Chapter 3

THE ANCESTOR IN DANGER: BUT NOT THE SAME DANGER*

The study of the stories commonly known as the 'ancestress in danger' narratives, in Genesis 12, 20, and 26, has in the past been rendered systematically unsatisfactory by two *idées fixes*.

The first is a minor one, which can soon be neutralized. It is that these stories are essentially tales of the *ancestress*, or perhaps rather that what makes them interesting as tales is the danger confronting the ancestress. There is indeed quite a lot of danger about in these narratives of adventures in foreign parts, so one could hardly claim that there is no danger at all to the ancestress. But what the texts of these tales makes plain is that the person who *feels* threatened is not the matriarch at all but always the patriarch. So in 12.12 Abram is sure that when the Egyptians see Sarai they will say, 'This is his wife'; 'then they will kill me', he says, 'but they will let you live.' There are no doubt fates worse than death, but none that Abram can imagine, not even for Sarai, and certainly not for himself.

In ch. 20 too, Abraham openly says that he thought there would be no fear of God in Gerar, and that its inhabitants would kill him because of Sarah (20.11)—which not only proves to be as wrong as it is possible to be, but also causes us to reflect on what 'fear of God' Abraham personally entertains when he lies about Sarah's blood relationship to him and asks for many other like offences to be taken into consideration in mitigation of the present one (20.12-13). In ch. 26 as well, Isaac no less than Abraham justifies the same deception on the ground of his fear: 'he feared to say, "My wife", thinking "lest the

* An earlier version of this Chapter was read as a paper to the Biblical Criticism and Literary Criticism Section of the Society of Biblical Literature at its Annual Meeting in Atlanta, November 25, 1986.

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men of the place should kill me for the sake of Rebekah"; because she was fair to look upon' (26.7). And to Abimelech's face he candidly admits his fear with the words, 'Because I thought, Lest I die because of her'. Laying down one's life for one's wife is evidently no ideal in this patriarchal society.

There may of course be a certain scholarly gallantry in play in making out that in these stories it is the *ancestress* that is endangered. Patriarchs can surely look after themselves (and do, if these tales are anything to go by), but matriarchs are vulnerable in a patriarchal world. What such a gallantry disguises is that the danger is all in the patriarch's mind to begin with, and, in addition, that the actual danger in the narratives is mainly of the patriarch's making. So calling these stories 'The Ancestor in Danger' seems to be a more appropriate focus, since that is the complication that sets each of these stories in motion. We might, nevertheless, wonder whether in fact the biggest danger is to either the ancestress or the ancestor, and not rather to some other element in the story, like the plot or else the achievement of what is supposed to be happening in Genesis. Whether that is indeed the case will have to transpire later.

The more important idea about these stories that is long overdue for re-evaluation is the conviction that these three narratives are 'really' one narrative, a 'thrice-told tale' in David Petersen's phrase.[1] It may well of course be true, and I indeed think it very probable, that what was once one tale now lies before us in three versions. But where that inference about the prehistory of Genesis is utterly unsatisfactory is that it cannot explain why the tale is told three times in Genesis, nor what the point of each of the tellings, at the specific places where they are located, can be.[2]

My idea is simply to read each tale strictly in the light of the

[1] David L. Petersen, 'A Thrice-Told Tale: Genre, Theme and Motif in Genesis 12, 20 and 26', *Biblical Research* 18 (1973), pp. 30-43.

[2] Robert Polzin's paper, '"The Ancestress in Danger" in Danger' (*Semeia* 3 [1975] 81-98), at first sight may seem to promise to carry out a similar project to the present one. His protest against the exclusively diachronic analyses of these stories would have been a suitable preface for a contextual reading of them; one can note his bewailing of the current 'lack of concern for how [the] stories fit into their present literary context ... the larger story-line of the present patriarchal narratives' (p. 82). In fact, however, his reading also is almost wholly concerned with the relationships between the three narratives, and not with their settings in the larger narrative of Genesis.

Genesis story so far, reader-responsively refusing to let my knowledge of what is going to happen in the story hereafter influence my reading of the tale before my eyes—until I choose to, that is, and very deliberately noting what differences hindsight makes to the reading and what new levels of meaning it adds to a tale that already has its own significance at this particular juncture within the developing story.

1. *The First Story (Genesis 12.10-20)*

With the first of the 'danger' stories (Gen 12.10-20), there are just three pieces of information from the foregoing narrative that are crucial for understanding the tale *in context*. The first is that Yahweh has promised Abram that he will make from him a great nation, which can only mean that Abram will have many descendants. The second is that Abram's wife Sarai is barren (11.30). The third is that Abram was accompanied by Lot, the son of his dead younger brother (11.27-28; 12.4-5).

Now these three items amount to a plot. That is to say: the man, who has been promised children, but who cannot have children by his wife, has, however, a nephew. The nephew, who lacks a father, can become the son of the man who lacks children.

If we review these plot elements from the point of view of Abram we understand how the character Abram behaves. When he hears the divine promise that he will be made into a great nation, he cannot believe that Sarai will have anything to do with the fulfilment of that promise. Her barrenness is a datum of both their lives. Yahweh has not said that the line of Abram's descendants will be through his own literal son, so how else can Abram imagine the promise being realized than through the son of his dead brother? From Abram's point of view, which is equally the perspective of the reader of the 'story so far', Lot is the only possible candidate for the channel of fulfilment of the promise.

This understanding makes quite a difference to how the wife-sister tale of this chapter is to be read. In this perspective Sarai is disposable, expendable; she has nothing to contribute to the realization of the promise. However attached to her Abram may be, nothing hangs upon her continued survival. Abram and Lot are the ones who must be preserved in Egypt, at all cost. In a way, of course, if Lot already is the son, nothing hangs upon Abram's survival either, but if Abram is to 'become' a great nation, perhaps he needs to be still alive in order to see it happen. And in any case, we do not know how old this

son/nephew Lot is, or whether he may be still in need of Abram's protection (as he certainly will be in ch. 14, even when he is a grown man).

The danger in this story is, on this reading, a danger to Abram's life, and, more seriously, a danger to the fulfilment of the prediction if Abram does *not* ensure that he and Lot survive the Egyptian experience. There is a danger to the plot and to what the announcements of it have promised the readers of the book.

Furthermore, this perspective is determinative for a preliminary ethical judgment on Abram. Whatever may be said of the means he chooses for the preservation of the promise, and whatever may be said about the very idea of thinking it is necessary to do anything at all for the success of a divine promise, the story makes it plain what Abram's motivation is, and invites us to return a judgment in accordance with that. We might phrase it somewhat differently from Calvin, but find it difficult not to echo his sentiments, so long, that is, that we read this tale in the light of the 'story so far':

> Abram had far higher ends in view... Undoubtedly, he would have chosen to die a hundred times, rather than thus to ruin the character of his wife, and to be deprived of the society of her whom alone he loved. But while he reflected that the hope of salvation was centred in himself, ... that unless he lived, the benediction promised to him, and to his seed, was vain; he did not estimate his own life according to the private affection of the flesh; but inasmuch as he did not wish the effect of the divine vocation to perish through his death, he was so affected with concern for the preservation of his own life, that he overlooked every thing besides. So far, then, he deserves praise ...[1]

That little phrase, 'so far, then', says a great deal about how wider considerations will impinge on the issue, but for the moment we are invited by the story to adopt Abram's standpoint.

Now, not only is Abram's deception explained by the present reading, but also some details of the narrative become intelligible for the first time. Why, first, should it be said when Abram has been told by Yahweh to 'go' (using the singular) from his country (12.1), leaving behind his 'kindred' and his 'father's house', not only that 'Abram went, as Yahweh had told him' but also that 'Lot also went with him' (12.4)? Perhaps we might reply, Because Lot is later to

[1] John Calvin, *A Commentary on Genesis* (r.p. London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), p. 359.

figure in the story of Abraham in Canaan, and we had better be told explicitly that he actually left Haran. That is not of course to explain the notation by the 'story so far', and while we can accept that narrative foreshadowings are not always explicable by the preceding action, the second notation makes us wonder whether we are dealing simply with foreshadowing and not with hints that are significant for the *present* narrative. For, secondly, in the immediately following verse it is said that 'Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son ... and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan' (12.5). In the third place, we note the remark at the end of the Egyptian episode: 'And Abram went up from Egypt, he and his wife and all that was his, and Lot with him' (13.1). The slight syntactic awkwardness of the reference to Lot foregrounds his presence. It would have been enough if at 13.5 Lot should have been mentioned for the first time after our original introduction to him: 'And also Lot, who went with Abram, had flocks and herds and tents'. Lot, we infer, has an implicit significance for the story of ch. 12, just as he has an explicit significance for the story of ch. 13.

This is now the moment for us to read the narrative again, this time with the hindsight that comes of knowing how the Abraham story as a whole will develop. This time we know that, since Sarah is to be the mother of the one legitimate channel of fulfilment for the promise, there is an important danger to her and therewith to the promise itself. An irony arises: Far from being the expendable member of the trio, as Abram thinks, she is essential, as we second-time readers know. And the narrative interest consists very largely in the tension between the first reading and all subsequent readings.

2. *The Second Story (Genesis 20)*

When we turn to the second of the 'ancestor in danger' stories (ch. 20), we must once again enquire about the context in which it is set. It is a much more complex context, from which we can separate out three strands of plot, concerning, respectively, Lot, Ishmael and Isaac.

a. *Lot*

The Lot strand has run right through the intervening narrative, from the beginning of ch. 13 right up to the last verse of the previous chapter (19.37-38). In ch. 13 we saw how Lot took possession (so to speak) of part of the promised land on behalf of the Abrahamic

family, and in the process entrenched himself yet further in its destiny. Far from the more usual reading of the chapter as a wistful parting of the ways between Abram and Lot, the narrative to my mind plainly depicts Lot settling in the most desirable part of the promised land, which Yahweh has at this very moment just 'shown' to Abram as the land he intends to be held by Abram 'and [his] descendants' (13.15). Lot is Abram's descendant, and at this point his only descendant; his settling in the valley of the Jordan, unquestionably a part of the 'land', is proof of that. In ch. 14, Abram is rescuing Lot from the confederate kings, not from a mere humanitarian impulse or out of a kinsman's sense of duty, but because Lot's death or absence from the land will mean the removal of Abram's only descendant.

The Lot thread continues. In ch. 15 we find Abram bewailing the fact that he has no true son of his own to inherit the gifts that Yahweh is promising him (the claimed reference to a slave named Eliezer of Damascus [cf. 15.2-3] is highly dubious, as the commentators say, and the person in question, 'a son of my house' and not 'my own seed', sounds very much like the only other male of the family we have met, namely Lot). This does not mean that Abram has been recently developing an urge to have a son of his very own and is now attempting to manipulate Yahweh into precisely that promise that Yahweh is about to deliver; nor that Abram is disenchanted with Lot; nor that Lot is no longer his descendant. These are the wistful words of an old man who realizes he is about to 'pass on' (הלך) without achieving what every red-blooded Israelite male is supposed to achieve.

Lot is next in view in ch. 18, where Abraham's bargaining over Sodom is self-evidently a story of the patriarch's concern for his kinsman or perhaps for someone who is rather more than merely a kinsman. The point of all this attention to Lot becomes apparent to the first-time reader with ch. 19, however. There we find the promise of progeny to Abraham beginning to take effect, for Lot becomes the father of Moab and Ammon—which means, as the narrator goes out of his way to inform us (19.37-38), that there will be 'one day' (the narrator's 'to this day') whole nations of Moabites and Ammonites who are descendants of Abraham. Even second-time readers, who know of a future twist in the plot, will have no reason to revise their view of Lot as a member of the Abrahamic family, and will see in this episode nothing other than a realization of the promise, triply noted, that Abraham will become the father of a '*multitude* of nations' (17.4-6), not just of a single 'nation'.

b. *Ishmael*

A second strand of the plot has been developing around Ishmael. If we have been blind to the role of Lot, and have been looking elsewhere for a solution to the problem, Who is going to be the channel of fulfilment of the divine promise?, the Ishmael story strikes us at first as curious. For the ostensible reason why Ishmael becomes a twinkle in Abram's eye is not as a potential fulfilment of the promise, but as an answer to Sarai's desire for a child: 'perhaps I shall obtain children by [Hagar]', she says (16.2). In the event, of course, any son of Sarai's, even by a surrogate mother, is a son of Abram's, and the narrative that began by being professedly concerned with a son for Sarai is at the end interested in Abram rather than Sarai. So it concludes: 'And Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram called the name of his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael' (16.15), Sarai having dropped out of consideration altogether. But what is it about this son that Abram is interested in? Even though in 15.4 Yahweh has promised that Abram's heir will be one who 'comes forth from [his] loins', we doubt that Abram believes it. What Abram 'believes' in this episode is God's second speech, 'So shall your descendants be' (15.5), not his first speech, 'Your own son shall be your heir' (15.4)—to which Abram has made no response and on which the narrator has made no comment. There is nothing at this juncture to convince us that Abram is investing his hopes of succession in Ishmael. If anything, we rather feel throughout chs. 15 and 16 that he cannot be viewing Ishmael as the heir of the promise if he so readily accedes to Sarai's treatment of Hagar, with its predictable outcome of the pregnant Hagar decamping from the Abrahamic household. It is something of a new twist to the plot when in the subsequent chapter Yahweh announces that Abraham will become the father of a multitude of nations (17.4-6)—which must sound to Abraham like the nations that Lot and now also Ishmael will give rise to. This is the point at which Abraham begins to take Ishmael seriously, expressing his emotional commitment to him in his plea for his continued life (17.18), and following up on the promise of Isaac by circumcising Ishmael (17.23-27)! By the end of ch. 17, with Lot temporarily absent from the main action of the plot, Abraham has come to accept Ishmael as the fulfilment of the promise, at the very moment that a third son, who will supplant Ishmael, is being promised. When Abraham at the beginning of ch. 22 hears the divine command to sacrifice Isaac, he will be thinking that he has seen this

movie before.

c. *Isaac*

In the third strand of the plot of Genesis between chs. 12 and 20, the future child, named in advance as Isaac (17.19), is promised as a child of Abraham and Sarah. Abraham's response, which has him prostrate with laughter, shows us clearly enough where his thoughts have been leading. His outburst, 'O that Ishmael might live in thy sight!' (17.18), means that he does not believe in this future son and is perfectly content with the one he now has. From Abraham's point of view there is no particular value in this future son. No son can be more his own son than Lot is already, especially now that he now represents the Abrahamic family abroad, so to speak, in the cities of the plain; no son can be more Abraham's own son than Ishmael is already, a son of his own loins and circumcised as sign of his inheritance of the Abrahamic promises.

Even Yahweh in his numerous speeches is unable to make any satisfactory distinction between the significance of the son that is and that of the son yet to be born. For, according to Yahweh, Hagar's descendants (through Ishmael, of course) will be so greatly multiplied that they cannot be numbered for multitude (16.10; 17.20), and the divine covenant is established with Ishmael and his offspring no differently than with all the Abrahamic descendants—that is, the covenant to be God to them and to give them land, which is to say, the covenant of which circumcision is the sign (17.7, 9; cf. 22-27). All the same, the fact is that the divine promise is of a child for Abraham and Sarah, to be born, from the perspective of ch. 17, at 'this time next year' (17.21), or, from the perspective of ch. 18, 'in the spring of the year' (18.10), 'at the season [already mentioned], viz. the spring of the year' (18.14; the Hebrew is not so certain).

d. *The visit to Gerar*

At this very moment, when Lot has just written himself strongly back into the saga, and when Ishmael has come of age (17.25) and Abraham is praying for his preservation (17.18), but a third son, Isaac, has been promised (17.19)—at this very juncture, we must notice, Abraham passes off Sarah as his sister. There is one further item of information, implicit indeed in the arithmetic of the narrative, but impressively

meaningful: at the time of the visit to Gerar, Sarah is pregnant.[1] For if there were twelve months to run from 17.21 to the birth of Isaac, and nine months from 18.10 to the birth of Isaac, and Isaac is to be born immediately the wife-sister narrative concludes—which is to say: promptly and explicitly 'at the season of which Yahweh had spoken' (21.2)—Sarah has to be pregnant during the dangerous incident of ch. 20.

What this must mean, in the first place, is that at the beginning of ch. 20 Abraham still does not believe in Yahweh's promise of Isaac. If he did, he would know that the child is in danger if Sarah is in danger. He might even realize that to whatever extent Sarai might have been dispensable in ch. 12, she is indispensable here. If anyone is expendable now, it is Abraham. And what is Abraham doing in Gerar anyway? He does not have the justification of a famine, as he had in ch. 12. His journey to Gerar is unmotivated. He has been settled at Mamre since as long ago as 13.18, which means for the last fourteen years (cf. 16.16 with 17.17).[2] The narrative feigns that Abraham is still on the move in search of a homeland, with its transparent itinerary style: 'from there Abraham journeyed toward the territory of the Negeb ... and he sojourned in Gerar' (20.1). But it does not deceive us; it is plain enough that this is no purposeful journey but an aimless uprooting of the family, an almost feckless heading into trouble.

The narrative demands from us an ethical judgment on Abraham here, not primarily for the lie and the deception, though we are pretty sure now that Sarah is *not* his half-sister, hearing his claim embedded among those other examples of obfuscation, the patriarch protesting too much to convince us of anything (20.11-13). Abraham earns the reader's disapproval rather for his refusal to accept the divine prediction or to imagine what the consequences of the move to Gerar might be if perchance the divine word could be coming true and Sarah

1 One of the few scholars to make this observation is Peter D. Miscall, *The Workings of Old Testament Narrative* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), p. 32.

2 It is amusing, incidentally, to watch the commentators pretending they do not know where Abraham last was; cf. Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis* (OTL; London: SCM Press, 1961), p. 221; Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12–36. A Commentary* (tr. John J. Scullion; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985), p. 320. E.A. Speiser, *Genesis* (AB, 1; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), p. 148, in a fit of false naivety thinks that 'from there' could only refer in the present context to Lot's cave!

could, against all the odds, be pregnant after all. We ourselves as readers may at this moment still be tempted to keep our options open and our fingers crossed, not yet knowing for sure how the prediction of Isaac may in reality be fulfilled, if at all.

The danger, from the point of view of the 'story so far', is a danger to Abraham, but not the danger he thinks. He fears he is in a godless town, where he may well be killed because of his wife (20.11); in fact it is a godfearing place, ruled by a moralistic king (20.9) who has conversations with God in dreams (20.3-7). The real danger is the danger to the promise which Abraham has received. For we readers suspect, even if Abraham will not believe it, and even if Yahweh himself has not said unequivocally that the only way the promise is going to be fulfilled is by this child of pregnant Sarah's, that the promise somehow hangs upon Isaac.

Even in the outturn, it must be said, we are to be left in some doubt about just what Isaac will be that Ishmael will not be. Ishmael, as well as Isaac, is to be made into a nation (21.13), in addition to being multiplied so greatly as to outdo the sand of the sea (16.10) and being circumcised and in covenant with Yahweh (17.7, 23). The one thing that will be said of Isaac that is not said of Ishmael is that 'in Isaac shall your descendants be called' (21.12), a sentence 'not readily comprehensible', as Westermann[1] remarks. Anyway, this is not a question in the 'story so far'.

It is enough for our present purpose to affirm that in this story of 'the ancestor in danger', unlike the story of ch. 12, the real danger to the ancestor is not the one he thinks. And the danger he is actually in is rather more important for the plot than the danger to the ancestress, who, admittedly, no doubt risks her neck if she is found in the harem of Abimelech to be pregnant with another man's child.

With the hindsight of how the total narrative will develop, what we find in addition to what the 'story so far' tells us is that Isaac will indeed be the only descendant of Abraham who really matters for the plot of Genesis, despite the red herrings of the text of the last seven chapters. And the safe birth of the promised son is only the beginning of troubles for the promise on its way to fulfilment; it will have to survive more than mere threats and possibilities of failure before it is established with any kind of reasonable certitude. But above all, the extra element that the 'story hereafter' superimposes upon our reading

[1] Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, p. 340.

of ch. 20 in the light of the 'story so far' is that Abraham and Sarah only realize after they have been deported from Gerar that Sarah had been pregnant all the time—which means that they have had a very near brush with disaster. In ch. 20 the danger was very much more complex than Abraham imagined or than the narrator makes explicit.

3. *The Third Story (Genesis 26)*

Now in the case of the third of our stories, the narrative context is different again. By this stage, the 'story so far' includes not only the sweep of the patriarchal history, but also the two previous wife-sister stories, to which the narrative now insists that we make connections. Thus not only is ch. 26 *like* ch. 12 in setting forth a famine in the land as the reason for the family's migration, but it also explicitly requires us to recall the ch. 12 story by the notation: 'besides the former famine that was in the days of Abraham' (26.1). No less directive for reading are the more implicit connections, as when Yahweh says to Isaac, 'Do not go down to Egypt' (26.2), when Isaac has not shown the slightest indication that he was thinking of going to Egypt, but when we readers know—even if the characters have forgotten it—that, especially in wife-sister stories, patriarchs always go down to Egypt when there is a famine in the land. There is an equally explicit clue when the story says that Isaac 'went *to Abimelech* king of the Philistines Gerar-wards' (26.1; RSV disguises the significant word-order, though NEB and NAB preserve it); he does not just go, as we might have expected, '*to Gerar*'—for that would simply have meant: 'to the city of Gerar, where, as it happened, there was in the office of king a certain Abimelech'. Rather, we are meant to recall that Isaac has already been in Gerar before (embryonically in ch. 20) and, more importantly, has been born within the boundaries of the 'land' of Abimelech (cf. 20.15 with 21.31, 33-34), and has set out from that same land for the incident on Mt Moriah (cf. 21.34 with 22.19). So he knows Abimelech already, if not personally then certainly from dinner-table conversation.[1]

[1] By the time of Sarah's death (ch. 23) Abraham has moved back to Mamre, but Isaac is living at Beer-lahai-roi (24.62; 25.11), where he must still be when our story opens. Wherever that is, it is obviously south of Gerar, and probably on a route to Egypt—which is a further reason why Isaac might potentially think of escaping the famine in that direction. And in case anyone should be wondering whether this is the same Abimelech who figures in the Abraham

Of more importance still is the 'mighty programmatic speech of promise'[1] that prefaces this chapter (26.2-5). In it the Abrahamic promise is repeated to Isaac, promises of 'all these lands', of 'multiply[ing] your descendants as the stars of heaven', and of blessing to all the nations of the earth through the patriarchs' descendants (26.3-4). But perhaps the most important narrative context for the story, at least for this story in comparison with the others, is that here the matriarch is not barren (not now, at any rate) and no children wait to be born to the parents. Already in ch. 25 Rebekah has given birth to Esau and Jacob, so we know immediately that here, whatever the danger may be, it cannot be to the promise of offspring. It is not the same danger.

Since nothing actually happens either to Isaac or to Rebekah, and no one acts upon the announcement that the wife is only a sister (Isaac is the only one who becomes sportive with her, 26.8), we may at first doubt that there is any real danger here at all. It is when we read Abimelech's words on discovering that she is Isaac's wife after all that we perceive that the danger which begins in the patriarch's head becomes in actuality a danger to the people of Gerar. 'What is this that you have done to us?', says the king. 'One of the people might easily have lain with your wife, and you would have brought guilt upon us' (26.10). However ungallant or outrageous may be Abimelech's casual assumption that if 'one of the people' (males, we presume) should take it into his head to lie with Rebekah, lain with she will be, the significant point is that the king regards the seduction of the matriarch by any one of the townsmen as a crime that would bring guilt upon 'us', the people as a whole. In fact, he says, Isaac has already done the people of Gerar a wrong in exposing them to the mere possibility of such a crime; the king uses the formal words of indictment as he reproaches Isaac, 'What is this that you have done to us?' (26.10).

It is the people who have been put at risk by Isaac's deception. The king himself has obviously not taken a fancy to Rebekah, even though in her case it is the omniscient narrator who has assured us that she is a beautiful woman (26.7), whereas in 12.11 we had only the questionable testimony of the ever devious Abraham to his wife's good looks. No, Abimelech has clearly learned his lesson from the adventure

story, we will not have far to read before we encounter Phicol (26.26; cf. 21.22), the very same troop-captain of what must surely be the very same Abimelech.

[1] Von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 265.

of ch. 20, and is not planning on 'sending' for *this* Hebrew's wife. The only candidates for Rebekah's hand (supposing their intentions to be so honourable) are 'the men of the place' (26.7). Yet although the king himself is utterly innocent, even of entertaining designs upon the matriarch, and is represented only as the outsider and onlooker, merely chancing upon the happy couple 'exchanging conjugal caresses',[1] *yitzchaq*ing about, we might say, 'sport' being the leitmotif of Isaac's life,[2] Abimelech is stunned by the thought of the guilt that could so easily have become attached to his people, the fear too of who knows what divine catastrophe lurking in the background. The role of the king in this narrative is no 'blind motif', though the comparison with the much more obvious acts of the king in the other two stories has led John van Seters[3] and others to declare it so; rather, the function of the king is to detect the true relation between Isaac and Rebekah and so save his people from unintentional guilt.[4]

The ancestor who brings danger

The story is not yet over with the detection of the deception, however. What we immediately discover is that from Abimelech's point of view the continued presence of Isaac in the territory of Gerar remains a danger for Abimelech's people. Something has to explain the extraordinary apodeictic warning by the king, who at first sight seems to be desperately over-reacting: 'Whoever touches this man or his wife shall surely be put to death' (26.11). While 'touching' a man often means striking him (is it implied that the people of Gerar will be strongly tempted to rough Isaac up for the danger he has brought them into?) and 'touching' a woman often means having intercourse with her, can the Gerarites be entirely sure, when a death penalty hangs over this 'touching', that the king does not mean *all* forms of touching? Are Isaac and his wife now in the position of the ritually unclean, people with whom it is dangerous to come into physical

1 John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Genesis* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1969), p. 364.

2 Derek Kidner, *Genesis* (TOTC; London: Tyndale Press, 1967), p. 153.

3 John van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (London: Yale University Press, 1975), p. 180.

4 We saw in ch. 20, incidentally, the same sense in Abimelech of the whole people's implication in the wrongdoing of any individual: after he is warned by God that because he has taken Abraham's wife he himself is a 'dead man' (20.3) he responds, 'Lord, will you slay an innocent *people*?' (20.4).

contact?

The long and short of it is that Isaac has proved to be the very opposite of a 'blessing' to the foreigners of Gerar. He has wished himself upon them, deceived them, brought potential guilt and actual danger upon them, leading their integrious king (cf. 20.6) to complain justifiably against him and put his own people under a threat of death if they associate with this Hebrew. Does this not mean that the patriarch whose descendants are grandly promised as a blessing to all the nations of the earth (26.4) is in this story nothing other, to be frank, than a curse? The conventional tale of the 'ancestor in danger' has become in this transformation a tale of 'the ancestor who brings danger'. The story, scorned on all sides today as naive, late, colourless, awkward, artificial, is actually a little masterpiece in its own right, confounding all the expectations we brought to it from our reading of the previous wife-sister stories, but in a novel way presenting the ancestors as a threat of immense proportions to the promise under whose sign they ostensibly live.

If that had been the very end of the story, so much would have been clear. But this narrative, unlike the other two, has no definite point of closure, and so invites us to consider its significance further, in the light of subsequent events. That is to say, the apparent resolution of the narrative, 'And Isaac sowed in that land, and reaped in the same year a hundredfold' (26.12), is at the same time the exposition for the following narrative of the Philistine response to his wealth (26.12-16); and thereafter all the little narrative units of this chapter are chained on to one another.

What we read in the verses that follow is an ongoing narrative of the Hebrew patriarch as no blessing at all to the Philistines—who are the only foreigners this patriarch has a chance to practice his blessing on. The people of Gerar never benefit from Isaac's presence or Isaac's wealth. We learn that Isaac prospers enormously 'in that land', the land of the Gerarites, be it noted, not in his own land, not in a land to which he has been given title by divine fief; and he reaps a hundredfold 'in the same year' as that of the famine he was escaping from, Yahweh blessing him—but not, apparently, blesing anyone else. He 'became rich, and gained more and more until he became very wealthy' (26.13), but not so as to overflow with blessings for his neighbours. The Philistines, who are presumably not having so good a time as Isaac, not surprisingly become 'envious' of him (26.14).

The upshot of Isaac's prosperity is that Abimelech nervously begs

him to 'go away from us, because you are so much mightier than us' (26.16). Isaac complies, but he has not taken the hint of how far distant Abimelech wishes him, for he moves only as far as 'the valley of Gerar', which, wherever precisely it is, cannot have been as far as Abimelech has had in mind. Nor can he tumble to the fact that the reason why the Philistines have been stopping up the wells that the herders of Abraham once dug is not simple obstreperousness but because they resent and feel threatened by the encroachment of the Hebrew family upon their own grazing lands. So the little history of quarrels between the herdsmen of Gerar and Isaac's herdsmen (26.18-22) is to be read as entirely of Isaac's making, and his smug announcement at the end that 'now Yahweh has made room for us' (26.22) could have been made much earlier if only he had realized that no one in Gerar was thinking him quite as much God's gift to humanity as he was imagining himself.

The point of the closing episode of Abimelech's encounters with Isaac is really just the same. Abimelech feels himself threatened by Isaac, and wants to take out an insurance against the harm he fully expects will some day come his way from that quarter. 'We see plainly that Yahweh is with you', he confesses; 'so we say, let there be an oath between you and us ... that you will do us no harm' (26.28-29). Not the words of a Gentile who understands that he is to be the object of overflowing blessing from the Abrahamic family! Abimelech's justification for a non-aggression treaty is, interestingly enough, his own conviction that 'we', he and his people, have not in fact 'touched' (נגע, as in v. 11) Isaac. The further you can keep of out the way of the 'blessing to the nations' the safer it is for you, and if you are destined to be the recipient of the blessing it is wise to have a non-aggression pact with those who are supposed to be its channel! 'The foreign potentate has to acknowledge that Isaac is blessed by Yahweh', says Westermann,[1] and that can only be ironic if the context is the divine speech of vv. 2-5, where the blessing is designed to be not only for Isaac but also for the nations.

From this perspective we are almost compelled to wonder whether the re-phrasing of the divine promise in v. 24may be more meaningful than at first appears. 'Fear not', says Yahweh, 'for I am with you and will bless you and will multiply your descendants.' Nothing more. Has the promise of blessing for the nations been silently abandoned under

[1] Westermann, *Genesis 12–36,* p. 428.

the circumstances? That thought may be a little extravagant, but the fact is that this element of the promise has in the present narrative of Isaac not only been in danger, but has been entirely lost sight of. It reminds us that in all these stories of the 'ancestor in danger', the danger the ancestor imagines for himself is of his own making, while the varying dangers his apprehension creates are always more serious.

What do we learn in addition from a second-time reading of this story? Not a lot if we are reading only as far as the end of Genesis. Which is an arbitrary and unsatisfying end, it must be admitted. Read on, and you will find out what kind of a blessing Hebrews prove to be to Philistines, and how much Isaac's merely putting them in danger is to be preferred to Samson's slaying them hip and thigh or David's intermittent genocide of them throughout 2 Samuel. Which makes us wonder in the end whether Isaac was not by comparison quite a blessing—and whether we know any longer what a blessing is. At which point we lay down our pens and call in the deconstructionists.