Lies, Wives and Sisters: The Wife-Sister Motif Revisited

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HISTORICAL-CRITICAL BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP during the past one hundred years generally built upon the acceptance of the documentary hypothesis of the Pentateuch. Simply stated, the documentary hypothesis is the term given to the school of thought that claims that the Torah in its present form is a composite document, representing materials originally compiled from separate sources. Many of the logical inconsistencies in some parts of the Biblical text and stylistic differences between various sections can be easily explained, the proponents of this thesis claim, by viewing the text as an amalgam of originally distinct literary works. Though some disagreement exists as to which sections of the Torah originated with which tradition and as to how these various traditions were ultimately united, most scholars refer to a limited number of major traditions. They are the J (Jahwist) and E (Elohist) traditions, the names of which stem from their usual forms of reference to God, D the tradition of the Book of Deuteronomy, H the Holiness Code, now imbedded in Leviticus and the P (Priestly) tradition, which is seen as primarily responsible for the Levitical cult. It was a redactor (often called R) who compiled these sources into the text of Torah which we now use and study.

In the last few decades, the documentary hypothesis has lost much of its central position, not because it has been disproved or refuted or replaced by a more comprehensive theory, but, primarily, because the focus of Biblical scholarship has shifted. In the past, the emphasis was upon analysis of the elements which entered into the final text. In recent years, scholars have recognized that it is the synthesis of these elements and the final product that emerged, the Torah, that ought to be the focus of critical attention. An emphasis on the final form of the texts is reflected in the varied works of Cassuto, Brevard Childs (as in his Introduction to the Bible as Scripture), Frye and Alter, among others. Even if it is granted that individual sources have entered into the composition of the Torah, these scholars today recognize that it is the final form which deserves to be carefully analyzed.

A case in point is the series of Biblical incidents known as the "wife/
sister motif." The Torah relates three instances in which one of the Patriarchs seeks to avert a perceived danger to himself by depicting his wife as his sister. Three such episodes in the space of fifteen chapters of a single Biblical book beg for discussion. In fact, much scholarly and interpretive energy has been devoted to analyses of these narratives, and in the pages that follow I would like to examine them, briefly discussing the manner in which they have thus far been incorporated into Biblical scholarship\(^1\) and suggesting yet an additional means of reading and interpreting them.

The plots of the three narratives are all similar. In the first one (henceforth, narrative I), found in Genesis 12:10-20, Abram\(^2\) journeys to Egypt in order to avoid a famine. There, because he fears that his wife's beauty will endanger his life, he seeks to convince Pharaoh that Sarai is his sister. Pharaoh, not suspecting his interference in a marital relationship, takes Sarai into his court until he learns the truth about her relationship to Abram. In narrative II (20:1-18), Abraham and Sarah (their names having been changed in the interim) settle in Gerar, where Abimelech is the ruler. Although the Torah does not offer a motive for the lie in this instance, Abraham once again tells the king that Sarah is his sister, whereupon Abimelech takes her until he discovers that he has been mislead. Genesis 26:1 and 6-11,\(^3\) narrative III, relates a similar event, dealing once again with Abimelech, though in this case the protagonists are not Abraham and Sarah, but Isaac and Rebekah.

In his classic work on Genesis, E.A. Speiser claims that the repetition of this plot provides sound support for the documentary hypothesis.\(^4\) The three instances taken together, he argues, present the reader with serious contradictions. It would appear that Abram learned little from his almost disastrous lie to Pharaoh, and tried again with Abimelech only a short time later. One would also have to believe that Abimelech, who

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1. For one almost "midrashic" approach to these texts, see also Joel Rosenberg, "The 'Wife-Sister' Legends of Genesis and the Role of Women," Davka Magazine, Number 17 (1976). Another recent analysis of this series of narratives may be found in Ruth F. Brin, "Abraham as Diplomat: Reconsidering the Wife-Sister Motif," Reconstructionist Magazine (October-November, 1984), 33-34.


3. Several sources, among them the Encyclopedia Judaica (Vol. VII, p. 390), suggest a division which would include only 26:6-11. However, Robert Alter, in his The Art of Biblical Narrative (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1981), p. 49, proposes including verses 1-11. While verses 26:2-5 do not represent an integral part of the wife/sister narrative, our description of the structure of these narratives, (p. 3) will suggest that at least 26:1 must be included.

appears in both narratives II and III, is so little nonplussed by the first incident that he readily believes Isaac's lie as well several chapters later. "No competent writer," Speiser concludes, "would be guilty of such glaring faults in characterization."  

Based on this assumption, and given the general characteristics of the E and J documents, Speiser and other advocates of the documentary hypothesis attribute narratives I and III to J, and narrative II to E. This way, neither tradition contains contradictions. Document E, containing only one of the narratives, poses no problems. Document J, even with two, proves defensible because one deals with Abraham and Pharaoh in Egypt, while the other focuses on Isaac and Abimelech in Gerar. Such a division, Speiser argues, also seems entirely consistent with the general qualities of the E and J documents.  

While Speiser's claim that the duplication of events here probably stems from the text's origin in distinct documents seems well founded, it has long been recognized that more may be said regarding the narratives at hand. Speiser himself noted that these sources prove interesting not only textually but historically and sociologically as well. Specifically, he suggested that the "wife/sister" motif reflects an ancient Hurrian practice, in which a man could "adopt" his future wife as a "sister" in order to grant her a higher social status.  

Hermann Gunkel (1862-1932), who explored categories of literary forms, provided an additional useful tool in the discussion of these texts. He proposed the classification of Biblical narratives according to the "type-scene" that they represent. "Type-scenes," he suggested, are those narratives in the Bible which exhibit striking similarity to each other, though specific characters and details may vary. Examples of such "type-scenes" are numerous and include, among others, the birth of a hero to a previously barren mother, encounters with a future spouse at a well, trials of initiation, epiphany in a field and the testament of a dying hero. Although Gunkel makes a vague reference to the wife/sister motif in his Legends of Genesis, he does not describe it in any detail.  

While the three narratives in question do not fulfill all of Gunkel's criteria for a "type-scene," they surely do support the following general structure:  

5. Speiser, p. xxxii.  
6. As suggested above, document E employs the name Elohim, rather than Yahweh, for God. (Speiser notes the reading of the Septuagint for 20:18 which renders Elohim instead of Yahweh, supporting his division of the texts.) E also uses dreams as a means of communication and it has a "marked tendency to explain and justify (p. 150)." J, on the other hand, is marked by an economy of speech and an ability to present actions without the need for interpretation (p. 152).  
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1. An introduction (usually a single verse) explains how the characters arrived at their foreign location.

2. The Patriarch claims that his wife is actually his sister. When applicable, the ruler then takes the wife into his quarters.

3. The ruler somehow learns the truth about the wife’s relationship to the Patriarch.

4. The ruler confronts the deceiving Patriarch and, depending on the instance, the Patriarch may offer an explanation.

5. The conflict is resolved.

The texts of the three narratives, presented so as to facilitate comparison of each of the five stages among the three instances, now follow:

**NARRATIVE I**

There was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land.

(12:10)

As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, “I know what a beautiful woman you are. If the Egyptians see you, and think, ‘she is his wife,’ they will kill me and let you live. Please say that you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that I may remain alive thanks to you.”

(12:11-13)

**NARRATIVE II**

Abraham journeyed from there to the region of the Negeb and settled between Kadesh and Shur. While he was sojourning in Gerar, (20:1)

Abraham said of Sarah his wife, “She is my sister.” So Abimelech king of Gerar had Sarah brought to him.

(20:2)

**NARRATIVE III**

There was a famine in the land — aside from the previous famine that had occurred in the days of Abraham — and Isaac went to Abimelech, king of the Philistines, in Gerar... So Isaac stayed in Gerar.

(20:1,6)

When the men of the place asked him about his wife, he said, “She is my sister,” for he was afraid to say “my wife,” thinking, “The men of the place might kill me on account of Rebekah, for she is beautiful.”

(26:7)

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10. The following represents nothing but a general paradigm. As we shall see, each of the sections obtains its particular significance precisely because it deviates from the rule in some way.

11. The text which follows is taken in its entirety from The Torah: A New Translation (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1962).
NARRATIVE I

When Abram entered Egypt, the Egyptians saw how very beautiful the woman was. Pharaoh's courtiers saw her and praised her to Pharaoh, and the woman was taken into Pharaoh's palace. And because of her, it went well with Abram; he acquired sheep, oxen, asses, male and female slaves, she-asses, and camels.

But the Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his household with mighty plagues on account of Sarai, the wife of Abram. (12:14-17)

NARRATIVE II

But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night and said to him, "You are to die because of the woman that you have taken, for she is a married woman." Now Abimelech had not approached her. He said, "Oh, Lord, will You slay people even though innocent? He himself said to me, 'She is my sister!' And she also said, 'He is my brother.' When I did this, my heart was blameless and my hands were clean." And God said to him in the dream, "I knew that you did this with a blameless heart, and so I kept you from sinning against Me. That is why I did not let you touch her. Therefore, restore the man's wife — since he is a prophet, he will intercede for you — to save your life. If you fail to restore her, know that you shall die, you and all that are yours."

Early next morning, Abimelech called all his servants and told them all that had happened, and the men were greatly frightened. (20:3-8)

NARRATIVE III

When some time had passed, Abimelech king of the Philistines, looking out of the window, saw Isaac fondling his wife Rebekah. (26:8)
Pharaoh sent for Abram and said, "What is this you have done to me! Why did you not tell me she was your wife? Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her as my wife? Now, here is your wife; take her and begone!"

(12:18-19)

Then Abimelech summoned Abraham and said to him, "What have you done to us? What wrong have I done you that you should bring so great a guilt upon me and my kingdom? You have done to me things that ought not to be done. What, then," Abimelech demanded of Abraham, "was your purpose in doing this thing?" "I thought," said Abraham, "surely there is no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife. So when God made me wander from my father's house, I said to her, 'Let this be the kindness that you shall do me: whatever place we come to, say there of me: 'He is my brother.'"

(20:9-13)

Abimelech sent for Isaac and said, "So she is your wife! Why did you then say: 'She is my sister?" Isaac said to him, "Because I thought I might lose my life on account of her." Abimelech said, "What have you done to us! One of the people might have lain with your wife, and you would have brought guilt upon us."

(26:9-10)
And Pharaoh put men in charge of him, and they sent him off with his wife and all that he possessed. (12:20)

Abimelech took sheep and oxen, and male and female slaves, and gave them to Abraham; and he restored his wife Sarah to him. Abimelech said, “Here, my land is before you; settle wherever you please.” And to Sarah he said, “I hereby give your brother a thousand pieces of silver; this will serve you as vindication before all who are with you, and you are cleared before everyone.” Abraham then prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech and his wife and his slave girls, so that they bore children; for the Lord had closed fast every womb of the household of Abimelech because of Sarah, the wife of Abraham. (20:14-18)

Abimelech then charged all the people saying, “Anyone who molests this man or his wife shall be put to death.” (26:11)

Clearly, each of the three instances at hand conforms to our described outline. However, as Robert Alter suggests, such a simple characterization may actually miss the essential points of the texts. For what is important may be not the manner in which these instances are similar to each other, but rather, the way in which each deviates from our abstract scenario, thereby conveying its specific message about the characters or issue at hand. The remainder of this paper consists of a “close-reading” analysis of these three narratives, and seeks to demonstrate that their affinity to the “type-scene” notwithstanding, each has been painstakingly constructed so as to highlight a specific issue with which the Biblical author is concerned.

Careful literary analysis of each of the three instances of the wife/sister motif illustrates that, in each, the author had a particular theme in mind. Our examination of the details of these three narratives will demonstrate that, in narrative I, the author seeks to display the rather human, darker

side of Abram's personality. Almost each element of the section is carefully designed to highlight his guile and the absence of any legitimate explanation or defense for his actions. Narrative II, however, centers on a moral issue, paralleling in many senses the story of the destruction of Sodom. At play here are the notions of the complexity and subtlety of moral judgments, along with issues of fairness in punishment and Divine justice. Finally, the third narrative furthers Genesis' portrayal of Isaac as a weak and passive personality, overshadowed consistently by the imposing characters of his father and his brother.

Stage One: The Introduction

The introductory portions of the narratives (12:10, 20:1, 26:1,6) serve primarily to define the beginning of each incident. No one of them is particularly important in explicating the special interest of the narrator in that narrative. Nonetheless, it is interesting that in both the first and second instances, the redactor employs verbs of motion. Narrative I uses the verb va-

13. That incident, like narrative II, raises the issue of God's innocence. Abimelech's question, "Oh, Lord, will You slay people even though innocent?" recalls Abraham's well known question and subsequent bargaining with God after learning of His intention to destroy Sodom.

14. That scholars generally assign the Sodom incident to the J document does not seem to me to detract from the plausibility of this argument. On the contrary, it seems almost likely that J and E could each contain one such confrontation.

15. It is a generally accepted reading of the Biblical text that Isaac was the most passive of the three Patriarchs. However, it should be noted that the Genesis record of his personality is by no means black and white. Abimelech's seeking a pact of non-aggression (Genesis 26:28-31) surely suggests that Isaac represented a considerable power. The following rather lengthy quotation from The Torah: Genesis: A Modern Commentary (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1974, p. 261), does, however, reflect a psychological explanation of this pervasive view of Isaac's character:

Of the three Patriarchs, Isaac's personality is the least clearly defined. Much in his life is a repetition of Abraham's experience, and some critics have even suggested that Isaac never existed at all, that he was the creation of later legendary amplifications of the Abraham cycle. But [this is rather unlikely . . .

He was the child of his parent's old age and was probably overprotected in his youth. Sarah was a woman of strong will. Abraham a man of deep conviction and great status who must have appeared as a towering giant to his son. It is not surprising that when Isaac was being offered as a sacrifice at Moriah he could not even raise his voice in protest. By coincidence . . . the wife who was obtained for him turned out to be aggressive and resourceful . . . The text is at pains to point out that Rebekah brought Isaac comfort after his mother's death (Gen. 24:67), which in contemporary terms may be said to indicate that he saw in Rebekah a mother substitute. Further, he repeated his father's experience with Abimelech, and the wells he dug were the old wells of Abraham.

Bad experiences seem to have followed him. He was nearly sacrificed by his father; he was caught in the crossfire of Sarah's and Hagar's jealousies; his children did not get along with each other; and, in old age, when he was stricken with blindness, his wife and son conspired to deceive him, so that the one thing he truly owned, his paternal blessing, was bestowed equivocally on the son he did not prefer.
which connotes movement (and, therefore, in a sense, power) but with
the verb va-yeshbev, which refers to fixed dwelling in the same locale.

Until now, we have discussed narrative III assuming that it begins
with 26:6. However, an interesting detail comes to light when we add 26:1
to the section. When one includes auxiliary verse 26:1 (which seems
necessary, given the structure outlined above), it becomes apparent that
this is the only narrative in which God is involved in the Patriarch’s de-
cision to move to a new locale. In the other two narratives, the Patriarch
makes his own determination of where to reside. Here, it is God who
insists that Isaac remain in Gerar. And yet, as we shall see, despite God’s
explicit promise that He will protect Isaac (26:3), Isaac still manages to
danger himself and his family. By virtue of this detail in the opening
verse(s), the narrative suggests from the very outset that Isaac is incapable
of competent, independent thinking.

Stage Two: The False Claim

The second stage of the “type-scene” (12:11-13, 20:2, 26:7), that in
which the Patriarch makes the claim that his wife is really his sister, proves
much more complicated. The indefensible character of Abram’s behavior
is highlighted by comparison with the other two parallel sections. In
those, the claim that the wife is actually a sister is made only once the
Patriarch has arrived at the new place (narrative II), or in reaction to spe-
cific queries by the local inhabitants (narrative III). However, in narrative
I, Abram’s lie is premeditated. As Harry Orlinsky points out in his notes
to the JPS translation of the Torah,16 *hikriv lavo* (12:11) refers not to place
but to time.17 The text stresses not their proximity to Egypt, but the short
amount of time left for their travel. In so doing, it points out that they
have yet to arrive. Therefore, Abram’s mendacity is completely
premeditated, in no way prompted by factors related to the Egyptians.

In the second narrative, Abraham says that Sarah is his sister, again
without apparent provocation. But there are two essential differences
which, when carefully noted, further the negative portrayal of narrative
I. In narrative II, the claim is not as premeditated, since Abraham has
already arrived at Gerar. Furthermore, the ruler’s “abduction” of Sarah is
almost immediate, unlike the first case, in which the reports of her beauty
apparently took some time to reach Pharaoh. The immediacy of the


17. Details such as this point to the absolute importance of working from the original text. In
this particular instance, even a translation as fine as Everett Fox’s proves less ideal, for his
rendition of *hikriv la-vo* as “came near” does not capture the subtle effect to which Orlinsky
refers. See Everett Fox, *In the Beginning: A New English Rendition of the Book of Genesis* (New
abduction suggests that Abraham may well have been given legitimate cause for worry, and may have lied out of what he considered a dire necessity. Surely, it suggests that he had less time to prepare a better response to this state of affairs. This fear and the sense of a dire necessity, of course, form the basis of his defense after his confrontation with Abimelech (20:11).

Finally, the third narrative is the only one in which the Patriarch makes the wife/sister claim only after a specific inquiry. Isaac, apparently in at least some danger (Abimelech himself later admits that someone might well have taken Rebekah), fails to protect himself by devising the subterfuge in advance, making the necessary claim only when the suggestion of danger is already upon him. The fact highlights the thrust of two of the narratives. It suggests the political naiveté which characterizes the third narrative’s portrayal of Isaac and it directs our attention, once again, to the contrastingly premeditated nature of Abram’s subterfuge in narrative I.19

Stage Three: The Truth is Revealed

In the third stage of the “type-scene” (12:14-17, 20:3-8, 26:8), in which the ruler finally learns that the woman in question is the Patriarch’s wife, and not his sister, the redactor furthers the themes already developed in each of the selections. In narrative I, Pharaoh suffers “great afflictions,” but nowhere does anyone tell him that it is his involvement with Sarai which has caused his punishment. Naḥmanides,20 sensitive to

18. Unlike the situation in narrative I, we find here no intermediary. Here, the action is all part of one verse, and va-yishlah va-yikah (he sent and he took) imply to me immediacy and intent.

19. Additional insight into the differences between the narratives may be gleaned from the occurrences of the verbs yarah and ra‘ah in each. The brilliance of the redactor’s use of these verbs stems from the fact that the third person plurals of these verbs are indistinguishable, while other forms also sound and look alike.

Let us begin with narrative II. In that case, these verbs appear twice (20:8 and 20:11). Both instances are from the root yarah, to fear, both refer to fear of God, and both refer to the local inhabitants’ fear. As we shall have occasion to note again, this section explores, among other matters, the notions of the fear of God and just Divine retribution. In narrative III, the verbs appear only once, again in the root of yarah. Yet there (26:7), it is Isaac who fears, fully in accord with the thrust of that narrative. In narrative I, however, such verbs appear three times, all notably from the other root ra‘ah (12:12, 14 and 15). The redactor’s intent seems to me unambiguous. In narratives II and III, fear was legitimate, so the root yarah, to fear, appears. The verb ra‘ah, to see, does not. In the first narrative, however, there was really no legitimate cause for fear, at least at the point of Abram’s decision. All the fear was in the eye of the beholder; he saw cause when there might well have been none. The redactor purposely includes the notion of fear in the other two narratives, then pointedly omits it here, by using verbs which look similar but mean something very different. The intent is clear, given his specific circumstances (i.e., the fact that he has not yet even arrived in Egypt), the premeditated nature of Abram’s lie cannot be justified.

20. See his commentary to 12:18, s.v. va-yshera Par‘ah le-Aram.
the issue, specifically notes that Pharaoh could have drawn this conclusion only by the use of his own logic. Although God creates the infection, Pharaoh never actually learns that the plague is Divine in origin. His intuition that the plague must have been caused by God, that it must stem from the fact that Sarai is Abram’s wife, and his horror at what he has done all point to a sharp contrast with Abram’s morality. Pharaoh’s ignorance of the origin of his suffering highlights his innocence, while Abram’s having created the lie himself points to the self-serving nature of his act and, therefore, in a sense, his guilt. Ultimately, it is Abram who has brought all this suffering on Pharaoh.

The text further hints at the darker side of Abram’s character by noting that the Patriarch profited from his lie in the form of sheep, oxen, asses, servants and camels (12:16). While a similar list of gifts also appears in narrative II, it is crucial that, there, the gifts are given at the end of the incident, as Abimelech seeks to “clear the slate” once and for all. Here, however, the gifts appear towards the opening of the narrative. The redactor even uses the subtle tool of the placement of the list of gifts to stress that Abram also acquired great wealth as a direct result of his lie.

While narrative I, in order to highlight Pharaoh’s innocence, points out that the ruler had to discern for himself the reason for the plague in his household, matters are different in narrative II. There, Abimelech has no need to divine the origin of his household’s barrenness. God explicitly informs him of the reason in a dream. Here, too, the innocence of the ruler remains undisputed. In this instance, that is accomplished by verse 20:4, through the text’s brilliant use of the verb karav, to approach. While we are explicitly told that Abimelech did not approach Sarah sexually (karav), the text’s use of the same verb with regard to Abram in 12:11 (hikriv la-vo) points subtly to both Abram’s manipulative deception in narrative I and Abimelech’s (relative) innocence in narrative II. Given this innocence, the discussion of God’s “sense of ethics” is all the more powerful. Why should Abimelech, much less anyone else in his community, be punished? The discussion is reminiscent of Abraham’s argument with God regarding Sodom (cf. 18:25). Abimelech’s question, “O Lord, will You slay people even though innocent?” reminds the reader of Abraham’s response regarding Sodom, “Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?” In both of these cases, a bargaining with God ultimately takes place. Here, God refuses to absolve Abimelech from guilt completely, but agrees to have Abraham, a “prophet,” pray for the recuperation of the king’s household.

We have already suggested that the text’s use of the verb karav offsets Abimelech’s relative innocence with Abram’s manipulation. It also bears mention that while the narrative of version II clearly states that Abimelech

21. Fox’s translation, “a nation,” seems preferable to JPS’ “people.” Somehow, it seems to reflect the concern expressed in Abimelech’s addressing his servants.
lecch did not have sexual intercourse (karav) with Sarai, narrative I makes no comparable statement regarding Pharaoh. On the contrary, the text leaves the reader with every reason to suspect that Pharaoh did have sexual intercourse with Sarai. Rashi's specific claim that the plague with which Pharaoh was smitten was one which made sexual intercourse difficult suggests that he was sensitive to this very same implication. 22 The use of karav in narrative II, then, points also to the sinful results of Abram's self interest in narrative I; it suggests that ultimately, Abram, and not Pharaoh, is responsible for his wife's illicit sexual experience.

Finally, narrative III once again points to Isaac's weakness and inability to care for himself. In the two instances with Abraham, it is God who reveals the truth about Sarah, thereby causing the king to confront the Patriarch. In the first instance, God causes Pharaoh's affliction, while, in the second, He plainly reveals Himself to Abimelech in a dream. However, the redactor has carefully constructed this narrative so that in the third and final instance of the motif, it is none other than Isaac himself who destroys his own cover. Abimelech looks out of his window and sees Isaac "laughing-and-loving" 23 with Rebeckah. Isaac feels sufficiently endangered to compose the subterfuge, but lacks the competence to protect his own cover.

Stage Four: The Confrontation

The fourth stage of this "type-scene" makes it even clearer that the Biblical redactor purposely constructed these narratives so as to beg comparison. The similarities between the various incidents in this stage result not only from their narrative content, in which the irate ruler confronts the Patriarch and demands an explanation for the misrepresentation, but also from a particular linguistic style. Each of these relatively brief sections (12:18-19, 20:9-13, 26:9-10) contains the form "va-yikra (the ruler) le- (the Patriarch) va-yomar (translation: and (the ruler) called to (the Patriarch) and said)." 24 The almost identical repetition cannot be accidental; it serves to illustrate the similarities and, therefore, to highlight the differences, as well, in the various forms of the incident.

The conversations between the respective rulers and Patriarchs also further the thematic aims of the redactor. Only in narrative I does the Patriarch make no response. Abram all but admits his wrongdoing by his absolute inability to explain his actions. His silence is the redactor's most powerful means of indicating guilt. Admitting the guilt would have at

22. See his commentary to 12:17, s.v. va-yenaga.
23. As translated in Fox, p. 102.
24. This phrase is followed by another which is also almost identical in each of the three narratives. In this question, the ruler asks, "what have you done to me/us?" always using some form of mah (what) and the verb asah (have you done). In narratives I and II the section begins with this phrase, while, in the third, it appears towards the end.
least suggested contrition. The Biblical text therefore carefully notes that even an admission is conspiruously absent. Narrative II, however, presents a lengthy discussion between the two personalities involved. As has been the case so far, their arguments develop the issues of justice and appropriate punishment. Abimelech stresses his own innocence, his lack of "deed," by using the root 'asa [to do] no less than five times in his confrontation with Abraham. The appearance of the phrase "what have you done" (discussed above) marked the only appearances of the verb 'asa in narratives I and III. Therefore, the appearance of an additional four instances in the space of a few verses clearly represents an intentional statement on the part of the narrator: the issue at hand is "deeds" and, specifically, the appropriate punishment for those deeds. Abimelech's accusation, "Deeds which are not to be done you have done to me," highlights his feeling that God has wronged him in punishing him so severely. It further the narrator's attempt at focusing the reader on the issue of the justice of God's punishment.

Unlike the Abram of narrative I, Abraham of narrative II does not prove speechless. In fact, the entire point of the section is that such ethical issues are not black and white, and Abraham has a defense to offer. He claims both that Sarah is, in some technical respects, his sister (thereby legitimizing the misrepresentation) and that his assessment of the nature of Gerar suggested to him that he might, in fact, have been in danger. His expression of the latter concern in the form that "Surely there is no fear of God in this place" ironically points to Abimelech's frustration that God is to be feared precisely because His punishments do not seem to correspond to the transgression, furthering once again the reductor's interest in, among other issues, the apparent randomness of Divine retribution.

The third narrative highlights Isaac's ineptitude once again with the fact that Abimelech does not accept his feeble response. Just as we noted that Abram's inability to respond in narrative I was significant, so it is of import that in neither narrative I nor II did the ruler say anything after the initial accusation. In both instances, the narrative proceeds directly to the fifth stage, in the first instance, immediately because Abram makes no response and, in the second, right after Abraham concludes his defense. Here, however, Isaac remains on the defensive still longer, as Abimelech accuses him once again, suggesting that his defense has failed. The logical, powerful defense which Abraham offers in narrative II (which tellingly also contains a counter-accusation about the nature of the populace of Gerar) points to the pitifulness of Isaac's statement, "Because I thought I might lose my life on account of her," a statement which amounts to little more than "I was afraid." The text makes further allu-

25. Fox, p. 75.

26. Fox, p. 76.
sion to Isaac's vulnerability when the king notes that any one of the populace might have seized his wife. In the former narratives, the notion that anyone but the king would take the wife seems unthinkable; here, Rebecca (and, therefore, Isaac) is vulnerable even to abad ha-am, any member of the populace.

This section provides one further irony. Though this is the only narrative in which the king does not actually take the Patriarch's wife into his court (and, therefore, avoids God's wrath), Isaac still finds himself in trouble. In the previous instances, the ruler confronted the Patriarch because the latter's lie caused him anguish and suffering. Here, Isaac caused no such trouble for the ruler, but is nonetheless the object of the monarch's wrath. This man, the text claims, has no political "savoir faire."

Stage Five: Resolution

The resolution stage of the "type-scene" (12:20, 20:14-18, 26:11) continues the redactor's painstaking presentation of these three different themes. In narrative I, Pharaoh simply evicts Abraham from Egypt. The brusqueness with which he does so illustrates Pharaoh's lack of patience for the dissembling Patriarch, while the text's explicit mention of the fact that Abram is evicted with all of the goods that he was given in return for Sarai heightens our sense of both Pharaoh's generosity and Abram's deceitfulness. This fact provides a glaring contrast with the resolution stage of narrative II. There, only after the confrontation does Abimelech give Abraham cattle and servants (a list almost identical to that of 12:16), pointing, in contrast, to the distasteful manner in which Abram had acquired them in narrative I. Here, Abimelech makes restitution to Abraham, vindicating Sarah as well, while Abraham prays to God that He bring an end to the barrenness of Abimelech's household. The text's explicit note that God hearkens to Abraham's call completes the cycle of the resolution, so that each of the involved parties has made a gesture of apology/forgiveness.

Abimelech's offer to Abraham of any of the land in the area he might want serves to remind the reader of Abraham's dispute with Lot over grazing ground for their respective flocks (see esp. Gen. 13:10-11). Such an allusion does not seem accidental. Rather, it reminds us of Abraham's seeking, at all costs, to avoid further conflict with Lot. Because that text is commonly referred to in describing Abraham's gracious dealings with his neighbors and associates, the allusion to that incident here implies once again Abimelech's large measure of innocence. In masterly fashion, the redactor has perpetuated the notion of the complexity of these ethical questions through the very end of the narrative.

Whereas the resolution of narrative I highlights Abram's guilt by having Pharaoh summarily evict him from Egypt, and that of narrative II alludes to the complexity of many ethical issues by having most of the par-
ties involved make some restitution to each other, that of narrative III points to Isaac's weakness, for Abimelech neither evicts him from Gerar nor gives him gifts, but only promises protection for him and his family. While it is true that Abimelech did not seize Rebekah, it is significant that, in both narratives I and II, the Patriarchs receive grants of great value, while here Isaac receives nothing at all. In fact, it could be argued, since Isaac has demonstrated that he cannot care for himself the only "appropriate" gift from the ruler is the protection that seems to be so desperately needed.

One final note regarding the resolution of narrative III bears mention. In warning the people not to harm Isaac, Abimelech uses the verb naga (to touch). Significantly, the root appears exactly once in each of the three versions. In the first, it appears in the discussion of the "mighty plague" (nega'ım) with which God punished Pharaoh. In the second, God tells Abimelech that He knows that the king did not touch (naga) Sarah. In both instances, the discussion centers on whether a source of great power (God or the ruler) exercised its option bi-nego'a (to touch). Here, however, the apparent fear is that any of the inhabitants might harm (nogo'a) Isaac. The contrasting uses of the same root further his characterization as weak and ineffectual.

To recapitulate, that the book of Genesis contains three versions of an almost identical story has long been noticed. It does seem very likely that the extraordinary conclusions which one would have to draw about the Biblical characters, if all the renditions of the legend stemmed from the same source, do support the theory of the documentary hypothesis. It also seems probable that the Biblical author must have had a standard "type-scene" in mind when constructing each of them. But the above analysis has demonstrated, I believe, that a complete appreciation of the import of these texts remains impossible without the "close reading" analysis attempted above. With the use of this analysis, it quickly becomes apparent that the Biblical redactor not only effected a brilliant combination of various documents making use of a standard literary paradigm with which he was familiar, but also used subtle and intentional literary techniques to express vastly different ideas in almost identical narratives. The first one, in which Abram devises his subterfuge even before arriving in Pharaoh's kingdom, expresses the darker side of his personality, while the second, in which Abimelech claims innocence deals with the always complex nature of questions of right and wrong and appropriate punishment. Finally, the third narrative, in highlighting Isaac's weakness, concludes the list of issues that such an analysis of text brings to the fore.

One final and basic question needs to be asked. Does the analysis in which we have engaged represent a reading of "hints" that the redactor left for the reader, or is our argument a midrash or homily on these well-known texts? I maintain that such a distinction is both impossible and unnecessary. While it seems relatively clear to us that the lessons and
implications derived by the authors of our classical midrashic texts are an imposition on the Biblical text rather than an extraction from it, it is by no means clear that they would have agreed. Theirs was an age in which certain tools in reading a text were more common and accepted than those tools are in our day. On the other hand, the literary techniques used in this "close-reading" of the "wife/sister" collection are those now utilized in many literary circles. To venture a guess as to whether these tools are ones which the Biblical author hoped we would use is to do just that; it is to guess. Such an assertion requires information which we do not have, and which we shall probably never have. One observation does seem fair, however: as long as men and women have known the Biblical text, they have been inspired to search continually for nuances, implications and insights never previously revealed. That they continue to do so is testimony, not to our increasing skill and expertise, but to the brilliance of the Biblical text which continues to enchant us all.