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ON THE MOTHERHOOD OF SARAH: A YAHWISTIC THEOLOGICAL COMMENT

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In the Yahwist's ancestral history (Gen 12-50), the reader finds a series of barren-wife narratives. These are sometimes looked upon as a literary technique used by the Yahwist to hold the interest of the audience by keeping it in suspense to impart a theological message: God's word is to be trusted and it will be fulfilled. The purpose of the essay is to explore another possible theological purpose: a theological comment stressing that the God Of Israel, not the Canaanite god Baal, was the true lord of Fertility.

Introduction

One of the more recognisable motifs found in the narratives of the Yahwist's ancestral history is that of the "barren-wife." These narratives, or composite narratives, as may be the case with the Rachel/Leah episode,[1] present a similar situation: the patriarch has been promised offspring,[2] but the matriarch is barren, a condition which is either expressly or implicitly mentioned.[3] This situation, in turn, creates an all but insurmountable obstacle to the fulfilment of the promise of progeny.[4] In each case, the matriarch's barrenness is removed, and YHWH grants her children.[5]

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[1] Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, trans. John J. Scullion, S. J. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985) 472.

[2] Abraham: Gen 15:4b; Isaac: 26:24b; Jacob: 28:14.

[3] Sarah: 11:30; Rebekah: 25:21a; Leah: 29:31a; Rachel: 29:31b. In the case of Leah, it is not explicitly state that she was barren, but only implicitly when the Yahwist comments that YHWH ". . . opened her womb. . . ."

[4] Peter Ellis, *The Yahwist: The Bible's First Theologian* (Notre Dame, IN: Fides Press, Inc., 1968) 137.

[5] Sarah: Gen 21:1-2; Rebekah: 25:21b; Leah: 29:31-32; Rachel: 30:22. In the case pf Rachel, the idiom used to express the return of her fertility (יפתח אֶת־רחמה) is identical to that used with Leah with the

The "barren-wife" motif of these narratives is often looked upon as a literary technique employed by the Yahwist to increase the suspense of the particular episode in order to hold the interest and attention of the audience. It is also seen as a device to impart a theological message to the people: the word of God is to be trusted and will be fulfilled.[6] However, there is another possibility for the use of these "barren-wife" narratives: the traditions surrounding the stories of the barrenness of the matriarchal ancestresses were used by the Yahwist writer as part of a larger polemic against the religious cultic practices of Israel's neighbours.[7] The author, at least by insinuation, was underlining that it is YHWH alone, and no other god or goddess, who is responsible for granting offspring to the chosen people. In the cases of the matriarchs, the innuendo would have been that the true Israelite woman, devoted to the exclusive worship of YHWH, seeks fertility and children only from YHWH.[8]

The purpose of this study is to explore this last mentioned possibility for the use of the "barren-wife" motif in the life-story of Sarah. We will focus our attention on those narratives which

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exception of the subject of the verb יהוה פתח opens the womb of Leah and אלהים does so in the case of Rachel. On this point, E. A. Speiser (*Genesis* [Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1964] 232) comments that, "The two documentary sources have been fused more intricately in this section than anywhere else in Genesis. . . . The eventual compiler did such a thorough job that redistribution at this time poses a delicate problem." The general subject matter of the theme of fertility, however, appears to be more in the Yahwistic line of thought that of the Elohist. Hermann Gunkel (*Genesis* [7. Aufl.; Göttingen: Vendenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966] 336) assigns this particular phrase to the Yahwistic source.

[6] Ellis 138.

[7] For all practical purposes, we are talking about the syncretistic influences of the Canaanite people. However, we do not want to insinuate that the concern of the Yahwist writer was limited to Canaanite influences and none of the other peoples of the ancient Near East.

[8] Ellis 140-41.

surround Sarah's barrenness and the subsequent birth of Isaac.[9] In so doing we intend to show that the Yahwist writer was making a two-fold theological comment in respect to the motherhood of Sarah: 1) YHWH's promise of offspring would be fulfilled even though, from a human perspective, there would seem to be no possibility of this; 2) the faithful Israelite is to avoid the practice of "surrogate motherhood" employed by Israel's neighbours. For the Yahwist such a custom, apparently adopted by the Israelites, showed a lack of trust and faith in the word of YHWH.

In order to accomplish our objective, we will begin with some very brief remarks which appear pertinent for our task at hand. These will be observations concerning the influence of foreign culture on Israel, the role of the Yahwist as a theologian, and the stigma of barrenness in the ancient Near East. Following these comments we will proceed with an examination of those narratives which treat Sarah's barrenness, attempted "surrogate motherhood," subsequent fertility, and, finally, conception and birth of Isaac.

THE THREAT OF RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM ON THE YAHWISTIC CULT

Following the "conquest" and settlement in the land of Canaan, Israel's struggles were not over.[10] The problems she probably faced would not necessarily have been the bellicose intentions of the local inhabitants, but, more likely, were of an ideological nature: combating the infiltration of cultic worship and practices of

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[9]   Gen 16:1-6; 18:9-15; 21:1a, 2a.

[10]   It is beyond the scope of this study to resolve the question whether the "conquest" was the result of military action, immigration, or social revolution. For a thorough discussion on this topic see Frank S. Frick, *A Journey Through the Hebrew Scriptures* (New York: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1995) 258-75; Norman Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250-1050 B. C.* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979) 220-33.

her neighbours, with all their corruptive influences, upon the Yahwistic system of belief.

During the era of the Israel's initial adjustment in Canaan, a natural consequence of the expansion movement would have been exposure to the cultural institutions, customs, and religious practices of those people who were presently occupying the land. Similarly, as Yahwism had entered the land of Canaan with the Israelites, it would have been only natural that some of the inhabitants of Canaan would have converted to the religious practice of the Israelites. Those who did, however, would, undoubtedly, have brought with them many of their former religious attitudes, customs, and rituals. Consequently, these "converts" would have had an influence upon the practice of ideal Yahwism, an influence which appears to have been rather extensive. John Bright succinctly summarises the situation when he notes, it light of Israel's earliest contact with a religious system different from her own, that "The Book of Judges is undoubtedly correct in recording the period [Israel's settlement in the land of Canaan] as one of theological irregularity."[11]

THE YAHWIST AS THEOLOGIAN

The Yahwist writer was more than just a recorder of the history of Israel. He was, above all, a theologian who was concerned about the proper theological understanding and praxis of Israel's divinely revealed religion. As a theologian he presented to his contemporaries his understanding of the truths of revelation "in a language they could understand and in a form that reflected and responded to their needs, their problems, and their challenges."[12]

Using some of the traditional stories available, the Yahwist appears to have recorded them in such a manner so as to instruct the audience that the God of Israel was the true lord of fertility in the land given them through the promises made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. One way in which he accomplished this was by

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[11]. John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 3rd ed., Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 178.

[12]. Ellis viii.

depicting to his audience that the obstacle of the barrenness of the ancestral matriarchs was overcome by YHWH in the fulfilment of the promise first made to Abraham that his own issue would be his heir (Gen 15:4b),[13] and, subsequently, to the succeeding patriarchs that their offspring would be innumerable. It goes without saying that the barrenness of the wives of the patriarchs presented a serious obstacle to the fulfilment of God's promises.

THE STIGMA OF BARRENNESS IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

The condition of barrenness brought with it a social stigma, one of the greatest that a woman could bear in the various societies of the ancient Near East.[14] Not only was it a cause of great sorrow for a woman, but also looked upon as disgrace (Gen 30:23; 1 Sam 1:5-8), and even as a punishment from God (Gen 20:18; 2 Sam 6:23; Hos 9:11). According to the anthropology of the patriarchal period, a woman could only find her self-identity within her society in bearing offspring for her husband. This was also the only way in which she could become a full and integrated member of her society.[15]

Consequently, it was customary for a woman to bring into marriage her own personal slave-girl,[16] who appears to have belonged to her alone and was not at the disposal of her husband in

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[13]. For a clear explanation of the Yahwist's use of "obstacle stories," see Ellis 136-38.

[14]. Gerhard von Rad (*Genesis*, [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961] 186) comments that, "There was no greater sorrow for an Israelite or Oriental woman than childlessness. Even today among the Arabs the barren woman is exposed to disgrace and even grievous wrongs." See also Antoin Jaussen, *Coutumes des Arabes au pays de Moab* (Paris: Libraire d'Amérique et d'Orient, 1948) 35-36; Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, trans. John McHugh (London: Darton, Logman & Todd, 1961) 41.

[15]. Westermann 239.

[16]. Westermann 238.

the same manner as the other female servants in the household.[17]
Such a custom would assure the new bride that, in the event of
barrenness, she would still be able to "build" (בנא) a family through
her personal slave-girl, whom she would give to her husband for
this purpose.[18]

It is in this social and cultural setting that the narratives
recording the problem of barrenness of Sarah is found, and,
perhaps, the reason for her great desire, or perhaps better, need, to
bear offspring to Abraham, even though it meant the use of a
"surrogate mother" appeared to her to be imperative.

SARAH, THE WIFE OF ABRAHAM

The Yahwist had informed the audience that Sarah was barren and
had borne no children (Gen 11:30),[19] a condition that she herself
acknowledged came from YHWH: "You see that the Lord has
prevented me from bearing children; . . ." (16:2a).[20] The audience
is also told that Sarah had a slave-girl, an Egyptian named Hagar

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[17]. Gunkel 184. See also von Rad 191; Bruce Vawter, *On Genesis: A New Reading* (New York: Doubdleday & Company, Inc., 1977) 214; Westermann 238.

[18]. The verb בנה, "to build", appears to be a play on words with בן As it occurs in our text (Gen 16:2a), אבנה can only mean "I will be built up," a *niph'al* (so E. A. Speiser 117). The same idiom is also found in the case of Rachel who gives her slave-girl to Jacob so that she can "build" (אבנה) from her slave-girl (Gen 30:3). The usage of this term in this manner appears to be confirmed by a text in Deut 25:9: ". . . This is what is done to the man who does not build (לא יבנה) his brother's house." On the figurative use of the term בנה, see Siegfried Wagner, " בנה *banah*," *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, eds. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren; trans. David E. Green, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980) 172-73.

[19]. This verse appears to be out of place and would logically fit in at the beginning of chapter 16 in place of the Priestly Kodex insert (v. 1a). See Gunkel 184.

[20]. The text of the *New Revised Standard Version* will be used throughout unless otherwise noted.

(16:1) whom, apparently, she had brought with her at the time of her marriage to Abraham, as was the custom of the day.

Because of her condition of barrenness, Sarah seeks a remedy: motherhood by means of a "surrogate." She tells Abraham to ". . . go in to my slave-girl; it may be that I shall obtain children by her" (16:2b), a proposal entirely in accord with both moral and legal customs of the day.[21] However, once Hagar was aware that she was pregnant, the Yahwist presents a negative portrait of both women. Hagar, desiring to rise above her legal status of a slave-girl, is filled with pride and haughtiness toward her mistress, for "natural maternal pride is stronger than the legal status;"[22] Sarah is presented to the audience as one who is consumed with anger, hostility, frustration, and maternal jealousy. (vv. 5-6).

Sarah's pride and self-respect had been injured, which was manifested in a most unjust manner: "May the wrong done to me (חֲמָסִי) be on you" (v. 5a).[23] The Yahwist has portrayed Sarah as a

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[21]. That there existed such a custom and legal precedent of presenting a slave-girl in case of the wife's barrenness is generally agreed upon by all commentators and critics. The most well-known biblical example of this custom and legality is found in a document from Nuzi, a culture and legal system not unfamiliar to patriarchal/matriarchal society. The text reads: "If Gilimninu bears children, Shennima shall not take another wife. But if Gilimninu fails to bear children, Gilimninu shall get for Shennima a woman from the Lullu country (i.e., a slave girl) as a concubine. In that case, Gilimninu herself shall have authority over the offspring (*u šerri Gilimninu-ma uwar*)." It is outside the scope of this article to go into the minute details of this issue. For a complete discussion of this topic see Louis Katzoff, "From the Nuzi Tablets," *Dor le Dor* 13 (1985): 216-19; Speiser 120-21; John Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (New Haven; London: Yale UP, 1975) 68-71; Vawter 214; Westermann 239.

[22]. Otto Procksch, *Die Genesis*, 3. Auf. (Leipzig: A. Deichertsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1924) 107-8.

[23]. On the use of the term חָמָס, Speiser (117-18) notes that, "It is strictly a legal term, which traditional 'violence' fails to show adequately. The same force is reflected in the Akk. verb *habalum*, 'to deprive someone of his legal rights.'. . . Sarah is thus invoking her legal rights, and she holds her husband responsible (literally, 'my injustice is against you') for

person whose reasoning may have been taken over by emotions. Sarah herself admits that she "put" Hagar into Abraham's "embrace." Nonetheless, she appears to deny any responsibility for the consequences of her action, insinuating that her loss of status and esteem in the eyes of Hagar was somehow brought about by Abraham (v. 5b).[24]

All in all, the Yahwist has painted for the audience a less than complimentary portrait of Sarah. Having received Hagar back as her own personal slave-girl, Abraham tells Sarah that she can handle the situation as she thinks best: ". . . Your slave-girl is in your power; do to her as you please" (v. 6a).[25] In other words, Sarah was allowed freedom of action in her treatment of Hagar, but, apparently, unable to expel her outright.[26] Legally, however, Sarah does not appear to have been prevented from abusing Hagar to such a degree that she preferred to risk the dangers of the desert, though pregnant and alone, on her way back to Egypt, rather than to continue to submit herself to humiliation and mistreatment at the hands of Sarah.[27] Vawter's appraisal of the manner in which the

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the offence." For a complete analysis of the term חמס, see Herbert Haag, " חמס *chāmās*," *TDOT*, vol. 4, 478-87.

[24]. J. Weingreen ("The Case of the Blasphemer [Leviticus XXIV 10 ff.]," *VT* 22 [1972]: 119-20) comments that, "The writer was referring, not to Hagar's assumed arrogance towards her mistress but, to Sarah's having lost status, because of the new standing which Hagar had acquired through her pregnancy. . . . It was, in fact, this loss of face which Sarah felt which impelled her to complain to Abraham . . . 'I have become contemptible in her [Hagar's] estimation.'" On the use of the term קלל, see J. Scharbert, " קלל *qll*," *Theologische Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament*, eds. Heinz-Josef Fabry and Helmer Ringgen, 7 (Stuttgart: W. Hohlhammer, 1989) 40-49.

[25]. According to Gunkel (186) this phrase is also a legal term.

[26]. Vawter (214) comments that, "The social and legal background presupposed by this story is . . . one that is not elucidated by the later Mosaic Law of Israel." However, according to the *Code of Hammurabi* (§146), a legal code undoubtedly familiar to the patriarchal/matriarchal society, Sarah was forbidden to dismiss Hagar from the household.

[27]. The term used to describe Sarah's abusive behavior, the *pi'el* of ענה, is generally considered to suggest violent and excessive severity in

Yahwist has presented Sarah in this situation accurately hits the mark. He comments that,

> Legalities aside, however, it must be admitted that at least Sarah does not cut too happy a figure in the episode, neither in her recriminations over the development for which she herself was partly responsible and which was the miscarriage of a plan designed for her benefit than anyone else's, nor in the vengeful treatment of Hagar after the fact. The lot of a slave is never a happy one, and quite obviously Sarah had no wish to change that rule.[28]

The Mamre Visitors: A Son is Promised

The resolution to the plight of Sarah—she had not yet borne her husband a son—and the fulfilment of the promise made by YHWH that his heir would be his own (Gen 15:4a) comes after Abraham and Sarah had grown old while settled at Mamre.[29] In the episode at Mamre (Gen 18:1-16a) the ancestral couple are visited by three mysterious strangers.[30] In the scene which unfolds, we find in this narrative,[31] even more explicitly than in the Sarah/Hagar episode, the theological message of the Yahwist that YHWH is the true source of fertility and life.

Following the customary greeting and amenities bestowed upon strangers (Gen 18:1-8), the visitors inquire of Abraham,

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the treatment of another. On the use of this term, see E. S. Gerstenberger, " ענה 'anah" *ThWAT*, 6, 247-70.

[28] Vawter 215.

[29] According to the Priestly chronology, Abraham was ninety-nine years old when Sarah conceived and bore Isaac (Gen 17:1, 24).

[30] The identification of the three visitors has long been a point of disagreement among biblical scholars. It is beyond the scope of this study to unravel their identity. For a complete discussion of this topic, see von Rad (204-05); Westermann (242-44, 275-76).

[31] Granting that the narrative of the received text (18:1-16a) was originally two once-independent stories (so Westermann 275), we will treat it in its present form as a single narrative in which one of the visitors is eventually identified as YHWH

"Where is your wife, Sarah?" Upon Abraham's response that she was in the tent, one of the three, later to be identified as YHWH, assumes the roll of spokesperson, and comments, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son" (v. 10). This was the first explicit indication to Abraham that the travellers were not simply wandering Bedouins as they might first appeared to have been.

The Advanced Years of Abraham and Sarah

In the mentality of the ancient Near East, old age brought with it the cessation of the human potential for procreation. It was believed that a man in his old age no longer was virile, and the woman in hers, no longer fertile. Therefore, in stating that Abraham and Sarah were old, the Yahwist is informing the audience that, from this fact alone, the possibility of Sarah conceiving would be ruled out, and ". . . there was no longer any possibility of having an influence on the continuance of the family . . . ."[32]

In the verses which follow the statement of the stranger that Sarah would bear a son, the obstacle of Sarah and Abraham's age is underscored, mentioned three times (vv. 11-13). It would appear that the Yahwist intended to underline the fact that it was all but impossible, humanly speaking, for Sarah to conceive and bear a son.

The obstacle of the advanced age of the ancestral couple to the fulfilment of YHWH's promise to Abraham is first mentioned by the Yahwist writer, informing the audience that the couple were now old (18:11). We find a very similar situation and statement recorded in the Second Book of Kings. Elisha informs the Shunammite woman that she will bear a son. Her reaction to the announcement was to take it in jest: "No, my lord, O man of God, do not deceive your servant" (2 Kgs 4:16). The narrator, (possibly the Yahwist?) makes the same comment as the Yahwist has done in our text: her husband is old (2 Kgs 4:14).

In order to stress even more emphatically the human impossibility of conception, the Yahwist now adds that Sarah was

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[32]   J. Conrad, זקן zaqān," *TDOT*, vol. 4, 125.

already in the post-menopausal time of her life (v. 11). Conception, therefore, was out of the question. Consequently, the only hope that remained for the fulfilment of the promise previously made to Abraham (Gen 15:4a) lies in the statement of the stranger who, with great assurance, had emphatically stated that Sarah would bear a son nine months hence.[33]

Following his own statement that Sarah and Abraham were too old to bring a child into the world, the Yahwist repeats for the second time that it is virtually impossible for Sarah to conceive and bear a child. This time, however, the statement comes from Sarah. The Yahwist portrays Sarah as a very down-to-earth person. Her first reaction to what she has overheard the stranger tell Abraham is quite spontaneous and very human: she simply laughed to herself and silently comments, in a somewhat unrefined manner,[34] "Now that I have grown old (בלתי)[35] and my husband is old, am I still to have pleasure (עדנה)?"[36] (v.12), bemused by the thought of the possibility of conception.

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[33]. On the meaning of this peculiar phrase (כעת חיה), see O. Loretz, "*k'et hyh* —'wie jetz ums Jahr' Gen 18:10," *Bib* 43 (1962): 75-78; Reuven Yaron, "*ka'eth hayyah* and *koh lehay* (Gen 18, 14; II Kg 4, 16-17," *VT* 12 (1962): 500-01; John Skinner, *Genesis* (Edenburgh: T & T Clark, 1912) 310.

[34]. Gunkel 198.

[35]. The verb בלה, which Sarah used to acknowledge her advanced years, would have been very graphic and, perhaps, to the audience, a bit comical. Literally, it means "to become worn out". It is not frequently used in the Old Testament and is found only on this occasion in Genesis. When this verb does appear elsewhere in the Old Testament, it is often in association with objects becoming worn-out as in the case of old clothes and garments (e.g., Deut 29:5; Is 50:9). On the use of this term, see J. Gameroni, " בלה *balāh*," *TDOT*, vol.2, 128-31.

[36]. The term that Sarah is portrayed as using is עדנה, from the root עדן. This form occurs only here. Although the root implies that which is pleasurable, A. A. McIntosh ("A Third Root עדה in Biblical Hebrew," *VT* 24 [1974] 472) is undoubtedly correct when he proposes the meaning "conception" following Pseudo-Jonathan.

For the third time the Yahwist returns to the human impossibility of Sarah conceiving and bearing a son. On this final occasion, the statement comes from the visitor, who once again is identified by the Yahwist as YHWH. He asks Abraham: "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Shall I really bear a child, as old as I am?'" (v. 13). The Yahwist, however, has altered the words spoken by YHWH, interpreting for the audience the meaning of Sarah's statement, lest there be any doubt that she was too old to bear a child.

The culmination of this passage comes in verse 14 when YHWH asks, "Is anything to wonderful (היפלא)[37] for the Lord?" This rhetorical question clearly implies that no obstacle is too great for YHWH in the fulfilment of his promises. There follows immediately the restatement of the promise that Sarah would bear Abraham a son after nine months' time. The Yahwist's theological message is clear: nothing is too difficult for YHWH. Von Rad has captured very well the meaning of this phrase when he comments that, "The word (היפלא)reposes in the story like a precious stone in a priceless setting, and its significance surpasses the cosy patriarchal milieu of the narration; it is a heuristic witness to God's omnipotent saving will."[38] The promise has now been repeated twice, almost word for word, emphasising that, since YHWH is the Lord of Fertility, no obstacle was too great for him to overcome in fulfilling his promise to Abraham that Sarah would bear him a son.

The fulfilment of the promised son is found in Gen 21:1a, 2a. Little of the circumstances surrounding the birth of Isaac is known. Though the birth is reported in all three traditions, very little remains of the Yahwist's account of this event, following the final redaction of the compiler. It is simply stated: "The Lord took note of Sarah as he said he would . . . . Sarah became pregnant and bore Abraham a son in his old age, . . ."

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[37]. On the use of the term *pl'* see J. Conrad, " פלא *pl'*," *ThWAT*, Bd. 6 (1989) 569-83.

[38]. Von Rad 202.

CONCLUSION

In this study we have investigated those stories which surrounded the barrenness of Sarah, her attempt to bear Abraham a son by the use of a "surrogate mother," and, finally, the birth of Isaac. From our investigation, three observations can be made and a final conclusion drawn.

First, the condition of barrenness came from God, a result of divine decision and action. Sarah, at the outset of the narrative in Gen 16:1-6 explicitly acknowledged that this condition came from YHWH. Secondly, in Sarah's attempt to bear a child by means of a "surrogate mother," the Yahwist portrayed her relationship with Hagar and Abraham in somewhat of an unfavourable light, indicating a disruption of normal family relationships, in particular, irreconcilable differences between Sarah and her slave-girl. For the Yahwist the use of a "surrogate mother" to "bear children" was unacceptable: it showed a lack of faith in YHWH as the true God of Fertility in the fulfilment of the promise of offspring. Finally, the son whom Sarah bore was clearly a gratuitous gift from YHWH alone. Although she did not explicitly acknowledge YHWH's role in the birth of her son, the Yahwist has presented the traditional materials in such a manner that there could be no doubt that Isaac was a direct result of YHWH's intervention.

In light of the above observations, one may draw a final conclusion: it appears evident that the Yahwist makes it clear to his audience that the promised son was completely and entirely a gift from YHWH. The author has, no doubt, presented the traditions surrounding the promise and birth of Isaac, the future patriarch, as he had received them. But he also appears to have reinterpreted and presented them in such a manner so as to impart his own theological message and comment to his audience: YHWH is the true and only God of Fertility, the only god upon whom Israel should depend for the fulfilment of the promise of descendants and, consequently, the continuation and growth of the chosen people.

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