Chapter Three</b>	<b>59</b>
<i>Particularity and Ambiguity in the Priestly Abrahamic Covenant</i>	
The use and adaptation of the Ishmael traditions in P	
<b>Chapter Four</b>	<b>90</b>
<i>Covenant and Context in P</i>	
The covenantal architecture of P and Ishmael's place therein	
<b>Chapter Five</b>	<b>137</b>
<i>Ishmael, Ishmaelites and Biblical Narrative</i>	
The Ishmaelites and their relationship to the biblical traditions of Ishmael	
<b>Chapter Six</b>	<b>169</b>
<i>Conclusion</i>	
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>176</b>

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For Abi  
בטח בה לב בעלה



## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

#### **I. The Nature of the Problem**

The intention of this study is to investigate the significance and function of Ishmael in the patriarchal traditions of Genesis, and particularly in those traditions reflected by the Priestly source (P). The expected conclusion is that Ishmael's role is, for P, much more than incidental, that he figures into P's larger theological outlook as a special representative of those non-elect whom God favors outside the purview of the Abrahamic covenant.<sup>1</sup>

The expression of P's version of the Abrahamic covenant in Genesis 17 warrants special consideration in a study of Ishmael because of its peculiar treatment of that non-elect son. Here, in contrast to the accounts of the Yahwist (J) or Elohist (E), there is no expulsion scene, nor any other hostility toward Ishmael. In fact, in P Ishmael remains on the horizon long enough to bury his father Abraham (Gen 25:9, 13–18), and has his own genealogy. It is perhaps most intriguing, though, that Ishmael enjoys very similar promises to those that the deity bestows on Abraham himself in the same passage (17:4–6). God assures Abraham that he will bless the patriarch's first offspring, that he will make that son fruitful and very numerous, that Ishmael will father twelve "chieftains" or "princes," and that God will make of Ishmael, too, a great nation (v. 20). The preceding line, verse 19, makes it clear that the divine covenant is with Isaac, yet the passage also

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<sup>1</sup> I am assuming as a tentative framework Joel Kaminsky's three levels of election in the Hebrew Bible: the elect, non-elect and anti-elect. One of his central points, to be tested here, is that divine favoritism does not necessitate alienation of the non-chosen from God or exclusion from his blessings (*Yet I Loved Jacob* [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007], esp. 16, 34).

explicitly mentions Ishmael's participation with Abraham in the sign of the covenant, circumcision, along with all the other males in Abraham's household. The question of Ishmael's status before God is thus ambiguous, and is especially at issue in the theology of P.

The curious relationship between Genesis 9 and 17, two P passages that describe covenants of God with Noah and Abraham, respectively, serves as the backdrop for this study: in the first of these two covenants, the terms are universally applied to Noah, his sons and their descendants, and even every living creature with them (9:9–10). According to the covenant established with Abraham, on the other hand, terms are only extended to this one individual and his seed—out of all of the descendants of Noah—and the seed that receives the covenant is restricted to that of the promised son, Isaac (17:19). The reader observes here a movement from the universal to the particular as the divine interests are narrowed or specified.

## **II. Previous Scholarship**

Previous research relating to this thesis may be considered primarily within two categories of inquiry: election in the Abrahamic cycle, and particularly in the Priestly source; and interpretations of Ishmael in the tradition of Genesis 17.

### ***On Universalism and Election in the Abrahamic Cycle and P***

The issue of God's favor for Isaac and (to some degree) Ishmael is part of a broader discussion of Abraham's own election, and bears also on the chosenness of

Israel. Therefore its relevance is not only for our understanding of the complexities of universalism in P specifically, but also for our reading of the Abrahamic Cycle.<sup>2</sup>

The point of departure for any consideration of Abraham's election is Gen 12:1–3, a J passage that details YHWH's promise to Abram that he will make of him a great nation, that he will be a blessing, and, ultimately, that in him all families of the earth will either “bless themselves” (through the use of Abraham's name as a positive example), or “be blessed” (נברכו).<sup>3</sup> What seems to be at stake is the scope of YHWH's favor, which extends primarily to Abraham and his descendants on the one hand, or to all the families of the earth on the other hand.

Both the Septuagint and the New Testament (Acts 3:25; Gal 3:8) understand that the nations are *blessed*, and it is not difficult to produce other interpretations that take Gen 12:3 to be the basis for Israel's role as mediator of blessing to the world.<sup>4</sup> Two scholars in particular, Gerhard von Rad and Hans Walter Wolff, understood this text to be the Yahwist's point of connection between the primeval and patriarchal stories, and, ultimately, the joining of *Heilsgeschichte*—the particular history of Israel and God's promises to them—with broader human history.<sup>5</sup> The Tower of Babel ends without grace

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<sup>2</sup> On “chosenness” and “universalism,” see Jon D. Levenson, “The Universal Horizon of Biblical Particularism,” in *Ethnicity and the Bible* (ed. M. G. Brett; Leiden: Brill, 1996), 143–69.

<sup>3</sup> The construction in Gen 12:3 is *niphal*, as also in Gen 18:18 and 28:14; other instances, however, including Gen 22:18 and 26:4, are *hithpael*, leading many to translate the verses differently, and to render 12:3 in particular as “be blessed.” There are other verbs, however, for which the *niphal* and *hithpael* stems can be interchanged, which suggests that “bless themselves” is also a possibility for Gen 12:3.

<sup>4</sup> For a list of recent studies, see Keith N. Grüneberg, *Abraham, Blessing and the Nations* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2003), 2 (n. 8). Other similar passages include Gen 18:18, 22:18, 26:4 and 28:14.

<sup>5</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *The Problem of the Hexateuch and other Essays* (London: Oliver & Boyd, 1966), 65–67; *Old Testament Theology* (vol. 1; Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1962), 161–65;

(11:7–9), says von Rad, and so the Yahwist takes up in chapter 12 the main question that the primeval history raises, that of the further relationship between God and the nations.<sup>6</sup> (The Priestly school’s coordination of primeval history and patriarchal history, by contrast, has received less attention; I will return to this below.)

Other commentators following Rashi, however, have recognized the compelling evidence that the families of the earth are merely blessing themselves by invoking Abraham (12:3)—an idiomatic means of demonstrating the greatness that God would bestow upon the patriarch.<sup>7</sup> This second reading, if correct, would seem to diminish the scope of YHWH’s Abrahamic project, making Abraham the primary beneficiary of any real blessing. Jon D. Levenson has found other indications, however, that the idea that Abraham’s blessing was also for the benefit of the nations was intact in Late Antiquity and has relevance for the biblical text itself.<sup>8</sup> For example, *Gen. Rab.* 39:12 enumerates several cases of Gentiles who are blessed because of the Jews: Joseph’s Egyptian pharaoh, Daniel’s Babylonian king, and Esther’s Persian king. In these instances, Gentiles are delivered from destruction or otherwise benefit through the agency of Abraham’s descendants.

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*Genesis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 155-56; H. W. Wolff, “The Kerygma of the Yahwist,” *Int* 20 (1966): 138-40.

<sup>6</sup> Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 1:163-64.

<sup>7</sup> See the list of studies in Grüneberg, 2 (n. 11); cf. the JPS: “And all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you” (12:3b). Rashi cites the similar example of Ephraim and Manasseh (Gen 48:20), whose names also serve as bywords of blessing, and R. W. Moberly (*The Theology of the Book of Genesis* [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2009] 152-53) includes Zech 8:13 as another positive instance, and Jer 24:8–9 and 29:21–23 as negative instances of the construction.

<sup>8</sup> Jon D. Levenson, “Jews and Christians as Abrahamic Communities” (2010 Hay of Seaton lecture, University of Aberdeen, February 2, 2010), 17-19.

I would add to this several attestations of the same pattern in the Abrahamic cycle itself. There we have, first, Abraham's nephew and associate, Lot, receiving the Jordan plain, a land "like the garden of YHWH" (Gen 13:10); and Abraham later delivers Lot and others from Chedorlaomer and his coalition of kings (14:14–16). As a member of Abraham's family, the person of Lot may not be quite "the nations," perhaps, but it should not be overlooked that he is to become the ancestor of the Moabites and Ammonites (Gen 19:37–38). Just as significantly for the story of Abraham, the patriarch's benevolence devolves upon Lot even though he is not to become the all-important heir.

Moreover, after Abraham's rescue of Lot, Abraham gives "one tenth of everything" to Melchizedek (Gen 14:20) and forswears, on the basis of his oath to YHWH, any goods from the king of Sodom (vv. 21-24); Abraham negotiates with God on behalf of Sodom (ch. 18); God rescues Lot *because of Abraham* (19:29 [P]); and Abraham pays Ephron the Hittite the liberal sum of 400 silver shekels (ch. 23). It is in this context that God shows compassion to Hagar and Ishmael (chs. 16 and 21), and promises Abraham that Ishmael would enjoy generous blessings (17:20 [P]).<sup>9</sup> It appears that P's presentation of Ishmael in Genesis 17 fits very well within the greater cycle, which raises questions about source redaction.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, the idea that there is a trajectory in the Hebrew Bible toward salvation or blessing for the world, whether through the Abrahamic tradition or other

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<sup>9</sup> Levenson (ibid, 18-19) notes the connection made by Abarbanel between Abraham's journeys, imparted in God's initial command to go (Gen 12:1), and the blessing that encompasses all the world (v. 3).

<sup>10</sup> See Jean-Louis Ska, "Quelques remarques sur Pg et la dernière rédaction du pentateuque," in *Le Pentateuque en question* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1989), 95-125; Sean McEvenue, *The Narrative Style of the Priestly Writer* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1971), 149-55.

texts, hardly represents a consensus. For many, such a theme is excluded especially in P. Harry Orlinsky, referring to the Priestly element that controlled Judah in the post-exilic period, roundly dismisses the notion that this school had any concern for the interests of the Gentiles:

[This group] manifested. . . narrow political, social, and cultural views, an attitude of superiority toward the nonclerical elements of the population, the kind of arrogance that comes from a belief that the priestly authority derives directly and exclusively from God himself, a ready reinterpretation and rewriting of history and law codes to provide antiquity and justification for what is really but contemporaneously priestly innovation and revision. . . There was no universalistic—not to speak of internationalistic—ideology present in the priestly outlook. . . [but rather a] vigorously nationalistic attitude toward non-Judeans, precisely the attitude against which the authors of Ruth and Jonah wrote so forthrightly and eloquently.<sup>11</sup>

Negative evaluations of the priesthood go back at least to the Protestant Reformation with its belief in the priesthood of all believers, and Julius Wellhausen most famously besmirched the Priestly source in his *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*. He writes,

The law is the key to the understanding even of the narrative of the Priestly Code. All the distinctive peculiarities of the work are connected with the influence of the law: everywhere we hear the voice of theory, rule, judgment. What was said above of the cultus may be repeated word for word of the legend: in the early time it may be likened to the green tree which grows out of the ground as it will and can; at a later time it is dry wood that is cut and made to a pattern with compass and square. . . What great genius was needed to transform the temple into a portable tent? What sort of creative power is that which brings forth nothing but numbers and names?<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Harry M. Orlinsky, “Nationalism-Universalism and Internationalism in Ancient Israel,” in *Translating and Understanding the Old Testament: Essays in Honor of H. G. May* (ed. H. T. Frank and W. L. Reed; New York: Abingdon Press, 1970), 222-23.

<sup>12</sup> Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* (Edinburgh: Adam & Charles Black, 1885; repr., Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), 361; cf. 509 (reprinted in the English translation of *Prolegomena*, but originally from the 9<sup>th</sup> edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* [1881]).

Walter Eichrodt's *Theology of the Old Testament*, then, sounds a familiar note: "A rapid florescence of the Priestly class . . . [causes it] to separate itself from the community at large, and become a caste. . . and proving instead of a mediator more of a hindrance to direct intercourse with God."<sup>13</sup> Von Rad concedes that the Priestly document also contains an element of the tradition that one finds in J, which joins Abraham's call with a universal extension of God's salvation beyond Israel (Gen 12:3); "P's real theological interest," nevertheless, "is much more in the inner circle of Israel's cultic regulations."<sup>14</sup> It is apparently for some similar reason, at least in part, that Michael Fox assesses the tradition-history of Gen 17:2–6 (P), which details God's promise to Abraham that he would become ancestor to a *multitude of nations*, to be an ancient posterity promise of the Abrahamic tribes, but not original to the Priestly school: "for P has little interest in foreign nations."<sup>15</sup> Similarly, James Kugel, in a section of his book entitled "A Cold and Indifferent God," comments on the theological perspective of P. Kugel speaks for many who understand P to possess "the most chilling conception of the deity" because of P's rather impersonal representation of God—a deity who does not speak to Moses in the first person in the Priestly part of Leviticus, does not *personally* forgive or punish, and for whom prayers are unnecessary and festive hymns without practical effect: He is a

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<sup>13</sup> Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (2 vols.; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), 1:405; also 2:315, 2:442; see also Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (2 vols.; New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 1:259-60.

<sup>14</sup> Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis*, 195.

<sup>15</sup> Michael V. Fox, "The Sign of the Covenant: Circumcision in Light of the Priestly *ô*t Etiologies." *RB* 81 (1974): 589.

God “enthroned in splendid isolation.”<sup>16</sup> The implications are significant for P’s theology:

[T]his divine presentness was the only reality that counted, and his priestly gaze never contemplated anything beyond the temple precincts and their immediate environs; even the rest of the land of Israel existed only insofar as it supplied tithes and produce and pilgrims to the temple. As for other nations, they did not play any significant role in P’s thinking.<sup>17</sup>

These appraisals are overstated at best, though, and fail to take into account important elements of anthropological and literary contexts. It is certainly the case that many of the Priestly regulations reflect self-interest; yet self-protective measures are employed in every professional vocation down to the present day.<sup>18</sup> Joseph Blenkinsopp urges a reconsideration of P’s “legalism” and “ritualism” in light of our better understanding of the societal functions of such,<sup>19</sup> and insists that the priest-author actually exhibits a universalist point of view not found in other parts of the Pentateuch, notably Deuteronomy.<sup>20</sup> He cites as evidence P’s responsibility for the creation narrative of Gen 1:1–2:4a, including the rather egalitarian declaration of the *imago Dei* (vv. 26–27), as well as the covenant between God and all humanity by extension through Noah

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<sup>16</sup> James Kugel, *How to Read the Bible* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 305-06.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 312.

<sup>18</sup> Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Sage, Priest and Prophet* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 67.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*; cited is cultural anthropologist Mary Douglas, whose research in ritual law bears directly in some cases on Priestly writings. See *idem*, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966); *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975); “The Forbidden Animals in Leviticus,” *JSOT* 59 (1993): 3-23; also, Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, cf. Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School* (repr., Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1992), 179-89.



(Gen 9:1–17), whence the rabbinic tradition of the seven Noahide laws.<sup>21</sup> Joel Kaminsky also adduces such data in his claim that P manifests one of the deepest expressions of biblical universalism, adding that the universal outlook comes as a *result* of P’s unique sense of Israel’s election, and not in spite of it; that is, in P, Israel’s chosenness leads to the mediation of God’s blessing to others.<sup>22</sup> If so, P’s theology would seem to be aligned with the common interpretations of Gen 12:1–3 attributed to the earlier J source. Further investigation is called for in this case.

### ***On Ishmael and the Abrahamic Covenant***

A second part of Genesis 12 has some bearing on our investigation. According to verse 7, YHWH promises to give the land (Canaan) to Abram’s unspecified seed. Jean-Louis Ska, describing the two main themes of land and posterity in the story of Abraham, underscores the repeated emphasis of the land promise for Abraham’s *posterity* rather than for the patriarch himself.<sup>23</sup> The point is not that Abraham is never mentioned as a recipient of the land, but rather “that the very first promise of the land is destined for the patriarch’s posterity and not for Abraham himself.”<sup>24</sup> For Ska, the question becomes which of Abraham’s seed will become *the* heir.

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<sup>21</sup> See *Sanh.* 56a.

<sup>22</sup> Kaminsky, *Yet I Loved*, 95-99.

<sup>23</sup> Jean-Louis Ska, *The Exegesis of the Pentateuch* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 28-30.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 30. Ska notes that “posterity” is mentioned in 12:7, 13:15, 15:18, 17:8 and 24:7. Abraham, on the other hand, is specifically mentioned as a recipient in 13:15, 15:7 and 17:8.

Several candidates are presented throughout the Abraham cycle, and each is turned away before Sarah's son, Isaac, is established as the son of the promise.<sup>25</sup> Lot parts ways with the family of Abraham in chapter 13; and Eliezer of Damascus comes into question in 15:2–3, only to be rejected by YHWH himself in verse 4. Then Abraham bears a son through Hagar at the suggestion of his wife Sarah, no less. But this one, too, is not the son of promise (17:18–20; 21:8–21). The true inheritor of the land will be Isaac, born finally in Gen 21:1–7. After this, as Ska explains, the last chapters of the Abraham cycle (chs. 22–25) will “make explicit with all the needed clarity to which posterity the land to which Abraham came to settle in will belong.”<sup>26</sup>

Ska's exposition, which is typical of so many interpreters, may be true enough, but this account of the Abrahamic cycle does not give sufficient attention, in my view, to the emphasis given to Hagar's son. He is, after all, Abraham's own “issue” יֵצֵא מִמֶּעֶיךָ, in the language used by YHWH himself (Gen 15:4). It may be the case that Ishmael is only one out of a list of rejected heirs to YHWH's covenant with Abraham, but I will argue that he is more than the first runner-up, and that there are some important differences between the passages that relate to Ishmael and those that describe the other potential heirs.

It is telling that Ska's brief summary of the end of the Abrahamic cycle skips from the narrative of Isaac's birth in Gen 21:1–7 to his near sacrifice in Gen 22:1–19, leaving out the expansive narrative of Ishmael's own near death in 21:8–21. Ishmael's story is largely neglected, in my view, not only by readers of P but by those who study

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<sup>25</sup> See Larry Helyer, “The Separation of Abram and Lot: Its Significance in the Patriarchal Narratives,” *JSOT* 26 (1983): 77-88.

<sup>26</sup> Ska, *Exegesis*, 31.

the Abrahamic Cycle as a whole. One obvious reason for this, I would argue, is that he is unclaimed by the two major religious traditions that dominate biblical scholarship, Judaism and Christianity. Here I wish to point out that Ishmael has an important role to play in the whole of the Abrahamic cycle. But more than that, he has a critical function in the Priestly covenantal architecture.

The studies of Blenkinsopp and Kaminsky signal a growing awareness of P's concern for others; nevertheless, that so few have acknowledged this aspect of the source is reflected in the vast commentary on Abraham's covenant in Genesis 17, which, on the whole, allows little consideration of the possible connection with Priestly universalism, and even less of Ishmael's function within such a program. Ishmael is most often treated as Isaac's foil in the service of Abraham's domestic testing, it seems, and as an incidental figure in the subplot of Hagar the Egyptian handmaid.<sup>27</sup> Those who do examine the question of Ishmael's role in the covenant of chapter 17 are flummoxed: Hermann Gunkel declares that P has erred by having Ishmael circumcised since he is supposed to be excluded from the covenant;<sup>28</sup> Bruce Vawter concludes that the *בריתי* found in verse 19, naming Isaac as the express recipient, is of a different kind from the covenant of circumcision that is found elsewhere in the chapter and includes Ishmael;<sup>29</sup> and Christopher Heard proposes that the circumcision of Ishmael may be, paradoxically,

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<sup>27</sup> E.g., only limited analysis, if any, of Ishmael's function in the covenant is provided in the treatments of Robert Davidson, *Genesis 12–50* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1979); von Rad, *Genesis*; J. Alberto Soggin, *Das Buch Genesis* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1997); Ephraim A. Speiser, *Genesis* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1964); Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*; and Walther Zimmerli, *1 Mose 12–25: Abraham* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1976).

<sup>28</sup> Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis* (Macon: Mercer Univ. Press, 1997), 267.

<sup>29</sup> Bruce Vawter, *On Genesis* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1977), 224.

Abraham's attempt to circumvent Ishmael's exclusion through meticulous observance of the covenant's stipulation (v. 13).<sup>30</sup> It is finally in the study of Gerald Janzen that one finds a movement toward a principal desideratum for the present thesis:

[Chapter 17] belongs to the Priestly tradition, which gave us the Creation story in 1:1-2:4a and the story of the covenant through Noah in 9:8-17. If the first two stories are universal, including all humankind and indicating the general human vocation on earth before God, this story focuses on the community of Abram as distinguished from all other peoples by circumcision (17:14). The question arises: What is the relation between the universal human vocation to be God's image on earth (1:26-28) and the particular vocation that comes through Abraham? The tension at the end of ch. 16 becomes the context for the treatment of this larger question in ch. 17.<sup>31</sup>

Commenting on Ishmael, Janzen points out that the universal vocation prescribed in Gen 1:28—"God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply'"—is most fully reiterated to *this* son (17:20); and that the same verse precisely echoes God's promise to Abraham (12:2), "I will make of him a great nation," again with reference only to Ishmael.<sup>32</sup> Blenkinsopp also discusses Ishmael's importance in P's covenant, implying that Gen 17:15-22 may have been added to underscore what would otherwise have been ambiguous, Isaac's ascendancy over the line of Ishmael.<sup>33</sup>

Two other works are directly relevant to a study of Ishmael and election:

Levenson's *Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son* and Kaminsky's *Yet I Loved*

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<sup>30</sup> R. Christopher Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001), 77.

<sup>31</sup> J. Gerald Janzen, *Abraham and All the Families of the Earth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 47-48.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 52. Walter Brueggemann ("The Kerygma of the Priestly Writers," *ZAW* 84 [1972]: 400, 404) identifies Gen 1:28 as a focus for understanding the kerygma of the entire Priestly tradition. In contrast with Janzen, however, Brueggemann perhaps overemphasizes the priority of Isaac over Ishmael in 17:20.

<sup>33</sup> Joseph Blenkinsopp, "Abraham as Paradigm in the Priestly History in Genesis," *JBL* 128 (2009): 237-38.

*Jacob*.<sup>34</sup> Levenson draws attention to several characteristic features of the first-born son, including a near death experience and servant-rulership, both of which correlate significantly to Ishmael; Levenson also highlights various features of Ishmael's narratives that parallel those of two of the primary elect sons in Genesis, Isaac and Joseph. From my point of view, there is a remaining need to explain Ishmael's ambiguous status as an elect or non-elect son who, though explicitly excluded from the covenant in Gen 17:19, nevertheless bears at least some of the characteristic markings of chosenness.

Kaminsky's work is very useful in this respect. According to his comparison of a number of examples of the non-elect, particularly from among the siblings mentioned in Genesis, divine favoritism toward an elect individual does not necessitate alienation of the non-elect counterpart from God. Kaminsky gives Ishmael as an illustration that there are *degrees* among the non-elect, that some non-elect are closer to the elect than others, and even receive promises of special divine blessing.<sup>35</sup> One concern with Kaminsky's assessment is that Ishmael appears to be the best and perhaps only real example of the non-elect receiving substantial divine blessing, at least from among the Genesis siblings in his study.<sup>36</sup> Is it the case that Ishmael is representative of the non-elect, so that we may extrapolate principles about biblical non-election from his situation? Or is this son of Abraham somehow special in his own right, *sui generis* among the non-elect, if that is indeed what he is? Does P have some other theological purpose for Ishmael, one that

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<sup>34</sup> Jon D. Levenson, *Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1993); Kaminsky, *op. cit.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 34-35.

<sup>36</sup> Cf., however, Gen 27:39-40.

does not include his expulsion but does include promises shared with Abraham? This is an open question that calls for further study.

### III. Rationale for this Thesis

Implicit in the examples of scholarship cited above is the need for a more thorough treatment of Ishmael in the Abrahamic cycle and particularly in the covenant of Genesis 17. There are indications that Ishmael may be of more central importance than commentators have often realized, and it seems likely that his function in P may be related to a kind of universal outlook that has been only recently acknowledged, though perhaps still not fully understood. If so, this subject could have significant implications for our comprehension of P's use of sources in the Abrahamic cycle, and may result also in a better perspective on P's covenantal landscape.

With respect to dating and sequence of sources, this study proceeds with the assumptions that the Priestly traditions are, in fact, predominantly pre-exilic,<sup>37</sup> and that P

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<sup>37</sup> Those who defend an early date for P cite the ample evidence of priests and priesthoods from early periods elsewhere in the ancient Near East. These other priesthoods and their texts include some parallel uses of technical terms and concepts found also in Israelite Priestly texts, terms that have been shown to antedate, linguistically, similar technical vocabulary of the exilic priest and prophet Ezekiel. Some argue also that Ezekiel and Jeremiah, prophesying just before the Babylonian exile, seem to exhibit a detailed awareness of some of P's laws, suggesting a pre-exilic date. Others have insisted recently that D knew P and depended on some of P's legislation for his own laws, indicating—again—a pre-exilic date. See James Kugel, *How to Read*, 302-03. Proponents of an early date for P include Yehezkel Kaufmann (*The Religion of Israel* [New York: Schocken, 1972], 175-200); Thomas Krapf (*Die Priesterschrift und die Vorexilische Zeit* [Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1992], 3-66); Moshe Weinfeld (*The Place of the Law in the Religion of Ancient Israel* SVT 100 [Leiden: Brill, 2004]); Avi Hurvitz ("The Evidence of Language in Dating the Priestly Code," *RB* 81 [1974]: 24-56; idem, *A Linguistic Study of the Relationship Between the Priestly Source and the Book of Ezekiel* [Paris: Gabalda, 1982]; and idem, "Dating the Priestly Source in Light of the Historical Study of Biblical Hebrew a Century after Wellhausen," *ZAW* 100 [1988]: 88-100); Ziony Zevit ("Converging Lines of Evidence Bearing on the Date of P," *ZAW* 94 [1982]: 481-511); Jacob Milgrom (*Leviticus 1-16* [AB; Garden City: Doubleday, 1991], 3-35). On D's possible awareness of and use of P, see William

is writing after the formation of the Hagar-Ishmael traditions represented in Gen 16:1–2, 4–14 (J) and 21:8–21 (E).<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, the observations made here are not dependent, for the most part, on these preconceptions, and much of what I conclude could be applied with profit also to other conceptions of the biblical sources.

#### IV. Organization

##### *Ishmael in the Abrahamic Cycle*

Using a comparative approach, I begin by demonstrating Ishmael's prominence throughout the Abraham narratives. First, I compare Ishmael and the other non-elect counterparts in the sibling narratives of Genesis.<sup>39</sup> In addition to Ishmael's characteristic features of election including a near-death experience and servant-rulership, as well as his narrative parallels with the elect sons Isaac and Joseph, I note here that Ishmael's mother Hagar is privileged with a form of birth annunciation (Gen 16:10–12) that puts her in the elite and elect company of Sarah (Gen 18), Rebekah (Gen 25:22–23), Manoah's wife

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L. Moran ("The Literary Connection Between Lev. 11:13–19 and Deut. 14:12–18," *CBQ* 28 [1966]: 271–277); Jacob Milgrom (*Cult and Conscience* [Leiden: Brill, 1976], 9–12); and Sara Japhet ("The Laws of Manumission of Slaves and the Question of the Relationship Between the Collection of Laws in the Pentateuch," in *Studies in Bible and the Ancient Near East* [Jerusalem: Magnes, 1978]).

<sup>38</sup> This traditional model has been questioned in the last several decades following the publications of John Van Seters (*Abraham in History and Tradition* [New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1975]; idem, *The Life of Moses: The Yahwist as Historian in Exodus-Numbers* [Louisville: Westminster, 1994]); Hans Heinrich Schmid (*Der sogenannte Jahwist* [Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1976]); Rolf Rendtorff (*The Problem of the Process of Transmission in the Pentateuch* [JSOTSup 89; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990]); Erhard Blum (*Die Komposition der Vätergeschichte* [Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1983]; idem, *Studien zur Komposition des Pentateuch* [BZAW 189; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1990]); Joseph Blenkinsopp (*The Pentateuch: An Introduction to the First Five Books of the Bible* [New York: Doubleday, 1992]); and others. One problem with those models that ascribe the consolidation of these traditions to a Deuteronomistic (or later) editor is that much of the patriarchal material involves the foundation of independent cultic sites, a feature that is inconsistent with any Deuteronomistic hand, to say the least. See John Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 62–63.

<sup>39</sup> Here I draw significantly on the works of Levenson (*Death*) and Kaminsky (*Yet I Loved*).

(Judg 13:9–11), and Hannah (1 Samuel 1), whose sons all constitute some of the leading figures of the biblical stories.<sup>40</sup> Going further, Hagar is the only woman—indeed, the only person apart from the patriarchs themselves—to experience a theophany in the patriarchal narratives.

### ***Ishmael and the Abrahamic Covenant***

Having considered the prominence of Ishmael within the Abrahamic cycle overall, I focus next on the question of Ishmael within the specific context of Genesis 17. With so many data to consider, the chapter will require a thorough exegetical treatment. Issues to examine include the following: (1) Abraham’s fate to be the “ancestor of a *multitude of nations*” and the resulting name change (vv 2–6); (2) The related concern regarding God’s establishment of an everlasting covenant with Abraham and his זרע after him (v 7), which is apparently the same זרע that will inherit the land of Canaan (v 8); (3) The emphasis on circumcision as the sign of the covenant (vv 10–14) juxtaposed with a matching emphasis on Ishmael’s own circumcision (vv 23–27); (4) Abraham’s plea that Ishmael would יחיה לפניך and God’s response, including a very generous concession (v 18–20).

I will include here a discussion of the relationship between P and his sources and antecedents (J, E, etc.) in an attempt to determine the extent to which P has reworked them, if at all; and if so, what is the overall effect.<sup>41</sup> This will necessitate some further

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<sup>40</sup> Cf. also Ex 2:1–10.

<sup>41</sup> See n. 10. This investigation will focus primarily on narrative material of P in Genesis, but may have implications for the rest of P.



consideration and discussion of the structure of the Abrahamic cycle. A tentative explanation of P's intention for Ishmael will be suggested at this point.

### ***Ishmael's Place in the Priestly Covenantal Structure***

If I have made progress in defining the function of Ishmael in P and the underlying motivation for this school, the final objective will be to describe P's comprehensive covenantal architecture. I am interested particularly in the relationship between the covenants of Genesis 17 and Genesis 9, both of which seem to prioritize some kind of concern for those outside of Israel. How do these passages fit together, and what is the overall covenantal structure within P? Does P have his own theology of a distinctive covenant for Israel? Does the Abrahamic covenant "nest" within the Noachic covenant, and does the covenant with Phinehas (Num 25) fit, in turn, within the Abrahamic covenant according to P?

### ***Ishmael in Israelite History and Tradition***

Finally, in order to address more fully the motivation underlying P's concern for Ishmael, I will survey the available ethnographic and archaeological data pertaining to the identity of the Ishmaelite groups in the various stages of Israel's history. From all appearances, the broader biblical and extrabiblical data present a group of Ishmaelites in the first millennium whose influence over the Levant is considerable. The question is whether P has a specific geopolitical basis for its representation of Ishmael, or only regards Ishmael in an antiquarian or notional sense, so that historical parallels between the Ishmael of Genesis 17 and the contemporary groups of P's era are not to be found.

**Chapter 2**  
**Patterns of Exodus**  
**in the Hagar and Ishmael**  
**Traditions of J and E**

**I.**

My task for this chapter is to survey the narratives and episodes that give indication of Ishmael's status outside of P, namely those found in J and E. Two principal questions emerge. First, to what extent may we compare Ishmael to his other non-chosen counterparts (described primarily through J accounts in Genesis)? It may be obvious at the outset that Ishmael's status and favor are more ambiguous than some of the others', but here I will seek to determine with as much precision as possible Ishmael's position in relation to figures like Cain, Ham, Lot and Esau. My contention is that the differences between these hapless individuals and Ishmael are greater than their affinities, and that Ishmael is quite clearly favored in these texts in a way that the others are not, even if he is not chosen.

Secondly, having established that the Hagar and Ishmael accounts exhibit many indications of Ishmael's favor—including Jon Levenson's features of the "beloved son"<sup>42</sup>—we consider how these two figures bear on Joseph's cycle of humiliation and exaltation by testing the conclusions offered by Levenson and Phyllis Tribble. Tribble contends that the miserable experiences of Hagar and Ishmael are best understood as a negative inversion of Israel's emancipation in the exodus. It is proposed here instead that

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<sup>42</sup> See Jon D. Levenson, *Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1993), 82-110.

Hagar and Ishmael not only anticipate the distress of Israel's bondage in Egypt, but also their deliverance. In this way they provide the basis for a pattern that is recapitulated first through Joseph, and finally in Israel's bondage and exodus. In Levenson's view, the story of Hagar's flight to the desert in chapter 16 is fundamentally different from Israel's desert wanderings in that she is instructed to return to the oppression of her mistress, whereas Israel is freed from bondage to Pharaoh and eventually led into Canaan. The patriarchal promise to Abram applies to Hagar and Ishmael only in a secondary way: Hagar faces servitude, but Ishmael thrives, yet outside the land promised to Abram. My conclusion differs primarily by comparing Hagar's continuing oppression not with Israel's exodus, but rather with YHWH's announcement to Abram that his descendants would be oppressed for four hundred years in a land that is not theirs (Gen 15:13). For both Abram and Hagar, comforting promises will be mediated through their own innumerable progenies (Gen 15:4–5; 16:10 [both J]).<sup>43</sup> My argument is that the experience of Hagar and Ishmael provides something of a parallel to that of Israel according to the narratives of J and E. We turn first of all to our comparison of Ishmael's non-chosen counterparts in Genesis.

## II.

It is typical of the non-elect siblings and family members that they have some great moral failure or shortcoming,<sup>44</sup> occasionally as a response to the inequity of

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<sup>43</sup> We must be careful to note, as Levenson reminds me, that Hagar and Ishmael do not participate in any sense in the land promises to Abram in Gen 15:18–21. In fact, Isaac is unique among the patriarchs in that he *does not leave* the Promised Land at any point, even to find a wife (see esp. Gen 24:1–8; 26:1–6).

<sup>44</sup> The term “non-elect” in this usage derives from Joel Kaminsky (*Yet I Loved Jacob* [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007], 121–36).

another's favor from God or a parent. On the whole, they are negative examples, miscreant foils for the chosen or favored sons of Israel's patriarchal stories. Often "foolish" in the proverbial sense of Israelite Wisdom, in many instances they provide case studies of what not to do when confronted with the inequities of God's favor. The point is not that the favored siblings are faultless. Their foibles and transgressions are patent; rather, the non-elect often seem to justify disqualification, even if their misdeeds are committed *ex post facto*.

### Cain

In the first instance, though we are not told explicitly why,<sup>45</sup> it is reported in J that YHWH did not have regard for Cain or his offering (Gen 4:5). "Why are you angry," asks YHWH, "and why has your face fallen? If you do right—uplift; but if you do not do right—sin is lurking at your door; its desire is for you, but you must master it" (vv. 6–7). The notion that good conduct results in exaltation, not dejection, is a wisdom motif,<sup>46</sup> and the instruction underlines the exemplary nature of the passage, whether or not it derives from a wisdom school.<sup>47</sup> It is worth noticing also that YHWH condescends to advise Cain. As Gerhard von Rad indicates, "Cain was not completely rejected even though his sacrifice was not accepted."<sup>48</sup> That is to say, Cain may not have been regarded, but he is not *disregarded*. YHWH has an interest in Cain and his doings: in fact, Cain is the real

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<sup>45</sup> See the discussion in Levenson, *Death*, 71-74.

<sup>46</sup> See Ephraim A. Speiser, *Genesis* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1964), 33.

<sup>47</sup> Recognizing here, of course, that "wisdom language does not constitute wisdom [literature]." Roland Murphy, "Assumptions and Problems in Old Testament Wisdom Research," *CBQ* 29 (1967): 410; cf. James L. Crenshaw, "Method in Determining Wisdom Influence upon 'Historical' Literature," *JBL* 88 (1969): 129-42.

<sup>48</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 101.

focus of a narrative that aims to present a message primarily through his failings and not Abel's success. The terse narrative makes it plain that Cain rejects the all-important instruction, and responds instead by luring Abel to his death. So the first disfavored son fails to achieve favor through the murder of Abel, and the elect status passes instead to Seth, who stands in as Abel's replacement (v. 25).<sup>49</sup>

## Ham

Next, Genesis 9:18 (J) informs us that the sons of Noah who went out of the ark were Shem, Ham, and Japheth, and that Ham was, incidentally, the father of Canaan. From these three sons, according to verse 19, all the earth was populated. Following this brief notice, the text describes to some degree the episode of Noah's drunkenness, and that Ham—the father of Canaan—saw his father's nakedness and told his two brothers outside (v. 22). It seems most likely that Ham has been inserted into an older version of the story in order to give a more international account in keeping with chapter 10;<sup>50</sup> regardless of the reconstruction of details, however, the main point of the narrative as it stands is given clearly in verses 24–27: some offense has been committed against Noah and Canaan is to bear the punitive curse. A midrash in *Gen. Rab.* 36:2 does not miss the implication that Canaan is the “source of degradation.” And Ibn Ezra is attentive to what is undoubtedly the central function of the passage: “the episode was recorded to show that the descendants of the Canaanites. . . were already cursed since the days of Noah.”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> See Kaminsky, *Yet I Loved*, 25.

<sup>50</sup> Von Rad, *Genesis*, 132.

<sup>51</sup> Translation by Meir Zlotowitz, *Bereishis I(a)* (Brooklyn: Mesorah, 2002), 299.

Heritage and blessing are at stake in Genesis 9. Ham and Canaan, Israel's chief competitor, are ineligible as a result of the evil deed.

## Lot

In another J passage, Genesis 13, Lot is a figure for whom the issues of God's favor and Abram's patrimony are ambiguous, particularly to Abram.<sup>52</sup> It is significant that Lot does not defer to Abram when faced with the land crisis over grazing rights; instead, looking to the well-watered "whole plain" (כל כנר) of the Jordan, Lot chooses for himself that region and journeys eastward (v. 10). In its typical style, the narrative omits commentary but leaves evaluation to the reader. That questions of inheritance and blessing are in view is confirmed by YHWH's response to Abram after the affair: "Lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are. . . for all the land that you see, I'll give it to you and to your *offspring* forever [emphasis mine]" (vv. 14–15). Lot is Abram's closest kin, to be sure, but he is not his offspring, and thus Lot is revealed to be outside of God's covenant with Abram. The land crisis appears to function here as a kind of litmus test for Lot's status.

Other observations from the career of Lot as it is depicted in J also suggest that he is unfit. In chapter 19, Lot plays host to the two angels who come to Sodom. It is a laudable act in itself, but Lot is much less successful in his hospitality than Abram in chapter 18 (also J). After rescuing their host, the angel-men strike the aggressors with blindness and take control in Lot's own household (vv. 10–12). As Lot attempts to gather his sons-in-law at the suggestion of the angels, he is "like a joker (מצחק) in [their] eyes"

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<sup>52</sup> See Larry Helyer, "The Separation of Abram and Lot: Its Significance in the Patriarchal Narratives," *JSOT* 26 (1983): 82.

(v. 14).<sup>53</sup> And when the angels finally urge Lot to leave with his wife and daughters, he delays, making it necessary for the angels to lead Lot and his family out by hand (vv. 15–16). Lot’s character engenders sympathy, but the narrative presents “a man whose decisions and acts are only half formed.”<sup>54</sup> It appears that J is employing wisdom tropes once again, as in chapter 3, to juxtapose the foolish actions of Lot with the skillful and decisively wise actions of Abram. The result is a justification of Abram’s position and the privilege of his offspring over Lot.

One might add to this that God’s judgment against Sodom and its environs should be read in part as an indictment against Lot for his choice in chapter 13 of the lush plain, which turns out to be undesirable in relation to the hill country. “Escape for your life,” Lot is told; “Don’t look behind. . . and don’t stop in all of the plain (בְּכָל הַכְּכַר). Escape to the mountain lest you be swept away” (19:17). Then YHWH rains brimstone and fire on Sodom and Gomorrah and overturns the cities and all of the plain (כָּל הַכְּכַר), and all the residents of the cities, and, to parallel the verdant well-watered imagery of chapter 13, “what sprouted on the ground” (vv. 24–25). After this, “Abram rose early in the morning”—as is his tendency when potential heirs are nearly sacrificed<sup>55</sup>—and beholds the landscape of Sodom and Gomorrah and, once again, all the face of the land of the plain (כָּל פְּנֵי אֶרֶץ הַכְּכַר), with the smoke of the land rising like the smoke of a furnace

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<sup>53</sup> Thus anticipating the foolish laughter that characterizes other prominent scenes in J: Sarah’s response to the angel’s birth announcement of Isaac (Gen 18:12–15), the “sporting” or “Isaacing” of Ishmael (21:9), and Isaac’s sexual play with Rebekah (26:8). Cf. also Abraham’s laughter (17:17 [P]) and Sarah’s joy (21:6 [E]).

<sup>54</sup> Von Rad, *Genesis*, 214.

<sup>55</sup> The immolation of Sodom and the plain is suggestive; cf. Gen 19:27 (J) with 21:14 and 22:3, both attributed traditionally to E.

(19:27–28). The scene finalizes Lot’s elimination and provides for the reader of J an affirmation of what had been promised earlier to Abram.

After this, Lot leaves Zoar, because of his fear, and resides with his two daughters in a cave in the *mountain*—a pathetic resolution to his choice of the lush plain.<sup>56</sup> In the end, Lot’s descendants the Moabites and Ammonites share in common with the Canaanites a rather ignominious origin, replete with drunkenness and incestuous sexual perversion (19:30–38).

## Esau

In the next example of J’s familial rivalry, Esau comes out at birth “all ruddy, like a hairy garment” (25:25); Esau is “a man who knows game, a man of the field” (v. 27). The brief introduction points out that he is animal-like, a carnal figure, brutish and uncultured. The narrator provides an antithetically parallel description of the two sons in verse 27:

וַיְהִי עֶשָׂו אִישׁ יָדַע צֹד אִישׁ שָׂדֶה  
וַיַּעֲקֹב אִישׁ תָּם יֹשֵׁב אֹהֲלִים

Whereas Esau is an אִישׁ who knows game, Jacob is an אִישׁ תָּם. According to most translations, תָּם should be understood in this context as “quiet,” “mild” or “plain.” Apparently the report of Jacob “dwelling in tents” suggests to translators a subdued, domesticated persona.<sup>57</sup> There is little doubt, too, that the description of Esau as a kind of

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<sup>56</sup> Theodore Hiebert (*The Yahwist’s Landscape: Nature and Religion in Early Israel* [New York: Oxford Univ., 1996], 107) suggests that J’s primary concern in the ancestral narratives is to explain how Israel’s fathers are connected to the hill country (their heartland), and to show how their neighbors are associated with their own physical geographies as well.

<sup>57</sup> In early Jewish tradition, the “tents” were houses of learning, reflecting Jacob’s contrast to his daft brother: e.g., “Jacob was a man perfect in good work, dwelling in schoolhouses” (*Tg. Neof.* Gen 25:27; cf. *Tg. Onq.* Gen 25:27; *Jub.* 19:13–15).



wild man has yielded this sense as a contrasting parallel; that is to say, Jacob has been defined through translation by what Esau is not.

Another possibility, however, is that Jacob's title of *איש תם* is useful as a commentary on the narrative's valuation of *Esau*. Robert Alter suggests that the opposition thus described between Jacob and Esau may contain another dimension.

[There is] a lurking possibility of irony in the odd epithet *tam* attached to Jacob in verse 27. Most translators have rendered it, as I have, by following the immediate context, and so have proposed something like "mild," "plain," or even "retiring" as an English equivalent. Perhaps this was in fact one recognized meaning of the term, but it should be noted that *all* the other biblical occurrences of the word—and it is frequently used, both in adjectival and nominative forms—refer to innocence or moral integrity.<sup>58</sup>

One can hardly argue that Jacob appears in the Genesis narratives as a blameless or morally upright exemplar. As Esau himself objects in Gen 27:36, "Was he named 'Jacob' that he might supplant me these two times?" If Alter's interpretation has merit, then perhaps the introductory formula of Gen 25:27 is a playful way of saying something negative about Esau through contrast with Jacob.

If so, the reader would be compelled to understand the description of Esau's out-of-doors persona as a critique, even of a *moral weakness*. Esau's characterization is typical of a pattern exemplified most famously perhaps by the animal-man of the Gilgamesh Epic, Enkidu, who stands on the wrong side of the nature vs. culture tension so common in myth and folklore.<sup>59</sup> In Gilgamesh, the characters Gilgamesh and Enkidu

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<sup>58</sup> Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 43. The only other instances of the construction *איש תם* occur in the book of Job (1:8; 2:3), where the protagonist is held up precisely for his blamelessness.

<sup>59</sup> See, e.g., Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Totemism* (trans. R. Needham; Boston: Beacon, 1963), 77-102; idem, *Structural Anthropology* (New York: Basic, 1963), 206-31; idem, *The Raw and the Cooked* (trans. J. and D. Weightman; New York: Octagon, 1979); Gregory Mobley, *Samson and the Liminal Hero in the Ancient Near East* (New York: T & T Clark, 2006).

represent opposite poles: the first is a royal figure, king of Uruk, and a man of culture and civilized life; the second is portrayed as the paradigmatic man of nature. Enkidu, like Esau, has a “hairy body.” He is said to be ignorant of the eating of bread and drinking of beer, both of which represent the civilized application of human technology to the preparation of food. Esau, too, must rely on Jacob for prepared stew, a cultural symbol outside of his domain that he can only identify as “that red, red [stuff]” (Gen 25:30). Other expressions of the pattern may be found also, for example, in the Egyptian deities Horus (god of culture) and Seth (god of nature), or in the legendary Phoenician brothers, Hypsouranios (identified with huts or tents) and Ousōos (identified with animals and hunting).<sup>60</sup>

The most important point of connection for all of these character pairs is the divide between nature and culture. Ancient Near Eastern ideology—speaking broadly seems appropriate in this instance—is not unlike other cultural systems in its high regard for intellectual and technological sophistication and disdain for perceived cultural deficits, often embodied by the wilderness or desert. The foreigner, outsider, or “other” is also representative of this dubious space, and Esau, Enkidu, Seth and Ousōos fit the pattern. Ron Hendel puts it in the following terms:

The advantages of culture and the *moral inferiority* [emphasis mine] of the natural state are patent in the traditions of the ancient Near East. At the heart of the traditional resonances of the nature/culture polarity lies at least a part of the answer to the question of the meaning of Jacob as the eponymous ancestor, the revered patriarch, of Israel.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> See the discussion and bibliography in Ron Hendel, *The Epic of the Patriarch: The Jacob Cycle and the Narrative Traditions of Canaan and Israel* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), 116-28.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

Could it be that these traditional resonances also partly answer the meaning of Esau, Jacob's natural and uncultured, *morally suspect*, non-elect counterpart? That is, if Jacob is an איש תם, Esau is an איש ידע ציד?

In actuality, it is less than clear that Esau's uncivilized characterization is the equivalent of a conscious moral censure on the part of the biblical author. Nonetheless it should be noted, as Hendel affirms elsewhere, that Esau shares his wild and peripheral attributes with other Genesis non-elect.<sup>62</sup> Cain, like Esau, is a firstborn son who, despite his advantage in birth order, loses status to his younger brother; like Esau, Cain is driven away from the cultivated ground and becomes "a restless wanderer" (Gen 4:12–14); and both figures murder or intend to murder their chosen brothers (4:8; 27:41). Lot, too, loses his residence in the city and must flee to the mountains; he eventually dwells in a cave, the setting for some most uncivilized rendezvous with his daughters. And finally, Esau resembles Ishmael in his wild nature, particularly as we have it in J's description: "He will be a wild ass of a man" (16:12). The term used in the Septuagint for Ishmael is ἄγροικος ἄνθρωπος, meaning "rustic man," "wild man," or the like. It should not be missed that the Septuagint uses the same terminology for Esau, even inserting the word ἄγροικος appositionally in its account of Esau as hunter: καὶ ἦν Ἡσαυ ἄνθρωπος εἰδὼς κυνηγεῖν ἄγροικος "And Esau was a man who knew how to hunt, a wild man" (25:27). Either the Greek text describes Esau through intentional evocation of his uncle, Ishmael, or it has employed the same stock phrase to depict them both.<sup>63</sup> In any case, it is evident

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 116. See also, e.g., Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis* (trans. M. E. Biddle; Macon: Mercer Univ., 1997), 191; cf. Roland De Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (trans. J. McHugh; New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), 13-14.

<sup>63</sup> We note also that Esau becomes son-in-law to Ishmael in P (28:9).

that Ishmael has been understood from early on as another member of this feral coterie. I turn now, then, to Ishmael's affinities with his other non-elect Genesis counterparts.

### III.

For J at least, Ishmael has much in common with Cain, Lot, and Esau. All four are relegated to the wilderness or periphery, away from culture and normative society. For Ishmael, as with the others, this is clearly defined: "He will be a wild ass of a man, with his hand against all, and every hand against him: he will live at odds with all his kindred" (16:12). (In the variant tradition usually ascribed to E [21:20–21], Ishmael matures in the wilderness and develops competence with the bow.) In this way, Ishmael is perhaps most like Cain.<sup>64</sup> The relevant text about that first non-elect sibling in Gen 4:12–14 reads as follows:

When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its strength to you;  
You will be a fugitive and wanderer in the land.  
Cain said to YHWH, "My punishment is too great for me to bear!  
You have driven me today from the face of the ground (מעל פני האדמה)  
And I am hidden from your presence (ומפניך אסתר)  
I will be a fugitive and wanderer in the land  
And anyone who finds me may kill me.

Three important parallels between Ishmael and Cain obtain: both figures are relegated to the periphery, both are physically at odds with all who come into contact with them, and both have or will have younger siblings who experience God's favor in a way that they do not. In these respects at least, it seems that Ishmael has been understood by J to occupy the same category as Cain.

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<sup>64</sup> See the discussion in Levenson, *Death*, 92.

More significant, however, are the elements that separate the two older brothers. First, when Cain is driven from the ground (מעל פני אדמה), here symbolizing his banishment from cultivation and civilization, he is also hidden from YHWH's presence (ומפניך אסתר); but when Hagar—and, by association, Ishmael—runs away into the wilderness, the angel of YHWH finds her there (v. 7) and is attentive to her affliction, whence the derivation of the name “Ishmael” (v. 11). Second, Cain must depart as “wanderer” as his just deserts for committing fratricide, whereas Hagar (and Ishmael) are in the wilderness seemingly through no real fault of their own. We return to this distinction below, but for now it is useful to recall that while *Cain*'s punishment dictates that he will be at odds with those who discover him (4:14), some commentators have remarked that Ishmael's contentious nature (“his hand against all. . .”) is a kind of retribution for *Sarai*'s treatment of Hagar, and a compensation for Hagar's obedient submission to her mistress's abuse.<sup>65</sup>

And it is precisely Hagar's submission, finally, that puts Ishmael's situation in such a dramatically different light from that of Cain. For the main point of the Cain and Abel narrative is “the inability of Cain to suffer the exaltation of the younger brother at his own expense,” as Levenson has observed, and the tension revolves around

. . . the brother whose offering has not been regarded [but] can still live in dignity—if only he masters the urge to even the score, that is, to pursue equality where God has acted according to the opposite principle, with divine inequality.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> E.g., Cynthia Gordon, “Hagar: A Throw-Away Character,” in *SBL 1985 Seminar Papers* (ed. K. Richards; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985), 276; Levenson, *Death*, 95.

<sup>66</sup> *Death*, 74.

Commenting on Gen 4:25, Kaminsky notes that Cain not only fails to gain elect status for having murdered his brother, but must suffer the election instead of Seth, Abel's replacement. Kaminsky concludes:

God's mysterious tendency to favor certain people remains unabated, offering evidence that the point of these stories is not to critique God for having elevated one brother over the other, but to critique the all too human propensity to become hateful and hurtful toward those whom God favors.<sup>67</sup>

Bearing in mind what Levenson and Kaminsky are surely correct in observing—that the human response to divine mystery is at the crux of these election episodes—one must pause carefully at the account of Sarai and Hagar. It is in all respects the question of human response that complicates the narrative and renders ambiguous the statuses of both Hagar and Sarai.<sup>68</sup> Sarai is Abram's primary wife, the one who stands to be "built up" or "sonned" through Hagar; yet it is Hagar, Sarai's familial inferior, who first conceives a child with Abram. In this sense at least, Hagar is *avored* over Sarai, and it proves most vexing to the would-be matriarch. Consequently, Sarai "pursues equality," as Levenson has it, and becomes "hateful and hurtful toward those whom God favors," in Kaminsky's terms, with respect to Hagar (Gen 16:6).<sup>69</sup> But the complicating ambiguity is that Sarai

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<sup>67</sup> *Yet I Loved*, 25.

<sup>68</sup> S. Nikaido ("Hagar and Ishmael as Literary Figures: An Intertextual Study," *VT* 51 [2001]: 237) notes that Sarah's role is both positive and negative: she is Israel's matriarchal figure and Ishmael's nemesis; Phyllis Tribble (*Texts of Terror*, [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984], 10; see also idem, *Hagar, Sarah and their Children: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006], 38) similarly observes the sociological dichotomies in play, noting that Sarah is Hebrew, married, rich and free (but old and barren), whereas Hagar is single, poor and slave (but young and fertile).

<sup>69</sup> For Levenson (*Death*, 75), the closest resemblance to Cain's rage upon learning of Abel's favor with God is Esau's response to Jacob's appropriation of birthright and blessing (Gen 27:41). I would add that Sarai's response to Hagar surely belongs in a similar category. In addition to an overwhelming rage toward the favored rival, Sarai has in common with Cain and Esau a natural familial superiority over the rival.

remains Hagar's mistress, and YHWH instructs Hagar to return in submission to Sarai, the one who has otherwise been degraded or demoted in Hagar's eyes (16:9; cf. v. 4). Taking for granted yet another reversal of theme, this thesis proceeds on the assumption that Hagar's suffering is a part of *her own* profile of favor, through analogy with the pattern of humiliation and exaltation of beloved sons that Levenson has observed<sup>70</sup>—though in this instance Hagar's "exaltation" will be experienced only through the long-term redemption of her son, Ishmael. I will have opportunity to consider this pattern in greater detail momentarily. I turn now to examine more closely the indications of Hagar's favor.

#### IV.

It is necessary to acknowledge at the outset that the identity of the principal figure of this study, Ishmael, is closely intertwined with the experience of his mother. And in the same way, *Hagar's vindication is played out through her son*. This is true particularly in these narratives that involve primarily the births and early childhood of Ishmael and his counterpart, Isaac. To put it in other terms, Ishmael's life is defined by his mother's actions just as Isaac's existence is an expression of Abraham's faith and obedience. As the text now stands, in fact, the accounts of Ishmael and Isaac are quite limited, so that one might almost consider the sons as mere extensions of their parents, Hagar or Abraham respectively, who enjoy relatively expansive biblical prose.

For Hagar, this prose may be found in Genesis 16 and 21:8-21, two passages that are usually understood to be variants (J and E) of the same essential story of Hagar's flight or expulsion from Sarah. In his 1981 commentary on Genesis 16, Claus

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 96.

Westermann delineates three common interpretations of the chapter: 1) etiological explanation of Ishmael's origins; 2) traditional story of personal conflict between two women; 3) theological statement about Abram's struggle to rely fully on God's promise for an heir.<sup>71</sup> The last few decades, however, have brought about other perspectives on the chapter that exhibit a more concentrated focus on Hagar's own role as protagonist.<sup>72</sup>

One of the most stimulating of these studies has been Jo Ann Hackett's comparison of the structural elements of the Hagar and Ishmael episodes of Genesis 16 and 21 with those of a familiar ancient Near Eastern mythic scene known from the Gilgamesh epic, the epic of Aqhat from Ugarit, and to some extent another fragment of Canaanite myth written in Hittite.<sup>73</sup> The common pattern in each of these stories is as follows:

1. There is some insult or offense that seems slight to the reader.
2. The offended party is beside herself with anger, more so than the humiliation would seem to warrant.
3. The anger is directed toward a third party, a patriarchal authority figure.
4. In the myths—and perhaps in the Genesis material as well—the anger is expressed by threats of violence.
5. The patriarchal figure calmly accepts the offended party's excessive plans for retribution.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 234-36.

<sup>72</sup> E.g., Gordon, "Hagar;" J. Gerald Janzen, "Hagar in Paul's Eyes and in the Eyes of Yahweh (Genesis 16): A Study in Horizons," *HBT* 13 (1991): 1-22; Toba Spitzer, "'Where do you come from, and where are you going?': Hagar and Sarah Encounter God," *Rec* 63 (1998): 8-18; S. J. Teubal, *Hagar the Egyptian: The Lost Tradition of the Matriarchs* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990); Kari Latvus, "Reading Hagar in Contexts: From Exegesis to Inter-Contextual Analysis," in *Genesis* (ed. A. Brenner, A. C. C. Lee, and G. A. Yee; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 247-74.

<sup>73</sup> Jo Ann Hackett, "Rehabilitating Hagar: Fragments of an Epic Pattern," in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel* (ed. P. L. Day; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 12-27.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 19-20.



By acknowledging that these accounts are in essence oral-formulaic literature, and that they represent variations on a common basic story, we may use the context of this basic story to interpret with Hackett certain difficult features, what she calls “incongruities,” of the narratives.<sup>75</sup> One example is that Sarai does not directly confront Hagar in chapter 16 or Ishmael in chapter 21, but complains instead to Abraham. The pattern for this may be found also in Ishtar’s appeal to Anu after being disparaged by Gilgamesh,<sup>76</sup> and in Anat’s confrontation with El following Aqhat’s insult.<sup>77</sup> The mythological trope also elucidates the seemingly benign sins of Hagar and Ishmael that set in motion Sarah’s vicious and decisive responses (Gen 16:4 [J]; 21:9 [E]). Hagar’s transgression, ותקל גברתה בעיניה, appears to involve hubris, possibly an assumption of equality with her mistress (if not superiority to her) as mother of the heir to the man who is now their common husband. J’s version of the offending mistake, however a reader may correlate it with Sarah’s reaction, is comprehensible; Ishmael’s offense according to E—the Masoretic Text includes only מצחק<sup>78</sup>—is far more enigmatic. Hackett’s suggestion that Ishmael’s crime is precisely that he is “Isaac-ing,” or “playing the part of Isaac,”<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Hackett’s approach to the expulsion scenes of Hagar and Ishmael avoids a methodological problem of explaining mythic material by means of legal material. There are a number of laws from various sources that may have some bearing on the scenarios depicted in these chapters; yet as the author notes, commentators have had to extrapolate from the brief descriptions of the infractions, both as listed in the legal corpora and described in the Genesis stories, in order to make sense of the actions taken by the characters in chapters 16 and 21. See *ibid.*, 16-17.

<sup>76</sup> See the translation of Alexander Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels* (Chicago: Univ. Chicago, 1949), 52-53.

<sup>77</sup> See the translation of Michael Coogan, *Stories from Ancient Canaan* (Louisville: Westminster, 1978), 37-39.

<sup>78</sup> Cf. LXX: “playing with Isaac.”

<sup>79</sup> Hackett, “Rehabilitating,” 20-21.

not only provides a parallel to Hagar's reported breach of elevating oneself above one's proper station or equalizing one's superior, but also explains why such an apparently small infraction could incur such heavy consequences: it *fits the typology* we find in these other myths. There as well the offended goddess has made some request or has sought to use the main character, a human necessarily of lower station, but has been denied or treated in a way that undermines the hierarchy of the relationship.

Hackett concludes that this ancient Near Eastern scene concerns the capricious use of power, and that the intention is to induce sympathy for the protagonist and to underscore the moral gap between the absolutely powerful and the less powerful.<sup>80</sup> This may be so, but I would suggest that there is another theme that may help to resolve some of the odd features identified by Hackett in the scene type: the challenge of the established order. This is undoubtedly at the center of the Gilgamesh epic itself, and seems to be operating in our other passages too. In each attested case of our common scene, a superior approaches an inferior with an invitation to relate on a level field: Ishtar propositions Gilgamesh for love; Anat asks Aqhat for his bow and arrows;<sup>81</sup> and Sarai makes Hagar the consort of her own husband.<sup>82</sup> In every instance, the superior is spurned by the inferior, resulting in a humiliating disruption of the hierarchy. Therefore the goddesses Ishtar and Anat take their cases before their hierarchical heads, Anu and El, and Sarai approaches Abram, because they all seek restoration of the established order. If these patriarchal figures will tolerate insubordination against their own subordinates, the

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>81</sup> This instance, too, is not without sexual overtone.

<sup>82</sup> Levenson (*Death*, 89) notes that the language of "taking" and "giving" is suggestive even of marriage (cf. Gen 34:9; Dt 7:3).

thinking goes, then it is only fitting that the offended parties should exact retribution on the hierarchical heads in turn. For this reason, Ishtar threatens Anu by suggesting that she “will sm[ash the door of the underworld and break the bolt]” so that the dead shall be raised up and will outnumber the living, thus furthering the collapse of the proper order.<sup>83</sup> Anat similarly declares to El, her superior, that she will smash his head and make his “gray hair run with blood,” and his “gray beard with gore;” then she invites him, through sardonic disregard for the hierarchy, to appeal to the human Aqhat for salvation.<sup>84</sup> Finally, the same sensitivity to her own self-compromised status induces Sarai to challenge Abram, “may YHWH judge between you and me (if you, as master of the household, do not restore my rightful position),” rendering Abram culpable for her abuse of Hagar (Gen 16:5).<sup>85</sup>

If these associations are correct, it would seem to resolve the difficulty in assigning blame to Abram for a result brought on by Sarai’s own suggestion. Reading the scene type in this way yields several conclusions about the Hagar-Ishmael passages from Genesis 16 and 21. First, according to the scene type, these predicaments really are the responsibility in the first place of Sarai, who, by inviting Hagar into Abram’s bed, has compromised her own station much in the same way that Ishtar and Anat have set themselves up for humiliation by approaching Gilgamesh and Aqhat. It is useful to reiterate a point made by Hackett, viz., the hero and protagonist of each story is the one at odds with the offended goddess or mistress: Gilgamesh, Aqhat, and Hagar or

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<sup>83</sup> See Heidel, *Gilgamesh*, 53.

<sup>84</sup> See Coogan, *Stories*, 38.

<sup>85</sup> Hackett, “Rehabilitating,” 21.

Ishmael.<sup>86</sup> Secondly, both Hagar and Ishmael, like Gilgamesh and Aqhat, are challenging their superiors, in this case Sarai or Sarah and Isaac. Even if their challenges seem innocuous, there is nothing less at stake than the priority of Sarai and Isaac in the family of Abraham, as noted by Sarah herself in Gen 21:10 (E). Sarah's strong reactions should not be surprising, then, and neither should be Abraham's acquiescence, considering the context of the pattern. Perhaps most importantly, it is precisely at the point of these challenges by Hagar and Ishmael that this scene type intersects with the other sibling stories of Genesis. The initial response of Hagar in Gen 16:4 (J) is comparable to the chafing exhibited by the other non-chosen siblings—most notably Cain, Esau, and Joseph's brothers—in the face of God's mysterious and inequitable favor.<sup>87</sup> Hagar, exhibiting a pattern consistent with non-chosen family members, “looked with contempt” on her mistress, meaning apparently that she would not accept her status as secondary wife under Sarai. The fundamental difference here, however, as I have noted already, is that Hagar seems to have *succeeded* in submitting eventually to God's mysterious non-selection in an exemplary way that surpasses all of the other disgruntled, non-chosen sons. Therefore I maintain that Hagar presents a kind of paradigmatic model for the proper response to God's mysterious favor or disfavor.

One objection to this interpretation might be that the narrative of Genesis 16 is limited on the question of Hagar's inner subjectivity or acceptance of her lot. Nevertheless her compliance and gratitude at the conclusion of the scene is sufficiently implied, in my judgment, by her naming of God as “The God who sees me” (v 13). The

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>87</sup> See Levenson, *Death*, 74; Kaminsky, *Yet I Loved*, 25.

story provides Hagar's own explanation for her choice—הלם ראיתי אחרי ראי—but the precise interpretation of this line is unclear. One possibility is that Hagar is grateful simply to survive after her theophany; thus, the NRSV “Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?” But if this is her (only) reason for giving God such a name, surely the name “The God who sees me” does not follow its supposed meaning. Moreover, the line does not supply a verb for “living,” so that Hagar's gratitude for living through the theophany must be intuited from her continued capacity to see even after she has been seen. And finally, הלם must be emended to אלהים.

Another possible interpretation is to read אחרי as a substantive for “hinder part,” as in the theophany of Ex 33:23. There, YHWH informs Moses that he will see (ראה) the divine back (אחור). If so, then Hagar chooses the name “The God who sees me” because she has seen the back of the One who sees her. That is to say, she has found one who cares about her and her plight. But if אחרי is to be rendered as “the divine back,” it is strange that the passage does not explicitly describe the theophany in these terms, as in Ex 33:23. The NIV seems to approximate this sense, though the substantive אחרי is elided: “I have now seen the One who sees me.”<sup>88</sup> Such a translation comports well with the Greek ὅτι εἶπεν Καὶ γὰρ ἐνώπιον εἶδον ὀφθέντα μοι.

Another possible means of translating the MT expression in a way that makes sense of Hagar's name for God is to retain אחרי as a preposition rather than a substantive, but to make it the predicate of ראי; thus, the ESV: “Truly here I have seen him who looks after me.” The preservation of the preposition notwithstanding, however, the syntax

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<sup>88</sup> The NIV footnote supplies the alternate translation: “Or *seen the back of*.”

oddly has the preposition coming before the participle ראי. The construction is somewhat awkward, but perhaps no more so than the other possibilities.

The name of the well, באר להי ראי, is certainly relevant, but does not seem to offer decisive evidence in any particular direction.

In any case, it is apparent from the name itself that Hagar's emphasis is on God's notice of her rather than her survival of the theophany. This emphasis is consistent, too, with God's own name for her son: Ishmael. The point of the narrative, which is not lost on Hagar in spite of God's absurd instruction to submit to Sarai's abuse, is that God's senses are attuned to this maidservant and her travails.

The final shape of the broader narrative—here I refer to both Genesis 17 (P) and Gen 21:8–21 (E)—which continues to assume the presence of Hagar and Ishmael in the household of Abraham, also implies Hagar's obedience, cheerful or not, to the Angel of YHWH's imperative on Hagar to return to her mistress. And I would argue that it is this obedience, apart from her subjectivity, that registers in the economy of Genesis anyway, just as Abraham's obedience—not moral acceptance—is at issue in Genesis 22.

Hagar's apparent significance in these passages only increases with closer inspection. It is often noticed that Hagar is the only female in Genesis to receive a promise directly from YHWH, and in language typical of patriarchal promises.<sup>89</sup> It is also the case that Hagar alone *names* the deity (ותקרא שם והיה), in contrast to Abram's act of calling *upon the name* of the deity (ותקרא בשם יהוה).<sup>90</sup> Indeed, within the patriarchal

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<sup>89</sup> E.g., Tribble, *Texts*, 16; Hackett, "Rehabilitating," 14–15; Boyung Lee, "When the Text Is the Problem: A Postcolonial Approach to Biblical Pedagogy," *RelEd* 102 (2007): 55–59. (But cf. Gen 25:21–23, where Rebekah hears from YHWH, even if only indirectly.)

<sup>90</sup> Tribble, *Texts*, 18. Cf. Gen 16:13 and 12:8; also 13:4.

narratives, only Hagar is the object of a theophanic experience apart from the patriarchs themselves. Hagar's theophany (Gen 16:7–14) has certain elements in common with one other J theophany in the patriarchal narratives, Jacob's encounter at the Jabbok (Gen 32:23–33): neither instances include an altar or a divine promise about land; both involve naming, either of Israel or Ishmael; and both are set near a water source in the wilderness. Due to the lack of altar and land promise, Theodore Hiebert locates both theophanies "at the margin of J's sacred landscape,"<sup>91</sup> thus minimizing their significance. It may be worth noting, nevertheless, that these accounts both serve to introduce the name "Ishmael" on the one hand and "Israel" on the other.

There are even more striking similarities between Hagar's encounter and Elijah's theophany sequence in 1 Kings 19:1–18:

- 1) both figures, Hagar and Elijah, have fled from some threat;
- 2) both anticipate death;
- 3) both are met by the "Angel of the Lord," who supplies life-sustaining sustenance in the wilderness;
- 4) both field a seemingly casual question from YHWH along the lines of "where are you going?" or "what are you doing here?"
- 5) both report suffering from abuse or persecution;
- 6) YHWH responds to both with instructions for the execution of his divine plan;
- 7) YHWH provides both with information to assuage negative circumstances.

The similarities do not necessitate common authorship, of course, or other close correlations for that matter, but the affinities do point out a certain intimacy with YHWH that Hagar seems to have in common with the prophet Elijah. If the two theophanies demonstrate nothing else, they show that YHWH, at least, does in fact "attend to" or "hear" Hagar in a way that is similar not only to the way he relates to the patriarch, Jacob, but also to a great prophet.

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<sup>91</sup> Hiebert, *Landscape*, 108.

Looking further still at the context of J's account of Hagar's birth annunciation (Gen 16:10–12), one finds Hagar among the elite and favored company of Sarah (Gen 18:1–15), Rebekah (Gen 25:22–23), Manoah's wife (Judg 13:1–25), and Hannah (1 Samuel 1:1–28). All of these women are privy to special details about the arrival of their offspring and give birth to leading figures in biblical narratives.<sup>92</sup> In reference to birth narratives generally, S. Nikaido notes that the central character of the narratives is the hero's parent rather than the hero, and that the stories' main functions are "to indicate the special nature of the hero himself," and "to tell the story of the heroic deeds of the hero's mother or father."<sup>93</sup> Nikaido goes on to compare Hagar's birth narrative with Hannah's in particular:<sup>94</sup>

- 1) In both cases, the women suffer at the hands of another wife over the issue of pregnancy.
- 2) Both have passive husbands who cannot or will not alleviate their suffering.
- 3) Both seek refuge elsewhere, and are desperate for relief.
- 4) Both speak with a messenger of God in their moment of need.
- 5) The messenger provides encouragement and instruction to return home, where the child is born.
- 6) One child is named ישמעאל with the explanation כי שמע יהוה אל עניך; the other is named שמואל for the reason כי מיהוה שאלתי.<sup>95</sup>
- 7) Both stories end with a separation of the child from his family by means of a journey; the mother accompanies the child on the journey in both cases, and weaning marks the beginning of both journeys.
- 8) Once separated from their homes, both sons prosper in the new environment, which is also the place in which the mothers first heard details of their births.

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<sup>92</sup> Cf. also Ex 2:1–10; one exception to this extraordinary group is Elisha's Shunnamite woman, whose son does not seem to be significant, at least in his own right, in the same way as the other sons (2 Kgs 4:12–17).

<sup>93</sup> Nikaido, "Hagar," 219.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 229–32.

<sup>95</sup> Nikaido ("Hagar," 231) acknowledges the different roots in each name, but finds the phonological similarities to be compelling.



Whether or not one agrees with Nikaido's assessment that the phonetic similarity of the children's names "suggest that in some subtle way these stories had influenced each other and were not simply the result of a universal literary pattern,"<sup>96</sup> the comparison of the two passages is useful at least to the degree that it underscores a recurring theme throughout these birth narratives, namely, God's compassion and response for the barren wife or mother in need. I culminate my comparative analyses of Hagar with an examination of her relation to Abraham himself.

It may be that Abraham provides for the most fruitful of all analogies with Hagar. Both Abraham and Hagar remain steadfast in the face of adversity, showing confidence in God's presence and obediently submitting to the divine will, either to return to a mistress's domination or to sacrifice the son of promise.<sup>97</sup> Particularly poignant is the last-minute assurance of survival and prosperity given to the two figures when all hope seemed lost: according to Gen 21:19 [E], "God opened her [Hagar's] eyes" to see a well of water; and likewise in 22:13, "Abraham lifted his eyes" to discover a ram for substitute sacrifice.<sup>98</sup> The connection between these two accounts of extreme and counterintuitive obedience includes homologous reward language from the divine speeches that conclude respective passages. "I will greatly increase your offspring (הרבה ארבה את זרעך) so they cannot be counted for multitude," YHWH promises Hagar (Gen 16:10); similarly, Abraham hears, "I will greatly increase your offspring (והרבה ארבה את זרעך) like the stars of heaven and the sand of the seashore (Gen 22:17)." Such promises, repeated both to

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 232.

<sup>97</sup> Gordon, "Hagar," 272. Note that both Ishmael and Isaac qualify as "sons of promise" in P (Gen 17:19–21).

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

Hagar and Abraham in the context of rewarded obedience, indicates a link between Abraham's readiness to sacrifice Isaac and the persecution that Hagar endured.

For Levenson, the parallel implies that "the greatness of the Israelite nation. . . rests upon Abraham's surrender of Isaac for sacrifice to YHWH," just as "the greatness of the Ishmaelite nation is founded upon the affliction of the slavewoman who was their matriarch."<sup>99</sup> By noting that the only other occurrence of הרבה הארב may be found in Gen 3:16, a text that establishes increased pain in childbirth for Adam and Eve's sin, Levenson suggests that the righteous acts of Hagar and Abraham "counteract 'Man's First Disobedience.'"<sup>100</sup> The author explains elsewhere that Hagar is comparable to Eve, and that God's promise to multiply Hagar's descendants is an answer to the pain-in-childbirth dictum prescribed in Gen 3:16.<sup>101</sup> I would add to this that YHWH's declaration that the woman's husband "shall rule over you" is another indication that these two J texts, Gen 3:16 and 16:10, are joined through intertextual reference to Hagar.

The larger point for Levenson is that Abraham's obedience in the *aqedah* has become a "foundational act": not only is God's selection of Abram justified by his ultimate obedience, but this obedience will constitute "the basis for the blessedness of the people descended from him through that very son."<sup>102</sup> The importance of this conclusion

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<sup>99</sup> Levenson, *Death*, 140.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid. Imagery from the Garden of Eden is well attested in Gen 16. Tribble, for example, also finds allusion in Gen 16:2, where Abram "heard [or obeyed] her voice" with respect to Sarai's speech, recalling YHWH's accusation of Adam, who also "heard the voice" of his wife by eating the forbidden fruit (Gen 3:17); and Sarai's blame for her spouse in 16:5 is comparable to Adam's blameshifting for his own role in the first transgression (Gen 3:11–12) (*Hagar*, 38–39). Still other reverberations are detected in Joel Rosenberg, *King and Kin: Political Allegory in the Hebrew Bible* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1986), 94–96.

<sup>101</sup> Levenson, *Death*, 94.

notwithstanding, there is an underdeveloped corollary in Levenson's analysis. If Abraham's obedience is "foundational" by analogy with Hagar's endured persecution, then Hagar's own situation might be "foundational," too, even in a way that transcends, in Levenson's terms, "the greatness of the Ishmaelite nation."

After all, it may be that the most significant comparison to be made of Hagar and Abraham is their common experience of the near-loss of beloved sons. Levenson has shown that such loss or near-loss is a marker of chosenness in the Hebrew Bible, and he notes that Hagar's experience in Genesis 16 "represents the first explicit instance of . . . the averted loss of the promised son."<sup>103</sup> Levenson stops short of referring to Hagar or Ishmael as "chosen"—and not without good cause considering the trajectory of the biblical story through Isaac—but there are too many indications of the special nature of Hagar and her son, even from this brief survey of Abraham-Hagar parallels,<sup>104</sup> not to seek out some broader function. In the conclusion of his essay, Nikaido describes the interpreter's dilemma:

. . . [there is] a kind of tension for the reader, who on the one hand must view them [Hagar and Ishmael] as antagonists for Isaac and Sarah's sake, but on the other hand, as central, even heroic, figures because of their positive literary associations.<sup>105</sup>

These positive associations stand in stark contrast to the negative associations from the accounts of the other non-chosen Genesis siblings that we examined earlier in this chapter. Turning our attention back to Ishmael, we see not only that he does not compare

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>104</sup> See also Gordon, "Hagar;" Larry Lyke, "Where Does 'The Boy' Belong? Compositional Strategy in Genesis 21:14," *CBQ* 56 (1994): 637-48; Rosenberg, *King*, 85.

<sup>105</sup> Nikaido, 241.

in many important respects with the disfavored, but he *does* resemble certain chosen figures of the patriarchal narratives—and not only through similar literary or conceptual patterns, but even through more direct connections in some instances. The patriarchal narratives tie Ishmael to Isaac and Joseph in particular.

## V.

I have already alluded to the notion that Ishmael has in common with other chosen sons in Genesis a near-death or near-sacrifice experience.<sup>106</sup> It is widely recognized especially that Ishmael's ordeal in the wilderness in Genesis 21 [E] is comparable to the *aqedah* of Isaac in chapter 22 [E].<sup>107</sup> So it is, for example, that both episodes begin with Abraham's rising early in the morning (וישכם אברהם בקר) to prepare for the day's horrible deeds (Gen 21:14; 22:3). Analyzing these same verses, Larry Lyke has shown that the peculiar syntax of Gen 21:14 serves to align the passage with 22:3.<sup>108</sup> The connection may have been preserved intentionally by a later redactor who was willing to overlook the difficult reading of Ishmael's age and physical size, seemingly for the very purpose of maintaining the similarity of the two stories. (On the basis of Gen 17:25 [P], Ishmael ought to be at least 14 years of age by the time of the events recorded in 21:14, which include Abraham's placing the boy on Hagar's back for the journey; the younger Ishmael allows for parallel syntax in both verses.) We have already noticed, too,

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<sup>106</sup> See Levenson, *Death*, 93.

<sup>107</sup> E.g., Hugh C. White, "The Initiation Legend of Isaac," *ZAW* 91 (1979): 13-18; Alter, *Art*, 181; Tribble, *Texts*, 34-35; A. Shapira, "And He Will Be a Wild Ass of a Man," *Bet Mikra* 145 (1996): 112-18 (Hebrew).

<sup>108</sup> Lyke, "'The Boy,'" esp. 647.

that Ishmael seems to play the part of Isaac (מצחק) in 21:9,<sup>109</sup> thus inducing Sarah’s ire—and perhaps anticipating Jacob’s trick upon Isaac of imitating Esau. Mention has been made also of God’s last minute rescue from certain death for both Ishmael and Isaac (21:19; 22:13). The reader is mindful, finally, of Abraham’s affection for both sons. Explicit in Gen 22:2 is Abraham’s *love* for Isaac, connoting much more than strong sentiment, but also important legal status for inheritance and property. Yet it is not insignificant that the narrative of Ishmael’s expulsion should include Abraham’s distress over the anticipated loss of his son Ishmael (21:11–12).<sup>110</sup> There is no record of the fathers of any of the other sibling pairs or groups showing great affection for favored and “unfavored” son alike. The commentary of *Genesis Rabbah* on Gen 22:3 is telling. Here, the rabbis consider the long appositional chain in God’s command to Abraham:

Said He to him: ‘Take, I pray thee. . . thy son.’  
 ‘Which son?’ he asked.  
 ‘Thine only son,’ replied He.  
 ‘But each is the only one of his mother?’  
 —‘Whom thou lovest.’—  
 ‘Is there a limit to the affections?’  
 ‘Even Isaac,’ said He.  
 And why did He not reveal it to him without delay? In order to make him [Isaac] even more beloved in his eyes and reward him for every word spoken.<sup>111</sup>

According to this interpretation, Abraham recognizes two sons and cannot distinguish them by descriptions of “only son” or “whom you love.” The verse is understood, of course, to increase the dramatic tension until Isaac’s name is revealed as the one most

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<sup>109</sup> On the prominence and importance of this term, see Lyke, “‘The Boy,’” 644-45.

<sup>110</sup> The intent, no doubt, is to build tension for the command of 22:2.

<sup>111</sup> *Gen. Rab.* 55:7; translated by H. Freedman (*Midrash Rabbah* [5 vols.; New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977], 1:486).

dear to Abraham, but the touching exchange serves to demonstrate that the rabbis also acknowledge Abraham's love for Ishmael, which endures even after the expulsion of chapter 21.

Later in Genesis 25 (P), we see that Ishmael does live on to bury his father (v. 9), and his posterity is recorded—perhaps as fulfillment of God's promises to Hagar and to Abram for the multiplication of Ishmael's seed (cf. 16:10; 17:20; 21:18). We will consider P's treatment of Ishmael more fully in the next chapter; here we continue to pursue Ishmael's prominence and intertextual influence in Genesis with attention to the Joseph Cycle. These narratives constitute the literary record of Israel's nascence, and may well be the most directly affected by the memory of Ishmael.

Joseph, like Ishmael, is entangled in a master-wife-servant relationship.<sup>112</sup> In both cases, the master has exalted the status of the servant in some way; and in both cases a jealous wife sees to the servant's unjust fall from his elevated position. Both wives are offended, at least through pretense, by the servants "mocking" or "playing" (מצחק), which precipitates the servants' exile and symbolic death.<sup>113</sup> It is noteworthy that Sarah's parallel in these narratives is none other than Potiphar's wife, who, according to the Netziv's nineteenth century torah commentary *Ha'amek Davar*, should be understood through her identification of Joseph as a "Hebrew slave" to mean that Joseph should have given her utmost respect.<sup>114</sup> In other words, there is a (self-induced) disruption of the hierarchy, just as we noticed in Hackett's scene type of Sarai and Hagar.

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<sup>112</sup> Nikaido, "Hagar," 234.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 235.

<sup>114</sup> See Zlotowitz, *Bereishis I(a)*, 1717.

Furthermore, just as Ishmael (or Hagar) is met in the desert by an angel of God (21:17), Joseph, too, encounters a mysterious man in the wilderness with preternatural knowledge to direct him to his brothers (37:15–17).<sup>115</sup> Then, as Ishmael is rescued from near death because of Sarah's jealousy, Joseph is narrowly delivered from his homicidal and envious brothers withal. It is at this point that the relationship between the two figures becomes much more direct, even overt: Joseph's rescue comes by way of Ishmaelite (J) or Midianite (E) traders (Gen 37:25, 28, 36). Whether or not such details are considered to be anachronistic,<sup>116</sup> it seems clear that the specificity is given for the purpose of joining Abraham's sons with Joseph for a particular cause. The reason could be that the forefathers of the Ishmaelites and Midianites were sent away by their common father, Abraham. This provides a link, at least, between them and Joseph;<sup>117</sup> yet there is ambivalence in this connection, since Joseph has been rescued from death, on the one hand, but sold into slavery in Egypt, ironically, on the other hand.

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<sup>115</sup> See Levenson, *Death*, 108.

<sup>116</sup> Nikaido ("Hagar," 237), following Samuel R. Driver (*The Book of Genesis*, [5<sup>th</sup> ed.; London: Methuen, 1906], 324), understands the Ishmaelite-Midianite reference to be out of chronological sequence because Ishmael and Midian are both contemporaneous with Joseph's own grandfather, Isaac, and therefore insufficient time has elapsed for the "Ishmaelites" or "Midianites" to develop; but this seems to be an unnecessary deduction in my view, since Ishmael and Midian are both described as having fathered a number of sons, and in Ishmael's case at least, those sons went on to become tribes soon thereafter (cf. Gen 17:20; 25:4, 12–16). Source critical issues here are on display in Edward L. Greenstein ("An Equivocal Reading of the Sale of Joseph," in *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives* [eds. Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis and James S. Ackerman, 2 vols.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1987], 2:114–25). He avers that the discordant narrative strands of Genesis 37 (and in the rest of the Joseph cycle passim) produce a type of narrative "blurring" that obscures the human causes of Joseph's transference to Egypt; and this ambiguity gives contrast to the clearer divine manipulation of events leading to Joseph's rise as major domo to Pharaoh.

<sup>117</sup> See Rosenberg, *King*, 95, 237 (n. 69); noted by Nikaido, "Hagar," 238.

The association of Ishmael with Joseph is evident also, and perhaps even more so, in the matching poetic descriptions attributed to both figures. Nikaido, following Stanley Gevirtz, observes the following parallels between Ishmael's birth annunciation (16:13; also 21:20) and Joseph's blessing (49:22–24):<sup>118</sup>

- 1.) Ishmael is a “wild ass of a man” פֶּרֶא אָדָם; Joseph a “son of an ass” בֶּן פֶּרֶת.
- 2.) Both passages refer to a spring in association with Shur.
- 3.) Both Ishmael and Joseph are on the defensive, either from archers, or from “all” generally.
- 4.) Both figures are bowmen.

Nikaido concludes that “Ishmael and Joseph were both *avored* [emphasis mine] servants (or sons) who were unjustly expelled by members of their own household—yet they prospered.”<sup>119</sup> Levenson, too, affirms that the main meaning of Ishmael's story is that he is a first-born or beloved son who lives “by God's *favor* after all [emphasis mine].”<sup>120</sup>

One can hardly challenge a reference to Joseph as a favored and chosen servant: he is Jacob's favorite son who perseveres through several cycles of humiliation and exaltation to emerge as the consummate servant-ruler.<sup>121</sup> But Ishmael is not chosen, and his favored status is more nuanced than Joseph's.

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<sup>118</sup> Nikaido, “Hagar,” 238-39; Stanley Gevirtz, “Of Patriarchs and Puns: Joseph at the Fountain, Jacob at the Ford,” *HUCA* 46 (1975): 35-49.

<sup>119</sup> Nikaido, 239. Nikaido notices that the men are “wild asses” because of their common characteristic: exile without family or home.

<sup>120</sup> Levenson, *Death*, 110. Ishmael is chronologically first-born, that is, though not explicitly mentioned by the technical term בְּכֹר in the text.

<sup>121</sup> See *ibid.*, 143-69.



## VI.

Levenson's analysis provides a useful point of departure. He observes in Exodus and Deuteronomy various references or key words that characterize the Hagar and Ishmael narratives,<sup>122</sup> but does not seem willing to assign them a positive meaning in Israel's exodus experience. In his bid against liberation theologians, who tend to discover a universal compassion for the poor and oppressed in the model of Israel's exodus from Egypt, he emphasizes that it is God's covenant with the patriarchs that compels him to deliver the descendants of Abraham and Isaac. He cites Ex 2:23b–25:<sup>123</sup>

. . . The Israelites were groaning under the bondage and cried out; and their cry for help from the bondage rose up to God. God heard [*wayyišmaʿ*] their moaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. God looked [*wayyar*] upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them. [his translation]

Although Levenson acknowledges that this passage is marked by language that recalls Hagar's distress—thereby drawing an analogy with Hagar—he does not identify her *relief* with the Israelites'. Commenting on God's promise to Moses in 3:17—which invokes the familiar root ענה from Hagar's suffering in Genesis 16—"I will bring you up from the misery (מעני) of Egypt to the land [of Canaan]"—Levenson sees only the contrast to "[God's] unfeeling order to Hagar in very similar circumstances: 'Go back to your mistress, and submit [*hit'annî*] to her harsh treatment'" (16:9).<sup>124</sup>

For him, there is a key distinction between God's unresponsiveness to Hagar's oppression, on the one hand, and his response to the suffering Israelites on the other hand.

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<sup>122</sup> Levenson, *Death*, 95-96.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

But for Levenson the contrast is problematic only for those who find in the exodus a “preferential option for the poor.”<sup>125</sup> The understanding is that Joseph (the chosen) reenacts in Egypt the bitter experience of Hagar (the non-chosen) under Sarai. Furthermore, Joseph serves as a metonym for all of Israel, who would also come to know “what Hagar knew as the defining reality of her life—exile, destitution, and . . . slavery.”<sup>126</sup> The pattern reveals a principle:

The exaltation of the chosen brother—Isaac over Ishmael, Joseph over the tribes—has its costs: it entails the chosen’s experience of the bitter reality of the unchosen’s life. Such is the humiliation that attends the exaltation of the beloved son.<sup>127</sup>

The comparison begins and ends, then, with suffering or humiliation. In my view, this reading suffers difficulty. First, there is a sense in which Ishmael and Hagar do experience God’s favor. In the case of Ishmael, this much is conceded already by Levenson, as noted above; as for Hagar, Levenson acknowledges, too, that something like a “preferential option for the poor” may be detected in the angel’s promise to her (Gen 16:11–12);<sup>128</sup> and we have seen in the preceding analysis that there is significant evidence that she also is favored, even if we cannot say that she is *chosen*. She, not Sarai or Abram, is the protagonist of Genesis 16 with whom the reader sympathizes: she is privileged with a theophany comparable to Elijah’s and the first birth annunciation (rivaling all others); she shares many of the experiences and characteristics of Abraham himself, including the near-death of a beloved son and the faithful execution of God’s

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 94.

terrifying and incomprehensible will (returning to Sarai), resulting in what may be called “a foundational act”—to use Levenson’s term—of obedience to countermand God’s curse on Eve in particular. Most significantly, the reader perceives no clear moral shortcomings in Hagar (or Ishmael), unlike the other hapless antagonist figures in Genesis. In other words, Hagar resists the mold of the disfavored counterpart exhibited elsewhere in Genesis, which significantly qualifies her inclusion in Levenson’s pattern.

Secondly, YHWH does hear, see, and *respond* to Hagar’s oppression. This cannot be the case according to Levenson:

In Genesis 16, Hagar confronts the twin immoveable realities of her slavery and her surrogate motherhood. Each testifies to her status as an object to be possessed by others for their purposes, and *God removes neither source of suffering from this oppressed woman* [emphasis mine]. His interest, rather, is in the promise to Abram, and it is his desire to fulfill this through Hagar’s child that constitutes the sweet side of the bittersweet message delivered by the angel of the LORD. . .<sup>129</sup>

The suggestion advanced here is that God’s mercy is expressed to both Hagar and Ishmael through the promise to Hagar, on the one hand, and in the outcome of Ishmael’s story on the other hand. If it is true that Hagar’s two problems are her surrogate motherhood and slavery, God removes the bitterness of both—in the long-term—through his promise, which proceeds immediately after his difficult instruction to submit to Sarai:

1) *Surrogate motherhood*: “I will so greatly multiply your descendants that they cannot be counted for number” (16:10). This is an unmistakable comfort for any distraught surrogate. The annunciation concerning Ishmael that follows makes it plain that this boy is to be *Hagar’s* son (v. 11), and YHWH reveals his name specifically to Hagar, the would-be surrogate mother. It is a name that is personalized to her, not Abram or Sarai, and it reflects God’s attention to her affliction. 2) *Slavery*: Verse 12 states: “He [Ishmael]

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 93.

will be a wild ass of a man with his hand against all and every hand against him; and he will live at odds with his kindred.” The description is enigmatic, to be sure, but whatever else it might convey, it is clear that Ishmael will be no one’s slave.<sup>130</sup> Confirmation of Hagar’s relief through these pronouncements is found on her own lips in verse 13: “‘You are the God who sees me,’<sup>131</sup> for she said ‘I have now seen the one who sees me.’” As I have noted above, the text is problematic and eludes definitive translation, but it is sufficient for our purposes to observe that Hagar gives credit to God for his “seeing” after she receives his promise.

With reference to the pitiable exile or banishment of Hagar and her son, I appeal to Tribble’s astute observations in order to complete the analogy between Hagar and Abraham (and now Israel). Hagar’s flight in Genesis 16 may be compared to Israel’s own escape to the wilderness from the house of bondage, and the reference to the spring of Shur provides confirmation of the allusion (cf. Ex 15:22).<sup>132</sup> Regarding Genesis 21, Tribble notes that Sarah, like Pharaoh, drives out (גרש) Hagar and her son (v 10; cf. Ex 6:1; 10:11; 12:39); and Abraham finally sends Hagar away (שלח; 21:14), anticipating Moses’ recurring demand of Pharaoh to let Israel go (שלח; e.g., Ex 4:23; 5:1).<sup>133</sup> Looking more closely at Ex 4:23 in particular, one may perceive other suggestions of Ishmael:

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<sup>130</sup> Cf. Levenson (ibid., 94-95), who understands that Hagar’s bondage will be vindicated by her son’s fierce independence. For Levenson, this is an outcome of “something not altogether dissimilar to the ‘preferential option for the poor.’” As Levenson reminds me through private correspondence, no indication is given of Hagar’s own manumission, unless her expulsion is interpreted as such.

<sup>131</sup> Translating *yodh* as an object suffix makes the best sense of the context. See Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 247.

<sup>132</sup> Tribble, *Texts*, 14.

<sup>133</sup> See ibid., 23.

YHWH tells Pharaoh through Moses, “Let my son go so that he may serve me; but if you refuse, I will kill your firstborn son.” Here, as in Genesis 21, the release of the servant son is a necessary condition for the welfare of the master’s son, and the issue of service is at the forefront (cf. Ex 8:20; 10:3). Once released, Hagar faces death and must wander with Ishmael—let us consider the phonological similarity to “Israel”—in the wilderness with sparse rations before receiving God’s miraculous provision and arriving finally in her ancestral home, Egypt. It is remarkable that Tribble can recognize many of these “identical words and similar themes,” yet interpret them to “tell opposing stories.”<sup>134</sup> For Tribble, Hagar’s story is a text of terror that concludes not with exodus or freedom, but exile. In this respect, she is in agreement with Levenson, who understands the defining reality of Hagar’s life to be exile, destitution and slavery. From my vantage point, though we may find elements of both exile and bondage in Gen 21:8–21, the notion of an *exile from bondage* does not sufficiently summarize the narrative, and the lives of both Hagar and Ishmael should be defined rather by the expression “God hears.”

Levenson gives an important clue for our reading through his observation that God’s intended fulfillment of his promise through Hagar’s son is the “sweet side of the bittersweet message” given by the angel in Gen 16:9–12. It is true that Hagar’s own *personal* reality includes the bitterness of slavery, but the all-important consideration is that she is vindicated eventually through the generations of her progeny: slavery for “the alien” (הגר) gives way to long-term liberation in due course, and the nation whom she serves will be judged (in the form of Israel’s own slavery in Egypt). One recalls that the

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

same message is delivered to Abram in the previous chapter, Genesis 15.<sup>135</sup> In verse 13 specifically, YHWH informs Abram that his offspring will be an “alien” (גר [sg.]) in a land that is not theirs—Egypt, as it turns out—and that they will be oppressed (עונה) as slaves there for four hundred years. This is the bitter part. The sweet part of the promise unfolds in verse 14, which announces that judgment is to come to the nation they serve, and they will go out with great possessions. In this reading, the judgment against the “nation they will serve” is adumbrated when Ishmael abets Joseph’s slavery in Egypt, though the “great possessions” are notably lacking in Hagar’s own departure from her oppressors. In addition to this, the reader notes that the oppression coming to Abram’s descendants will not be experienced personally by Abram himself, but will come about long after his own day has passed (Abram is told, “But you will go to your fathers in peace; you will be buried with a good gray head” [v 15]). Likewise for Hagar—in an inverse way—despite whatever deliverance or redemption there may be for Ishmael in the long-term, her own fate for the time-being is oppression at the hands of Israel’s maternal forebear, Sarai.

As a final support for this line of interpretation, I note that the dynamic cycle of humiliation *and exaltation* of Joseph, Israel’s metonym, is anticipated in the story of Ishmael. One of the parallels between the two beloved sons, not yet observed in this discussion, are the similar editorial comments given during the final exaltation phases of both Joseph and Ishmael. The ending of Joseph’s story begins with Gen 39:21: “YHWH was with Joseph (וַיְהִי וְהָיָה אִתּוֹ יוֹסֵף);” thereafter the last two verses enumerate the ways in which Joseph prospered. In the same way, and in keeping with the other parallels and

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<sup>135</sup> Note that Genesis 15, like chapter 16, is usually considered to be J; but the specific verses in question, including 13–17a, are a likely addition to the story. This does not preclude an intentional literary link between the two chapters, however.

connections between the two figures, Gen 21:20 begins the conclusion of Ishmael's story—at least for the purposes of J and E—with the statement that “God was with the boy (וַיְהִי אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַנֶּעֱר);” then the narrator reports of Ishmael's prowess with the bow and his procurement of a wife from his mother's native land (21:20b–21).

The point is not to gainsay the covenant's centrality in Israel's exodus, nor to suggest that the exodus constitutes a biblical mandate for universal liberation. But it cannot be denied that there is something of a literary and theological resonance in Exodus from the Hagar and Ishmael narratives as well, one that includes God's deliverance of these non-covenantal figures. I am more sympathetic, then, with the perspective that Levenson offers elsewhere:

Here it is essential to avoid two extremes, each of which oversimplifies the issue, as extremes are wont to do. One extreme ignores the particularistic dimension, the chosenness of Israel, altogether and subtly universalizes the exodus story, as if all Egypt's slaves were manumitted in the exodus, if not all the world's slaves. The other extreme ignores the universalistic dimension of the exodus, the connection of the exodus with the character of the God who brings it about, as if only the Patriarchal Covenant enabled him to be moved by the pain and suffering of those in great affliction. In short, an adequate theology must reckon both with the chosenness of Israel and with what the liberation theologians tend to call the preferential option for the poor.<sup>136</sup>

This point of view develops a somewhat different emphasis on Ex 2:23–25 from the one examined earlier.<sup>137</sup> Having established that God's notice of Israel is a result of the patriarchal covenant—“the point is not that it is Israel's *suffering* that brings about the exodus, but that it is *Israel* that suffers”—Levenson allows also that God's attention is drawn in the first place to Israel's groaning in bondage: “the point here is that the pain of

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<sup>136</sup> Jon D. Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism*, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), 151.

<sup>137</sup> This essay, which originated as “Liberation Theology and the Exodus,” (*Midstream* 35:7 [1989]: 30-36), preceded the publication of Levenson's *Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son* (1993).

any slave can evoke sympathy in God; slaves need not be members of the covenantal community for God to be affected by their plea.”<sup>138</sup>

Yet even in this interpretation, Levenson is opaque about what it might mean for God’s sympathy to be evoked or for him to be affected by a slave’s plea if his intention is not to respond in some way—even if not through the memory and effectualization of a covenantal promise, which is the sole domain of the chosen people Israel. If it can be sustained that Hagar and Ishmael figure into God’s *response* through the exodus, then there is a need for a more detailed explanation, which is what I have attempted to provide here.

## VII.

I have noticed an ambiguity in Ishmael’s characterization in J and E. He has in common with the other non-chosen counterparts a proclivity for the periphery or wilderness that is not typical of the chosen sons. Yet there are certain considerations to be kept in mind in making this observation. Ishmael, unlike Cain or Lot, is not relegated to the periphery because of any immoral or foolish doing of his own, but rather through Sarai’s own jealousy—of Hagar (J) and Ishmael (E). Her command to have Hagar and Ishmael cast out is ratified by God because Isaac is the one through whom covenant offspring will be granted to Abraham (Gen 21:10–12 [E]). Yet this acknowledgment is accompanied by the pronouncement that Ishmael will become a nation, too, on account of his own status as Abraham’s seed (v 13).

And unlike Cain, Esau or even Sarai, Hagar does not respond to her unjust circumstances by seeking to equalize her status with that of her rival, but responds

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<sup>138</sup> Levenson, *Hebrew Bible*, 152.



instead to God's promise through her submission to Sarai. This is described in the present chapter as a "foundational act," one that establishes Hagar as an example of the proper human response to God's mysterious favor or disfavor. Hagar's tacit consent to God's almost unbearable will demonstrates the contrast between Hagar-Ishmael and their non-chosen counterparts who often seem to exhibit foolish behavior or in some way show themselves to be unfit or undeserving.

But I have argued that ambiguity can also be found in another facet of the Hagar-Ishmael narratives, that is, in the resemblance between their experiences and those of Israel. If so, one should not be surprised to find such a literary strategy in the J source in particular, which also portrays the sojourn of Abram and Sarai in Egypt with details redolent of the larger account of Israel's experience in Egypt (Gen 12:10–20): a famine sends the patriarchal family from the Promised Land to Egypt in search of food; the man's life is jeopardized by Pharaoh, the woman's life is not; both survive the threat by stratagem; YHWH afflicts Pharaoh with great plagues (נגעים); the patriarch has a confrontation with Pharaoh; and the family leaves with wealth gained during their sojourn in Egypt.<sup>139</sup>

In the case of Hagar and Ishmael, in turn, their lives seem to prefigure in microcosm God's plan revealed to Abram in Gen 15:13–14 (J). This passage announces that the patriarch's descendants would be an "alien" (sg. גר) in a land that is not theirs,

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<sup>139</sup> See Jon D. Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham: The Legacy of the Patriarch in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2012), 40; also, Yair Zakovitch, "And You Shall Tell Your Son..." *The Concept of the Exodus in the Bible* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1991).

and that they would be oppressed as slaves until God brings relief.<sup>140</sup> It is proposed furthermore that Ishmael's wilderness experience continues the analogy by foreshadowing Israel's own exodus and wanderings in the wilderness. The point is that the deliverance of Hagar and Ishmael, in addition to their suffering, prepare the reader for the reoccurrence of a similar pattern first in the Joseph novella and then in Israel's own bondage and exodus from Egypt.

In this connection, we note finally that our discussion of Hagar and Ishmael draws our attention to the important question of P's treatment of Ishmael, particularly in Genesis 17 and 25. What degree of continuity may we perceive in these passages with those studied in this chapter, and how has P engaged with the Hagar-Ishmael materials at its disposal? We will take up these questions in chapter three.

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<sup>140</sup> I note once again that Hagar and Ishmael have no participation in YHWH's promise to Abram of land.

### **Chapter 3 Particularity and Ambiguity In the Priestly Abrahamic Covenant**

#### **I.**

In the last chapter, I argued that Hagar and Ishmael function in J and E as relatively innocent exemplars of the non-chosen sibling or family representatives in Genesis, and positive models of human response to the inequities of divine mystery. One of the results of the mysterious divine will that they encounter, particularly in the E tradition, is their final expulsion from the community of Abraham. This is intended to explain the inheritance of the land promise by Isaac and his progeny instead of Ishmael.

The priestly treatment of Ishmael seems to identify with what is explicit in E, but only implicit in J: the notion that Ishmael is *not* to be Abraham's heir, at least as far as the covenant is concerned.<sup>141</sup> There are important differences in the way that P handles Ishmael in comparison with the accounts of J and E. For one thing, Ishmael is not expelled from the family of Abraham, either temporarily or permanently, but is available to assist Isaac in the burial of their common father (Gen 25:9 [P]). I note also that P features much more detailed and specific instructions concerning the heritages of Ishmael and Isaac than one finds in J and E. This is typical, of course, of the priestly penchant for

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<sup>141</sup> Understanding that the notice of Gen 25:5–6 may come from a redactor other than J or P: “Abraham gave everything he had to Isaac; but Abraham gave gifts to the children of the concubines that Abraham had, and sent them away from Isaac, his son, while he was still alive, eastward to the land of the east.”

careful and methodical explanation. And this is exactly what makes P's treatment of Ishmael so intriguing. Ishmael is to become the father of a great nation, but Abraham's multitude of nations shall issue through Sarah, not Hagar. The covenant is specifically designated for Isaac and not Ishmael, yet Ishmael receives along with Abraham the sign of the covenant in the form of circumcision.<sup>142</sup> Isaac is the chosen seed, but Ishmael occupies the author of Genesis 17 far more than the elect son does. If P has indeed crafted this chapter so carefully, then surely the reader will do well to respect these curiosities as indicators of P's intention to make sense of Hagar's son.

The primary objective of this chapter, then, is to examine the priestly representation of the Abrahamic covenant (Gen 17) and its significance for Ishmael. In doing so, I seek to address four questions in particular. First, how, and to what end, does P interact with J and E in terms of the Abrahamic covenant? A second question is related to the first: Why does God bless Ishmael using the language of fertility that so closely resembles Abraham's own promise for increase? Third, if Ishmael is excluded from the covenant, then why is he circumcised, considering that the ritual is emblematic of the covenant itself? Finally, what is the scope of the promise to Abraham that he is to become father of a multitude of nations?

One comprehensive conclusion that I will draw from our investigation is that the answers to all of these questions involve ambiguity, or perhaps better in certain instances, a kind of narrative *blurring*, that seems to aid in P's transition from the universal ambit of

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<sup>142</sup> Carol Bakhos recognizes this to be an inherent paradox (*Ishmael on the Border: Rabbinic Portrayals of the First Arab* [Albany: SUNY Press, 2006], 17).

the primeval history to the rather particular field of reference that unfolds in the Abrahamic covenant.<sup>143</sup>

## II.

I begin by considering the relationship between Genesis 17 (P) and the other relevant documentary source material, primarily J. Hermann Gunkel describes the material of Genesis 17 as “even less a ‘narrative’ than Gen 15.”<sup>144</sup> Narrative is not the author’s concern, says Gunkel, but rather “establishing facts and propounding ideas.” Recognizing that P is drawing from the covenant of J in chapter 15, Gerhard von Rad notices that P’s focus of presentation in the Abrahamic covenant differs considerably from that of J: “The Yahwist set God’s call in the midst of Abraham’s human situation, which became psychologically clear in Abraham’s answer and in the delineation of his fear;” on the other hand, “The P document . . . reduces Abraham’s call to the purely theological.” J describes God’s call and promise in a single verse (15:7), whereas P provides “a long, ponderous, and detailed speech by God in which the theological substance of the covenant with Abraham is defined.” But the actual making of the covenant, again by way of contrast with J, “is severe and solemn, almost in a vacuum. [But h]ow dramatically the Yahwist told of God’s coming!”<sup>145</sup> Of course one might respond to von Rad with the objection that J’s covenant is also “severe and solemn,” but von Rad’s point is well taken. P’s objective tends toward commentary and explanation

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<sup>143</sup> Credit is due to Suzanne Smith, who read an earlier draft of this chapter and has helped to point out this common factor in Genesis 17. I alone bear responsibility, of course, for any shortcomings in the observations made on this point.

<sup>144</sup> Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis* (Macon: Mercer Univ. Press, 1997), 263.

<sup>145</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 192-93; see also Sean McEvenue, *The Narrative Style of the Priestly Writer* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1971).

rather than description of events. It is true that this characteristic may be found throughout the Priestly tradition, yet there is every reason for precision in this chapter, since its connections and fulfillments are numerous and far-reaching in Genesis and beyond.<sup>146</sup>

In the next chapter I will entertain many of these connections and fulfillments in taking up the question of P's overall conception of the various covenants. Nevertheless, in order to appreciate better the objectives of Genesis 17—our present concern—it is necessary to make a few preliminary observations about the chapter within the context of the Genesis material of P. The first covenant in P, the Noahic covenant, is plainly universal in scope, pertaining to the whole of humanity.<sup>147</sup> It is only in P's second recorded covenant, with Abraham, that the covenant and promises are delimited around this patriarch and his progeny. According to the promises of chapter 17, Abraham will be father to a multitude of nations; he and his descendants through Sarah will receive the land of Canaan; and El Shaddai will "be God" to them. Within the context of P, the chapter is situated neatly between the introductions of Abraham's two celebrated sons: Ishmael, whose birth is noted at the end of chapter 16 (vv 15–16 [P]); and Isaac, whose origin is similarly described in chapter 21 (vv 1b, 2b–5 [P]). In fact, apart from a possible

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<sup>146</sup> See John A. Emerton, "The Priestly Writer in Genesis," *JTS* 39 (1988): 387. In his argument for the unity and integrity of P as a source, Emerton discusses many of these interconnections, including the use of El Shaddai, the fulfillment of Isaac's birth and circumcision (21:2, 4), the promise of the land (28:4), the repeated promise of multiple nations and royal descendants (35:11), and the reference to Abraham's covenant itself (Ex 6:4). In his recent monograph (*The Realignment of the Priestly Literature* [Eugene: Pickwick, 2009], 99), Thomas J. King argues for the prime position of Genesis 17 within the P narratives of Genesis, or "P<sup>N</sup>," by his terminology. For example, he observes that Genesis 17 is "the only substantial narrative within the central *toledoth* section" of P<sup>N</sup>.

<sup>147</sup> This is demonstrated not only by the pragmatics of Noah's family line, which constitutes the entire postdiluvian human existence, but also by the language of the command to "be fruitful and multiply" (9:1, 7), invoking creation (1:28); and by the reference to the creation of man in the image of God (9:6; 1:26–27).

P expansion in 19:29, the birth notices of Ishmael and Isaac provide the frame of Genesis 17 in P. This is consistent with the notion that P's conceit for the chapter is a qualification of Ishmael's role after his birth and a definition of Isaac's position in anticipation of his birth. And to all appearances, this section of P material has been placed in the midst of a continuous J narrative, whether by P or a later redactor, for the purpose of supplementing or perhaps correcting the impression that J would otherwise give on its own, that Ishmael may be Abraham's promised heir.

Levenson has adduced evidence in particular for a Priestly reshaping or adaptation of J's story of Hagar's flight from Sarai.<sup>148</sup> The essential elements of Genesis 17:20 are worth citing:

- a) As for Ishmael, I have heard you;
- b) I will bless him and will make him fruitful, causing him to increase exceedingly.
- c) He will be the father of twelve chieftains,
- d) And I will make of him a great nation.

In Gen 16:11 (J), Hagar's affliction inspires the name of her son, Ishmael; and in Gen 17:20a, God similarly responds to Abraham's plea on Ishmael's behalf with a suggestive reference to Ishmael's name. (One finds the same kind of exchange in Gen 21:17, E's version of the expulsion—or exclusion—of Hagar and Ishmael.)<sup>149</sup> Both in Gen 16:10 (J) and in 17:20b (P), the reference to Ishmael's name is accompanied by the promise of future progeny, and in very similar language:

“I will greatly increase your seed so that they cannot be counted for number.” (J)  
“I will bless him and will make him fruitful, causing him to increase exceedingly.” (P)

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<sup>148</sup> Levenson, *Death*, 97-98.

<sup>149</sup> Note that in this instance, God responds directly to the voice of Ishmael rather than Hagar or Abraham.

The reader will note that there is a significant difference in P's version of the statement—the additional mention of blessing. Nevertheless, it appears that P has recontextualized the J material. His motivation is possibly connected to his reading of the events depicted in J up to this point. According to the J sequence as it now stands—something of the original tradition could be missing—the reader may very reasonably assume that Ishmael is the intended heir of God's covenant with Abram. Genesis 15:4 merely records God's general promise to Abram that his own son would be his heir, and Hagar's conception of Ishmael follows closely (16:4).<sup>150</sup>

Levenson implies that P's strategy goes further. By focusing on the continuity between God's *promises* to Abraham and Ishmael, even promises that are associated with the covenant in J, P is able to distinguish between those promises and the covenant itself in order to identify, with care, Isaac as Abraham's heir and not Ishmael.<sup>151</sup> Not only does P look to paraphrase the promise given for Ishmael in Gen 16:10, he also reiterates the original form of J's promise, given in this case to Abram. Here I compare Gen 12:2 (J) and 17:20d (P):

“I will make of you [Abram] a great nation.” (J)  
 “I will make of him [Ishmael] a great nation.” (P)

The identification of Ishmael with God's promise of fertility to Abram has already occurred within J (cf. 12:2, 15:5; 16:10). Therefore P's move in this direction only serves to acknowledge what is already stated. The primary difference that P introduces, however, is that Ishmael is to become a great *nation*, whereas Abraham will be ancestor to a *multitude* of nations (17:4–6); and Abraham will bring forth *kings*, whereas Ishmael

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.



will only produce twelve *chieftains*.<sup>152</sup> The effect is to put Ishmael's preexisting identification with Abraham through fertility into relative terms.

In 17:19–21, P carefully distinguishes the fertility promise, which Abraham and Ishmael both receive, from the covenant, which belongs only to Abraham and Isaac. This is different from the first statement of the covenant to Abraham in verses 2–14, in which the covenant and fertility promise are stated together in verse 2, and then the covenant is explicitly defined in terms of fertility (vv 4–6), the promise to “be God” (v 7), and the land of Canaan (v 8). The covenant that Isaac is to receive implies all three of these components (vv 19, 21). Ishmael's promise in verse 20, by contrast, only includes the first element, fertility. This may help to explain P's mention of blessing in connection to the fertility promise that is shared both by Abraham and Ishmael (17:20b). (The connection between blessing and fertility is first introduced by P in verse 16, which twice mentions God's intention to bless Sarah through fertility.)<sup>153</sup> In J, there is no specific reference to fertility as a *blessing* for Abraham (or Ishmael); rather, it is simply an implicit component of the covenant. According to our reading, by describing Ishmael's fertility as a blessing, P is separating the issue of fertility from those other elements that are exclusively inherent in the covenant: “to be [their] God” and to possess Canaan. This accords with Westermann's interpretation of the use of blessing:

In V. 15–21 wird differenziert zwischen der Mehrungsverheißung, ausgedrückt mit dem Verb ‚segnen‘ und der Bundschließung mit dem Nomen *berit*. . . Wenn nun in V. 3b–8 die Mehrungsverheiß als *berit* bezeichnet wurde, hier in 19–21 aber die *berit* nicht mit Ismael aufgerichtet wird, obwohl er die Mehrungsverheißung erhält, sondern allein mit Isaak, dann zeigt das

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<sup>152</sup> For Gunkel (*Genesis*, 267), the twelve chieftains or “princes” derive from the Ishmael legend that is available to P and is expressed in Gen 25:13–18.

<sup>153</sup> See Claus Westermann, “Genesis 17 und die Bedeutung von *berit*,” *TL* 101 (1976): 168.

unverkennbar, daß P im 17. Kapitel einen Begriff berit aufbaut, der nicht mehr auf die Bedeutung ‚Zusage, bindende Versicherung‘ beschränkt sein kann. Denn eine Zusage, eine bindende Versicherung erhält auch Ismael. Die berit, die mit Isaak allein, nicht aber mit Ismael aufgerichtet wird, ist mehr und anderes als eine Zusage, es ist der Bund Gottes mit Abraham, der allein in der Linie Isaaks weitergeht.<sup>154</sup>

My interpretation is in line with Westermann’s observation that Isaac’s covenant is something more—something other—than the promise that Ishmael receives. This presumes either that P is reworking the J tradition that did not make such an explicit distinction in the first place, or, perhaps more likely, that P has replaced a J tradition of Ishmael’s exclusion from the covenant.

Michael Fox offers a different assessment. Fox maintains that the first covenant promise of fertility in verses 2–6 includes Ishmael and the other Abraham tribes, and that the additional covenant promises for land and that God would be God to Abraham and his seed (vv 7–8) pertain only to Abraham’s descendants through Isaac. But he asserts that verses 2–6 are not original to P, but instead constitute an ancient promise of posterity given by El Shaddai to all the Abrahamic tribes. P has taken over this ancient promise and reinterpreted it, correcting in verses 15–27 not J or E, but the posterity promise.<sup>155</sup>

Fox’s reading is problematic in my view. First, acknowledging that verses 15–27 reflect the structure of verses 1–8 in reverse—following McEvenue<sup>156</sup>—Fox understands that the second unit is a commentary on the first. But the chiasm that Fox recognizes includes the broader section 1–8, not just 2–6, and so if the second unit is correcting the

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 168-69.

<sup>155</sup> Michael V. Fox, “The Sign of the Covenant: Circumcision in Light of the Priestly *ô*t Etiologies,” *RB* 81 (1974): 588-89.

<sup>156</sup> McEvenue, *Narrative Style*, 158.

first, the framing verses, 1 and 7–8, make the strategy somewhat cumbersome and complex.

Second, Fox associates “El Shaddai,” mentioned in 17:1, with the ancient posterity promise that is shared by—“or at least applied to”—the Abrahamic tribes.<sup>157</sup> He mentions in a footnote that El Shaddai is known by the religio-ethnic group of Hebrews of which Israel was a part.<sup>158</sup> Fox’s suggestion, as I understand, is that the use of El Shaddai implies an older tradition that P engages and corrects. If so, one will readily concede that the divine appellation “El Shaddai” has origins that precede P or any other Israelite or Judahite source,<sup>159</sup> but this does not demonstrate the relative antiquity of a promise that “can hardly be P’s invention.” On the contrary, “El Shaddai” is P’s primary designation for the patriarchal deity,<sup>160</sup> and it is the case that every occurrence of El Shaddai in P appears together with P’s recurring verbs פָּרַח and רָבַח,<sup>161</sup> as is true in Genesis 17. The use of El Shaddai seems to confirm, then, rather than deny, the unity of P in Gen 17:1–8.

Third, Fox claims that verses 2–6 cannot originate with P because “P has little interest in foreign nations.” The reference, apparently, is to the plurality of nations that God promises to Abraham in verses 4–6. In response to this claim, one may cite the bulk

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 589.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., following Menahem Haran, “The Religion of the Patriarchs: An Attempt at a Synthesis,” *ASTI* 4 (1965): 42.

<sup>159</sup> See Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1973), 52–60.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>161</sup> Noted by Klaus Koch, “Šaddaj,” *VT* 26 (1976): 323, 325. The occurrences may be found in Gen 17:1b–6; 28:3; 35:11; 48:3–4. See also Emerton (“Priestly Writer,” 387), and the discussion in King, *Realignment*, 112–13.

of material that precedes this chapter, viz. the universal scope of the P material in Genesis 1 and 9, including the application of the *imago Dei* to all humanity (Gen 1:27; 9:6). It bears mentioning, too, that P is responsible for genealogical accounts in Genesis that concern the origins and records of other nations, indeed, all other nations.<sup>162</sup> Finally, I have already noted that these covenantal promises, fertility and land, are joined by J. If one can assume that P is familiar with J's account of Hagar's flight—and Levenson has shown that one can—there is no need for P to introduce another tradition to refute. His work is cut out already by the ambiguity of J.<sup>163</sup>

For P, the covenant really includes all three components: fertility, “to be (their) God”, and the land. The first of these, fertility, is a necessary but insufficient element that is extended also to Ishmael in the form of a blessing. This is similar to our reading of J and E from chapter two, by which I understand that God has favored Ishmael even though he is not chosen. In P, God expresses his favor toward Ishmael in the form of a fertility blessing and a promise of national greatness, but he is not chosen for the covenant. With this we are introduced to an element of ambiguity that is not altogether missing in the other sources. But, as I will argue, it is a feature of P's Abrahamic covenant that figures prominently, and for important effect, in several other aspects of Genesis 17.

Finally, and most importantly for our discussion of fertility and blessing, the mention of these concepts in connection with the specific verbs פרה and רבה in the *hiphil* constitutes an obvious allusion to the multiplication imperative of Gen 1:28, which also

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<sup>162</sup> Sons of Noah: Gen 10:1–7, 20, 22–23, 31–32; Ishmael: Gen 25:13–18; Esau: Gen 36:2–30.

<sup>163</sup> P's dependence on J is evident from the outset of Gen 17:1–3a, which alludes to Gen 12:1–4a (J). See Westermann, “Genesis 17,” 162.

follows a blessing: “God blessed them and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth. Subdue it and rule over the fish of the sea, the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.’” We turn our attention now to this theme.

### III.

Walter Brueggemann has asserted that the notion of fertility is central to the narrative theology of P,<sup>164</sup> and some of his findings will be useful for our consideration of the significance of Ishmael’s progeny blessing. First of all, Brueggemann notices that the full formula of “be fruitful and multiply. . .” (Gen 1:28 [P]) is restated, in various partial forms, throughout the P material of Genesis and beyond. The attested occurrences are as follows, according to the persons whom the formula references:

1. Adam (1:28)
2. Noah (8:17; 9:1, 7)
3. Abraham (17:2, 6)
4. Ishmael (17:20)
5. Jacob (28:3–4; 35:11)
6. Jacob and Joseph (47:27; 48:3–4)
7. Israelites (Ex 1:7)<sup>165</sup>

Commenting on the formula’s pertinence for Ishmael, Brueggemann emphasizes the subordination of Ishmael’s blessing to the promise for Isaac. He reasons that the Ishmael theme is a product of “the old tradition,” now used to reinforce God’s promise to Abraham in 17:2. Positing a sixth century context in which God’s promise “concerns restoration of all the Abraham-derived people from Babylonian subversience (sic),” he supposes that even the restoration of Ishmael serves to underscore God’s power and

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<sup>164</sup> Walter Brueggemann, “The Kerygma of the Priestly Writers,” *ZAW* 84 (1972): 397-413.

<sup>165</sup> See *ibid.*, 407 (with modifications).

fidelity.<sup>166</sup> These claims give short shrift to a formula that is primary not only within Genesis 17, but also, as Brueggemann himself has noticed, in the whole of P's Genesis. In the first place, it does not suffice to cite "an even greater promise to Isaac" (v 21),<sup>167</sup> because this does not account for the fertility blessing that P has Ishmael receive directly from God, but that Isaac does not.<sup>168</sup> Gerald Janzen notices that the fertility formula of Gen 1:28 is most fully reiterated to Ishmael out of all of its occurrences (17:20), and that the echo of God's promise to Abraham (12:2)—"I will make of him a great nation"—refers to Ishmael alone.<sup>169</sup> Secondly, the fertility formula makes no mention of "restoration," which would hardly fit Ishmael's literary situation in any case. Surely the cause for Ishmael's inclusion in this formula list is something of more consequence than what Brueggemann seems to acknowledge.

More positively, Brueggemann raises two important points about the formula: it pervades the P material in Genesis all the way to Exodus 1, and it is clearly related to

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 404. A similar perspective on the date, provenience and purpose of Ishmael's blessing in P may be found in Joseph Blenkinsopp, "Abraham as Paradigm in the Priestly History in Genesis," *JBL* 128 (2009): 225-41. *Pace* Blenkinsopp, a preexilic setting for P is preferred here (following, e.g., Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel: From its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile* [trans. and abridg. Moshe Greenberg; Chicago: Univ. Chicago Press, 1960], 180-84; Richard Elliott Friedman, *The Exile and Biblical Narrative: The Formation of the Deuteronomistic and Priestly Works* [Chico: Scholars Press, 1981]; Jacob Milgrom, "Priestly ('P') Source," *ABD* 5:456-57; Israel Knohl, *The Sanctuary of Silence: The Priestly Torah and the Holiness School* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995]; Avi Hurvitz, "The Language of the Priestly Source and its Historical Setting—The Case for an Early Date," in *Proceedings of the Eighth World Congress of Jewish Studies [1981]* [Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1983]; idem, "The Evidence of Language in Dating the Priestly Code," *RB* 81 [1974]: 24-56; King, *Realignment*, 3-124.)

<sup>167</sup> Brueggemann, "Kerygma," 404.

<sup>168</sup> Isaac, curiously, is the only patriarch who does not directly receive the covenant or any part of the Gen 1:28 formula in the Priestly narratives (cf. Gen 26:1-5 [J]).

<sup>169</sup> Janzen, *Abraham*, 52.

land theology. The first observation requires little commentary here, but the second is highly relevant—or irrelevant—for Ishmael. It turns out that in almost every passage that this formula is partially repeated to the patriarchs or their progeny, the specific mention of land is made, even if an explicit promise for land is not given. For Adam and Noah, the whole earth is intended. For the Israelites in Egypt, it is a foreign land that is filled by the multiplying Israelites. For Abraham and Jacob, the formula is tied specifically to the promised land of Canaan. But Ishmael is the only one for whom this fertility formula is completely unattached to land. I have noticed already that P does not expel Hagar or Ishmael in the way that the other sources do, thus removing them from the land of promise. But the expression of this partial formula in P, with the particular element of land missing, effects a similar result. A notable difference, of course, is that here it is *God* who does not include Ishmael in this aspect of his promise to Abraham, whereas Sarai (or Sarah) initiates the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael in the other sources J (Genesis 16) and E (Gen 21:8–21), and Abraham in J is at least complicit.<sup>170</sup>

Robert Neff, writing about the election of Isaac, provides a different perspective: “the problem of Ishmael and Isaac is not resolved by a negative act, the departure of Hagar and her son from the household of Abraham, but by a positive one, God’s choice of Isaac as the recipient of the covenant.”<sup>171</sup> One’s vantage point makes all the difference, clearly, but Neff’s observation does point out that P has removed the burden of

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<sup>170</sup> In fact, J has God send Hagar back to Sarai. In E, on the other hand, God gives his tacit approval to the plan, assuring a distressed Abraham (21:12).

<sup>171</sup> Robert W. Neff, “The Birth and Election of Isaac in the Priestly Tradition,” *BR* 15 (1970): 17.

mistreatment—not to say non-election—from Sarah and put it directly on the mysterious divine will instead.<sup>172</sup>

Another feature of this list ought to be mentioned. In the cases of Adam and Noah, the formula is applied universally to all mankind and even to all “birds, animals and every creeping thing” (8:17 [P]). But after Genesis 17, the formula is only given to Jacob, Joseph and the Israelites—the chosen. The formula serves to illustrate in this sense what is patently obvious otherwise, that the focus of Genesis narrows from the universal to the particular as it develops from creation to Abraham’s chosen seed. So, for example, in P the creation account relates the origins of all humanity and the Noahic covenant includes the universal promise not to wipe out the earth again. And after P’s Abrahamic covenant, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph are specified.<sup>173</sup> But more importantly, this suggests the importance of *Ishmael’s position* within this scheme according to P. Ishmael is the first and only non-chosen person in Genesis to participate in this fertility formula after Abraham has been similarly identified. It is intriguing that Gen 17:2 and 4 refer both to ברית “covenant” and the fertility formula with respect to Abraham. The reader perceives an association between the two, but they are nevertheless distinguished, no doubt for the purpose of setting Isaac apart from Ishmael in verses 19 and 20, according to my interpretation. After Genesis 17, the term ברית and the fertility formula are never used together in the same context again in P, though it seems clear that subsequent promises of fertility to Abraham’s descendants always imply the Abrahamic covenant, especially as it is delivered to Jacob.<sup>174</sup> With this in mind, it appears that the expression of the fertility

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<sup>172</sup> See King (*Realignment*, 69-72), on divine and human relationships in P.

<sup>173</sup> This is noticed, for example, in *ibid.*, 78.



formula to Ishmael has more to do with its occurrences from before Gen 17:2–9 than it does with the use of the formula after Genesis 17. That is to say, Ishmael is understood to belong to the general, universal fertility imperatives given to Adam and Noah, whereas Abraham and his line—Isaac, Jacob, Joseph—are equated with the special blessing of fertility that is connected not only to land but the covenant itself. And yet this observation can only be recognized in counterpoint to the broader theme that is even more explicit, that Ishmael is identified with Abraham by echoes of the older promises to Abraham from J as we have noted above, particularly from Gen 12:1–3.<sup>175</sup> The result is a kind of *blurred transition* from the universal to the particular in Genesis 17, centering on the persons of Abraham and especially Ishmael.

Another way of approaching this transitional ambiguity comes from scanning the list of the fertility formula occurrences in P from Adam to the Israelites. Here one notices that Ishmael is out of sequence: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Jacob, Israel. If Ishmael is identified with Adam and Noah, and Abraham with Jacob and Israel, we might expect Ishmael's fertility formula to be mentioned before Abraham's. One possible explanation is that P is making a statement about the nature of the Abrahamic covenant itself. By including Ishmael in the fertility formula, a motif that J had associated with the Abrahamic covenant all along, P includes Ishmael into the background and context for the special covenant with Abraham. The entire chapter concerns the narrowing of focus from all humanity to Abraham, and so Ishmael's interlocking fertility formula might be read as an integral part of what it means to move in this direction. In order to go from the universal to the particular, to limit the scope of God's focus, some allowance for the

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<sup>174</sup> Gen 28:3–4; 35:11; 47:27; 48:3–4.

<sup>175</sup> Credit is due to Levenson for his suggestion of the priority of this broader theme.

newly excluded must be made. It may be that Ishmael is for P a type, or a first-born, among this group.

Another possibility is that Ishmael is blessed in this way merely by virtue of his sonship through Abraham. After all, the fertility formula is conveyed to Ishmael as a blessing in response to Abraham's plea on Ishmael's behalf (v 18). The use of the *lamed* preposition draws the reader back to Abraham's request,<sup>176</sup> so that the fertility blessing is God's response to Abraham. The petition—"Let Ishmael live before you!"—is part of Abraham's response following God's announcement that Sarah would be blessed with a son, and that she would be the one to bring forth for him a plurality of nations and kings of peoples. In the context of God's announcement and Abraham's initial response, prostrated laughter, his request concerning Ishmael is ambiguous. This is the only occurrence of this kind of construction (חיה לפני) in the Bible, and the meaning is not entirely clear. One wonders whether Abraham is speaking primarily from an inability to believe the promise, wishing instead that Ishmael could fulfill the covenant, or from compassion for his son Ishmael.

The rabbinic responses to verse 18 demonstrate the range of possibilities.<sup>177</sup> One interpretation is offered by Rashi, for example, who supposes that Abraham does not feel worthy of such an extraordinary blessing and therefore humbly offers to reduce God's promise by accepting Ishmael as his heir instead. The thirteenth century commentator

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<sup>176</sup> See GKC §167a, 505. Jesús-Luis Cunchillos ("Genèse, 17,20 et KTU 2.10:5-7. A propos de *šm<sup>l</sup>*," *RB* 92 [1985]: 380) contrasts the use of the preposition in this context from its putatively similar function in an Ugaritic letter, concluding that here it is alluding to what precedes through ellipsis: ". . . *l'yišmā'ēl* est un équivalent de «venons maintenant à ce qui te préoccupe et parlons d'Ismaël. Eh bien, à ce sujet, je t'ai écouté»."

<sup>177</sup> See the discussion of these opinions in Levenson, *Death*, 99.

Hezekiah ben Manoah (Chizquni) gives a similar explication that accounts for Abraham's dubious question: "can a son be born to a man a hundred years old?" (v 17), suggesting that Abraham is satisfied with the son already born. The most interesting reading for our purposes, however, is that of rabbi Moses ben Nahman (Ramban), also writing in the thirteenth century. For him, God's announcement of a son through Sarah signals the possible death of Ishmael, and it is for this reason that Abraham must plead that his other son would live.

Levenson, too, notes that these various readings may reflect an intentionally ambiguous passage, but he develops in particular the thread introduced by the last interpretation. Bearing in mind the recurring theme of the death of the beloved son in Genesis, Levenson infers that Abraham's appeal likely is instrumental in preventing the premature death of Ishmael, and that the aversion of his demise here in Genesis 17 is linked to the more dramatic expression of the same motif in Genesis 21 (E).<sup>178</sup> I would add to this that Ramban's interpretation of Abraham's request most closely matches the response offered by God in verse 20 concerning Ishmael. Just as one finds in E, here in P the prospect of the birth of a son through Sarah makes Ishmael redundant and unnecessary. At issue is the question of what will become of Ishmael, who represents a threat to the inheritance of Isaac. When Hagar is at the point of giving up on her son's survival, God responds: "Arise, lift up the boy and hold him by your hand, for I will make of him a great nation" (21:18 [E]). The promise is connected to the boy's survival in the very next verse: "God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went and filled the waterskin with water and gave the boy a drink" (21:19). In a similar way, the angel of YHWH assures Hagar through a fertility promise when her own life is in

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<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

jeopardy in the desert (16:10 [J]). Now in Gen 17:18, it is Abraham himself who pines for the life of his son, and God responds again with the promise of Ishmael's *posterity*. If this connection is meaningful, then Abraham's response, "Let Ishmael live before you!", does not betray lack of faith so much as concern for the welfare of his son, and Abraham is concerned with life just as much as the fulfillment of an unlikely promise. I have already mentioned that in P Sarah does not bear the burden of Hagar's mistreatment, as in J, or of the deadly expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael, as in E. Abraham's own culpability in these episodes is less clear, but it should not be missed that P does not have Abraham acquiesce in these sins against Ishmael, but rather has Abraham pleading on Ishmael's behalf. The blessing that results is altogether more pleasant than what befalls Ishmael and his mother in J or E.

#### IV.

Perhaps it is fitting that Abraham's request concerning Ishmael is that he would *live* (יחיה) before God, since life and death are of primary importance throughout the Priestly corpus. P's priority on life is most often recognized in connection with the purity laws.<sup>179</sup> Jacob Milgrom in particular has explored the theme in Priestly legislation, concluding that life is associated with holiness, and death with impurity.<sup>180</sup> In P, the impurity can come by way of a corpse, scale disease, or genital discharge—all associated in one way or another with death. And there is justification for detecting similar concerns within P's Genesis narratives as well. Brueggemann has found that the fertility formula is

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<sup>179</sup> See, e.g., King, 72-73.

<sup>180</sup> See Milgrom, *ABD* 5:456-57. See also his introduction in idem, *Leviticus 1-16* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1991); and idem, "A Prolegomenon to Leviticus 17:11," *JBL* 90 (1971): 149-56.

central to the kerygma of P, and that it begins in P's account of creation (Gen 1:28).<sup>181</sup>

There we find eight occurrences of the root חיה in the context of the same fertility formula that is mentioned later twice in P's Abrahamic covenant. And we recall that life and death are a main focus of P's first covenant, given through Noah, which also exhibits the fertility formula and is bestowed on humanity following the mass destruction of all things living as consequence for the filling of earth with violence. By adumbration of my next chapter, I note for the present some of the injunctions of that covenant:

You must not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. For your blood—your life—I will require a reckoning; from every animal and from man I will require it, each one for the life of another. Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his own blood be shed (9:4–6).

The central preoccupation of P's Noahic covenant is life and death, expressed through the respect of all life and preservation specifically of human life. Tikva Frymer-Kensky understands that the meaning of “murder” is inherent in the term חמס as it is used in Gen 6:11 and 13 (P) as grounds for the flood. It is this kind of חמס that must be stamped out according to P. “Our best way to find out the nature of the evil [that caused the flood],” reasons Frymer-Kensky, “is to look at the solution given to control the evil, i.e., to the laws given immediately after the flood.”<sup>182</sup>

One should not be surprised to find the same concerns again in P's Abrahamic covenant, where the issue of “life” in the form of birth or offspring also predominates. Some have noticed that the Abrahamic covenant in P has emphasized this component of the covenant over other aspects, notably land, which is the driving impetus of the

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<sup>181</sup> Walter Brueggemann, “Kerygma,” 413.

<sup>182</sup> Tikva Frymer-Kensky, “The Atrahasis Epic and Its Significance for Our Understanding of Genesis 1–9,” *BA* 40 (1977): 152.

Abrahamic covenant in J (15:7–21).<sup>183</sup> The use of circumcision as a sign of the covenant, then, is completely appropriate. The connection between circumcision and fertility (or life) is obvious. Not only is the ritual linked both explicitly and implicitly with procreation in Genesis 17, but there is a consensus that circumcision has its origins in fertility or marriage ceremonies and as an apotropaic device to ward off evil.<sup>184</sup> Exodus 4:24–26 records an enigmatic episode that seems to illustrate both of these functions: Moses' wife Zipporah, having circumcised her son, uses the term “bridegroom of blood,” and her act is effective in preventing YHWH from bringing death. The use of circumcision as a symbol of the covenant in a chapter that is so focused on life and progeny, then, is entirely suitable. And Abraham's request that Ishmael should *live* before God anticipates Ishmael's own circumcision.

Nevertheless the specific application of circumcision to Ishmael remains unclear. If circumcision is a sign of the covenant, and if Ishmael is excluded from the covenant, why should he be circumcised? This is a question that has stymied interpreters. Gunkel, for instance, who emphasizes that P's author is concerned “with establishing facts and propounding ideas,”<sup>185</sup> contends nevertheless “P made the error of having Ishmael circumcised as well.”<sup>186</sup> Christopher Heard proposes that Abraham could be conspiring to circumvent Ishmael's exclusion through careful observance of the stipulation to

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<sup>183</sup> E.g., John Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1975), 289; George Coats, *Genesis, with an Introduction to Narrative Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 134.

<sup>184</sup> See Robert G. Hall, “Circumcision,” *ABD* 1:1026.

<sup>185</sup> Gunkel, *Genesis*, 263.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, 267.

circumcise all the members of the house.<sup>187</sup> And Bruce Vawter conjectures that the covenant that includes Isaac but excludes Ishmael is of a different kind from the covenant of circumcision that Ishmael and the other male members of Abraham's house receive.<sup>188</sup> These postulations lack merit, for the most part, and may be dismissed.

Westermann's discussion of the meaning of ברית may be more fruitful. According to Westermann, ברית takes on an additional nuance after its first occurrence (v 4a), where its basic definition is simply "guarantee" or "assurance" (*Zusicherung oder Versicherung*). In verse 7a, the sense is more indicative of a continuing, institutional relationship between God and his people (*Bund*).<sup>189</sup> Emphasizing that ברית does not lose its first meaning of "binding assurance," Westermann explains that the scope of the term is merely extended. He claims that this kind of "term extension" may be due to the nature of Hebrew, which occasionally uses the same term to describe both an act and its result.<sup>190</sup> Westermann later goes on to identify verses 9–14, which set out the requirements of circumcision, as the inauguration of a reciprocal action series between "I" and "you." The repeating nature of this relationship cycle thus "in die Geschichte hinein erstreckt," as generations after Abraham both affirm and participate in the *Bund*.<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> R. Christopher Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001), 77.

<sup>188</sup> Bruce Vawter, *On Genesis* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1977), 224.

<sup>189</sup> Westermann, "Genesis 17," 165–66.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 166. Westermann uses the example of און, which can mean both "crime" and "punishment". On this point, Westermann concurs with Walther Zimmerli ("Erwägungen zum «Bund» Die Aussagen über Jahwe-ברית in Ex 19–34," in *Wort–Gebot–Glaube: Beiträge zur Theologie des Alten Testaments, Walther Eichrodt zum 80. Geburtstag* [Zürich: Zwingli Verlag, 1970], 173), who also understands that ברית functions as a synthetic term that suggests both a promissory oath and an act that constitutes a relational sphere.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., 167.

It seems probable, then, that the circumcision acts of Ishmael and all of the other servants of Abraham's household, present and future, serve as affirmations, symbols, or *signs* of the special relationship that God began with Abraham. In other words, the circumcision of all male members of the household serves as the abstract sign of the covenant, even though not all of those male members are specifically *included* in the covenant. By comparison, one will note that even the גר among the Israelites is not to eat leaven on Passover (Ex 12:19), and the slave has to be circumcised to eat of the Passover (Ex 12:44). In all of these instances the foreigner must conform to the Israelite customs to function within the Israelite fold. The sign does not indicate the affiliation of slaves' own progeny with the covenant per se, but rather suggests an identification with God's relationship to Abraham by virtue of their own membership in the Abrahamic household. In this way, Ishmael can be excluded from the covenant, yet still bear in his flesh the sign that otherwise commemorates the *Bund* between God and Abraham.

In all of this, it appears that P is striving to give theological meaning to the concept of circumcision, which, heretofore, had been a longstanding and multivalent tradition with much broader application than P would have for it. Pressed into the service of covenant by P, circumcision is used as a symbol to identify and commemorate God's promises to Abraham. That the symbol can even be borne ambiguously by those outside the covenant, including Ishmael, brings us finally to the question of the "multitude of nations" and plural "nations" referred to in Gen 17:4–5 and 16 as the heritages of Abraham and Sarah, respectively.



## V.

In general terms, an interest in broad-scale procreation is consistent with what is found elsewhere in Genesis passages from P.<sup>192</sup> I have already commented on the fertility formula and its repetition in the universal accounts of creation and the flood and have noted also the priestly penchant for detailed genealogical records that concern all the peoples of the earth. Let us turn our attention, then, to God's promise to Abraham to make him the "father of a multitude of nations" (לֹאֲבֵ הַמּוֹן גּוֹיִם). One finds that the interpretation of this phrase is every bit as ambiguous and "blurred" as any of the other questions we have examined so far pertaining to Ishmael. The sense in which Abraham is to be a "father" to these many nations is an open question.

At first blush, it may seem clear enough that the multiple nations prophecy is fulfilled by Abraham's physical descendants who become nations: the Ishmaelites, Midianites, Edomites, and other descendants of the sons mentioned in Gen 25:2—if this is indeed P material—in addition to the Israelites. The question of Abraham's lack of heir is a predominating theme in the Abraham cycle, and the revelation that a *multitude of nations* will issue from Abraham provides the ultimate resolution to a confounding biological dilemma. Moreover, one might argue that the crowning development of Genesis 17 is the unexpected and absurd pronouncement that Abraham miraculously will have *another* son, in addition to Ishmael, and now through the elderly Sarah (v 17). This can be understood as an inchoate fulfillment of the multitude of nations prophecy that continues to gain traction, synchronically speaking, through the notification (outside of

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<sup>192</sup> Ted Hiebert points out that P concentrates primarily on procreation in the ancestral age, in keeping with the Priestly theology in the primeval material, and offers descendants as the "foremost blessing" given to Israel's ancestors (*The Yahwist's Landscape: Nature and Religion in Early Israel* [New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996], 100).

P?) that Abraham went on to have many other sons through another wife and several concubines (Gen 25:1–6). Some variation of this view is commonly accepted.<sup>193</sup>

The problem with this, of course, is that Sarah too receives a promise for nations, *plural* (Gen 17:16), thus limiting the potential nations to Edom and Israel.<sup>194</sup> And even Edom is excluded if one considers that the promise is reiterated to Jacob in Gen 35:11 (P): “A nation and an assembly of nations will come from you, and kings will come forth from you . . .” It is possible to conceive of Israel as two nations, yet as Fox astutely observes, the division of the Israelite kingdom and the resulting multiplication of kings would hardly constitute a blessing in the eyes of P.<sup>195</sup> And in any case, Gen 28:3(P) portrays only Jacob as father.

Furthermore, both Gen 28:3 and Gen 35:11 (also P) anticipate an *assembly* (קהל) of nations. This designation, like המון (17:4–5 [P]), suggests not just multiple nations but many. In fact, both terms generally refer to the members of a larger group. To carry it further, the word המון is frequently used with reference to the collective people of a nation,<sup>196</sup> which suggests that the combination המון גוים in 17:4–5 could be intended to convey a multiplicity, something like “a nation of nations.” Such a reading is further supported by the syntax of 35:11, גוי יםקהל גו, rendered in the JPS as “A nation, yea, an assembly of nations,” which closely approximates the sense of 17:4–5 as well. For this

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<sup>193</sup> See, e.g., Ze’ev Weisman, “National Consciousness in the Patriarchal Promises,” *JSOT* 31 (1985): 70 (n. 27); Samuel Driver, *The Book of Genesis*, (London: Methuen, 1920), 186; Derek Kidner, *Genesis* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1967), 129.

<sup>194</sup> Note that Gen 17:16 LXX has Isaac as the object of these promises rather than Sarah, but the result is the same: multiple nations coming not only from Abraham, but even more specifically through his promised son through Sarah.

<sup>195</sup> Fox, “Sign,” 590.

<sup>196</sup> Cf. 2 Sam 6:19, 2 Kgs 7:13, Isa 5:13, Ezek 32:12.

reason, even if the promise to Abraham were not limited further by the promises to Sarah and Jacob, whose lineages include fewer national patriarchs, the physical progeny of Abraham seem to fall short in this category of an exponential abundance of nations, at least on the basis of the line of Abrahamic descendants that are specified in Genesis.

For Fox, the recurrence of the formula in these various instances, and particularly for Jacob, whose descendants hardly constitute an assembly of nations, demonstrates that the formula was never intended “for the sake of the context.”<sup>197</sup> It is instead an ancient, independent tradition that has been used here apparently because of its connection to circumcision, which P has sought to appropriate. But if so, Fox does not explain why the formula is “of some importance to P,” or how P intends the formula to operate in these contexts. It would seem that some other explanation is necessary to account for these promises.

Understanding that P’s origin is in the Jewish dispersion, J. G. Vink attributes P’s emphasis on the Abrahamic covenant to the symbolism of Abraham for the Jewish race spread all over the Near Eastern world.<sup>198</sup> Following J. Roth,<sup>199</sup> Vink avers that Abraham’s racial progeny “is in this covenant far too important for a single people to issue from him.” In fact, it is precisely Abraham’s *ethnic* character that gives the motive for P’s emphasis on the Abrahamic covenant over the “far too limited” Sinai covenant. For Vink, the covenant with Abraham, by contrast with that of Sinai, is not limited in scope to one nation, but rather bears continuity with P’s account of Noah, which is

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<sup>197</sup> Fox, “Sign,” 590.

<sup>198</sup> J. G. Vink, “The Date and Origin of the Priestly Code in the Old Testament,” *OTS* 15 (1969): 90.

<sup>199</sup> J. Roth, “Thèmes majeurs de la Tradition sacerdotale dans le Pentateuque,” *NRT* 90 (1958): 711.

“unlimited in space and time and in its turn linked with the universal scope of the creation story.”<sup>200</sup> I am sympathetic with these observations that P’s Abrahamic covenant develops organically in some way from P’s accounts of creation and the Noahic covenant.<sup>201</sup> And I am in accord with Vink’s important recognition of a universal scope in all of these texts that belies the more popular presentation of P as primarily self-interested. Vink’s language of unlimited “salvation” is out of place in this context,<sup>202</sup> but it is true that these passages hardly convey the idea that only the covenanted nation has access to the knowledge of God.

Nevertheless, Vink may have pushed this line of reasoning too far, particularly in his emphasis on Abraham’s ethnic identity which comes to serve as “the mirror held up to the wide-spread Jews who recognized themselves in the patriarch traveling across Mesopotamia and from Mesopotamia to Canaan.”<sup>203</sup> One possible way to understand Vink’s allusion to the ethnic identity of Israel in the Diaspora is to acknowledge that the postexilic Priestly Code reflects Israel’s reality during the time when many of the normal characteristics of a *gôy* are lacking, including, notably, a specific territorial affiliation.<sup>204</sup> Thus, according to Ronald Clements, there is a movement in P away from J’s promise that Abram would become a great *nation*, and instead he is to become a *host* of nations.<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> Vink, “Date,” 90.

<sup>201</sup> This issue is developed in chapter four.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid. Abraham’s story in P has been similarly treated recently by Joseph Blenkinsopp, “Abraham as Paradigm in the Priestly History in Genesis,” *JBL* 128 (2009): 225-41.

<sup>204</sup> But cf. Dt 26:5, which attributes nationhood to Israel while they are still in Egypt. See Ronald Clements, “גוֹי *gôy*,” *TDOT* 2:427.

What is meant, apparently, is that Abraham becomes all of these other nations, as it were, through mixing or assimilation. But this can hardly be the intention behind P's proud promise!

Finally, if we bear in mind that the term גוי can refer to groups smaller than what is suggested by the typical translation “nation”—even in some instances referring apparently to *individuals*<sup>206</sup>—perhaps the problem may be solved. After all, P reports an extensive list of subgroups descending from Esau in Genesis 36, enumerating particularly the chiefs of verses 15–19. Could each אלוף represent a separate גוי? If so, a similar equation would have to apply to the sons of Jacob, considering that he also receives a corresponding promise for a progeny of גוים, even a קהל גוים (Gen 35:11 [P]), that would necessarily exclude Esau or Edom and leave only Israel. If so, perhaps the tribes of Israel represent a קהל וימג, not only for Jacob but also for Abraham.

According to Gunkel, P includes this initial promise to Abraham because he has in mind Ishmael and Esau, and because, whereas J and E always think only of one people, Israel, in these promises, “in his national pride [P] thinks of Israel alone as a whole ‘community of peoples’.”<sup>207</sup> In my view, this explanation still accounts best for the data relating to Abraham's fatherhood.

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<sup>205</sup> Ibid., 431. The promise for multiple nations is found in (P) Gen 17:4 and 35:11; but cf. (J) Gen 12:2, 18:18 and Num 14:12, which refer to a single nation.

<sup>206</sup> See Gen 20:4 and Ps 43:1. See Jon D. Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham: The Legacy of the Patriarch in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2012), 53.

<sup>207</sup> Gunkel, *Genesis*, 264.

## VI.

This chapter has pursued the priestly re-presentation of the Abrahamic covenant and its implications for Ishmael. Four questions in particular have occupied the discussion. The first problem I have undertaken is that of the relationship between P, on the one hand, and J and E on the other, with respect to the Abrahamic covenant and the Abrahamic cycle. Noting that the covenant includes three specific components—fertility, that God would “be (their) God,” and land—I have found that P allows Ishmael the blessing only of fertility, since it is given already to Ishmael in J, but limits the other two covenant components to the chosen son, Isaac. In this sense, P’s ambiguous portrayal of Ishmael is similar to that of J and E, who also present Ishmael as a son who is favored but not chosen.

The second question is closely related and concerns the remarkable similarity between Ishmael’s fertility blessing and Abraham’s own promise for multiplied progeny. I have noted that Ishmael’s blessing is consistent with a fertility formula that he has in common not only with Abraham, but also with many other figures throughout Genesis (P). By comparing other instances of this formula, I have found that Ishmael is the only one who receives the fertility formula without any reference to land whatsoever, thus underscoring the emphasis on Isaac as the true heir of the land promised to the patriarchs and not Ishmael. The effect is reminiscent of the deadly expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael known to varying degrees in J and E: in all instances, Hagar or Ishmael are removed in some way from the Abrahamic household and their land. Nevertheless one also finds that the juxtaposition of the particular covenant between God and Abraham with the similar blessing of fertility for Ishmael signals a recognition of Ishmael and those whom he

represents outside of the covenant. This could be an instance of what we have called “narrative blurring” because of the interlocking sequencing of the fertility formula as it is expressed both to Abraham (particular) and to Ishmael (universal). The point is that the particular covenant is given in the context of Ishmael, and the newly excluded is *included* in a blessing of the covenant.

In addressing the third question, the problem of Ishmael’s circumcision, I have argued that the emphasis on fertility is not an insignificant move, but is consistent rather with P’s theology of life. This theology may be found not only in Abraham’s plea, “Let Ishmael live before you!”, but also in this symbolic ritual. Circumcision itself points to fertility—life—and identifies the circumcised (sometimes somewhat ambiguously) with God’s relationship to Abraham by virtue of membership in the Abrahamic household. Those who, like Ishmael, find themselves in the household of Abraham but would not be included otherwise in the covenant through biological descent bear the mark of the covenant as a means of commemorating the *Bund* between God and Abraham. The point is not that the household slaves or foreigners are identified with the Abrahamic covenant—it is clear that *Isaac* will be the one whom the covenant promises will involve—but rather that these outsiders participate in the covenant to the extent that they commemorate the covenantal sign. The degree to which this legal technicality ought to be read as a theological symbol is difficult to demonstrate on its own terms, but in light of other factors demonstrating P’s apparently universalistic bent, the reader does well to take notice.

Another factor that I have given special attention to in this chapter has been P’s declaration of the scope of Abraham’s fatherhood of “a multitude of nations.” By

recasting the J promise that Abraham would become “a great nation” into a promise for a “multitude of nations,” P’s presentation of Abraham gives a suggestion of universality, even if the scope of the universal application is narrowed from Ishmael, Isaac and Esau (under Abraham) to Esau and Isaac (under Sarah), and finally to the tribes of Israel (under Jacob). (At issue here is the related question of the seemingly concentric nature of the Priestly patriarchal narratives, a subject for investigation in the next chapter.)

And this is, in the end, perhaps the most remarkable result of our study on P’s Abrahamic covenant. It seems that at every turn one finds some hint of paradox, narrative blurring, or ambiguity. P’s reputation for deliberate and methodical explanation would seem to rule out pure happenstance. And though it is difficult and perhaps unwise to attribute purposiveness to every twist and turn and the resulting cascade of interpretive possibilities, the reader may discern in P a certain “constructive force,” following Sternberg’s phrase, in the ambiguities of Genesis 17.<sup>208</sup> This force works artfully through Ishmael to describe and define the parameters of God’s relationship with Abraham and the broad scope of their particular covenant.<sup>209</sup>

Nevertheless, we should not marvel, perhaps, at P’s predilection for ambiguity in Genesis 17. Sean McEvenue, contemplating the structure of the flood story in P, writes: “One constantly feels that structure is present, but it is so overwoven and interlaced with different systems of echo and repetition that the final effect is of a universe of thought which is completely mastered and unified, but whose pattern remains elusive. This is the

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<sup>208</sup> Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1985), 227.

<sup>209</sup> Cf., again, Levenson, “Universal Horizon,” 143-69.



essence of the priestly style, the secret of its force and fascination.”<sup>210</sup> No doubt Genesis 17 exhibits something of this elusive force and fascination that is so characteristic of P.

In the next chapter, I will investigate more carefully the “force and fascination” of P’s covenantal scheme, giving attention especially to priestly conceptions of the transition from the universal to the particular through covenant.

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<sup>210</sup> McEvenue, 81.

## **Chapter 4 Covenant and Context in P**

### **I.**

The last chapter provided the occasion to compare some of the connections between P's Noahic and Abrahamic covenants in our pursuit of Ishmael's function in Genesis 17. One thing becomes clear as a result of that analysis. If we are to understand Ishmael's situation in the Abrahamic covenant, it will be necessary to plot out P's covenantal schema in order to appreciate the broader structure and Ishmael's movement within that structure. The specific concern here, of course, is with the relationship between the covenant in Genesis 17 and the other covenants described in P, but a survey of the general covenantal architecture will be necessary to shed light on our topic. At issue are two questions. First, how many covenants are there in the Priestly source, and how are they organized? It is clear that the covenants with Noah and Abraham play a major role for P, but the priestly representation of the Sinai revelation is more complex, and the covenant with Phinehas appears to play a comparatively minor role in the schema. One possibility that I pursue is that the various covenants "nest" within each other, matryoshka style, or as a pattern of concentric circles. Such an arrangement facilitates well the universal scope of Priestly theology, conjoining both the universal Noahic covenant and the particular Abrahamic covenant, and thus affording space for Ishmael the Noahide even in the context of the Abrahamic covenant.

The second question that will occupy our attention concerns the lasting significance of the covenants. If these covenants are properly understood in terms of concentric circles, and in light of the chronological development from Noah to Abraham, do the various covenants remain in effect even after other covenants have been established in P? This question is of no small import, particularly for the covenant with Noah, because of its implications for P's broad theological perspective. My contention is that P's adaptation of history through mythological terms implies that the Noahic and Abrahamic covenants—each known to P by the label ברית עולם—remain active for P. Furthermore, the figure of Ishmael and his treatment by P in the Abrahamic covenant reflect the Priestly ideal for the protection of human life that is championed so prominently in the Noahic covenant and throughout the four periods of P's history, represented by Adam, Noah, Abraham, and Moses. Another way to say this is that the relationship between the priestly covenants, indeed, even the four periods of P's history, *cannot* be fully understood apart from Ishmael.

I begin with a brief review of the modern scholarly representations of P's covenantal structure.

## II.

### EWALD

One of the most penetrating descriptions of this material from the nineteenth century is that of Heinrich Ewald, who refers to the Priestly tradition as the “Book of Origins” in his *Geschichte des Volkes Israel*.<sup>211</sup> “The chief aim,” states Ewald, “was unmistakably to survey from the resting-place which that epoch had reached, the entire

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<sup>211</sup> The first edition appears in 1843; all subsequent references are to the fourth edition, *The History of Israel* (trans. Russell Martineau; London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1883).

mass of historical matter in its greatest extent, and to trace it back up to the ultimate commencement of all creation.”<sup>212</sup> The work is properly compared to the Greeks’ pursuit of the history of all nations and ages after the Persian War. Ewald goes on to observe that the Book of Origins privileges Israel as the center of all nations, and the great final *telos* of history. And it is precisely from this vantage point that the Book of Origins “overlooks the wide circle of all nations, and from this final purpose it boldly rises to the earliest conceivable beginning of all history.”<sup>213</sup> These attempts to survey the origins of human history and indeed the cosmos are easily combined, according to Ewald, with the common theory of four ages of humankind. Applied to Israel’s situation by the Book of Origins, the period since the patriarchs represents the final age, the patriarchs the penultimate, and the humans living after and before the flood are the second and first ages, respectively.<sup>214</sup>

For Ewald, the historian’s “principle of arrangement” of the details of every period of the primeval history was “to dispose of those nations or families that do not lead down direct to Israel,” so that Israel could emerge as a special people. This arrangement typifies the work’s entire structure.<sup>215</sup> So, for example, the author organizes peoples from the most distant to nearest: Japheth, Ham and Shem (Gen 10); and, “in like manner. . . he first separates off all Terah’s and Abraham’s descendants who do not lead

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<sup>212</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 80.

down to Isaac's family, especially Ishmael (25:12–18),”<sup>216</sup> and so on with Esau and Jacob.

With his reference to the “single great infinitely ramified pedigree” of the Book of Origins, Ewald discerns a tree with roots in Adam and then Noah and finally in the “youngest branches” of the author's contemporaries and their families. This tree led to the three Patriarchs, then to the twelve tribes, and finally Levi most likely served as a continuation of the pedigree.<sup>217</sup>

## WELLHAUSEN

In the work of Ewald's student, Julius Wellhausen, one can easily trace the “theory of four ages” in his famous use of the siglum “Q” (= *quattuor*) to denote the source characterized by God's four covenants with Adam, Noah, Abraham and Moses. This source, known also as the “Book of the Four Covenants,” forms the basis or *Grundschrift* of his Priestly Code, which divides history into three periods, each introduced by a covenant:

The covenant with Adam (Gen. i. 28–ii. 4) is the simplest; it is not called a covenant, but it is the basis of the second covenant with Noah (ix. 1–17), which modifies it in important particulars, and brings it nearer to the present age. The covenant with Abraham (Gen. xvii.), which alone is ratified with the succeeding patriarchs, does not apply to the whole of mankind, but only to Abraham's seed, and especially to Israel.<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>218</sup> Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1994; orig. 1883), 338.

In terms of the relationship of these covenants to each other, Wellhausen seems to understand that the Noahic covenant both overturns and builds on the Adamic covenant (Wellhausen's Adamic covenant, which is "not called a covenant," would not be recognized by later interpreters as a covenant at all). He calls the first covenant the "basis" for the second, but whereas "[t]he first parent of mankind is enjoined to use a purely vegetable diet, the father of mankind after the flood receives permission to slaughter animals." (The new entitlement is limited, however, by the prohibition not to eat flesh with the blood or to shed the blood of man.)<sup>219</sup> But the Abrahamic covenant, on the other hand, appears only to build on the Noahic covenant for Wellhausen, who explains that "[w]hat is said to Noah remains good for Abraham; but to the latter God promises that his posterity by Sarah shall possess the land of Canaan. . . . Further, God reveals Himself to Abraham as El Shaddai, and under this name He also manifests Himself to Isaac (xxviii. 3) and Jacob (xxxv. 11), repeating to them the promise of the possession of the land." This is an important new covenantal component for Wellhausen, who points out that up to now God only reveals himself to the patriarchs by the name El Shaddai. And, of course, going further, God's "Israelite name," YHWH, is known only in the time of Moses (Ex 6:2, 3).<sup>220</sup> This is typical of what Wellhausen perceives to be a pattern in the Priestly Code, a pattern with certain lines traced emphatically and systematically. He notices, for example, that the progression of these covenants is marked by Sabbath, rainbow, circumcision and, finally, sacrifice. That the meaning and significance of these symbols are thought to carry over and reflect the reality of exiled

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<sup>219</sup> Ibid.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

Jews—who, like the patriarchs, are deprived of cultic sacrifice—suggest further that Wellhausen interprets the covenants as having lasting significance in the Priestly Code, without supersession.<sup>221</sup>

Perhaps the most important organizational factor in these covenants for Wellhausen, though, is that the three periods and their three corresponding covenants are understood to be “preliminaries” to the fourth period and fourth covenant: “The narrator everywhere has an eye to the Mosaic law, and the thought of it determined the *plan* which comes so prominently into view in his representation of the origins of human history.”<sup>222</sup> This preparation is seen particularly in the patriarchal period, where, for example, the explanation of the institution of circumcision in Genesis 17 “throws into the shade and spoils the story out of which it arose, namely, the promise of the birth of Isaac as a reward to Abraham of the hospitality he showed Jehovah at Hebron.”<sup>223</sup>

## PROCKSCH

It is in the work of Otto Procksch that we first find the suggestion of a pattern of concentric circles in P’s conception of the covenants. For him, the covenants with Noah and Abraham are both established in the pattern of the ברית עולם and express “Das ewige Grundverhältnis zwischen Gott und Mensch” through this nesting pattern.<sup>224</sup> Procksch does not find in P a recognition of a third covenant under Moses, but only the national

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<sup>221</sup> The particular application of Priestly symbols to the Jews in exile, now commonplace, seems forced. Not all exilic sources speak of circumcision, for example, and in any case it remains unclear how such a hidden symbol could serve as a marker of cultural identification.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid., 340.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

<sup>224</sup> Otto Procksch, *Die Genesis: übersetzt und erklärt* (Leipzig: Deichertsche, 1924; orig. 1913), 518.

and cultic fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant, which is both personal and “kultlos.” In this way, it is only at Sinai that P unfolds God’s nature in a way that is already known to J and E in the patriarchal period. Yet P is able to go farther than J with the Abrahamic covenant—though both portray that covenant as an *Ausblick* of Sinai—because the very term ברית holds the concept of a revealed religion, the nucleus of which is the union of God and man.

Procksch observes in P that the whole land of Canaan as a possession of Israel—that is, Israel’s vested right—is an always unfulfilled ideal. And the close connection between deity and land in P is an echo of an ancient concept recognizable in P’s sources.<sup>225</sup> Several decades after Procksch, Karl Elliger would go further by claiming that P’s divine ordering of history is centered around possession of the land of Canaan, which represents the material and ideological basis on which the lives of the people and the cult as the most important function, can develop.<sup>226</sup> Nevertheless the centrality of the land promises can be detected in other, earlier Pentateuchal sources, as Procksch indicates, and the special connection between land and cult is perhaps not so explicit as Elliger would suggest.

## VON RAD

Von Rad follows Procksch in finding concentric circles in P.<sup>227</sup> Von Rad’s circles, however, are not arranged strictly according to the covenants (he denounces

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<sup>225</sup> Ibid., 519.

<sup>226</sup> Karl Elliger, “Sinn und Ursprung der priesterlichen Geschichtserzählung,” *ZTK* 49 (1952): 129.

<sup>227</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *Die Priesterschrift im Hexateuch literarisch untersucht und theologisch gewertet* (Berlin: Kohlhammer, 1934), 166-89.



Wellhausen's *liber quattuor foederum*, finding in the first putative covenant with Adam no theological justification for a self-limitation of God),<sup>228</sup> but rather by his recognition of repetitions within the narrative, centering in three major units: "Der Weltkreis," "Der noachitische Kreis," and "Der abrahamitische Kreis."

These repetitions are occasionally worked out in an overlapping pattern of development. For example, in *Der Weltkreis*, the Sabbath is not a matter of compulsion or law, "sondern vielmehr um den Hinweis auf eine Ruhe, die vor dem Menschen da war und auch ohne ihn da ist."<sup>229</sup> This Sabbath rest is a mystery too great for all humanity, but in P's "innersten Offenbarungskreis"—the zone that features the most intimate relationship between God and Israel—the mundane life of God's people is bound up in this same mysterious rhythm of the divine work of creation.

In the *noachitische Kreis*, the repetition from the *Weltkreis* appears to undo the effects of that circle. Von Rad notices that P's description of judgment is not an earthly tribunal, as in J, but a cosmic catastrophe of unimaginable proportion, one that corresponds with the processes of creation: the heavenly ocean breaks apart, and the waters of תהום swell up from below; in fact, "der Erdkern, der durch die Scheidung von den Wassern ehemals herausgestellt war, wieder ins Chaos zurückfiel, daß Gott willens war, seine Schöpfung wieder zurückzunehmen" (my emphasis).<sup>230</sup> In this sense, it would not appear that von Rad understands the Noahic circle to "nest" within the cosmic circle. Yet there remains continuity from the old order, as von Rad goes on to observe that P, in

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<sup>228</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid., 172.

a distinctive theological timidity that is appropriate for reporting the destruction and re-creation of life, now also puts great emphasis in this eon on God's *repeated* blessings, including the instruction to embrace fertility that both ensures and reaffirms the propagation of humanity after its destruction.

The Noahic circle eon is not like the first, but stands under the new symbol of “des Kampfes der Kreaturen.” There has been a collapse, and the resulting disorder is not fully resolved, demonstrated by the animals' dread of humans, and humanity's own proclivity for violence against humanity. For P, human society is enjoined to respect or protect life—a commitment that loosely follows the establishment of the Noahic covenant: henceforth all creatures preserved from the disaster should be safe.<sup>231</sup> The divine will for salvation is understood by von Rad to be written by priests for the whole Noahic community. Its covenant—“im engeren Sinn des Wortes nicht mehr teilt”—is not *with* an earthly partner now, but *given to* an earthly partner.<sup>232</sup> In a similar way, for von Rad the Table of Nations following the Noahic covenant is not intended to highlight the “Bruderschaft aller Völker,” as much as to determine the relation of God to humanity.<sup>233</sup> Therefore it is best to understand von Rad's depiction of these two circles in terms of God's progressive plan for salvation history.

Turning to the “abrahamitische Kreis,” von Rad treats here both the Abrahamic covenant *and* the Sinai covenant. For him, the distinction in P between the patriarchal times and the Mosaic epoch is made clear by the idea that YHWH appears to Abraham,

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<sup>231</sup> Ibid., 173.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid., 174. This is supported by the suffixes on ברית that relate exclusively to God (e.g., Gen 9:11, 15; 17:2, 4, 7, 9, 10, 13).

<sup>233</sup> Ibid., 175.

Isaac, and Jacob as “El Shaddai,” but in Moses’ day as YHWH (Ex 6:3). Though Wellhausen’s *liber quattuor foederum* is dismissed, von Rad acknowledges the difficulty in determining that P is not a *liber trium foederum*, acknowledging that only the Noahic and Abrahamic covenants are “solennen Bünden.” That concession notwithstanding, von Rad has no trouble in describing the relationship between Abraham and Moses in P: the Mosaic era of a new covenant can only be inaugurated in light of the covenants with Noah and Abraham; for in light of the heavy emphasis on the Abrahamic covenant, the Sinai covenant could hardly bring anything fundamentally different. Sinai does not represent a *new* basic setting for God and his people, but rather the constitution of their permanent relationship. So it is that in von Rad’s conception of P’s innermost circle, the two covenant signs, circumcision and Sabbath, symbolize promise and fulfillment.<sup>234</sup> While von Rad admits of “ein innerer Fortschritt” between Abraham and Moses, it is a historical progress—promise to fulfillment—that cannot be compared to the “heilsökonomischen Fortschritt” from Genesis 9 to 17. And it is finally in Moses that P demonstrates “that the cult which entered history in the people of Israel is the goal of the origin and evolution of the world. [For] creation itself was designed to lead to this Israel.”<sup>235</sup>

It is unfortunate, perhaps, that von Rad does not describe in closer detail the relationship between these two solemn covenants, Genesis 9 and 17. We are told little more than that “das große Neue” that brings God’s revelation to Abraham is the promise of unexpected offspring and the concomitant special divine relationship with Abraham’s

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<sup>234</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>235</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (2 vols.; New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 1:233-34.

seed. Von Rad's conclusion is one that we seek to qualify in the present study: "Damit hat P die große universalistische Schau abgeschlossen und wendet sich nun der schmalen Linie der Erwählung zu."<sup>236</sup> Von Rad himself tempers the remark with the admission that the reader perceives an unmistakable tendency toward the universal within P's particularistic theological sphere—"Israel"—whenever the promise is made to the patriarchs that they will become "peoples" (plural). Nevertheless, this is merely a general element of the tradition, according to von Rad, and it is one that P shares in common with the Yahwist, who pursues the idea further than P.<sup>237</sup> Surely von Rad has in mind J's introduction to salvation history in Gen 12:1–3, and especially the blessing of 12:3b. But the universal scope of that blessing has been questioned,<sup>238</sup> and if P has understood 12:3b in this way, it may have been a misinterpretation—or a reinterpretation—of its source. And if so, I would argue that it is a reinterpretation that is not as dependent on J as von Rad has suggested.

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<sup>236</sup> *Priesterschrift*, 177.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid. Along these lines, von Rad warns that P is not rigid and lifeless, without dimension—its intertwined traditions must be respected (176). Cf. Martin Noth, (*Überlieferungsgeschichte des Pentateuch* [Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1948], 255), who notes that P's narrative material is often derived from traditions with obscure prehistories.

<sup>238</sup> As I note in the previous chapter, von Rad's implied translation of וּנְבָרְכֻ is "they will be blessed." But there is strong evidence that this verb ought to be rendered as a reflexive, "they bless themselves" (see especially R. W. Moberly, *The Theology of the Book of Genesis* [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2009], 148–56), thus attenuating the universal scope in J's account of Abraham's call in Gen 12:1–3. See also Erhard Blum, *Die Komposition der Vätergeschichte* (Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament 57; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1984), 349–59.

## EICHRODT

Walther Eichrodt shows similarities with both Wellhausen and von Rad. In his inaugural dissertation,<sup>239</sup> Eichrodt speaks of *Vierbundesbuch* and the three world periods of divine intervention that reflect God's preparatory work leading to the Mosaic period—God judges humanity by the deluge, then returns to humanity through Abraham's election, which enables the development and full revelation mediated through Moses.<sup>240</sup> Later, in his *Theology of the Old Testament*, Eichrodt praises P's sharp definitions and formulations, typified in a strictly religious use of the term ברית for the purposes of salvation history. Thus, in P YHWH does not כרת "cut" the covenant, after the human way of doing it, but rather הקים "establishes" or נתן "gives" it. This is important for Eichrodt, because it signifies the sublimity of the covenant giver, who bestows his covenants as gifts of grace. And the extraordinary, sublime and distinct nature of these covenants is confirmed by P's designation of them as ברית עולם, valid for all ages: P's grant of salvation does not depend on man's behavior, but "[God] maintains it for all time by virtue of his eternal steadfastness."<sup>241</sup> Therefore Eichrodt follows Wellhausen and von Rad in recognizing that one covenant does not supersede the other, and that all are joined together in eternal interconnection.

Eichrodt most closely resembles von Rad with his evaluation of the relationship between Abraham and Sinai. For Eichrodt, as for von Rad, YHWH's covenant with Israel

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<sup>239</sup> For the acquisition of the *Licentiatenwürde* from Ruprecht-Karls-Universität in Heidelberg (*Die Priesterschrift in der Genesis* [Halle: Alfred Töpelmann, 1915]).

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>241</sup> *Idem*, *Theology of the Old Testament* (2 vols.; London: SCM Press, 1961), 1:56. Here the author cites Gen 9:16; 17:7, 13, 19; Ex 31:16; Lev 24:8; Num 18:19; 25:13.

is *concluded* already with the Abrahamic covenant. Sinai is a (rather anticlimactic) “renewal and refashioning” of Abraham’s covenant, not a separate instance of covenant making. The point, Eichrodt contends, is that YHWH’s divine covenant, the decisive one for Israel’s history, is completed *before* YHWH’s revelation of the detailed ceremonial law.<sup>242</sup> This is a reflection of the religious nature of ברית, the goal of which is a “real community between God and man (Gen 17:7, 8, 19).”<sup>243</sup> Since Abraham’s covenant has no attached cultic practices—circumcision is merely a sign of the covenant—it is best to understand human performance as a means by which humanity can enter into YHWH’s gift.

Out of this conclusion, Eichrodt is able to derive the “profoundest significance” from P’s refusal to use the ברית designation for the revelation at Sinai.<sup>244</sup> He understands that the introduction of the cultus at Sinai represents the expansion of the Abrahamic covenant to the whole nation. In this way the institution of the cultus at Sinai is analogous to the rite of circumcision: neither makes the covenant effective through human performance; they have, rather, the character of a sacrament—a means of God’s unfolding himself to humanity. Therefore for P the ברית is not a bilateral contract but a (seemingly one-sided) “institution created by divine omnipotence.” P represents, then, the full development of the notion of sovereignty, present always from the first elements of the tradition of a covenant between God and man. Only here in P is there full protection

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<sup>242</sup> Ibid.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid., 1:57.

<sup>244</sup> Eichrodt is speaking here, presumably, of the entire revelation at Sinai as a collective. Note, however, that ברית can be applied in P to specific stipulations within the Sinai revelation (Ex 31:16; Lev 2:13; 24:8).

from legalistic “misinterpretation,” thereby precluding any abuse of the covenant law to satisfy human selfishness.<sup>245</sup>

One such abuse that Eichrodt identifies, quite significantly, is that of particularism:

P is indeed the only Israelite writer to tell of a divine covenant with the human race before Abraham. The narrative of the covenant with Noah, Gen. 9, certainly came down to him from an ancient tradition. . . but the fact that he in particular was the one to adapt it and to fit it into his narrative as he does, shows the *universalist* character of his faith. According to him not only Israel, but the whole of humanity stands to God in a ברית relationship, and theirs too is a ברית possessing eternal validity.<sup>246</sup>

Even if Eichrodt has shown his Protestant disdain for human performance, he is to be lauded for not imputing such “selfishness” to P—he is right about the unbefitting use of such a label for P, but less so about performance—and it is not insignificant that Eichrodt can identify P’s universalist character. It is a concept that Eichrodt considers further as he affirms Procksch’s statement that P has “stretched out a mighty panorama of the course of history as this is seen from the vantage-point of the covenant concept,” and that God’s relationship with humanity has been realized “in two concentric circles,” all humanity under Noah and Israel alone under Abraham.<sup>247</sup> The eternal nature of these covenants, according to Eichrodt, comes from P’s preference for the “statutory, the consistent, [and] the eternally binding,” correlating with P’s vision of the transcendent, eternal God.

Nevertheless, for Eichrodt this presentation of salvation history does not yet reach its zenith because a “closer union with God” is only possible for outsiders by way of

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<sup>245</sup> Ibid.

<sup>246</sup> My emphasis, *ibid.*, 1:57-58.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:58, and see Procksch, *Genesis*, 518-19.

entry into Israel, and in the manner of the slaves and foreign-born among Abraham's household—adoption through circumcision into the community. Though Eichrodt seems to appreciate more fully than others the universal vision of P, his statement about entry into Israel in the manner of slaves or the foreign-born does not adequately consider P's presentation of Ishmael, who does not gain entry into Israel at all (that is the point), but does know something of a "closer union with God" through his fertility blessing (Gen 17:20).

## NOTH

Noting that the theological content of P is not obtained from the graphic description of events or conversations but in the use of technical language for objects and institutions, Martin Noth reasons that it is more challenging to identify the basis of P's theology than it is in the case of J.<sup>248</sup>

Noth contends that even though the author of P may have been a priest—especially considering his detailed information concerning cultic institutions—P is not a distinctly Priestly work, to the extent that a "priestly spirit" ought to entail fidelity to an *existing* scheme of cultic institutions. P's author instead portrays an ideal cultic order realized at some point in distant antiquity. Noth does not make clear why the orientation toward an ideal cultic order rather than a contemporary set of cultic instructions should mitigate the Priestly nature of the work,<sup>249</sup> but his observation is useful in pointing out the consistently expansive horizon of P's outlook, which manifests not only in the Priestly cosmogony and *toledoth*, but also in these idealized cultic instructions.

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<sup>248</sup> Martin Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1981), 239.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid.



Credit is due to von Rad, according to Noth, for advancing our knowledge on the subject of P's theology,<sup>250</sup> but Noth does not agree that P's emphasis may be found in the structure of the work, however systematically conceived and executed it may be. Instead, the major organizational features of the history of God's acts—including the three “concentric circles” moving from outer to inner—are established already by the tradition.<sup>251</sup> Noth surmises that the “orders” related to von Rad's “circles” are less attributable to a comprehensive historical view than to the variegated details of the older tradition. The final shape, then, according to Noth, is not deliberate. So, for example, P's covenant with Abraham, including promises for land and progeny, derive from the old tradition (Gen 15 [E]), but the sign of the covenant comes from P's own day, when circumcision as the distinguishing mark has significant value among the exiles. And in Genesis 9, the rainbow, incorporated by P as the sign of the covenant, “certainly already belonged to this (Flood) story in the older Narrative tradition.” Yet Noth does not explain why his conjecture should be taken as a certainty, nor does he adequately account, more broadly speaking, for the appearance of “systematically conceived and executed” (accidental) orders in P's representation of the narrative.

## **CROSS**

Much more in line with Wellhausen, von Rad, and Eichrodt is the work of Frank Moore Cross, Jr., who recognizes in P “a powerful tendency to the periodization of history.”<sup>252</sup> Cross affirms that P has divided history into four ages—Adam, Noah,

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<sup>250</sup> Ibid.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid., 240-41.

Abraham, and Moses—and that each period after creation is designated by a covenant.<sup>253</sup>

Each of these periods is connected by the fertility blessing formula, which occurs first at creation and again with each of the covenants.<sup>254</sup> Cross perceives, too, that the use of the blessing formula is related to the promise of land and Israel's multiplication in it.<sup>255</sup>

Beginning with the Noahic covenant, P's schema separates the new age from the first age by the deluge, and then institutes a universal covenant with all flesh (Gen 9:1, 17); God is known here as Elohim. The second postdiluvian age begins after the migration of Terah and Abraham. The Abrahamic covenant is described by Cross as both “deeper and narrower” than the Noahic covenant because more is revealed to fewer: God, now revealed as El Shaddai, binds himself with an eternal covenant to give Canaan to Abraham's seed, and “to be a god” to Abraham and his offspring. Abraham receives the sign of the covenant and “at the same time a law of the covenant”—in addition to an obligation to maintain El Shaddai's cult. (With this, Cross contradicts Procksch, who declares the Abrahamic covenant to be *kultlos*; and Eichrodt, who also finds no attached cultic practices, emphasizing that circumcision is merely a sign of the covenant.<sup>256</sup> The position represented by Procksch and Eichrodt better recognizes the promissory nature of the Abrahamic Covenant, especially in P—note that P's other covenantal sign, the

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<sup>252</sup> Frank Moore Cross, Jr., *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1973), 295.

<sup>253</sup> Note, however, that P does not mention Adam until Gen 5:1.

<sup>254</sup> See Gen 1:28, 9:7, 17:6 and Lev 26:9.

<sup>255</sup> As we note in the previous chapter, Ishmael is the *only one* to receive the fertility blessing without any additional promise or mention of land (Gen 17:20).

<sup>256</sup> Cross, *Canaanite Myth*, 296-97; cf. Procksch, *Genesis*, 518; and Eichrodt, *Theology*, 1:57.

rainbow, entails no law—and is therefore preferred here.<sup>257</sup>) Finally, Israel's exodus from Egypt separates the Abrahamic age of the Fathers from the period of Sinai. This culminating era is foreshadowed by the blessing formula and by the Sabbath, both found in creation, and, "with increasing intensity," by the Noahic and especially the Abrahamic covenants:

On the one hand, each pointed forward as the genealogies and the scope of the recipients of the covenants funneled down; on the other hand, in each the divine self-disclosure and promises expanded. While both the Noahic and Abrahamic covenants remained valid, each was provisional, a stage on the way to God's ultimate covenant and ultimate self-disclosure.<sup>258</sup>

Although the universal and patriarchal covenants feature compact covenant formulae, Cross observes, at Sinai the formulae are spread over the entire, massive Sinai pericope from Exodus 19 to Numbers 10:10.<sup>259</sup> In the prologue to the Sinai covenant, Ex 6:2–9, we have the disclosure of the tetragrammaton, thus completing the sequence:

Noahic Covenant/Elohim,  
Abrahamic Covenant/El Shaddai,  
Mosaic Covenant/YHWH.

And the common covenant blessing occurs in the Sinai covenant in its proper place at the close of the covenant formulary: "I will make you fruitful and multiply you and confirm my covenant with you" (Lev 26:9).<sup>260</sup>

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<sup>257</sup> The functional connection between these two signs, featuring nearly identical language, is clear (cf. Gen 9:13b and 17:11b). Another term for "promissory covenant" is introduced by Moshe Weinfeld, who refers to the covenants with Abraham and David as "grants" ("The Covenant of Grant in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East," *JAOS* 90 [1970]: 184-203).

<sup>258</sup> Cross, *Canaanite Myth*, 297.

<sup>259</sup> Cross (ibid.) notes that P's covenant formulary actually begins even earlier with the prologue of Ex 6:2–9 and ended effectively with the blessings and curses of Lev 26:3–45.

<sup>260</sup> Cross's translation, ibid., 298.

Therefore Cross can claim that the priestly covenant with Abraham “has been shaped strongly by . . . theological constructions,” and “is fitted into a sequence of three covenants, each adumbrating its successor, each funneling down to the people Israel.”<sup>261</sup> For Cross, the promise that is first revealed to Abraham, that El Shaddai “will be a god” for Abraham and his descendants (17:8), is magnified at Sinai through the concept of YHWH’s abiding presence in the midst of the people, using the Old Canaanite verbal root שכן “to tent” or its substantive משכן “tabernacle.” In Cross’s formulation, this is at the very heart of P’s covenantal theology, “whose entire cultic paraphernalia and cultus was designed to express and overcome the problem of the holy, transcendent God visiting his pervasively sinful people,” since Yahweh’s “tabernacling” alone could make full Israel’s redemption.<sup>262</sup> For Cross and others, this ideology would have accounted for the problem of the ruptured Zion theology after the Babylonian exile.<sup>263</sup> But Benjamin Sommer observes that שכן can refer to “permanent dwelling” in biblical Hebrew (Isa 34:17; Jer 7:7; Ezek 43:7, Ps 37:27; 1 Chron 23:25), and that the tension between immanence and transcendence has a timeless nature, one that can hardly be pinpointed to

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<sup>261</sup> Ibid., 270.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid., 299-300.

<sup>263</sup> Cross, “The Priestly Tabernacle,” in *The Biblical Archaeologist Reader* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1961), 228; cf. Ronald E. Clements, *God and Temple: The Idea of Divine Presence in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965), 116-20; G. Ernest Wright, “God Amidst His People: The Story of the Temple,” in *The Rule of God: Essays in Biblical Theology* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1960), 71; and Trygve Mettinger, *The Dethronement of Sabaoth: Studies in the Shem and Kabod Theologies* (Lund: Almqvists Wiksell, 1982), 96, 113.

a particular historical context.<sup>264</sup> Acknowledging the influence of Moshe Idel and Mircea Eliade, he writes:

[A]n interpreter should first of all at least consider the possibility that we can understand a religious text as manifesting religious intuitions that are essentially timeless. Attempts to portray religious ideas as reactions to historical factors often avoid grappling with these ideas' deep humanistic significance. From a methodological point of view, this sort of historicist reductionism represents (and here I introduce a technical term that is not used frequently enough in discussions of method in religious studies) what we may call a *cop-out*.<sup>265</sup>

And in any case, as Sommer also notes, any dating of P will be somewhat speculative—the difficulty in interpreting the data is shown by the lack of consensus on this question—and in light of this, the interpreter is wise to read the texts apart from the presupposition of a post- (or pre-)exilic setting.

Furthermore, though there is little doubt that P's cult is concerned with purity before God, YHWH's communion with Noah and Abraham, apart from the cult, calls into question the claim that the Priestly cult is primarily “designed to express and overcome the problem of a holy and transcendent God visiting his pervasively sinful people.”<sup>266</sup>

The primary difficulty with Cross's explication of P's organization and theology, however, is that P's Mosaic “covenant” does not conform at all with the Priestly Noahic and Abrahamic covenants. There is no discrete section of material that can be identified as the Priestly covenant, and no explicit mention of the term ברית, much less an אֹת ברית, representing the entire revelation as one finds in the Noahic and Abrahamic covenants.

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<sup>264</sup> Benjamin D. Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2009), 96-98.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>266</sup> A broader concern, as I discuss below, is the continuing victory of life and order over death and chaos.

The blessing formula that Cross identifies is indeed a major priestly theme, but not one that appears uniquely in the covenants. Moreover, the progressing sequence of self-revelation which culminates in Ex 6:2–4 is problematic: the Noahic covenant features no special introduction of the deity as “Elohim” as one would expect from the pattern in Gen 17:1 and Ex 6:2. Indeed, though YHWH recalls his appearance to the patriarchs as “El Shaddai” (Ex 6:3), he has no such recollection of his appearance to Noah as “Elohim” as Cross’s pattern might suggest. YHWH reflects on the establishment of his covenant with the patriarchs (Ex 6:3), but does not mention the covenant with Noah; nor does he give indication here of another, new covenant with Moses. It seems that the entire notion of a Priestly covenant at Sinai, as Cross presents it, rests on dubious grounds. This, of course, calls into question his idea of a multi-tiered system of funneling (or concentric) covenants extending beyond Noah and Abraham.

## **BLINKINSOPP**

Joseph Blenkinsopp’s analysis challenges some of these traditional appraisals of P’s covenantal architecture. Observing that P’s history is primarily a framework for the progressive establishment of Israel’s cultic institutions, Blenkinsopp draws attention to the formulaic expressions in P that give notice of the execution of a command or the completion of a task (for the cultic framework explains their prevalence).<sup>267</sup> It is particularly in the three instances of the conclusion formula that Blenkinsopp identifies a “triadic structure” demonstrating the importance to P of the exact fulfillment of a predetermined plan: 1) The creation of the world (Gen 2:1, 2); 2) The construction of the

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<sup>267</sup> Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Prophecy and Canon* (Notre Dame: Univ. Notre Dame, 1977), 60.

wilderness sanctuary (Ex 39:32; 40:33); and 3) The establishment of the sanctuary in the land, and the division of the land among Israel's tribes (Josh 19:51).

This triadic structure presents a disquieting problem, Blenkinsopp explains, for those who understand Genesis 17 to be of decisive importance as a theological datum and as a critical structural element: "That Abraham fulfilled the command to circumcise Ishmael, Isaac, and all his household is indeed explicitly noted in the P formulaic manner (Gen 17:23; 21:4), but that is all."<sup>268</sup> It is the *promissory* nature of the Abrahamic covenant—for land and divine presence—that accounts for this, because it does not include the fulfillment of a predetermined plan. Blenkinsopp differs from Cross with his recognition of the Abrahamic covenant's strictly promissory nature; but like Cross, he maintains that the promise of divine presence (to "be their God") is fulfilled in the sanctuary's construction and the establishment of the cult in the wilderness. This, according to Blenkinsopp, explains P's lack of an independent version of the Sinai covenant: "What happened at Sinai is. . . explicable only in the light of what happened in the archaic period, what passed between God and those just men Noah and Abraham."<sup>269</sup> That is to say, understanding the covenants with Noah and Abraham as promissory is the key to interpreting Sinai, which, for P, is focused entirely on the establishment of the cult as the necessary condition for God's presence with his people—the essence of the covenant. "The triadic structure of P, therefore, *subsumes* the promissory covenant in the

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<sup>268</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid., 61-62. See sources cited therein, including Walter Beyerlin, *Origins and History of the Oldest Sinaitic Traditions* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1965); Walther Zimmerli, "Sinaibund und Abrahambund," *TZ* 16 (1960), 268; and Klaus Koch, "Die Eigenart der priesterschriftlichen Sinaigesetzgebung," *ZTK* 55 (1958), 36-51.

setting up of the sanctuary and the occupation of the land” (my emphasis).<sup>270</sup>

Blenkinsopp does not explicitly address the proposition of a narrowing funnel within the Priestly covenant structure, but his conclusion implies that Sinai is *not* a concentric circle within the broader circles of Abraham or Noah, but is properly understood rather as the *telos* of those promissory covenants for progeny, land, and the divine presence. P’s covenants with Noah and Abraham are “subsumed,” as Blenkinsopp has it.

Blenkinsopp goes on to describe P’s reinterpretation of the covenant concept from his earlier sources: whereas P’s sources recognize two covenants, that of Abraham and that of Israel at Sinai, P’s two covenants are with Noah and Abraham. The result is that the “dispensation of grace to Israel” is given alongside “another offered to the nations which is chronologically and logically anterior.”<sup>271</sup> Here, again, Blenkinsopp conceives of P’s covenants between Noah and Abraham not in terms of concentric circles, but instead in linear terms, perhaps as parallel lines.

Setting aside for the moment the dependence of Blenkinsopp’s hypothesis on the attribution of the Joshua material to P,<sup>272</sup> one might question the conclusion, common both to Blenkinsopp and Cross, that the primary purpose of the cult is to enable and accommodate God’s presence among his people. The Priestly record of God’s presence with Noah, Abraham, and Jacob may represent evidence to the contrary.<sup>273</sup>

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<sup>270</sup> My emphasis, Blenkinsopp, *Prophecy*, 62.

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>272</sup> This conclusion is far from settled: see, most recently, Peter Weimar (*Studien zur Priesterschrift* [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008], 10-17).

<sup>273</sup> Credit for this observation is due to Jon Levenson.



## LOHFINK

Norbert Lohfink, among others,<sup>274</sup> puts an emphasis on P's representation in terms of myth.<sup>275</sup> Even though the Priestly narratives follow the major features of the old Pentateuch narratives, which give the reader information about the past,<sup>276</sup> P's description is so clear and so orderly that it *must* be prioritized first of all according to principles of aesthetics.<sup>277</sup> This is demonstrated in P's well-conceived chronological system, its variety of structural systems (particularly the comprehensive divisions of *toledoth*), and in its favored method of presentation in pairs: e.g., detailed descriptions of creation and flood, Noah and Abraham as the two recipients of a covenant, theophanies to Abraham and Jacob, Moses and Aaron leading Israel through deliverance and wanderings, and so on.<sup>278</sup> From this, Lohfink concludes that in P the "feeling for the bewildering and opaque complexity of historical facticity has been banished," in contradistinction with the older Pentateuchal sources, which maintain a feeling for these things and therefore preserve the confused, minimally edited masses of tradition. Instead of limiting the narrative through fidelity to these sources, P "created a lovely form by doing violence to [those] sources," omitting and revising with freedom.<sup>279</sup>

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<sup>274</sup> See, e.g., Cross, *Canaanite Myth*, 295; Isaac M. Kikawada, *Before Abraham Was: The Unity of Genesis 1–11* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 36–53; Kenton Sparks, "Enūma Elish and Priestly Mimesis: Elite Emulation in Nascent Judaism," *JBL* 126 (2007): 625–48.

<sup>275</sup> Norbert Lohfink, *Theology of the Pentateuch: Themes of the Priestly Narrative and Deuteronomy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 149–72.

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

<sup>278</sup> Cf. Weimar's discussion of "Das Prinzip der paarweisen Zuordnung" (*Studien*, 69–75).

<sup>279</sup> Lohfink, *Theology*, 155.

Noting a relationship between the events of P's narrative and various passages in Ezekiel,<sup>280</sup> Lohfink recognizes in P a philosophy of history in which "the Then can illuminate the Now," so that P's narratives are applicable and relevant for the contemporary setting. According to this view of history, certain paradigmatic cosmic situations from the past can be or will be expressed anew in the present or future. Such a perspective is presupposed and perhaps best exemplified in Mesopotamian omen literature, which Lohfink loosely associates with the priestly narrative because of Joshua's subordination to the priest Eleazar with regard to control of the Urim oracle (Num 27:21 [P]).<sup>281</sup>

And it is in this sense of timeless perspective, representing realities and principles that are true always and everywhere, that the priestly narrative reflects primeval myth. Lohfink is careful to qualify the comparison, however: myth is not concerned with the historicity of its figures or events—though historical figures can be *subsumed* in myth—but the Priestly narrative

rests on a broad historical substratum, and despite its freedom it remains true to that basis, for example in the sequence of the principal events. And yet it narrates everything as if it were recounting myths. In a sense it converts history back into myth. Therefore we get the impression that, in spite of the temporal sequence, we are . . . looking at a great picture assembled on artistic principles. It derives from history, and yet its tendency is toward paradigm.<sup>282</sup>

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<sup>280</sup> Ibid., see 159-61.

<sup>281</sup> Ibid., 162. One important distinction between the omen literature and P, according to Lohfink, is that P maintains a general respect for temporal succession, whereas the omen literature is less concerned with temporal succession and tends to treat events in isolation from their broader historical contexts.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid.

One example of this Priestly fusion of myth and history comes from Genesis 1, which, as Mark Smith extrapolates from the standpoint of the broader canonical context, is “not simply linked to historical time; it represents the beginning of time.”<sup>283</sup> Lohfink’s conclusion is that the primeval era does not end for the P narrative with the Flood, but extends, rather, throughout its entire narrative.<sup>284</sup> From this we are to infer that P’s covenants with Noah and Abraham are eternally relevant (Now) because of their portrayal of Israel’s history (Then) in terms of myth.

### III.

If one can trace a unifying point through most of these representations of scholarship concerning P’s covenantal schema, it is the notion of a building progression toward a single purpose, whether that is understood to be the people of Israel (Ewald), the settlement of land (Elliger), the priestly cult (Wellhausen), or the abiding presence of YHWH in his sanctuary among his people (Cross and Blenkinsopp). All of these elements are prioritized by P, to be sure, but it is the emphasis on cult that has dominated scholarship in the latter half of the twentieth century. Von Rad describes the cult’s entrance into the history of Israel as the goal of the origin and development of creation itself; Cross deduces that El Shaddai’s promise to “be a god” for Abraham and his descendants is magnified at Sinai, where God’s presence with his people in the tabernacle reflects the very heart of P’s theology; and Blenkinsopp’s emphasis on the conclusion formulae in P reveals a triadic structure based on the creation of the world, the construction of the wilderness tabernacle, and the establishment of the tabernacle in the

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<sup>283</sup> Mark S. Smith, *The Priestly Vision of Genesis 1* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 156.

<sup>284</sup> Lohfink, *Theology*, 163.

land. Yet for all of the importance of Sinai that one may attribute to P, it is not clear that the Priestly covenant with Abraham is intended to include or otherwise anticipate directly God's revelation to Moses. The Abrahamic covenant has been identified rather as a promissory covenant akin to ancient Near Eastern royal grants.<sup>285</sup> Sinai, which is an obligatory covenant in the older traditions, is not designated as a covenant at all in P. What, then, is the nature of P's covenantal architecture?

Two questions that I set out to examine in particular were the Priestly organization of the covenants, on the one hand, and on the other hand the lasting significance of the covenants in the mind of P. Our orientation to some of the principal voices from the discussion over the past century will help to shed light on both of these problems.

First, are the covenants best expressed in terms of nesting concentric circles? Some variation of this thesis is supported by Procksch, von Rad, Eichrodt, and Cross. Of these, the earliest and perhaps best evaluation of the Priestly schema, in my view, is that of Procksch, the first modern commentator to identify concentric circles within P's covenants. Though Procksch does not describe in detail the contours of concentricity, he does identify some of its most important dimensions, denying both the "Adamic" and "Mosaic" covenants in P—thus limiting the covenantal material to Noah and Abraham—and acknowledging that the Abrahamic covenant is "kultlos."<sup>286</sup> Taking the Priestly covenant to be a basic, eternal relationship between God and humanity, Procksch is close to Eichrodt, who insists that the religious nature of ברית effects a "real community

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<sup>285</sup> See Weinfeld, "Covenant of Grant," 184-203.

<sup>286</sup> Procksch, *Genesis*, 518. Though the Abrahamic covenant is without cult, according to Procksch it does nevertheless anticipate Sinai, which is for him the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant.

between God and man.”<sup>287</sup> That the ברית may be understood in this way both in Genesis 9 and 17 shows that there is a fundamental relationship between the two covenants.

Are we justified, then, in speaking of a system of concentric covenants within P? There are only two major priestly covenants, precluding a network of seemingly endless covenants within covenants. Yet there are “concentric” characteristics that one can discern nonetheless, even within these two covenants. The most important of these are the genealogical connections, so characteristic of P, that join Noah and Abraham. Taking the genealogy of Shem (Gen 11:10–27, 31–32) as P material that connects Noah’s progeny and Abraham, L. Dequeker argues for continuity between the two eras in P.<sup>288</sup> The assignment of that genealogy to P is uncertain,<sup>289</sup> but even if the P material moves directly from the statement of Noah’s children and the dispersion of the nations after the flood (10:32), to Terah’s descendants and their journey to Canaan (Gen 11:27–31), and finally to the reports of Ishmael and Abraham (Gen 16:15–16; 17:1–27), there is an unbroken and logical development of genealogy. At several points along the way certain individuals in the genealogy are excluded until the covenant is established specifically with Abraham and his son Isaac as heir. For Ewald, the priestly historian employs a “principle of arrangement” which is “to dispose of those nations or families that do not

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<sup>287</sup> *Theology*, 1:57.

<sup>288</sup> L. Dequeker, “Noah and Israel,” in *Questions disputées d’Ancien Testament: méthode et théologie* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1989), 127.

<sup>289</sup> P’s version of Shem’s genealogy is given in Gen 10:22–23, and vv. 31–32 supply the summarizing conclusion. According to Cross (301), P has likely employed an older document comprised of a continuous genealogy from Adam to Abraham, “secondarily split up by P to separate the era of creation from the era of Noah, and the era of Noah from the era of the Fathers, in short, to periodize the old times.” If so, the ultimate origin of the genealogy of Shem is moot.

lead down direct to Israel.”<sup>290</sup> Another way to think of this, more positive, no doubt, in light of P’s ancient Near Eastern context, is that Israel descends from the same biological sources—Noah, and ultimately Adam—as the rest of humanity. Abraham, elect of God, has in common with all humanity Noah and Adam. The concept of concentric circles helps to portray such a perspective: Ishmael is not elect as his brother Isaac is, but both share Abraham as father; Esau is not elect as his brother Jacob is, but both share Isaac as father.

Therefore as the covenant devolves upon the next generation, its scope becomes ever smaller even as the basic terms remain relatively constant. This can be observed, for example, even within Genesis 17. El Shaddai first tells Abraham that he will establish the covenant “with your (unspecified) seed after you” (v 7); then Abraham is told that the covenant will be with Isaac in particular (v 19), a reality that is confirmed by P’s genealogical dismissal of Ishmael (Gen 25:11–20). In a similar way, P’s theophany report identifies only Jacob as “Israel” (Gen 35:9–15), and he receives the covenantal promises before Esau is unceremoniously detached from the covenantal group—“Esau, he is *Edom*” (Gen 36:8 [P]; cf. v 19). Isaac and Jacob, not Ishmael and Esau, are understood to inherit the covenant El Shaddai has bestowed upon Abraham, even though this is not revealed initially to Abraham. One can say, therefore, that certain particulars of the covenant, viz., the parties involved, develop over three generations, thus displaying concentricity even within a single covenant—one that P describes as the “covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and with Jacob” (Ex 2:24; cf. 6:4).

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<sup>290</sup> Ewald, *History*, 80.

Working backward once again, one might think of the priestly Noahic covenant in similarly concentric terms in relation to P's Abraham's covenant, which is, after all, much narrower in scope than the former. In many other respects they are quite similar: 1) Both include expressions of the fertility formula (Gen 9:1, 7; 17:2, 6, 20 [P]); 2) Both covenants feature an *ברית*, implying in both cases that the covenants are eternal; 3) Both Noah and Abraham serve as Adamic figures, heads of new beginnings and fathers of new peoples; and 4) As Weinfeld has noticed, "not only Abraham but also Noah was rewarded by God (Gen. IX, 1–17) for his loyalty which is expressed by the very phrases used of Abraham's devotion: *התהלך את האלהים, תמים היה* (VI, 9)."<sup>291</sup> There are also notable differences between these covenants, to be sure, but the consistencies—and especially the narrowed scope—allow for some degree of "nesting" between the two covenants. As Blenkinsopp puts it, the Abrahamic covenant is a "dispensation of grace to Israel" that is given alongside "another (such dispensation) offered to the nations which is chronologically and logically anterior."<sup>292</sup>

In this light it may be worth noting, with James Barr, that the term *ברית* is not attested in biblical Hebrew in the plural.<sup>293</sup> Is it possible that P does not recognize these as discrete covenants but instead as different dispensations or generations in which the covenant has become present?<sup>294</sup> Barr does not arrive at such a conclusion:

The oddity cannot be avoided through notions that there is only one *b<sup>e</sup>rīt* with many manifestations, as one might suppose of the use of the singular *tōrā* in

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<sup>291</sup> Weinfeld, "Covenant of Grant," 186.

<sup>292</sup> Blenkinsopp, *Prophecy*, 63.

<sup>293</sup> James Barr, "Some Semantic Notes on the Covenant," in *Beiträge zur alttestamentlichen Theologie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1977), 29-31.

<sup>294</sup> Credit is due to Levenson for this provocative question.

Deuteronomy, or that a *b<sup>e</sup>rit* is not a particular event but a sort of generality or abstraction, a state rather than an identifiable event. . . . On the contrary, the Old Testament clearly specifies a considerable number of covenants specifically attached to particular persons, times and places.

Barr is certainly correct that the Bible attests separate covenants, but does that rule out the possibility that ברית can function collectively? On the one hand, we have noted already that concentricity exists even within the Abrahamic covenant, as the scope narrows first to Isaac and then to Jacob. There is a single covenant among them, but the scope and particulars are not quite the same for all three patriarchs. On the other hand, P does not include Noah in any reference to the patriarchal covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (cf. Ex 2:24; 6:4 [P]). It is important to bear in mind, however, that the association between Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was likely well established before the Priestly traditions coalesced; and there may never have been a Noahic covenant at all before P. Perhaps P has in mind, then, to incorporate the Noahic covenant into the ברית with the patriarchs, patterning the one very closely to the other. It may be unnecessary to go this far, ultimately, but there can be no doubt that P has connected the Abrahamic covenant to Noah in a way that the other sources apparently did not. The literary and theological effect of this maneuver is to cast the particular covenant with Abraham in the light of the universal covenant with Noah—Blenkinsopp’s “chronologically and logically anterior” dispensation, featuring P’s vaunted statement of the *imago Dei*.

One possible complication in such a system emerges with the “covenant of peace” between YHWH and Phinehas (Num 25:12–13 [P]), not yet considered here. The grandson of Aaron, Phinehas turns back YHWH’s fury in the matter of Zimri son of Salu and Cozbi, Midianite daughter of Zur, who cavort before the congregation of Israel at the tent of meeting (vv. 6–19 [P]). Phinehas’s zeal for God and his resulting atonement for



Israel are the grounds for YHWH's covenant with Phinehas and his seed after him. This covenant could fit into the concentric circles because it delimits further the recipients. And it, too, is an eternal covenant of sorts, a ברית כהנת עולם (v. 13 [P]). Nevertheless the covenant of peace with Phinehas, which provides an important etiology, is not like the others because it has no accompanying "sign" and does not bear structural weight in the Priestly account of the wilderness. And in any case, one cannot be certain that everything in the Priestly style comes from P.

#### IV.

Assuming that a concentric model of covenants is useful for describing P's presentation of the Noahic and Abrahamic covenants, at least, one must face the problem of chronology and temporal relevance—our second question. If one covenant "nests" within the other, is the first still effectual? Do they, that is, both remain valid even as they mark "provisional stages," to borrow Cross's paradoxical language?<sup>295</sup> Do they represent parallel lines connecting the deity to separate parties and for separate objectives? The language of Abrahamic covenant is still widely affirmed among Jews today, along with the rite of circumcision, to which it is integral. And it seems unlikely that the Noahic covenant was ever intended, or understood, to expire. As early as the second century BCE, Jubilees records something like the later Jewish tradition of "Noahide Laws" (*Jub.* 7:20–28), intended to apply to all humankind descended through Noah. The first century CE Book of Acts attests similar Gentile proscriptions (Acts 15:28–29), and various rabbinic sources give expression to more developed forms of those universal laws

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<sup>295</sup> Cross, *Canaanite Myth*, 297.

deriving from Genesis 9 and elsewhere. These appropriations of the “Noahide Laws” would suggest that the Noahic covenant is still thought to be operative on some level. Can one be confident that this is P’s intention for what might have been referred to collectively at one time as “the covenant”?

Such a question is best resolved through P’s presentation of history in terms of myth, according to which the “Then” illuminates the “Now,” as Lohfink has capably demonstrated in our discussion above. One of the central features of myth, after all, is its timeless aspect—the story’s realities are always in effect, always present and relevant. Therefore it may be true that the covenants develop chronologically toward an ultimate purpose, but it is equally the case that the two priestly covenants, each one a ברית עולם, are for all time. The covenants develop in sequence, yet each has its own purpose with lasting promises of significance on a cosmic scale.

Lohfink’s conclusion that the primeval era continues for P beyond the Flood and into the patriarchal narratives is well justified. There is very little in the way of theological reflection separating Noah and his progeny from Abraham in P as one finds in Gen 12:1–4a (J). God’s call of Abraham in Gen 17:1 (P), by contrast, serves the immediate context of introducing the Abrahamic covenant. And as I have already discussed, one can trace an unbroken and logical development of genealogy from Noah to Abraham. P’s primeval and patriarchal traditions also show continuity through use of consistent terminology.<sup>296</sup> In particular, whereas for J “blessing” is known only in the patriarchal narratives (Gen 12:2–3; 24:1), P homologizes the patriarchal and primeval materials by extending the language of blessing into the creation and flood accounts (Gen

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<sup>296</sup> Dequeker, “Noah and Israel,” 127.

1:22, 28; 2:3; 9:1). The same obtains for the term “covenant,” known in the primeval traditions only through P’s account of Noah (Gen 6:18; 9:9, 12).<sup>297</sup>

This is not to say that P’s Genesis narratives progress steadily in an unbroken chain; rather, Cross’s observation stands: “(t)he Priestly strata of the Tetrateuch are marked by a powerful tendency to the periodization of history,” including the division of history into four epochs (Adam, Noah, Abraham, and Moses).<sup>298</sup> The important consideration is that P approaches these various epochs in a similar way, with a mythologized historical frame of reference. In this sense at least, Lohfink’s claim that the primeval era extends beyond the Flood and into the Patriarchal era rings true. Is it possible to determine the theological significance of this for the relation between P’s Noahic and Abrahamic covenants?

For one thing, if P does not recognize a strong break between Noah and Abraham, then it follows that the priestly Abrahamic covenant is not intended so much to solve a problem raised by the primeval history. This represents a significant departure from J’s structural scheme. The Yahwistic problem-solution dichotomy, described by von Rad, is one of curse (primeval history) and blessing (patriarchal history) in a progression of salvation history: “The whole primeval history, therefore, seems to break off in shrill

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<sup>297</sup> Ibid. Following Ernst Kutsch (“Gottes Zuspruch und Anspruch. *B<sup>c</sup>rit* in der alttestamentlichen Theologie,” in *Questions disputées d’Ancien Testament: méthode et théologie* [Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1989], 71-90), Dequeker (“Noah and Israel,” 128) approximates the meaning of ברית in the Noahic covenant (P) with that of God’s word in J (ויאמר יהוה אל לבו [Gen 8:21]). This is also comparable to the idea expressed in Isa 54:9: “I swore that the waters of Noah would never again go over the earth,” and, Dequeker notes, similar terminology is used by the Elohist and the Deuteronomist. Therefore the ברית is a pledge (*die Verpflichtung*) of one party to the other. By this reckoning, not only are the P and J accounts of Noah compatible, but, according to Dequeker, the Noah covenant and Israel covenant correspond well also in P, as Noah’s covenant becomes the theological and situational context for Abraham’s.

<sup>298</sup> Cross, *Canaanite Myth*, 295.

dissonance, and the question. . . now arises even more urgently [after the Tower of Babel]: Is God’s relationship to the nations now finally broken; is God’s gracious forbearance now exhausted; has God rejected the nations in wrath forever?”<sup>299</sup> The dichotomy is established especially by the conjunction, or rather disjunction, of the Tower of Babel and its curse (11:1–9 [J]) with the commissioning of Abram and his blessing (12:1–4a [J]). Rolf Rendtorff describes the difference here between J and P, noting that J’s real salvation history begins with the election of Abram—that is to say, with the early history of Israel—but P, by contrast, begins “die theologisch gewichtige Geschichte” after Noah’s flood.<sup>300</sup> Rendtorff recognizes that P has taken “den Rahmen des göttlichen Geschichtshandelns wesentlich weiter. . . als der Jahwist.”<sup>301</sup>

If the Flood is a solution for violence, then the rescue of Noah and his progeny, representing all future humanity, is an act of salvation—a preservation of life. This, I think, is one of the most important points of connection between the Priestly Noahic and Abrahamic covenants. To carry it further, even creation itself entails the protection of life from the continual threat of evil, particularly in the priestly account (Gen 1:1–2:3).<sup>302</sup> As Jon Levenson has demonstrated, this is one of the central features of Israel’s own origin story; it is a timeless (or recurring) theme played out again and again in Israel’s history

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<sup>299</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), 149.

<sup>300</sup> Rolf Rendtorff, “Hermeneutische Probleme der biblischen Urgeschichte,” in *Festschrift für Friedrich Smend zum 70. Geburtstag* (Berlin: Merseburger, 1963), 24.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid. Yet it is misleading to think in such terms at all for the primeval history, which is hardly a history of curse in its essence, even for J. “Primeval history is characterized by a constant variation, or better, by a permanent tension between sin and grace,” Dequeker (“Noah,” 124–25) observes, so that various sins and their punishments—e.g. Cain’s murder of Abel or the violence precipitating the Flood—are mitigated by elements of grace through promise: the divine mark protecting Cain from avengers (Gen 4:15) or the postdiluvian promise “no more. . .” (Gen 8:21–22).

<sup>302</sup> Dequeker, “Noah and Israel,” 126.

and consciousness, a theme that shares a functional relationship with Mesopotamian mythology, especially the *Enūma Elish* and its reenactment in the annual *Akītu* festival.<sup>303</sup> Furthermore, and most importantly, it is through the cult that Israel is empowered to cooperate with God in the abeyance of chaos and death:

Among the many messages of Genesis 1:1–2:3 is this: it is through the cult that we are enabled to cope with evil, for it is the cult that builds and maintains order, transforms chaos into creation, ennobles humanity, and realizes the kingship of the God who has ordained the cult and commanded that it be guarded and practiced. It is through obedience to the directives of the divine master that his good world comes into existence.<sup>304</sup>

Returning to Cross's priestly periodization of history, including Adam, Noah, Abraham and Moses,<sup>305</sup> one finds an emerging pattern of emphases within the periods. Two relationships in particular are clearly evident. First, creation and cult both prioritize, in general terms, the triumph of the created order of creation over chaos. The other two periods, Noah and Abraham, represent the priestly understanding of the "real community between God and man," in Eichrodt's terms,<sup>306</sup> first for all humanity and second for the chosen people Israel. For my purposes the correspondences between the periods may be shown as a simple chiasm:

**A** Creation: order/life over chaos/death  
          **B** Noah: (concentric) Covenant: order/life over chaos/death  
          **B'** Abraham: (concentric) Covenant: order/life over chaos/death  
          **A'** Moses: order/life over chaos/death

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<sup>303</sup> Jon Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988).

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>305</sup> Cross, *Canaanite Myth*, 295; cf. Wellhausen's "liber quatuor foederum."

<sup>306</sup> Eichrodt, *Theology*, 1:57.

These relationships obviously have overlapping parts, most notably in P's report of the regression of creation back into chaos during the flood and the following re-creation.<sup>307</sup> Yet it is the Priestly commitment to *life* that manifests most clearly throughout all four periods, drawing all four together as significant movements in P's historiography. It is this theme of life that I would like to examine more carefully at present, before defending in the next section my characterization of B' in terms of order/life over chaos/death, a theme that may not be patent on first glance.

## V.

The subject of life brings us once again to compare P with Mesopotamian myth, focusing now on some of their differences, pronounced particularly in P's monotheism and anthropology.<sup>308</sup> It is not insignificant that P attributes humanity's origin to divine creation rather than the blood of a slain and nefarious deity,<sup>309</sup> or that humankind bears the *imago Dei* in P. The idea of humans as representatives—image-bearers—of the divine is well attested in Mesopotamia, but there it is generally kings who represent the deity.<sup>310</sup> By contrast, P's account of human creation in general is redolent of royalty. For example, in P God charges the primordial people to be fertile, overseeing the fructification of the

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<sup>307</sup> Von Rad, *Priesterschrift*, 172.

<sup>308</sup> See the discussion in Sparks, "Enūma Elish," 631.

<sup>309</sup> E.g., *Enūma Elish* VI.22-36 (Alexander Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis* [Chicago: University of Chicago, 1942], 47); *Atra-Ḥasīs* I.173-228 (W. G. Lambert and A. R. Millard with Miguel Civil, *Atra-Ḥasīs: The Babylonian Story of the Flood with The Sumerian Flood Story* [Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1969], 53-59).

<sup>310</sup> See Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis = Be-reshit: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 12.

earth—commonly understood in the ancient Near East as the king’s duty—to “subdue” the earth and “rule” over the creatures (or, “subjects”), in it (Gen 1:28). Also, the primeval genealogy in Genesis 5 (P), enumerating the generations from Adam to Noah, bears remarkable similarity with the Mesopotamian king lists.<sup>311</sup> The implications are not insignificant for P’s anthropology.

Other related and celebrated points of intertextual difference are found in the flood accounts, especially in Atrahasis and P. Once again, without denying P’s dependence on J’s version of the deluge, it is apparent that P has the Atrahasis theme of overpopulation in mind.<sup>312</sup> The commandment for fertility in Gen 9:1b (P), God’s first action after the flood, rejects the ancient tradition of overpopulation as the divine motivation for widespread destruction,<sup>313</sup> though it should be noted that *rest* is seemingly

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<sup>311</sup> Again, see Sparks, “*Enūma Elish*,” 631.

<sup>312</sup> Tikva Frymer-Kensky, “The Atrahasis Epic and its Significance for our Understanding of Genesis 1–9,” *BA* 40 (1977): 150. Kikawada (*Before Abraham*, 36–53, esp. 52) suggests that Genesis 1–11 is written to oppose the Atrahasis traditions, and to encourage instead the nomadic or pastoral life for human fertility. Apart from nomadism or the pastoral life, it seems more likely that P should encourage population increases in order to vie better with Israel’s military and economic competitors.

<sup>313</sup> Also known from *Iliad* XVI.384–93 (see Michael N. Nagler, *Spontaneity and Tradition: A Study in Oral Art of Homer* [Berkeley: University of California, 1974], 149–50); and cf. *Cypria* of Stasinus (3) from the epic cycle (Hesiod, *The Homeric Hymns and Homerica* [Evelyn-White, LCL]):

There was a time when the countless tribes of men, though wide-dispersed, oppressed the surface of the deep-bosomed earth, and Zeus saw it and had pity and in his wise heart resolved to relieve the all-nurturing earth of men by causing the great struggle of the Ilian war, that the load of death might empty the world. And so the heroes were slain in Troy, and the plan of Zeus came to pass.

The Zoroastrian Tale of Yima also knows of a flood to resolve overpopulation. See Herman Lommel, *Die Yast’s des Awesta* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1927) and Fritz Wolff, *Die heiligen Bücher der Parsen* (Strassburg: Trubner, 1910). Anne Kilmer (“The Mesopotamian Concept of Overpopulation and its Solution as Reflected in the Mythology,” *OR* 41 [1972]: 176) notes the connection between this story and the Mesopotamian theme of overpopulation.

at stake in Genesis as it is in Atrahasis and Gilgamesh.<sup>314</sup> (Such interaction between the traditions does not require a “genealogical” dependence of P on Atrahasis, of course, but this possibility is not excluded.) The point is clear: fertility is not the cause for the flood, but should continue and increase afterward. The suggestion is not that Babylonian or Assyrian societies have no regard for life by contrast, of course, but only that *life* has become a significant aspect of priestly theology.

The theme of life is noticeable throughout the Priestly narratives. I have noted already in the previous chapter Walter Brueggemann’s essay on P’s kerygma,<sup>315</sup> which underscores the central role of the fertility formula throughout the P material of Genesis. I have also considered the explicit pronouncements that P has included in the Noahic covenant for the priority of life, particularly Gen 9:4–5: “Only, you will not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. For your own lifeblood I will require: from every creature I will require it and from human beings, each one for the blood of his brother, I will require for human life.” The close contextual relationship of the dietary restriction from blood and the proscription of human bloodshed leads Jacob Milgrom to observe the “fundamental premise [here] that human beings can curb their violent nature through ritual means, specifically, a dietary discipline that will necessarily drive home the point that all life

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<sup>314</sup> The name of the Genesis protagonist, נח, derives from the verb נח “to settle down, rest, repose” (cf. Akkadian *nāḫu*). P presents חמס “violence” (6:11, 13) as a divine motive for the flood in Genesis (6:11, 13). Peter Machinist (“Rest and Violence in the Poem of Erra,” *JAOS* 103 [1983]: 221–226) observes a connection between rest and violence in the Mesopotamian Poem of Erra, where the two concepts are in opposition. In Atrahasis, Enlil yearns for rest from human “noise”; in Genesis, Noah is an agent of rest from human violence.

<sup>315</sup> Walter Brueggemann, “The Kerygma of the Priestly Writers,” *ZAW* 84 (1972): 397–413.



(*nepeš*), shared also by animals, is inviolable, except—in the case of meat—when conceded by God. . . .”<sup>316</sup>

Those pronouncements are recapitulated and expanded in the Priestly legislation restricting the consumption of meat to a few domestic quadrupeds whose blood must be offered, according to H, on the altar at the central sanctuary. Milgrom goes so far as to ask, “What else could the compliant Israelite derive from this arduous discipline except that all life must be treated with reverence?”<sup>317</sup> Perhaps it is beyond the pale to affirm that the entire biblical dietary system is meant to instill an ethical lesson concerning life and death—why slaughter cows and not pigs?—but it is hard to avoid the conclusion that something of P’s reverence for life is operative in this legislation. If Milgrom is correct that the three sources of impurity in P—scale disease, genital flux, and corpse contamination—all have in common their association with death or its appearance, then the priestly purification system may be, in part, “a symbolic system reminding Israel of the divine imperative to reject death and choose life.”<sup>318</sup>

It may be worth noting, along those lines, that P is silent on the episode of the Egyptian man whom Moses kills (Ex 2:11–15 [J]), attesting no other similar examples of wrongful death by Israelite hands, including Ishmael’s near death. Furthermore, P presents the Passover not only as a story of YHWH’s triumph over Pharaoh, but also of the life-saving effect of the blood of the paschal lamb (Ex 12:1–20); and P is on record

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<sup>316</sup> Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1991), 47–48.

<sup>317</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>318</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

for dedicating the Levites in place of all firstborn Israelites in what previously had been, ostensibly, a gruesome ritual of human sacrifice:

YHWH spoke to Moses, saying, “From here on I take the Levites from among the Israelites instead of every firstborn issue of the womb from the Israelites. They will be my Levites. For every firstborn is mine since the day when I struck every firstborn in the land of Egypt and I consecrated every firstborn in Israel (Num 3:11–13; cf. 8:13–18).

As Levenson explains, “the underlying assumption is the same as in Ex 22:28b: the first-born son is to be ‘given’ to YHWH. The difference is that in Numbers 8 (or Numbers 3), unlike Exodus 22 (E) but like Exodus 12–13, a substitute is provided.”<sup>319</sup> The substitute in Exodus 12–13 is the paschal lamb; here in Numbers 3 and 8, the Levites stand in.<sup>320</sup> These examples serve to demonstrate that P’s concern for life is borne throughout the document, including narratives and legislation.

P’s mythologized history relates four ages: Creation, Noah, Abraham, and Moses. The variety of opinions on the nature of the relationships between these periods—scholars have acknowledged in the last century two, three, and even four covenants in these four periods, and with a broad range of emphases—bring to mind Noth’s contention that P’s final shape is not deliberate, and that any “orders” are accidents of borrowing from older traditions. Nevertheless, this is unnecessary in light of the many shared concepts and themes in P’s mythological-historical periods, for there is no reason to insist on one-to-one correspondences throughout the schema, even in a well-designed overarching narrative. Once again in this chapter, as in the last, Sean McEvenue’s observation is apt: “One constantly feels that structure is present, but it is so overwoven

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<sup>319</sup> Jon Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 46. Levenson understands Exodus 12–13 to be P material (45).

<sup>320</sup> Other modes of substitution include monetary ransom (Num 3:46–48 [P]), Naziritehood (Num 6:1–21 [P]), and perhaps circumcision (Ex 4:21–26). See *ibid.*, 47–52.

and interlaced with different systems of echo and repetition that the final effect is of a universe of thought which is completely mastered and unified, but whose pattern remains elusive. This is the essence of the priestly style, the secret of its force and fascination.”<sup>321</sup> But there must be some truth in Noth’s opinion, too, for the reader concedes that the progressions throughout these periods are not evenly distributed—the temptation to over-systematize what P may never have intended as a tightly knit system must be avoided.

In summary, my intention has been modestly to identify a single feature of P’s theology—fertility and life—already highlighted by Brueggemann and others for its distribution throughout P, in the four periods of the priestly myth-history. The priority on life is already recognized, at least by some, in the periods of Creation, Noah, and Moses; but it is less discussed, from what I have seen, with reference to Abraham. My argument is that Noah’s and Abraham’s covenants “nest” in a concentric structure, and that they, in fact, have more in common with each other than with anything in the other two key periods in the Priestly schema, those of Creation and Moses. Nevertheless all four periods share in common a central priority for life. A final desideratum now, therefore, is an explanation of the Abrahamic period within this basic schema, and particularly Ishmael’s importance within that schema.

## VI.

P inherits from the patriarchal sources a portrait of Ishmael that is very much at odds with the perspective on life just described. In fact, Ishmael’s life is in jeopardy

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<sup>321</sup> Sean E. McEvenue, *The Narrative Style of the Priestly Writer* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1971), 81.

because of the forces of evil at play through the very hands of Israel's ancestors. P's recasting of Ishmael in the Abrahamic covenant provides affirmation of the divine priority for life, not only for Abraham and Isaac but also for Ishmael, the non-covenantal Abrahamite. Unlike P's sources, which describe the separation, expulsion and near death of Hagar and Ishmael,<sup>322</sup> P reports that Ishmael is present and available to bury his father Abraham upon his death. Ishmael is not separated or otherwise cut off, but cooperates with Isaac in the task (Gen 25:9 [P]).<sup>323</sup> Most significantly, the declaration that Ishmael will be "fruitful and exceedingly numerous," and "the father of twelve princes" who are to make of Ishmael "a great nation" (Gen 17:20) is a linchpin that connects the Noahic and Abrahamic covenants. On the one hand, Ishmael points toward Noah:

Gen 9:1 (P): "God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, 'be fruitful and multiply. . .'"

Gen 17:20 (P): "' . . . I will bless him (Ishmael) and make him fruitful and exceedingly numerous.'"

Ishmael will experience exactly what God prescribes to Noah and humanity. Both instances refer to 1) blessing; and 2) the fertility formula. As I have already indicated, it is also the case that Ishmael's fate is brought into line with what God dictates to Noah concerning life. Following the dietary instructions, God warns Noah:

Nevertheless you shall not eat the flesh with its life—its blood. For your own lifeblood I will seek recompense, whether from beast or human. I will seek recompense, each one for the other, for human life. Whoever sheds human blood, by a human shall his blood be shed. For in his own image God has made humankind. As for you, be fruitful and multiply, cover the earth and multiply in it (Gen 9:4–7 [P]).

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<sup>322</sup> Genesis 16 (J) and 21:8–21 (E).

<sup>323</sup> Cf. Gen 35:29 (P).

The general structure of the statement is 1) priority for life; 2) the *imago Dei*, viz. the basis of P's priority for life; and 3) the fertility formula. The three elements are all expressions of the universal scope of P's theology. With this structure in mind, it is instructive to consider Gen 17:18–20 (P):

Abraham said to God, "Let Ishmael live before you!" Then God said, "Nevertheless, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you will call his name 'Isaac.' I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his seed after him. As for Ishmael, I have heard you. I will bless him and make him fruitful and exceedingly numerous; he shall bear twelve chieftains, and I will make him a great nation."

In this passage, the first and third structural elements from Gen 9:4–7 are plainly evident. Most interestingly, however, the second element, the *imago Dei*—the basis for P's priority on life—is not invoked in Ishmael's narrative as one might have anticipated. Instead, the reader hears the reason for what one would have expected to be Ishmael's death, or near death (which is precisely what befalls Hagar and Ishmael in P's sources): Ishmael will not participate in the covenant (v. 19). In my view, reading Gen 17:18–20 in context with Gen 9:4–7 is highly suggestive of the universal scope of P's theology and overall regard for life, if not of an echo of the *imago Dei* even in Ishmael's exclusion from the covenant.

Ishmael also has much in common, to be sure, with Abraham. He is Abraham's son and only appears in P in association with Abraham. Both Abraham and Ishmael are to become "a multitude of nations" or "a great nation" (cf. 17:4); both are expected to become "exceedingly numerous" (cf. 17:2); and both receive the mark of circumcision (17:26), a symbol that points to the reality of God's covenant with Israel through Abraham. This shows that Isaac (or Israel) does not exhaust God's promise to Abraham,

even though Isaac receives its fullest form, including the covenant and thus the land. Instead, the principle of concentricity applies within the Abrahamic covenant.

It is noteworthy that this feature of P's historiography accommodates so well the universal scope of P's theology. The actions of Abraham toward Hagar and Ishmael are illustrative. Abraham's concern for Hagar and Ishmael is muted (but perhaps implied) in Gen 16:5–7 (J), recording Sarai's complaint, Abram's apparent indifference, and God's appearance to Hagar only after she has fled from Abram's household. It is more explicit in Gen 21:11–12 (E), which refers to Abraham's distress and God's instruction to allow Sarah to act. But both of these texts stand in stark contrast to Gen 17:18–20 (P), where Abraham's compassion for Ishmael is given full expression, "Oh that Ishmael would live before you!"<sup>324</sup> and God's response of blessing for Ishmael is unequivocal.<sup>325</sup> Such an interchange between Abraham and God concerning Ishmael is possible in P precisely because of the system of concentricity. The election of Isaac and not Ishmael is at issue for P no less than it is for P's sources. But whereas P's sources find no other means of distinguishing clearly between Abraham's two sons than to remove Hagar and Ishmael, P's concentric model permits the reader to follow the line of divine election through to Israel. Ishmael's presence—even his circumcision!—in the priestly Abrahamic covenant poses no threat because the Abrahamic covenant develops out of the Noahic covenant.

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<sup>324</sup> Reading the particle לו in the optative sense with an imperfect verb (cf. Gen 30:34; Job 6:2; Ruth 2:13), but not denying the possibility, too, of skepticism in Abraham's plea in response to God's absurd promise in the previous verse.

<sup>325</sup> The JPS gloss of אבל in verse 19 as a restrictive "Nevertheless" is more felicitous than the NRSV "No," which is a dubious translation of אבל in any of its 11 occurrences in the Hebrew Bible: Gen 17:19; 42:21; 2 Sam 14:5; 1 Kgs 1:43; 2 Kgs 4:14; Dan 10:7, 21; Ezra 10:13; 2 Chron 1:4; 19:3; 33:17. According to Ronald Williams, all instances of אבל in Classical Hebrew are asseverative, though late texts use the term in adversative clauses (*Hebrew Syntax: An Outline* [Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1976], 93). First Kings 1:43 challenges this evaluation, in my view, but its context still does not require use of negation as many translators have thought.

Ishmael is both Noahide and Abrahamide, part-outsider and part-insider, because of P's broad theological perspective and unique historiography.

## VII.

We have discovered that P's covenants cannot be neatly systematized, but include overlapping themes and emphases that demonstrate a deliberate relationship nevertheless. P's covenants take the form of mythologized history and are presented not in terms of problem-solution, or curse-blessing, as some have understood J's treatment of the primeval and patriarchal histories, but rather as progressive stages on the way to identifying Israel as God's chosen people. Of course, it would be an exaggeration to say that Ishmael is at the center of P's theological perspective, but I argue that one would be justified in claiming that Ishmael's representation in P showcases both P's broad theological vantage point and unique approach to the notion of covenant. I also maintain that the Priestly presentation of Ishmael cannot be fully comprehended apart from the concentric arrangement of covenants, and that the juxtaposition of the covenants comes to a crescendo with the figure of Ishmael on the Abrahamic stage.

Are the covenants in P's schema intended to remain in effect indefinitely? All indications suggest that this is the case. Apart from P's designation of each covenant as a ברית עלום, the very nature of P's historiography, which portrays Israel's origins in mythological terms according to which the "Then" illuminates the "Now," as Lohfink puts it, demonstrates that these covenants are intended to have lasting significance in Israel's consciousness. And this does appear to be the case, not only for the Abrahamic covenant, which represents the incipient moment of Israel's identity, but also for the

Noahic covenant, out of which flowers the various iterations of the Jewish “Noahide Laws.” Most interestingly, however, the concentric nature of the priestly covenants show that the priestly injunctions respecting human life, a primary focus of the Noahic covenant, *remain in effect* during the Abrahamic covenant as Ishmael’s fate is determined. God’s unequivocal blessing for Ishmael in response to Abraham’s plea—“O that Ishmael might live before you!”—illustrates, I think, that P is applying the Noahide standards to the tradition of Ishmael in the Abrahamic covenant.

Finally, these questions about the priestly presentation of Ishmael, P’s system of concentricity, and the universal cope of P’s theology give us cause to consider more carefully P’s attention to genealogy and the nations. How do the historical Ishmaelites affect P’s shaping of genealogy and historiography? And in what sense does the Ishmael of history reflect his status as Abraham’s son? I will take up these questions in the next chapter.



## Chapter 5 Ishmael, Ishmaelites, and Biblical Narrative

### I.

There is one final angle from which our subject of the universal scope of P's theology must be viewed. Given the concentric nature of the priestly covenants, and with it the Priestly attention to such a range of nations, the reader is left to wonder why P is so concerned with ethnographic origins, and in particular those of Ishmael and Esau, whose records are so fastidiously preserved. Of course one's answer to this question will be determined to a great extent by one's views on dating and life setting. Joseph Blenkinsopp, for example, is among the many who attribute to P an exilic or postexilic outlook. He finds that Ishmael "could hardly have failed to be of interest to a reader in sixth- or fifth-century B.C.E. Judah," considering that the descendants of Qedar, Ishmael's "son" (Gen 25:13), had displaced the Edomites from their territory in the Neo-Babylonian period, settling a large portion of land from the Transjordanian plateau to the Nile delta.<sup>326</sup> He also notes that Geshem, head of the Qedarite confederacy, helped to lead the opposition facing Nehemiah (Neh 2:19; 6:1–2).<sup>327</sup> In such a context, it seems that Ishmael is "a pivotal figure, intimating a broader and more inclusive idea of the

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<sup>326</sup> Joseph Blenkinsopp, "Abraham as Paradigm in the Priestly History in Genesis," *JBL* 128 (2009): 237.

<sup>327</sup> Geshem (Akkadian *Gashmu*) is known to be the Qedarite head from Assyrian sources (see *infra*). Also, his name appears in a Persian period dedicatory bowl found in 1947 at Tell el-Maskhuta in Lower Egypt. See Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah* (OTL; London: SCM Press, 1988), 225.

Abrahamic covenant, one entirely in keeping with the universalism of the Priestly History.”<sup>328</sup>

My purpose here is briefly to survey the historical data regarding the Ishmaelites—both from biblical and extrabiblical records—in order to understand the presence and influence of this group among the Israelites during the formation and composition of the biblical records. Ultimately, the aim is to gain some purchase on Israel’s attitude, or longer-term *mentalité*, toward the Ishmaelites, and then to parse that attitude or attitudes in the biblical traditions about Ishmael, and especially in the Priestly literature.<sup>329</sup> My contention is that the Ishmaelites of history are well suited for the purposes of the biblical authors, including those responsible for the Priestly traditions. I begin with a review of our knowledge of the Ishmaelites in history.

## II.

Genesis 25:13–15 (P) records the names of Ishmael’s sons, the twelve chieftains whom YHWH promised to him first in Gen 17:20 (P): Nebaioth the firstborn, Qedar, Adbeel, Mibsam, Mishma, Dumah, Massa, Hadar, Tema, Jetur, Naphish and Kedmah.<sup>330</sup> “These are the sons of Ishmael,” proclaims P, “and these are their names according to their villages and their camps—twelve chieftains according to their peoples” (Gen 25:16

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<sup>328</sup> Ibid., 238.

<sup>329</sup> On the term *mentalité*, see Marc Bloch of the so-called *Annales* school of history, charting long-term *mentalités* and their effect on social conditions; esp. his seminal *Les rois thaumaturges: étude sur le caractère surnaturel attribué à la puissance royale particulièrement en France et en Angleterre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983, orig. 1924).

<sup>330</sup> For the translation of נָשִׂי as “chieftain” in this verse, see Ephraim A. Speiser, “Background and Function of the Biblical *Nāšī*,” *CBQ* 25 (1963): 111-17. Speiser finds that the translation of the term varies according to context, and that “chieftain” is best in this case, which pertains to clans and tribes.

[P]). Whether these tribes identified in Gen 25:13–15 as “Ishmaelites” are understood outside of P to represent Ishmael’s descendants—that is to say, whether these tribes are at all connected to Ishmael apart from P—is an open question. Also, whether a group of “Ishmaelites” is known as such in extrabiblical sources at all is a point of debate.<sup>331</sup>

Israel Eph<sup>al</sup> holds the view that the Ishmaelites are a southern Palestinian tribe of the second millennium BCE of non-Arab extraction and with no actual connection to the “sons of Ishmael” chieftains enumerated by P.<sup>332</sup> An opposing viewpoint is offered by Ernst Knauf, who identifies the biblical Ishmael—and the Priestly list of his progeny—with an Ishmaelite ethnic and political entity known as *Su-mu-(ʿ)-il* in the Assyrian inscriptions of Sennacherib and Ashurbanipal from the 8<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE. He posits an Ishmaelite tribal confederacy spanning North Arabia from the period of Tiglath Pileser III to Ashurbanipal.<sup>333</sup>

At issue between the two positions of Eph<sup>al</sup> and Knauf are the question of the dating of the biblical sources and the possible equation of “Ishmael” with *Šumu’il* (*Su-mu-[-ʿ]-AN*), and its putative variations from the records of Sennacherib and Ashurbanipal.<sup>334</sup> Interestingly, Assyrian sources from the second half of the eighth

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<sup>331</sup> Ernst Knauf, “Ishmaelites,” *ABD* 3:514.

<sup>332</sup> Israel Eph<sup>al</sup>, *The Ancient Arabs: Nomads on the Borders of the Fertile Crescent, 9<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> Centuries B.C.* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1982); idem, “‘Ishmael’ and ‘Arab(s)’: A Transformation of Ethnological Terms,” *JNES* 35 (1976): 225-35, esp. 226.

<sup>333</sup> Knauf, *ABD* 3:515. Cf. idem, *Ismael: Untersuchungen zur Geschichte Palästinas und Nordarabiens im 1. Jahrtausend v. Chr.* (Wiesbaden: In Kommission bei O. Harrassowitz, 1989); and idem, “Midianites and Ishmaelites,” in *Midian, Moab and Edom* (JSOTSS, 24; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1983), 147-62.

<sup>334</sup> See Friedrich Delitzsch, *Assyrische Lesestücke* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1912), 183.

century BCE also denote as “Arabs” the people of Nebaioth, Qedar, Adbeel, Massa, and Tema: groups attributed to Ishmael in Genesis 25.<sup>335</sup> Furthermore, certain names and titles are attested in the inscriptions of Ashurbanipal, including “Yautā<sup>c</sup> son of Ḥaza’il, king of the Qedarites,” and “Uaite<sup>c</sup>, king of Arabs.” Another name, that of “Uaite<sup>c</sup>, king of SumuAN,” also appears in a gate in the wall of Nineveh from the time of Sennacherib. Franz Delitzsch, reading Sumu(?)AN as Sumu(?)il, interprets the name to be a variation of “Ishmael,” referring to a nomadic tribe in the Syro-Arabian desert. And J. Lewy goes further, deducing that these three titles refer to the selfsame ruler, one whose title was “(Yautā<sup>c</sup> son of Ḥaza’il,) king of the Qedarites.”<sup>336</sup> If so, there is an early extrabiblical connection not only between “Ishmaelites” and “Arabs,” but also between “Ishmaelites” and “Qedarites,” a group whose eponymous ancestor is understood by P to descend directly from Ishmael. But as Eph<sup>al</sup> points out, the reign of Yautā<sup>c</sup> son of Ḥaza’il, king of the Qedarites, ended by 652 BCE; and the inscriptions referring to Uaite<sup>c</sup>, king of SumuAN, refer to later events, thus showing that the connection is specious.

Indeed, Eph<sup>al</sup> claims that the very identification of “Sumu(?)AN” or “Sumu(?)il” with “Ishmael” is unlikely. The proper name <sup>m</sup>Ya-si-me-<sup>ʔ</sup>-AN, of the same verbal *yaqtal* construction, also appears in a Neo-Assyrian document from Gozan. And since the scribes in the courts of Sennacherib and Assurbanipal would have already known the construction of that name, “it is therefore most unlikely that they would have transcribed

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<sup>335</sup> On these tribes, see Fritz Hommel, *Ethnologie und Geographie des alten Orients* (München: C. H. Beck, 1926), 578-600; James A. Montgomery, *Arabia and the Bible* (New York: Ktav, 1969), 58; and Simo Parpola, *Neo-Assyrian Toponyms* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Butzon & Bercker, 1970), 34-35.

<sup>336</sup> J. Lewy, “The Late Assyro-Babylonian Cult of the Moon and its Culmination at the Time of Nabonidus,” *HUCA* 19 (1945/46): 432, n. 143.

Ishmael as Sumuʾilu, which is a proper name with a nominal construction. The Hebrew transcription of Sumuʾilu would be \*Šumuʾel, or \*Šumuʾel, but surely not *Yišmaʿel*.<sup>337</sup>

Ephʿal assumes furthermore that all biblical references to Ishmael antedate the end of the tenth century BCE, save for the later list of names from Genesis 25 (P).<sup>338</sup> Therefore no intentional association between Ishmael and the Arab tribes in the earlier sources can exist. Instead, the author of P’s list found Ishmael to be a suitable, traditional name for appropriation as ancestor to these contemporary tribal groups.<sup>339</sup>

Knauf counters that the name *Yišmaʿ(ʾ)el* is a typical West Semitic personal name attested from the earliest West Semitic texts in the third millennium BCE to Pre-Islamic Arabic in the first half of the first millennium CE.<sup>340</sup> He writes that “[e]ven without the stories about Ishmael in Genesis 16 and 21, and the list of the sons of Ishmael in Gen 25:12–17, it could still be concluded from the generic term *yīšmēʿ(ʾ)ēlīm* that this group of tribes derived itself from an eponymous ancestor named *yīšmaʿ(ʾ)el*.<sup>341</sup> Knauf argues further that the Assyrian Šumuʾil does likely render an old North Arabian tribal name *S\_amaʿ(ʾ)il*, which is the same in meaning as *Yišmaʿ(ʾ)il*. Recalling that the Assyrian *s* tends to represent West Semitic *š* in proper names, and that Assyrian *u* often occurs in Arabian names in Assyrian transcriptions instead of Semitic *a*—likely due to a

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<sup>337</sup> Ephʿal, “‘Ishmael’ and ‘Arab(s),’” 230.

<sup>338</sup> Including Psalm 83, which Ephʿal dates to the period of the Judges, and all other references within the Pentateuch other than Genesis 25; see “‘Ishmael’ and ‘Arab(s),’” 225-29.

<sup>339</sup> Ephʿal, *Ancient Arabs*, 233-40; “‘Ishmael’ and ‘Arab(s),’” 225-35.

<sup>340</sup> See Knauf, *Ismael*, 38, n. 170.

<sup>341</sup> Knauf, *ABD* 3:514.

pronunciation in ancient Arabic that resembles the *tafkhīm* of contemporary Arabic— Knauf concludes that the identity of Ishmael/*Yišmaʿ(?)il* with Šumuʿil /*Sīamaʿ(?)il* is probable.<sup>342</sup>

Taking Knauf's position as the stronger case, not only from the linguistic data but also from the source dating, one can identify the Ishmaelites with a group of *Yišmaʿel/Šumuʿil/Sīamaʿil* from the 738 BCE campaign of Tiglath-pileser III in Syria.<sup>343</sup> Based on records of tribute and Assyrian booty identified with Massa, Tema, and Adbeel, Knauf concludes that at least some of the tribes of Ishmael lived along the incense route through West Arabia and controlled its trade by the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE.<sup>344</sup> It is unclear whether or not an Ishmaelite confederacy existed by then, but the establishment of the incense route, Assyria's geopolitical surge, and the economic organization of the Near East led to the emergence of larger political entities including powerful tribes and confederacies in North Arabia. As Knauf observes, "the growing demand for incense from the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C. onward, brought increasing political and economic power to those who controlled the Arabian deserts. This may have prompted the camel-breeders of Arabia to organize themselves into larger, politically more powerful tribes."<sup>345</sup>

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<sup>342</sup> Ibid., 515; also *Ismael*, 5-9, 45.

<sup>343</sup> See "Tiglath-Pileser III (744-727): Campaigns Against Syria and Palestine," translated by Daniel D. Luckenbill (*ANET*, 283); also Fred V. Winnett, "The Arabian Genealogies in the Book of Genesis," in *Translating and Understanding the Old Testament: Essays in Honor of Herbert Gordon May* (New York: Abingdon, 1970), 194.

<sup>344</sup> Knauf, *ABD* 3:514. For sources, see *Ismael*, 2, n. 10; 3, n. 16; and M. Weippert, "Zur Syrienpolitik Tiglatpileser's III," in *Mesopotamien und seine Nachbarn* (vol 2; Berlin: D. Reimer, 1982), 25, 51.

<sup>345</sup> Knauf, *ABD* 3:517.

By the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE, the *Yišmaʿel/Šumuʾil/Samaʿil* tribal confederacy is clearly established through documentary evidence. The tribe of Qedar in particular seems to have been at the political and cultic center.<sup>346</sup> Tribal leaders fought among themselves, alternately joining forces with the Assyrians and also fighting against them according to shifting political alliances. The Assyrian annals give a picture of the growing importance of the Arab tribes, showing the Assyrians' fear and hostility toward the Arabs generally. The tribes portrayed in coalition are Qedar, Nebaioth, Massaʾ, Naphish, and possibly Mishmaʿ. Duma is represented as the political center of the tribe of Qedar, and as the cultic residence of the six deities of the "kings of the Arabs."<sup>347</sup> Tema, however, though mentioned together with *Šumuʾil*, is unlikely to have been part of the Ishmaelite confederacy considering that its pantheon was quite different from that of Duma, which is understood to be the Ishmaelite capital.

It is unlikely, then, that all twelve of the sons credited to Ishmael in Gen 25:13–15 (P) were simultaneously part of the Ishmaelite confederacy. But there is little doubt that tribes who joined the confederacy in one instance would not have in the next instance, and their affiliation with the larger group certainly would not preclude fighting between the tribes. It is, in short, "as difficult for the modern historian to describe this type of political entity and its history as it was for the Assyrians to deal with it politically and militarily."<sup>348</sup>

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<sup>346</sup> Knauf, *Ishmael*, 1-5, 81-91.

<sup>347</sup> For a description of "Die Götter von Duma," see *ibid.*, 81-88.

<sup>348</sup> Knauf, *ABD* 3:518.

The term “Ishmaelites” (*Šumu’il*) disappears from documentary sources after the fall of the Assyrian empire, but this should not be taken to mean that the group itself has passed from existence. When Cyrus took power in Babylon, there was in “Amurru” (the term used for Syria-Palestine and North Arabia), apart from the Phoenician coastal cities, only the “kings that lived in tents.”<sup>349</sup> The territories of Ammon, Moab, Edom and southern Palestine were comprised considerably of Arabs, who had become entrenched there in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE. And it was precisely this extension of their realm, claims Knauf, “resulting in decreased contacts between the disparate tribes and clans, not military defeat by one of the empires, that brought the Ishmaelite confederacy to an end.”<sup>350</sup>

Of all the Ishmaelite tribes, the Qedarites in particular retained their political sway well into the 5<sup>th</sup> century, and one Gušam bin Šahr (biblical Geshem) is reported to have controlled southern Palestine to the borders of Egypt, as well as the Transjordan and northwest Arabia. The same figure, known as “Geshem” in the biblical sources, is listed as one of Nehemiah’s opponents (Neh 2:19; 6:1–2, 16). The family of Gušam bin Šahr and the tribe of Qedar lost its dominance around 400 BCE when their buttressing support—the Persians—lost hegemony over Egypt, Arabia, and likely southern Jordan. The Nabateans gained control over the region once ruled by the Qedarites. This group, though not connected with the Nebaioth mentioned as Ishmael’s firstborn son (Gen

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<sup>349</sup> See F. H. Weissbach, *Die Keilinschriften der Achämeniden* (VAB 3; Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1911), 6.

<sup>350</sup> Knauf, *ABD* 3:519.



25:13), may have been a subset of the Qedarite clan.<sup>351</sup> Their name first appears in the written record in 312 BCE.<sup>352</sup>

In light of such a long and sustained history of influence of the Ishmaelite tribes and people groups over the geopolitical context of Syria-Palestine, it is difficult to assign value for dating narratives, as Blenkinsopp does, to the prominent role of the Qedarite Arabs in the Neo-Babylonian and Persian periods.<sup>353</sup> The Qedarites are afforded no place of particular honor in the Priestly genealogy, and in any case the tribe plays a prominent role already in the 7<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>354</sup>

In light of the considerable presence and influence of the Ishmaelite tribes, the question of pressing concern is how did the Israelites conceive of the Ishmaelites, and how is that conception reflected in the biblical record?

### III.

The biblical data relating to the Ishmaelites are limited, but there are enough to draw several tentative conclusions about Israel's attitude toward this group. To begin, Gen 16:12 (J) includes YHWH's pronouncement that Ishmael will be "a wild ass of a man, with his hand against all, and every hand against him: he will live at odds with all

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<sup>351</sup> Ibid.

<sup>352</sup> In 312 BCE, the Nabateans repelled an attack by Antigonous the One-Eyed, a commander under Alexander the Great. See Hieronymus of Cardia *apud* Diodorus Siculus 19.95.

<sup>353</sup> Joseph Blenkinsopp, "Abraham as Paradigm in the Priestly History in Genesis," *JBL* 128 (2009): 237.

<sup>354</sup> Qedar is second in the list of Ishmael's sons. Jack M. Sasson ("A Genealogical 'Convention' in Biblical Chronology?" *ZAW* 90 [1978]: 171-85) argues that genealogies are sometimes manipulated to position the figure of significance in the seventh (or fifth) place.

his kindred.” Such language does not bespeak a harmonious bond with the Ishmaelites or an admiration for their character. This is not unexpected: anthropologists studying living cultures observe that settled populations tend to regard nomads such as the Ishmaelites with suspicion and antipathy. It seems that most nomadic cultures depend on occasional or even regular raiding of nearby settled populations.<sup>355</sup>

Indeed, various tribes attributed to Ishmael in Gen 25:13–15 are objects of judgment in the prophets. Included are Dumah, the object of an oracle in Isa 21:11–12; Tema and Qedar, featured in the subsequent oracle “concerning the desert plain” (21:13–16);<sup>356</sup> and Jetur and Naphish, who are associated with the Hagrites (NRSV) or are perhaps subsets of the Hagrites (JPS) in 1 Chron 5:19. The Reubenites, Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh cry out to God during their battle with the Hagrites and their cohort, including Jetur and Naphish, and God delivers them into their hands in response: “Many fell slain,” the chronicler reports, “because it was God’s battle” (1 Chron 5:19–22). Finally, the psalmist includes among Israel’s enemies “the tents of Edom and the Ishmaelites, Moab, and the Hagrites” (Ps 83:7). The picture thus painted is one of enmity and judgment against the Ishmaelite tribes.

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<sup>355</sup> Walter Goldschmidt, “Career Reorientation and Institutional Adaptation in the Process of Natural Sedentarization,” in *When Nomads Settle: Processes of Sedentarization as Adaption and Response* (New York: Praeger, 1980), 52; Philip Carl Salzman, “Processes of Sedentarization among the Nomads of Baluchistan,” in *ibid.*, 99; L. E. Sweet, “Camel Raiding of North Arabian Bedouin: A Mechanism of Ecological Adaptation,” *American Anthropologist* 67 (1965): 1132-49; and David C. Wright, “Nomadic Power, Sedentary Security, and the Crossbow,” *Acta orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 58 (2005): 15-31. See Kenton Sparks, “Israel and the Nomads of Ancient Palestine,” in *Community Identity in Judean Historiography* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 10.

<sup>356</sup> For Tema, cf. also Jer 25:23.

But the whole picture is more complex. A closer look at the identity confusion between the Ishmaelites and the Midianites, for instance, shows that although the Ishmaelites are in some respects quite similar to this other group, they have an experience with Israel that is very different. And this difference reflects perhaps a relatively softer characterization of Ishmael in the Israelite *mentalité*.

First, the Joseph novella has Joseph's brothers deciding to sell him to Ishmaelites (Gen 37:27), and then handing him over to the Midianites who sell him to Ishmaelites (v 28). The narrator reports that the Midianites were the ones who sold Joseph into slavery in Egypt under Potiphar (v 36), only to explain later that the Ishmaelites had brought Joseph to Egypt (39:1). Whatever the source critical explanations involved here,<sup>357</sup> the Midianites and Ishmaelites are presented as *two separate groups* in the story, particularly in Gen 37:27–28.

According to Judges 6–8, however, the two groups are apparently not so distinct. Gideon's victory over the Midianites is remembered as a great victory for Israel against an enemy that is identified also as "Ishmaelites." After the battle, Gideon makes one request of those whom he led: "Every one of you give me the earrings from his spoil"—for, as the narrator elucidates, "they had golden earrings because they were Ishmaelites" (Judg 8:24). The identification suggests, perhaps, that the narrator understood the Midianites to be a subgroup of the Ishmaelites (or vice versa). Another possibility is that the term *Ishmaelite* is a reference to their nomadic means of economic subsistence, a way

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<sup>357</sup> See Edward L. Greenstein, "An Equivocal Reading of the Sale of Joseph," in *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives* (eds. Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis and James S. Ackerman, 2 vols.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1987), 2:114-25.

of life that the Joseph novella implies (Gen 37:25–36).<sup>358</sup> It seems most likely that the narrator (or editor) is comparing the Midianites, an unknown peripheral group in his own day, with a known peripheral group, the Ishmaelites. Eduard Meyer, noting long ago that the nomadic and semi-nomadic populations were fluid in antiquity as they are in his day, explains that old tribes would dissolve, move away, or perish, to be replaced by new ones, as Judg 8:24 appears to attest for the Ishmaelites and Midianites.<sup>359</sup> For George Mendenhall, this explains the confusion in both the Joseph novella and the account of Gideon’s battle.<sup>360</sup>

That the tradition of Gideon’s victory over Midian reaches at least to the eighth century BCE may be inferred from Isa 9:4, if Isaiah ben Amoz is referring to that event as “The Day of Midian” in his oracle. And the tradition is likely much older, as are many of the traditions found in Judges.<sup>361</sup> Numbers 31 also portrays the Midianites as Israel’s enemies over the matter of Peor. Yet Israel’s animus toward Midian is offset by the much more positive stance toward Midian, most likely quite older even than the negative traditions of Judges 6–8 and Numbers 31, which connects Moses and YHWH with the Midianites and the Midianite priest known variously as Jethro, Reuel, and Hobab. Such a

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<sup>358</sup> Some argue that the Midianites were a settled population, and not nomads. See Ernst A. Knauf, *Midian: Untersuchungen zur Geschichte Palästinas und Nordarabiens am Ende des 2. Jahrtausends v. Chr.* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1988), 1–42; George Mendenhall, “Midian,” *ABD* 4:817.

<sup>359</sup> Eduard Meyer, *Die Israeliten und ihre Nachbarstämme: Alttestamentliche Untersuchungen* (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1906), 324.

<sup>360</sup> Mendenhall, *ABD* 4:815. See also Euan Fry (“How Was Joseph Taken to Egypt? [Genesis 37:12–36],” *The Bible Translator* 46 [1995]: 445–48), who takes both names “Ishmaelite” and “Midianite” as general terms for nomadic peoples thought to be descendants of Abraham, and therefore referring to the same group both in Gen 37:27–28 and Judg 8:22–24.

<sup>361</sup> Sparks, “Israel and the Nomads,” 12.

memory is likely quite old, as a late historiographer would be unlikely to associate YHWH with peoples and places outside of Israel. Therefore it would appear that Israelite sentiments toward Midian were positive in the earliest period—early Iron I or possibly earlier—and then antipathetic in later periods. Kenton Sparks attributes the shift to Israel’s Midianite roots in the first phase, and subsequent sedentarization in the next.<sup>362</sup> This evolutionary explanation does not comport well with the archaeological data, but Sparks’s observations are useful nonetheless.<sup>363</sup>

He notices in particular that Israel’s stance toward Ishmael is much less extreme than the very positive and negative attitudes reflected toward Midian, even using the term “ambivalence” to characterize Israel’s view of the Ishmaelites.<sup>364</sup> The stronger antipathy toward the Midianites is likely attributable to political and economic factors, reasons Sparks. Because Israel’s tribal groups were poorly organized before the monarchy, it was more difficult to control interactions with the Midianites, who, in such circumstances, could pose a serious threat. But the monarchies, in turn, enabled the Israelites and Judahites better to secure their own borders and to capitalize on foreign trade through the Ishmaelites. Eph<sup>ʿ</sup>al suggests that this economic link was one of the factors that prompted these early Arabs to join Israel in the 9<sup>th</sup> century coalition against Shalmaneser of

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<sup>362</sup> Kenton Sparks (ibid., 11), in his argument for Israel’s nomadic origins, suggests that Israel (and Assyria) may have had “a quasi-evolutionary view of human society that understood sedentary living as a development from more-primitive nomadic lifestyles.” According to him, this explains why Num 24:20 lists the nomadic Amalekites as ראשית גוים, “first among the nations.”

<sup>363</sup> See Lawrence E. Stager, “The Archaeology of the Family in Ancient Israel,” *BASOR* 260 (1985): 1-35, esp. 17; and V. Fritz, “The Israelite ‘Conquest’ in the Light of Recent Excavations at Khirbet el-Meshâsh,” *BASOR* 241 (1981): 61-73.

<sup>364</sup> Sparks, “Israel and the Nomads,” 18.

Assyria.<sup>365</sup> No doubt the Ishmaelites would have offered some economic benefit for Israel, though the advantage for Israel would be as tenuous as its control over the borders and trading routes.

Having described Israel's general relationship with the Ishmaelites from the available data, I turn now to consider more carefully how that relationship is portrayed in Genesis. The point of departure will be the Jacob and Esau cycle because it presents a well-recognized correspondence between narrative and geopolitical history, and because of its close contextual affinity within the broader patriarchal narratives.

#### IV.

The Jacob and Esau stories provide perhaps the most obvious and sustained reading of the patriarchal narratives with a view toward geopolitical relationships—they are etiological explanations of the connection between Israel and Edom at the time of composition. At the outset the two brothers are introduced as the ancestors of two different nations (Gen 25:23). In his birth account, Esau's hairy appearance is described as כְּאֶדְרֵת שֵׁעַר “like a hairy mantle” (Gen 25:25), evoking the hill country of Edom, Seir (Gen 36:8; Josh 24:4). Moreover, Esau is said to be אֶדְמוֹנִי “ruddy,” sounding very similar to “Edom” (Gen 25:25)—a connection that is doubly emphasized when Esau sells his birthright to Jacob in exchange for what Edom's eponymous ancestor calls הָאֶדוֹם הָאֶדוֹם “that red-red” (Gen 25:30). The portrayal of Jacob and Esau as brothers, even twins, helps to explain the close ties between Israel and the territory beyond its southeastern

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<sup>365</sup> See Eph'al, *The Ancient Arabs*, 86-87.

boundary, Edom. Those ties include deep cultural and linguistic affinities between Edom and Israel, but they are hardly “brotherly” in any positive sense.

Particularly in the prophetic oracles, the portrait of Edom and their ancestor is decidedly inimical. Jeremiah announces YHWH’s intention, “I will bring the calamity of Esau upon him at the time when I punish him” (Jer 49:8); Obadiah prophesies the just deserts coming to proud Edom (Obad 1–21); and Malachi’s censure, which incorporates the covenantal language of “love” and “hate,” is perhaps the most severe:

I have loved you, says YHWH. But you say, “How have you loved us?” Is not Esau Jacob’s brother? declares YHWH. Though I have loved Jacob, Esau I have hated. I made of his mountains a desolation, his heritage a wilderness for jackals. If Edom says, “We are shattered but we will return and rebuild the ruins,” thus says YHWH of Hosts: They may rebuild, but I will destroy. They will be called “the region of wickedness, the people with whom YHWH is angry forever.” Your own eyes will see this, and you will say, “Great is YHWH beyond the borders of Israel!” (Mal 1:2–5)

Disapproval of Esau is recorded also in the first century CE by Pseudo-Philo, who, like the prophets Jeremiah and Obadiah, indicates that the negative stance toward Esau is attributable to his deeds (*L.A.B.* 32:5; cf. *Jub.* 35:13–17). Esau becomes a symbol of the corrupt age (4 *Ezra* 6:7–10), evil passions (Philo *Heres* 251–54), and Rome (y. *Ta’an.* 4:8, 68d; b. *Abod. Zar.* 2b; *Gen. Rab.* 65:21, 67:7). In the New Testament, Paul claims that God’s hate for Esau is a function of his purposes in election, “before they [Jacob and Esau] had been born or had done anything good or bad. . .” (Rom 9:10–13). The picture that emerges of Israel’s historical relationship with Edom is thus anything but ambivalent. Esau is Israel’s brother, but the familial bonds are primarily circumstantial, relating to geographical and linguistic proximity, and much less to mutual cooperation for the common welfare of the sort that one finds occasionally among the brothers descended from Israel. Israel’s attitude toward Edom is characterized by resentment for Edom’s

opportunistic oppression, and consequently by appreciation for YHWH's judgment against this "brotherly" nation. Edom, it is safe to say, bears much more of Israel's antagonism than the Ishmaelites do. And in this sense the Edomites appear to have more in common with the Midianites than with the Ishmaelites.

The Jacob and Esau cycle in Genesis seems to reflect Israel's experience with Edom, but only partly so. As Hermann Gunkel interprets Gen 27:28, "May God give you the dew of heaven, the fatness of the earth, and an abundance of grain and wine," Israel is presented as having obtained the richer territory, even though Edom is established with settlements under a monarchy before Israel, the "younger brother."<sup>366</sup> In all three of the distinct stories about Jacob and Esau in their youth—their birth (25:19–26), the sale of the birthright (25:29–34), and Isaac's blessing for Jacob (ch 27)—the younger brother overtakes the older brother.<sup>367</sup> The meaning of these tales is realized when David subdues Edom (2 Sam 8:13–14; 1 Kgs 11:15–16; Ps 60; 1 Chron 18:12–13), suggesting the period of David's reign as a likely date for the initial composition of the stories. Similarly, Isaac's secondary blessing for Esau, "You will live by your sword, and will serve your brother; but when you become restive, you will break his yoke from your neck" (27:40), points to the Edomite overthrow of Israelite hegemony. Thus, the story may have undergone change or been created to reflect Edom's resurgence after a period of

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<sup>366</sup> Hermann Gunkel, *Water for a Thirsty Land: Israelite Literature and Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 58–59.

<sup>367</sup> James L. Kugel, *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 144.



domination; it could be that the original story comes from the 10<sup>th</sup> century, but the additional blessing comes after Edom's freedom from Israel.<sup>368</sup>

Nevertheless, Gunkel provides an important caveat for our reading of these stories in terms of geopolitical reality. He points out that the narratives were not *originally* intended to represent poetically the natural relationships between Israel and Edom, but were later transformed for this purpose. This is indicated by the use of two names: the tales invariably use "Jacob" and "Esau," but later historical accounts refer to "Israel" and "Edom." Also, the characterization of the figures in the folktales do not match representations of Israel and Edom in the historical accounts: in the tales, Jacob is astute but not brave, and Esau is strong but guileless; yet in the histories, Israel overcomes Edom through force (2 Sam 8:13–14), and Edom is renowned precisely for sagacity.<sup>369</sup> Thus, it appears to Gunkel that later redactors gave the old stories a new political adjustment that only roughly matched the current geopolitical relationships.<sup>370</sup> Some other function, more basic in all likelihood, must be at work.

Robert Alter maintains that these Jacob-Esau stories demonstrate effectively that Esau is "not spiritually fit" for divine election. Whereas Esau "is altogether too much the slave of the moment and of the body's tyranny to become the progenitor of the people promised by divine covenant that it will have a vast historical destiny to fulfill," his brother Jacob "is a man who thinks about the future. . . [he is] a suitable bearer of the

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<sup>368</sup> See Kugel, 146. See also Amos 1:11; Mal 1:2–3; Obad 1:10; *L.A.B.* 32:5; Rom 9:10–13.

<sup>369</sup> See Jer 49:7: "Concerning Edom. Thus says YHWH of hosts: Is there no longer wisdom in Teman? Has counsel perished from the prudent? Has their wisdom decayed?" Additionally, see Job 1:1, cf. Gen 36:28; Job 2:11, cf. Gen 36:10–11; Bar 3:22–23.

<sup>370</sup> Gunkel, *Water*, 59.

birthright: historical destiny does not just happen; you have to know how to make it happen, how to keep your eye on the distant horizon of present events.”<sup>371</sup>

Gunkel may well be right, then, that these stories were not originally developed with Israel and Edom in mind, and his observation of the differences between the characteristics of Jacob and Esau in the stories and Israel and Edom in the histories is well made. The parallels were never intended to correspond in a one-to-one relationship with real history, but the stories do point to Esau’s disqualification for election, and, perhaps it is appropriate to say, Jacob’s developing capacity for his role as Israel’s progenitor.

If nothing else, the stories about Jacob and Esau demonstrate the difficulty in assigning details of characterization and plot to geopolitical realities, or even moral or theological terms. As Alter warns, “in the literary perspective there is latitude for the exercise of pleasurable invention for its own sake,” and “[it is] important to emphasize that the operation of the literary imagination develops a momentum of its own, even for a tradition of writers so theologically intent as these.”<sup>372</sup> Nevertheless, the tension comes from the apparent nature of the biblical literature, for which “the primary impulse would often seem to be to provide instruction or at least necessary information, not merely to delight.” It is in the freedom of literary play that the writers are “sometimes unexpectedly capturing the fullness of their subject” and in this sense such literary play enlarges rather than limits a text’s range of meanings.<sup>373</sup> With this in mind, I consider now the

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<sup>371</sup> Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 45.

<sup>372</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>373</sup> *Ibid.*

geopolitical and social location of the Ishmaelites with a view toward their reflection in the Genesis narratives, first in J and E, and then in P.

## V.

### *J and E*

Gunkel affirms that Ishmael was patriarch of a nomadic people from earliest times, noting that Genesis 16:14 (J) has the Ishmaelites centralized around Lahoi-Roi, and that Gen 21:21 (E) situates the group in the steppe of Paran, the wilderness in the northern Sinai Peninsula.<sup>374</sup> The Genesis traditions inspire Gunkel's rather Romantic observation of the Ishmaelites as "a Bedouin people, freedom loving, quarrelsome, troublesome for its neighbors, and famed as marksmen (21:20 [E])," a group of caravaneers shuttling spices from Gilead to Egypt (37:25b [J]).<sup>375</sup>

Gunkel surmises further that there must have been a primitive tribe by the name of Hagar whence the tribe of Ishmael derived.<sup>376</sup> This may well be the case, and in light of our conclusions about Hagar's significance in the J narrative as an Egyptian *alien* (גר) who anticipates the fulfillment of YHWH's announcement that Abram's descendants will be an alien (sg. גר) in a land that is not theirs (Gen 15:13 [J]), one might offer the conjecture that the Hagar tribe became mother to the Ishmaelites in the narrative in part because of this wordplay. It is more likely, perhaps, that the association would have been

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<sup>374</sup> Rabbi Samuel ben Meir (Rashbam), twelfth century, detects a possible wordplay in Gen 16:12 between פרא and פראן, the wilderness of Ishmael's dwelling.

<sup>375</sup> Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997), 189.

<sup>376</sup> *Ibid.*, 190. Indeed, Psalm 83:7 and 1 Chron 5:10, 19 know of a group of Hagrites, whatever their origin and connection.

established before the Abraham narrative tradition took its shape. In any case, one can agree with Gunkel's conclusion that "the slave status of Ishmael's mother would have been of no small significance for those who found their origin in Isaac; for this element signifies to them that they, the Israelites, are Abraham's legitimate descendants—not Ishmael."<sup>377</sup> Gunkel finds meaning in Ishmael's status as firstborn, a feature that is consistent with the historical record indicating that Ishmael appeared before Israel was well established on the stage of history.

Martin Noth, speaking from his perspective on the traditio-historical background of the Ishmaelites, understands that Ishmael was primarily the brother of Isaac, and only became the son of Abraham secondarily, along with Isaac, through his association with Isaac.<sup>378</sup> In this respect, Noth claims that Isaac and Ishmael are not unlike Jacob and Esau, who were a fraternal pair before their genealogical association with Isaac. Isaac and Ishmael were "brothers" because they were ancestors of two clan groups sharing the well Beer-Lahai-Roi and worshipped the local deity, El-Roi (Gen 16:15 [J]). He speculates that "Only on the basis of this connection with Isaac did the figure of Ishmael gain entrance into the 'patriarchal' tradition."<sup>379</sup> If so, according to Noth, such a fraternal kinship may have been one-sided, perceived only by the descendants of Isaac, since the Ishmaelites were broadly scattered and would only have had certain segments of their number associated with Beer-Lahai-Roi.<sup>380</sup>

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<sup>377</sup> Ibid., 191.

<sup>378</sup> Martin Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1981), 108.

<sup>379</sup> Ibid., 108-09.

<sup>380</sup> On the limited association of Ishmael with Beer-Lahai-Roi, see Noth, *History*, 108 (n. 311).

The chief question of the legend of Hagar's flight, claims Gunkel, is how does Ishmael, "our elder brother," become a bedouin?<sup>381</sup> He may have been conceived in Abraham's house, as the thinking goes, but Ishmael is nevertheless a son of the desert. According to the legend, the answer is that his mother became a fugitive after his conception and he was thus born in the wilderness.

But if these stories originally had an etiological function, such a function no longer interests the narrator's contemporaries, as von Rad points out, because an explanation of the origins of the shrine of Beer-Lahai-Roi would be of small significance to them.<sup>382</sup> The intended effect of the Ishmael stories, rather, "is to retard the action of the main narrative and to heighten the suspense."<sup>383</sup> S. Nikaido similarly finds that these Hagar and Ishmael traditions were not preserved for their ideological or historical import, but instead for their contribution to the narrative in recognizable and entertaining displays of motifs and patterns.<sup>384</sup>

Without discounting these "recognizable and entertaining motifs and patterns," Ishmael's expulsion, in both the J and E accounts, must be read for its ethno-political significance in establishing Isaac's descendants—Edom and Israel—as Abraham's primary lineage. The Hagar and Ishmael stories are analogous in this sense to the Jacob

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<sup>381</sup> In the present day, of course, such language is acknowledged to be grossly anachronistic. Gunkel, *Water*, 75-76.

<sup>382</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 190-91.

<sup>383</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>384</sup> S. Nikaido, "Hagar and Ishmael as Literary Figures: An Intertextual Study," *VT* 51 (2001): 242.

and Esau cycle, which serves to install Jacob (or Israel) instead of Esau (or Edom) as Isaac's principle heir.<sup>385</sup>

## VI.

*P*

Elsewhere in this study I have had occasion to notice that *P* does not present Ishmael in separation from the Abrahamic household or from Isaac himself, but rather has Ishmael and Isaac together for Abraham's burial (Gen 25:9 [*P*]). It may be noteworthy, too, that the international scope of the great patriarch's death is enhanced by the included explanation that Abraham is buried in the "field of Ephron son of Zohar the Hittite, east of Mamre, the field that Abraham bought from the Hittites" (vv 9–10).

This is, of course, entirely consistent with *P*, a source that exhibits an interest throughout Genesis for international genealogy and ethnography. For example, *P* is responsible for the records of Shem, Ham and Japheth: Japheth, from whom "dispersed the coastland peoples, each with their own language, according to their families, within their nations (Gen 10:2–5 [*P*]); and Ham and Shem, "by their families, their languages, their lands, and their nations" (vv 20, 31 [*P*]). Genesis 16:3, an insertion that adds primarily the ironic detail that Sarai's maid Hagar is an *Egyptian* who has been living with Abram's family in Canaan for ten years, is occasionally attributed to *P*.<sup>386</sup> Furthermore, *P* has God promise to make Abraham into a *המון* "multitude" of nations (17:4), and Jacob a *קהל* "assembly" of nations (35:11). Oddly, Ephron the Hittite is

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<sup>385</sup> Jon Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1993), 109.

<sup>386</sup> Richard Elliott Friedman, *The Bible with Sources Revealed* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), 55.

featured prominently in each of the several Priestly passages describing Abraham's family burial place (23:10; 25:9; 49:30–32; 50:13). Also, the patriarchs are linked to the sons of Heth by P's mention of Esau's Hittite wives (26:34), a cause of great consternation for Rebekah, who could not bear her own life if Jacob were to take a Hittite wife as Esau has done (27:46). And finally, P includes genealogies for Ishmael (25:13–18), as well as for Esau and the Sons of Seir (36:2–30). In all, the Priestly texts are occupied to a surprising degree with information about other peoples and nations, especially considering their limited space within the narratives of Genesis. In this sense, Priestly attention to Ishmael is not unique, insofar as P is also concerned with the nations—despite what some scholars might say—and particularly also the Edomites, a point that I would like to examine more carefully at present.

One of the more interesting and somewhat peculiar features of the Priestly genealogies develops through the ambiguous connection between Esau and Ishmael as in-laws through marriage. In Gen 36:3 (P), Esau takes Basemath daughter of Ishmael, sister of Nebaioth. Yet according to 26:34, also attributed to P, Basemath is the daughter of Elon the Hittite, who, along with Judith (also a Hittite), cause “a bitterness of spirit” to Isaac and Rebecca.<sup>387</sup> Adding to the confusion is 28:9 (P), where it is reported that Esau went to Ishmael and took “Mahalath,” also identified as the sister of Nebaioth. It would appear that some scribal adjustments have been made, or perhaps that the work of some other source or editor is in evidence.<sup>388</sup> From a geopolitical perspective, the presentation

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<sup>387</sup> For Claus Westermann (*Genesis 12–36* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984], 448–49), P's placement of the prohibition to marry foreigners in the patriarchal period (Gen 27:46–28:1) lends prescriptive force for the importance of family ties for Israel in every period.

of Esau as Ishmael's son-in-law probably reflects ethnic and political realities in the region to the south of Canaan.<sup>389</sup> From the narrative's point of view, however, the references to marriage through Ishmael in Gen 28:9 and 36:3 may be an attempt by P to present Esau more positively in Abraham's line, to mitigate the ill effects of his Hittite marriages. According to Gen 28:8–9 (P), "When Esau saw that the Canaanite women displeased his father Isaac, Esau went to Ishmael and took as wife, in addition to the wives he had, Mahalath the daughter of Ishmael, sister of Nebaioth."

Even more certain, however, is that P's presentation of Esau's gesture serves to consolidate the covenantal promises specifically for Jacob, whose line remains unaffiliated with and unsullied by the Abrahamic son who is excluded from the covenant.<sup>390</sup> As Jon Levenson has observed,

. . . the image of Esau's fleeing to Ishmael just after his relative disinheritance at the hands of Jacob makes a powerful literary statement. Now, just outside the land promised to Abraham, these two descendants of his make common cause, ruling their mighty nations yet utterly powerless to deflect the providential course that has decreed that the status of the beloved son shall attach not to themselves, but to their younger brothers.<sup>391</sup>

Indeed, both the fifteenth century Jewish statesman and commentator Isaac Abarbanel and nineteenth century Rabbi Meir Leibush (Malbim) note that this marriage is intended by Esau to pacify his father Isaac, but that Esau fails nevertheless to take a wife from the Abrahamic family in Paddan Aram.<sup>392</sup> It is worth noting as well that the

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<sup>388</sup> The rabbis speculate about various nefarious relationships among Esau's household, producing unusual family connections.

<sup>389</sup> Levenson, *Death*, 102.

<sup>390</sup> See Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 448.

<sup>391</sup> Levenson, *Death*, 102.



name מַחֲלַת “Mahalath” is understood in *y. Bik.* 3:3 to derive from מָחַל, “forgive,” and as the substantive מַחֲלָה to mean “forgiveness.” This etymology is uncertain—מַחֲלָה can mean other things, including “sickness”—but makes sense of the context. Whether or not the notion of forgiveness is intended through the name of Ishmael’s daughter Mahalath, it would appear that Esau’s affiliation with Ishmael has an ambivalent function in the Priestly tradition: Ishmael accommodates Esau’s good intention to do right by his parents’ wish, on the one hand; but on the other hand, Ishmael serves to remove Esau even more decisively from the blessing of Jacob.

A second important means of comparing Ishmael and Esau in the biblical data appears in the *toledoth* formulae. There is no consensus on the source(s) responsible for the *toledoth* headings—some suggest that an independent book of *toledoth* was edited into P at a late stage in the formation of Genesis; others argue that the *toledoth* have always been a part of P—nevertheless, Blenkinsopp is right to observe that the *toledoth* formulae are entirely compatible with P, even if not original to that tradition, by virtue of their character as genealogical history in outline.<sup>393</sup> The *toledoth* of Genesis can be arranged into two pentads:

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<sup>392</sup> See Meir Zlotowitz, *Bereishis I(a)* (Brooklyn: Mesorah, 2002), 1172.

<sup>393</sup> Blenkinsopp, “Abraham,” 232. Gerhard von Rad (*Die Priesterschrift im Hexateuch literarisch untersucht und theologisch gewertet* [Berlin: Kohlhammer, 1934], 34) shows that information in the *toledoth* passages are inconsistent at several points with information found in other Priestly texts. He supposes that the *toledoth* served as a kind of skeleton for P’s history up to the exodus, and not a subsidiary source incorporated by P (33-40). Peter Weimar (“Die Toledot-Formel in der priesterschriftlichen Geschichtsdarstellung,” *BZ* 18 [1974]: 65-93) and Sven Tengström (*Die Toledotformel und die literarische Struktur der priesterlichen Erweiterungsschicht im Pentateuch* [Lund: Gleerup, 1981]) understand seven Genesis instances of the *toledoth* (2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 11:10, 27; 25:19; 37:2), corresponding to the seven days of creation, to be P’s contribution.

**Table 1**

1. Heaven and Earth (2:4a)	1. Terah (11:27)
2. Adam (5:1)	2. Ishmael (25:12)
3. Noah (6:9)	3. Isaac (25:19)
4. Noah's sons (10:1)	4. Esau (36:1, 9)
5. Shem (11:10)	5. Jacob (37:2)

Each generation, excepting Ishmael and Esau/Edom, leads in succession toward the generation of Joseph and the nascence of Israel. The obvious question, then, is, why should Ishmael and Esau/Edom—two dead-ends in the procession toward Israel—be included in such an important way?<sup>394</sup>

According to *Gen. Rab.* 62.5.1, the rabbis sought a reason that the Scripture should go to the trouble of articulating the genealogy of Ishmael, “that wicked man.”<sup>395</sup> The response of Rabbi Levi—“It is to let you know how old your ancestor [Jacob] was when he was blessed [by Isaac]”—shows how difficult it was for some early Jewish circles to reconcile the inclusion of such a trifling matter as Ishmael’s kindred; it reflects, according to Neusner, “the established polemic concerning Israelite history.”<sup>396</sup> Later Jewish commentators, however, including Shlomo Yitzhaki (Rashi) in the eleventh century CE and Nachmanides (Ramban) in the thirteenth century, are more sympathetic toward Ishmael and the position of his genealogy in the Torah. Rashi, citing *Meg.* 17a, notes that Ishmael deserved the honor of his genealogical record because of his journey “from the uttermost recesses of the wilderness” to honor his father at death. And the

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<sup>394</sup> When a genealogy involves multiple lines of descent from an ancestor, it is called a “segmented genealogy.” See Robert R. Wilson, *Genealogy and History in the Biblical World* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1977), 9.

<sup>395</sup> See Jacob Neusner, *Genesis Rabbah: The Judaic Commentary to the Book of Genesis, Volume II, Parashiyot Thirty-Four Through Sixty-Seven* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985), 346.

<sup>396</sup> *Ibid.*, 346-47.

Ramban points out that the correct explanation for the account of Ishmael's genealogy, out of the many Midrashic explanations available to him, is that Ishmael deserved such recognition because he had repented and would later die a religious man.<sup>397</sup> These generous reflections on Ishmael, though tempered by more negative evaluations available in *Genesis Rabbah*, illustrate the continuing contrast between the receptions of Ishmael and Esau.

Another possible explanation for the inclusion of both Ishmael and Esau in the *toledoth* formulae comes from anthropological observations that genealogies tend to change over time as the social or political structures develop. One group said to have come from the firstborn may be replaced by another "firstborn" in a later generation.<sup>398</sup> Could it be that Ishmael and Esau are both presented as Abraham's descendants and Israel's kin precisely because some of Israel's own number is understood to derive from these other nearby groups?

Such an explanation is not well supported by the biblical data, and in any case it seems more likely that P has offered Abraham as a kind of Adam or Noah figure. After all, he is the one from whom so many of the regional inhabitants descend. One should note accordingly that the second pentad featuring Ishmael and Esau is not altogether unlike the first pentad, which includes lengthy descriptions of the descendants of Japheth and Ham (Gen 10:2–20 [P]), none of whom contribute to the line of Jacob.

In the end, one can do no better than to recognize the important role that the genealogies of Ishmael and Esau seem to play in the broader literary context of Genesis.

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<sup>397</sup> See Zlotowitz, *Bereishis I(a)*, 980.

<sup>398</sup> See Abraham Malamat, "Tribal Societies: Biblical Genealogies and African Lineage Systems," *Archives européennes de sociologie* 14 (1973): 132-33.

Ishmael's *toledoth* are enumerated immediately after the death of Abraham, described in Gen 25:7–11 (P), and before the *toledoth* of Isaac in 25:19. Ishmael “is thus part of a literary bridge between the Abraham stories and the Esau-Jacob stories,” as Robert Wilson and others have noticed.<sup>399</sup> The same is true of the *toledoth* introducing Esau in Genesis 36:1–30 (P) following on the death of Isaac in Gen 35:28–29 (P) and preceding the *toledoth* formula of Jacob in Gen 37:2.<sup>400</sup> In both cases, the genealogies have the function of linking the narratives of Israel's chosen patriarchs. That the complexity of these genealogies—particularly in Genesis 36—appears to outstrip the mere function of “literary bridge” signals to Wilson that these individual genealogies once operated in different contexts as lineage genealogies.<sup>401</sup>

In my view, however, the complexity of these non-chosen genealogies indicates just as clearly that P considers the descendants of Ishmael and Esau to be integral in the story of Israel's origins, that Ishmael and Esau provide a broader familial context for the chosen people Israel. This is consistent, no doubt, with the pattern of concentricity that appears to characterize P's system of covenants, which moves from the general or universal to the particular.

One other peculiar feature of the *toledoth* formulae is worth noticing for similar reasons, namely, there is no *toledoth* announcement for Abraham. Instead, his father Terah is remembered in this way (Gen 11:27). Marshall Johnson finds that Terah's

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<sup>399</sup> Wilson, *Genealogy*, 181-82.

<sup>400</sup> Ibid. Wilson notes that Julius Wellhausen (*Die Composition des Hexateuchs und der historischen Bücher des Alten Testaments* [3<sup>rd</sup> ed.; Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1899], 48-49) first made a similar observation over a century ago.

<sup>401</sup> Wilson, *Genealogy*, 182.

position is thus parallel to that of Noah in several respects: both Noah and Terah end one list of *toledoth* and have their own *toledoth* assigned to them in another context; the *toledoth* assigned to Noah and Terah each include three sons; and in each case, the firstborn son—Shem and Abram—are the sons of interest for the compiler.<sup>402</sup> The connection between Noah and Terah may be of some significance for our purposes because both are *segmented* genealogies that record the advance of the chosen seed within a broader human context.<sup>403</sup> This is not unexpected in the case of Noah, through whom the deity mediates a universal covenant in Gen 9:1–17 (P); but Terah’s son Abraham and his grandson son Isaac will receive a very particular and exclusive covenant in Genesis 17. Terah’s parallel with Noah provides another indication that these *toledoth* are *comparable to the concentric nature of the Priestly covenant schema* which moves from Noah to Abraham and finally to Isaac and Jacob.

Terah’s other sons Nahor and Haran provide a contrast, then, for Abraham. Like Noah’s other sons Ham and Japeth, they are the non-elect without whom there could be no elect figures like Shem, Abraham, and Isaac. To put it more positively, they provide the context for election: the non-elect issue of Noah, Terah, and indeed, Abraham, all give a purpose, function, or *telos* for election itself. Johnson sees a purpose behind the compiled *toledoth* formulae:

Once the stage had been set with its great tribal confederacies, the line did indeed narrow until it reached Aaron, the seventh from Abraham, who was for the Priestly tradition the focal point in the establishment of the cultus. Traditional lists

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<sup>402</sup> Marshall D. Johnson, *The Purpose of the Biblical Genealogies* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1969), 24-25.

<sup>403</sup> For a description of “segmented genealogy,” again, see Wilson, *Genealogy*, 9.

were used in order to set the establishment of the cultus within the context of the origins of the Semites and, in turn, of all mankind.<sup>404</sup>

Johnson goes on to note that the narrative fragment of Num 3:1, which introduces Aaron's descendants, specifically joins the culmination of the *toledoth* with the primary event of the exodus—"YHWH spoke with Moses on Mount Sinai"—thus underscoring the Israelite cultus and "also implicitly hinting at the concept of divine election."<sup>405</sup> In overall design, therefore, the *toledoth* lead in some sense from creation to cultus, a point widely appreciated and applied to the Priestly material as I found in the previous chapter.

And it is also the case that the genealogies, though encompassing all of humanity and, indeed, all creation, move forward through ever-narrowing fields of election. It does not follow that the *toledoth* (or P) are meant to exclude or specifically to remove certain peoples from the line of history, as some have understood, but rather that the divine drama is being played out on a world stage.<sup>406</sup> Enzo Cortese concurs, noting that even though the narrators have privileged the line that becomes Israel, "these genealogies and narratives also point to some peoples as brothers and co-sharers in the divine privileges accorded to Israel."<sup>407</sup>

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<sup>404</sup> Johnson, *Purpose*, 27.

<sup>405</sup> Ibid.

<sup>406</sup> Pace Urs von Arx, *Studien zur Geschichte des alttestamentlichen Zwölfersymbolismus* (New York: P. Lang, 1990), 128, 149.

<sup>407</sup> Enzo Cortese, "Patriarchal Genealogies: Literary, Historical and Theologico-Political Criticism," in *Divine Promises to the Fathers* (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 1995), 18-19.

## VII.

Both the biblical and extrabiblical data would suggest that the Ishmaelites had some considerable influence over the Levant in the first millennium. Nevertheless, the biblical texts seem not to express the same level of enmity toward this group as some others, notably the Midianites or the Edomites, two groups who compare closely in the Bible with the Ishmaelites. In fact, Sparks sees “ambivalence” in Israel’s attitude toward Ishmael.

The Jacob and Esau stories demonstrate the capacity of the patriarchal narratives to reflect geopolitical realities, but only to a certain degree. Perhaps one should expect the same to be true of the Ishmael material. But I would argue that the Ishmael stories reflect fairly well what we are able to construct of Israel’s *mentalité* respecting the Ishmaelites. They are a group that is not to be trusted, by and large, but are known also to contribute at times in Israel’s economy.

If so, if ambivalence is a good description of Israel’s attitude toward Ishmael, then perhaps this figure is well equipped for narratives that serve neutrally “to retard the action of the main narrative and to heighten the suspense.” Indeed, I have argued in chapter two that Ishmael serves broader Pentateuch themes of humiliation, exultation, and exodus in J and E—and it seems rather implausible that another more politically charged figure, the eponymous ancestor of Edom, say, could have played the role. (But it is also true that J and E are exercised to establish that Ishmael does *not* have a place in the household of Abraham.)

Though Ishmael is not excluded so explicitly in P, his position as outsider is consolidated by his in-law relationship with Esau, a figure that is clearly described

throughout the Bible in less than flattering terms. In spite of this, on the other hand, one should not rule out the possibility that Esau's marriage to Ishmael's daughter serves precisely to attenuate his own status as an outsider. That Esau looks to Ishmael upon learning of his father's distaste for Canaanite women may serve to indicate that the association with Ishmael is as much damage-control for Esau as it is damaging for Ishmael (Gen 28:8–9).

Most significantly, the inclusion of Ishmael's *toledoth* is of a piece with the larger scheme of the *toledoth* formulae, the scope of which includes from the outset the whole of creation, and thus contextualizes the various levels of election within a multinational frame.



## Chapter 6

### Conclusion

It is possible now to draw several conclusions about the function of Ishmael in the Priestly tradition. In the first place, one will notice that the narrative traditions preceding P seem to portray Ishmael and his mother in a more positive light than other non-elect siblings and family members of Genesis. It is certainly the case that the narratives of Genesis 16 and 21 have as one objective the explanation of Ishmael's separation from Abraham; but I have also observed an empathetic iteration of a familiar pattern in the story(s) of Hagar and Ishmael: an exodus pattern of slavery and redemption, oppression and liberation, or humiliation and exaltation.<sup>408</sup> The presence of the pattern indicates a kind of perceived divine favor that rests even on these non-elect persons, Hagar and Ishmael.

If so, the appearance of this favor likely says more about the biblical authors' perspective on God than it does of their perspective of Hagar, Ishmael, or their descendants. One can hardly argue that the Ishmaelites or their kin are exalted particularly in the broader scope of biblical tradition. And the same is reflected, no doubt, in the relationship between Israel and the Ishmaelites in history, which appears rather to have been somewhat ambivalent—at various times more cooperative and on other occasions more antagonistic. It may be the case that this ambivalence is an ideal

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<sup>408</sup> This last alternating pair—humiliation and exaltation—derives from Jon Levenson (*Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son* [New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1993]), as does the suggestion of its recurring cycle in the Bible.

correspondence for the ambiguous status of Ishmael in the narratives as non-elect yet favored. If the figures of Hagar and Ishmael are incorporated in the J and E stories of Abraham in order to make a universal theological point, or if the accounts of Hagar and Ishmael are stylized within the Abrahamic narratives for such a purpose, then perhaps they would have served this purpose more effectively than other Israelite neighbors such as the Edomites would have.

And it is in the Priestly presentation of Ishmael that his position as a Noahide appears most explicitly. In this sense, Ishmael is a key figure in the Priestly covenantal architecture, displaying both P's broad theological vantage point and unique approach to the notion of covenant. I have argued that the juxtaposition of the Noahic and Abrahamic covenants comes to a crescendo with the Noahide figure of Ishmael on the Abrahamic stage, demonstrating that P does not discard Hagar and Ishmael as the other sources seem to do, but includes Ishmael the non-elect even within the narrative describing God's election of Abraham and his descendants through Isaac. (Yet even in this difference, this study suggests that P preserves some continuity with the J and E traditions, to the degree that those traditions find some means of redemption even for Hagar and Ishmael.)

I am suggesting furthermore that a central basis for P's own treatment of Ishmael is the Priestly priority on the preservation of life and fertility in general, which applies broadly not only to Israel, but to Ishmael, to all humanity, and indeed, all creation. For P, there can be no expulsion of Hagar or Ishmael into the wilderness because this would mean that Abraham and Sarah are exposing their servants to the deadly wilderness. But even more importantly, Ishmael is a son of Abraham, and fits therefore into the

covenantal schema that begins with Noah and funnels down through Ishmael's father, Abraham, and eventually to Jacob.

This investigation affirms, therefore, those emerging scholars of P who defend the Priestly universal outlook, and challenges the more traditional perspective of those who find in P a solipsistic attitude, declaring that P has "no interest in foreign nations."

The findings are consistent also with the notion that P conceives of Israel's election as an election for divine service.<sup>409</sup> The role of the priests and people living in the land of Israel is to maintain the cult, and thereby to maintain a suitable environment for God's dwelling among them. Numbers 35:34 (P) admonishes Israel not to defile the land in which they live, because YHWH himself lives in it, abiding among the Israelites. As Joel Kaminsky explains, by protecting God from offenses to his holiness, Israel—"and by extension the entire world"—may enjoy God's presence and the blessing that goes with it. Thus, paradoxically, "while requiring Israel to maintain her distinction from the other nations of the world, her enforced separation is beneficial to the world as a whole."<sup>410</sup>

The point is not to draw a sharp line of distinction in this respect between P and the other biblical sources. The same inference may be drawn from many biblical passages, that Israel's service to God will bring peace, prosperity, and, ultimately, the nations' understanding that Israel's God YHWH is, as Jethro the Midianite declares, "greater than all gods" (Ex 18:11 [E]).<sup>411</sup> In a similar way, the Deuteronomist instructs

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<sup>409</sup> See Joel Kaminsky, *Yet I Loved Jacob* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), 97.

<sup>410</sup> *Ibid.*, 97-98.

<sup>411</sup> See Moshe Greenberg, "A Problematic Heritage: The Attitude Toward the Gentile in the Jewish Tradition—An Israeli Perspective," *CJ* 48 (1996): 23-35, esp. 25-26; also *idem*,

Israel to observe carefully the statutes and ordinances in order that Israel's wisdom and discernment will be manifest to the peoples. If so, those peoples will finally say, "Indeed this great nation is a wise and discerning people;" for, as the author inquires, "what other great nation has a god so near to it as YHWH our God is whenever we call to him?" (Dt 4:6–7). This interest in the nations' perception of Israel's God is common also in Ezekiel and Second Isaiah, two sources often compared with P. Ezekiel in particular makes a connection between holiness and the nations' knowledge of YHWH (e.g., Ezek 38:23); and Third Isaiah makes reference to those foreigners who join themselves to YHWH, who minister to him, serve him, keep the sabbath and hold fast to the covenant—the likes of these will be brought by YHWH to his holy mountain (Isa 56:6–7).

Even in this canonical context, the Priestly schema, and particularly the legal corpora, may appear to be exclusionary and hierarchical in certain respects. This is observable in the celebrated ring-like structure that characterizes the Priestly gradations of holiness.<sup>412</sup> According to the system, God occupies the Holy of Holies, the priests maintain the temple, and the non-priestly Israelites and any foreigners residing in the land are responsible for protecting and preserving the holiness of the land of Israel itself. But it is too simple to cite this structure as evidence of unmitigated self-interest.

Several observations can be made about this ring-like structure in light of our study. To begin, the gradations of holiness bear a remarkable similarity to the system of concentricity that one finds in the Priestly Noahic and Abrahamic covenants. Both ring systems are concerned with levels of chosenness or election. Esau, for example, is a part of the chosen, covenant line of election through Isaac, but he is not elect in the same way

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"Mankind, Israel, and the Nations in the Hebraic Heritage," in *Studies in the Bible and Jewish Thought* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1995), 369-94.

<sup>412</sup> See Israel Knohl, *The Sanctuary of Silence* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995).

that Jacob is. Nevertheless, the Priestly scriptures preserve a record of Esau's blessing, including his multiplied descendants. Ishmael, too, is a son of Abraham, though he is not in the chosen line of Isaac at all. He also enjoys a blessing that includes the multiplication of his progeny, the fulfillment of which is carefully recorded by P. In this regard, Ishmael has a place—as a universal Noahide—within the Priestly covenantal architecture, just as the responsibilities for the holiness of the land extend not only to the Israelites but also to the alien who resides in the land.

Furthermore, I have had occasion to recognize, as many others already have, that the Priestly creation narratives assume the status of royalty, not only for Israel, but also for all humanity. This is indicated especially by Gen 1:26–28, which includes the creation of humanity in the *imago Dei*, and verbs of rule and dominion, כָּבַשׁ and רָדָה. The theme of royalty also appears in the universal Noahic covenant in Gen 9:1–18, which also features the *imago Dei*, and, significantly, the Priestly priority for all human life. And, most importantly for our purposes, the idea appears again in the Priestly Abrahamic covenant. There, Abraham is to become the progenitor of nations, and it is said that *kings* shall come forth from him (Gen 17:6 [P]). The idea is given a parallel in the promise to Ishmael, who, it is said, will become the father of twelve נְשִׂאִים “chieftains” and a great nation. Whatever else this term may convey,<sup>413</sup> it should be noted that it carries the connotation of rulership and royalty. And if a royal meaning is intended for Ishmael, then this passage is consistent with the royal ideology of the Priestly texts of creation and the Noahic covenant, which recognize this royal characteristic in *all* humanity. This is what I

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<sup>413</sup> On the significance of this term in the Hebrew Bible, particularly for Ezekiel but also for P, see Jon D. Levenson, *Theology of the Program of Restoration of Ezekiel 40–48* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1976), 57–107, esp. 68–69.

understand to be an intentional emphasis for the Priestly presentation of Ishmael. Though Ishmael is not included in the chosen line of Isaac, his own progeny participate nevertheless in the royal line of Abraham, and, to be sure, of Noah.

There are at least two reasons that this Priestly royal ideology might bear so directly on Ishmael's treatment in the biblical record. First, ancient Near Eastern conceptions of kingship famously include the king's duty to protect and provide for the welfare of the disenfranchised widows and orphans in the realm.<sup>414</sup> Kaminsky sees a link here between royal ideology and P's concern for the weak and poor. The suggestion is that a royal self-awareness would bring about, ideologically, a broader national responsibility for the dispossessed within the land.<sup>415</sup> Though Kaminsky does not mention Ishmael specifically in this regard, it would seem that Ishmael and his mother would fit very well into such a category, particularly if P is drawing on traditions that are anything like what one finds in Gen 16:1–2; 4–14 and 21:8–21. Secondly, ancient Near Eastern kings are generally charged with the fructification and overall welfare of the land withal. If the land and its crops suffer, the kingship is put into question by inference. This appears to be the ideological thrust behind Elijah's pronouncement of drought, for example, in 1 Kgs 17:1 (cf. 1 Kgs 18:5–6). If so, then it is natural and expected that Ishmael, even as a Noahide, should be blessed for increase under the auspices of the royal progenitor and Noahic figure, Abraham. Furthermore, both Abraham and Ishmael are divine image-bearers, and both are charged accordingly with the command to be fruitful

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<sup>414</sup> Thus the ending of the prologue to the *Code of Hammurabi*, where the king claims to have brought about the welfare of the oppressed. See also 2 Samuel 14; Ps 72:12–14; and cf. Ps 82:3–4.

<sup>415</sup> Kaminsky, *Yet I Loved*, 99.

and increase, both at creation and in the Noahic covenant. Ishmael's multiplication develops intuitively out of this principle.

It is my hope that observations such as these will help to put to rest, at long last, the kind of judgments against the Priestly source that have held sway from the Reformation to Wellhausen, and still predominate in some circles today.

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