

## THE WIVES' TALES OF GENESIS 12, 20 & 26 AND THE COVENANTS AT BEER-SHEBA<sup>1</sup>

James K. Hoffmeier

The stories of Abraham and Isaac claiming that Sarah (Gn. 12:11-16; 20:2-3) and Rebekah (Gn. 26:6-11) were their sisters are most perplexing, and consequently have attracted considerable scholarly discussion over the years. D.L. Petersen<sup>2</sup> has rightly said that these stories 'have long served as whetstones on which various techniques of higher criticism have been sharpened'.

C. Westermann<sup>3</sup> concludes, with J. Van Seters,<sup>4</sup> that Genesis 12 is the earliest of the three,<sup>5</sup> and that the narratives of Genesis 20 and 26 are dependant on it. M. Noth,<sup>6</sup> E.A. Speiser,<sup>7</sup> J. Myers,<sup>8</sup> and S. Nomoto,<sup>9</sup> on the other hand, maintain that the Isaac version was the original. Clearly there is no agreement on the question of sources.

---

<sup>1</sup>An earlier version was read at the Society of Biblical Literature Annual meeting in Boston December 20, 1987. Several friends and colleagues read this paper and their comments and bibliographic references were extremely helpful. My thanks to K.A. Kitchen, A.R. Millard, R.S. Hess, D.J. Wiseman, S. Greengus, and my Wheaton associates C.H. Bullock, A.E. Hill, and A.J. Hoerth.

<sup>2</sup>D.L. Petersen, 'A Thrice-Told Tale: Genre, Theme, and Motif', *BibRes* 20 (1975) 30.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>4</sup>J. Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (New Haven, Yale University Press 1975) 167-248.

<sup>5</sup>E.A. Speiser, *Genesis* (Garden City, NY, Doubleday 1964) 89-90; B. Vawter, *On Genesis: A New Reading* (Garden City, NY, Doubleday 1977) 178-81; C. Westermann, *Genesis 12-36: A Commentary* (Minneapolis, Augsburg 1985) 346-47; G. von Rad, *Genesis* (Philadelphia, Westminster 1961) 161-65.

<sup>6</sup>M. Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions* (Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall 1972) 102-9.

<sup>7</sup>Speiser, *op. cit.*, 203.

<sup>8</sup>J. Myers, 'The Ways of the Fathers', *Interpretation* 29 (1975) 129.

<sup>9</sup>S. Nomoto, 'Entstehung und Entwicklung der Erzählung von der Gefährdung der Anfrau', *Annual of the Japanese Biblical Institute* 2 (1976) 12.

In the area of form criticism there has also been sustained attention given to these stories. H. Gunkel<sup>10</sup> and K. Koch<sup>11</sup> regarded Genesis 12 as saga, Genesis 20 as legend, and Genesis 26 as narrative that could not be specifically classified. C. Keller<sup>12</sup> and R. Hals<sup>13</sup> have shown that the traditional categories of saga and legend are no longer adequate for classifying Hebrew tales. Petersen<sup>14</sup> proposes using the label 'episodes in the patriarchal saga' in his treatment of the stories in Genesis 12, 20 and 26. He likened the recurrence of the 'wife-sister' motif to the repetition of a musical motif in a symphony. He claims, 'the motif itself is a building block out of which a larger work is constructed'.<sup>15</sup>

This 'literary' approach is similar to that advanced by R. Alter.<sup>16</sup> He rejects the view that these repeated stories are the result of duplication due to variant traditions. Alter also dismisses R. Culley's conclusions that the repetition is the result of oral re-telling of stories which lead to the shifting of characters (Abraham to Isaac, or Pharaoh to Abimelech) or locations (Egypt to Palestine).<sup>17</sup> Culley's tables of parallel versions of a story, based on oral narration of West Indian and African traditions, serves as Alter's basis for seeing the repetition of episodes as 'the lineaments of a purposefully deployed literary convention'.<sup>18</sup> He goes on to observe that the 'parallel episodes are not at all *random*, as a scrambling by oral transmission would imply' and 'they are not "duplications" of a single *ur-story*'.<sup>19</sup> Alter refers to the three wife-sister stories in

<sup>10</sup>H. Gunkel, *The Legends of Genesis* (London, 1901) 37ff.

<sup>11</sup>K. Koch, *The Growth of the Biblical Tradition: The Form-Critical Method* (New York, Scribners 1969) 111-32.

<sup>12</sup>C.A. Keller, 'Die Gefährdung der Ahnfrau Ein Beitrag zur gattungs- und motivegeschichtlichen Erforschung alttestamentlicher Erzählungen', *ZAW* 66 (1955) 181-91.

<sup>13</sup>R. Hals, 'Legend: A Case Study in OT Form-Critical Terminology', *CBQ* 34 (1972) 166-76.

<sup>14</sup>D.L. Petersen, *op. cit.*, 34.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>16</sup>Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York, Basic Books 1981) 49-50.

<sup>17</sup>R.C. Culley, *Studies in the Structure of Hebrew Narrative* (Philadelphia, Fortress 1976).

<sup>18</sup>R. Alter, *op. cit.*, 50.

<sup>19</sup>*Loc. cit.*

Genesis as such an example of this deliberately used literary device.<sup>20</sup>

The new literary approach, looking at the texture of the literary tapestry rather than seeking to isolate the threads, in recent years has been cutting new paths in Genesis studies. The works of G.J. Wenham,<sup>21</sup> M. Fishbane,<sup>22</sup> D.W. Baker,<sup>23</sup> J.M. Sasson,<sup>24</sup> I. Kikawada and A. Quinn,<sup>25</sup> and most recently J. Rosenberg,<sup>26</sup> and G. Rendsburg<sup>27</sup> have demonstrated the validity of this method. However, there are those who remain unconvinced despite the developing scholarly consensus on the matter.<sup>28</sup>

In Rendsburg's chiasmic scheme for the Abraham cycle (Gn. 11:27-22:24), the stories of Sarah in Pharaoh's palace and Sarah in Abimelech's palace are part C and C' respectively.<sup>29</sup> Rendsburg lists twelve 'theme-words' that link the two stories, not to mention the very plot and the conclusions, as evidence for a literary relationship between the two stories.<sup>30</sup>

For Fishbane<sup>31</sup> and Rendsburg,<sup>32</sup> the story involving Isaac and Rebekah in a foreign palace falls into the chiasmic structure of the Jacob cycle (Gn. 25:19-35:22), where it is section

<sup>20</sup>Alter, *op. cit.*, 49.

<sup>21</sup>G.J. Wenham, 'The Coherence of the Flood Narrative', *VT* 28 (1978) 336-48.

<sup>22</sup>M. Fishbane, *Text and Texture: Close Readings of Selected Biblical Texts* (New York, Schocken 1979).

<sup>23</sup>D.W. Baker, 'Diversity and Unity in the Literary Structure of Genesis', in *Essays on the Patriarchal Narratives*, A.R. Millard & D.J. Wiseman (edd.) (Leicester, IVP 1980) 197-215.

<sup>24</sup>J.M. Sasson, 'The "Tower of Babel" as a Clue to the Redactional Structuring of the Primeval History (Gen. 1-11:19)', in *The Bible World: Essays in Honor of Cyrus H. Gordon*, ed. G. Rendsburg, *et. al.* (New York, Ktav 1980) 211-19.

<sup>25</sup>I.M. Kikawada & A. Quinn, *Before Abraham Was* (Nashville, Abingdon 1985).

<sup>26</sup>J. Rosenberg, *King and Kin: Political Allegory in the Hebrew Bible* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press 1986).

<sup>27</sup>G.A. Rendsburg, *The Redaction of Genesis* (Winona Lake, Eisenbrauns 1986).

<sup>28</sup>J. Emerton, 'An Examination of Some Attempts to Defend the Unity of the Flood Narrative in Genesis, Part I', *VT* 37 (1987) 401-20.

<sup>29</sup>G. Rendsburg, *op. cit.*, 28-9.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 35-36.

<sup>31</sup>M. Fishbane, *op. cit.*, 42, 46-8.

<sup>32</sup>G. Rendsburg, *op. cit.*, 52-3.

B and it is par-alleled by the story of Dinah (34:1-34) which is B'. Their analysis, however, has not connected the respective 'wife-sister' stories in the Abraham and Jacob cycles. Rosenberg's observation on the three stories is similar to Rendsburg's in that these stories are among a number of episodes in which the Hebrew Patriarchs have contact with foreigners.<sup>33</sup> He also considers the stories to be related to the threat to 'Abraham's promised progeny through Sarah'.<sup>34</sup>

The studies from the past decade which utilized the 'new literary approach', have allowed us to see a relationship between the stories as well as the genius of the redactor(s). For some the conclusions reached by this literary approach cast doubt on the multiplicity of sources in the patriarchal narratives.<sup>35</sup> While this is a welcome outcome, the new literary approach has not sought to answer the social, legal, or historical issues raised by these stories.

An added wrinkle to the episodes of Genesis 20 and 26 is covenant/treaty ceremonies with Abimelech of Gerar in Genesis 21:22-34 and 26:26-33. Since both stories involve drafting a treaty between the Hebrew Patriarchs and Abimelech at Beer-sheba, the prevailing view is to regard the stories as a doublet. The Abraham version has been ascribed to the Elohist (E) while the Isaac story is attributed to the Yahwist (J).<sup>36</sup> However, there are those who believe that Genesis 21:22-34 is comprised of two layers, A. 22-24, 27, (31 or) 32 and B. 25-26, 28-30 (or 31-32). But, as Westermann observes, 'there is great uncertainty about the relationship of these layers to each other and whether they are to be ascribed to J or E'.

Westermann sums up the current impasse in the analysis of Genesis 21:22-34 by saying, 'The peculiar state of research shows that in this case a new approach is needed in order to arrive at more secure ground'.<sup>37</sup> Westermann's approach, unfortunately, is not really new. Although he rightly concludes that it is a mistake to distinguish the strata of 21:22-34 without considering the Isaac story of 26:26-33, he remains

<sup>33</sup>J. Rosenberg, *op. cit.*, 77-8.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>35</sup>Kikawada & Quinn, *op. cit.*, 83-138; Rendsburg, *op. cit.*, 1-6, 99-120.

<sup>36</sup>Speiser, *Genesis op. cit.*, 150-2; Vawter, *op. cit.*, 244 & 251; Westermann, *op. cit.*, 346-7.

<sup>37</sup>Westermann, *op. cit.*, 346.

locked within the confines of traditional source-critical analysis and leaves the nagging historical questions unanswered.

Some of these questions are: did all three of the 'sister-wife' incidents take place? If not, then, which one or ones did? Furthermore, what is the relationship between these stories (especially Gn. 20 and 26) and the following accounts of a treaty ceremony between Abimelech and Abraham, and then with Isaac? Before responding to these questions, we need to determine what significance there was to the Patriarchs' claim that their wives were their sisters, and why this resulted in Genesis 12 and 26 in Sarah being taken into the palace of the monarch.

E.A. Speiser,<sup>38</sup> followed by N. Sarna,<sup>39</sup> theorized that 'wife-sister' incidents reflect the Hurrian custom of elevating one's wife to a special legal status of 'sistership' thereby providing the woman greater protection and legal status.<sup>40</sup> C.J. Mullo Weir,<sup>41</sup> R. De Vaux,<sup>42</sup> Van Seters,<sup>43</sup> and others were sceptical of this explanation. A detailed critique of Speiser's thesis, including the examination of additional related texts, was made by S. Greengus.<sup>44</sup> He concludes that the Nuzi texts provide no basis for explaining the 'wife-sister' stories in Genesis, but he does not offer an alternative explanation.

Van Seters has suggested that a *double entendre* may have been involved when Abraham refers to Sarah as his sister; namely that Abraham was claiming Sarah as 'blood relative and legal guardian' as well as using 'sister' as an

<sup>38</sup>E.A. Speiser, 'The Wife-Sister Motif in the Patriarchal Narratives', *Biblical and Other Studies I* (Brandeis University, 1963), 15-28; *idem* *Genesis*, 91-4.

<sup>39</sup>N.M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York, Schocken Books 1966) 102-3.

<sup>40</sup>A thorough study of Nuzi sistership contracts was made by B.L. Eichler, 'Another Look at the Nuzi Sistership Contracts', in *Essays on the Ancient Near East in Memory of Jacob Joel Finkelstein*, Maria De Jong Ellis (ed.) (*Memoirs of the Connecticut Academy of Arts & Sciences* XIX, 1977) 45-59.

<sup>41</sup>C.J. Mullo Weir, 'The Alleged Hurrian Wife-Sister Motif in Genesis', *Glasgow University Oriental Society Transactions* 22 (1967-68) 14-25.

<sup>42</sup>R. de Vaux, *The Early History of Israel* (Philadelphia, Westminster 1978) 245-47.

<sup>43</sup>Van Seters, *op. cit.*, 71-6.

<sup>44</sup>S. Greengus, 'Sisterhood Adoption at Nuzi and the "Wife-Sister" in Genesis', *Hebrew Union College Annual* 46 (1975) 245-32.

affectionate term for wife.<sup>45</sup> He notes with interest that in Egyptian marriage contracts of the 6th century BC the term 'sister' is used when it is clear that no blood relationship existed between the husband and wife.<sup>46</sup>

Van Seters' proposal is problematic. First, as M.J. Selman observes, if the Egyptian custom and understanding of the word 'sister' is meant, it is strange indeed that the Egyptian Pharaoh missed the point.<sup>47</sup> Second, the Egyptian word *brnt* 'sister' used in an affectionate manner to describe one's wife is not restricted to the late period, an impression Van Seters has tried to convey to support his 6th century date for J. This usage of *brnt* is well attested as early as the New Kingdom (16th-15th centuries).<sup>48</sup>

Rosenberg's recent treatment of the patriarchal narratives offers no new interpretation for the 'wife-sister' stories, claiming that the meaning is 'obscure' and 'will continue to elude us'.<sup>49</sup> However, in a footnote he suggests that there must be some 'socio-economic factors' involved.<sup>50</sup>

While not specifically addressing the stories under discussion here, M. Greenberg has cautioned against always trying to explain human motives in sociological terms.<sup>51</sup> This is a valid point: people act irrationally and our seeking a legal or cultural explanation in some cases would be irrelevant. Thus one must be cautious when searching for social 'parallels' between ancient Israel and the Near East. With the 'wife-sister' stories, however, the fact that two different Hebrew patriarchs respond in like manner on three occasions before foreign kings makes Greenberg's methodological concern, which he voiced regarding Rachel's theft of Laban's teraphim (Gn. 31:19), less problematic. Put another way, had there been only one incident in Genesis of a patriarch, out of fear for his own life, claiming his wife to be his sister, it might be explained

<sup>45</sup>Van Seters, *op. cit.*, 75.

<sup>46</sup>*Loc. cit.*

<sup>47</sup>M.J. Selman, 'Comparative Customs and the Patriarchal Age', in *Essays on the the Patriarchal Narratives*, 122.

<sup>48</sup>A. Erman & H. Grapow, *Wörterbuch der Aegyptischen Sprache IV* (Leipzig, J.C. Hinrichs 1930) 151.9.

<sup>49</sup>Rosenberg, *op. cit.*, 77.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, 77, n. 39.

<sup>51</sup>M. Greenberg, 'Another Look at Rachel's Theft of the Teraphim', *JBL* 81 (1962) 246.

as an irrational act. But the fact that there are three claims of a wife being the patriarch's sister, suggests that one ought to consider critically possible socio-legal parallels to help shed light on these stories.

After more than thirty years of looking at the Nuzi texts to elucidate Genesis 12, 20, and 26, and over a century of source and form-critical investigation, it seems that scholarship has come to an impasse which requires new ground to be broken. One concurs with Rosenberg that some veiled socio-economic or socio-political factors stand behind the 'wife-sister' stories. The suggestion that will be developed here has been considered only in passing by a few scholars, and that is that some type of diplomatic marriage may be involved in the stories in Genesis 12, 20 and 26.<sup>52</sup> If this hypothesis is correct, it may also provide the key to understanding the legal function of the treaty ceremonies of Beer-sheba and their relationship to the preceding wife-sister stories.

Diplomatic marriages between nations, city-states and peoples are well documented in the Near East during the second and first millennia BC.<sup>53</sup> Such marriages were consummated to establish or solidify political relationships and the marriages often accompanied or followed the making of a treaty.<sup>54</sup> Marriages between equals as well as between a conqueror and his vassal were practised. The *a'utu* or brotherhood treaty (which may or may not have included a diplomatic marriage), Gerstenberger observes, was practiced

---

<sup>52</sup>D. Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction & Commentary* (Downers Grove, IVP 1967) 117; D.J. Wiseman, 'Abraham Reassessed', in *Essays on the Patriarchal Narratives*, 149. It might be noted that the writer reached his conclusions before discovering that Kidner and Wiseman had hinted at the possibility.

<sup>53</sup>W. Röllig, 'Politische Heiraten im alten Orient', *Saeculum* 25 (1974) 11–23; F. Pintore, *op. cit.*; A.R. Schulman, 'Diplomatic Marriage in the Egyptian New Kingdom', *JNES* 38 (1979) 177–93.

<sup>54</sup>F. Pintore, *Il Matrimonio Inter-dinastico nel Vicino Oriente durante i secoli XV-XIII* (Rome, *Orientis Antiqui Collection* 14, 1978); Paul Kalluveettil, *Declaration and Covenant: A Comprehensive Review of Covenant Formulae from the Old Testament and the Ancient Near East* [*Analecta Biblica* 88] (Rome, Pontifical Institute 1982) 80–3.

'not only among equally high or low-ranking potentates, but also among partners of unequal status'.<sup>55</sup>

Diplomatic marriages during united monarchy in Israel, especially in Solomon's day, are well attested (cf. 1 Ki. 3:1; 11:1-3).<sup>56</sup> In Egypt diplomatic marriages between rival families vying for the Egyptian throne can be documented as early as Dynasties 1 and 2 (c. 3100-2900).<sup>57</sup> It even appears that the Hyksos king Apophis had entered into a marriage with the rival Theban kings of Dynasty 17 (c. 1600-1550).<sup>58</sup> In the New Kingdom (c. 1550-1100 BC) diplomatic marriages between Egypt and foreign powers or petty kings were the order of the day. Thutmose III's campaigns in Palestine and Syria (c. 1457-1425 BC) resulted in some diplomatic marriages with vassal states.<sup>59</sup> Thutmose IV (c. 1400-1390 BC) apparently had established an alliance with Mitanni that was sealed by a marriage according to Amarna letter 29, 16-18 (EA). The Amarna letters make occasional reference to the diplomatic marriages between the kings of Syria-Palestine and their Egyptian overlords, as well as the marriages among west Asian and Mesopotamian monarchs. A number of these communiqués refer to marriages between the daughter of the reigning king or the daughter of the preceding king. Kadashman-Enlil I of Babylon reports that his sister was married to Amenhotep III (c. 1390-1352 BC), and in EA 4, 21-22 he indicates that his daughter had reached a marriageable age. A new marriage was being negotiated between Babylon and

<sup>55</sup>E. Gerstenberger, 'Covenant and Commandment', *JBL* 84 (1965) 38-51. See also, *CAD A/1* 187-8.

<sup>56</sup>A. Malamat, 'The Kingdom of David and Solomon in Its Contact with Egypt and Aram Naharaim', *BA* 21 (1958) 96-102; *idem*, 'Aspects of the Foreign Policies of David and Solomon', *JNES* 22 (1963) 1-17.

<sup>57</sup>W.B. Emery, *Archaic Egypt* (Baltimore, Penguin 1961) 45-7; M.A. Hoffman, *Egypt Before the Pharaohs* (London, Ark 1980) 351.

<sup>58</sup>H. Carter, 'Report on the Tomb of Zeser-Ka-Ra Amenhetep I, Discovered by the Earl of Carnarvon in 1914', *JEA* 3 (1916) 147-54; W.K. Simpson, 'The Hyksos Princess Tany', *Chronique d'Égypte* 34 (1959) 233-9; A.R. Schulman, *op. cit.*, 181-2. The New Kingdom Egyptian dates used here follow Kitchen's chronology in 'The Basics of Egyptian Chronology in Relation to the Bronze Age' in *High, Middle or Low?: Acts of an International Colloquium on Absolute Chronology held at the University of Gothenburg 20-22 August 1987*, part 1 P. Åström (ed.) (Gothenburg, P. Åström 1987) 37-52.

<sup>59</sup>*Ibid.* 182-3.

Memphis, because the previous diplomatic marriage had taken place during the reign of his predecessor Kurigalzu I. EA 4, containing the words of Kadashman-Enlil I, suggests that it was the Egyptian court that had urged a new marriage be consummated. In return, the Kassite king wanted an Egyptian princess (EA 4, 4-21). Apparently in an earlier communication, Amenhotep had indicated that Egyptian kings did not send their daughters to foreign courts. The refusal to send an Egyptian princess to a foreign court reflects what Schulman calls the 'one sided' Egyptian policy.<sup>60</sup> Reluctantly Near Eastern monarchs acquiesced to Egypt's jingoistic attitude.<sup>61</sup> The Babylonian king urges that if he could not receive a princess, then a beautiful woman, even if she was not of royal stock, should be sent who would masquerade as an Egyptian princess. He goes on to complain about the Egyptian policy and questions Amenhotep's motives in requesting a new marriage.

If you haven't sent one as a matter of principle, however, . . . then you weren't really seeking brotherhood and good friendship when you wrote that we should draw closer to one another through a marriage. This is what I had in mind . . . So why hasn't my brother sent a single woman to me? Should I, like you hold a woman back from you? No! My daughters are here and I won't hold one from you.<sup>62</sup>

Kadashman-Enlil charges that Amenhotep could not truly want closer relations if the Pharaoh was unwilling to reciprocate and send a maiden, even if she was not a princess. Apparently the Egyptian king did not respond as his Babylonian colleague had hoped, but he did dispatch a number of gifts including 'animal statuettes' of Egyptian craftsmanship (EA 4, 33-35, 40-43; EA 5, 16-17). Only in the late period of Egyptian history, during the 21st dynasty, which coincides with

---

<sup>60</sup>*Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>61</sup>M. Liverani, 'Elementi "irrazionali" nel commercio amarniano', *Oriens Antiquus* 11 (1972) 313-4; E.T. *idem*, "'Irrational" Elements in the Amarna Trade', in *Three Amarna Essays* (Malibu, Undena 1979) 31-4.

<sup>62</sup>Schulman, *op. cit.*, 179, n. 10. See more recently W.L. Moran's *Les Lettres D'El-Amarna: Correspondance diplomatique du pharaon* (Paris, Cerf, 1987). An English translation of Moran's 1987 publication is scheduled to appear in 1992 from Johns Hopkins University Press.

Solomon's reign, was the Egyptian tradition reversed (1 Ki. 3:1).<sup>63</sup>

The Mitannian king Shuttarna II sent his daughter, apparently Giluhepa, to Amenhotep III (EA 17, 24-27),<sup>64</sup> and then his son, Tushratta, sent his daughter Taduhepa to the same pharaoh. The appearance of a new Mittanian monarch, just as happened with the accession of Kadashman-Enlil I after Kurigalzu I, necessitated the renewing of the old relationship by negotiating a new marriage.<sup>65</sup>

Daughters, however, were not the only ladies presented to a fellow monarch. Abdu-Heba of Jerusalem on one occasion records that 21 maidens were sent to Pharaoh (EA 288),<sup>66</sup> while on another occasion 20 were dispatched as a gift (EA 301).<sup>67</sup> Similarly, a letter from the Egyptian court to Milkilu of Gezer informs us that Egypt was sending 'silver, gold, linen garments turquoise, all (sorts) of precious stones, chairs of ebony, as well as every good thing, totalling 160 deben' in exchange for 40 beautiful concubines, the price of each being 40 shekels of silver.<sup>68</sup>

The presentations to Pharaoh reflect the 'gift-giving' economy that prevailed among royalty in the second millennium.<sup>69</sup> But clearly, receiving a princess was the greatest honour for a monarch, regardless of his status.<sup>70</sup> In the diplomatic correspondence of the Amarna period, there is no evidence of a petty king giving his wife to pharaoh. However, Lab'ayu of Shechem, in order to show the extent of his loyalty to Egypt, expresses his willingness to offer his queen to Pharaoh.

---

<sup>63</sup>This change is attributed to political weakness in Egypt, cf. Schulman, *op. cit.*, 187, and that during this period, different mores prevailed for Egyptian princesses were married to commoners as well as foreigners, cf. K.A. Kitchen, *The Third Intermediate Period in Egypt*, 2nd ed (Warminster, Aris & Phillips 1986) 479, table 12; 594 table \*12.

<sup>64</sup>Schulman, *op. cit.*, n. 35.

<sup>65</sup>*Ibid.* 192-3.

<sup>66</sup>ANET, 488.

<sup>67</sup>Schulman, *op. cit.*, n. 32.

<sup>68</sup>ANET, 487.

<sup>69</sup>Liverani, *op. cit.*, 297-317; C. Zaccagnini, *Lo Scambio dei Doni nel Vicino Oriente durante i Secoli XV-XIII* (Rome, *Orientalis Antiqui Collectio* 11, 1973); D.B. Redford, *Akhenaten the Heretic King* (Princeton, The University Press 1984) 39-42.

<sup>70</sup>Liverani, *op. cit.*, 306-7, 312-5.

... if the king should write for my wife, how could I withhold her? If the king should write to me, 'Plunge a bronze dagger into thy heart and die!', how could I refuse to carry out the command of the king? (EA 254, 38-46).<sup>71</sup>

Ramesses II of Egypt, after years of conflict with the Hittites, made a treaty of brotherhood with Hattusil III in the 21st regnal year (1259 BC) of the Egyptian monarch.<sup>72</sup> About 12 years later (1246 BC), as relations between the two powers became more stable, a marriage was arranged in which Hattusil's daughter was sent to Ramesses. Both Hittite and Egyptian texts each record the haggling over the bride as well as the pomp surrounding the marriage ceremony.<sup>73</sup>

A Babylonian princess, possibly the daughter of Kadashman-Enlil II, had come to the court of Ramesses earlier in his reign.<sup>74</sup> A second marriage between Ramesses II and the Hittites occurred after the death of Hattusil III according to Schulman.<sup>75</sup> However, Kitchen and Gaballa point to a stela of Ramesses II from Coptos which indicates that the marriage took place prior to the death of Hattusil.<sup>76</sup>

The foregoing information makes it clear that diplomatic marriages between Near Eastern potentates of varying authority was a significant practice for establishing and/or maintaining cordial relationships for economic,

<sup>71</sup>ANET, 486. Lab'ayu indicates his willingness to comply with any command of Pharaoh with regard to his wife. In 1 Ki. 20:1-12 Ben Hadad of Damascus demands of Ahab silver, gold, wives and children. When the Damascene was going to take delivery of the wives, Ahab refused, upon receiving counsel from his advisors, recognizing that to do so was to submit to his overlord. Ahab's defiance brought a strongly worded warning that he would totally reduce Samaria for not complying.

<sup>72</sup>K.A. Kitchen, *Pharaoh Triumphant: The Life and Times of Ramesses II* (Warminster, Aris and Phillips 1982) 75-9.

<sup>73</sup>*Ibid.* 83-8. The Bentresh Stela, once thought to be a pious forgery (ANET 29), can now be understood to contain another reference to the first Egyptian Hittite marriage, thanks to a recent suggestion that Bekhten is a corrupt writing for Hatti. cf. A. Spalinger, 'On the Bentresh Stela and Related Problems', *Journal of the Society for the Study of Egyptian Antiquities* 8 no. 1 (1977) 11-18.

<sup>74</sup>Schulman, *op. cit.* 187; Kitchen, *op. cit.*, 83.

<sup>75</sup>Schulman, *op. cit.*, 190 & 192.

<sup>76</sup>K.A. Kitchen, and G.A. Gaballa, 'Ramesside Varia II', *Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde* 96 (1969) 14-17.

military or political reasons. Let us now turn and consider what implications these observations may have for the 'wife-sister' episodes in Genesis.

Abraham and Isaac were considered resident aliens (*ger*) in Canaan and Egypt (cf. Gn. 23:4) and they were at the mercy of the local kings and needed protection while in their territory.<sup>77</sup> Out of fear (Gn. 12:12; 26:7) for what might befall them in a new territory, it might be suggested, they took the diplomatic steps to initiate relationships and ensure security. By virtue of a diplomatic marriage or a treaty, a relationship between the Hebrews and the local kings could be established which would be mutually beneficial. The pastoralists (i.e. Abraham and Isaac) would obtain water and grazing rights, while the agriculturalist (i.e. Abimelech) would have his fields fertilized by the herds, and exchanging goods and services of the respective economies benefited both parties.<sup>78</sup> Such a symbiotic relationship between urban agriculturalist and pastoral nomad is evident between Abraham and Isaac with the residents of Gerar.

In all three stories, Abraham and Isaac claim their wives are their sisters. Since both Sarah and Rebekah had not given birth to daughters (Gn. 16:1; 25:21-26), the Patriarchs had no daughters to offer to their prospective allies.<sup>79</sup> As we have seen from the Amarna correspondence, the giving of concubines or servants did not have the same status as giving one's daughter. On what basis then could Abraham and Isaac hope to establish a relationship with these urban kings? Perhaps their hosts would not have been satisfied by the gift of a servant. And it would have violated marital codes and diplomatic protocol to present one's wife for a diplomatic marriage. Adultery was considered to be immoral by the Egyptians,<sup>80</sup> and in Canaan as well, to judge from Abimelech's

<sup>77</sup>V.H. Matthews, 'Pastoralists and Patriarchs', *BA* 44.4 (1981) 215-8.

<sup>78</sup>*Ibid.*, 215-6; N.K. Gottwald, 'Were the Early Israelites Pastoral Nomads?' *BAR* 4.2 (1978) 2-7.

<sup>79</sup>Jacob and Hamor of Shechem apparently understood the union of their children Dinah and Shechem as a means of establishing cordial relations (cf. Gn. 34:21-4). However, this plan was jettisoned after Levi and Simeon's bloody attack on the men of Shechem because they believed their sister had been treated like a harlot (Gn. 34:25-31).

<sup>80</sup>For the idea of adultery being taboo in Egypt, see 'The Wisdom of Any' in M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature* II (Berkeley,

reference to adultery as 'a great sin' when he discovered that he had taken a married woman into his household (cf. Gn. 20:3-6).<sup>81</sup> Lab'ayu's claim in EA 254, cited above, clearly shows that it was not customary for a monarch to give his wife to a fellow king, but he was willing to violate the mores of the day to demonstrate his loyalty to Egypt.

Thus, it might be suggested that in order to ingratiate themselves to their host, Abraham and Isaac had no other option than to present deceitfully their respective wives as their sisters. In Genesis 12:15 and 20:3 the texts report that the Hebrew Sarah was 'taken' (from the root *lqh*) which is generally used in a marital relationship and is distinguished from merely a sexual union.<sup>82</sup>

The result of this 'taking' for Abraham was that he was treated well by Pharaoh (Gn. 12:16). The verb *ytb*, in the hifil form, is used to describe the state of Abraham and pharaoh's relationship. The use of *ytb* or *tôb* here is significant, for in the treaty language of the Amarna letters the words *tûbtu* and *tabûttu* are used with great frequency to mean 'alliance' and 'friendship'<sup>83</sup> (cf. EA 2, 9-13; 4, 15; 6, 8-12; 8, 8-12; 9, 7ff.; 17, 15; 19, 32; 41, 19-20; 67, 13-16). In fact, W. Moran observes, 'There is no doubt that in the Amarna letters *tabûttu* refers to a relationship effected through treaty...'<sup>84</sup> *Ytb/tôb* elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible is used in connection with the covenant relationship between God and Israel as well as between Israel (Ex. 18:8; Nm. 10:29; Dt. 26:11) and the Kenites (cf. Nm. 10:29). Following Moran, many others have recognized that *ytb/tôb* is used in the Old Testament in covenant-diplomatic contexts.<sup>85</sup> The use of *tôb* outside the Amarna letters,

---

University of California Press 1976), 137, 143, and 'The Tale of Two Brothers' (*Ibid.*, 204-5), and possibly hinted at in Book of the Dead spell 125 (*Ibid.*, 125). See also C.J. Eyre, 'Crime and Adultery in Ancient Egypt', *JEA* 70 (1984) 92-105.

<sup>81</sup>W.L. Moran, 'The Scandal of the Great Sin at Ugarit', *JNES* 18 (1959) 280-1.

<sup>82</sup>G.J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (Waco, Word 1987) 289.

<sup>83</sup>W.L. Moran, 'A Note on the Treaty Terminology of the Sefire Stelas', *JNES* 22 (1963) 174-6.

<sup>84</sup>*Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>85</sup>D.R. Hillers, 'A note on Some Treaty Terminology in the Old Testament', *BASOR* 176 (1964) 46-7; A. Malamat, 'Organs of Statecraft in the Israelite Monarchy', *BA* 28.2 (1965) 34-64; T.N.D. Mettinger, *King*

however, does not in every instance demand the existence of a treaty or covenant. In some instances the usage of *tôb*, along with some form of *salôm* ('peace'), D.J. Wiseman observes, 'denotes a state of non-hostility and is used of equals whether or not they are in covenant bond'.<sup>86</sup> It appears then, that *tôb* in Hebrew and *tûbtu* in Akkadian relates to parties who either have a treaty or who have good relations that could lead to a covenant relationship.

The evidence of the relationship between pharaoh and Abraham is witnessed in the presents received by the latter. The gift included 'sheep, oxen, he-asses, menservants, maidservants, she-asses, and camels'.<sup>87</sup> Westermann believes that this list functioned to elaborate 'the wealth of the patriarchs'.<sup>88</sup> This may be a secondary function of the list. However, based on what we have seen of the dealings of Egyptian monarchs of the Empire period with the petty kings of

---

and Messiah: *The Civil and Sacral Legitimation of the Israelite Kings; Coniectanea Biblica, Old Testament Series*, No. 8 (Lund, 1976) 147. D.J. McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant: A Study in Form in the Ancient Oriental Documents and in the Old Testament* (Rome, *An Bib.* 21, new edition, 1978); *idem* 'Ebla, orkia temnein, *tb, slm*: Addenda to Treaty and Covenant', *Bib* 60 (1979) 247–53.

<sup>86</sup>D.J. Wiseman, "Is it Peace?" — Covenant and Diplomacy', *VT* 32 (1982) 311–26.

<sup>87</sup>Pharaoh's gift of camels continues to trouble some scholars, who for decades have seen this reference as anachronistic (W.F. Albright, *The Archaeology of Palestine* (Gloucester, Mass., Peter Smith 1971) 206–7; Gottwald, *op. cit.*, 2; Westermann, *op. cit.*, 165) or simply is reflective of the late date of the writing of the Abraham cycle (Van Seters, *op. cit.*, 13–20). It has been thought that the domestication of the camel did not take place until late in the second or early in the first millennium. In recent years considerable evidence has been available which clearly shows that the camel was domesticated and in use in the second millennium in the Near East, and Egypt in particular. See the following sources on the camel: F.E. Zeuner, *A History of Domesticated Animals* (New York, Harper & Row 1963); K.A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IVP 1966) 79–80 [see his many references], Richard W. Bulliet, *The Camel and the Wheel* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press 1975) 28–56; E. Porada in *Journal of the Walters Art Gallery* 36 (1977), 1–6; J. Clutton-Brock, *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 45 (1979) 146; M. Ripinsky, 'The Camel in Ancient Arabia', *Antiquity* 49 (1975) 295–8; *idem* 'The Camel in Dynastic Egypt', *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 71 (1985) 134–41.

<sup>88</sup>Westermann, *op. cit.*, 165.

Palestine, the gift of a princess was reciprocated by a gift from Pharaoh (although never a princess, except in the first millennium). Pharaoh, in Genesis 12:16, does not present Abraham with his sister or daughter, which reflects the second millennium Egyptian practice, rather than that of the Third Intermediate Period (c. 1100–650). The fact that Abraham, a non-Egyptian, receives maidservants, which is probably how Hagar came to Abraham and Sarah (Gn. 16:1), is unparalleled in Egyptian literature. However, for the Middle Kingdom (c. 2000–1750 BC), still the generally accepted period for the Genesis patriarchs, we know nothing about diplomatic marriage or sending of maidens from Western Asia to Egypt. In the 'Hyksos' era (c. 1650–1550 BC), as noted above, there may have been diplomatic marriages between Avaris and Thebes. In view of the dearth of information from this period, it might be that jingoism of the Empire period was not a factor in the Middle Kingdom and First Intermediate Period. Perhaps a pharaoh would give maidens to petty kings or Asiatic chieftains during this era. In any event, once Abraham's ruse is discovered, he and his household were expelled from Egypt.

Abraham then returned to Canaan where he was allied (*berit*) with the Amorites of Hebron (Gn. 14:13). Treaty making or alliances between tribal chieftains, like Abraham and Mamre, Eschol, and Aner is a practice known in the Egyptian 'Tale of Sinuhe', the setting of which dates to the 20th century BC. Through marriage, perhaps the *erebu* type,<sup>89</sup> Sinuhe is aligned with a Syrian chieftain (Sinuhe B. 78–79).<sup>90</sup> Later in the story, Sinuhe is challenged by an alien chieftain. In the dialogue between Sinuhe and his father-in-law, it turns out that this other chieftain is not an ally, *smy*,<sup>91</sup> consequently, a battle between the two follows. The tribal alliance documented in the 'Tale of Sinuhe' reflects the type of tribal relationships

<sup>89</sup>C. Gordon, 'Erebu Marriage' in *Studies on the Civilization & Culture of Nuzi and the Hurrians (in honour of Ernest R. Lacheman)*, M.A. Morrison & D.I. Owen (edd.) (Winona Lake, Eisenbrauns 1981) 155–60.

<sup>90</sup>A.M. Blackman, *Middle Egyptian Stories (Bibliotheca Aegyptiaca II, Brussels 1932)* 22; M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature I* (Berkeley, University of California Press 1975) 226; *ANET*, 19.

<sup>91</sup>Erman & Grapow, *op. cit.*, Vol. III, 449. Cf. Sinuhe B. 113–4.

that existed among the fiefs of Syria–Palestine in Middle Bronze I or the early second millennium BC.<sup>92</sup>

In Genesis 20 Abraham relocates to the region governed by Abimelech, king of Gerar.<sup>93</sup> Once again, the Patriarch is in need of good relations, protection and water rights for his herds from the local king, and Abraham claims that Sarah is his sister. Consequently she was taken<sup>94</sup> into the household of Abimelech. Soon thereafter Abraham's trick is discovered and Abimelech is embarrassed, and angered. He returns Sarah to Abraham along with sheep, oxen, male and female slaves and a thousand pieces of silver (Gn. 20:14-16). The gifts to Abraham, even though the diplomatic marriage failed, suggests that Abimelech wanted warm relations with the Hebrews,<sup>95</sup> and he allows Abraham to graze his flocks in the territory of Gerar (Gn. 20:15).

The situation in which there was no treaty, but good relations prevailed between an urban centre and tent-dwelling tribal people, is also found in Judges 4:17. There the escaping Sisera, commander of the armies of Jabin of Hazor, flees to the tent of Jael the Kenite. The text explicitly states that there was *salôm* between the two parties. Even if no formal treaty existed, the state of *salôm* probably meant that a fugitive could find asylum with the other party.<sup>96</sup>

The uncertainty surrounding the relationship between Abraham and Abimelech after leaving Gerar may well have resulted in the treaty that was ratified at Beer-sheba (Gn. 21:22-32). Treaty terminology is found in abundance in this passage; viz. 'covenant' *b'rit* (21:27, 32), 'swear' or 'oath' *saba*<sup>c</sup> (21:23, 24, 31), 'witness' *cedah* (21:30) and 'loyal' *hesed* (21:23). When the terms of the treaty are being arranged, Abraham complains (*hōkiah*) about the way Abimelech's men had his wells seized. This complaint, part of the negotiating process, coupled with Abimelech's claim of ignorance, suggests that an

<sup>92</sup>Cf. A.F. Rainey, 'The World of Sinuhe', *Israel Oriental Studies* II (1972) 371–81.

<sup>93</sup>Here is not the place to enter a full discussion of the so called Philistine problem. Kitchen's suggestion in 'Philistines' in D.J. Wiseman (ed.) *POTT* (Oxford, Clarendon Press 1973) 53–78 is a good working hypothesis.

<sup>94</sup>See the discussion above concerning *lqh*, cf. note 85

<sup>95</sup>Wiseman, 'Abraham Reassessed', 149.

<sup>96</sup>Wiseman, *VT* 32 (1982) 314.

understanding about water rights had been reached earlier (Gn. 21:25). The water rights are settled in what appears to be a parity treaty between the two (21:30).<sup>97</sup>

After Abraham's death (Gn. 25:7-10), Isaac, the new chieftain, is forced to return to Gerar because of famine (26:1). He may have intended to renew the association with Abimelech that had existed with his father. Again, the Patriarch's wife is said to be a sister, but apparently before the diplomatic marriage is consummated, the truth is discovered and Isaac is forced to leave Gerar, another attempted diplomatic marriage ending in failure.

Many commentators find it improbable that both patriarchs would make the same mistake with the same monarch. Speiser thought it unlikely that if the two patriarchs came to the same city that the king should bear the same name.<sup>98</sup> This, however, is really not a serious problem. Two possibilities present themselves: (1) the two Abimelech's could be one and the same king, or (2) they are two different individuals.

(1) As the Amarna letters show, and Schulman and others<sup>99</sup> have observed, a diplomatic marriage and a treaty lasts only as long as the life time of the maker or recipient of the treaty. The new king usually arranged another marriage to reaffirm or renew the old relationship. It was noted above that both Amenhotep III and Ramesses II, who reigned 38 and 67 years respectively, out-lived their Babylonian and Hittite counterparts and so a second marriage was negotiated for both. There was a need to renew old treaties at the death of one of the treaty makers even if a marriage had not been involved before.

Evidence of this practice is seen when Hiram of Tyre seeks to renew the treaty with the new Israelite king, Solomon, after David's death (1 Ki. 5:1-12). Naturally, a monarch could decide against renewing an old treaty. Such appears to be the case after the death of the 21st Dynasty Pharaoh, apparently

---

<sup>97</sup>Wiseman, *op. cit.*, 149.

<sup>98</sup>E.g. Speiser, *op. cit.*, 203-4.

<sup>99</sup>Schulman, *op. cit.*, 192-3; G. Mendenhall, 'Covenant Forms in Israelite Tradition', *BA* 17.3 (1954), 50-76 = *BA Reader* #3, 25-53 (the latter is cited herein); Hillers, *op. cit.*, 47; P.K. McCarter, *II Samuel* (Garden City, NY, Anchor 1984) 85.

Siamun,<sup>100</sup> who had made the marriage alliance with Solomon (1 Ki. 3:1; 9:16). The new Dynasty founded by Shishak or Shoshenk I did not honour the old treaty with Israel, and invaded Israel and Judah (1 Kings 14:25). In view of these ancient diplomatic practices, Isaac's return to Gerar and Abimelech makes very good sense.

(2) It is also possible that the Abimelech of Genesis 20 and 26 are not one and the same person. Abimelech could be a throne or dynastic name that was passed on to succeeding generations.<sup>101</sup> Thus it is possible for Abimelech of Gerar in Genesis 20 and 26 to be one and the same person or two entirely different individuals. Our inability to determine which option is correct should not cast aspersions on the historicity of the two stories.

A diplomatic or legal connection between the two encounters with the king of Gerar is evidenced by the fact that Abraham's wells are stopped up after his death, a point underscored in Genesis 26:18. This act illustrates that the previous arrangement terminated with Abraham's death.<sup>102</sup> This then led to re-negotiating water rights between Isaac and

<sup>100</sup>Siamun is the choice of most historians for the unnamed Pharaoh of 1 Ki. 3:1, cf. K.A. Kitchen, *The Third Intermediate Period in Egypt* (1100-650), §§ 235-36; S. Horn, 'Who was Solomon's Father-in-Law?' *Biblr* 12 (1967) 3-17; H.D. Lance, 'Solomon, Siamun and the Double Ax', in *Magnolia Dei: The Mighty Acts of God*, F.M. Cross Jr. et. al. (ed.) (Garden City, Double Day 1976) 209-23; D.B. Redford, 'Studies in Relations during the First Millennium B.C. (II)', *JAOS* 93 (1973) 7; A.R. Green 'Solomon & Siamun: A Synchronism between Early Dynastic Israel and the Twenty-First Dynasty Egypt', *JBL* 97 (1978) 353-67; and J.K. Hoffmeier, 'Egypt as an Arm of Flesh: A Prophetic Response' in *Israel's Apostasy and Restoration*, A. Gileadi (ed.) (Nashville, Nelson 1988) 85-6.

<sup>101</sup>In Egypt eleven pharaohs bear the name Ramesses, four Thutmose and Amenhotep, there are at least three Ben Hadad's in Damascus, three Hattusils and Mursils in Hattusas, and five Shalmanesers in Assyria. Two different kings, possibly succeeding each other, with the name Abimelech is plausible. Support for this suggestion is found in 1 Sa. 21:10-15 when David seeks refuge in the Philistine city of Gath where Achish is king. The superscription of Ps. 34 states 'A Psalm of David, when he feigned madness before Abimelech' (RSV). The writer of this line apparently opted to use the title of the Philistine monarch which may have survived into the first millennium, rather than his name Achish.

<sup>102</sup>Wiseman, *op. cit.*, 149.

Abimelech which was sealed by a covenant, *berit*, in Genesis 26:26-33. Had Isaac's attempted diplomatic marriage succeeded, the old agreements might have stood, and the second treaty at Beer-sheba with Abimelech might not have been required. At the conclusion of their ceremony at Beer-sheba the words *tôb* and *salôm* are used to describe the state between Abimelech and Isaac (Gn. 26:29). These terms, as we have noted, are well attested in Near Eastern treaty texts.<sup>103</sup>

In conclusion, the evidence has been presented here which suggests that the wife-sister stories of Genesis represent attempts by the Hebrew patriarchs to establish good relations with foreign kings through diplomatic marriages, none of which succeeded. The Hebrew patriarchs were interested in protection, water and grazing rights, while Abimelech was apparently impressed with the God of Abraham and Isaac and thought that material (economic) blessings might accrue to him by this alliance (Gn. 21:22-23; 26:27-29). Neither Abraham nor Isaac had daughters and so they deceptively presented their wives as sisters to their prospective confederates. From a theological perspective, divine intervention was necessary to deliver Abraham from a difficult situation that jeopardized the 'patriarchal promise'.<sup>104</sup> The failure with Abimelech resulted in drafting the first treaty with Abraham (Gn. 21:22-32). Abraham's death terminated the previous relationship, which Isaac apparently sought first to establish through marriage (Gn. 26:6-16) and then by establishing a covenant (26:26-31).

The 'new literary approach' to Genesis studies has enabled us to see the patriarchal narratives in a more coherent way. Hopefully the hypothesis posited here will supplement this picture by providing some possible socio-political factors that may be lurking behind the episodes. If our suggestion proves to be correct, then it becomes possible for all three 'wife-sister' stories to be separate events that, when viewed together, make sense in light of the ancient Near Eastern practice of diplomatic marriage.

<sup>103</sup>Cf. note 86.

<sup>104</sup>Wenham, *op. cit.*, 290-1; Westermann, *op. cit.* On the patriarchal promise being the unifying factor in Genesis and the Pentateuch, see D.J.A. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch* (Sheffield, JSOT Press 1978).