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PIMPS OR PROTECTORS? A REEXAMINATION OF THE WIFE-SISTER DECEPTIONS

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Abstract: *The purpose of this article is to reevaluate the portrayal of deception in the wife-sister episodes of Genesis (12:10–20; 20:1–18; 26:1–17). After exploring the motives and results of these deceptions and the literary portrayal of the deceivers in each passage, the article argues that rather than attempting to trade their wives for personal safety or gain, the patriarchs were deceiving in order to protect both themselves and their wives. By claiming to be their wives' full maternal brothers, the patriarchs presented themselves as their prime protectors, the ones with whom potential suitors must negotiate in order to pursue marriage. What the patriarchs did not anticipate was the king bypassing negotiations and simply taking their wife for himself, which necessitated God intervening to protect the endangered woman. Interpreted this way, the patriarchs' deceptions should not be viewed negatively as selfish attempts to save themselves at the expense of their wives' safety.*

Key words: *Genesis, lying, deception, wife-sister episodes, ethics, patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac*

In recent years the phenomenon of deception in the Bible has increasingly piqued the interest of both biblical scholars and theologians. Simply defined, to "deceive" means intentionally to cause someone to believe something one knows to be false.[1] Deception may therefore be committed by means of lying (stating an explicit falsehood that another person believes), or it may be achieved by less overt means, such as ambiguous language or physical motions, neither of which are true or false in themselves but may nevertheless cause someone to believe something false. Although some have argued that the Bible proscribes all forms of deception by means of lying,[2] recent research has suggested that such a view is unsustainable in light of the positive portrayals of certain lies and deceptions in biblical narratives.[3] For this reason, close analyses of narratives involving deceptive activity are critical for a properly nuanced theology of deception.

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[1] For a critical discussion of the definition of deception, see James Edwin Mahon, "A Definition of Deceiving," *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* 21 (2007): 181–94.

[2] See, e.g., John Murray, *Principles of Conduct: Aspects of Biblical Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 132; Wayne Grudem, "Why It Is Never Right to Lie: An Example of John Frame's Influence on My Approach to Ethics," in *Speaking the Truth in Love: The Theology of John M. Frame*, ed. John J. Hughes (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2009), 778–801.

[3] See, e.g., Michael James Williams, *Deception in Genesis: An Investigation into the Morality of a Unique Biblical Phenomenon*, StBibLit 32 (New York: Peter Lang, 2001); John E. Anderson, *Jacob and the Divine Trickster: A Theology of Deception and YHWH's Fidelity to the Ancestral Promise in the Jacob Cycle*, Siphrut 5 (Winona

After the primordial account of the serpent deceiving the first man and woman in the garden, the next three deceptions in the Bible are found in the so-called "wife-sister episodes" of Genesis (12:10–20; 20:1–18; 26:1–17). In each of these accounts, a patriarch travels to a foreign land, and out of fear of being killed on account of his wife claims that she is his sister, implying that she is not his wife. In the first two episodes the wife is taken into the local king's harem, and in the third account the king chastises the patriarch for the possibility that she might have been taken. Historically, most interpreters have viewed these deceptions negatively, with David Lamb going so far as to label Abraham "the pimping patriarch."[4] The purpose of this essay is to analyze the depiction of deception in each of these passages and reevaluate this view. Although explicit narratorial evaluation is lacking in each case, by attending carefully to narratological data we may gain insight concerning the implied author's perspective on the events he portrays.

In the analysis that follows, for each passage I identify (1) the motive for the deception, (2) the results of the deception, and (3) the characterization of the deceiver. After this I seek to synthesize these findings, argue that the author is not depicting these deceptions negatively, and provide an alternate interpretation of these events. As has been common practice among scholars who have examined these accounts, I refer to them as episodes A, B, and C according to the order of their appearance in Genesis.

I. MOTIVE

In all three episodes the motive for the deception is to preserve life. In episode A, Abraham[5] expresses concern that the Egyptians will kill him on account of Sarah's beauty, so he says to her, "Say you are my sister, *that it may go well with me* (למען ייטב־לי) because of you, *and that my life may be spared* (וחיתה נפשׁי) for your sake" (12:13). Although the parallelism here seems to suggest that ייטב־לי is in synonymous relationship with וחיתה נפשׁי, some have argued that v. 16 precludes this understanding.[6] In v. 16, this same language of "things going well" with Abraham (ולאברם היטיב) describes his acquisition of sheep, oxen, donkeys, servants, and

Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011); Matthew Newkirk, *Just Deceivers: An Exploration of the Motif of Deception in the Books of Samuel* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2015).

[4] David T. Lamb, *Prostitutes and Polygamists: A Look at Love, Old Testament Style* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 93. See also Ruth F. Brin, "Abraham as Diplomat: Reconsidering the Wife-Sister Motif," *Reconstructionist* 50 (1984): 33–34; Daniel H. Gordis, "Lies, Wives and Sisters: The Wife-Sister Motif Revisited," *Judaism* 34 (1985): 344–59; M. E. Biddle, "The 'Endangered Ancestress' and Blessing for the Nations," *JBL* 109 (1990): 605; G. Hepner, "Abraham's Incestuous Marriage with Sarah a Violation of the Holiness Code," *VT* 53 (2003): 144; Michael J. Williams, "Lies, Lies, I Tell You! The Deceptions of Genesis," *CTJ* 43 (2008): 11–13; Andrew Chinpeng Ho, "A Paragon of Faith? Doubting Abraham," *Them* 42 (2017): 453, 461.

[5] For simplicity's sake, throughout this essay I will refer to the first patriarch and his wife as "Abraham" and "Sarah."

[6] See, e.g., Pamela Tamarkin Reis, "Take My Wife, Please: On the Utility of the Wife/Sister Motif," *Judaism* 41 (1992): 308.

camels, which are widely understood to be gifts received from Pharaoh.[7] Since v. 16 uses יטב this way, so the argument goes, v. 13 must be describing Abraham as *intending* to deceive in order to exchange Sarah for material goods or even to establish a treaty relationship with Pharaoh.[8] On this reading, Abraham deceives *in order that* Sarah would be taken, and thus his motive is not simply self-preservation but self-advantage at the expense of his wife, revealing what Daniel Gordis calls "the darker side of Abram's character."[9]

However, this view does not account for the different verbal stems of יטב that vv. 13 and 16 employ. In v. 13, when planning his deception, Abraham uses the Qal stem, which in construction with ל typically refers impersonally to one's circumstances going well.[10] For example, in Genesis 40:14, after Joseph interprets the cupbearer's dream and tells him that he will soon be released from prison, he asks the cupbearer to put in a good word for him with Pharaoh "when it is well with you" (כאשר ייטב לך); that is, when his circumstances are good. This suggests that Abraham's use of this Qal construction in 12:13 does not depict him as intending to exchange Sarah for material goods from any person in particular. Rather, Abraham's motive for deceiving is self-preservation—the maintenance of generally good circumstances for himself—and therefore ייטב־לי fits well as a synonymous parallel to וחיתה נפשי.

In contrast to this Qal use, 12:16 uses the Hiphil stem of יטב, which typically refers to a particular person "doing good" to someone else.[11] For example, in Exodus 1:20, after the midwives deceive Pharaoh, the text says that "God dealt well with the midwives" (וייטב אלהים למילדת), which included giving them families (cf. v. 21). This suggests that the narrator's use of the Hiphil stem in Genesis 12:16 is portraying Pharaoh in particular as "doing good" to Abraham on account of Sarah—that is, giving him gifts because of her. However, although this Hiphil use may describe some type of treaty exchange at this point in the narrative, it does not follow that such a situation was Abraham's motive for deceiving at the outset. Rather, as revealed in his direct discourse, Abraham's motive is to preserve his life from a perceived threat from the Egyptians.

Supporting this reading of A is Abraham's stated motive for deceiving in episode B. When Abimelech confronts him for his deception, Abraham says, "I did it because I thought, 'There is no fear of God at all in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife'" (20:11). That Abraham uses this same deception for self-preservation in B supports the view that self-preservation—and not self-advantage—is his motive in A as well. Furthermore, one specific datum in episode

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[7] John Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1975), 175; Gordis, "Lies, Wives and Sisters," 354; T. Desmond Alexander, "Are the Wife/Sister Incidents of Genesis Literary Compositional Variants?," *VT* 42 (1992): 148; Reis, "Take My Wife, Please," 308; Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27—50:26*, NAC 1B (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2005), 129.

[8] So suggests James K. Hoffmeier, "The Wives' Tales of Genesis 12, 20 and 26 and the Covenants at Beer-Sheba," *TynBul* 43 (1992): 92–93.

[9] Gordis, "Lies, Wives and Sisters," 354.

[10] E.g., Gen 40:14; Deut 4:40; 5:16, 29; 6:3, 18; 12:25, 28; 22:7.

[11] E.g., Exod 1:20; Num 10:29, 32; Josh 24:20; Judg 17:13; 1 Sam 25:31.

B suggests that Abraham never intended this deception to result in Sarah being taken. In 20:13 Abraham says, "When God caused me to wander from my father's house, I said to her, 'This is the kindness you must do me: at *every place to which we come*, say of me, "He is my brother."'" This statement reveals that (1) Abraham has been committing this deception ever since leaving Terah's house in 12:4, which therefore includes the deception in episode A, and (2) from the beginning Abraham has envisioned deceiving this way *in perpetuity*. Since this ruse could not be committed in perpetuity if Sarah were taken, it follows that Abraham's goal in posing as Sarah's brother was not to trade her away for personal safety or gain. Consequently, although Abraham's motive for deceiving is self-preservation, this statement in 20:13 reveals that he did not intend for this self-preservation to occur at the expense of his wife being taken. The fact that he is twice wrong about this outcome does not impinge upon his motive as revealed in his direct discourse.

In episode C, Isaac's motive for deceiving is the same as Abraham's: to preserve his own life. According to 26:7, "When the men of the place asked him about his wife, he said, 'She is my sister,' for he feared to say, 'My wife,' thinking, 'lest the men of the place should kill me because of Rebekah,' because she was attractive in appearance." A significant development for our understanding of motive in this passage is that, whereas episodes A and B communicate motive only through Abraham's direct discourse, in episode C it is the narrator who conveys that self-preservation is Isaac's motive. Since one of the main functions of Genesis 26 is to present Isaac as the true successor of the divine promises to Abraham by portraying him like Abraham,[12] it follows that the narrator's authoritative description of Isaac's motive for deceiving reinforces the reliability of Abraham's direct discourse concerning his motive for deceiving.

Moreover, just as episode B provides evidence that Abraham did not intend for Sarah to be taken, one aspect of episode C hints that the same is true for Isaac with respect to Rebekah. In 26:8 Abimelech looks out his window and sees Isaac "Isaacing" (מצחק) Rebekah, which has been variously translated as "laughing with" (ESV), "caressing" (NIV, NASB), and "fondling" (NRSV). This description portrays an interaction intimate enough that the king is able to discern rightly that Rebekah is Isaac's wife (v. 9). What is relevant for our consideration is that Isaac and Rebekah are characterized here as an intimate couple, which does not comport well with the view that he is ready to trade her away at any given moment for personal safety. Although their intimacy in this scene does not prove this point, this portrayal coheres better with the evidence adduced from episode B that Abraham did not intend for Sarah to be taken as a result of his deception.

To summarize: in all three episodes the patriarch's motive for deceiving is self-preservation in the face of a perceived threat of death, and episode B provides

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[12] Harry S. Pappas, "Deception as Patriarchal Self-Defense in a Foreign Land: A Form Critical Study of the Wife-Sister Stories in Genesis," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 29 (1984): 46; Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, WBC 2 (Dallas: Word, 1994), 189; John D. Currid, *A Study Commentary on Genesis: Volume 2: Genesis 25:19—50:26* (Webster, NY: Evangelical, 2003), 27; Bill T. Arnold, *Genesis*, NCBC (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 235–39.

evidence that Abraham does not anticipate Sarah being taken as a result of this deception.

II. RESULTS

In episodes A and B three primary results follow from the deceptions: (1) the king takes Sarah into his harem, (2) the king experiences a form of divine judgment for taking Sarah, and (3) Abraham receives wealth from the king. Concerning the first result, although many surmise that Sarah was likely compromised sexually in episode A,[13] the text does not state this one way or another. As others have rightly noted, for a woman to be "taken" (לקח) in such a marriage setting does not necessarily indicate immediate sexual union.[14] This is illustrated among other places in episode B, where Abimelech also "takes" (לקח) Sarah but never consummates the marriage (20:2, 6). Therefore, although Sarah's sojourns in these episodes are certainly fraught with risk, there is no evidence that she is ever harmed or violated, and as we saw above when discussing motive, it was not a result that Abraham intended to bring about.

Concerning the second result (divine judgment on the king), in episode A YHWH brings "plagues" against Pharaoh and his house (12:17a), and in episode B he closes all the wombs in Abimelech's house (20:18a). In both cases the narrator states that this is "because of Sarah, Abraham's wife" (12:17b; 20:18b). Although Kenneth Mathews argues that "others suffered because of the deception, bringing guilt on themselves unknowingly (12:17–18; 20:9; 26:10),"[15] it is important to observe that in each case this negative consequence for the foreign king is a miraculous, divine judgment, not a natural consequence of the deception itself. The divine origin of these judgments indicates that these negative results should not be viewed as wrong or unjust in any way. In other words, we cannot conclude that God is punishing the king for Abraham's deception, since that would imply injustice on God's part; something else must be going on.[16]

Concerning the third result (Abraham receiving wealth from the king), in episode A Abraham receives wealth from Pharaoh while Sarah is still in Pharaoh's

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[13] James G. Williams, "The Beautiful and the Barren: Conventions in Biblical Type Scenes," *JSOT* 17 (1980): 116; Reuven Firestone, "Priesthood, Marriageable Consanguinity, and Text: The Problem of Abraham and Sarah's Kinship Relationship and the Response of Jewish and Islamic Exegesis," *JQR* 83 (1993): 333; Yitzhak Peleg, "Was the Ancestress of Israel in Danger? Did Pharaoh Touch (נגע) Sarai?," *ZAW* 118 (2006): 197–208; Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 382; John H. Walton, *Genesis*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 553; Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Abraham: The Story of a Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 48.

[14] Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 289; Hoffmeier, "Wives' Tales," 93; Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 214.

[15] Mathews, *Genesis 11:27—50:26*, 128.

[16] Contra Ho, who writes, "Thus Abram's mendacity was punished with plagues, though inflicted on the cheated, not the cheater" ("Paragon of Faith?," 456). This interpretation presumes that the plagues were punishment *for Abraham's deception*, and not some fault with the king, yet God punishes the king rather than Abraham. Such a view is difficult to adopt, since God would be portrayed as punishing the innocent and exonerating the guilty.

custody (12:16). Although many view Abraham's reception of this wealth as wrong,[17] the text nowhere condemns this. On the contrary, because this episode clearly prefigures Israel's subsequent exodus from Egypt,[18] where God *commands* Israel to plunder Egypt's wealth (Exod 3:22), it would seem that Abraham's acquisition of Egyptian wealth in this context should be viewed positively.

In episode B, Abraham again receives wealth from the king (20:14–16), a transaction that resembles the first wealth transfer in episode A. Both include "sheep" (צאן), "oxen" (בקר), "male servants" (עבדים), and "female servants" (שפחת), with A additionally including "male and female donkeys" (חמרים; אתנת) and "camels" (גמלים; 12:16), and B including "one thousand pieces of silver" (אלף כסף; 20:16). The only other place in the Pentateuch where such a litany of wealth is mentioned is Genesis 24:35, where Abraham's servant says, "YHWH has greatly blessed my master, and he has become great. He has given him sheep (צאן) and oxen (בקר), silver (כסף) and gold, male servants (עבדים) and female servants (שפחת), camels (גמלים) and donkeys (חמרים)." This subsequent description of Abraham's wealth alludes to these two gifts from the foreign kings in episodes A and B, yet it identifies these gifts as *YHWH's blessing* upon Abraham.[19] Taken together, these broader data suggest that this third result—Abraham's acquisition of wealth—is depicted positively in the book of Genesis overall.

In episode C, none of these three results follow from Isaac's deception. Rebekah is never taken into the king's harem, the king does not experience any form of divine judgment, and Isaac does not receive any gifts from the king. The only immediate result of Isaac's deception is Abimelech's protective decree for him and Rebekah (26:11). Significantly, this decree is followed by the notice that "Isaac sowed in that land and reaped in that year a hundredfold, for YHWH blessed him. The man became *great* (גדל), and became more and more *great* (גדל) until he became very *great* (גדל). He had possessions of sheep and oxen and many servants, so that the Philistines envied him" (26:12–14). This description recalls Abraham's acquisition of "sheep" and "oxen" in episodes A and B as well as his servant's description in 24:35 of YHWH "blessing" him so that he "became great" (גדל) Indeed, 24:35 and 26:13 are the only two passages in the Pentateuch where a person is said to "become great" (גדל) in terms of wealth—with 26:13 belaboring this point by employing גדל three times to describe Isaac's success—and both passages explicitly attribute this material success to YHWH's "blessing" (24:35; 26:12). All of this suggests a direct literary connection between Abraham's acquisition of wealth in A and B and Isaac's in C. Although Isaac does not receive wealth directly from Abimelech,

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[17] Van Seters, *Abraham in History*, 175; Alexander, "Wife/Sister Incidents," 148; Gordis, "Lies, Wives and Sisters," 354.

[18] Note in particular the parallels outlined in John L. Ronning, "The Naming of Isaac: The Role of the Wife/Sister Episodes in the Redaction of Genesis," *WTJ* 53 (1991): 19.

[19] Since episode A (12:16) and the servant's description of YHWH's blessing upon Abraham (24:35) are the only two places that describe Abraham owning "male donkeys" (חמרים) and "camels" (גמלים), I disagree with Robert Polzin that only the wealth transfer in episode B is a sign of YHWH's blessing upon the patriarch ("'The Ancestress of Israel in Danger' in Danger," *Semeia* 3 [1975]: 90).

the latter's protective decree serves a parallel function in C to the royal gifts in A and B; it is YHWH's means of blessing the patriarch in the wake of his deception.

To summarize: in none of these deceptions do negative results obtain for the deceivers aside from Sarah's temporary sojourns in episodes A and B. However, in both of these episodes, rather than bringing judgment upon Abraham for this, YHWH judges the king, and the king responds in each case by returning Sarah to Abraham. This judgment upon the king rather than Abraham is consistent with the conclusion above that Abraham does not envision Sarah being taken on account his deceptions. On the contrary, rather than being judged, in all three episodes the patriarch receives YHWH's blessing in the form of material goods.

III. CHARACTERIZATION

Concerning episode A, most view the author's characterization of Abraham to be negative.[20] Three arguments are typically adduced to support this view. First, some say that for Abraham to depart Canaan without divine guidance shows a lack of faith in God, which contributes to a negative appraisal of his actions.[21] However, although Abraham receives no divine command to leave the promised land, to conclude that this invalidates his travel is an argument from silence. Moreover, by the end of Genesis, Abraham's descendants will be back down in Egypt precisely because God instructs Jacob to go there (46:3–4) due to famine (47:4). This subsequent validation of Israel's descent to Egypt because of famine, which Abraham's sojourn prefigures, suggests that there is no reason to assume disapproval of Abraham's travel in episode A.[22]

Second, some argue that Pharaoh's rebuke—"What is this you have done to me?" (12:18)—is idiomatic for accusing a person of wrongdoing and therefore reflects Abraham's guilt.[23] However, that *a character* uses this phrase does not necessarily indicate that the one accused is guilty from the standpoint of *the author*. For example, in Genesis 42, after concealing his identity Joseph sends his brothers back to Canaan with grain and the money they brought to buy the grain. Upon discovering this money in their sacks, the brothers exclaim, "What is this that God has done to us?" (v. 28). Although this exclamation certainly conveys that God has brought undeserved wrong upon the brothers *from their perspective within the narrative*, this is clearly not the case from the author's perspective. Similarly, the fact that Pharaoh accuses Abraham of wrongdoing in this manner does not mean that the author believes that Abraham has done wrong. The fact that Pharaoh is divinely judged

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[20] E.g., Gordis, "Lies, Wives and Sisters," 354; Reis, "Take My Wife, Please," 310; Williams, *Deception in Genesis*, 16; John D. Currid, *A Study Commentary on Genesis: Volume 1: Genesis 1:1—25:18* (Webster, NY: Evangelical, 2003), 263; Blenkinsopp, *Abraham*, 46–48.

[21] E.g., Waltke, *Genesis*, 213.

[22] See also Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1967), 115–16; Mathews, *Genesis 11:27—50:26*, 127.

[23] E.g., Susan Niditch, *Underdogs and Tricksters: A Prelude to Biblical Folklore* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 39.

rather than Abraham would seem to point in the opposite direction: that Pharaoh is the one who has done wrong to Abraham.

Third, some argue that by giving Pharaoh the last word of the account and providing no response from Abraham, the author is portraying the latter as wrong.[24] However, while giving a character the last word is a recognized means by which biblical authors may indicate their viewpoint, this technique is most directly applicable in situations in which this last word is also the final element of the narrative. For example, the account of the rape of Dinah ends with Jacob rebuking Simeon and Levi for deceptively killing the Shechemites, but then Simeon and Levi retorting to their father, "Should he treat our sister like a prostitute?" (Gen 34:31). This unanswered question closes the account, which, as Meir Sternberg notes, "leave[s] no doubt where [the narrator's] sympathy lies."[25] Although episode A also contains unanswered questions by Pharaoh, the account does not end with these but with Pharaoh commanding Abraham to depart and the narrator noting that Abraham left Egypt "with his wife and all that he had" (12:20). Since Abraham offers a lengthy response to Abimelech's similar interrogation in episode B—the content of which corresponds to his stated motive for deceiving in episode A—we may not conclude that Abraham is silent at the end of A because he has no response to give.[26]

Rather, since this episode prefigures Israel's exodus, narratologically Abraham's lack of response highlights *the plagues* as the primary reason that Pharaoh lets him go, rather than any justifying rationale Abraham may have offered. This ties Abraham's departure all the more closely to that of Israel, who is also released from Egypt due to the power of divine plagues. Furthermore, not only does the narrator conclude the story in 12:20 by noting that Abraham left Egypt "with his wife *and all that he had*"—that is, all that he had been given by Pharaoh—the narrator immediately repeats this information in 13:1, saying, "So Abram went up from Egypt, he and his wife *and all that he had*." This repetition emphasizes that Abraham departs Egypt with Pharaoh's wealth and thereby ends the account by reinforcing this connection between Abraham and Israel once again; both plunder the Egyptians as they are delivered by divine plagues. From an Israelite perspective, this emphasis on Abraham as a plunderer of Egypt seems to characterize him positively, which coheres with his positive portrayal in the immediately preceding and succeeding contexts, both of which describe him as "calling on the name of YHWH" (12:8; 13:4).

Concerning episode B, most view the author's characterization of Abraham to be negative here as well, which is again generally supported by three main arguments. First, some suggest that because God has recently stated that within the year Sarah will give birth to Abraham's promised offspring (Gen 17:15–19; 18:10),

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[24] Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 169; David L. Petersen, "A Thrice-Told Tale: Genre, Theme, and Motif," *BR* 18 (1973): 37–38; Van Seters, *Abraham in History*, 174; Gordis, "Lies, Wives and Sisters," 355; Waltke, *Genesis*, 215.

[25] Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 475.

[26] Contra, e.g., Petersen, "A Thrice-Told Tale," 37–38.

Abraham shows a lack of faith in God by prevaricating.[27] However, the fact that Abraham acts deceptively in the face of perceived danger does not necessarily indicate a lack of faith. Such a view assumes that the only way Abraham could respond faithfully to God's word in the midst of a dangerous situation was to rely on miraculous providence over against ordinary providence. Yet in a parallel situation, in 1 Samuel 16, YHWH instructs Samuel to travel to Bethlehem because he has chosen one of Jesse's sons to be king (v. 1). When Samuel objects that Saul will kill him if he takes such a journey, YHWH responds not with assurances of supernatural protection but with instructions for Samuel to deceive concerning the purpose of his trip (v. 2). This indicates that deceptive behavior is not outside the bounds of God's ordinary providence for ensuring the fulfillment of his intentions, and therefore Abraham's deception need not be viewed as antithetical to trusting in God's promises.[28]

Second, some suggest that episode B paints an exculpatory picture of Abimelech as a righteous and God-fearing king, which highlights the impropriety of Abraham deceiving him.[29] However, despite common perception, it is not at all clear that Abimelech is characterized as a paragon of morality in this episode. Although God affirms Abimelech's defense that he has taken Sarah with integrity of heart, it quickly becomes clear that Abimelech's lack of sexual violation is due only to God's restraining mercy and not to any righteousness on Abimelech's part. God appears to Abimelech in a dream and threatens him with death (Gen 20:3). In the circumstantial clause that follows, the narrator explains that Abimelech has not approached Sarah (v. 4a), and after Abimelech offers his defense (vv. 4b–5) and God agrees with his integrity of heart (v. 6a), God highlights with emphatic grammar that Abimelech has remained innocent only because God himself has intervened: "I have kept you, indeed I, from sinning against me (ואחשׂך גם־אנכי אותך מחטו־לי); therefore I did not let you touch her" (v. 6b). The means by which God restrains Abimelech from this sexual violation is not revealed until the end of the episode. In the final verses the narrator closes the story by noting that "Abraham prayed to God, and God *healed Abimelech*, and also healed his wife and female slaves so that they bore children, for YHWH had indeed closed up every womb in Abimelech's house on account of Sarah, Abraham's wife" (vv. 17–18). These verses have several implications.

First, in conjunction with the circumstantial clause in v. 4a, this reveals that some sort of affliction leading to sterility was the means God used to keep Abimelech from touching Sarah, and therefore Abimelech's innocence is not due to his own uprightness.[30] That this sterility requires the healing of Abimelech himself (v. 17) suggests that a type of genital disease or even impotence may have been

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[27] Ronning, "Naming of Isaac," 18; Waltke, *Genesis*, 285.

[28] For further discussion of Samuel's deception, see Newkirk, *Just Deceivers*, 58–60.

[29] Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 177; Williams, *Deception in Genesis*, 17; Arnold, *Genesis*, 191.

[30] Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 315–17; Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 71; Tzvi Novick, "'Almost, at Times, the Fool': Abimelekh and Genesis 20," *Proof* 24 (2004), 279.

the means God used to keep him from Sarah.[31] Second, the final clause of this account, which notes that this sterilization of Abimelech's house was "because of Sarah, Abraham's wife" (v. 18), is the same reason given for the plagues sent upon Pharaoh in episode A (12:17). However, whereas Pharaoh appears to have intuited his wrongdoing from the plagues themselves, Abimelech does not discern his wrongdoing from his household sterility; God himself must appear in a dream and explain his circumstances to him.[32] This depicts Abimelech as less spiritually attuned than Pharaoh, when the latter found himself in a parallel situation to the former. Thirdly, this explicit connection with the plagues of episode A suggests that, like Pharaoh, Abimelech is being judged. Although he is initially unaware of Sarah's marital status, through this judgment the text is presenting Abimelech as culpable for some kind of wrongdoing, and the only reason he does not receive capital punishment for further wrongdoing is God's intervening mercy, not his own morality.

These observations relate directly to the third major argument used to support a negative evaluation of Abraham here. Some argue that Abraham is wrong in his assessment that "there is no fear of God" in Gerar (v. 11), which condemns his actions as mistaken.[33] However, as several note, in this context, "fear of God" (יראת אלהים) refers to general moral standards, not a "fear of YHWH" in particular.[34] Although it is true that upon hearing of Abimelech's encounter with God, "all his servants . . . feared greatly" (v. 8), what they fear in this context is "all these things" that God has just communicated to Abimelech in the dream. Significantly, this dream ends with the threat of death for Abimelech and "all who are [his]" (v. 7), which presumably includes these very servants. Since God's power has just been demonstrated through Abimelech's sterility, that these servants fear greatly at this death threat and that Abimelech complies with God's commands does not reflect a "fear of God" in the sense of general morality but rather a fear of death should they fail to obey. For these reasons, the Philistines' response to God does not contravene Abraham's assessment that there is no fear of God in that place.

In sum, none of these three major arguments demonstrates that Abraham is evaluated negatively in episode B. On the contrary, that the account ends with Abraham acquiring wealth from Abimelech (vv. 14–16)—which is subsequently interpreted as YHWH's blessing upon him (24:35)—along with the final notice that God responds positively to Abraham's prayer and heals Abimelech, seems to point to a positive characterization of Abraham in this passage.

Concerning episode C, once again several arguments have been put forward to support a negative characterization of the patriarch. First, some argue that Isaac's fear of harm reflects a lack of faith in God's promises (26:7),[35] though as we have already seen, such a conclusion does not follow. Second, others suggest that

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[31] Walton, *Genesis*, 495; Currid, *Genesis 1:1—25:18*, 362.
[32] Novick, "Almost, at Times, the Fool," 279.
[33] E.g., Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 72.
[34] Waltke, *Genesis*, 287; Currid, *Genesis 1:1—25:18*, 365.
[35] Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 193; Waltke, *Genesis*, 369.

Isaac's long stay in Gerar (v. 8) reveals that his fears are unfounded, which makes his deception unnecessary and therefore, as Victor Hamilton says, "repugnant."[36] However, that Isaac and Rebekah stay safely in Gerar while posing as siblings does not invalidate his fear of being killed as Rebekah's husband. The fact that Abimelech feels compelled to command his people not to touch Isaac or Rebekah upon discovering their true relationship—listing "this man" first (v. 11)—supports the validity of Isaac's fear. Third, others argue for a negative characterization based on the accusatory and unanswered nature of Abimelech's question in v. 10—"What is this you have done to us?"[37]—though, again, as we saw in episode A, such an accusation by a character does not necessarily reflect a negative evaluation by the author. Furthermore, as in episode A, this interrogation is not the final element of the narrative but is followed by Abimelech's decree of protection over Isaac and Rebekah. As noted above, it is this decree that enables Isaac to flourish and acquire wealth under YHWH's blessing while in Gerar.

In contrast to these arguments, rather than a negative assessment, the overall depiction of Isaac throughout this section seems to be remarkably positive. Verses 1–5 portray him as the heir of YHWH's covenant promises originally given to Abraham. In these opening verses YHWH commands Isaac not to go down to Egypt, and v. 6 presents Isaac as wholly obedient to YHWH, much as Abraham had been in 12:4 in response to God's original call.[38] This positive depiction of Isaac before the deception is balanced by a similarly positive portrayal afterward. As we have already noted, after Abimelech issues his protective decree, Isaac grows in wealth under YHWH's blessing (26:12–14). Subsequently YHWH provides him with water in multiple wells (vv. 17–22) and repeats his promises of blessing and progeny (v. 24), after which Isaac "calls on the name of YHWH" (v. 25). Indeed, by the end of the chapter Abimelech and his officials even say to Isaac, "You are now the blessed of YHWH" (v. 29). All of this contributes to a positive characterization of Isaac in this chapter.

IV. SYNTHESIS

Having explored these deceptions in terms of motive, results, and deceiver characterization, it becomes clear that our conclusions in the first two categories reinforce the third. That is, supporting the view that the author is not characterizing the deceivers negatively is the fact that in each case (1) the patriarch's motive is self-preservation without any intent that his wife be taken, (2) no unjust results follow as a consequence of the deceptions, (3) YHWH blesses the patriarch, and (4) YHWH judges the foreign king for taking the patriarch's wife (A and B only). Although these observations by themselves do not prove a positive narratorial appraisal of these deceptions, they should at least caution us against arriving at negative assessments of these deceptions prematurely. What is needed is an interpreta-

[36] Hamilton, *Genesis 18–50*, 195. See also Kidner, *Genesis*, 153.
[37] Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 190–91; Williams, *Deception in Genesis*, 17.
[38] See also Waltke, *Genesis*, 368–69; Arnold, *Genesis*, 238.

tion of these deceptions that fully accounts for the deceivers' motives, the results of their deceptions, and the seemingly positive characterizations in these contexts.

The theory that comports best with the preceding analysis is that, by pretending to be their wives' brothers, the patriarchs are seeking *the welfare of both of them.* Their goal is not simply to preserve their own lives but to prevent their wives from being taken, which would presumably happen if they were killed. An early interpretation along these lines is found in Josephus. Concerning episode A, Josephus writes, "[Abraham] pretended to be her brother, and directed her in a dissembling way to pretend the same, for he said it would be for *their* benefit."[39] Although Josephus does not specify how such a ruse would benefit both Abraham and Sarah, a stream of Jewish interpretation has noted that, as her brother, the patriarch would have been viewed as the woman's legal guardian and therefore would have been responsible for negotiating the terms of her marriage. Consequently, if a zealous suitor were to desire her as a wife, the initial path to marrying her would not be to eliminate her husband but to negotiate with her brother. This would enable the patriarch either to make unrealistic demands or prolong negotiations in such a way that they could flee to safety should danger appear to be encroaching.[40]

Supporting this theory, Barry Eichler has argued that in antiquity it was specifically the full maternal brother who had a special guardianship over his sister. Eichler points to the rape of Dinah, where it is "the sons of Jacob" and not Jacob himself who negotiate with Shechem (Gen 34:13–17), and it is Simeon and Levi in particular—two of Dinah's full maternal brothers—who avenge her rape (vv. 25–29). Similarly, in 2 Samuel 13, after Amnon rapes Tamar, she does not return to David's house, but goes to live with Absalom, her full maternal brother, who subsequently avenges her rape as well.[41] Eichler further adduces anthropological data from African, Polynesian, Arab, and Persian cultures, all suggesting that a maternal brother was viewed as having a special relationship with his sister, since they are "from the same belly."[42] This background may shed light on Song of Songs 1:6, where the maiden laments that her "mother's sons" were angry with her and consigned her to manual labor—those brothers who should have been her prime protectors have instead caused her body to be worn out by the sun.

More to the point, this insight concerning maternal sibling relationships also informs our understanding of the patriarchs' actions in the wife-sister deceptions. In episode B, when explaining himself to Abimelech, Abraham says, "Besides, she is indeed my sister, the daughter of my father *though not the daughter of my mother*" (Gen 20:12). In other words, not only has Abraham deceived about not being Sarah's husband (for his safety), he has also deceived about being Sarah's full maternal brother (for her safety). Understood this way, Abraham has presented himself

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[39] *Ant.* 1.8.1 (emphasis mine).

[40] Barry L. Eichler, "On Reading Genesis 12:10–20," in *Tehillah le-Moshe: Biblical and Judaic Studies in Honor of Moshe Greenberg*, ed. Mordechai Cogan et al. (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 32. See also Van Seters, *Abraham in History*, 169.

[41] Eichler, 33–34.

[42] Eichler, 35–37.

as Sarah's prime protector—the one with whom suitors must negotiate for her marriage.

What the patriarch apparently did not count on was *the king* having an interest in his wife and simply taking her, thereby bypassing any negotiations. In both episodes A and C the patriarch's explicit concern is that the common male citizens will desire his wife and kill him. Abraham specifies "the Egyptians" (12:12) and Isaac "the men of the place" (26:7); the king is never mentioned as a concern. However, ancient kings are well known for simply taking what they want on occasion,[43] which appears to be what happened in episodes A and B. Although Pharaoh transfers wealth to Abraham in episode A in a manner that resembles a bride price, this does not indicate that Abraham agreed to any negotiations.[44] It is equally plausible—and more consistent with the other data we have surveyed—that Pharaoh and Abimelech bypass negotiations and simply take Sarah; the transfer of wealth in episode A may be understood as a unilateral courtesy rather than a mutually negotiated bride price.

This interpretation has the benefit of accounting for the stated motive of self-preservation, the intended perpetuity of these deceptions, the results in which the foreign king is judged and the patriarch is blessed, as well as the seemingly positive characterizations of the patriarchs in these passages. Moreover, on this interpretation we need not conclude that God is unjustly judging the foreign kings based on ignorance due to deception but rather because these kings have unjustly taken a woman by force, and this woman happens to be the wife of God's covenant partner.

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, in this study I have argued that the wife-sister episodes do not portray the patriarchs in a negative light. Rather, narrative features point toward positive characterizations in each case, which are reinforced by a sharpened understanding of the motives and results of each deception. By posing as his wife's full maternal brother, neither Abraham nor Isaac is "throwing her under the bus to save his own skin" and thereby "pimping" her, as Lamb concludes.[45] Instead, the patriarchs are presenting themselves as their wives' prime protectors, the ones with whom potential suitors must negotiate in order to pursue marriage. In so doing the patriarchs are not only seeking to preserve their own lives but also the welfare of their wives, who would most certainly be taken if the patriarchs were killed. Although not all the actions of the patriarchs are commendable, these wife-sister deceptions should not be put forward as examples of questionable ethics on the part of Israel's ancestors.

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[43] Of particular relevance is the Egyptian tale, *The Two Brothers*, in which a pharaoh falls in love with a married woman, takes her, and has her husband killed. Concerning this tale Currid comments, "If we learn anything from this story it is that pharaohs can act capriciously and they can take what they want. Thus the danger to Abram is real and serious" (*Genesis 1:1—25:18*, 261). See also 1 Samuel 8:9–18.

[44] Contra Walton, *Genesis*, 396.

[45] Lamb, *Prostitutes and Polygamists*, 94, 93 (respectively).