

COMMENT ON "THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, REBEKAH, AND JACOB"

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In his article "The God of Abraham, Rebekah, and Jacob" (JBQ XXXII:2, 2004) Moshe Reiss sets as his objective to "review whether it is Isaac or Rebekah who has the more active relationship with God in their generation" (p. 91). I want to comment on three aspects of his attempt and on his objective as well.

First, in commenting on God's relationship with Abraham, Reiss states that Sarah "scoffs at the absurd idea" (p. 92) that she will bear a child to Abraham when she is 90 years old. (According to Genesis 18:12, Sarah "laughs" to herself). The Lord's reaction to Sarah's laughter is three-fold: The Lord asks Abraham why Sarah laughed at His announcement of her forthcoming pregnancy and birth of a son; the Lord asserts His omnipotence via the rhetorical question *'Is anything too wondrous for the Lord?'* (see my article "God, Abraham, Moses: A Comparison of Key Questions," JBQ XIX:4, 1991); and the Lord states that He will return to Abraham in the same season next year, when Sarah shall have a son. Upon hearing the Lord speak to Abraham, Sarah this time says aloud, *'I did not laugh.'* Reiss comments, "Then in their only direct interchange, God accuses Sarah of lying" (p. 92).

As a translator of the Tanakh, Reiss errs by failing to stay close to the text. The text only quotes "he" saying *'No, you did laugh.'* There is ambiguity about the the pronoun "he" which is embedded in the complex Hebrew *va-yomer*. It could refer either to the Lord or to Abraham, who had just learned from the Lord's question to him that Sarah had laughed. Many people do translate that complex Hebrew word as *But He said*, thereby presenting an interpretation along with a translation that it was God Who said *'No, you did laugh.'* Nevertheless, it remains a possibility that it was Abraham who said those words. Some notable commentators do interpret the Tanakh as referring to Abraham, not the Lord (see my article "Bible Translators as Arbiters of Ambiguity: Part I," JBQ XXIX:2, 2001, footnote 5.)

The speaker here does not explicitly "accuse Sarah of lying," as Reiss

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states, but merely contradicts her. It is one thing to state the opposite of what Sarah said and another thing to attach the label of lying. To say '*You did laugh*' is to state a fact; to accuse someone of lying is to infer that a person deliberately intended to mislead. It is the Narrator who labels Sarah's action as a lie and then gives the reason for it: *because she was afraid* (18:15)..

Without any notice that he has interpreted the Tanakh, and without any substantiation of his assertion, Reiss concludes that because of her laughter "Sarah **thus** [my emphasis] is never the recipient of a prophetic message from God" (p. 92). Reiss's conclusion is unwarranted and unjustified. How does Reiss know the Lord's motive for His subsequent actions concerning Sarah?

Second, Reiss gives two questionable impressions of Rebekah in his support for Rebekah over Isaac. In the first one, he asserts that Rebekah refers to Jacob as "my son" and to Esau as "Jacob's brother" (p. 95). However, the phrase "Jacob's brother" does not appear in the Tanakh. Reiss cites Genesis 27:5-6, 8, 13. In those verses Rebekah is speaking to Jacob. She says: '*I overheard your father speaking to Esau, your brother . . .*' Again, when speaking to Jacob (27:42) she uses the term '*Esau your brother.*' Obviously, she can use this identification only when speaking to Jacob. She never refers to Esau as *Jacob's brother* when she speaks to someone else, even if would be appropriate. Indeed, after Rebekah speaks to Jacob in verse 27:42 the Tanakh reports only one more instance when she speaks, and at that time, she is talking to Isaac about Jacob. There, she does not refer directly to Esau. Contrary to Reiss's assertion, Rebekah never uses the term *Jacob's brother* when speaking to Jacob or to anyone else.

Reiss gives another impression of Rebekah in his support of her over Isaac. He indicates that the Lord blessed Abraham twice and Isaac once (p. 96). Then he says: "Rebekah receives, in the name of her family, the blessing to have descendants This is a repetition of a blessing God gave to Abraham . . . Thus, Rebekah, not Isaac, receives the blessing for posterity." With these words Reiss gives the reader the impression that it was the Lord who blessed Rebekah for posterity. Not so. Reiss does not indicate the source of the blessing Rebekah receives in verse 24:60, which comes from her own family when she leaves home to marry Isaac (24:55-61). A blessing from her family is not the equivalent of a blessing from the Lord.

Third, Reiss belittles Isaac while trying to build up Rebekah, and offers a

spate of psychological assertions against him:

1. as a consequence if the Akeda, Isaac "suffers severe emotional trauma, and develops a dependent personality" (p. 93);
2. he is "unable to function and assume the massive responsibilities of being the second-generation chosen one" (p. 93);
3. Abraham sought to find a wife for Isaac because of the "extent of the damage to Isaac from the Akeda" (p. 93);
4. "Isaac, her husband, is damaged" (p. 94);
5. Isaac walking (meditating?) in the field toward evening "appears to lead his life under a cloud of dimness, in the gray twilight between day and night, an effect of the Akeda" (p. 94);
6. Isaac is a "weak son" (p. 97);
7. Isaac's "passivity is in striking comparison to his aggressive wife" (p. 97);
8. Isaac "remained in his traumatized state, dependent on his mother who overprotected him" (p. 94);
9. "he never sees clearly, never laughs" (p. 97).

Such statements constitute a considerable attack on Isaac. They should not be based on mere assumption; but should have point-by-point justification. As they now stand, they are unsupported and unacceptable. Furthermore, Reiss does not give a balanced assessment of Rebekah and Isaac. He concentrates on her positive points and does not mention any negative ones. He focuses on Isaac's supposed negative points and does not mention any positive ones.

Reiss says he can surmise the effects of the Akeda on Isaac "by the later events in his life" (p. 93), but does not say what those events are. Neither does he offer any evidence that Isaac was traumatized or "overprotected"; a pejorative term that belittles Sarah. The events of Isaac's life do not indicate any such trauma. On one occasion in the Philistine city of Gerar he fears for his life because of Rebekah, just as Abraham in Egypt fears for his life because of Sarah. Isaac's fear does not necessarily derive from trauma because of the Akeda, just as Abraham's fear does not arise from any severe emotional trauma.

The argument of Isaac's "passivity" is contradicted by his success as a farmer, sowing the land and reaping a hundredfold, acquiring flocks and herds and a large household (26:12-14). It is also contradicted by his success

in making peace with Abimelech the Philistine (26:26-30). In addition, it is contraindicated by his conduct toward Jacob just before the latter leaves for Haran to find himself a wife (28:1-5).

Support for Reiss's psychological assertions would need a wealth of facts and an analysis steeped in the psychological literature. However, he does not present facts or a constructed analysis. Without knowing more than what is found in the Tanakh, it appears to me that it is unreasonable and inappropriate to apply modern psychoanalytical concepts, such as severe emotional trauma and dependent personality, to someone who lived several thousand years ago in quite different circumstances. Reiss has only a dearth of facts about Isaac, yet he has decided that Isaac suffered from severe emotional trauma and overprotection, among other things. Instead of supporting facts, we get mere psychological assertions that create a dubious method when applied to people in the Tanakh.

In addition to commenting on Reiss's paper, I will comment on his objective itself. There is no need to replace Isaac in the traditional liturgical phrase "God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob" by pitting Rebekah against Isaac. As Reiss points out, the ancient rabbis of the Talmud did not desire to replace any of the three patriarchs by considering the addition of Job. The Reform movement and some Conservative congregations already add the quartet of matriarchs to the liturgical trio of patriarchs so that the Lord is the Lord of seven of our ancestors. In any case, there is no need for a win/lose contest between two good people in the Tanakh, Isaac and Rebekah.

Even if we grant that Reiss's objective is a worthy one, we still do not learn how he will determine whether Isaac or Rebekah has the "more active relationship with God." He offers no single criterion or set of criteria to make that determination. I doubt that he can offer a set of criteria for assessing any person's active relationship with God. Every person's relationship with the Lord is personal and unique, and not subject to inspection by an outsider. In summary, Reiss errs in his facts regarding Sarah and Rebekah, his psychoanalytic approach is inappropriate when applied to the Tanakh, and in the end his objective is unattainable by any means.