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Yitshak and God's Separation Anxiety

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Abstract

The biblical Yitshak is a rather pale character. What colors his personality is his name and the story of his birth, which are inseparably intertwined with one another. My focus in this essay shall be upon the meaning of the name Yitshak and the circumstances under which it was given. I shall make two central claims. First, that the name Yitshak bears a negative connotation. This is indicated both by the meaning of the name in the biblical lexicon, and by the three contexts in Genesis in which the name is explained. Why should the son for whom the chosen father yearned, and through whom God's promise and plans were to be realized, be given an insulting name? The answer to this question—which is my second claim—is rooted in the unique interpersonal relationship between God and Abraham. This answer is a key for understanding the saga of Abraham as whole, including the story of the Akedah.

Keywords

Yitshak, mockery, God, Abraham, love, jealousy, separation, Akedah

I

The biblical Isaac or, as he is called in Hebrew, Yitshak, is a rather pale character. Not only are there but a few chapters devoted to him in the book of Genesis, but he seems to exist in the shadow of his father Abraham and his son Jacob-Israel, to the extent that he is almost swallowed up by them. What colors his personality, notwithstanding a few successes in life, is the blindness that strikes him in old age, and even more than that his name and the story of his birth, which are inseparably intertwined with one another. In what follows, my focus shall be upon the name Yitshak and the circumstances under which it was given—namely, those of Yitshak's birth itself. No less than they pertain to the figure of Isaac, they pertain to God's relations with his parents, and particularly with his father Abraham.

I shall make two central claims below. First, that the name Yitshak bears a negative connotation, so much so that it is nearly a term of insult. This is indicated both by the meaning of the name in the biblical lexicon, and by the three (or perhaps four) contexts in the book of Genesis in which the name is explicitly or implicitly explained. On the basis of the evidence to be presented below, this claim is nearly a philological-literary fact, yet, to the best of my knowledge, and rather surprisingly, hardly any biblical exegetes or scholars have taken note of this fact; moreover, a decisive majority even maintain the opposite.

This claim elicits surprise, even puzzlement: Why should the name of the second patriarch bear a negative connotation? Why should the son for whom the chosen father yearned, and through whom God's great historical plan to establish a people to dwell in the Land was to be realized, be given an insulting name? The answer I will propose to these questions—and this is my second claim—is rooted in the unique interpersonal-emotional relationship between God and “Abraham, my beloved” (Isa 41:8). Furthermore, this answer is a key for understanding the saga of Abraham as whole; it embodies a “theological” structure of thought that underlies a salient trend in the Jewish tradition.

The name Yitshak was “born” in three different episodes in the book of Genesis: in chapter 17, when God changes Abram's name to Abraham, promises him that he will be the father of many nations, commands him concerning circumcision, and changes the name of his wife Sarai to Sarah; in chapter 18, by implication, when the “three people” visit Abraham and Sarah to herald the birth of their son; and in chapter 21, immediately after his birth and weaning. Philological-historical research based upon the Documentary Hypothesis ascribes these three chapters to two sources: chapter 17 to P and chapter 18 to J, while chapter 21 is a redacted version incorporating both J and P.¹

The various accounts of the origin of the name Yitshak in the book of Genesis will be analyzed on the basis of these source-critical assumptions. Parallel to that, the discussion will also take into consideration the redacted framework of the book of Genesis. In light of the basic similarity between J and P in their respective accounts of the birth of Isaac, the viewpoint of the redaction is of particular importance. A careful reading of these chapters in terms of the questions that I have posed strengthens the possibility, already raised by biblical scholarship, that all three accounts of the origin of the name Yitshak were

¹ In recent years, doubts have been raised regarding the distinction made between J and E. However, the distinction between J and P generally, and in the chapters discussed here in particular, is still considered well established; see below.

taken from a single, ancient source.² I shall discuss these occurrences of the origin of the name Yitshak one by one.

II

The first occurrence of the name Yitshak is in Genesis 17. This chapter is the first and only epiphany to Abraham in the P document, and the lengthiest divine speech addressed to him in Genesis as a whole.³ The chapter is composed of three distinct units of speech, each of which opens with the words, “And he / God spoke to Abraham,”⁴ followed by a concluding section telling of the covenant of circumcision that Abraham performed on himself, on his son Ishmael, and on all those born in his household (vv. 23–27).

In the first speech (vv. 1–8), God reveals his name to Abram (“I am God Almighty [*El Shaddai*]”), commands him to “walk before me and be blameless (*tamim*),” and establishes his covenant with him. In the wake of the promise that Abram shall be “the father of a multitude of nations,” his name is changed to Abraham, and God immediately promises him fertility and dominion, an “everlasting covenant” with his seed after him, and the land of Canaan (vv. 4–8). In the second speech (vv. 9–14), God commands Abraham concerning circumcision (vv. 9–13), and concludes by warning that whoever violates “my covenant” will be cut off (v. 14).⁵

The central subject of God’s third address to Abraham (17:15–22) is Sarah, and it is there that the name Yitshak occurs for the first time. In this speech, unlike the two preceding ones, there is an exchange between God and Abraham. At the beginning of his speech, God changes Sarai’s name to Sarah and immediately promises Abraham, “I will bless her, and I will give you a son by

² See, e.g., Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis*, trans. M. E. Biddle (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997), 225–29, 259–67; cited hereafter as Gunkel.

³ Gunkel, 262. This revelation includes an enumeration of all of God’s promises to Abraham. From this point on, the revelations in Genesis are rare and concise. See Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 16; cited hereafter as Wenham.

⁴ On the appearance of the name YHWH at the beginning of the Priestly narrative in Genesis 17, see Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12–36: A Commentary*, trans. J. J. Scullion (London: SPCK, 1985), 257; cited hereafter as Westermann. While the chapter does in fact contain five words that indicate the beginning of a speech (יִאמֶר/יִדְבֵר, in vv. 1, 3, 9, 15, 19), in terms of their subject matter, the speeches in vv. 3 and 19 are part of the previous speech.

⁵ The fulfillment of this command appears in the final section of the chapter, which as mentioned above narrates the carrying out of circumcision.

her.” Sarah’s change of name is parallel to that of Abraham, and is derived from it: just as he is to become “the father of a multitude of nations” according to God’s promise, “I will make nations of you” (vv. 4–5), she too shall be “a mother of nations”; just as “kings shall come forth from” Abraham (v. 6) so too “kings of peoples shall come from her” (v. 16).⁶ One need not add that there is a close relation, both in the case of Abraham and that of Sarah, between the change in name and the promise of offspring. The third speech (about Sarah) is thus a continuation of the first one (about Abraham), as if to say that Abraham and Sarah enjoy a similar status and are as one unit.

The third speech in chapter 17 must be read not only as a sequel of the initial speech to Abraham, but also against the background of the birth of Ishmael to Hagar, related in the previous chapter. Whereas the promise of sons in the first speech to Abraham is general and impersonal, the promises regarding Sarah in the third speech are very “personal”; they touch upon the exposed nerves of Abraham’s family. Indeed, perhaps it is for this reason that the Priestly author separates them by presenting them as a new act of speech. After Sarah’s name is changed a promise appears: “Moreover I will give you a son by her (*mimēnah lekha ben*)” (v. 16). This is a promise to Sarah (“by her”) and simultaneously a promise to Abraham (“to you”), and is a kind of realization of the promise given to him in the first speech: “I will multiply you exceedingly.”

The background for this promise, as for the third speech in general, is Ishmael, Abraham’s son from Hagar. The phrase “Moreover (*ve-gam*), I will give you a son by her” implies that until then Abraham had placed his hopes for the future upon the son of Sarah’s Egyptian maidservant who, according to P, was already thirteen years of age (Gen 16:16; 17:1). At the age of ninety-nine years, Abraham thought that the promises in the first speech (“multitude of nations”) would be realized in Ishmael,⁷ who was born from his wife Hagar.⁸

⁶ Abram is a “lofty father” (*av-ram*), and his new name Abraham makes him a “father of many nations” (see Westermann, 84–5); Sarai means “our princess,” but her name “Sarah” identifies her as a princess over all. See, e.g., *Gen. Rab.* 47.15 (ed. Theodor-Albeck; Jerusalem: Vahman, 1965), 471.

⁷ For this reason, the notice regarding Abraham’s age in the first verse of the chapter is not simply priestly pedantry regarding numbers, and see Nahmanides’ commentary on Gen 17:18, s.v. *lu Yishma’el*. It is worth noting that the promise made to Abraham in the first speech in Genesis 17 does not mention a son, but rather identifies Abraham as the father of “a multitude of nations.”

⁸ According to P, Sarah (*eshet Abram*) raises her Egyptian maidservant to the status of her own husband’s wife (*lo le-ishah*, Gen 16:1–3), that is, as a rival wife to herself. In J, by contrast, Sarah only asks Abraham to have relations with her maidservant so that she might be “built up” through her, thinking in her shortsightedness that the latter would preserve her lowly position; compare Westermann, 238–9. P states (twice, 16:15–16) that Hagar bore Ishmael for Abram, thus

The change in Sarah's name and the promise of a son, and of "nations" that will come from her, appears here against the background of Abraham's state of mind, and his alienation from his wife, to which he alludes. The third address to Abraham is thus intended to give Sarah a special status before God, (almost) equivalent to that of Abraham.⁹

The contours of the parallel narrative in J are similar.¹⁰ According to J, Sarah, who understands that "the Lord has prevented me from bearing children," asks Abraham to have relations with Hagar, her Egyptian handmaiden: "Perhaps I will obtain children [*ibaneh*, lit., be built up] from her" (Gen 16:2).¹¹ The prompt conception by the latter, and presumably also Abraham's feelings towards her, cause the handmaiden to treat her mistress with disdain and contempt. Sarah's frustration soon breaks out, specifically against Abraham: "My anger is against you (*hamasi 'alekha*)! I gave my maid to your embrace (*be-ḥeikekha*), and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt (*va-ekal be-'eineiha*). May the Lord judge between you and me!" (16:5). Sarah's words reflect the quandary in which she finds herself. Her anger and frustration are turned against Abraham, even though she was the one who brought her rival Hagar upon herself and her family. This wording alludes to the emotional connection that had been woven between Abraham and Hagar and to the infant within her womb, which allows the maidservant to lord it over her mistress (at least in Sarah's perception). Sarah's appeal to Abraham is rooted in his power, as patriarch, to bring about change, but simultaneously betrays the deepening

emphasizing that he was his son in every sense. Moreover, while according to J the angel of God called the son Yishma'el (16:11), in P it is Abram who gives him this name, as if to say: God has heard my request. The birth of Ishmael comes following the promise in 15:1–4, and cf. Nachmanides to Gen 17:18. Yet, these verses evidently do not belong to either J or P (see Westermann, 214–16).

⁹ The fundamental difference between the two is still reflected in the fact that God speaks to Abraham and not to Sarah. The change in her name and the promises made to her were conveyed through Abraham.

¹⁰ See Gunkel, 262; Westermann, 238; Wenham, 5.

¹¹ It would appear that Sarah attempts to outwit divine providence. She understands that her barrenness is not natural; God has prevented her from bearing a child (in any event, that is how barrenness is understood throughout the book of Genesis [e.g., 29:31; 30:22] and in the ancient Near East), and so she attempts to be "built up" through her maidservant. See Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, rev. ed., trans. J. H. Marks and J. Bowden (London: SCM, 1972) ad loc.; cited hereafter as von Rad. See also Wenham, 7; and cf. Westermann, 238. On the subject of being "built up" through one's maidservant, both in the Torah and in parallels from the ancient Near East, see E. A. Speiser, *Genesis*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981), 120; and the summary in Westermann, 239.

alienation between them.¹² The similarity in the contour, and even in many details, suggests that P knew J, or that both of them at least borrowed from a common source, which each one shaped in his own manner.¹³

Abraham's response to God's speech concerning Sarah, and particularly to his promise, "moreover I will give you a son by her," follows quickly: "Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed (*va-yitshak*)" (v. 17). At first glance, Abraham falls on his face because of the overwhelming power of the revelation—but then, surprisingly, he laughs.¹⁴ That which initially appears to be an involuntary action, "in the manner of prophecy,"¹⁵ or perhaps a demonstration of homage or gratitude for the wonderful promise that has been given him, ends up as an attempt to conceal his mocking laughter.¹⁶ His falling on his face in order to conceal his laughter precedes the phrase, "and he said to himself (*va-yo'mer be-libo*)"; it is intended to conceal the mockery and doubt that Abraham utters to himself: "Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" How much frustration, doubt and bitterness is contained within these words: frustration over the long years of useless waiting; skepticism as to God's ability, and perhaps even willingness, to realize his promise to the elderly couple.¹⁷ Also echoed here is the bitter

¹² The language [עלִיךָ] חמסי ("my anger is against you") is interpreted by many as meaning, "The anger caused me by my maidservant is your fault" (thus Rashi, Sforno, Radak, and so on). The use of the term *hamas* is a deliberate exaggeration (compare Gen 6:11 and 13) in order to indicate the extreme transformation in the mood of Sarah, whose anger is now directed towards Abraham, calling upon God to judge between them, using formal legal language (Westermann, 241), and perhaps even a kind of curse (Wenham, 8). In fact, God first of all judges Sarah, who initiated the entire incident as a kind of protest against the fact that he had prevented her from having a child.

¹³ See Gunkel, 266.

¹⁴ See Gunkel, 266; von Rad, 203; Westermann, 267.

¹⁵ Ibn Ezra (regarding Moses' falling on his face) in Num 16:4, and cf. Ezek 1:28; Dan 10:8.

¹⁶ It is difficult to attribute religious significance to Abraham's falling on his face, similar to the "falling of the prophets" (see above, n. 15). God's connection with the patriarchs throughout Genesis 12–36 is always described in a natural and self-evident manner, without any element of surprise or shock and without arousing the fear of death, such as we find in later cases: "For no man shall see me and live" (Exod 33:20). See Westermann, 109–10, and below, n. 120. It may be that the falling referred to in the first speech in chapter 17 (v. 3), after God appears to Abraham and reveals his name, is different, as it seems like an expression of awe and respect. Cf. *Gen. Rab.* 41.3 (463–4).

¹⁷ The response to God's promise attributed to Abraham in Genesis 17 is very remote from his response to a similar promise of offspring in 15:6. "And he believed in the Lord, and it was considered to him as righteousness." This is the verse most identified with Abraham in the Judeo-Christian and Western tradition, and it is also the one quoted most frequently in discussions about him, among both commentators and theologians. Because of it Abraham was transformed into

recognition that, even if a miracle does take place, the time has already been missed, for what point is there to a child being born to a mother who is ninety years old and to a father who is one hundred?

While still thinking that he has succeeded in concealing the laughter and mockery (in his heart) from God, Abraham turns “to ‘The God’ (*ha-elohim*),” suggesting: “Would that Ishmael might live in your sight! (*lu yishma’el yihyeh le-fanekha*)” (v. 18). This self-effacing language—as if to say, “I am not worthy of this great miracle”¹⁸—conceals in ironic politeness the words of mockery and doubt that Abraham says in his heart. Perhaps Abraham’s intention here may be explained thus: “that which you have given me, namely, Ishmael, is sufficient” (Kimhi); “might live (*yihyeh*)”—that is, your plans and promises may be realized (i.e., live) in Ishmael;¹⁹ “before you (*le-fanekha*)”—that is, he will inherit from me and continue my path, as in your words to me now: “Walk before me” (17:1). In pretended modesty, Abraham hints to God: To what end is all this effort? Why promise something which it is doubtful that you are able—or even willing—to realize? Let us “go on” through Ishmael, who is already alive and mature.²⁰

Abraham’s suggestion, whether based on authentic humility or ironic politeness, betrays his deep connection to Ishmael, in whom (and evidently also in whose mother) he has pinned his hopes for more than thirteen years. The mention of Ishmael’s name in this context displays the sense of distance and alienation that prevails between him and Sarah. In the final analysis, God’s third and last address to Abraham in chapter 17 is aimed entirely at relieving Sarah from her distress: he changes her name, blesses her, and promises her (at the age of ninety) that she will bear a son. He elevates her status to that of

the “knight of faith” (to use the famous phrase of Kierkegaard) and the “father of believers.” See Westermann, 222. Many scholars think that this verse is a late exegetical addition, the product of theological reflection, distinct from both P and J and from their sources (Christian commentators and even scholars see this verse as an anticipation of Pauline theology). For centuries, this verse dictated—among both Christians and Jews, and among theologians, traditional exegetes, and critical scholars—the exegetical content and tone of the entire Abraham cycle. However, as noted by Westermann (268), according to P, and certainly according to J, Abraham is not a knight of faith.

¹⁸ Thus Rashi, *ibid.*

¹⁹ Not in the sense that he will not die; compare the linguistic discussion of Nahmanides s.v. *lu Yishma’el*.

²⁰ Westermann, 203; and cf. *Gen. Rab.* 47.18 (473). According to the parable told in this midrash, Abraham identifies in the “king” (i.e., God) an emotional difficulty. The parable implies that Abraham hints to God that Ishmael is sufficient for him and that he has no need for a son from Sarah.

Abraham in order, so to speak, to marry them anew. The declaration “Would that Ishmael might live before you” is essentially a rejection of God’s attempts at saving Sarah and his relationship with her, implying more than a measure of contempt and affrontery, both towards the renewed “bride” and towards the “matchmaker.” Abraham’s polite rejection both of Sarah and of God is consistent with the contemptuous words that he said in his heart.

The ancient and medieval commentators did not understand Abraham’s laughter in this manner. Already the *Book of Jubilees*, whose fifteenth chapter is an almost verbatim paraphrase of Genesis 17, states, “And Abraham fell on his face and rejoiced” (*Jub.* 15:17), an interpretation shared by the Septuagint.²¹ The ancient Aramaic Targumim follow a similar path. Thus, for example, Onkelos: *u-nefal Avraham ‘al apohi ve-hadei* (And Abraham fell on his face and rejoiced),²² followed by Rashi.²³ Similarly, Rav Sa’adya Gaon (*va-yismaḥ*), Kimhi (*samaḥ be-libo*), and Nahmanides.²⁴ The identification of Abraham’s laughter as an expression of joy dictates in turn their explanations further along in the chapter. Thus, regarding Abraham’s question, “Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old?” Rashi writes (*ibid.*, s.v. *ha-leven*): “There are expressions of astonishment that are fulfilled [i.e., rhetorically]. . . . So was this one [as if it had been—YL] fulfilled. Thus he said in his heart, ‘Shall this kindness be done after all that the Holy One, blessed be he, has done for me?’” Abraham, according to Rashi, is self-effacing: “‘Would that Ishmael would live before you’—I am not worthy to receive such a reward.”²⁵

This interpretation is opposed to the contextual meaning of the passage for a number of reasons. First and foremost: even though the occurrences of the

²¹ Or: “was very happy.” See James C. Vanderkam, ed. and trans., *The Book of Jubilees* (Louvain: Peeters, 1989), 86, and thus also the LXX. But cf. Josephus, *Antiquities* 1.193 (Shalit ed., 21): “Abraham thanked God for his promises.”

²² Neophiti and Pseudo-Jonathan translate ותמה (she was astounded), whose meaning is positive. For a survey of the translations of the root צחק, see Michael Segal, *The Book of Jubilees: Rewritten Bible, Redaction, Ideology, and Theology* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2007), 240 n. 85.

²³ Following Onkelos, Rashi (on Gen 18:12) draws a contrast between Abraham’s laughter and that of Sarah (והצחק שרה), translated as וחיכת שרה).

²⁴ Nahmanides on Gen 17:17, s.v. *va-Yitshak*, and similarly Moshe Garsiel, *Midrashic Name Derivations in the Bible* [Hebrew] (Ramat Gan: Revivim, 1987), 156.

²⁵ Rashi: “‘Before you’—will live in your fear, as in ‘Walk before me’ [Gen 17:1].” Compare Nahmanides *ad loc.* His interpretation seems forced: Why should the promise that he will have progeny from Sarah cause Abraham to fear that Ishmael will die?

root צחק have a number of different meanings in the Bible, all of them carry a negative connotation.²⁶

Moreover, the words that Abraham says in his heart, with their explicit resemblance to Sarah's laughter in chapter 18, indicate that Abraham is not joyful but rather mocking. Similarly the interpretations of the phrase "O, that Ishmael might live in your sight," derived from the assumption that *va-yitshak* = *va-yismah*, i.e., that it relates to joy, seem highly forced. The apologetic motivation of the early commentators, all of whom speak in one voice, is clear and requires no further elaboration.²⁷

Unlike the ancient and medieval exegetes, most of the modern commentators correctly understand Abraham's laughter as mockery.²⁸ But while they are not mistaken with regard to the philological meaning of the word *va-Yitshak*, each in his own way modifies and attenuates its significance. Thus Gunkel writes that "P took the 'laughter' (צחק) associated with this promise from his exemplar. It stems from an old legend tradition and was originally intended to motivate the name צחק" (a feature which no longer figures prominently in P). This element was so firmly fixed in the tradition that even P could not remove

²⁶ The verb צחק (including the giving of the name Yitshak, as opposed to the appearance of the name Yitshak per se) appears fifteen times in the Torah, fourteen of them in Genesis: 17:17; 18:12–15 (six times; see below); 19:14; 21:3, 6 (four times); 26:8; 39:14, 17 (see below); and once in Exod 32:6. The majority of its appearances in the Torah (ten) thus relate to the birth of Yitshak. For occurrences of צחק that refer to mockery, see Gen 18:13–15; 19:14; 21:9; 39:14, 17; Judg 16:25 ("and they said, 'Call Samson, and let him sport [or: dance] before us'... and he danced for them"); Ezek 23:32 ("deep and wide; it shall cause derision and scorn"). In many places, צחק has a sexual connotation that is in all cases negative (with perhaps one exception, 26:8); see 39:14, 17; possibly Gen 21:9 (see below); Exod 32:8; Judg 16:25; 2 Sam 6:21. On all of these occurrences of צחוק, see below, and cf. Athalya Brenner, "On the Semantic Field of Humour, Laughter and the Comic in the Old Testament," in *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Y. T. Radday and A. Brenner (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1990), 39–58. The root צחק is at times exchanged in the Bible with the root חקש, hence the name Yitshak also appears as Yishak. The occurrences of the verb חקש, in almost all of their appearances in the Bible, likewise carry the sense of mockery (see, e.g., Jer 20:7; 33:26; Ps 2:4; cf. Jer 48:26–27; Hab 1:10; Prov 1:26; 26:19; 29:9; Lam 3:14). The verb חקש may also carry the meaning of joy, as in, e.g., Ps 126:2 ("Then our mouths were filled with laughter and our tongues with song"), but this is a singular case. As against that, the occurrences of צחק always carry a negative meaning, as already noted by the early rabbis; see *t. Sot.* 6.6 (and below). For suggestions concerning the exchange of צחק with חקש, see M. Moreshet, "Tsehok–Sehok, Yitshak–Yishak" [Hebrew], *Beit Mikra* 13 (1968): 127–30; Y. Kutscher, *Words and Their History* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer, 1965), 104–6. It should be noted that in the absolute majority of those cases in which the Bible indicates joy, it does not use the root שחק but rather שמח; see Judg 9:19; 19:3; 1 Sam 11:15; 1 Kgs 5:21; 2 Kgs 11:20; Isa 39:2; Jon 4:6; Prov 23:24; 2 Chr 29:36.

²⁷ See above, n. 17.

²⁸ See Gunkel, 266; von Rad, 202–3; Westermann, 268; and Wenham, 25–6. Compare Speiser, *Genesis*, 125.

it.” According to Gunkel, the motif of *tsehok* in Genesis 17 expresses no more than the Priestly author’s respect for his sources.²⁹ Von Rad writes that of all the occurrences of the motif of laughter repeated in all the stories concerning the birth of Yitshak, that found in the Priestly Document (17:17) is “the strangest of all. . . . Abraham’s laughter brings us to the extreme boundary of what is possible from a psychological viewpoint, it being incorporated within a demonstration of awe suffused with pathos (‘and he fell upon his face’). This laughter is not a game (nor mockery). It is a terrible laugh, dreadfully serious, combining faith and scepticism.” The promise that Abraham received with awe “was so paradoxical that he involuntarily laughed,” says von Rad, quoting Delitzsch, and he concludes, “Abraham attempts to bypass that which was incomprehensible for him, and he turns God’s attention to that which was already certain, to Ishmael.”³⁰ This is an impressive interpretation, only it imposes upon the text a theological burden that it is difficult to find therein.³¹

God does not take Abraham’s words in silence, but answers him: “And God said, ‘No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Yitshak’” (v. 19). The word *aval* (but) as used here implies opposition and admonition,³² as if to say: Against your suggestion, my plan will not be realized in the living Ishmael. With a note of censure, God reminds the estranged Abraham that Sarah is “your wife (*ishtekha*)” and that she shall bear a child “to you (*lekha*),” immediately adding, “and you shall call his name Yitshak.” The command regarding the name follows directly from the rebuke and censure, but even more so it is a direct reaction to Abraham’s laughter and the covert scorn implied in his manner of addressing God. Abraham imagines to himself that he has succeeded in concealing his laughter, but God, who knows the secrets of men’s “hearts and innards,” sets him straight as to his error. This

²⁹ Gunkel, 266. According to him, the comparison to Sarah’s laughter in the parallel passage in 18:12 indicates the alien nature of the Priestly version: whereas Sarah laughs only because she is unaware of the identity of the “people,” Abraham laughs in the presence of God. Gunkel adds: “To exonerate P, one may assume that he took this element from his source. At any rate, P adds on his own that Abraham fell on his face before God (as was common). The result is that he falls before God and laughs at his promise!” This surprising combination of piety and mockery “offers deep insight into the heart of this churchman and trained theologian who surely held these old narrators in high regard and who, nevertheless, stands so far beneath them in matters of religion!” (266).

³⁰ von Rad, 202–3.

³¹ Likewise Westermann, 268, and see below.

³² For the use of the word of אַבַּל (*aval*) in the Bible to indicate opposition or contrast, see, e.g., Dan 10:17. Cf. E. Ben Yehuda, Eliezer ben Yehuda of Jerusalem, *A Complete Dictionary of Ancient and Modern Hebrew* [Hebrew], Vol I (Jerusalem: Ben Yehuda Hozaa La’Or, 1948), 27–28; and see also Gen 42:21; 2 Sam 14:4–5.

follows from the linguistic parallel, “and Abraham fell on his face and laughed (*va-yitshak*),” followed immediately by God’s instruction to him, “And you shall call his name Yitshak.” The command regarding the name Yitshak does not come at the beginning of the third speech, when Abraham is promised that Sarah will bear him a son, but only after he laughs. Hence, both in terms of the subject matter and in terms of language and style, God’s command to Abraham is a kind of measure-for-measure response: Just as you ridiculed me, so shall I ridicule you or, more precisely, your child; so, too, whoever calls him by his name will ridicule him.³³ Yitshak is thus a pejorative name, as if to say, “he shall ridicule.”³⁴

³³ According to Rashi (s.v. *va-Yitshak*), because Abraham believed while Sarah mocked, “The Holy One blessed be he was strict with Sarah and was not strict with Abraham.” However, according to the reading proposed above, God was stricter with Abraham than he was with Sarah. In chapter 18, he only insists that Sarah laughed, and thereby alludes to the name of the child (see below), whereas in chapter 17 he orders Abraham to call him by a contemptuous name. Simultaneously, here too the stylistic difference between the documents is expressed. Whereas God’s insistence with Abraham in the Priestly chapter 17 is restrained, even though its contents are dramatic, his interaction with Sarah in the Yahwistic narrative in chapter 18 is harsher and more externalized, albeit without any clear result.

³⁴ Some scholars think that Yitshak is an abbreviated form of a theophoric name, such as “Yitshak-El,” found in Hittite texts, whose original meaning was “El [i.e., a Canaanite deity] shall rejoice and gaze with a laughing face.” According to another theory, the name Yitshak stands by itself and indicates the joy of parents upon the birth of their child. See M. D. Cassuto, s.v. Yitshak [Hebrew], *Encyclopaedia Biblica* 5 (Jerusalem: Bialik, 1978), 752–4, at 752; J. J. Stamm, “Der Name Isaak,” in *Festschrift für D. Albert Schädelin* (Bern: H. Lang, 1950), 33–8; cf. Westermann, 268–9; Wenham, 26. The Bible is of course not interested in the historical sources of the name, but rather in the meaning attributed to it and the associations that it wishes to elicit. At the same time, if the source of the name Yitshak is in the theophoric Yitshak-El, then P, and evidently also J, reversed its meaning. If there is any substance to this claim, then it is interesting to note that the name El was deleted from this name, which is especially clear when it is compared to the name of his rejected brother, Yishma’-El, and see below. On names in the Bible, see B. Porten, s.v. “Names in Israel” [Hebrew], *Encyclopaedia Biblica* 8 (Jerusalem: Bialik, 1982), 35–6, 39–42; on theophoric names and abbreviated theophoric names, see J. Liver, s.v. “Family” [Hebrew], *Encyclopaedia Biblica* 5 (Jerusalem: Bialik, 1978), 584; on the differences between names in the stories of Abraham and Yitshak and those in the Jacob cycle, see Z. Weisman, *From Jacob to Israel: The Cycle of Jacob’s Stories and Its Incorporation within the History of the Patriarchs* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1986), 30–1, and the literature mentioned in nn. 34–36. In the prophets the name Yitshak is exchanged for Yishak in a number of places; see Amos 4:9, 16; Jer 33:26; Ps 105:9. On this substitution, see Moreshet, “Yitshak–Yishak,” 128–9. In this context, I would like to comment that even if the negative connotation of the name Yitshak was somewhat obscured, the prophet Amos alludes to it (9:7): “And the high places of Yishak shall be desolate, and the temples of Israel shall be destroyed,” and immediately thereafter (v. 16): “Hear now the word of the Lord: You say, Do not prophesy to Israel, and do not exhort the house of Yishak.” The Yitshak–Yishak exchange is a wordplay suggesting that “the high places of Yishak” are places of mockery that shall

It is impossible not to discern the paradoxical difference between the name of the rejected son, Ishmael—which Abraham, according to P, gave to his first son before God revealed himself to him (Gen 16:15)—and that which God gives to the promised son.³⁵ God himself alludes to this fact by saying immediately to Abraham, “As for Ishmael (*Yishma’el*), I have heard you (*shem’atikha*),” and he promises, “Behold, I will bless him and make him fruitful and multiply him exceedingly” (17:20). But, he adds, “I will establish my covenant with Yitshak, whom Sarah shall bear to you” (v. 21).

The classical commentators also interpret the command “you shall call his name Yitshak” as a direct reaction to Abraham’s laughter—but reading this as an expression of joy, they interpret the name accordingly. Thus Nahmanides: “This is a sign that it [Abraham’s laughter] was of faith and joy.”³⁶

Several modern commentators think differently. Westermann, who, as mentioned, interprets Abraham’s laughter as an expression of scepticism and mockery (“a bizarre reaction to the wonderful promise”) writes with unconcealed Christian piety regarding the command to call him Yitshak:

But that is precisely P’s intention. . . . God has promised to act; He continues along his majestic way, which is “above all understanding,” beyond Abraham’s laughter and doubt. The name of the son, which is a play on Abraham’s laughter, will attest to this marvelous action of God.³⁷

III

The element of laughter occurs a second time in the narrative of Yitshak’s birth in Genesis 18, which scholars identify as belonging to J.³⁸ The element

in turn be put to mockery (“shall be desolate”). This is a remark of barbed irony to Israel, which had put its trust in its high places and altars; and see Moreshet, “Yitshak–Yishak.” At the same time, one need not accept Moreshet’s claim (*ibid.*, 128–9) that every change of name in the Bible from “Yitshak” to “Yishak” is intended to emphasize the element of mockery; see, e.g., Jer 33:26 and Ps 105:9, for which Moreshet offers rather forced interpretations.

³⁵ See nn. 8 and 34 above.

³⁶ Thus Rashi and Radak. It is worth noting that the traditional interpretation is difficult, even in its own terms. For if Abraham’s laugh there is indeed joyful, then God’s instruction to call him Yitshak as a sign of “joy and faith” is surprising, as from this point of view the joy is natural; why then should it elicit the reaction, “and you shall call his name Yitshak”? It must be that, even according to the apologetic interpretation, an element of mockery and doubt creeps into the divine promise, at least as a reaction that Abraham needed to overcome.

³⁷ Westermann, 268; similarly (by implication), von Rad, 202–3. Gunkel’s apologetics, *Genesis*, 266, is different, being based upon philological “considerations”; see above, n. 29.

³⁸ Gunkel, 198–200; Speiser, *Genesis*, 128–31; Westermann, 204, 274–5; compare Wenham, 40–9.

of laughter stands at the center of the first part of the chapter (vv. 1–15), where it is repeatedly emphasized. While the name Yitshak is not mentioned there explicitly, there is no doubt that it is at its focus.

While still “sitting at the door of his tent,” Abraham lifts his eyes and sees “three men standing in front of him.” Despite the intense midday heat, Abraham runs to greet them and insists that they enter his tent. The chapter describes Abraham’s generosity and the table that he sets for his guests in the best tradition of ancient Near Eastern hospitality (vv. 3–8). Abraham does not know the nature of these “men” (*anashim*). They seem to him like ordinary travelers, weary from the exertions of travel.³⁹ Only after the meal does their divine nature gradually make itself known to Abraham, and to Sarah.⁴⁰ As a reward for his generosity and kindness, the men promise the barren Abraham and Sarah that they will have a son. This promise is preceded by a question signifying a turn in the plot that sparks a minor drama. This stage of the story is spread over vv. 9–15, and at its focus is the motif of laughter/mockery and a clear foreshadowing of the name of the promised child.⁴¹

“They said to him, ‘Where is Sarah, your wife?’” (v. 9). How did these strangers know the name of Abraham’s wife, whom they had never met? By means of their question they hint to him that they are not ordinary men.⁴² Only at this point would it seem that Abraham begins to recognize the divine nature of his guests. When he replies, “Behold, she is in the tent,” one of the guests immediately announces,⁴³ “I will surely return to you next year at this time (*ka-et hayyah*, lit. ‘when this time returns’)⁴⁴—“and Sarah your wife shall have a son”

³⁹ Genesis 18:1a (“And God appeared to him . . .”) is a note of the redactor. Initially Abraham only sees “three people”; see Gunkel, 198; Westermann, 277; von Rad, 206; Wenham, 45; and cf. James L. Kugel, *The God of Old: Inside the Lost World of the Bible* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 11–13. Some medieval interpreters explained 18:1a in this manner; see, e.g., Maimonides in *The Guide of Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), II.42, 389. Compare Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Nahmanides ad loc.

⁴⁰ The phrase “Behold, three people stood above him, and he saw . . .” describes a sudden, almost miraculous appearance, as if they had appeared out of nowhere (emphasized by the repetition of the word, וירא, “and he saw”). This already suggests to the reader that these are not ordinary “people.”

⁴¹ On the structure of the chapter and of the various narratives included therein, see Gunkel, 199–200; Westermann, 274–6.

⁴² Gunkel, 198; Wenham, 47.

⁴³ Throughout the continuous course of the chapter, there are transitions from plural to singular and vice versa, both in the words recited by Abraham and the words related to those who speak to him.

⁴⁴ Thus Gen 18:14; cf. 2 Kgs 4:16–17, and see R. Yaron, “*ka’eth hayyah* and *koh lehay*,” *Vetus Testamentum* 12 (1962): 500–1; Wenham, 48. Nahmanides, at 2 Sam 11:1, comments that the phrase *שוב אשוב* (I shall return to you) is like *תשובת השנה* (at the turning of the year); cf. his comment at Gen 18:10 (s.v. *veha-nakhon*), and cf. Rashi and Ibn Ezra. On *בעת חיה*, Nahmanides writes, “all of you shall be living and existing,” while Rashbam reads *חיה* as “pregnant.”

(v. 10). At this stage it becomes clear, at least to Abraham, that these are messengers of God—or perhaps that it is God himself, accompanied by his angels, who is visiting him.⁴⁵ Although the promise is given to Abraham (*ashuv elekha*), it is really addressed to Sarah (*ve-hinneḥ ben le-sarah*). The phrase “and Sarah was listening at the tent door” (v. 10) is a direct sequel to the question that preceded the promise—“Where is Sarah your wife?”—and the narrator explains, “and it”—that is, the tent door—“was behind him”—that is, behind the “man” (or God) who was speaking, which seemingly prevents him from seeing Sarah and observing her reaction, which follows immediately.⁴⁶ At this stage in the unfolding of the plot, the narrator moves Abraham away from the center of the stage and brings Sarah forward. “Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age.” Moreover, it is impossible for Sarah to become pregnant because “it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women (*oraḥ ka-nashim*)” (v. 11). The use of the connective *waw* (“Now (*ve-*) Abraham . . .”) is intended to present these words not only as information to the reader, but also as an indication of what Sarah must be thinking while still “listening” to the news “at the tent door,” possibly to justify somewhat her mocking response.

“So Sarah laughed within herself (*va-titshak Sarah be-kirbah*), saying ‘After I have grown old shall I have pleasure?! And my husband is old’” (v. 12). Whereas according to P Abraham falls on his face and laughs (17:17), here in J Sarah laughs within herself. Her laughter here is not only disbelief; as in all the similar

⁴⁵ A great deal has been written, both in traditional exegesis and in modern biblical scholarship, on the status of the “three people” in Genesis 18 and their relation to God. See Gunkel, 198; Westermann, 277. There are those who held that God was present in each one of them; there are those who thought that the three of them were messengers of God (*mal'akhim*; often translated as “angels”); and those who maintained that God was one of the three and that he was accompanied by two angels. This latter possibility is supported by 19:1 (“and the two angels . . .”), and possibly also by chapter 18, in which there are frequent transitions from plural to singular (see, e.g., v. 22). I tend towards the latter possibility; however, for our purposes a decision on this matter makes no difference. See on this matter Edward L. Greenstein, “The God of Israel and the Gods of Canaan: How Different Were They?,” in *Proceedings of the Twelfth World Congress of Jewish Studies* (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1999), 47–59, at 57; and Benjamin D. Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 40–41. In late antiquity and the Middle Ages, Genesis 18 served both Christian and Jewish exegesis as a basis for theological speculations concerning the appearances of God and the relation between him and the angels. See on this Yair Lorberbaum, “Nahmanides’ Kabbalah on the Creation of Man in the Image of God” [Hebrew], *Kabbalah* 5 (2000): 312–7, and the bibliography there.

⁴⁶ Thus Rashi, s.v. *ve-hu aḥarav*, and many others in his wake; cf. Westermann, 280.

biblical occurrences of the verb צחק it includes mockery.⁴⁷ Sarah mocks this message within herself (*be-kirbah*), without any visible physical manifestation: “she laughed within herself.”⁴⁸ She thinks that her guests are ordinary desert travelers and only conceals her mockery out of politeness. Her words follow the phrase “and Sarah laughed to herself, saying . . .” and thus are not said aloud.⁴⁹ The subject of her inner mockery is her age: “After I have grown old and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure (*’ednah*)?” This rhetorical question expresses Sarah’s bitter astonishment in reaction to the promise made by the visitors; she is also laughing at herself, thinking: Can a worn and “dried out” woman like myself arouse sexual pleasure or passion (*’ednah*)?⁵⁰ Moreover, my husband Abraham has lost his virility (*zaken*).⁵¹ Sarah’s bitterness not only concerns the physical state of herself and her husband, but also alludes to a certain emotional weariness; perhaps this is a reflection of the state of their marriage.⁵² And here the reader wonders: Even if in some miraculous way this couple does manage to have a child, in what sort of mood and with how much enthusiasm will they raise him?

The divine response to this inner contempt comes immediately: “And the Lord said to Abraham, ‘Why did Sarah laugh, saying, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’” (v. 13). The narrator here alludes to v. 1a, disclosing to the reader that it is God who is speaking, and that he was evidently one of the “men,” and simultaneously making it clear that his identity has now become known to Abraham and Sarah as well.⁵³ Like Abraham in chapter 17, here too in chapter 18 Sarah thinks that her contemptuous laughter was hidden from the “man.” But God confronts Sarah with her mockery. In order to moderate the intensity of the confrontation, he does not look at her directly but turns to Abraham, pressing him for an explanation: “Why did Sarah laugh?” The motif

⁴⁷ See above, n. 26, and Rashi, s.v. *va-titshak Sarah*. As opposed to the laughter of Abraham in Genesis 17, no one disputes that the phrase “and Sarah laughed” refers to mockery.

⁴⁸ See, e.g., Ibn Ezra: “it was not recognizable in her face.” Compare Westermann, 281; cf. *Gen. Rab.* 48:12 (Theodor-Albeck, 494), s.v. *va-titshak Sarah*.

⁴⁹ As Rashi (s.v. *be-kirbah*) comments, it is possible that the word *be-kirbah* (inside her) also alludes to her womb, the site of her pregnancy, similar to the language used regarding Rebekkah: “And the sons struggled inside her (*be-kirbah*)” (Gen 25:22), as if to say: the bitter laughter was within her barren and dried-out womb.

⁵⁰ Compare Josh 9:13; Ps 32:3. See Rashi and Ibn Ezra, and cf. Westermann, 281; Wenham, 48.

⁵¹ See *Gen. Rab.* 48:12 (Theodor-Albeck, 494): “He grinds and does not ejaculate.” There is a certain irony in this language, which implies that “my master” (*adoni*) had lost his virility.

⁵² The old age that suddenly overtakes Abraham and Sarah is in sharp contrast to the quickness and ease the narrator attributed to them in the previous verses.

⁵³ Cf. Gunkel, 200.

of laughter, which gave a sharp dramatic turn to this narrative of gracious hospitality, is intensified, only to be exacerbated. Sarah laughs by saying to herself (*be-kirbah lemor*): *ha-af omnam*—that is, is it really true that—“I shall bear a child now that I am old?” (v. 13).⁵⁴ The midrash already observed God’s subtle alteration of Sarah’s words—he reports that Sarah said “I am old” instead of “my husband is old”—and explained that God did this to “keep the peace” between the couple.⁵⁵ God also refrains from describing Sarah as “worn out” or lacking in “pleasure.” Instead he asks, “Is anything too difficult/wondrous for the Lord?” Does giving a child to an elderly couple go beyond my ability?⁵⁶ He then repeats the words of promise: “At the appointed time I will return to you next year and Sarah shall have a son” (v. 14). Abraham is silent. One wonders: Is he surprised by his wife’s train of thought, or is it possible that the sense of mockery regarding this promise is not Sarah’s alone?⁵⁷

It seems doubtful whether God’s complaints against Sarah are justified. The essence of the plot involves, among other things, the gradual discovery of the nature of the visitors. If it was not clear to the couple that God (or his messenger) was visiting them, and the guests appeared to them (as the result of deliberate dissimulation on their part) as ordinary travelers, why attribute to Sarah mockery of God and skepticism regarding his capabilities? There is no reason to think that Sarah’s failure was rooted in a mistaken identification. In light of her sensitive state, implied by the bitter disappointment in her words, her laughter is an almost unavoidable necessity. The impression gained is that this was also the intention of the narrator, who does not wish to hold Sarah guilty.⁵⁸

God initially addresses Abraham, but in fact he primarily castigates Sarah. Thus she understands matters, and she immediately responds: “And Sarah denied saying, ‘I did not laugh (*lo tsahakti*),’” which the narrator explains, “for she was afraid (*ki yare’ah*).” It is not that Sarah is lying. Her awareness of whom she is standing before, which was slow to dawn, leads her to respond with a kind of nonvolitional denial, in an attempt to draw back her laughter/mocking.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Thus Rashi and cf. Ibn Ezra (אמנם; the letter *mem* is added, as in the word שלשם).

⁵⁵ *Gen. Rab.* 48.18 (495), and in its wake Rashi.

⁵⁶ As in Deut 17:8 (כי יפלא נמך), and cf. Rashi ad loc. Here יפלא does not necessarily refer to something miraculous, but to ability. See Westermann, 282, and compare von Rad, 207.

⁵⁷ Abraham does not express any astonishment when it becomes clear to him that God (or an angel) is speaking to him. Compare, for example, the reaction of Gideon (Judg 6:22), and see above, n. 16.

⁵⁸ See, e.g., Speiser, *Genesis*, 131. And compare the “theological” interpretation of Westermann, 280.

⁵⁹ Westermann, 282. Compare von Rad, 208; and, in another direction, Wenham, 49, who thinks that she did not really lie, as laughter within the heart is not real laughter.

But the “man” doesn’t let go. Now he addresses her directly in order to intensify the confrontation between them, and insists, “No! But you did laugh!” (v. 15).

Even though the name Yitshak is not mentioned here, there is no doubt that this exchange regarding the subject of laughter also alludes to the name of the son. The subtle literary fashioning of this chapter announces the name without stating it explicitly. From the redactor’s viewpoint, the name had already been given in the previous chapter (17), whereas in J it will be given further on, in chapter 21, while Sarah’s laughter and the exchange relating to it are still echoing in the reader’s consciousness—and there, too, it is interwoven with her laughter. As in the Priestly chapter 17, here too, only more so, the name Yitshak is depicted as a punishment for that *tsehok*, once again a kind of measure for measure: *lo, ki tsaḥakt* (“No! But you did laugh!”), therefore you shall call him Yitshak.

Nearly all of the modern commentators observe this connection.⁶⁰ Not so the medieval Jewish exegetes: to the best of my knowledge, not a single one of them comments on this fact. This is not because the matter is obvious to them. To the contrary: they refuse to see it so as not to attribute a negative connotation to the name Yitshak.

Alongside fundamental differences in the formulation of the plot and in its details, there is a clear similarity between the element of laughter in the Priestly chapter 17 and that of the Yahwist, chapter 18: upon hearing the promise, Abraham in chapter 17 and Sarah in chapter 18 laugh; they both attempt to conceal their laughter, the one by falling on his face and the other by laughing within herself. The contents of their laughter/mockery, notwithstanding the differences in wording, are very similar; in both cases there is an element of self-mockery (17:17; 18:12). In both chapters God informs them that their laughter is not hidden from him and insists on responding to it (17:17; 18:13, 15). The similarity between the chapters is also manifested in their style. Both begin with a heading declaring that God appeared to Abraham, in almost identical language (17:1; 18:1). Even the language of the promise is similar in both chapters (17:21; 18:14).⁶¹

For our present purposes, there is no need to decide which of the sources, P or J, is older or which one (if any) borrowed from the other. It may well be that

⁶⁰ See Gunkel, 200; Speiser, *Genesis*, 131; Westermann, 282; and, in a somewhat different manner, Wenham, 47, 49. Yet they all obscure the significance of this connection.

⁶¹ See Wenham, 41. To this one must add that the change in the names of Abraham and Sarah in the Priestly chapter 17 is paralleled by the Yahwistic chapter 18 (in the redaction).

Gunkel is right in his assertion that both drew on some other, earlier source.⁶² There is support for the conjecture that the element of laughter in the story of Yitshak's birth comes from a single ancient tradition. The various biblical documents and the redacted framework of the book of Genesis preserved, in the story of the birth of Yitshak, both the basic contours of the element of laughter and its centrality and weight, even if each one of them (P, J, and the redactor) formulated it in his own style and in his own way. As is to be expected, in this story too J is literary and vividly pictorial, as against P's more restrained style. However, we must not be misled: the Priestly source also preserves laughter in all its psychological complexity and in all its dramatic and disturbing nature.⁶³

IV

The element of laughter is also central to the story of Yitshak's birth in Gen 21:1–7, and is continued into the second half of the chapter, in the story of the expulsion of Ishmael and Hagar from Abraham's household (vv. 8–21). Laughter appears three or even four times in chapter 21, and is directly related to its appearances in chapters 17 and 18. All of its appearances in chapter 21 bear a negative connotation, painting the story of Yitshak's birth in disturbing colors.

Genesis 21:1–7 is the result of the work of the redactor: vv. 3–5 are from P, serving as the genealogical conclusion of chapter 17;⁶⁴ vv. 1–2 are from J, but incorporate elements from P: these verses are the joint conclusion of chapters 17 and 18; vv. 6–7, which shall constitute the focus of our attention below, are from J alone.⁶⁵

The chapter opens with a rather laconic description of the birth of Yitshak. God fulfills the promise he made in both chapter 17 and chapter 18. He visits

⁶² Gunkel, 199–200. See above, n. 29, and many other commentators in his wake.

⁶³ On the emotional-psychological basis for the figure of God in P in Genesis, see Yair Lorberbaum, "The Rainbow in the Cloud: An Anger-Management Device," *Journal of Religion* 89 (2009): 498–540.

⁶⁴ Gunkel, 225; von Rad, 231 (who also attributes v. 2 to P), and see the survey by Westermann, 331; Wenham, 79 (according to whom P includes vv. 2b–5).

⁶⁵ Westermann, 331–2, and in his wake Wenham, 79. Earlier critical scholarship tended to attribute v. 6a to E (thus, e.g., Gunkel, 225), but in light of more recent criticism questioning the distinction between J and E, scholars now tend to attribute vv. 6–7 to J (as the source or as the redactor of E); cf. Tzemah Yoreh, *The First Book of God*, BZAW 402 (New York: De Gruyter, 2010), 65–70.

Sarah, and she gives birth to a son for Abraham.⁶⁶ The emphatic “in his old age” echoes both 17:17 and 18:11–12. Notwithstanding the skepticism of the parents, Sarah gives birth “in the time (*la-mo’ed*) that God had spoken to him”—a term that also appears in both of the earlier chapters (17:21; 18:14). A similar emphasis appears in the last verse of this section (vv. 3–5), taken from P: “And Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Yitshak was born to him” (v. 5). This is not merely the pedantry of the Priestly author and his fondness for numbers and dates. P is here confronting Abraham’s skeptical mockery (“Shall a man who is one hundred years old become a father?,” 17:17). However, there is a certain irony in these emphases, as the reader wonders: Can the birth of a child to a barren couple, weary and tired of promises, she ninety years old and he one hundred, be “in the proper time”? As we shall see presently, this question does not take leave of Sarah but casts a shadow over her joy in her son.

P tells us that Abraham obeys the divine commandment concerning circumcision (17:12) and circumcises his son when he is eight days old (21:4). Previously, immediately following his birth, Abraham called “the name of the son who was born to him, whom Sarah had borne—Yitshak” (v. 3). This is not only because in P it is always the father who gives the name to his children. Here too Abraham is obeying God’s commandment: “You shall call his name Yitshak” (17:18).⁶⁷ And indeed, the language of 21:3 repeats almost verbatim that of 17:18. Abraham’s obedience is reported here in laconic Priestly style. If the name signifies the laughter of faith and joy, as claimed by all the traditional commentators and many of the critical ones, then his obedience is natural and self-evident. If, however, Yitshak is an insulting, contemptuous name, a kind of mocking, sarcastic response to Abraham’s “laughter” or mockery, as implied by the text, then his naming is not a trivial matter. Uriel Simon has rightly noted that the commandment to call the son Yitshak was intended “to perpetuate the fact that he was born after both his parents had given up on him, and laughed upon hearing the divine tidings of his expected birth.”⁶⁸ But, as we shall see below, this is only a partial, external aspect of his name.

That which is implicit in the Priestly source is expressly stated in J: “And Sarah said: God has made laughter for/at me (*tsehok ‘asah li elohim*). Everyone who hears will laugh over me (*yitshak li*)” (v. 6). This verse, again, lends

⁶⁶ The word פקד (to remember, visit) has a broad semantic field in the Bible. See, e.g., 1 Sam 2:21.

⁶⁷ See Kimhi ad loc.; Wenham, 80.

⁶⁸ U. Simon, “Biblical Abraham: The Blessing of Contrasts” [Hebrew], in *The Faith of Abraham: In the Light of Interpretation throughout the Ages*, ed. M. Halamish, H. Kasher, and Y. Silman (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 2002), 41–6, at 43, and see below, n. 97.

meaning to the name Yitshak. Scholars conjecture that in the J source, as is its way in many other places, the mother, Sarah, is the one to give the name to her son; hence, v. 6 ought to be read as the sequel to v. 2 (there is only lacking here the words, “and she called his name Yitshak”).⁶⁹ In the redaction, Sarah merely explains the name that has already been given by his father, Abraham (v. 3), while repeating it: “all who hear will laugh at me” (*yitshak li*, v. 6).

How does Sarah explain the name Yitshak? Most of the traditional exegetes understand v. 6 (in its entirety) and its continuation in v. 7 as an expression of joy. Onkelos translates: “God has made me to rejoice, whoever hears shall rejoice with me,” and Rashi in his wake says, “will rejoice because of me.”⁷⁰ Regarding “Who would have said to Abraham, ‘Sarah will suckle children?’” Rashi explains Sarah’s statement as “language of praise and importance: ‘See who [God] is and how he fulfills his promise.’”⁷¹ Several modern commentators write in the same spirit.⁷² Against this position, a large number of critical commentators distinguish between the two references to laughter in v. 6. Gunkel, and following him von Rad and Westermann, think that whereas in 6a “God has made laughter for me” is a religious-pious expression—Sarah expresses joy and thanksgiving for the miracle that has been done for her—her words in 6b, “everyone who hears it will laugh at me,” are marked by a bitter and sober realism. Sarah is disconcerted and embarrassed by the mockery of her neighbors: they will laugh at me—and not with me; they will laugh at an elderly and worn-out woman who suddenly finds herself nursing a child. The laughter here is also directed at the absurdity of her own situation: at her advanced age, Sarah is embarrassed to be the mother of a baby. The words of laughter in v. 6 (“whoever hears . . .”) are explained in v. 7: “Who would have said to Abraham . . .”—no one will believe me that I am nursing and that “I have given him a son in his old age.”⁷³

⁶⁹ von Rad, 231; Westermann, 333; Wenham, 80.

⁷⁰ Rashi adds (following *Gen. Rab.*): “Many barren women were visited together with her . . . and there was great laughter in the world.” Similarly R. Saadya Gaon (צחק, joy; צחק, will rejoice), Kimhi, Rashbam (קצק, laughter of astonishment), Sforno, and Gersonides.

⁷¹ Thus also *Gen. Rab.* 53 (Theodor-Albeck, 560–5).

⁷² Speiser, *Genesis*, 155 (and before him Delitzsch, Dillman, and Skinner; and cf. Westermann, 334), and cf. Wenham, 80–1.

⁷³ Gunkel, 226; von Rad, 232; Westermann, 334. Gunkel and Westermann accept the suggestion of Budde that v. 6b originally appeared (in J) following v. 7, and that there are two “statements” here: “And Sarah said, ‘God has made a joke of me’; and she said, ‘Who will tell Abraham . . . ? All who hear will laugh at me.’” However, they do not explain the rather odd final structure of v. 6; cf. Nahmanides on Gen 21:7, s.v. *mi millel*, and *Gen. Rab.* 53:9 (564).

Commenting on the inconsistency between the contradictory explanations of the name Yitshak in v. 6 (both of which are rooted in circumstances following the birth), and between them and the explanations in chapters 17 and 18, which are associated with doubts as to the promise per se, Westermann conjectures that the redactor had at hand numerous traditions regarding Yitshak and laughter, which he incorporated within the plot according to the circumstances. Thus, in chapter 21 he uses those that assume that the birth of the son has already taken place.

These two interpretations of Sarah's words in v. 6a—as praise or bitter realism—are remote from the straightforward meaning of this passage and, like both the traditional and critical commentaries to chapter 17, reflect a certain theological-apologetic tendency. The traditional commentaries correctly understand that the two appearances of laughter in v. 6 relate to the name Yitshak and, just as they interpreted Abraham's laughter in chapter 17 as the language of joy (“and faith”), so too do they interpret Sarah's words here. But, as we have seen, Abraham's laughter in chapter 17 contains mockery, and the name Yitshak there is one of contempt. Moreover, Sarah's remark in v. 6 that God has made a joke of her has little to do with Abraham's laughter (and to the name Yitshak) in chapter 17, but rather alludes to her own laughter in chapter 18, which everyone agrees to be laughter at the absurd, or derisive laughter. This is the case according to the critical reading—which holds that chapter 18 and 21:6–7 are from J—as well as from the viewpoint of the redactor. But primarily, as I have already noted above, “laughter” in the Torah, especially in the book of Genesis, always carries a negative connotation, generally of mockery or derision. Thus, in the absence of any real reason to think otherwise, it is unreasonable to attribute the unusual meaning of joy to the occurrences of *tsehok* in verse 6.

For these reasons, modern commentators have argued that in vv. 6b–7 Sarah expresses embarrassment and bitterness, giving the name Yitshak a “secular-mundane” meaning. This being the case, why do they decide that the phrase *tsehok 'asah li [elohim]* in 6a expresses a specifically religious joy? Apart from the fact that all of the reasons I have mentioned thus far mitigate against it, this rather oddly divides v. 6 into two contradictory statements. It would appear that here too the theological-apologetic consideration is paramount. In vv. 6b–7, where Sarah is referring to the laughter of other human beings, there is no obstacle to seeing their laughter as mockery, but in v. 6a she is referring to God. Evidently these commentators did not feel it appropriate to attribute to the pious Sarah the sentiment that the miracle of birth at the age of ninety,

from which the community of believers is to be built up, is nothing more than a heavenly joke.⁷⁴

In fact, all of Sarah's words in vv. 6–7 express bitter humiliation. She feels that everybody, both God and human beings, is laughing at her; the birth that took place after so many long years of barrenness and childlessness has brought her no joy. This "miracle" of God, after so many repeatedly postponed and unfulfilled promises until the age of ninety, can be naught but mockery and contempt.⁷⁵ Moreover, "Whoever hears it will laugh (*yitshak*)"—at me (*li*); Sarah alludes here to the contemptuous name given her son, taking it as a personal insult. Her words here serve as a kind of interpretation and expansion of "God has made a joke of me." God is not only mocking her in private, between the two of them, but, due to the public nature of giving birth to a son, she feels the laughter of her entire community: a laughter/mockery that is an inseparable part of the deliberate "laughter/joke" (*tseḥok*) performed by God. It would seem that by these words Sarah is referring not only to the birth of her son, but to all the frustrations she has experienced—the separation from her family and her birthplace, the promises that were postponed, the extended years of barrenness, the bitter confrontations with her husband—which have reached their height in this soured birth.⁷⁶ In saying, "Who would have said (*mi millel*) to Abraham, "Sarah will suckle children?" For I gave him the child in his old age" (v. 7) Sarah is interpreting the mockery of her social environment. This verse is poetry, constructed of three strophes, each of which is composed of three words.⁷⁷ "Sarah will suckle children" is a kind of ancient means of informing the father that his wife has born a son.⁷⁸ By the word "in his old age" (*li-zekunav*), Sarah alludes to her husband's extraordinary age, mentioned two verses earlier. These words are not an expression of wondrous joy, but rather,

⁷⁴ Notwithstanding the fact that the laughter in vv. 6a–7 is interpreted by Westermann as mockery, he summarizes the message of Gen 21:1–7 as follows: "These verses bring to a conclusion that which began in 11:27–32. The family is not complete until a child is born, upon whom rests the future. The joy over the birth of a son is complete, despite all the crises" (333).

⁷⁵ Cf. Joel S. Kaminsky, "Humor and the Theology of Hope in Genesis: Isaac as a Humorous Figure," *Interpretation* 54 (2000): 363–75, who confuses mockery with humor, which, to my mind, hardly exists in the stories of the birth of Yitshak.

⁷⁶ The word עשה, like מעשה, generally indicates in the Bible not only a specific event but an overall, well-thought-out plan (מעשה חושב). Thus, regarding the actions of human beings, and all the more so the acts of God, see, e.g., Gen 2:2 (עשה); Exod 34:10 (מעשה).

⁷⁷ The Aramaic word מלל appears in the Bible only in poetic contexts; see Ps 106:2; Job 8:2; 33:3.

⁷⁸ Westermann, 333; Wenham, 80.

to quote R. Joseph Bekhor-Shor: “Who would say of Abraham . . . that Sarah would nurse a son? . . . It would be mockery in [Abraham’s] eyes.”⁷⁹

A literary reading of 21:6–7 in the context of the J document, and particularly in the context of the redaction of the Torah as a whole, supports this reading. According to an approach widespread among critical commentators, both the author/redactor of J (at least of Gen 18:1–15 and 21:1–8) and the redactor of the Torah collected different and at times supposedly opposing ancient traditions relating to the name Yitshak, merely to string them one after another. The advantage of the reading suggested here is that it weaves the various appearances of laughter related to the birth of Yitshak into a single unified picture.⁸⁰ A “literary” reading of the birth of Yitshak, as of many other sections of the Bible, does not contradict a critical reading thereof. In chapters 17 and 18 Abraham and Sarah mock the promise made by God and by the “man” (respectively), but one can hear in their laughter not only skepticism about the promise, but also self-mockery due to their advanced age; God’s promise arrived too late, long past the time when the couple hoped to have a child. Their sense that the promise is mistimed, to which they merely allude in the words said upon hearing the promise (in chapters 17 and 18), is made explicit in Sarah’s words upon its realization (chapter 21). The old woman regards the birth of a child as an extension of her humiliation, an absurd event that will turn her into the object of mockery: “God has made a joke of me.”⁸¹

The *tsehok* motive occurs once more in chapter 21 (vv. 8–9).

And the child grew, and he was weaned and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Yitshak was weaned. And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, mocking (*metsahek*).

⁷⁹ *Mikra’ot Gedolot Ha-keter: Bereshit*, vol. 1, ed. M. Cohen (Ramat-Gan: Bar Ilan University, 1997), ad loc.; compare Nahmanides, ad loc.

⁸⁰ This “literary” reading enjoys an advantage even if we accept that these are different “traditions,” for, as mentioned, due to the proximity among these motifs it seems reasonable, even according to the critical reading, to assume that they stem from a single source. I am well aware of the approach that “allows” for inconsistency and incoherence in the biblical text (and in ancient texts in general), yet one would agree that there is an advantage in finding consistency therein; see M. Tsevat, “Common Sense and Hypothesis in Old Testament Study,” in *Congress Volume: Edinburgh 1974*, Supplements to *Vetus Testamentum* 28 (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 217–30.

⁸¹ A similar conclusion follows from the assumption that Genesis 21 belongs to E (with the exception of vv. 1, 4–5, which belong to P). See Yoreh, *The First Book*, 65–70. This is also alluded to in *Gen. Rab.* 53.1 (555), and 53.6 (561).

The word *metsahek* (v. 9) is clearly a play on the name Yitshak, and is part of the “circle of laughter/mockery” by which he is surrounded. He has barely been separated from his mother’s breast when Sarah sees his big brother, Ishmael, mocking ([with?] Yitshak). It may be that the juxtaposition of these verses alludes to the fact that Ishmael laughed or mocked during the great feast that Abraham prepared “on the day that Yitshak was weaned.”⁸² The biblical author makes do with brief and refined language—*metsahek*—but there is no doubt that the object of this laughter/mockery is his brother, the “child” Yitshak. And indeed, the Septuagint makes this explicit: Sarah saw Ishmael “laughing at (with) her son Yitshak.”⁸³ So too the majority of commentators.⁸⁴

What is meant by *metsahek*? There are those commentators who do not attribute anything negative to Ishmael in his context; they think that *metsahek* simply means to play with, to enjoy, to have fun with, or even to rejoice. In the words of Ibn Ezra, “for such is the way of every youth.”⁸⁵ According to this interpretation, Ishmael’s innocent play with Yitshak arouses Sarah’s fears. She is well aware of Abraham’s warm attitude towards Ishmael, so that as she watches the children playing in the here-and-now she envisions (“and Sarah saw”) future struggles over the inheritance.⁸⁶

But it is difficult to accept *metsahek* here as referring to something innocent. We may infer the contempt implied therein from the language and the

⁸² Thus already *Jubilees* 17:1–4, and cf. the view of Rabbi Akiva on *t. Sotah* 6 (in *Tosefta ki-feshutah*, ed. S. Lieberman [New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1955], 185–6), and Nahmanides, ad loc., s.v. *metsahek*. However, each of these understood the word מצחק in a different fashion; see below. On celebrating a feast in honor of the weaning of a male child in the ancient Near East, which served as a rite of passage, see Westermann, 338, and the bibliography there.

⁸³ The Septuagint text reads *paizonta meta Isaak tou huiou autēs* (compare LXX 26:8, *eidon ton Isaak paizonta meta Rebekkas tēs gunaikos autou*, which may suggest that Ishmael is playing with Isaac, not laughing at him). Some conjecture that this was the original version, which was subsequently abbreviated out of respect for Yitshak. See A. Rofé, “Text-Criticism within the Philological-Historical Discipline: The Problem of the Double Text of Jeremiah” [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 78 (2009–2010): 437–46, at 444–5, and see below. But this is not necessarily the case; despite the literal tendency of the LXX, it is possible that this is no more than an exegetical gloss on the brief language of the original.

⁸⁴ See further Galatians 4:21–31; Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Kimhi (all in Genesis ad loc.); and among the modern commentators: Gunkel, 226; Westermann, 338; Wenham, 82. Compare with other views in *t. Sotah* 6; thus R. Akiva and R. Eliezer (see above, n. 82), and in their wake Targum Jonathan and the Neophiti. Jerome interprets in a similar direction: “quod idola ludo fecerit”: see Jerome, *Quaestiones Hebraicae in Liber Genesis*; cf. Martin McNamara, trans., *Targum Neofiti 1, Exodus*, The Aramaic Bible 2 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994), 129.

⁸⁵ Ibn Ezra, ad loc. (s.v. *metsahek*) and, among the modern commentators, see Gunkel 226; Speiser, *Genesis*, 155; Westermann 338. On מצחק as joy, see *Jubilees* (above, n. 82).

⁸⁶ Thus Westermann, *ibid.*

context. While the word *tseḥok* in the Qal stem may at times bear a neutral meaning (“to play,” or even “to rejoice”), in the Pi’el the verb is always used in a negative sense, denoting mockery and/or sexual humiliation.⁸⁷ The context of the verb *metsaḥek* and its play on the name Yitshak and the contemptuous connotation embedded therein indicates that one is not speaking here of an innocent act.⁸⁸

And indeed, a widespread interpretation, among both the medieval exegetes and the modern researchers, is that *metsaḥek* (like *tseḥok*) means mockery: at the time of “the great feast” Ishmael mocks Yitshak on account of his elderly parents.⁸⁹ But Ishmael’s laughter contains an echo of the self-mockery of Yitshak’s mother (in vv. 6–7), which is also mockery of Yitshak himself because of his name. It may be that *metsaḥek* also alludes to the fact that, in Sarah’s imagination, Ishmael (by means of this contemptuous imitation) wishes to become a “Yitshak” so as to inherit his half-brother’s position.

Another possibility is that *metsaḥek* carries a far more negative connotation—namely, as a humiliating sexual act.⁹⁰ This interpretation is based upon a usage widespread in the Bible, particularly in the book of Genesis, in which the word *tseḥok* in the Pi’el construction generally refers to sexual behavior, at times improper. In Gen 26:8–9, it is told that Abimelech looked through the window “and he saw, and Yitshak was sporting with [*metsaḥek et*] his wife Rebecca.” From this sexual-erotic “play” he concludes that Yitshak and Rebecca are husband and wife. After Joseph refuses to sleep with Potiphar’s wife, she denounces him before “the people of her house,” saying, “See, they brought to us a Hebrew man to insult us [*le-tsaḥek banu*]” (Gen 39:14); and later on she tells her husband, “The Hebrew servant, whom you have brought among us, came to me to sport with me” (*le-tsaḥek bi*, v. 17). It is quite clear from the context that Joseph, according to her account, attempted to rape her (“and when he heard that I lifted up my voice and cried out, he left his garment with me and fled and went outside,” v. 17). The word *le-tsaḥek*, once again in

⁸⁷ On מצחק as mockery, see Gen 19:14.

⁸⁸ The need to justify Sarah cannot be a reason for interpreting מצחק as mockery or contempt. Moreover, even if the verb does have a negative connotation, it is doubtful whether Sarah’s demand to expel Ishmael was justified. Cf. Y. Fleishman, “The Expulsion of Ishmael” [Hebrew], *Beit Mikra* 44 (1999): 153.

⁸⁹ Thus R. Saadya Gaon, Kimhi, and Nahmanides, ad loc. Cf. Wenham, 72.

⁹⁰ See Fleishman, “The Expulsion of Ishmael,” 154–55; Rofé, “Text-Criticism,” 445. This is also the view of R. Eliezer b. R. Yossi the Galilean in *t. Sotah* 6 (Leiberman ed., 185), albeit in his opinion the act was not performed on Yitshak. The Tosefta (ad loc.) also brings other opinions connecting מצחק to idolatry (R. Akiva, based upon Exod 32:6) and bloodshed (2 Sam 2:14).

the Pi'el construction, carries a sexual meaning also in connection with the actions attributed to Israel in the sin of the golden calf. After they offered burnt offerings and peace offerings and ate and drank, “they got up to play [*le-tsahek*]” (Exod 32:6). By the word *le-tsahek* the biblical author attributes to the people cultic activity of a sexual nature, as in the fertility cult of Dionysius, involving dancing and evidently also sexual sporting.⁹¹ If the sense of the phrase *metsahek* is in fact sexual abuse performed by the pubescent Ishmael on his younger brother, then the “mockery” anticipated by the name Yitshak here becomes real humiliation.⁹²

Whatever the precise negative denotation of *metsahek* in Gen 21:9 may be, no doubt it is a pun on the name Yitshak, alluding to its pejorative sense. It seems that this is the case also in Gen 26:9 (*Yitshak metsahek*).⁹³ Puns on the name of Yitshak appear also in Amos 7:9, 16: “And the high places of Isaac shall be desolate (*ve-nashamu bamot Yishak*). . . . Prophecy not against Israel, and drop not thy word against the house of Isaac (*ve-lo tatif 'al beit Yishak*).” The replacement of Yitshak with Yishak intends to mock Israel’s idolatrous altars.⁹⁴

The verb *metsahek* in Gen 21:9 is the last in a series of occurrences of laughter that relate to the circumstances of Yitshak’s birth and the origin of his name. The story concerning Ishmael *metsahek*—mocking or sexually molesting—Yitshak when the latter has barely been weaned from his mother’s breast is a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy: not only is the contemptuous name given to

⁹¹ See, e.g., U. Cassuto, *A Commentary to The Book of Exodus* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem, Hebrew University, 1959), 289, and cf. W. C. Propp, *Exodus 19–40*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 553; Jack M. Sasson, “The Worship of the Golden Calf” in *Orient and Occident: Essays Presented to Cyrus H. Gordon on the Occasion of His Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, ed. Harry A. Hoffner, AOAT 22 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1973), 151–9. Support for this interpretation of Exod 32:6 comes from the phrase *kol 'anot* (Exod 32:18); see Propp, *Exodus 19–40*, 556–8; S. Morag, “The ‘Great Metaphor’ of Hosea (2:4–17): The Appeasement (2:16–17)—Some Linguistic Notes” [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 68 (1998): 5–11; and cf. N. Hakham, “‘INNA (Response to Shelomo Morag, “The ‘Great Metaphor’ of Hosea)”)” [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 69 (2000): 442. There may also be a sexual-erotic component in the act of mockery (again using the Pi'el form *בוצחק*) involving Samson, Judg 16:25, as well as a cultic element, as is the case in David’s dancing before the ark of the Lord in 2 Sam 6:20–23; see B. Rosenstock, “David’s Play: Fertility Rituals and the Glory of God in 2 Samuel 6,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 31 (2006): 63–80.

⁹² The totality of the meanings of the byforms *צחוק* and *שחוק* in the Bible are interwoven with one another in the hedonistic Greek cult of fertility, which entails drinking parties, dancing, cultic laughter and mockery, violence, and orgiastic sexuality for the sake of increasing fertility. See Rosenstock, “David’s Play.”

⁹³ See also Gen 27:47 and Garsiel (n. 24 above), 147.

⁹⁴ See Moreshet (n. 26 above), 128–9.

Yitshak because of the mockery of his parents, but it also heralds his becoming an object of *tsehok*, which comes far too quickly.

* * * * *

In the series of passages devoted to the birth of Yitshak (Gen 17, 18, and 22), the *tsehok* motif is dominant. It appears repeatedly in order to explain, whether explicitly or by implication, the name Yitshak. As opposed to all the traditional exegetes, and many of the modern critical commentators, who interpret Yitshak as the “language of joy,” I have shown that throughout these narratives, both laughter and the name itself carry negative connotations—ridicule and mockery (including self-mockery), and maybe even contempt linked to sexual abuse. The *tsehok* motif is central to both the narratives attributed to P and those attributed to J, and it is given even more prominence in the editorial framework of Genesis. A literary reading of the motif of laughter in the various sources, relying upon and complementing a historical-critical reading, uncovers the thematic connections among all of its occurrences and indicates the key relationship between the name Yitshak and the idea of mockery. This reading eliminates the basis for the claim, widespread among critical scholars, that already in P and J, and certainly in the redaction of the book of Genesis, the name had become detached from any negative connotations attached to it in the ancient traditions.

Names in Scripture are not merely a matter of convention. Frequently in the Bible, “the name is the soul,”⁹⁵ and it serves as a kind of declaration as to the nature of the person bearing the name; likewise a change in name may mark the impressing of a new essence upon an individual. This is frequently the case in the book of Genesis, and particularly in chapter 17 where, as mentioned, God changes the names of Abraham and Sarah as an inseparable part of the blessing he pours upon them.⁹⁶ There, in reaction to Abraham’s laughter, God commands them, “you shall call his name Yitshak.”

Against the background of all these things, it is difficult to overemphasize the dramatic nature of the command to name the child Yitshak, and the mockery already embodied therein. To return to the question posed in the beginning of this essay: Why does God impress, on a son who was born from his extraordinary blessings and promises, a seal of mockery and humiliation? Or,

⁹⁵ Porten, “Names in Israel,” 35. See, e.g., Gen 32:2; Judg 13:18. For a discussion of the substantive understanding of names in the Bible, see Johannes Pedersen, *Israel: Its Life and Culture* (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), 245–59.

⁹⁶ Gunkel, 263: “His [Abraham’s] change of name is not only a symbolic matter, but also a matter of real value. The name is a source of strength and is the destiny of its subject.”

to put it differently: Why does God arrange the circumstances of the birth of a son to Abraham, his chosen one, such that he and his wife will mock his promises, and God will respond with the command to name the child Yitshak? Such questions lead us to shift the focus of our interest from the laughter of Abraham and Sarah to the behavior of God, and the circumstances that he brings about in the story of the birth of Yitshak, which is the central moment in the cycle of Abraham narratives in the book of Genesis. Thus, the personality whose emotions, sensitivities, and responses elicit astonishment and require clarification is not that of Abraham, nor that of Sarah, but rather that of the “man”—namely, God himself.⁹⁷

V

The beginning of an answer to these questions may be found, in my opinion, in the following remarks by Yehudah Liebes concerning the personality of the biblical God:

God wants his chosen, his loved ones, those who walk with him, for himself alone. Thus “Hanokh walked with God: and he was not; for God took him” (Gen 5:22). Thus Abraham, who is called the one who loves him (Isa 41:8), is not taken to heaven but told to leave his country, his kindred, and his father’s house and belong only to God (Gen 12:1), and is then commanded: “Take now thy son, thy only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of” (Gen 22:2). I believe that the reason for this command may be God’s suspicion that Abraham is turning his love away from him, toward his only son.⁹⁸

Liebes’s remarks about the divine commandment to Abraham to offer his son are a dramatic innovation, but once stated they seem self-evident. They seem

⁹⁷ Cf. Simon, “Biblical Abraham” (n. 68 above). Simon writes that Abraham’s greatness “is not in the absence of weakness of mind or weakness of character, but rather in his constant struggle to overcome his weaknesses and limitations. There is no stronger expression of this than in the command to call the son who will be born to him Yitshak” (43). Yet this description does not match the texts. Abraham is not described anywhere as one who struggled with “weaknesses” or “failures,” longing for perfection. Simon also fails to recognize the biblical God as a real personality.

⁹⁸ Y. Liebes, “De Natura Dei: On the Jewish Myth and Its Transformation” [Hebrew], in *Masu’ot* [Ephraim Gottlieb Memorial Volume], ed. Michal Oron and Amos Goldreich (Jerusalem: Bialik, 1994), 243–97, at 291–2; the essay is reprinted in Liebes, *God’s Story: Collected Essays on Jewish Myth* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Karmel, 2008), 35–117.

self-evident because they are so suited to the emotional logic of the story of the Akedah (the “binding” of Isaac), and they are only rejected as a result of theological preconceptions (which are so prevalent in biblical exegesis, both ancient and modern). In what follows I shall argue that this insight explains not only the story of the Akedah, but also sheds light upon the relationship between God and Abraham throughout all the preceding chapters, particularly in the narrative of the birth of Yitshak. But first I shall comment upon the thematic and methodological basis for Liebes’s suggestion and the interpretation that I shall offer in its wake.

Leibes’s comment about the Akedah is offered in the context of an essay concerning the mythical nature of the Jewish tradition, and particularly that of biblical and talmudic myth. He writes: “Even Judaism’s monotheistic essence is not contradictory to myth, and monotheism itself has its own, far-reaching myth.”⁹⁹ Here Liebes associates the Akedah with the term “myth,” in its original sense of a story concerning the gods and their nature, making the necessary adjustment for the nature of the Jewish religion, which speaks of one God. “God’s unity,” he writes, “determines his nature; it also has a mythical aspect that, in my eyes, is the source of life of the Jewish religion.”¹⁰⁰ Liebes continues:

One of the salient features of biblical stories is that they portray history as dependent on the character and moods of God, whose attitude to his creatures is ambivalent, compounding love, on the one hand, and hatred and jealousy, on the other. God created and sustains humankind; to mitigate his loneliness and find expression for his love and his kingdom, he chooses those who are worthy because . . . “there is no king without a people.”

“This is the impression,” Liebes writes further, “usually given by a literal reading of the Bible, and there is nothing new in it. Since ancestral times, most of those who have read the Scriptures literally have perceived God’s image in this fashion, even when they found it antithetical to their views.”¹⁰¹

In another essay entitled “God’s Love and His Jealousy,” Liebes develops this argument further. He writes, “The love of God is the fundamental principle of Judaism, and its best teachers and scholars invested their thinking therein.” Liebes distinguishes between two meanings of the phrase “the love of God” (*ahavat ha-Shem*). According to one meaning, God is the object, and the phrase refers to human love of God; but according to the second meaning, God is the

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 245.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 251.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 289.

subject, and the phrase refers to the love by which God loves man. Between these two possibilities, “ordinary consciousness explicitly chose the former of the two.” However, “It is specifically the second option that is more vital and original in religion on all its different levels, and man’s love for God is derived from God’s love of man.” Liebes adds:

Judaism is unique, in my opinion, precisely in the intensity of God’s love. This is an obsessive and possessive love, uncompromising and humorless, which comes out of naught and ends with death. [It is] a love that consumes and negates itself in the fire of jealousy, and with it its object and, essentially, all others. . . . Perhaps those who saw in monotheism the uniqueness of Judaism were correct, but not, as it has been defined by some, as “ethical monotheism” (to the contrary!), nor as ontological or philosophical monotheism. . . . Jewish monotheism is an explicitly mythical matter. It signifies the psychological characteristics of God, that is, the power of his love and jealousy and his total demand for response: “Hear O Israel, the Lord is God, the Lord is One. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”¹⁰²

Even before Liebes, Yochanan Muffs developed a similar line of thought.¹⁰³ For Muffs, the revolutionary innovation of the Bible—as opposed to rationalistic-speculative theology, on the one hand, and the mythic gods of the ancient Near East, on the other—was the “focus upon the idea of the personality of God.” The subjugation of the gods of Mesopotamian and Egyptian myths to nature and to a trans-divine fate involves apathy towards the human condition: “These gods, who are only concerned with the satisfaction of their own physical needs, are not yet ready for interpersonal relationships.”¹⁰⁴ On the other hand, the God of the philosophers is “destined for eternal self-contemplation. . . . Not so the God of Israel, whose personality finds its full expression in love of another, independent and external personality. This is a love that transcends the limits of the self, that longs for connection . . . with its human counterpart.”¹⁰⁵ For Muffs,

¹⁰² Y. Liebes, “God’s Love and His Jealousy” [Hebrew], *Dimuy* 7 (1994): 30–6.

¹⁰³ Yochanan Muffs, *The Personhood of God: Biblical Theology, Human Faith, and the Divine Image* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2005), 24; and see also idem., “Between Compassion and Sternness: The Prayer of the Prophets” [Hebrew], in *Torah Nidreshet: Three Interpretative Essays on the Bible* [Hebrew], ed. A. Shapira (Tel Aviv: ‘Am ‘Oved, 1984), 39–87; reprinted in his *Love and Joy: Law, Language, and Religion in Ancient Israel*, trans. A. Meltzer (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1992), 9–41.

¹⁰⁴ Muffs, *Personhood of God*, 42. For a comparative discussion of the gods of myth and the God of Israel, see *ibid.*, 33, 39.

¹⁰⁵ Muffs, *Personhood*, 24, drawing upon Abraham J. Heschel; see especially Heschel’s *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1955), e.g., 324.

as for Liebes, more than (biblical) man seeks God, (biblical) God seeks man. Hence, God's love, his jealousy, his fear, and his frustrations and disappointments, which both theologians and Bible scholars over the generations have tended to obscure and even violently reject.

As I have noted at length elsewhere, many classical exegetes and even more so modern scholars, both Jewish and Christian, were reluctant to see God's love and the jealousy implied therein as qualities of the biblical God. This is part of a general tendency to deny the (biblical) God a complex and dynamic persona. Such an attitude is tainted with anthropomorphism; moreover, it does not fit the theological preconceptions of the exegetes and scholars in their various circles and schools.¹⁰⁶ Indeed, the interpretation proposed by Muffs and Liebes for the Bible involves a major paradigm shift. The difference between reading the biblical God in a philosophical-theological manner and reading him as a complex and dynamic personality has implications for virtually every chapter and subject in the Bible, particularly in the Torah.

VI

If Liebes's comment on the Akedah is correct, then it is clear that God's fear of abandonment did not begin with the birth of Yitshak. God's jealousy concerning Abraham goes back to the beginning of his relationship with him. His desire to set him apart for himself explains his behavior in many of the episodes in the saga of Abraham, particularly those dealing with the promise of offspring and of a son. In the saga of Abraham, divine jealousy reaches its height in the story of the Akedah; however, it motivates its storyline throughout. One of its manifestations is the narrative of the birth of his second son and the laughter and mockery it features.

Commentators and scholars have noted that the story of the Akedah in Gen 22:1–19 is the high point of the entire saga of Abraham, in both the dramatic and the theological sense. From a literary viewpoint, the story of the Akedah fits well into the chapters that precede it, and it alludes to them at many of its turning points.¹⁰⁷ The most striking parallel is that between the Akedah and Genesis 12, which opens the Abraham saga. For our purposes, we shall focus upon 22:2 and its parallel to 12:1.

¹⁰⁶ See Lorberbaum, "Rainbow in the Cloud"; idem, *Image of God: Halakhah and Aggadah* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Shoken, 2004), 27–82.

¹⁰⁷ Wenham, 99. Compare Westermann, 238. For a critical analysis of Genesis 22 and a survey of the history of critical research on it, see Wenham, 101–2.

Following the striking heading, “and God tested Abraham,” and after God addresses him and he responds (Gen 22:1),¹⁰⁸ there appears the detailed command in v. 2:

And he said: “Take, please, your son, your only one, he whom you love, Yitshak, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains which I shall tell you.”

It is difficult to exaggerate the dramatic tension in this verse, to which both language and style contribute. The language of request—“take, please” (*kaḥ-na*)—differs from the usual wording of divine commands in the Bible.¹⁰⁹ It suggests the profound emotional motivation concealed therein—jealousy, which is none other than a quest for love.¹¹⁰ The fourfold phrase—“your son, your only one, he whom you love, Yitshak”—contains within it the entire saga of the birth of Yitshak. The accumulated and increasingly powerful descriptive nouns are intended to emphasize the power of this command that is also a plea. The language hints at the intensity of the love that God seeks from Abraham, and may be compared to another command: “And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deut 6:5). It should be noted that here, for the first (and only) time it is stated that Abraham loves Yitshak.¹¹¹ This emphasis does not appear in a neutral context, but is placed in the mouth of the jealous God, who is telling Abraham: the true test of your love for me is “your son, your only one, he whom you love.”¹¹²

Exegetes and scholars have noted the parallelism between the language used in the command to sacrifice Yitshak in Gen 22:2 and that of the command that opens the saga of Abraham in 12:1: “And the Lord said to Abraham: Get you out of your land, and your birthplace, and the house of your father, to the land which I shall show you.” The parallelism between these two verses is impressive: “*Get you out (lekh lekha)* of your land”—“*Go forth (lekh lekha)* to the land of Moriah”; “from your land, from your birthplace, from the house of your

¹⁰⁸ See Wenham, 104; Westermann, 146.

¹⁰⁹ Wenham, *ibid.*

¹¹⁰ The midrash, and Rashi in its wake (“ \aleph is none other than a language of beseeching”) sensed this in their own way; see, e.g., *b. Sanh.* 89b.

¹¹¹ Nowhere prior to this is the love of Abraham (or Sarah) for Yitshak mentioned. Even when Ishmael mocks Yitshak and Sarah tells Abraham, “Send away this maidservant and her son,” the text emphasizes Abraham’s deep emotional connection specifically to Ishmael: “And the thing was very evil in the eyes of Abraham, because of his son.”

¹¹² Compare Wenham, *ibid.*

father”—“your son, your only one, he whom you love, Yitshak”; “to the land that I will show you”—“on one of the mountains, which I will tell you.”¹¹³ It is possible that the phrase *lekh lekha* in both commands incorporates the sense of “at your will,”¹¹⁴ to which chapter 22 adds the phrase *na* (please). An even more impressive parallel is that of the gradually intensifying rhythm of the Hebrew text. In chapter 12 God commands Abraham to cut himself off from his land, from his birthplace, and from his family and those that love him—all in order to set Abraham aside for himself.¹¹⁵ In chapter 22 he is commanded, in similar rhythm: tear yourself away from your son, from your special one, from the one you love, from Yitshak, for the sake of my love. Moreover, in chapter 12 God deliberately refrains from stating the destination of his travels and only says “to the land that I will show you”—again, in order to emphasize Abraham’s exclusive connection to him, as if to say: you are not leaving your country and your birthplace because of the good land to which you are going, but rather to set yourself apart for me.¹¹⁶ Similarly the language of the Akedah: “on one of the mountains which I shall tell you.”¹¹⁷

Genesis 12:1 is God’s first act of speech to Abraham, while 22:2 is the beginning of his final act of speech to him: after the story of the Akedah God no longer reveals himself to Abraham. The biblical author creates a parallel between these two verses, so as to connect the beginning of the story with its end: that which began with Abraham’s being torn away from his birthplace and from his family in order to set him aside for God reaches its peak in the jealousy “harsh as Sheol” that moves him, against all his promises and plans, to command his beloved to offer his only son as a burnt offering.¹¹⁸

What accentuates the emotional basis of the connection between God and Abraham is the well-known fact that, according to the straightforward sense of Scripture, Abraham does not establish the monotheistic faith and has no connection with the theology of the unity of God. According to both J and P, as well as the redactor of the book of Genesis, it is not Abraham who discovers God, but rather God who “discovers” Abraham.¹¹⁹ Moreover, from numerous places

¹¹³ See Westermann, 357; Wenham, 104.

¹¹⁴ Compare Nahmanides at Gen 12:1, s.v. *va-yomer ha-Shem*.

¹¹⁵ Nahmanides (ad loc.) and many others; see also Westermann, 146–7.

¹¹⁶ See Kimhi, ad loc.

¹¹⁷ See *Gen. Rab.* 55.2 (Theodor-Albeck, 592) and Rashi ad loc.

¹¹⁸ God commands Abraham: “And you shall offer him . . . as a burnt offering [לְעֹלָה],” i.e., as one that is entirely consumed; see Wenham, 105.

¹¹⁹ Against a deeply rooted exegetical tradition, which begins in *Jubilees* and continues in the midrash, according to which it was Abraham who recognized the one and only Creator, and acted

in the biblical story it follows that God, YHWH, was known to many people—for example, Melchizedek king of Shalem (Gen 14:18–19) and Abimelech king of Gerar (Gen 20:3–18)—and not necessarily through Abraham. Fundamentally, God's love for Abraham is dependent on neither a theological goal nor a political-ideological one.¹²⁰

God's love and his jealousy are thus the basis for the connection between him and Abraham, and they dominate the Abraham story as a whole—even the middle chapters, and particularly the story of the birth of Yitshak. The desire for closeness causes God to repeatedly promise him offspring, but the fear that Abraham will turn his love away from him towards his son, or even share it with him, causes him time and time again to postpone the realization of the promise.¹²¹ In order to assure its postponement, he causes Abraham to marry a barren woman (Gen 11:30) and even prevents her from bearing a child (16:1).¹²² Over the course of twenty-five years, he postpones the realization of his promises, until his chosen one has reached advanced old age. Yitshak is finally born when Abraham is one hundred years old, and Sarah ninety.

It would appear that God's wish to set aside Abraham for himself may explain the circumstances he repeatedly brings about that lead Abraham to get involved in quarrels, or to become distant or separated from those who are closest to him, who might threaten the exclusivity of his connection with God. Thus his relations with Sarah become progressively worse. First he (God) brings a famine upon the land, which evidently causes Abraham to lose his wealth and forces him to go down to Egypt. There he persuades Sarah to represent herself as his sister (12:11–13) so that he may receive wealth from Pharaoh

to make him known to the point of self-sacrifice. See *Jubilees* 11:16–12:31; 17; 19; *Gen. Rab.* 38 (361–2), 39 (365–6), 43 (435), and cf. Albeck's comments, *ibid.*, 361–2, line 6. The pinnacle of this tradition is Maimonides' *Hilkhot Avodah Zarah* 1.3; cf. *Guide of the Perplexed* III.29.

¹²⁰ What further supports the claim of an interpersonal connection between God and Abraham is that throughout Genesis 12–36, God's encounters with the patriarchs are always depicted as a conversation between two people, without the elements of surprise, trembling, or fear of death that appear later on in the Bible; cf. Westermann, 109–10. In his summary of the Abraham saga Westermann comments that the central element therein is the relationship of Abraham to God, which is “separated from institutions, from cult, from theological doctrine, from laws, and from all religious polemic” (*ibid.*, 404).

¹²¹ God promises offspring to Abraham five times: Gen 12:1 (J; and by implication also in v. 7); 15:4–5 (J?; and by implication also in vv. 13 and 18); 17:2–6 (P); 17:16 (P); and 18:10 (J).

¹²² See *b. Yev.* 73a, and for the other side of the same coin, cf. *Gen. Rab.* 45.4 (Theodor-Albeck, 450).

“because of” her beauty.¹²³ Sarah’s barrenness exacerbates the crisis between them even further. She “places in his bosom” her Egyptian maidservant Hagar, so that she may be “built up” from her—but Abraham becomes attached to Hagar. Sarah gets furious at Abraham for this and, powerless to do anything else, he allows her to do with her servant, who is pregnant with his child, “that which is right in your eyes.” The estrangement between them now seems almost irreparable. It may be recognized (perhaps with some resignation) in the mocking laughter with which she reacts to hearing, at the age of ninety, the promise of the “man” that next year she will bear a son to Abraham, and even more so after the birth, when she declares that God is mocking her. His relationship with Hagar is also nipped in the bud. While she is still pregnant she flees from the house, fearing mistreatment at the hands of Sarah. She returns to her mistress at the behest of an angel of God, only to give birth to Abraham’s son and to continue to be abused “at her [Sarah’s] hand” under the eyes of Abraham, her child’s father. Abraham’s most significant emotional connection is that with his son by Hagar, whom he calls (according to P) Ishmael, thinking that God’s promises of offspring have been realized through him. God corrects this error—albeit not immediately, but only after thirteen years. Despite Abraham’s “protest,” God insists that the promised son will be born to him from his “estranged” wife Sarah. His love for Ishmael does not diminish after the birth of Yitshak, even after the older brother mocks or otherwise abuses the child. Sarah firmly demands that he expel “this maidservant and her son.” Abraham is “greatly” troubled and evidently refuses to do so. But God quickly intervenes, does not display any consideration for his pain, and orders him to obey Sarah. Abraham sends Hagar and the child into the desert of Beer-sheba, this time never to return.

Jewish tradition, from the time of the tannaim on, was well aware of God’s ongoing emotional abuse of Abraham, but gave it a theological interpretation—namely, that this was a series of trials by which God was testing Abraham in order to prove his “religious heroism” and to teach it to future generations.¹²⁴ There is, however, no basis for such a theology of ordeal in the literal sense

¹²³ See Gen 12:13, and indeed, immediately thereafter: “And it was good with Abraham, on account of [Sarah] . . . and Abram went up from Egypt . . . very rich in herds, in silver and gold” (12:16–13:2).

¹²⁴ See *Avot de-Rabbi Nathan* 36, version B, ed. S. Schechter (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1997), 94. Compare the language of the mishnah in *m. Abot* 5:3: “With ten trials was Abraham tried . . . to show the great love of Abraham our father”—that is, the greatness of God’s love for him. The trials were intended to “make known” his love, first and foremost, for God. It may be that the mishnah (unlike the more “theological” version in *Avot de-Rabbi Nathan*) is closer

of the Bible. God does not subject Abraham to “religious trials,” he does not attempt to test his character, to strengthen it, or to provide him opportunities to gather “points of merit” for his descendants and future generations. The explanation for these “trials” lies not in the realm of theology, but rather in that of the emotions and of psychology and is anchored, as stated, in God’s complex feelings of jealous love towards Abraham.

There are numerous and varied expressions of God’s love and jealousy to be found in the Bible. It is not simply destructive and devastating jealousy, as in the case of the flood or the sin of the golden calf, where Moses with great effort stands in the breach. It is also expressed in the command-request to Abraham that he offer his only son and, in a more subtle manner, in the repeated delays in the fulfillment of the promise of a son. Yet another, more hidden manifestation of that same jealous love may be seen in the laughter and mockery that accompany the birth of Yitshak.

The postponements of the promise cause Abraham and Sarah (each one in turn) to laugh in the face of yet another divine promise. Their mockery elicits a reaction in the form of the contemptuous name Yitshak. This name imprints the promised child with the mockery of his parents, and it will reflect their failure in a permanent manner.

It would appear that God’s attempt to alienate Abraham from Yitshak leads God himself to remain distant from the son. The book of Genesis devotes only one chapter to the second of the patriarchs. Yitshak thus serves merely as a transitional figure between his father and his son. It would seem that this literary fact also reflects an emotional state, that of God’s distance from him. And indeed, in God’s two appearances to Yitshak in chapter 26, his dependence upon Abraham is emphasized.¹²⁵ When God addresses Yitshak to assure him that his promises to Abraham will be continued in him, he makes their realization dependent upon the merits of his father Abraham. Thus, in God’s second revelation to Yitshak (following his difficulties and the events in Gerar) he states, “I am the God of Abraham your father. . . . I have blessed you and multiplied your seed on behalf of Abraham my servant” (*ba-’avur Avraham ‘avdi*) (26:24). Yitshak is not addressed here in his own right, but as a son dependent

to the interpretation proposed above, as according to many midrashim such is God’s way with the righteous.

¹²⁵ Genesis 26 does not belong to either J, E, or P. See Gunkel, *ad loc.*; Westermann, 423; and cf. Martin Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions*, trans. B. W. Anderson (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972), 102–15; Weisman, *From Jacob to Israel*, 20 n. 6.

upon his father.¹²⁶ So too in the first revelation in the chapter: “And I will fulfill the oath which I swore to Abraham your father, and I shall increase your seed . . . because Abraham listened to my voice, and kept my commandments, my laws, and my teachings” (26:3–5).¹²⁷ This is not the case with Jacob: in God’s revelations to him there is no mention of the merit of Abraham, and certainly not of Isaac.¹²⁸ God’s distance from Yitshak is also expressed in the fact that God does not change his name. Unlike Abraham and Jacob, whose names are changed to make known God’s fondness for them, Yitshak’s name, once given, is never changed.

VII

As I have noted elsewhere, the claim that one ought to read the biblical God as a complex and multifaceted personality is not meant to imply a reduction of biblical theology to moods and psychology. Of course, the biblical assemblage proposes theological insights that are not merely psychological. My own claim is that biblical narrative interweaves nonanthropomorphic or transanthropomorphic theological elements that establish God’s loftiness and transcendence, his eternity and power, with psychological and emotional elements. In my view, a central component in the study of biblical religion is the manner in which these elements are interwoven with one another and the manner of their mutual influence.¹²⁹ My focus in this essay upon the personality of God is not intended to deny the existence of impersonal theological elements in the Bible as a whole, nor in the book of Genesis and the cycle of Abraham stories in particular.

The biblical story of Abraham encompasses at least two levels. The first level, on which most commentators and scholars engage the text, is “impersonal”—God has a historical plan to establish a people upon the land. To this end, he chooses Abraham, presents to him his great plan, and promises him that he will father a son, as well as multiple nations, and that his offspring will possess the

¹²⁶ On the idiom “Abraham my servant,” which appears only in Genesis (compare “my servant Moses” in Num 12:7–8; Josh 1:2; and “David my servant” in 2 Sam 3:18), see Westermann, 428. Yitshak responds to the revelation in the same way his father does: “And he built there an altar, and called upon the name of the Lord” (Gen 26:25; cf. 12:8).

¹²⁷ It is only mentioned that the Lord is the God of Abraham and Yitshak. On Gen 26:3 and 5 as later insertions, evidently post-Deuteronomistic, see Westermann, 424.

¹²⁸ See Gen 28:13–15, and esp. 35:9–15. On the differences between the promises to Jacob and those to Abraham (and to Yitshak), see Weisman, *From Jacob to Israel*, 124–30.

¹²⁹ See Lorberbaum, “Rainbow in the Cloud.”

land of Canaan. The second level, no less important, deals with God's longing for close and intimate relations with those people whom he chooses to realize his grandiose scheme—for our present purposes, Abraham. This second level does not contradict the first level. Rather, it complements it, and perhaps even precedes it, as asserted by Muffs and Liebes, in the same manner that ends precede means. At times these two levels may clash with one another. This occurs already in the opening chapters of the book of Genesis, in the story of the flood, in which God's great plan to create a world and fill it with human beings made in his image clashes with his jealousy of their inclination towards corruption. Only after he destroys the entire earth with a flood, creating the rainbow as a means of controlling his own fury, does he reconcile these two levels with one another. The same holds true, albeit in a different manner, for the cycle of stories of Abraham. God's love for Abraham and his jealousy concerning him cause God to undermine his own plan, until he almost destroys it while still in the bud. The tension between these two levels, characteristic of central blocs of the Bible, is one of the elements that turn it into literature at its best and endow it with a complex, dramatic, and uncanny theology.¹³⁰

¹³⁰ The tension between these two planes, both in the Bible generally and in Genesis in particular (which is a basic tension within the Jewish tradition in numerous other contexts), deserves a separate discussion. I will only comment here that the stories of the patriarchs in Genesis combine a grandiose divine plan with an impressive collection of "small" human stories, focused primarily upon inner-familial tensions. It is thus in the saga of Abraham, in the stories about Yitshak, and even more so in the story of Jacob's family. The solution proposed here to resolve the "gap" between the "great divine plan" and the tensions within the family of Abraham, which are bound up with God's love and jealousy, is not necessarily suitable for the other chapters of Genesis. Thus, for example, the powerful tensions within the family of Jacob—and especially between Joseph and his brothers—are a kind of divine ruse intended to bring the family of Jacob down to Egypt. God's emotional presence in this story seems relatively weak.