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Ancestral Queerness: Normativity and Deviance in the Abraham and Sarah Narratives

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Abstract

Interpreters of the Abraham and Sarah narratives in Gen 11-21 often focus on the importance of the line of inheritance, through a particular biological child. While they also note the many irregularities in Abraham and Sarah's familial relationships and activities, there has been no sustained attention to the combination of deviance and normativity that characterizes these narratives. I argue that, due to their particular combinations of normativity and deviance, Abraham and Sarah are Queer, where Queer is a general, cross-cultural category which includes but is not limited to contemporary forms of queerness (e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, etc.).

Using a comparative method drawn from Jonathan Z. Smith, I compare Abraham and Sarah's narratives to stories of contemporary queer families and other queer resources. This comparison allows me to suggest initial descriptions of the larger Queer category, and to argue that both Abraham and Sarah and contemporary queer families are examples of Queerness: (1) Queers often pass. (2) Queerness involves legitimate alternatives to familial norms. (3) Resistance to norms of reproduction constitutes evidence of Queerness. (4) Queerness is often represented as inverted tragedy. (5) Queer people with ethnic and/or class privilege can sometimes use that privilege to achieve greater inclusion into normativity.

In addition to and in support of this overarching argument, this dissertation makes several more specific contributions to the interpretation of the Abraham and Sarah narratives. I offer new interpretations of (1) the reasons for Abraham and Sarah's passing as siblings in Gen 12 and 20 (because of deviance in their marriage), (2) the complications of Abraham's strategies for obtaining an heir in Gen 15, 16, and 21 (they are legitimate alternatives to the norm), (3) the reasons for Sarah's childlessness (she chose to be childless), (4) Sarah's response to Isaac's conception and birth in Gen 18 and 21 (it represents "inverted tragedy"), and (5) the relationship between Abraham, Sarah and Hagar in Gen 16 and 21 (Abraham and Sarah use their class and ethnic privilege to pursue greater normativity).

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ABBREVIATIONS

AB	Anchor Bible
BA	*Biblical Archaeologist*
BAR	*Biblical Archaeology Review*
BASOR	*Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*
BDB	Brown, Francis, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs. *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*
BSC	Bible Student's Commentary
BT	*The Bible Translator*
CBC	Cambridge Bible Commentary
CBQ	*Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
CurTM	*Currents in Theology and Mission*
DCH	*The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*. Edited by David J.A. Clines. 9 vols. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoneix Press, 1993–2014
FCB	Feminist Companion to the Bible
FOTL	Forms of the Old Testament Literature
GELS	*A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint*. Takamitsu Muraoka. Leuven: Peeters, 2009
HALOT	*The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann J. Stamm. Translated and edited under the supervision of Mervyn E. J. Richardson. 4 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1994–1999
HR	*History of Religions*
ICC	International Critical Commentary
ITC	International Theological Commentary
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*

JCS	*Journal of Cuneiform Studies*
JSOT	*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*
NCB	New Century Bible
NIBCOT	New International Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
OTL	Old Testament Library
RIDA	*Revue international des droits de l'antique*
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
SJOT	*Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament*
TDOT	*Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*. Edited by G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren. Translated by John T. Willis et al. 15 vols. Rand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974–2006
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries
TynBul	*Tyndale Bulletin*
VT	*Vetus Testamentum*
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
ZAW	*Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

At first sight, the patriarchal narratives of Genesis seem an unlikely site for queer reflection, let alone for recovering queer affirmation. These are *patriarchal* stories after all. The narratives thematize and valorize heterosexual procreation. The chosen patrilineage, the focus of most of Genesis, is achieved through sometimes valiant heterosexual relations, and within the confines of what appear to be normative heterosexual marriages and relationships. Genesis, with its incessant patrilineal genealogies, its promises of progeny, its carefully arranged marriages, its unbelievably and miraculously repetitive overcoming of barrenness, seems to embody patriarchal heteronormativity and its "reproductive futurism."[1] The one exception, of course, is Sodom, and one wonders whether queer reflections on Genesis might be damned to remain in the burning city on the plain, struggling for survival.[2] Few have thought that Sarah's tent might be more fruitfully queer than Lot's door.[3] But this is precisely my

[1] "Reproductive futurism" is the idealization of the figure of the Child (itself an ideal construct, not an actual child or actual children); Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004). It is a name for rhetoric which appeals to children (in the abstract) and their idealized future in order to justify an argument, position, or policy. See chapter 5 for a fuller description.

[2] For queer interpretations of Sodom, see Stephen V. Sprinkle, "A God at the Margins?: Marcella Althaus-Reid and the Marginality of LGBT People," *Journal of Religious Leadership* 8 (2009): 57–83; Michael Carden, "Homophobia and Rape in Sodom and Gibeah: A Response to Ken Stone," *JSOT* 82 (1999): 83–96.

[3] Sarah and Abraham receive those names about half way through their narrative. In general, I use these divinely bestowed names, rather than their previous names of Sarai and Abram. However, when

claim. In the face of Genesis's unrelenting straightness, I argue in this dissertation that Abraham and Sarah are Queer.[4]

Setting aside for the moment this startling thesis, we might begin, as so many critical projects begin, by taking a second look at our first impressions. Under the influence of the queer insights of the last several decades, many of these initial impressions of Genesis' heteronormativity begin to transform or evaporate. First, we can complicate the notion that the narratives in Genesis describe anything heterosexual. Heterosexuality, like its twin homosexuality, is a modern construction.[5] Even sexuality, as a distinct domain of experience and identity, is a modern construct. Ancient Near Eastern ideas and practices around sex had their own logic, their own associative matrices, and their own ways of participating in the inextricably interrelated domains of politics, religion, and personal life. From the relatively meager evidence available to us, these ancient ways of "doing" sex were quite different from those found in 21st century U.S. contexts. Therefore, any attempt to describe Genesis as heteronormative must acknowledge and in some way address the norms around sex, gender, and reproduction specific to Genesis (whether its narratively constructed world, that of its historical

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interpreting specific passages which precede the name change, I use the names that they carried in those contexts.

[4] As I explain below, Queer refers to a cross-cultural category, while queer refers more specifically to the usual contemporary sense of queer associated with the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and other gender or sexuality transgressing communities.

[5] Jonathan Ned Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Michel Foucault, *An Introduction*, vol. 1 of *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1978); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

authors, or both).[6] While this project does not describe Genesis as heteronormative—in fact, I will be arguing the opposite, that Genesis is surprisingly queer—wrestling with a description of ancient Near Eastern norms will still be a crucial part of my work.

There is a second way that my (and I suspect many others') first impressions transform under queer reflection. This transformation concerns the nature of narrative and of text more generally. Even if we identify elements of patriarchal heteronormativity in Genesis (or its ancient Near Eastern context, whatever that might be), the import of that normativity would still be an open question. Does the presence of normative elements mean that that text is unequivocally endorsing normativity?[7] This seems unlikely, as the biblical text is unequivocal about very little. How then, does normativity operate in the text, and how do other ways of being—non-normativities, deviances, queerness—operate in and around that normativity?

Particularly in a narrative so sparse on details, and even sparser on direct narrator evaluation, there is room to move around in the text. The aim of this movement is to gain a different vantage point, a new orientation, that offers a view of the kinks and bends in a text that had first appeared to be so straight. Most interpreters agree that Abraham and

[6] While it is necessary to acknowledge and address the ancient context, it is not necessary to privilege it. Certain types of interpretation, for instance, will address this problem (i.e., the difference between ancient and modern norms) by dismissing the ancient context as irrelevant for its purposes. It is also possible to playfully merge those contexts, to queer the boundary between them, and to otherwise resist the tendency of biblical scholarship to maintain the binary division between ancient and modern contexts (and to privilege the former), but problems of misdescription and misappropriation may begin to arise when the two are *carelessly* conflated.

[7] To understand the issue at stake, see the conversation between Junot Díaz and Paula M. L. Moya, "The Search for Decolonial Love: A Conversation between Junot Díaz and Paula M. L. Moya," in *Junot Díaz and the Decolonial Imagination*, ed. Monica Hanna, Jennifer Harford Vargas, and José David Saldívar (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), in which they discuss the problem of representing racist attitudes and actions realistically in a work of fiction without endorsing or perpetuating racist ideas, and indeed while simultaneously resisting those ideas.

Sarah do not embody the norm or ideal for their context, insofar as they lack a male heir through the primary wife for most of the narrative. The questions at the heart of my project are (1) whether or not the non-normativity (queerness) that they model for us throughout their stories must be overshadowed, erased, or denied by the eventual outcome (the continuation of the privileged line of descent) and (2) whether or not Abraham and Sarah's resistance to normativity can be productively linked, through the term "queer," with the experiences and politics of queer people today.

Identifying Queerness in an Ancient Text: Comparison

How do we move from asking the question of queerness to offering an affirmative answer? The process is complicated, and in fact the question of queerness first raises more questions. What does "queer" mean? How can queerness be recognized, particularly in an ancient text with its own set of norms and deviances?

One of the central problems in biblical hermeneutics is how to bridge the world of the text with the world of the reader. The world of the text (this can mean either the world of the author or the world represented in the text, but I am concerned almost exclusively with the latter, acknowledging that one must wrestle with the former in order to understand the latter) has its own language with its own concepts, its own criteria for what is thinkable and what kinds of lives are livable. Often these don't match up neatly with the world of the reader and its language, concepts, "thinkabilities" and "livabilities." But the catch, of course, is that readers can only access, describe, and think about the world of the text through their own worlds.

To help bridge this divide, I use Jonathan Z. Smith's comparative method. The method is designed to help the scholar avoid the most common pitfalls of comparison, in part by ensuring the scholar will contextualize the comparands and balance similarities and differences. The similarities connect ancient and modern concepts, while the differences prevent collapsing the two into one another. In addition, Smith's method asks the scholar to be transparent about the purpose of the comparison. Smith's summary of his method is worth quoting at length:

> I would distinguish four moments in the comparative enterprise: description, comparison, redescription, and rectification. Description is a double process which comprises the historical or anthropological dimensions of the work: First, the requirement that we locate a given example within the rich texture of its social, historical, and cultural environments that invest it with its local significance. The second task of description is that of reception-history, a careful account of how *our* second-order scholarly tradition has intersected with the exemplum. That is to say, we need to describe how the datum has become accepted as significant for the purpose of argument. Only when such a double contextualization is completed does one move on to the description of a second example undertaken in the same double fashion. With at least two exempla in view, we are prepared to undertake their comparison both in terms of aspects and relations held to be significant, and with respect to some category, question, theory, or model of interest to us. The aim of such a comparison is the redescription of the exempla (each in light of the other) and the rectification of the academic categories in relation to which they have been imagined.[8]

The first step, *description*, involves describing both comparands on their own terms and in their own contexts, along with a brief literature review. As Smith's language of a doubled doubling suggests, this task can be quite extensive. The scholar inevitably makes choices about what aspects of the "social, historical, and cultural environments" should be described, as well as which scholarly conversation partners are most appropriate. Moreover, what counts as "most appropriate" will inevitably be determined by the author's purpose.

[8] Jonathan Z. Smith, "The 'End' of Comparison: Redescription and Rectification," in *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age*, ed. Kimberley S. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 239.

These descriptions of the comparands can be understood as the kind of background that a scholar might offer in any project, regardless of whether the project uses comparison explicitly or only implicitly (scholarship always involves at least implicit comparisons). A description situates the subject so that the argument about it (which takes place most explicitly in the *redescription* step) will make sense. Moreover, a good description helps the reader evaluate whether or not the scholar misinterprets the data, perhaps by interpreting them in a way that does not fit their context. Descriptions also minimize the possibility that the argument misleads by omission. In general, a full description forces the scholar to show that their redescription coheres and interprets the comparand completely, rather than explaining one aspect of it while conflicting with another.

Note that, when this method is used to structure an argument in writing rather than to do the mental work of comparison, there is an element of deception by omission in these descriptions. The description is supposed to provide a thorough contextualization, but it cannot contain those elements which are crucial to the redescription. That is, one of the functions of the ensuing steps of the comparison is to call attention to some aspect(s) of the comparands that had previously been ignored or misinterpreted. While the scholar has already identified these aspects, she cannot discuss them transparently in the description without voiding the comparison of its purpose and rhetorical effect. If the scholar were to write the description as he understands it (at the time of writing, after the mental work of comparison had been accomplished), there would be no opportunity for redescription. In this sense, Smith's method is at least in part a rhetorical method: it tells us how to best articulate and report the insights which comparison stimulates, in addition to helping to achieve new insights through acts of comparison.[9]

But the method is not just rhetorical. In addition to the redescription of the comparands, which it might be possible to accomplish without the rhetorical assistance of the comparison, Smith's method is about the interplay between the redescriptions of the comparands and of the category of which the comparands are exemplars (or the theory or model which the comparands illustrate). Smith captures this aspect of his method in his brief statement explaining the second step, *comparison*, which he says should proceed "with respect to some category, question, theory, or model of interest to us."[10] This category, question, theory, or model is what Smith elsewhere calls the "third term" of the comparison.

Smith invokes "third term" twice in *Drudgery Divine*, and both passages suggest that for Smith, the third term is a generic category of which the comparands are both examples.[11] He describes the third term as a "pattern" which the comparands exemplify.

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[9] Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 52.

[10] Smith, "The 'End' of Comparison," 239

[11] Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 33, 99. Smith's articulations of the "third term" are expressed primarily through example (in some accordance with his method) rather than explicitly. Thus, it is unsurprising that this terminology has been appropriated variously by other scholars. In some cases, "third term" has the same function as in Smith, but the failure to understand its categorical nature gives its use less clarity and power; see Grant LeMarquand, *An Issue of Relevance: A Comparative Study of the Story of the Bleeding Woman (Mk 5:25–34; Mt 9:20–22; Lk 8:43–48) in North Atlantic and African Contexts* (New York: Lang, 2004), 8. In others it is used to refer to something else altogether (in what I take to be a misinterpretation of *Drudgery Divine*); see Ryan S. Schellenberg, *Rethinking Paul's Rhetorical Education: Comparative Rhetoric and 2 Corinthians 10–13* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2013), 51. In so far as he identifies the comparands as "exempla," my use follows the understanding of David Frankfurter, "Comparison and the Study of Greek Religions in Late Antiquity," in *Comparer in Histoire des Religions Antiques: Contraverses et Propistions*, ed. Claude Calame and Bruce Lincoln (Liége: Presses Universitaires de Liége, 2012), 86–87, 93–94, although I think that he too underestimates the usefulness, for the sake of both clarity and the step of

This pattern, I contend, is best understood as a category of religious phenomenon. Whatever we call it, this pattern or category—the third term—will take center stage in the final step of Smith's method, *rectification*. I find most helpful in understanding Smith's use of "third term" his notes that each comparand "is but an instance" of the third term, that the third term has to do with genre ("generic"), and that comparison is "vertical." This verticality is taxonomical: comparison horizontally at the same level of a taxonomy (between "species" of religion, for example) must take place with respect to a higher level of taxonomy, as well (a type or "genus" of religion).

There are two reasons for Smith's insistence on this "generic" third term. First, Smith is resisting the tendency within religious studies to use comparison to answer historical questions about influence and dependence, questions which have been riddled with apologetic biases. Due to this tendency, much of the theoretical reflection on comparison as a method in religious and biblical studies has been dedicated to avoiding pitfalls in arguments around influence and dependence. According to Smith, the way to avoid these fruitless questions is to focus instead on creating categories which can help explain the comparands and the patterns of similarities and differences that the scholar observes between them.

The other reason that Smith insists on this third term is simply that these categories or patterns are what interest him. Ultimately, Smith is more interested in the categories, because of what they suggest about the nature of religion in general, than he is in the specifics of any one religion. That is, even the redescription of the comparands,

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rectification, of describing the third term as a category rather than as a "phenomenon," which he uses in reference to both species and generic "patterns."

which for some scholars might be an end in itself, is only a means for Smith to a greater end, which is the "rectification" of a category.[12]

There is one more thing to be said about the nature of the third term. Because it is a category to which the comparands belong, the third term is not inherent in either comparand. Smith stresses that the third term, as with every step of comparison, is a product of the scholar's mind.[13] In the context of Biblical Studies, this means that it will not be a biblical term. If a biblical concept or word is chosen as the third term, it must be understood in a more general sense, as a larger category in which the biblical understanding is one particular example, not the final determinative evidence for the meaning of the category at large. David Frankfurter emphasizes that comparison therefore involves a very specific and useful approach to the divide between "emic" insider understandings and modern "etic" outsider understandings.[14] The third term is etic, the scholar's own idea, but the "emic" understanding is accommodated, if the comparison is successful, as one example of this modern category. As I describe below, this makes the comparative method quite useful for describing the relationship between the modern category "queer" and the ancient biblical text.

I return now to Smith's second step, *comparison*, to emphasize that the comparison must balance both similarities and differences. Here again, Smith argues for a balance between similarities and difference in order to avoid the pitfalls of comparisons

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[12] Jonathan Z. Smith, "The Bare Facts of Ritual," *History of Religions* 20 (1980): 112–127, illustrates this well (although in this essay the rectification happens without help from explicit comparison).

[13] Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 50–53.

[14] Frankfurter, "Comparison," 88–89.

focused on genealogy, dependence, and borrowing.[15] Due to the nature of my comparands, and particularly their cultural, generic, and temporal differences, these particular pitfalls pose little risk for my project.[16] Thus, my reasons for attending to the work of similarities and differences are related to their positive benefits and functions rather than to the potential pitfalls of underestimating one or the other.

According to Smith, the third step of the method, *redescription*, is accomplished through the comparison of similarities and differences. However, he never explains how this happens: how does the process of identifying similarities and differences (in light of the scholar's purpose and in reference to the third term) help us to redescribe the comparands?[17] At least one way, which I will take advantage of throughout this dissertation, is through the dynamic interplay between the similarities and differences: comparison leads us to question the similarities and differences, and to put them in

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[15] Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 36–48; Brent A. Strawn, "Comparative Approaches: History, Theory, and the Image of God," in *Method Matters: Essays on the Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Honor of David L. Petersen*, ed. Joel M. LeMon and Kent Harold Richards (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2009), 118–24.

[16] There is undoubtedly a relationship between the Bible and contemporary queerness, primarily but not exclusively through the role the Bible has played and continues to play in the construction of the norms against which queer people resist. But this relationship is at most tangential to my comparisons. However, this relationship does connect directly to one of my motivations for making the comparison, which is to intervene in the standard way of constructing the relationship between queerness and Bible by suggesting an alternative conception of that relationship. In any case, I am interested here in the relationships which people create, in their own minds, between the two, not in historical, causal relationships between the two.

[17] The lack of clarity about how redescriptions work is one of Smith's greatest omissions. This is, after all, where the real work of comparison happens. Smith's failure to offer a better analysis of redescription has allowed the process to remain obscured with a veil of mystery, the "magic" to which Smith's well-known title refers ("In Comparison a Magic Dwells," in Patton and Ray, *A Magic Still Dwells*, 23–44). Moreover, Smith's insistence on the importance of difference, and not just similarities, makes more sense when one understands the role played by difference in the process of redescription. Smith (and others) highlight how focusing on similarities and differences prevent particular common problems in religious and biblical studies, but this narrow focus has distracted from the role that similarities and differences play in the comparative process more generally. I hope that my explanations and practices with respect to redescription will at least partially fill this gap in Smith's work.

perspective, each on the basis of the other. In light of the similarities, should we reconceive or reimagine the comparands so that the differences are not so stark (and vice versa)?

This is how I interpret Smith's insistence that comparison requires "a playing across the 'gap.'"[18] This "play" is the way that comparisons send us back and forth between the similarities and the differences, and the way this "back-and-forth" leads us to see those similarities and differences differently than we did at first, and thereby to redescribe the comparands. This means that the similarities and differences are not fixed. They are not givens, somehow inherent to the comparands and their "facts." They, like the third term, are always a product of the scholar's mental work, and, more importantly for the purposes of the redescription, they are always changing based on new information and reflection. As we see more similarities, those similarities inflect and nuance the differences we saw at first. What appeared similar on first glance becomes less significant as we look closer at the differences. This dialectical processes of mutual changes to the apparent similarities and differences reveals new things about the comparands which we had not noticed, or allows us to reframe, re-theorize, or otherwise rethink the data we had already seen; in other words, the changes that the similarities and differences inspire in each other lead to our redescriptions.[19]

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[18] Smith, "In Comparison," 40. This quote is often cited by scholars who invoke Smith, but, to my knowledge, it is never explained.

[19] Smith hints at this dynamic when he states that, "comparison … is an active, at times even playful, enterprise of deconstruction and reconstruction which, kaleidoscope-like, gives the scholar a shifting set of characteristics with which to negotiate the relations between his or her theoretical interests and data stipulated as exemplary" (*Drudgery Divine*, 52) and when he asks, "What differences can be defensively relaxed and relativized in light of the intellectual tasks at hand?" (Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987], 14).

Finally, the fourth step of Smith's method is *rectification* of a category. Specifically, the category which comparison will improve or correct is that which served as the third term of the comparison. For Smith, this is the purpose of comparison: to improve our understanding of something more general than just the comparands. We must learn something about a category, a framework, or a theory. The way in which one or more of the comparands are redescribed should lead to this rectification. Because the comparison helps us see the comparands differently, and because the comparands are exemplars of the category, we will end up seeing the whole category differently.

Comparative Queerness

My appropriation and application of Smith's method to Abraham, Sarah, and the problems of cross-cultural queerness, which I describe in this section, has two tiers: the dissertation as a whole is structured around one overriding comparison, while each chapter is structured around its own "sub-comparison."[20] In general, both of these levels compare the Abraham and Sarah narratives in Gen 11–21 (or aspects thereof) with accounts of contemporary queer people. I chose these accounts because each exemplifies some aspect of queer experience which is of particular interest given my comparative purpose. They of course are not representative; no small collection of queer people can ever capture the wide diversity of queer lives and experiences. However, I also believe

[20] In addition to these overarching comparisons, other, smaller comparisons play important supporting roles. In general, these smaller comparisons are between the Abraham/Sarah narratives and other biblical or ancient Near Eastern documents. These comparisons are not formally structured according to Smith's method. For the most part, these are the same comparisons that have often been made by previous interpreters of the narratives, but I reinterpret the comparisons, usually by focusing on differences where other scholars have emphasized similarities.

that the queer accounts used here are not idiosyncratic, and that they capture shared experiences of queerness.

The chapter-level comparisons offer the clearest structure, for each chapter explicitly includes descriptions, comparisons, and redescriptions, in that order. These comparisons are between passages or themes in the biblical narrative and accounts, stories, theories, or institutions involving queer people. Each chapter offers in-depth descriptions of the relevant aspects of both the biblical narratives and the queer stories. The chapters then compare these materials with respect to their respective third terms, highlighting both similarities and differences. Finally, they each explicitly articulate a redescription in the form of new interpretations of the biblical stories and some relatively brief comments about how the comparisons shed a different light on the queer accounts. These comparisons depart from Smith's method in that they do not always offer a rectification of categories. My interest, in contrast to Smith, is in the redescription, particularly of the biblical materials. There will of course be implicit or potential rectifications of the third terms, but I rarely emphasize these.

The comparands and third term for each chapter are as follows: the wife-sister stories and accounts of queer passing, with respect to passing (chapter 2); Abraham's strategies for securing an heir and commitment ceremonies, civil unions, and same-sex marriage, with respect to legitimate alternatives (chapter 3); Sarah's childlessness and stories of childless queers, with respect to childlessness (chapter 4); Sarah's reactions to Isaac's conception and birth and queer theories of tragic representation, with respect to inverted tragic representation (chapter 5); the arrangement with Hagar and transnational gestational surrogacy, with respect to intersecting differences (chapter 6).[21]

For the highest level comparison, which I make throughout the dissertation, the third term is "queer."[22] In other words, I argue that both Abraham and Sarah and the subjects of the contemporary accounts exemplify queerness. At this level, Smith's four steps of comparison appear fractured, because one part of each step occurs in each chapter. Thus, the full description of Abraham and Sarah can be found in the smaller-level descriptions of each chapter. Similarly for comparisons and redescriptions. In other words, the comparisons of the chapters, taken together, constitute the larger comparison.

The conclusion offers some final redescriptions and the rectification of the category "queer." The rectification of this category is one goal of the dissertation because it supports my thesis that Abraham and Sarah are queer. I demonstrate this thesis through the combination of the rectification of queerness in the higher-level comparison and the redescriptions of the biblical narratives in each chapter. That is, I redescribe Abraham and Sarah, and then argue that these redescriptions show them to be queer, given the new understanding of queerness that the overall rectification offers.

The Queer Category

My suggestions for re-imagining queerness are intended to make more precise a cross-cultural application of the category "queer." The contemporary meaning of queer

[21] The third term for chapter 6 is actually more specific, but is too long to serve as a chapter title: non-normative families who use ethnic and class difference to pursue greater normativity.

[22] As I explain in detail below, the third term is actually "Queer," a more general, cross-cultural category which encompasses but is not exhausted by the contemporary category "queer." To use this terminology here, however, would be to get ahead of myself.

has emerged in a very specific time and place: late twentieth-century activism and scholarship related primarily to gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and intersex lives.[23] On the one hand, queer serves as an umbrella term which highlights the similarities between these particular non-normative sexual and gender identities and desires. In this sense, "queer" is relatively well-defined: it refers to one or more of the identities or desires that fall under its umbrella. On the other hand, efforts have been made to define the category of queer not only by exemplary members of the category (lesbian, gay, etc.) but by a rule which can help decide whether a particular phenomenon is queer or not. Such rules generally include the idea of non-normativity. Whatever resists or transgresses the norm is queer (though some formulations restrict this to gender and/or sexual norms). The first method of definition, listing specific sexualities and gender identities which "count" as queer, clearly restricts the concept to those times and places in which the specified identities or desires exist. In general, according to this definition "queer" is most applicable starting in the twentieth century and in specific geographic locations. Attempts to apply the term outside of this context, or even in its early phases, require that

[23] Calvin Thomas, "Straight with a Twist: Queer Theory and the Subject of Heterosexuality," in *Straight with a Twist: Queer Theory and the Subject of Heterosexuality*, ed. Calvin Thomas (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 12–18; Ian Barnard, *Queer Race: Cultural Interventions in the Racial Politics of Queer Theory* (New York: Lang, 2004), 10–13; Donald E. Hall, *Queer Theories* (New York: Macmillan, 2003), 12–16, 51–61; Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 1; David M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 62–67; William B. Turner, *A Genealogy of Queer Theory* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), 8–11; Clyde Smith, "How I Became a Queer Heterosexual," in Thomas, *Straight with a Twist*, 60–61; Sean D. Burke, *Queering the Ethiopian Eunuch: Strategies of Ambiguity in Acts* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 39–44; Stuart Macwilliam, *Queer Theory and the Prophetic Marriage Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2011), 9–10; Katherine Gantz, "'Not That There's Anything Wrong with That': Reading the Queer in *Seinfeld*," in Thomas, *Straight with a Twist*, 168; Stuart Macwilliam, "Queer Readings," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Gender Studies*, ed. Julia M. O'Brien (Oxford Biblical Studies Online).

we establish the relevance of some more specific term (transgender, homosexual, gay, etc.) to the person or situation in question.

There are two important consequences of this approach. First, queerness stays attached to particular discourses of sexuality, not to specific acts. For example, anal sex between men would only count as "gay," and therefore as queer, in contexts in which homosexuality was understood as a distinct identity or orientation. In addition, non-normative sexualities or identities may not count as queer if they don't match the contemporary examples which are used to define queerness. For example, in his interpretation of the eunuch in Acts 8:26–40, Sean Burke seems to adhere to such an understanding, given his reluctance to describe the eunuch as queer, instead calling the eunuch a "queering figure" and arguing that he uses "queering strategies" to read Acts.[24] Because "eunuch" is not one of the defining terms of queerness, it cannot be queer, even if it can be "queering."

On the other hand, a definition of queerness in terms of non-normativity opens up the possibility of including phenomena from earlier times and different cultures within the category of queer.[25] No longer would a person or culture need to have an established identity which matches one of the named queer identities in order to be considered queer. In fact, while "identity" is an important feature of contemporary queerness, it need not be present in this more inclusive idea of queerness as non-normativity. A person from a different or earlier culture might resist or transgress sexual or gender norms without it

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[24] Burke, *Queering the Ethiopian Eunuch*, 144, 150.

[25] See n. 23 above.

being a part of a specific identity; such people would be considered queer under the broader definition involving non-normativity, but not under the narrower definition involving specific identities and desires. Notice, too, that under this definition some actions which would be queer in contemporary society may not be in other cultures. For example, there is evidence that in some times and places in the ancient Near East and Mediterranean, sexual penetration was a normative part of male sexuality, regardless of the gender of the person being penetrated.[26] Thus, sexual activity between males that today would most often (though not always) be considered "gay" would not be considered queer in those contexts.

As many theorists have pointed out, this inclusiveness brings both worries and benefits.[27] The worry is that queerness will become diluted to the point of uselessness, and that it might lose its potency for political and social transformation. The benefit is that queerness can gain a history and an increasing number of allies through connections with similar (but not identical) phenomena. Another benefit is that such a formulation helps to avoid anachronistic or culturally inappropriate analyses of sexuality and gender. We are discouraged from beginning our questions with current categories, asking whether David and Jonathan were gay or if Ruth was a lesbian. While these remain possibilities, we are encouraged to begin with a different set of questions, about the norms of the given context and the possible transgression of those norms. Specific identities or formulations of non-normativity will only arise if the context demands it, so we are more likely to keep

[26] Burke, *Queering the Ethiopian Eunuch*, 75–76.

[27] See n. 23 above.

distinct phenomena distinct, even as we identify their commonality as queer in some more general sense.

This project follows, and further develops, this second sense of queerness as non-normativity. I argue that, because of the way that this use of queerness helps us to identify similarities even as we maintain differences, such an understanding of queerness fits well with the comparative enterprise. Moreover, thinking in terms of comparison, and specifically invoking the “third term” as a category to which both of the comparands belong, suggests a slightly different understanding of queerness, one which brings together both senses of contemporary queerness. I argue that contemporary queerness (which I use as an umbrella term for the wide variety of specific forms of queerness in North America, Europe, and Australia beginning around the turn of the twentieth century) is one type of a more general Queerness, which is available as a cross-cultural category, the forms of which must be specified in each case. In these terms, my thesis is that Abraham and Sarah and contemporary queer families both participate in a more overarching Queerness. I also make some initial proposals towards a definition of this broader sense of Queerness, based on the specific similarities between the biblical and contemporary forms of Queerness.

In proposing this comparative understanding of Queerness, I aim to bring more precision, and hopefully more clarity, to efforts at understanding normativity and its transgression across time and space. There is little queer scholarship that addresses the intersection of comparison and queerness, or that theorizes the application of the term “queer” to diverse times and locations. The most substantial methodological engagement with these issues can be found in the introduction and afterword of *Comparatively Queer:*

Interrogating Identities across Time and Cultures, an anthology of essays which identify and analyze queerness outside of the contemporary West. The editors share the basic premises of my comparison:

> If queer is always queer in relation to the normative, it is only queer in historical and cultural context. If queer differs from context to context, it might nonetheless be considered a concept capable of crossing both time and cultures. But if we are going to allow the queer to travel in such a way, we should deploy it comparatively.[28]

This quote captures several components of my method. It focuses on similarities ("queer in relation to the normative"), differences ("queer differs from context to context"), and the usefulness of comparison as a tool for navigating these similarities and differences.

However, the editors also note that whatever comparison actually happens within each essay, it is almost always implicit: they contrast the "explicit object of comparison (the "other" in time or culture) and the implicit one (i.e., the subject of comparison—'homosexuality as we know it today,' as the cliché goes)."[29] That is, each chapter primarily treats a specific temporal and/or cultural context, only rarely drawing explicit comparisons with "familiar" forms of queerness (i.e., LGBT people). As a result, the comparison that is assumed and implied by the use of the term "queer" remains hidden and implicit, and therefore does not contribute to their analyses. Moreover, while several of the essays have the potential to improve our understanding of queerness as a cross-

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[28] Jarrod Hayes, Margaret R. Higonnet, and William J. Spurlin, "Introduction: Comparing Queerly, Queering Comparison: Theorizing Identities between Cultures, Histories, and Disciplines," in *Comparatively Queer: Interrogating Identities across Time and Cultures*, ed. Jarrod Hayes, Margaret R. Higonnet, and William J. Spurlin (New York: Macmillan, 2010), 2.

[29] Hayes, Higonnet, and Spurlin, "Introduction," 2.

cultural phenomenon, the essays generally do not articulate these insights, focusing on arguments that are more particular (redescriptions rather than rectifications).

In her afterword, Valerie Traub notes some of the difficulties in the collection's use of queer as a comparative term, difficulties that I contend could be solved through the use of a comparative method like the one outlined here. First, she notes that "the meaning of queer … seems to function less as a point of contention than a form of working assumption."[30] That is, the queerness of the phenomena being studied is more often than not taken for granted rather than scrutinized and defended. Consequently, queer is used in several diverging ways throughout the essays. Traub suggests that a careful comparison of the various essays with regard to their understandings of queerness might help bring some precision to the term, even as she acknowledges the possibility that such precision may be elusive due to the very nature of the term "queer."[31] "I am not the first to worry," she says, "that the very capaciousness of queer—often seen as its unique promise as an analytical category—might obscure as much as it enables historical understanding."[32] I agree with Traub's implication that, in at least some of the essays in this collection, the non-reflective use of queer does obscure rather than allow insight. My comparative use of "queer," including my insistence on a larger category of "Queer" that would subsume contemporary Western queerness, the examples identified in *Comparatively Queer*, and

[30] Valerie Traub, "Afterword: Comparisons Worth Making," in Hayes, Higonnet, and Spurlin, *Comparatively Queer*, 217.

[31] Traub, "Afterword," 217.

[32] Traub, "Afterword," 218–19.

Abraham and Sarah, preserves the "capaciousness" of the category while allowing at the same time for more precision.

The Comparison Begins

We are ready now to take a first, introductory foray into the overall comparison between the narratives of Abraham and Sarah and the accounts of contemporary queer families. In terms of general description, the biblical materials with which I am concerned—selections from Gen 11–21—find their context in the larger book of Genesis, the first book of the *Tanak* or Old Testament, both of which are often situated for their Jewish and Christian readers as one text among several foundational scriptures. The authorship of these chapters is unknown, although it is likely that multiple authors and editors contributed over many years before the text reached its present relatively stable form. I draw primarily from the Hebrew Masoretic Text, usually following the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) translation. The dating of the composition of Genesis is disputed, but it is relatively clear that it originated in the first millennium B.C.E. (or, in part, perhaps the second). The early authors or editors probably came from ancient Judah and/or Israel, but it is possible that later contributions also took place in Mesopotamia.[33] In general, the world of the narrative is best described as Canaan and nearby territories in the second millennium, despite occasional alleged anachronisms.[34]

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[33] Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12–36: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985), 30–50; Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis*, trans. Mark E. Biddle (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997), xlxxi–lxxxv; John Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975); Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, rev. ed., OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 25.

[34] E. A. Speiser, *Genesis*, AB (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), xliv–xlv; Westermann, *Genesis*, 58–86; John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis*, 2nd ed., ICC (Edinburgh: T&T

The accounts of queer people come from a more diverse set of texts.[35] Prominent among the texts I use are accounts by queer people themselves about a specific aspect of their lives. Others come from academic texts in which scholars describe and quote queer people they have interviewed. Still others are academic analyses of institutions or texts. All of the accounts are in English and come from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. All were published in North America, Europe, or Australia. Each account has its own context: the autobiographical accounts come from anthologies of personal essays, while the scholarly accounts are embedded in works that, in general, describe some aspect of queer life or experience and make some argument about those lives or experiences. Both can be further contextualized within particular corners of the publishing industry and within specific academic disciplines and institutions.[36]

These very general descriptions suggest dramatic differences with regard to the language, composition, temporality, geography, and institutionalization of the comparands. With my purpose of arguing that Abraham and Sarah are Queer firmly in mind, we can also identify some important similarities. Beyond the fact that both comparands are texts, both have a small number of central characters as their focus. It is usually these central characters—Abraham and Sarah in the biblical texts, the queer people in the contemporary accounts—that are the primary focus of my comparisons.

Clark, 1930), xxiv–xxix; Thomas L. Thompson, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives: The Quest for the Historical Abraham* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1974), 313–26.

[35] Note how description, which is the primary purpose here, blends into comparison; to keep the two entirely separate often leads to stilted rhetoric.

[36] Note that the comparands for chapters 3, 5 and part of 6 are of a different nature. I leave their descriptions for those chapters.

That is, according to the texts, who are these people, what do they do and say, and how might we describe them, their situations, and their actions?

One possible difference between these two sets of "characters" is their relationship to reality. We have reason to believe that the queer people described in the contemporary accounts are actual people, and that the accounts closely match reality, while many scholars see Abraham and Sarah as fictional characters who do not correspond to actual historical people.[37] But both of these assumptions are subject to critique insofar as neither can be verified through the texts themselves. In fact, in terms of the rhetoric of the respective texts, both purport to represent real people. Meir Sternberg argues that the biblical text is an example of historiography, not because it represents history but because it claims to do so.[38] Sternberg supports this claim by citing such features as an omniscient narrator, explicit statements about the importance of the history being recounted, and the inclusion of explanations for present-day readers (that is, the present-day of that narrator) of certain features of the earlier times being recounted. Thus, the Bible purports to be describing actual people named Abraham and Sarah, even if we judge the Bible's claims to be historically false.

Similarly, the contemporary accounts also represent themselves as true accounts of history, in that they describe past events in a person's own life or report on a past interview. They use a very different "poetics" from the Bible to convince the reader of

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[37] Westermann, *Genesis*, 73–74; Gunkel, *Genesis*, viii–xi; Skinner, *Genesis*, xxxiii–xxxvi; Thompson, *Historicity*, 315, von Rad, *Genesis*, 40.

[38] Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 30–35.

the truth of their representations of their characters: for example, quotation marks, paratextual titles and publishing information, and prefatory framing by editors or through an introduction and description of academic method. But from my perspective as a reader of texts, I have little or no more ability to evaluate the connection between the contemporary accounts and the realities they say they describe than I do with the biblical text, although there is sometimes the theoretical possibility of tracking down the subjects and interviewing them myself. If I have more trust in the historicity of the contemporary accounts it is because I am more convinced by their rhetoric of reliability than by the Bible's, not because the Bible suggests its own fictionality. Thus, when I focus on the characters in the texts, in both instances I am reading for how they are represented in the texts (which in both cases includes the claim that they represent real people), and in neither can I make claims about real people that transcend what is offered in the texts.

Modern and Ancient Norms

While there are many other potential similarities and differences that could be identified, these are sufficient for setting the stage. In the discussion which follows in this section (on norms) and the next (on gaps), further comparisons will be made (with particular attention to differences). But the purpose of these sections is not primarily to further the comparison, but rather to introduce additional methodological concerns. In this section, I address the identification of norms in both the contemporary queer accounts and the biblical narratives. Because of the inherent connection between queerness and the normativity against which it is defined, being able to identify norms is essential to any queer project. While this section cannot do justice to the complexity of norms and their operation, it is intended to provide additional context for the more particular discussions in the rest of the dissertation.

Heteronormativity

In the contemporary context, the set of norms with which I am primarily concerned is captured by Michael Warner's term, "heteronormativity."[39] Heteronormativity refers to the interrelated discourses, practices, and social institutions which privilege heterosexuality and marginalize other forms of sexuality. A central aspect of the operation of heteronormativity is that it links heterosexuality with marriage, reproduction, and the family, all of which mutually reinforce each other in contrast with other forms of both sex and sociality. But it does not stop there. These features of heteronormativity are inextricably connected with a wide range of other discourses, concepts, and practices, including such apparently disparate domains as debates about free will and choice, the distinction between the private and the public, immigration policy and discourses, and what it means to be a member of a group.[40]

While heteronormativity names the set of norms against which queerness resists, in this project it arises less in the context of the queer accounts that I use as a comparand and more in the context of previous biblical interpretations. That is, I am interested in the ways in which interpretations of Abraham and Sarah have been informed by heteronormative assumptions.

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[39] Michael Warner, "Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet," *Social Text* 29 (1991): 3–17.

[40] Warner, "Introduction," 14.

Part of the way that heteronormativity operates is as ideology, in the sense that it appears so natural and inevitable as to be invisible.[41] Therefore, it operates on the level of basic assumptions, unstated cultural convention, and "common sense." One example is the invisibility of heteronormativity in biblical interpretation. Whenever readers interpret and make coherence out of the given details of the text, they do so with their own ideas of what makes sense and is coherent. For many modern interpreters, an important part of this sense of the world is heteronormativity. Thus, heteronormativity often operates as one of the first sources of direction and control over interpretation. This is always the case, throughout the process of interpretation, but the role of heteronormativity often becomes especially prominent where the text itself is least helpful and where it offers the least direct guidance. Lacking other sources, interpreters default to their own assumptions, including those which have been shaped by heteronormativity. I will discuss this dynamic in much greater detail in my explanation of gaps and gap-filling below.

Identifying Biblical Norms

While heteronormativity is well documented and relatively well understood, the norms operative in the biblical context prove more resistant to analysis. There are two obstacles to gaining a clear understanding of the operative norms in biblical narrative in general and in Gen 11–21 more specifically. First is the often-noted dearth of evidence. Compared to the abundance of data from which to draw conclusions about norms in the

[41] Teresa J. Hornsby, "Heteronormativity/Heterosexism," in O'Brien, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Gender Studies*; Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, "Sex in Public," *Critical Inquiry* 24 (1998), 554–55.

contemporary world, or compared to the textual and material artifacts from post-Enlightenment history, the Bible and extra-biblical ancient Near Eastern sources offer a tiny set of evidence from which to reconstruct the norms of thousands of years of history across a wide geographic area. While such limited data can be mined for many rich conclusions, the nature of norms makes them resistant to this movement from scarcity to certainty. An important aspect of the constitution of norms is repetition and numerical preponderance, both of which are difficult to identify in limited data sets unless the norm is particularly strong.

The second, related difficulty in identifying ancient Near Eastern or biblical norms is determining whether the limited data we have represents the norm or its transgression. Very occasionally the Bible will label a practice as normative or otherwise. For example, Ruth 4:7 identifies the practice of exchanging sandals as the normative method of "confirm[ing] a transaction." But most of the time the Bible is silent about the normativity or lack thereof of the practices it narrates. With respect to the Abraham and Sarah narratives, the preponderance of traditional comparative biblical scholarship has been dedicated to precisely the question of the normativity of its actions with respect to its story world. The more examples scholars can find from outside the Bible of practices that are similar to those of Gen 11–21, the more likely it is that those practices are normative. But even when a handful of roughly similar cases can be found (this is usually the best we can do), whether inside or outside the Bible, there is only enough evidence to make a provisional guess about normativity.

Gaps

This difficulty in identifying biblical norms can be understood as an example of the more general phenomenon of gaps and gap-filling, discussed most notably by Sternberg. These gaps, which are far more pronounced in the biblical materials than in the contemporary queer accounts, play an important role in several chapters. Therefore, I describe here in detail the nature of gaps, criteria for their identification, and how gaps are filled.

That biblical narrative is spare with details is well-rehearsed. There is less certainty, however, about how to interpret this lack of details. When is it appropriate, useful, interesting, ethical, or necessary to try to fill in the details that the narratives leave out, and when is it the opposite? If we decide that a particular missing detail requires elaboration, how do we go about filling in that detail? Sternberg's *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* offers the most comprehensive system that I am aware of for recognizing and interpreting different types of missing details in the text, and he offers several pieces of advice for answering these questions.

First, Sternberg distinguishes between "gaps," which beg to be filled, and "blanks," which are irrelevant. There is no certain, universal criteria for deciding whether a missing detail is a gap or a blank. Identifying a missing detail as a gap worth filling or a distracting blank is, as with everything else, a matter of interpretation and deeply dependent on context. However, Sternberg does offer several guidelines for identifying gaps, some of which will be helpful in this project as I defend my choices to fill particular gaps in the Abraham and Sarah narratives.

In general, a missing detail is a gap (i.e., worth filling) if the text either highlights the detail or requires the detail in order to make sense. Some ways that the text might highlight a gap include having a character ask a question about it or juxtaposing it with another case in which the detail is not missing. We also note gaps, even in the absence of such textual highlighting, when there is some confusion about what is happening or why. That is, there is an interpretive difficulty which raises questions, and the answers to those questions are ways of filling in the gaps. In such cases, the clearer the problem, the more certain the existence of the gap. Some examples of clear problems include the close juxtaposition of contradictory statements and repetitions with clear changes. Another way of describing this situation is that a gap exists if more information is required in order to make the text coherent.

One way that Sternberg explains the connection between gaps and coherence is that, in threatening coherence, the gap is breaking a norm (specifically, the norm of textual coherence). He then generalizes this, arguing that many gaps are created when various norms are broken. Moreover, he describes a pattern in which first there is a breach of a norm, creating an informational gap: we ask questions about why the norm is breached, what the motivation is for the breach, if we understand the norm correctly, etc. Then the closure of the gap leads us either to "restore or replace" the broken norm.[42] The norm is restored when the closure of the gap allows us to see that the norm had not really been broken, while it is replaced when the closure helps us to better understand the norm, either by modifying it, putting it into perspective, or overshadowing it with another norm.

[42] Sternberg, *Poetics*, 205.

Note that Sternberg's use of norms to describe gaps and their filling resonates with my use of queerness as non-normativity: because queerness is non-normative, queer moments in the text will be read as gaps. Therefore, gaps alert us to the possibility of queerness, even if not every gap will end up involving queerness.

Sternberg spends almost no time discussing the process of gap-filling. Rather, he illustrates it in a series of extended interpretations. However, he does mention five "factors" which "direct and circumscribe" gap-filling:

> a. the different materials—actional, thematic, normative, structuring—explicitly communicated by the text;
>
> b. the work's language and poetics;
>
> c. the perceptual set established by the work's generic features;
>
> d. the special nature and laws and regularities of the world it projects, as impressed on the reader starting from the first page;
>
> e. basic assumptions or general canons of probability derived from "everyday life" and prevalent cultural conventions.[43]

In addition, Sternberg specifies three ways in which the text itself directs gap-filling (that is, three examples of factors (a) and (b) above): "directions (e.g., the narrator's filling of a temporary gap), half-directions (fillings voiced by characters, often unreliably), [and] indirections (like metonymy, analogy, verbal echo, generic frame)."[44]

Sternberg's rhetoric often suggests a very clear, objective process, insofar as he uses the language of "control," "directed," "circumscribed," and conversely

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[43] Sternberg, *Poetics*, 189.

[44] Sternberg, *Poetics*, 259.

"illegitimate."[45] However, Sternberg's method of gap-filling is much more open-ended than this language suggests, and not just as a result of its highly contextual nature, which makes the details of each case distinct. Sternberg's factors themselves, and especially the last one ("basic assumptions"), create their own tensions and ambiguities, particularly when put in conversation with Sternberg's rhetoric of "control." Because it is these tensions and ambiguities that allow me to deploy Sternberg's method to queer effect, I focus my attention, with regard to the process of gap-filling, on these areas.

A common critique of much queer interpretation, arguably sometimes justified, is that it too easily finds queerness everywhere, even when it disregards or disrespects the text or context to do so. In Sternberg's language, this is a critique of "illegitimate gap-filling," which Sternberg describes as "one launched and sustained by the reader's subjective concerns (or dictated by more general preconceptions) rather than by the text's own norms and directives."[46] He goes on to explain that such gap-filling solutions "are often based on assumptions that have no relevance to the world of the Bible…, receive no support whatever from the textual details, or even fill in what the narrative itself rules out."[47] I am particularly interested in the middle clause here, in which a proposed gap-filling receives no support from the textual details. More precisely, I am interested in the case in which there is also no textual contraindication to the proposed gap-filling. That is,

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[45] These examples all appear in Sternberg, *Poetics*, 188–89, but such language appears throughout the book.

[46] Sternberg, *Poetics*, 188.

[47] Sternberg, *Poetics*, 188.

the text neither confirms nor denies the interpretation which fills the gap. This would constitute a fourth category of textual “directions” for gap-filling: non-directions.

The line between indirections (clues, hints, etc.) and non-directions will often be blurry, and a lack of directions might signal that the perceived gap is actually a blank. But what happens when the text signals that a missing detail is indeed a gap, but offers no directions about how to fill it? Arguably, if the text does give us directions about gap-filling, we should follow them. That is, there is a kind of interpretive imperative to fill gaps according to the text’s instructions. This is certainly Sternberg’s argument. (To be transparent about my biases, it is not my own. Refusing the text’s directions can not only be interesting; it can also be ethically imperative.[48]) But without directions, can there be a “should”? Is the reader unconstrained in her gap-filling, or is there some other source of constraint?

Two of Sternberg’s factors provide constraints in this situation. According to (d), the reader should take into account the world which the text constructs and, if that world corresponds to a “real” world, then information from that real world can be used to fill gaps. In addition, factor (e) says that the reader may draw on her own experiences to fill gaps in a way that seems reasonable.

Note that this final factor is the only one that is not at all textually based. In other words, gap-fillings that derive exclusively from this extra-textual factor will “receive no support whatever from the textual details,” which, as mentioned above, constitutes one of

[48] See The Bible and Culture Collective, *The Postmodern Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 112-23, 117, 182, 278-79 for a critique of Sternberg’s overly eager alignment with the ideology of the text.

Sternberg's examples of "illegitimate gap-filling."[49] This creates a tension, if not contradiction, in Sternberg's explanation of proper and improper methods for filling gaps: on the one hand he suggests that gaps be filled by non-textual means, and on the other that non-textual gap-filling is illegitimate. Sternberg does not seem to be aware of this tension.

I suggest that the relationship of the personal factor to the textual factors is more complicated than Sternberg allows, and that as a result gap-filling is much less controlled and determined than Sternberg admits. This is especially the case because, as Sternberg describes it, readers generally begin not with the textual factor, but with the personal one. It is only when their initial, common-sense interpretations run into problems that readers turn to other gap-filling factors.[50]

However, it often arises that the reader does not abandon those initial interpretations, because there is no clear reason to. That is, there are no textual contraindications which force the reader to reject their conventional interpretation. In such cases, the reader might easily miss the fact that, in addition to this lack of contraindications there are also no positive indicators. That is, the reader is unlikely to notice that he has filled the gap based on non-directions.

This procedure, in which readers use their own experience, assumptions, and cultural conventions, often with little thought, to help fill gaps for which there are no directions, is one site of queer intervention in this dissertation. More precisely, I identify

[49] Sternberg, *Poetics*, 188.

[50] Sternberg, *Poetics*, 189.

ways in which interpreters use their own heteronormative assumptions to help fill gaps. I suggest that, instead, we refuse to fill those gaps or, perhaps, fill them with queer assumptions instead. One benefit of filling them queerly, despite the fact that there are no more directions for queer filling than there are for heteronormative filling, is that it can help us see that the heteronormative filling, which often has the benefit of a long, unquestioned history, is not textually governed and not necessary. By demonstrating that the queer assumptions can fill the gaps just as coherently as the heteronormative ones (and often in a more "interesting light"), it helps us to see more clearly how the heteronormative assumptions are operating, even if in the end we prefer not to adopt either method of gap-filling, given the lack of directions in the text.

In such cases, there is also the possibility of holding both the heteronormative and queer systems of gap-filling in tension. Sternberg describes the story of David, Bathsheba, and Uriah as a paradigmatic example of how the Bible allows for two, mutually exclusive systems of gap-filling, a literary strategy that has powerful aesthetic effects.[51] There are several aspects of the gap-filling in this story—it truly involves systems, and not just single gaps. But at its heart is the gap captured by the question, "Does Uriah know what David is up to?" Depending on whether we answer this question with a "yes" or a "no," we will interpret all of the interactions between David and Uriah in different ways. Moreover, there are no directions, according to Steinberg, for bringing this gap to closure. Every piece of textual evidence can be interpreted in either direction. In this case, he argues, the text's overall direction acts against closure. Note that it does

[51] Sternberg, *Poetics*, 190–229.

not dissuade us from filling the gaps. To the contrary, the text directs us to fill the gaps abundantly. Instead, it dissuades us from choosing, with any certainty, one way of filling the gaps over another.

Many of the solutions I propose for filling the systems of gaps in the Abraham and Sarah narratives are structurally similar to Sternberg's account of the David, Bathsheba, and Uriah narratives. At each juncture, the text allows for either the heteronormative or the queer gap-filling, and it never directs us to choose one over the other. Therefore, the queer system of gap-filling is equally valid, and can, if the reader chooses, replace the heteronormative system. Alternatively, the reader may prefer to adopt a stance like Sternberg's, which sees in the text a directed ambiguity.

Queer, but not Same-Sex

Finally, I address one anticipated question about my project, and in doing so further elaborate the academic context of my work. The question is this: "Am I arguing that Abraham or Sarah had gay sex?" The answer is, "No, their queerness is not dependent on same-sex sexual activities or desires." As such, my project resonates with scholarship that identifies queerness in unusual places. Specifically, such works argue for queerness that does not involve same-sex sexual activities or desires and does not have gender transgressions, crossings, or ambiguities as a primary theme. This scholarship, which I discuss below under the headings of "queer heterosexuality" and "queer sociality," has implicitly begun the work of rectification that I articulate explicitly in this dissertation, offering examples of queerness that test and sometimes expand the boundaries of the category "queer."

Queer heterosexuality and queer sociality are the natural consequences of two ideas that I introduced above: first, the idea that heteronormativity is concerned with more than just sex acts, and second, that queerness can be defined in terms of non-normativity rather than in terms of identities built around specific sexual orientations and desires. Combining these, we begin to see that queerness involves noncompliance with the nonsexual dimensions of heteronormativity, not just the sexual ones. Thinking comparatively, we can imagine a similar dynamic for multiple "species" of normativity (analogous to heteronormativity) and multiple versions of Queerness.

Francesca Canadé Sautman's article on fairground performers in the *Comparatively Queer* collection (introduced above) offers one example.[52] While gender and sexuality are foci for Sautman, for example in her depictions of competing normativity and queerness in the lives of some bearded women, she also insists that the queerness of the fairground performers transcends gender and sexuality. The performers whose non-normativity was based on gender were not the only carriers of queerness in the fairs. Sautman identifies the full range of non-normativities on display at the fairs as queer. She explains that her perspective is

> a "comparatively queer" made of many forms of blurring and crossing: across national cultures, borders, language barriers, genders, and across a range of performances and ascriptions to "art." "Queer" moves in relation not only to societal norms but also according to a sliding ruler of marginalization underlined by gender and social class and between the places where extremes outside the norm are performed. Thus the "queer" is always in process, shifting, and redeployed in contact with other instances or moments of queer potential, and

[52] Francesca Canadé Sautman, "'Fair is not Fair': Queer Possibility and Fairground Performers in Western Europe and the United States, 1870–1935," in Hayes, Higonnet, and Spurlin, *Comparatively Queer*, 91–112.

> "queer possibility" overshadows any one easily recognizable category of "queer."[53]

Elsewhere, she says, "The 'queerness' of the fair as a performance and exhibit space was unique, with its own ideological and social codes and its multiple transgressions of normative systems, in and outside of gender."[54] Sautman lists gender as one of many forms of queerness, and never lists it in isolation. She contrasts "queer possibility" with "any one easily recognizable category" and highlights its dynamic and unstable nature. Traub notes these features of Sautman's work, which stands out among the essays of *Comparatively Queer* for the ways in which it stretches our sense of the queer, commenting that "Canadé Sautman's vision of a "queer potential,". . ., while erotic, does not depend on specific sexual acts or identities."[55]

In her insistence on identifying queerness that transcends the historical connection between queer on the one hand and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender on the other, Sautman is contributing to a body of scholarship on queer heterosexuality and queer sociality. This dissertation also contributes to this scholarship, particularly in its arguments concerning Abraham and Sarah's queer sociality. There is no clear evidence that Abraham or Sarah ever had sex with someone of the same gender, or that they identified with a gender that did not match their biology. They do not clearly fit in any of

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[53] Canadé Sautman, "'Fair is not Fair,'" 92.

[54] Canadé Sautman, "'Fair is not Fair,'" 96. Her use of "queer possibility" and scare quotes around "queerness" are evidence of Canadé Sautman's struggle to bring precision to the category of queer. They signal the differences between the queerness she identifies and the more common understanding of queerness as an umbrella for specific categories. I would argue that a comparative method like the one I employ here would help Canadé Sautman in this task, and that the queerness she identifies at the fair is yet another specific manifestation of the larger Queer category.

[55] Traub, "Afterword," 217.

the categories that are usually associated with queerness (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender). While it can be both useful and fun to imagine possible queer sex and desires on their part, and while at the margins of my arguments throughout this dissertation I will sometimes make such suggestions, my focus will be elsewhere. This "elsewhere" is best understood in terms of queer heterosexuality and especially queer sociality.

Queer Heterosexuality

Almost as soon as "queer" began to appear in academia in the mid 1990's, scholars were already interrogating possible relationships between queerness and straightness. While such scholarship took a number of approaches, the one that most interests me, and which is most relevant for this project, focuses on non-normative forms of heterosexuality.[56] That is, it argues that sexuality can be queer even when it involves people of the opposite sex. Following an understanding of queer as that which resists normativity, "queer heterosexuality" identifies forms of sexuality which are not same-sex, but still resist heteronormativity, as queer. Some examples of non-normative heterosexualities include non-monogamous relationships, sex involving S/M (sadism and

[56] Another topic related to "queer straightness" is the question of whether a queer straight identity is possible. See Thomas, "Straight with a Twist;" Smith, "How I Became;" Calvin Thomas and Catherine A F. MacGillivray, "Afterword(s)," in Thomas, *Straight with a Twist*; Annette Schlichter, "Queer at Last? Straight Intellectuals and the Desire for Transgression," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 10 (2004): 543–64. In addition, some work that claims to be about "queer heterosexuality" argues that there is a hidden homosexuality, homoeroticism, or same-sex desire operating in a particular text that hadn't been recognized before. This last category of queer straightness, it seems to me, is better understood as just plain queer.

masochism) and/or bondage, incest, cross-generational sex, and sometimes even non-procreative sex.[57]

Rachel Carroll describes several forms of non-normative female heterosexuality in contemporary fiction in *Rereading Heterosexuality*.[58] For example, Carroll analyzes the construction of the spinster in various time periods and with respect to both hetero- and homosexuality, intergenerational heterosexual relationships all along the spectrum of abuse and violence, and the childlessness of sterile human clones. While Carroll brings an explicitly queer theoretical perspective to bear on the texts she interprets, she does not use the term "queer" to describe the non-normative heterosexualities she identifies.

Other examples come from the collection of essays in *Straight Writ Queer*.[59] For example, Celia Daileader reads references to anal sex between men and women in the Renaissance.[60] Similarly, Richard Fantina highlights a woman's anal penetration of a man in Ernest Hemingway's novel *The Garden of Eden* as an exemplary case of a masochistic or submissive masculinity that can be found throughout Hemingway's work.[61] Madeleine Monson-Rosen argues that the incest in Angela Carter's *The Magic*

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[57] In addition to the examples described below, see Sheila L. Cavanagh, *Sexing the Teacher: School Sex Scandals and Queer Pedagogies* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2007) and Berlant and Warner, "Sex in Public," 564-66.

[58] Rachel Carroll, *Rereading Heterosexuality: Feminism, Queer Theory and Contemporary Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012).

[59] Richard Fantina, ed., *Straight Writ Queer: Non-Normative Expressions of Heterosexuality in Literature* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006).

[60] Celia R. Daileader, "Back Door Sex: Renaissance Gynosodomy, Aretino, and the Exotic," in Fantina, *Straight Writ Queer*, 25–45.

[61] Richard Fantina, "Pegging Ernest Hemingway: Masochism, Sodomy, and the Dominant Woman," in Fantina, *Straight Writ Queer*, 46–67.

Toyshop is both queer and serves a queer function.[62] Consider as well Kate Faber Oestreich's essay arguing for the queerness of celibacy in the novel *Adam Bede*.[63] While celibacy is not heterosexuality, it also is not homosexuality. Thus, it serves as another example in which the queerness of multiple sexualities are highlighted, not just those involving same-sex desires.

While my project is closely related to this scholarship that identifies what is queer about certain kinds of opposite-sex sexuality, "queer heterosexuality" is not quite the right category for my argument. The biblical narratives about Abraham and Sarah contain so little information about sexual desires and practices that it would be difficult to identify clearly what is normative and what is deviant with respect to sexuality. The only clear evidence of sex occurs in Gen 16:4, when Abraham has sex with Hagar. There may also be sexual references in Gen 18:12, when Sarah responds to the promise of a child, and some commentators suggest that Sarah has sex with Pharaoh when he takes her as a wife in Gen 12:15.[64] Beyond these few, mostly uncertain examples, what stands out most is the lack of sex, which is emphasized with respect to Sarah in Abimelech's household in Gen 20:4, 6 and which is noteworthy in its absence at the conception of Isaac in Gen 21:1–2. This dearth of clear sexuality makes it difficult to construct Abraham and Sarah's

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[62] Madeleine Monson-Rosen, "'The Most Primeval of Passions': Incest in the Service of Women in Angela Carter's *The Magic Toyshop*," in Fantina, *Straight Writ Queer*, 232–43.

[63] Kate Faber Oestreich, "Deviant Celibacy: Renouncing Dinah's Little Fetish in *Adam Bede*," in Fantina, *Straight Writ Queer*, 82–93.

[64] See J. Cheryl Exum, "Who's Afraid of the 'The Endangered Ancestress'?" in *The New Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible*, ed. J. Cheryl Exum and David J. A. Clines (Sheffield: Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Press, 1993), 92–93.

queerness in terms of their sexuality. Instead, I construct their queerness in terms of their sociality.

Queer Sociality

The concept of queer sociality begins with the fact that the queerness that results from queer sexualities is not restricted to those sexualities, but it impacts many other aspects of life. That is, having a queer identity often means that one's social relationships and one's relationships to social institutions are also queer. Thus, there are queer relationships and queer ways of participating in social institutions which can be, but are not necessarily, related to queer sex acts and desires. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner offer the following list of mundane activities and experiences that are not at all sexual and yet are profoundly impacted by sexuality: "paying taxes, being disgusted, philandering, disposing of a corpse, carrying wallet photos, buying economy size, being nepotistic, running for president, divorcing, or owning anything 'His' and 'Hers.'"[65] While Berlant and Warner emphasize that being queer leads to different experiences of these activities, it is also the case that each of these activities can be engaged in queerly.

As discussed above, heteronormativity encourages people not only to be heterosexual in the bedroom, but to go about their lives in a properly heterosexual way, such as by getting married, having families, and presenting themselves as heterosexually married with children. Marriage and family are not just examples of this phenomenon of the heteronormative bundling of sexual and non-sexual aspects of life: they are the prime example. To recognize the importance of marriage and family to heteronormativity, note

[65] Berlant and Warner, "Sex in Public," 555.

how many of the items on Berlant and Warner's list intersect with, and gain their importance for heteronormativity from, heterosexual marriage and biological reproduction: paying taxes differs depending on marital status and dependents (usually children), disposing of a corpse is often managed and authorized by a family member, wallet photos are stereotypically of children and grandchildren, etc. Queer sociality is interested in the ways that these non-sexual aspects of heteronormativity can be resisted or transgressed. Deviations from these non-sexual norms oppose heteronormativity in a way that complements and parallels sexual deviations, and these deviations are what comprise "queer sociality."

One example of a work that identifies queer sociality is Holly Furneaux's *Queer Dickens.*[66] Some of Furneaux's topics fit into more traditional queer categories, such as noting the homoerotic desires connecting men with their brothers-in-law or highlighting the transgressive masculinity of Dickens's gentle men. But Furneaux also discusses several examples in which the queerness is exclusively social. She argues for a Dickensian theme of men who choose to be single fathers by adopting, and notes how such men refuse to participate in heteronormative familial institutions such as marriage and sexual reproduction. She also notes a male resistance to marriage that runs through Dickens's work: his bachelors are happy, his marriages unhappy, and the marriages that in other contexts would represent the goal or climax are constructed by Dickens as temporary and fragile. It is not that Dickens's happy bachelors are secretly gay; they are

[66] Holly Furneaux, *Queer Dickens: Erotics, Families, Masculinities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

queer simply by being disinterested in marriage, and in their happy contrast with Dickens's portrayals of unhappy marriages.

While Furneaux identifies queer sociality in literary texts, Sara Ahmed uses phenomenology to describe the experience of queer sociality. [67] Most useful for my project is Ahmed's account of "disorientation," which describes one aspect of queer experience of the social world. To get to Ahmed's account of queer disorientation, we must begin with her account of orientations more generally. Ahmed describes how both queer and straight people experience straight privilege and compulsory heterosexuality (which is closely related to heteronormativity). She emphasizes how repeated habitual actions create a world in which certain actions, desires, and ways of being and thinking are easier than others.[68] These ways of living—these orientations to the world—appear as natural. They are often taken for granted and overlooked. They pass unnoticed because they are so usual, so common, and so expected. Straight privilege is the ability to live one's life without noticing this aspect of the world, that it is set up to be easier for some than for others. And compulsory heterosexuality names the fact that it is precisely for heterosexuals that the world is set up, that it is easier to live a heterosexual life than a queer one.

Then Ahmed describes what it is like when someone departs from these usual ways of doing things: it is disorienting. For the onlooker, queer departures are

[67] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); Sara Ahmed, "Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 12 (2006): 543–74.

[68] Judith Butler's theory of performativity (*Gender Trouble*) makes a similar point about how repetition naturalizes.

disorienting because they go against what is expected.[69] This unexpected turn disrupts the regular, taken for granted ordering of the world. For the moment of queer deviation, then, the onlooker must more actively interact with the world, at least until they can reestablish a sense of proper order (often by assigning the queer deviation a marginal or abject place, or by identifying herself in opposition to the queer deviation). Ahmed calls this re-establishment of order "straightening."

On the other hand, for the queer who departs from the usual ways of doing things, their own departures may not seem disorienting, but the world does. That is, when one does not follow the well-trodden, easy path that the world presents, one instead must follow new paths. These new paths must be cleared, and their directions are uncertain, so these paths are experienced as disorientation. It takes extra work to move, to act, and to think in these directions where the way has not yet been made easy by constant and repeated use.

Of course, not every moment in a queer person's life is characterized by the same level of disorientation. Moreover, some people will experience more disorientation than others—and queerness is not the only source of disorientation. But in general, I accept Ahmed's account that disorientation is a common experience of many people who are queer, and of many people when they first encounter people who are queer (or the effects that their queer deviations have caused).

[69] Ahmed does not carefully distinguish between the two types of queer disorientation that I highlight here (the disorientation of the onlooker and of the queer), but various parts of her analysis apply primarily to one or the other.

Several of Ahmed's examples of specifically queer disorientation focus around reproduction and the family, not around more directly sexual practices or desires. When she describes the straight line of a straight life, the most common points she names are marriage and childbirth.[70] Her point is to show how orientations to sexual objects transcend those objects and have thorough-going consequences for social life, so she does not describe the points of a straight life in terms of sexual choices but in terms of familial experiences. That is, while Ahmed has in mind people whose sexualities are queer, and sees their social disorientations as a result of these queer sexualities, Ahmed's queer disorientations are social. Ahmed does not identify disorientations in the bedroom, or in desire, but in the social institutions of marriage and the family.

Finally, Ken Stone provides a rare example of queer sociality in the field of biblical studies.[71] Stone argues that the book of Qohelet is queer, despite the fact that it contains little or no eroticism and the erotic references that do exist suggest heterosexuality. In fact, one of the passages on which he most clearly focuses includes the imperative, directed at a male reader, to love a woman: "Enjoy life with the wife whom you love" (Qoh 9:9). Nevertheless, he argues that Qohelet is queer for two reasons. First, its resistance to the dominant biblical tradition and ideology is similar to the resistance queerness poses against heteronormativity. For example, Qohelet challenges many of the positions taken in other Wisdom literature, such as Proverbs' claim that it is better to be wise than to be a fool. Stone argues that, because of these

[70] Amhed, "Orientations," 554, 567–68.

[71] Ken Stone, *Practicing Safer Texts: Food, Sex and Bible in Queer Perspective* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 135–49.

challenges, Qohelet “occupies something like an ‘oppositional relation to the norm,’” which is one definition of a queer position.[72] In addition, Qohelet encourages a positive attitude to bodily pleasures, a perspective that Stone identifies with queerness and with queer contributions to theology. Both of these arguments can be seen in terms of queer sociality. Stone’s argument assumes certain characteristics of queerness that are not sexual: that it resists dominant ideologies and emphasizes the body and its pleasures. Both this stance toward normativity and this discourse of the body take place in the social sphere, not the sexual (although both are often related to sexuality).

Both queer heterosexuality and queer sociality offer examples of scholarship which, like this dissertation, argue for queerness independent of same-sex sexuality. My thesis and its subordinate arguments are almost all examples of Queer sociality, and most specifically concern Queer forms of marriage, reproduction, and family. While at times I make suggestions about possible sexual preferences that can explain what we see in the text, as I argued above, sexuality is usually not made explicit in the text. Queer forms of family and reproduction, on the other hand, are front and center throughout Abraham and Sarah’s narratives.

[72] Stone, *Practicing Safer Texts*, 142.

CHAPTER TWO: PASSING

> When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, "I know well that you are a woman beautiful in appearance; and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife;' then they will kill me, but they will let you live. Say you are my sister, so that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared on your account." (Gen 12:11–13)

> And Abimelech said to Abraham, "What were you thinking of, that you did this thing?" Abraham said, "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. Besides, she is indeed my sister, the daughter of my father but not the daughter of my mother; and she became my wife. And 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.'" (Gen 20:10–13)[73]

In this chapter I compare the wife-sister stories in Genesis 12 and 20, in which Abraham and Sarah pretend to be siblings rather than spouses, with accounts of contemporary queer passing.[74] The third term for this comparison is "passing in order to avoid negative consequences based on a committed relationship," which I often will refer to simply as "passing." Passing, in this context, means disguising or hiding one's committed relationship, usually by disguising it as another type of relationship (such as when two lesbians pretend to be sisters or friends). For my purposes, "committed

[73] All biblical citations are from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

[74] Sarah's participation in passing is debated. On the one hand, the (temporary) success of the passing and Abimelech's claim in Gen 20:5 suggest that Sarah went along with the plan. On the other hand, her silence and the lack of women's power in the ancient Near East suggest that her agency may have been limited, at best. In line with my argument in chapter 4, I seek to highlight rather than neglect Sarah as an active agent, and so frame the passing as a joint effort.

relationship" is a catch-all for the variety of romantic, sexual, and marital relationships in which Abraham, Sarah, and the queer families are involved. That is, I argue that both the biblical couple and the queer families I analyze are examples of such passing.

In accordance with the comparative method outlined in chapter 1, I begin with descriptions, first of the wife-sister stories, and then of several accounts of people who hide their queer relationships. These descriptions are focused on passing, and in the context of the wife-sister stories this includes a review of interpretive explanations for Abraham's desire to pass. I then identify similarities and differences between the two comparands, again with their various forms of passing clearly in view. This comparison will allow a redescription, primarily of the reason for Abraham and Sarah's passing. I argue that Abraham is not afraid that someone will steal Sarah (a gap-filling explanation based in heteronormative assumptions), but rather because he fears violence based on something unusual, deviant, or perhaps even Queer about his relationship with Sarah. Possibilities for this fear-provoking difference include incest (Abraham and Sarah may in fact be half-siblings, in which case their passing is not an outright lie but deceives by omission) and Sarah's childlessness (see chapters 4 and 5). In terms of the thesis that Abraham and Sarah are Queer and the larger comparison which supports that argument, this chapter suggests that passing is one characteristic of Queerness, and that Abraham and Sarah exemplify that characteristic.

Description: The Wife-Sister Stories

I begin with a description of the two wife-sister stories involving Abraham and Sarah, which are found in Gen 12 and 20. In these stories, Abraham and Sarah, who are married, pass as brother and sister.[75] I also describe the most common interpretation of why Abraham chooses to pass (he is scared that he will be killed so that someone can marry Sarah), and suggest that this interpretation is poorly supported by the available evidence.

Genesis 12

The first example of passing comes early in the section of Genesis that concerns Abraham and Sarah (chapters 11–24). The first we hear of Abraham and Sarah, they are traveling with Abram's father, Terah, from Ur to Haran (Gen 11:31). There YHWH tells Abram to keep traveling "to a land that I will show you" (12:1). He also makes the first of a series of promises, including making Abram "a great nation," blessing him, and making his "name great" (12:2).

Abram is not told in detail where to go, but nevertheless Abram sets off with his family to Canaan. There is an aimlessness in this journey—the fact of traveling without a clear goal, of following a command to "go" without an answer to the question "where?"[76] When Abram arrives in Shechem, YHWH appears and makes his next promise: "To your offspring I will give this land" (12:7). This is a surprising promise, since Abram has no offspring. The complications involved in obtaining offspring were signaled when Abram

[75] It is possible that they use this deception other times, as well (see Gen 20:13).

[76] Umberto Cassuto, *From Noah to Abraham: A Commentary on Genesis VI 9–XI*, Vol. 2 of *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1964), 310, 312, 316, 321; W. H. Bennett, *Genesis: Introduction; Revised Version with Notes, Giving an Analysis Showing From Which of the Original documents Each Portion of the Text is Taken; Index and Map*, NCB (New York: Oxford University Press, n.d.), 175.

and Sarai were introduced with the note that Sarai was childless (11:30), despite the couple's advancing age (Abram is 75 when he sets off from Haran [12:4]).

It is at this point that the first wife-sister story begins, when a famine leads Abram to take his family to Egypt. On the way there, something about his marriage to Sarai, apparently related to her beauty, causes Abram to fear for his life. He asks her to disguise their relationship as siblings in order to save his life. He says to Sarai,

> I know well that you are a woman beautiful in appearance; and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, "This is his wife"; then they will kill me, but they will let you live. Say you are my sister, so that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared on your account. (12:11–13)

Abram's logic is not explicit here, but according to most (if not all) interpreters Abram is scared that someone will kill him in order to take Sarai as a wife. Scholars suggest that such a fear was reasonable in that context, citing examples of texts from the ancient Near East that attest to the insatiability of rulers when it comes to taking others' wives.[77] The implication is that Sarai agrees, and thus begins the first biblical example of passing.

The result of this act of passing is that Pharaoh takes Sarah as his wife, giving Abram a variety of animals, as well as slaves, probably as a bride-price (v. 16).[78] But

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[77] Gunkel, *Genesis*, 170; Skinner, *Genesis*, 248; J. Gerald Janzen, *Abraham and All the Families of the Earth: A Commentary on the Book of Genesis 12–50*, ITC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 24; Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 144; John E. Hartley, *Genesis*, NIBCOT 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000), 193; Bruce Vawter, *A Path through Genesis* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1956), 123; H. C. Leupold, *The Exposition of Genesis* (Columbus, OH: Wartburg, 1942), 424. For a contrary view, see Dean Andrew Nicholas, *The Trickster Revisited: Deception as a Motif in the Pentateuch* (New York: Lang, 2009), 48; Laurence A. Turner, *Genesis*, Readings (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000), 65, 92–93; Miguel A. De La Torre, *Genesis*, Belief (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 150.

[78] In the absence of a woman's father, her brother could arrange her marriage and receive the bride-price; Cassuto, *From Noah to Abraham*, 348; Westermann, *Genesis*, 165.

soon enough Pharaoh learns of the deception, perhaps as a result of the plague that YHWH sends against "Pharaoh and his house … because of Sarai" (v. 17). Pharaoh's response is surprise, anger, and confusion. He cannot imagine why Abram and Sarai would have deceived him this way. "What is this you have done to me?" he asks Abram. "Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her for my wife?" (vv. 18–19). The episode concludes with Abram and company being escorted out of Egypt and their returning to Canaan.

The Passing of Genesis 20

At least 24 years pass before the second example of Abraham and Sarah's passing. In the meantime, Abraham has a son, Ishmael, with Sarah's maidservant (who becomes Abraham's concubine), Hagar.[79] In addition, YHWH has clarified and expanded his promises to Abraham, including specifying that Sarah will give birth to a son, Isaac, with whom YHWH will make his covenant (Gen 17:21). That set of promises also included the name changes from Abram to Abraham and Sarai to Sarah, and indicated that Isaac's birth would come in just a year.

Unlike the first episode, where the famine led Abram and Sarai to Egypt, there is no indication in Genesis 20 why Abraham and his family settled in Gerar. But while there, Abraham and Sarah again pass as siblings. This time the passing comes with a simple declaration and no explanation (at least until later in the story): "Abraham said of

[79] See chapters 3, 4, and 6. I omit summaries of Genesis 13–15; 17–20, since they have little bearing on Abraham and Sarah's act of passing in the wife-sister stories.

his wife Sarah, 'She is my sister.' And King Abimelech of Gerar sent and took Sarah" (Gen 20:2).

Then God comes to Abimelech in a dream and warns him that he is about to die because he took a married woman. Abimelech protests that he didn't know that she was married, and God gives him a second chance, contingent on Sarah's return to Abraham and Abraham's prayer on Abimelech's behalf. Abimelech returns Sarah, along with extra gifts, and Abraham does pray for him. This restores the fertility of Abimelech's household which had been stunted while Sarah was in residence.

Before returning Sarah, however, Abimelech expresses his anger and confusion, just as Pharaoh does in the first episode.

> "What have you done to us? How have I sinned against you, that you have brought such great guilt on me and my kingdom? You have done things to me that ought not to be done. … What were you thinking of, that you did this thing?" (Gen 20:9–10)

This provides Abraham an opportunity to explain himself. His explanation differs from that in Genesis 12. There he emphasized Sarai's beauty, and connected that beauty to his fear of being killed, thus prompting the interpretation that he is afraid that he will be killed because someone wants to steal and marry Sarai.

In Genesis 20, Abraham gives several partial explanations. The first is similar to his statements in Genesis 12, but without the reference to Sarah's beauty. He is worried about being killed "because of my wife" (20:11). He also connects his fear to his perception that "there is no fear of God at all in this place" (v. 11). Abraham's next explanation is that he and Sarah were telling the truth when they said they were siblings: "Besides, she is indeed my sister, the daughter of my father but not the daughter of my mother; and she became my wife" (v. 12). In his final statement, Abraham asserts that God caused him to wander. Moreover, he connects this divinely caused wandering to the sibling-deception, and he admits that this deception was the couple's common practice as they wandered. "And 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'" (v. 13).

As with the first episode, Abraham and Sarah's passing leads to increased prosperity. Unlike the first episode, they are not expelled; to the contrary, Abimelech invites them to settle in Gerar (v. 15), and Abimelech and Abraham later forge a treaty on Abraham's behalf over a disputed well. Directly following this second episode of Abraham and Sarah's passing, Sarah conceives and gives birth to Isaac (21:1–3).

Passing Problems

As I described above, there is a near-consensus that Abraham is afraid that someone is going to kill him so that they can steal Sarah. It is so taken for granted by biblical scholars that calling it the "standard interpretation" is justified. But note that this is a gap-filling explanation, and that the gap is filled through indirection. In the text, Abraham says that he is afraid of being killed "because of" Sarah (20:11), and that he is afraid they will kill him and let Sarah live (12:12). Abraham talks about Sarah's beauty, how the people of Gerar do not fear God, how he and Sarah really are siblings, and how

God caused him to wander, but he never says anything about anyone taking Sarah as a wife.[80]

The theory that Abraham is afraid that he will be killed so someone else can marry Sarah is based on patriarchal and heteronormative assumptions. If Sarah is beautiful, the theory goes, then of course men will kill for her. The interpretation accepts it as a social fact that men will go to great lengths, even murder, in order to marry a beautiful woman. In fact, it posits the desire for a beautiful woman as the most likely cause of murder. It connects the textual details of *murder*, *female beauty*, and *"because of her*" through the "natural" fact of heterosexual desire. This theory gets its power from patriarchal heteronormative common sense, according to which such pursuit of heterosexual desire appears natural and obvious. But it ignores both the evidence of the stories themselves and of other ancient Near Eastern texts about rulers who take other men's wives.

Internal Evidence

As I have noted, the stories themselves never mention the possibility of someone marrying Sarah after killing Abraham, and instead offer a variety of other partial explanations for Abraham's fear. Even Sarah's beauty, which is the central piece of evidence for the standard interpretation, is only mentioned in one of the episodes.

In addition, the humble reaction of the rulers and the outcome of Abraham and Sarah's deception both suggest that Abraham's fear of being killed so that someone can

[80] That the complete reason for Abraham's passing is a gap, and not a blank, is supported by the inclusion of a partial explanation for that passing, and the repetition of the explanation (with differences), in chapters 12 and 20.

marry Sarah is not based in reality. The royal treatment that Abraham receives in both cases—being sent away with large amounts of wealth in one case and being invited to stay with his extra wealth in the other—is a far cry from the murder that Abraham imagines. If there would ever be a time when a ruler might kill a foreigner residing in his land, it would be after uncovering a deception of this sort.[81] Abraham supposedly thinks that an Egyptian or Gerarite is likely to feel entitled to kill him for no other reason than to obtain Sarah. But even after he lies to the monarchs (who, according to several interpreters, can do whatever they please), they still don't want to kill him, either for the deception or in order to keep the beautiful Sarah.[82] While there is a good chance that the rulers' behavior in both cases has been shaped by YHWH's actions (plaguing the rulers' households and threatening Abimelech), nevertheless the rulers' actions do more to call into question than to explain Abraham's actions.

It should also be noted that Abraham does not link his fears specifically to the rulers, but rather to the "Egyptians" (12:12) and Gerarites more generally ("there is no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me…" [20:11]). That is, even if it were true that ancient Near Eastern rulers commonly killed foreigners for their wives (which I argue below they did not), Abraham does not report that he is scared of the rulers, but of all of the people. If Abraham's fear is ungrounded for the rulers, who might have the

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[81] W. Lee Humphreys, *The Character of God in the Book of Genesis: A Narrative Appraisal* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 87; Hartley, *Genesis*, 139.

[82] Basil Atkinson, *The Book of Genesis*, Pocket Commentary of the Bible (Chicago: Moody, 1957), 122; Wilbur Glenn Williams, *Genesis: A Bible Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Indianapolis: Wesleyan, 2000), 162.

power to do such a thing if they so desired, it is even more baseless for the general populations that Abraham claims to fear.[83]

Some commentators argue that the subsequent actions of Pharaoh and Abimelech (when they take Sarah into their households) prove that Abraham was right about the situation and that his fears were justified.[84] But this ignores the fact that, appearing as Abraham's sister rather than his wife, Sarah was available for marriage. The fact that the rulers took Sarah in marriage when they thought she was unmarried says nothing about what they would have done had they thought she was married. However, the rulers' reactions when they find out about the deception—they want nothing to do with Sarah—says quite a bit about what they would have done had they known. They would have avoided her like the plagues they suffered on her and Abraham's account.[85]

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[83] My assumption here is that rulers in the ancient Near East had a greater right and ability to take life than ordinary people. The sources I examine below offer some evidence for this assumption.

[84] Von Rad, *Genesis*, 168; John Barclay Burns, "Pharaoh in the Old Testament: A Literary Degradation," *Proceedings – Eastern Great Lakes and Midwest Biblical Society* 7 (1987), 17; Sarna, *Genesis*, 94; D. Stuart Briscoe, *Genesis*, The Communicator's Commentary 1 (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 128; Pauline A. Viviano, *Genesis*, Collegeville Bible Commentary (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1985), 45; Hartley, *Genesis*, 138; David L. Petersen, "Thrice-Told Tale: Genre, Theme, and Motif," *Biblical Research* 18 (1973), 36; John Otwell, *And Sarah Laughed: The Status of Women in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), 22. Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes, "Sarah's Exile: A Gender-Motivated Reading of Gen 12:10–13:2," in *The Feminist Companion to Genesis*, ed. Athalya Brenner, FCB 2 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993), 228, has a similarly misguided interpretation in which the events of Exodus 1 somehow validate Abraham's fear of being killed on Sarah's account.

[85] Scholars supporting this argument include Susan Niditch, *Underdogs and Tricksters: A Prelude to Biblical Folklore* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 54; Janet Tollington, "Abraham and His Wives: Culture and Status," in *The Old Testament in Its World: Papers Read at the Winter Meeting, January 2003 The Society for Old Testament Study and at the Joint Meeting, July 2003 The Society for Old Testament Study and Het Oudtestamentisch Werkgeselschap in Nederland en België*, ed. Robert Gordon and Johannes de Moor (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 185.

Comparative Evidence from the Ancient Near East

In addition to the evidence from within the text of Genesis 12 and 20, all of the comparative evidence from the ancient Near East suggests that there was no reason for a man to fear that someone would kill him in order to marry his wife. While it is still possible that Abraham had such a fear, the argument that follows shows that such a fear would not match reality, thus calling into question the standard interpretation.

To begin with, there is a strong silence: there are no known cases from the ancient Near East in which a man is killed so that the king can take his wife. But it is not just an argument from silence that supports my contention that Abraham and Sarah's actions are unusual. There is also positive evidence that the situation which Abraham is said to fear—the murder of a husband to take the wife—would be extremely unusual. The comparative texts I will consider are the Gilgamesh epic and the Egyptian "Tale of Two Brothers," as well as the biblical parallels with kings David and Solomon. These are the texts that interpreters cite in order to make the opposite case, that Abraham's fear is reasonable given the tendency of ancient kings to steal wives.[86] What these scholars fail to recognize is that, even though these comparisons do demonstrate that rulers often stole

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[86] Gunkel, *Genesis*, 170; Skinner, *Genesis*, 248; Janzen, *Abraham*, 24; Sarna, *Genesis*, 144; Hartley, *Genesis*, 193; Vawter, *Path through Genesis*, 123; Leupold, *Genesis*, 424; Benno Jacob, *The First Book of the Bible: Genesis*, ed. and trans. Ernest I. Jacob and Walter Jacob (New York: Ktav, 1974), 89. For several contrary views, more in agreement with my argument, see Nicholas, *Trickster Revisited*, 48; Turner, *Genesis*, 65, 92–93; De La Torre, *Genesis*, 150; Ilona Rashkow, *The Phallacy of Genesis: A Feminist-Psychoanalytic Approach* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 42. Bennett, *Genesis*, 180, offers for comparison an additional Egyptian text that states that in the afterlife Pharaoh will "at his pleasure take the wives away from the husbands." While I treat other comparisons below, I relegate this one to a footnote because it is not widely accepted. In any case, it does not substantiate Abraham's fear because (1) as a statement of the afterlife it could easily describe an ideal (in the eyes of Pharaoh) unattainable in reality, and (2) even if, as Bennet claims, Pharaoh was free to take wives in this life as well, this does nothing to explain Abraham's fear of being killed. In fact, it suggests the opposite: Pharaoh could easily take Sarah without first killing Abraham.

wives, they also demonstrate that rulers did not kill husbands in order to do so. While many scholars use the comparative texts to argue that the standard interpretation is justified, and also that Abraham's alleged fears were reasonable, I argue to the contrary that the available evidence suggests that either the standard interpretation should be rejected because it does not accord with the evidence, or else Abraham's fears were not based in reality.

Gilgamesh

The Gilgamesh comparison is based on the fact that Gilgamesh takes women for himself, including married women. Gilgamesh "leaves not the maid to her mother,/The warrior's daughter, the noble's spouse."[87] However, there is no evidence that Gilgamesh is killing the nobles before taking the wives. The parallel (with mothers and warriors) suggests this probably is not the case, unless Gilgamesh was also killing mothers and fathers in order to take their daughters. Gilgamesh's crime is rape, not murder, but if the Gilgamesh epic is to explain Abraham's fear it requires the threat of murder.

David/Solomon

The Biblical examples of kings who take women are David and Solomon. David's impregnation of Bathsheba and his elaborate plan engineering the death of her husband, Uriah, at first seems to provide evidence of a king who murders in order to steal a wife. David does (indirectly) murder Uriah, and he does marry Bathsheba. However, upon closer inspection the tale of David, Bathsheba, and Uriah also fails to provide evidence

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[87] Andrew George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic: Introduction, Critical Edition and Cuneiform Texts,* 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), I.ii.13, 16–17, 24, 28–29.

that the murder of husbands in order to obtain their wives was a common occurrence among ancient Near Eastern kings.

First, the text makes it clear that David's actions are anything but normal. The beginning of the story establishes that the context for David's adulterous behavior was that he stayed at home when he should have been at war (2 Sam 11:1), emphasizing that David was straying from the expected norm for ancient Near Eastern kings.[88] Moreover, the prophet Nathan's judgment of David's behavior also suggests that wife-stealing and husband-murdering were not accepted practices, at least for an Israelite king (2 Sam 12:1–15).

Second, David seems to be interested in sex, not marriage, and at first appears to have no intention of marrying Bathsheba, let alone killing Uriah. Uriah only becomes involved in the adultery (except as its unaware victim) because Bathsheba becomes pregnant (11:5–6). Even then, David tries to avoid killing Uriah.[89] He recalls Uriah from battle and encourages him to go home and have sex with Bathsheba so that the baby's paternity would not be questioned (11:8). It is only when it becomes clear that David's adulterous behavior will become known that Uriah's death is arranged (11:1–15). The method of execution is important, too, in that it is indirect and cannot be attributed to David. David immediately marries Bathsheba and the illusion of propriety can be kept (11:26–27).

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[88] Sternberg, *Poetics*, 193–96; Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 95; P. Kyle McCarter, Jr., *II Samuel*, AB 9 (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1984), 285.

[89] Admittedly, "tried" might be a bit strong. Had David *really* tried to avoid having Uriah killed he probably could have pulled it off.

What is significant for my argument is that David does not feel that he can act with impunity. He cannot simply kill Uriah and take his wife, as interpreters of the wife-sister stories claim is the case for ancient Near Eastern kings. While he does end up killing Uriah and he does end up taking his wife, his actions are all designed to hide the fact that this is what he has done. He knows he has no right to do this, even as king. He plots, murders, and marries not because he wants Bathsheba, but because he does not want anyone to know that he committed adultery, or that he had anything to do with Uriah's death. This is far from Abraham's stated fear, and even farther from interpreters' claims that David's behavior exemplifies the ability of kings from that time and place to murder a resident alien[90] in order to steal his wife (however beautiful she might be).

As for Solomon, we only know that he loved many women, including 700 princesses and 300 concubines (1 Kgs 11:1–3). There is no evidence about how these women came to be "loved" by Solomon. They may very well have been taken in marriage according to the normal customs of the time. There is certainly no evidence that anybody was murdered in the process.

"Tale of Two Brothers"

The Egyptian "Tale of Two Brothers" is the closest example to a case of what Abraham fears: a man being killed because of his beautiful wife.[91] However, even here

[90] The fact that Uriah is not Israelite further supports my argument: David had to be careful about his unethical actions even when his victim was a foreigner.

[91] See Susan Tower Hollis, *The Ancient Egyptian "Tale of Two Brothers": A Mythological, Religious, Literary, and Historico-Political Study*, 2nd ed. (Oakville, CT: Bannerstone, 2008); *The Literature of Ancient Egypt: An Anthology of Stories, Instructions, and Poetry*, ed. William Kelly Simpson, trans. R. O Faulkner, Edward F. Wente, Jr., and William Kelly Simpson, new ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973).

there are important differences. Moreover, the "Tale of Two Brothers" is a complex "fairy tale" filled with unusual and bizarre situations and events; to use it as a measure for "normative" behavior would be a profound (if morbidly amusing) mistake.[92]

The tale is about two brothers, Egyptian gods, Anubis and Bata. The entire story is filled with unusual events, but I summarize below only those features that are most relevant to the wife-sister stories. Bata, the younger, finds himself alone, self-castrated, and with his heart cut out (by himself) and placed at the top of a pine tree. The gods create a "companion" for him who "was more beautiful in her body than any woman in the whole land, the fluid of every god being in her."[93] The sea convinces the pine tree to cut off one of her braids, which the sea brings to the Pharaoh's launderers. The braid has an intoxicating scent, so eventually the Pharaoh orders that the owner of the braid be brought to him. A first group fails to bring her back, because Bata kills them. But a woman in the second contingent offers "every beautiful ornament" and Bata's "companion" agrees to go with her. The Pharaoh makes her his "Great noble Lady," and at the request of the Pharaoh she reveals "the manner of her husband": "Have the pine tree [housing his heart] cut and have it destroyed."[94] The Pharaoh does, and Bata dies (only later to be resurrected as a Bull, and then later as the son of the divine woman and the Pharaoh, the result of an apparent impregnation by mouth from a flying splinter).

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92 Gunkel, *Genesis*, 170.

93 Hollis, *"Tale of Two Brothers,"* 5.

94 Hollis, *"Tale of Two Brothers,"* 6.

In rough detail, the tale does include a king who kills a man on account of his beautiful wife, and so gives evidence that Abraham's alleged fear might actually have had some basis in reality. One important difference is that the Pharaoh marries the woman before killing the husband. Also, the reason for the murder is not entirely clear, since Bata appears to pose no threat. It is certainly not the case that the Pharaoh prefers murder to adultery, since he seems happy enough to commit both, and without any apparent narrative condemnation. (At the end of the story, the wife is judged by her infant son who, according to interpreters, is Bata reincarnated.[95] But the Pharaoh avoids judgment by the narrator or any character.)

When the tale is taken as a whole, it is difficult to imagine using any part of it to describe what was normative in its time and place (not to mention the difficulties in pinning down that time and place and trying to connect it to the also unknown time and place of the wife-sister stories). This is a tale of gods, exceptions, and miracles, not of norms. One gets the sense that Pharaoh was motivated by an irrepressible desire stemming from the wife's divine origins, and that had she not been more beautiful than any human, the Pharaoh would not have gone to such lengths either to marry her or to kill Bata. In Gen 12 both Abraham and the narrator report that Sarai, too, was beautiful. But missing from Gen 12 is the evidence of exceptionalism that is prominent in the "Tale of Two Brothers." It is precisely this exceptionalism, in addition to the important detail that the husband is killed *after* the wife is stolen, that disqualifies the "Tale of Two Brothers" from serving as evidence for a common practice of wife-theft and husband-murder, even

[95] Hollis, *"Tale of Two Brothers,"* 9.

in the case of beautiful wives. Despite its few compelling similarities to the wife-sister stories, the “Tale of Two Brothers” does not lead us to think that there was anything normal or reasonable about Abraham’s fear.

Summary of Comparative Evidence

In sum, the biblical and other ancient Near Eastern texts suggest the following: (1) Ancient Near Eastern rulers were known to steal wives; (2) on very rare occasions, a husband was murdered in association with the stealing of the wives; (3) when a husband was killed, the motivation for the killing was not the wife-stealing; (4) therefore, there is no evidence of a husband being killed so that the ruler can steal his wife, so the standard interpretation that Abraham was afraid of precisely this situation, and that such a fear was reasonable given his context, fails to convince.[96]

If the standard interpretation fails, what might replace it? I argue below that Abraham’s fear of being killed is related to something non-normative about his marriage, perhaps incest or childlessness. As I will show, this explanation makes as much sense of the biblical text, if not more so, than the standard interpretation. This interpretation will be aided by a comparison with examples of contemporary queer passing, to which I now turn.

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[96] One possibility that has been explored by other scholars is that his fear was that someone would kill him to marry Sarah, but that this fear was unreasonable (Nicholas, *Trickster Revisited*, 48; Turner, *Genesis*, 65, 92–93; De La Torre, *Genesis*, 150; Rashkow, *Phallacy*, 42). The explanation is usually that Abraham was xenophobic and so had an irrational fear of the “other.” Note how the statements in the text about Abraham’s otherness can go one of two ways (or both): they imply Abraham’s marginal and vulnerable status, or they imply Abraham’s irrational fear. I find this interpretation compelling, but offer in this chapter an alternative that I find equally satisfying.

Description: Contemporary Queer Passing

Because queer families face threats from a variety of institutions and individuals, they sometimes deem it necessary or useful to hide the queerness of their relationships by passing: disguising their sexual relationships as non-sexual.[97] The context in which queer passing takes place is one of oppression and shame. People who are queer suffer a variety of minor and major oppressions as a result of their gender or sexual identities and practices, from physical violence and verbal harassment to professional and legal vulnerability. Passing is one strategy for avoiding some or all of these negative outcomes.

In addition, queerness is often associated with shame.[98] One of the ways that queer oppression manifests itself is through the shaming of queer practices and identities. This shaming often occurs in impersonal ways that are not directed at any particular individual or family. Rather, this shame is generated through the everyday idealization of heteronormativity and the assumption that deviance from the heteronormative ideal constitutes an imperfect "other." Thus, in addition to helping queer people avoid direct consequences due to their queerness, passing also allows them to avoid the shame that sometimes accompanies the open acknowledgement of queer identities and practices.

Passing has a close relationship to the closet, a central figure in queer thinking and in many queer lives.[99] The idea of the closet assumes that people experience

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[97] Queer passing takes other forms, as well, such as when a transgender man or woman passes as cisgender. However, in this chapter I focus on disguising relationships rather than identities.

[98] Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (New York: Free Press, 1999).

[99] For the most well-known analysis of the closet and its implications for all sexual identities, see Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet*.

themselves as having an authentic gender and sexual identity. When a person manifests a different gender or sexual identity from that authentic one, they are said to be in the closet. That is, people in the closet know themselves to be queer, but live their lives (or at least their public lives) as straight. As a strategy for hiding the nature of a relationship, passing is a common part of being in the closet. However, passing is also a strategy used by people who are not in the closet. For those in the closet, passing is often a long-term, sustained effort, while for those out of the closet it may be more episodic and ad hoc.[100] While passing has received less attention in queer scholarship than the closet, the necessity of passing for the maintenance of the closet suggests that passing is a widespread feature of queer life and that its neglect in scholarship does not reflect its importance.[101] With this background in place, I now offer four examples of queer passing which illustrate some of the contexts in which such passing takes place.

Hillary Goodridge

"And you are?" This is the question that Hillary Goodridge was asked three times while trying to be with her partner, Julie, and her newborn daughter, Annie.[102] Julie had

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[100] For a different distinction between passing and the closet, see Kelby Harrison, *Sexual Deceit: The Ethics of Passing* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2013), 17–20.

[101] For queer passing, see Pamela Caughie, *Passing and Pedagogy: The Dynamics of Responsibility* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999); Claudia Mills, "'Passing': The Ethics of Pretending to Be What You Are Not," *Social Theory and Practice* 25 (1999): 29–51; Maria Carla Sanchez and Linda Schlossberg, eds., *Passing: Identity and Interpretation in Sexuality, Race, and Religion* (New York: New York University Press, 2001); William Ian Miller, *Faking It* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 141–53; Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore, ed., *Nobody Passes: Rejecting the Rules of Gender and Conformity* (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2006); Anna Camaiti Hoster, *Passing: A Strategy to Dissolve Identities and Remap Differences,* trans. Christine Marciasini (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007); Jeffrey McCune, *Sexual Discretion: Black Masculinity and the Politics of Passing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

[102] Hillary Goodridge, "And You Are?" in *Confessions of the Other Mother: Nonbiological Lesbian Moms Tell All,* ed. Harlyn Ailey (Boston: Beacon, 2006), 31–34. In the essay, Goodridge refers to Julie as her

just given birth by cesarean section and Annie was in the NICU. “And you are?” is also the title of the essay in which she describes these interactions and how she came to understand the lamentable power of passing. The first time Goodridge confronts the question, she is trying to return to Julie, confined to her bed, after accompanying newborn Annie to the NICU and watching, for hours, as Annie struggled to breathe. When Goodridge explains to a nurse that she is Julie’s partner, she is turned away: “immediate family only.”[103] Goodridge decides to return to the NICU, where she is challenged again. This time she describes herself in relation to Annie: “Hillary Goodridge, her mother.”[104] The nurses reply that she “can’t be her mother, her mother just had a cesarean.”[105]

Eventually, Goodridge is allowed to be with Annie, and she stays in the NICU until Annie is released and taken back to Julie. Goodridge goes to join them, and is stopped for a third time. Goodridge reports this final conversation:

> “Who are you here to see?”
>
> “Julie Goodridge,” I say.
>
> “And you are?”

“partner.” The language used to describe queer relationships can be complex and fraught with significance. To honor my sources, I deploy the original language, even if this sometimes means using different names for apparently similar relationships.

[103] Goodridge, “And You Are?” 32.

[104] Goodridge, “And You Are?” 33.

[105] Goodridge, “And You Are?” 33.

"Hillary Goodridge, her sister."

"Go right in," the nurse says with a smile.[106]

Alice and Soulla

Alice is the subject of an interview recorded by Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli and Sara Lubowitz.[107] In the interview, Alice describes her relationship with her husband, Paul, who had sexual relationships with men throughout Alice and Paul's forty-eight year marriage. Alice reports being very happy in her marriage, but says that disguising their open marriage as a monogamous heterosexual marriage was not always easy. "The hardest part of our marriage was the secrecy we had to keep for years and years with work colleagues and family, and the agonies and hurts we caused and had to face when some loved ones found out along the way."[108] According to Pallotta-Chiarolli and Lubowitz, Alice and Paul's secrecy—their disguise of their queer relationship as a normative marriage—exemplifies a larger trend. In their studies of women who are married to bisexual men, they find that closeting the bisexuality (i.e., passing as heterosexual) is common. "Our research finds that most women and their partners pretend to the outside world to live conventional heteronormative monogamous lives."[109]

While these couples undoubtedly have a variety of personal and professional reasons for concealing the true details of their marriages, a woman named Soulla explains

[106] Goodridge, "And You Are?" 34.

[107] Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli and Sara Lubowitz, "Outside Belonging: Multi-Sexual Relationships as Border Existence," *Journal of Bisexuality* 3 (2008): 53–85.

[108] Pallotta-Chiarolli and Lubowitz, "Outside Belonging," 64.

[109] Pallotta-Chiarolli and Lubowitz, "Outside Belonging," 74.

one of her motivations for keeping the queerness of her marriage a secret. Soulla's father had disapproved of her marriage from the start because her husband was not Greek, and he was worried that the husband would do something "to shame and dishonor the family."[110] Moreover, Soulla's father held her personally responsible for avoiding this shame and dishonor: " … it would be my responsibility as a woman to keep the marriage together. If anything went wrong, my father threatened to kill him and me."[111] Soulla also felt that her children's well-being might be jeopardized if her family were to find out about her husband's bisexuality. Dying of cancer, she is worried that her family might separate her husband from her daughters.[112]

Married Bisexual and Polyamorous Women

While Alice and Soulla represent women who are married to men who have sex with other men, Alison Moss conducted a study of marriages where the roles were reversed: married bisexual women who had female partners.[113] Many of these women were selective about revealing their polyamorous relationships, and so often passed as monogamous. The women passed as monogamous with those who they thought would be physically or symbolically violent if they knew the truth.[114]

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110 Pallotta-Chiarolli and Lubowitz, "Outside Belonging," 71.

111 Pallotta-Chiarolli and Lubowitz, "Outside Belonging," 71.

112 Pallotta-Chiarolli and Lubowitz, "Outside Belonging," 72.

113 Alison R. Moss, "Alternative Families, Alternative Lives: Married Women *Doing* Bisexuality," *Journal of GLBT Family Studies* 8 (2012): 405–427.

114 Moss, "Alternative Families," 422.

Moreover, the women in Moss's study feared the consequences from the authoritative institutions in their lives if their polyamory were to be revealed. In particular, they feared that if their employers found out they would lose their jobs or their professional licenses or credentials. This loss of licensing is related to another institutional fear: the legal system and the federal government, due to the passage of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA, 1996).[115] DOMA defined marriage as between one man and one woman, thus making it very clear that the women's additional relationships were not and could not be recognized under federal law. Given DOMA and other laws, the women's other relationships could be considered adultery, so the women risked prosecution if the wrong people found out about their polyamorous relationships. This legal threat is what led to the women's fear regarding their professional licenses, since criminal charges often lead to the loss of such credentials. While the Supreme Court has since ruled DOMA unconstitutional (*United States v. Windsor*, 2013), this has done little to remove the legal threats to polyamorous relationships.

Polyfamilies at School

One place that polyfamilies (families in which the parents are polyamorous) often pass is at their children's schools. In her research about polyfamilies' experiences with schools, Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli reports that many polyfamilies have an easy time passing in school because, with the exception of their private sexual activities and intimate moments, they resemble familiar monogamous families. [116] "For example,

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[115] Moss, "Alternative Families," 412, 423.

[116] Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli, "Polyparents Having Children, Raising Children, Schooling Children," *Lesbian & Gay Psychology Review* 7 (2006): 48–53; Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli, "'To Pass, Border or Pollute':

families will give existing and publicly known normative labels to family members in order to pass in schools, such as 'step-dad,' 'step-mum,' 'uncle' and 'godmother.'"[117] Note that the "uncle" example is actually disguising the sexual relationship as siblings: if the man is called the child's uncle, then he is disguised as one of the parents' brothers. Families' reasons for disguising their polyamory include a "fear of legal interventions, social stigmatization and harassment of themselves and their children."[118]

Pallotta-Chiarolli offers one particular example in which race and polyamory both play a part in the families' decision to pass, and in which a false sibling relationship was used as a disguise. Two Australian Aboriginal students called themselves cousins at school, but were actually half-siblings, children of the same father by two different mothers, all of whom lived together in a polyamorous family (the two mothers, both wives of the same husband, passed as sisters in the context of their children's school). The students had been instructed by their parents not to let anyone know about their family situation so that they could avoid harassment from their peers and the possibility that they would be taken away from their family. These fears were exacerbated because the students already were the victims of racial harassment, and their parents had, as children, been removed from their families and taken to mission schools.[119]

Polyfamilies Go to School," in *Understanding Non-Monogamies*, ed. Meg Barker and Darren Langdridge (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2010).

[117] Pallotta-Chiarolli, "To Pass," 183.

[118] Pallotta-Chiarolli, "To Pass," 182.

[119] Pallotta-Chiarolli, "Polyparents," 51.

Comparison of Genesis 12 and 20 with Queer Passing

In this section I offer a comparison between the wife-sister stories and the accounts of queer families I summarized above. The comparison is tightly focused around the third term of passing. Thus, I will begin with a quick argument that both comparands exemplify passing. Most of this section will highlight differences between the examples of passing. It will be primarily these differences that motivate and allow for the redescriptions that follow. In particular, attention to the reasons for passing and the association between disorientation and passing will allow us to redescribe Abraham's reasons for passing and to better see the Queerness of Abraham's wanderings.

First, Abraham's actions in Egypt and Gerar are similar to those of the queer families; in both cases people disguise or hide their relationships to avoid negative consequences based on those relationships. Abraham disguises his marriage as a sibling relationship because he is afraid that he will be killed because of his marriage. Goodridge disguises her lesbian partnership as a sibling relationship so that she can be with her partner and newborn child. Alice and Soulla disguise their husbands' bisexuality and the non-monogamy of their relationships. While Alice is not explicit about what she hopes to avoid through this deception, Soulla seeks to avoid shame and violence. Polyamorous women hide their polyamory, fearing vocational and legal consequences, among others, and polyfamilies hide their polyamory to avoid bullying and the separation of their families. While the nature of the consequences and of the relationships differ in each case, the basic dynamic of hiding a relationship (or certain aspects of it) to avoid something negative is similar. In other words, these families are similar in that they all pass.

Hidden and Disguised Relationships

In addition to the differences mentioned so far, there are many other differences between Abraham's passing and that of the queer families. Among these are the methods used to pass (e.g., some disguise romantic or marriage relationships as siblings, while others simply hide the non-normative aspects of their romantic relationships) and the outcomes of the passing (Abraham and Sarah are separated as a result of their passing, while passing allows many of the queer families to stay together). But the most striking differences, and those that will lead to redescription, concern what the families hide or disguise with their passing.

Each of the people who pass in my examples are hiding or disguising something different. Goodridge is hiding the fact that she and Julie are partners. The language of partnership, and Goodridge's apparent lack of rights in this situation, suggest that the partnership was not a legal one, such as a marriage or a civil union. Moreover, the context of the story suggests a romantic and sexual partnership that, apart from its lack of legal rights, would be similar to a heterosexual marriage in terms of commitments and mutual expectations.

The other examples are different because they involve more than one relationship. Thus, for Alice, Soulla, and the polyamorous families, there is generally one opposite-sex relationship, often a legal marriage, which is not hidden. Instead, only certain aspects of this relationship are hidden, namely the fact that it is not exclusive. On the other hand, these families also involve a variety of other relationships which are hidden or disguised as non-sexual. From the point of view of these relationships (which in some families may be just as central as the legal one), the nature of what is hidden through passing is similar to Goodridge's case: a non-normative relationship.

Abraham and Sarah are different from all of these examples in that they hide their opposite-sex marriage, a marriage which appears to be normative. Thus, while it is similar to Goodridge and the polyfamilies in that a relationship is hidden or disguised, it is different because the relationship that is disguised is normative, at least according to the standard interpretation. But this difference presents a problem. I argued above that Abraham and Sarah's passing is similar to that of queer families in that it avoids negative consequences of the hidden relationships. This description of passing makes sense for the queer examples: they hid non-normative relationships because non-normativity leads to negative social consequences. But the logic seems questionable in Abraham and Sarah's case: why would there be negative consequences to their normative relationship? That is, why would Abraham and Sarah need to hide their relationship if it was normative?

These questions prompt me to reconsider this apparent difference in the normativity of the relationships which are hidden by passing. Under the influence of the similarities in the examples of passing, we can ask if the normativity of the relationships might be more similar (i.e., non-normative) than it first appeared. In opening up this possibility, we are led to ask how Abraham and Sarah's marriage might be seen as non-normative. One possibility, incest, concerns a possible additional difference in the relationship that Abraham and Sarah hide.

Abraham and Sarah's passing may be different from that of the queer families in that the disguise Abraham and Sarah use might not be a complete lie. When they claim to be siblings, it is possible that they are telling the truth. Abraham tells Abimelech that Sarah is actually his half-sister (Gen 20:12). Interpreters are conflicted about the truth of Abraham's statement.[120] If it is true, then Abraham is using one aspect of his relationship with Sarah (their siblinghood) to hide another (their marriage), a dimension that is missing from queer passing. In addition, if Abraham is telling the truth then incest may be an additional background factor in Abraham's decision to pass, a possibility I explore in the redescription below.

Moreover, regardless of whether or not Abraham and Sarah actually were siblings, claiming to be siblings carried a different weight in the ancient Near East than it does for the queer families like Goodridge and the polyfamilies at school who use the same disguise. If Abraham claims to be Sarah's brother, he holds patriarchal authority over her. This is what allows Abraham to enjoy the bride-price when Pharaoh marries Sarah. The brother-sister relationship in the ancient Near East was highly structured, especially in the absence of the father. In general, expectations and roles for contemporary siblings are less structured, more diverse, and do not include such patriarchal dominance (even as I acknowledge that some brothers may continue to exert similar controls over their sisters, this is not the norm in the contemporary U.S.).

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[120] Gunkel, *Genesis*, 221; von rad, *Genesis*, 227–28; Cassuto, *From Noah to Abraham*, 352; Skinner, *Genesis*, 318; Robert D. Sacks, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1990), 143; Nicholas, *Trickster Revisited*, 50; Sarna, *Genesis*, 94–95, 143; Turner, *Genesis*, 65–66; Briscoe, *Genesis*, 177; W. Sibley Towner, *Genesis*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 141; Hartley, *Genesis*, 138, 197; Petersen, "Thrice-Told Tale," 39–40; Bennett, *Genesis*, 228.

Oppression and Shame

So far I have noted that Abraham and Sarah hide an opposite-sex, normative relationship (deferring the question of incest for now) while the queer families hide non-normative same-sex, non-monogamous, and extra-marital relationships. In addition, these relationships and the acts of passing can be compared with respect to their contexts of oppression and shame, and their association with different kinds of disorientation.

Recall from the description above that the background for contemporary queer passing involves the twin structures of oppression and shame. Queer families are oppressed and shamed because of their sexual and gender identities and desires. They pass because their non-normative relationships highlight their queerness and therefore make them visible targets for such oppression and shaming. By passing, the oppression and shaming are reduced.

This dynamic is not apparent in Abraham and Sarah's example. Their relationship is not one that is the subject of oppression or shame based on sexual or gender identities or desires, at least not in any explicit or straightforward way. (In my redescription below I will argue that gender identities and sexual desires may in fact be implicitly implicated.) However, both oppression and shame do seem to be present in the wife-sister stories, but their causes are different, as are their relationship to passing.

In both Egypt and Gerar, Abraham had the status of a resident alien, and the text makes this context explicit in both stories (Gen 12:10; 20:1). Resident aliens had a marginal status in ancient Israel.[121] Interpreters often cite Abraham's status as an alien as a compounding factor in his fear of being killed.[122] Because he is an alien, these scholars assert, he stood outside legal protection and was vulnerable to the whims of the local inhabitants. There is little evidence that aliens in the ancient Near East were oppressed to the extent assumed by the standard interpretation (murder for the sake of wife-stealing). Nevertheless, it seems likely that the references in the stories to Abraham's status as an alien are intended to portray his vulnerability, and perhaps the potential for more substantial oppression.

The primary evidence for the status of resident aliens comes from the biblical legal codes, which recognize the marginalization, and particularly the economic dependency, of resident aliens, while extending protections to them in order to ameliorate their condition (Ex 22:20–26; Lev 19:9–10; Deut 10:18; 14:28–15:3; 24:17–21). Based on these references, aliens were vulnerable and marginalized but were still afforded some protection. The extent to which this picture of resident aliens extended to neighboring societies such as Egypt and Gerar must remain a matter of speculation.

Oppression related to alien status thus appears to contribute to Abraham's desire to pass. This status made Abraham feel more vulnerable, increasing his fear. While the status still does not explain the extremity of Abraham's fear, it offers a partial explanation and background context for Abraham's passing. This suggests a similarity

[121] Christian van Houten, *The Alien in Israelite Law* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1991); Mark Sneed, "Israelite Concern for the Alien, Orphan, and Widow: Altruism or Ideology?" *ZAW* 111 (1999): 498–507.

[122] Skinner, *Genesis*, 318; Vawter, *Path through Genesis*, 123.

with contemporary queer passing, which also takes place in a context of oppression. However, there is an important difference in the place of oppression in the biblical and contemporary examples of passing. When queer families pass they seek to avoid oppression by hiding or disguising the subject of the oppression: their queerness. In contrast, Abraham does not pass by hiding his alien status, the source of his oppression. That oppression is a contributing factor to his passing, but his passing seeks to overcome this potential oppression less directly, by hiding his relationship rather than his alien status. Again, this difference raises the question of why he would hide his marriage with Sarah if oppression based on his alien status is the cause of his fear. In the redescription below I suggest the possibility that an additional source of oppression, one more directly related to his marriage, helps to explain this logical difficulty.

In addition to oppression, shame is in the background of the wife-sister stories, as well. Marriage in the ancient Near East was patriarchal, as is reflected in Abraham's prominent role in contrast with Sarah's invisibility and silence throughout much of Genesis 11–24. One aspect of this form of patriarchal marriage is the expectation that men would control the sexuality of the women in their households. Failure to uphold this expectation caused shame.[123] This background makes Abraham's willingness to allow Sarah to enter Pharaoh's and Abimelech's households particularly dramatic. Whatever led Abraham to pass must have been so threatening that he was willing to risk the shame

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[123] Ken Stone, "Gender and Homosexuality in Judges 19: Subject-Honor, Object-Shame?" *JSOT* 67 (1995), 95; Renata Rabichev, "The Mediterranean Concepts of Honour and Shame as Seen in the Depiction of the Biblical Women," *Religion and Theology* 3 (1996), 52–53.

that would result from his failure to control and retain exclusive access to Sarah's sexuality.

This shame is very different from the shame associated with queerness, but it is worth noting that both are reflections of and help to sustain patriarchy and normative sexualities. In terms of passing, the relationship between the passing and the shame is inverted in the two cases: queer passing is often motivated by a desire to avoid shame, while Abraham and Sarah's passing puts Abraham at increased risk of shame. It is also worth noting that, to the extent that shame is operative in the wife-sister stories, it is gapped. The context of patriarchal control of women's sexuality is not made explicit in either story, nor is the potential shame to which Abraham is exposing himself. In contrast, shame is explicitly mentioned as an issue in several of the queer passing examples, including Soulla and the polyfamilies at school.

Disorientation

A final point of comparison between biblical and queer passing involves the role of disorientation. First, both contexts are similar in that they are marked by disorientation. As I discussed in chapter 1, disorientation is a common queer experience, and it can be seen in several of the examples of queer passing. The persistent difficulties Goodridge faces in reuniting with her partner and daughter are disorienting to her; they prevent her from following the easy, straight path through the hospital that would be open to a heterosexual partner. Similarly, Alice and Soulla must constantly negotiate their way through a set of relationships which have no model. They must not only negotiate the terms of their marriages, but with regard to passing they must decide who to trust and figure out how to conceal their husbands' sex lives. There are no well-worn paths for these negotiations and decisions; Alice and Soulla, together with their husbands, must make their own way. In both of these examples passing is used as a strategy to deal with some of the disorientation of queerness. Passing creates one line, one path which allows for a partial reorientation, or at least a partial reprieve and place of safety in the midst of the disorientation.

The wife-sister stories are marked by disorientation, and Abraham and Sarah use passing as a strategy to deal with that disorientation. The disorientation in the Bible is different from that in the queer examples (and I treat those differences more below). Abraham's disorientation can be seen in his wandering: Abraham wanders after leaving his father's home, he wanders into Egypt to escape the famine, he wanders into Gerar for no apparent reason, and he cites his wandering as a reason for his decision to pass. All this wandering suggests a sense of disorientation on Abraham's part. Similar to queers who must make their own paths through life in the absence of normative prior models, Abraham seems to be lacking a clear sense of direction and therefore is making his own path. Abraham's disorientation is reinforced by his use of the verb תעה (Gen 20:13) and its association with "pathless wastes." Insofar as the primary meaning of תעה seems to be something like "to go astray," תעה as "to wander" can be understood as the wandering which follows from going astray; it is what happens when one leaves the normative, well-trodden paths.[124] That is, תעה seems to involve being in a place of disorientation very similar to that which Ahmed describes for queer experience.

One difference between the disorientations in the wife-sister stories and those in the contemporary queer examples is that the biblical disorientation concerns large-scale spatiality and aimlessness. In contrast, Goodridge's example concerns a relatively small space (hospital corridors), and a clear aim which is thwarted. In Alice and Soulla's example, spatiality is not important; the disorientation is more psychological, an uncertainty about decisions rather than a physical disorientation.[125]

Another salient difference is that, for contemporary queers, passing has become a common enough strategy that it has become an orientation in itself. While people often pass when they are in a place of disorientation, passing has taken on its own logic, and has become a well-known strategy which people observe, discuss, and learn from others. In contrast, Abraham and Sarah seem to invent their passing, given the rulers' surprise and confusion when they discover the ruse and the lack of evidence of any similar deception in the ancient Near East.

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[124] Note the way that Daniel Berrigan, *Genesis: Fair Beginnings, Then Foul* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 116, describes Abram and Sarai's time in Egypt, capturing deviance (see above), the disorientation of going astray, and the disorientation of the resident alien (see below): "No sooner are matters of divine preference clarified than a strange deviation occurs on the part of the one favored … Abram takes a wrong turn. Into a dark landscape he goes, a place of deception and moral fog, Egypt. … An outsider, he labors to render himself invisible."

[125] However, Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, helps us see the importance that material objects and spaces have on how we make those decisions (see chapter 1).

Redescriptions of Biblical and Queer Passing

In this final step of the comparative process I use the interplay between the similarities and differences I identified above to redescribe several interrelated aspects of Abraham and Sarah's passing: the normativity of Abraham and Sarah's marriage, the reasons for their passing, and the nature of Abraham's wanderings. Starting from the textual evidence—Abraham's own claims about why he passes—I re-fill the gaps in the text with the perspective gained from the comparisons, arguing that Abraham chose to pass because of his own Queerness and that of his marriage.

Briefly, my argument is that passing because of some sort of Queerness makes more sense of the textual evidence than does the heteronormative standard interpretation. Without the support of the ancient comparative evidence which is usually cited on its behalf, the standard interpretation rests only on heteronormative assumptions about male reactions to female beauty. More compelling, and just as consistent with the biblical evidence (if not more so, because it is rooted in Abraham's own statements), is an interpretation which fills the gaps with the help of the queer comparison. The queer examples show that one reason why people hide or disguise relationships is because there is something non-normative about those relationships. Moreover, the comparison reminds us that such non-normative relationships are often subject to regimes of oppression and shame. The text does not make it clear precisely what non-normativity characterizes Abraham and Sarah's relationship, but as I will show it does offer several possibilities.

Why Abraham Passed

There are two passages in which Abraham explains his reasons for passing, and he gives at least four explanations for his passing. In none of these does he mention the possibility that anyone might want to steal or marry Sarah. In only one of the four is Sarah's beauty mentioned. Since Sarah's beauty is the only textual evidence for the standard interpretation of wife-stealing, its absence from most of Abraham's justifications is telling.

Abraham's first explanation comes in Gen 12:11–12: "When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, 'I know well that you are a woman beautiful in appearance; and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, "This is his wife"; then they will kill me, but they will let you live.'" The second explanation comes in the form of a response to Abimelech.

> Abraham said, "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. Besides, she is indeed my sister, the daughter of my father but not the daughter of my mother; and she became my wife. And 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.'" (Gen 20:11–13)

The strongest similarity between the two explanations is that in both Abraham expresses a fear of being killed because Sarah is his wife. In the first, he imagines being killed after the Egyptians identify Sarah as his wife; in the second he explicitly says he feared being killed "because of" his wife. The standard interpretation explains the gapped cause-and-effect in terms of male desire for Sarah, seeing the reference to Sarah's beauty as evidence of this desire. But this explanation ignores the fact that her beauty is only mentioned in Gen 12, not in Gen 20, and that there are other reasons Abraham might be killed “because of” his wife. Moreover, the standard interpretation is forced to discount Abraham’s explanations to Abimelech as lame excuses, because they do not match the interpreters’ pre-formed conclusions about Abraham’s real reasons for passing.

In contrast, an explanation for Abraham’s passing based on non-normativity in his marriage is more consistent with Abraham’s multiple explanations. It takes seriously his repeated claim that he feared for his life because of his wife. But it also takes seriously Abraham’s other explanations, which can be read as references to non-normativity in his marriage.

Death by Incest

First, in the Gen 20 account, the statement that Sarah is indeed Abraham’s sister immediately follows Abraham’s fear of being killed. Usually commentators break Abraham’s speech here into three unrelated excuses, according to which Abraham’s comment about his sister is unrelated to his stated fear of being killed; it is another, separate excuse for his deceptive behavior.[126] I propose instead an interpretation that connects Abraham’s statements, giving them logic and coherence. Abraham mentions the sibling relationship not as a separate excuse, but as an explanation for why he was afraid of being killed. He fears the Gerarites will kill him because of his incestuous relationship.[127]

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[126] For example, see Briscoe, *Genesis*, 177; Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, WBC 2 (Dallas: Word, 1994), 72–73; Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 18–50*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 65, 67–69; Sarna, *Genesis*, 143–44; De La Torre, *Genesis*, 207; Robert Davidson, *Genesis 12–50*, CBC (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 5.

[127] The relationship between incest and queerness is contested and problematic. On the one hand, incest fits some definitions of queer in that it is non-normative sexual behavior. But on the other hand, it is primarily opponents of same-sex marriage who compare incest to homosexuality, and incest is almost never mentioned in queer literature. One exception is Judith Butler, *Antigone’s Claim: Kinship between Life and*

An unusual phrase connects Abraham's statement of fear with his claim that Sarah is indeed his half-sister: וגם־אמנה (20:12). While גם often means "also" or "in addition," its meaning is much more diverse. In particular, it is not uncommon for גם to take on an emphatic sense.[128] For example, this is clearly the case just a few verses earlier, in Genesis 20:5: "Did he not himself say to me, 'She is my sister'? And she herself [גם] said, 'He is my brother.'"[129] It may be the case in Genesis 20:4, as well.

This is the only place where גם appears with אמנה, which means "truly" or "indeed." The only other occurrence of אמנה is Joshua 7:19–20:

> Then Joshua said to Achan, 'My son, give glory to the LORD God of Israel and make confession to him. Tell me now what you have done; do not hide it from me.' And Achan answered Joshua, 'It is true [אמנה]; I am the one who sinned against the LORD God of Israel.

Death (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000). Butler uses Antigone's sibling love as a figure for rethinking what constitutes livability when it comes to objects of love, but she continues to disavow incest. Moreover, even among those who support same-sex marriage, the ethics of incest remain murky; see William Saletan, "The Love That Dare Not Speak Its Surname: What's Wrong with Marrying Your Cousin?" *Slate*, April 10, 2002, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/frame_game/2002/04/the_love_that_dare_not_speak_its_surname.html. I highlight here that I am claiming incest as a possible queer reason for Abraham and Sarah's fear and passing. I do not intend to minimize the differences between incest and more "normative" forms of queerness, nor to comment on the ethics of incest. Moreover, while incest is often used to refer to sexual abuse or rape of family members, I have in mind consensual sex among family members (or, in the case of Abraham and Sarah, at least as consensual as other marriages in that context).

[128] *DCH*, 357; BDB, 169.

[129] It is interesting, but probably a coincidence, that this occurrence is directly related to the content of Genesis 20:12.

Note that here אמנה is used to emphasize the truth of a confession. I suggest that it is used similarly in Genesis 20:12. The NRSV translates וגם as "besides" and אמנה as "indeed" ("Besides, she is indeed my sister. . ."). This gives a disjunctive sense, disconnecting Abraham's fear of being killed from his comments about Sarah being his sister. But we can also translate the phrase as "truly" (I do not translate גם directly, but instead suggest it adds emphasis). The result allows for a close connection between Abraham's fear and his disclosure of incest: ". . .they will kill me because of my wife. [*Truly*], she is my sister, the daughter of my father but not the daughter of my mother; and she became my wife'" (vv. 11–12).

My interpretation is also bolstered by the Septuagint, which begins the translation of v. 12 with *kai gar alēthōs adelphē…* ["For because truly she is my sister…"].[130] The Septuagint translator uses *gar*, which has a clear sense of cause or explanation, thus creating a causal connection between verses 11 and 12.[131] Just as I am proposing, the translator apparently understood Abraham's claim that Sarah is his sister as an explanation for Abraham's fear of being killed.[132]

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[130] Susan Brayford, *Genesis,* Septuagint Commentary Series (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 89.

[131] *GELS*, 93.

[132] Despite her attention to the differences between the Greek and Hebrew versions of Genesis, and particularly of the Sarah/Abraham/Hagar stories, Susan Brayford does not note this subtle change which emphasizes the possibility that verse 12 explains verse 11 (*Genesis*, 324; "The Taming and Shaming of Sarah in the Septuagint of Genesis" [PhD diss., Iliff School of Theology and University of Denver, 1998], 196–200).

Moreover, there is evidence that Abraham may have had a reason to fear being killed for incest. The incest punishments in Leviticus 20 include death for some offenses. While the punishment for sibling incest is that they both be "cut off," the fact that sometimes people were killed for incest is sufficient to explain Abraham's fear. We would not expect any known law code to apply perfectly to these wife-sister stories, which take place in different jurisdictions and time periods. But the fact that incest was sometimes seen as a capital offense explains Abraham's fear, especially as he entered new places where he was unfamiliar with the law. Just as a same-sex couple who married in Massachusetts might worry about their status when they travel to other states, Abraham worried about the implications of unknown incest laws in "every place to which we come" (v. 13). Moreover, some incest laws punished only the man, thus explaining Abraham's fear that he would be killed but Sarah would be spared.[133]

Because God Queered Me

Next Abraham links Queerness to his fear and his motivation for passing, this time through the term תעה. Abraham says "And when God caused me to wander [תעה] 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'" (Gen 20:13). Here, Abraham links his passing directly to what I argue is a Queerly disoriented wandering.

As described above, the word תעה is used to describe a kind of wandering or going astray that is very similar to queer experiences of disorientation. Moreover, there is

[133] Jonathan R. Ziskind, "Legal Rules on Incest in the Ancient Near East," *RIDA* 35 (1988): 79–109.

a close linguistic connection between תעה and "queer." Both use a spatial metaphor to describe deviance, and both commonly have negative connotations. Drawing on these meanings of תעה, it is not a stretch to read Abraham's use of this term as a reference to his own non-normativity. He says that he has "erred" or "gone astray." Depending on the form of this straying, Abraham might have had reason to fear for his life.

There is another similarity between Abraham's use of תעה and queer discourse. When Abraham names his queer wandering, he also locates its cause. He claims that God caused him to wander. Thus, he grants his deviance divine authority. This is not unlike the claim that homosexuality is biologically rooted (or otherwise inherent, including by divine will) rather than an individual choice. It authorizes, explains, and justifies, but more importantly rejects a moral framework (that might apply to a choice freely made) in favor of a framework based on biological diversity. While several queer thinkers have questioned the dichotomy between biology and choice and highlighted the dangers of the discourse of origins, Abraham's assertion of divine origins for his wandering fits clearly within the queer scholarly and activist conversations about the origins of queerness.[134] Thus, not only does Abraham's wandering demonstrate the disorientation involved in his decision to pass, but it can be read as distinctly Queer wandering.

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[134] Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 40–44; David M. Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality: And Other Essays on Greek Love* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 41–53.

Abraham links his fear to his queer wandering with the words ויהי כאשר, which the NRSV translates "and when." But כאשר can also mean "because," as in 2 Kgs 17:26.[135] If this well-attested meaning is used here, then Abraham directly attributes his passing to his divinely caused queer wandering: he tells Sarah to pass "because God caused me to queer."[136]

Can we be more specific about this queerness, about this deviation from the norm which is captured by תעה? In addition to incest, there is one other possible non-normativity in Abraham's marriage that can be used to fill this gap: the childlessness of his marriage. Commentators often note the shame that childlessness inflicted upon women, but it is likely that the same was true for men, as well.[137] Recalling the place of shame in queer passing helps us see why Abraham may have been motivated to pass in order to hide the childlessness of his marriage, even if it is unlikely that this would have led to a fear of death. It is possible that he passes in part because of his and Sarah's childlessness, because their lack of children allows them to pass (their children would have made passing more complicated, if not impossible), and perhaps because he half hopes that it will be successful and he will be free of his childless wife, as has been

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[135] *HALOT*, 1:98–99; *DCH*, 432–33; BDB, 455.

[136] My translation.

[137] Mark K. George, "Masculinity and its Regimentation in Deuteronomy," in *Men and Masculinity in the Hebrew Bible and Beyond*, ed. Ovidiu Creanga (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2010), 74; Harry A. Hoffner Jr., "Symbols for Masculinity and Femininity: Their Use in Ancient Near Eastern Sympathetic Magic Rituals," *JBL* 85 (1966), 327; Sandra Jacobs, "Divine Virility in Priestly Representation: Its Memory and Consummation in Rabbinic Midrash," in Creanga, *Men and Masculinity*, 146–70; David Clines, "Final Reflections on Biblical Masculinity," in Creanga, *Men and Masculinity*, 234–39.

argued elsewhere.[138] Abraham uses תעה as a figure for his childless deviation, which feels to him like "going astray."

In Gen 20:11–13 Abraham gives several reasons for his passing. On the one hand, he explains his fear of being killed in terms of his incestuous relationship with Sarah. On the other, he says that he passes because of his "going astray," which might be related to his childlessness. These explanations for Abraham's fear and his passing are better than the standard interpretation (the king will kill him in order to steal his wife) because they derive directly from the text, rather than relying on a gap-filling speculation. Moreover, I showed above that the ancient Near Eastern evidence mostly contradicts the standard theory, rather than supporting it. While there is no direct evidence for the execution of those who committed sibling incest, there is enough support to justify Abraham's uncertainty and fear regarding his incest and, perhaps, some other unidentified queerness.

There is one detail that still must be reconciled with this interpretation: Abraham's association of Sarah's beauty with his request for her to pass in Gen 12: 11–12. While there is no reason to privilege these verses over those in Gen 20, as the standard interpretation does, the queer interpretation will be more satisfying if it can explain these verses, as well.[139] We need not introduce heteronormative speculation about

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[138] Rashkow, *Phallacy,* 42–46; Naomi Steinberg, *Kinship and Marriage in Genesis* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 55; De La Torre, *Genesis*, 151

[139] Admittedly, the standard interpretation does include a reason for privileging the Gen 12 explanation, or, more accurately, for dismissing Abraham's explanations in Gen 20. Interpreters suspect Abraham's motives in Gen 20, accusing him of inventing excuses for his deceit, trying to get out of trouble once he has been caught. This interpretation is supported by the standard translations which disconnect the three parts from each other, rather than seeing them as interconnected. Interpreters then see the disconnected explanations as evidence that Abraham is futilely reaching for false or half-true excuses. Failing to see the logic of his explanation, interpreters instead claim that Abraham's excuses are poor ones and fail to

wife-stealing to explain the association between Sarah's beauty and Abraham's fear. It may simply have been a matter of attracting the Egyptians' attention. This is, of course, what happens in Egypt (12:14–15). It is not that her beauty would have inspired the Egyptians to kill Abraham, but that it would lead to the discovery of their incest or other Queerness.

Finally, I offer a brief comment about Abraham's final explanation of his passing, his statement that the people of Gerar do not fear YHWH. We can see this statement as an additional reference to Abraham's status as an alien. As I described above, while his status as an alien does not completely explain Abraham's fear, it could be a contributing factor, and thus would make sense as part of an explanation for his passing. This is precisely the context in which it is found, as an introduction to Abraham's three-fold explanation. Abraham reminds Abimelech that, as an outsider he felt particularly vulnerable, so his non-normativity seemed that much more threatening. This is an example of the intersectionality of multiple identities: a marginal ethnic identity magnifies Abraham's experience of the non-normativity of his relationship.

The Deviance of Queer Passing

While the primary purpose of this comparison is a redescription of Abraham and Sarah's passing, it also supports a redescription of queer passing. In particular, it can help us to see the need for passing, rather than queer relationships, as what is truly deviant

convince. This is an example of queer disorientation—in this case the disorientation that queer people provoke in those around them—and the difficulty people have in interpreting queer phenomena.

about queer passing. That is, rather than judging queer families for their queerness, we can condemn the conditions of oppression and shame that lead to queer passing.

Such a redescription results from attention to the ways in which Abraham's and queer passing are generally evaluated. Most commentators think that Abraham has done wrong through his deception, or at least argue that the text portrays Abraham as having done wrong (Sarah is not brought under the same judgment).[140] Walter Brueggemann puts it clearly: "Abraham is a desperate man who will act in prudential and unprincipled ways, even endangering Sarah to save himself."[141] The precise reasons for their accusations vary (his lying or misdirection, his endangerment of Sarah and her honor, or his failure to trust God and his promises for protection), but the condemnation is remarkably common. But there is no condemnation for his marriage, including for its non-normative aspects. His lack of children is never seen as a moral failing, and even

[140] Cassuto, *From Noah to Abraham*, 351–352; von Rad, *Genesis*, 169; van Dijk-Hemmes, "Sarah's Exile," 233; Bill Moyers, *Genesis: A Living Conversation* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 157; Berrigan, *Genesis*, 116–117; Sacks, *Commentary*, 143; Nicholas, *Trickster Revisited*, 50; Thomas L. Brodie, *Genesis as Dialogue: A Literary, Historical, & Theological Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 218; Fredrick C. Holmgren, "Looking Back on Abraham's Encounter with a Canaanite King: A Reversal of Expectations (Genesis 20:1–18)," *CurTM* 37 (2010): 366–77; Turner, *Genesis*, 65–66, 91–93; Briscoe, *Genesis*, 128, 177–80; Pamela Tamarkin Reis, "Take My Wife, Please: On the Utility of the Wife/Sister Motif," *Judaism* 41 (1992), 307–08; Cornelis Houtman, "Between Stigmatizing and Idolizing the Bible: On the Reception of Genesis 12:10–20; 20; 26:1–11," in *Tradition and Innovation in Biblical Interpretation: Studies Presented to Professor Eep Talstra on the Occasion of His Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, ed. W. Th. Van Peursen and J. W. Dyk (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 155–169; Petersen, "Thrice-Told Tale," 38–40; C. T. Fritsch, *Genesis,* Layman's Bible Commentaries (London: SCM, 1959), 54–55; Bennett, *Genesis,* 178; Brayford, "The Taming and Shaming," 197; De La Torre, *Genesis*, 153; Derek Kinder, *Genesis*, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1967), 116, 137–38; Leupold, *Genesis*, 421–425; Hemchand Gossai, *Power and Marginality in the Abraham Narrative* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1995), 111–132.

[141] Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, Interpretation (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 128.

those interpreters who believe that Abraham and Sarah are half-siblings are quick to explain that such marriages would have been normative in that context.[142]

In contrast, in her study of the ethics of queer passing, Kelby Harrison explains that, in contemporary culture, the relationships are judged more harshly than acts of passing. Queer people are actually encouraged to pass so that straights will not have to see or think about their queerness. She cites "common cultural rhetoric that suggests that as long as LGB/Q people act straight in public, they are to be tolerated," and notes how "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," required passing.[143] But under the influence of Abraham's example, we might begin to reverse this equation, and to see contemporary forms of queerness in the same non-judgmental light that we see Abraham's relational non-normativity. Moreover, while I do not suggest we import biblical scholars' condemnations of Abraham's passing onto queer passing, we might impose such condemnation on the conditions which promote passing. Indeed, Harrison notes that, at least some within queer communities view those who pass sympathetically because the community recognizes the oppressive conditions that lead to passing.[144]

Conclusion

This comparison of Abraham and Sarah's passing with contemporary queer examples of passing both supports and is supported by my larger claim that Abraham and

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[142] Gunkel, *Genesis*, 221; von Rad, *Genesis*, 227; Skinner, *Genesis*, 318; Sarna, *Genesis*, 143; Hartley, *Genesis*, 197; Vawter, *Path through Genesis*, 161; Bennett, *Genesis*, 228.

[143] Harrison, *Sexual Deceit*, 5; see also Elizabeth Grosz, *Space, Time, and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 225.

[144] Harrison, *Sexual Deceit*, 77–89. Another queer perspective renders passing as problematic because it supports the heteronormative status quo.

Sarah are Queer. First, it supports this claim by highlighting similarities between Abraham and Sarah and contemporary queers: both hide or disguise committed relationships in order to avoid negative consequences based on those relationships. This suggests that such passing will be a component of the larger category of Queerness for which I am arguing in this dissertation. The nature of the relationships and the negative consequences will differ across various exempla of Queerness, but it appears that a common feature of all the examples is that Queer relationships bring negative consequences and that those consequences motivate passing. It is in this sense that I have begun my argument that Abraham and Sarah are Queer.

Conversely, the argument in the rest of the dissertation that Abraham and Sarah are Queer makes this particular comparison of passing more compelling. The evidence is cumulative; the more evidence of Queerness we have, the easier it is to see any single piece of evidence as Queer. This is particularly true given the argument I make in this chapter: if the dissertation successfully argues that Abraham and Sarah are Queer, then it will be easier to accept that Abraham chooses to pass because he is afraid of the consequences of that Queerness. I will revisit this aspect of the argument in the conclusion, at which point the reader will be better prepared to evaluate all of the evidence taken together.

CHAPTER THREE: LEGITIMATE ALTERNATIVES

> But Abram said, “O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” And Abram said, “You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.” (Gen 15:2–3)

> Now Sarai, Abram's wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian slave-girl whose name was Hagar, and Sarai said to Abram, “You see that the LORD has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my slave-girl; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.” (Gen 16:1–2)

I move in this chapter to a closer focus on Abraham. Specifically, I read the narratives in which Abraham attempts to secure an heir, given Sarah’s childlessness. Genesis 15:1–4 describes a conversation between Abraham and God in which Abraham states that he plans for Eliezer, a member of his household, to inherit. Genesis 16 describes the arrangement in which Hagar, Sarah’s slave-girl, becomes Abraham’s secondary wife and gives birth to Ishmael. Ishmael is Abraham’s heir until Isaac displaces him in Gen 21.

I compare these “heirship strategies,” adoption and having children with a secondary wife, to some of the strategies used by queer families to formalize their relationships, which I call “couplehood institutions”: same-sex marriage, civil unions, and commitment ceremonies. Following Smith’s four-step method as described in chapter 1, I begin with descriptions of Abraham’s heirship strategies as depicted in Gen 15–16 and of the couplehood institutions. I then compare Abraham’s heirship strategies and the couplehood institutions with respect to the third term “legitimate alternative to a familial norm." That is, I argue that they are both examples of such legitimate alternatives, which have some degree of normativity, but less than the norm. Based on this comparison, which involves demonstrating both the legitimacy and the alternativeness of both Abraham's strategies and the queer couplehood institutions, I redescribe both sets of practices. The comparison will help us see how alternative Abraham's strategies are, given the usual interpretive focus on their legitimacy. Conversely, thinking about queer couplehood in relation to Abraham can help us imagine the queer couplehood institutions as more legitimate, less a matter of ethics, and as different options for different people. In addition, I offer an interpretation of Abraham in which he, like many queer couples, values the less normative alternative just as highly as he values his culture's norm, thereby resisting that norm.

Description: Abraham's Heirship Strategies

Abraham has no children, and in particular he has no sons. This means he has no clear heir. Resolving the question of Abraham's heir is an important theme of Genesis 11–24. Abraham and Sarah's lack of children is established early on (11:30), and the text offers several possible solutions for Abraham to secure an heir given Sarah's childlessness. Two of these, the adoption of Eliezer and Abraham's taking Hagar as a secondary wife,[145] are relatively clear, and these will be my focus.[146]

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[145] Some commentators separate a man's taking a secondary wife and a woman's offer of one of her slave-girls as different strategies. While there are differences, the arrangement with Hagar seems to involve elements of both, so for my limited purposes I treat both situations together under the term "secondary wife." That is, my concern is with Abraham's intention to bear a child to be his heir, and from that perspective the exact nature of the relationship with the secondary wife or slave-girl is less important. As we will see, what is important is the difference between the primary wife and this "other woman."

[146] There are other possible strategies which may be implied by the Genesis text, such as adopting Lot or strategically "divorcing" Sarai by pretending that she is his sister; Larry R. Helyer, "The Separation of

Adoption (Genesis 15:1–7)

In Genesis 15, Abraham says that he plans to adopt Eliezer as his heir.[147] The passage begins when Abraham receives a vision containing "the word of the LORD" (v. 1). This is the fourth communication Abraham receives from YHWH. Previously YHWH had made many promises: Abraham will become a great nation and be a blessing (12:1–3), YHWH will give the land near Shechem to Abraham's offspring (12:7), and Abraham will have countless offspring to inhabit Canaan (13:14–17).

The present vision begins rather vaguely, with a promise of protection and rewards. "'Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great'" (15:1). When he responds, Abraham seems to be thinking of the previous promises, about his abundant offspring becoming a great nation. For the first time (but not the last), Abraham challenges YHWH by asking what kind of reward he is to expect given his lack of children. "'O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?' And Abram said, 'You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir'" (15:2–3). In this NRSV translation, it seems clear that Abraham envisions that Eliezer of Damascus, one of his

Abram and Lot: Its Significance in the Patriarchal Narratives," *JSOT* 8 (1983), 82–83; Steinberg, *Kinship and Marriage*, 52–58; Turner, *Genesis*, 73–74; Jacques van Ruiten, "A Miraculous Birth of Isaac in the *Book of Jubilees*," in *Wonders Never Cease: The Purpose of Narrating Miracle Stories in the New Testament and its Religious Environment*, ed. Michael LaBahn and Bert Jan Lietaert Peerbolte (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 9. However, I do not address these other options, because their identification as strategies for securing an heir is more speculative. In addition, even if they are indeed heirship strategies, they are similar enough to the adoption of Eliezer and the secondary marriage with Hagar that they add little to my argument.

[147] See Steinberg, *Kinship and Marriage*, 60–61.

slaves, will be his heir. Interpreters usually identify adoption as the mechanism by which Eliezer would become Abraham's heir.

This clarity is disrupted somewhat by the Hebrew of verse 2, which is notoriously difficult to understand.[148] Eliezer's identity is quite uncertain: his connection to Damascus is unclear, as is his role in Abraham's household. It seems fairly clear that Eliezer is a member of Abraham's household, given the repetition of "house" (ובן־משק ביתי and בן־ביתי; vv. 2–3), even if the precise nature of these designations remains a mystery. That Abraham sees Eliezer as his likely heir is supported by his statement that he will "inherit from me," יורשׁ אתי (v. 3).[149] The repetition of "son" in Abraham's descriptions of Eliezer further supports this reading; he is constructing Eliezer as a substitute son. Thus, while certain details may be unrecoverable, it seems highly likely that Abraham imagines something like the adoption of a member of his household.[150]

In response, YHWH assures Abraham that adoption will not be necessary. His own biological child will be his heir. "This man shall not be your heir; no one but your

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148 Christer Åsberg, "The Translator and the Untranslatable: A Case of *Horror Vacui*," *BT* 58 (2007), 5–9; Sarna, *Genesis*, 382–83; Turner, *Genesis*, 73; von Rad, *Genesis*, 183–184; Skinner, *Genesis*, 279; Gunkel, *Genesis*, 179; for possible solutions involving emendation, see H. L. Ginsberg, "Abram's 'Damascene' Steward," *BASOR* 200 (1970): 31–32; Julius A. Bewer, "Eliezer of Damascus," *JBL* 27 (1908): 160–62; Horst Seebass, "Genesis 15:2b," *ZAW* 15 (1963): 317–19.

149 Focusing on the negative connotations that the root ירשׁ usually bears, L. A. Snijders, "Genesis XV. The Covenant with Abram," in *Studies on the Book of Genesis*, ed. B. Gemser et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1958), 261–279, argues that Abraham fears dispossession rather than adoptive inheritance.

150 "With the help of translatable fragments and with contextual support from v. 2a and v. 3, it is possible to maintain that the content of v. 2b must be something at least very close to the translation given by the REB [Revised English Bible] and many others" (Åsberg, "The Translator," 6).

very own issue shall be your heir" (15:4). YHWH adds an emphatic visual demonstration by telling Abraham that his descendants would be as countless as the stars, and then again promises Abraham the land (vv. 5–7). The rest of chapter 15 narrates the ritual of sealing the covenant through which Abraham is assured that the land would be his.

Having a Child with a Secondary Wife (Genesis 16)

There is a swift transition from YHWH's assurance that Abraham would have his "own issue" in Gen 15 to the birth of Ishmael, his biological son, in Gen 16. Just as chapter 15 begins with a statement of Abraham's lack of children (v. 2), chapter 16 opens with a restatement of Sarah's (v. 1). This is the first time that Sarah's childlessness has been mentioned since it was introduced in Gen 11:30. Since then, Abraham has been promised not just an heir (indirectly in Gen 12:1) but a biological heir (Gen 15:4). Sarah suggests to Abraham that he "go in to" Hagar, Sarah's "slave-girl" (שִׁפחה). While Sarah's stated motivation is personal—she wants Hagar's children to be her own (v. 2)—it is likely that when Abraham agrees, he does so at least in part to solve his own heirship problem.[151] The plan works, at least as far as Abraham is concerned, and Hagar conceives and later gives birth to Ishmael (vv. 4, 15–16). When Ishmael is born, Sarah has dropped from view and Abraham and his new biological heir are front and center. "Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram named his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael" (vv. 15–16). The repetition of Abraham and Hagar's names, three times each in two verses, reinforces Ishmael's connection to

[151] Steinberg, *Kinship and Marriage*, 61–65.

Abraham even as it highlights Sarah's absence. Also reinforcing the Ishmael-Abraham connection is the fact that Abraham names Ishmael.[152] Sarah was the one who wanted to obtain a child, but here the text emphasizes that Abraham has found an heir.

Heirship Strategies and the Larger Abraham Narrative

Having introduced the passages in which Abraham's heirship strategies appear, I now contextualize them in the larger arc of Abraham's narrative in Gen 11–24. One way to read the Sarah/Abraham cycle is as a movement toward the birth of Isaac, the biological son of the primary wife (which I call the "prime bio-son"). Starting with the declaration of Sarah's childlessness in 11:30, the narrative moves through a series of possible resolutions to this problem. I will come back to the events of chapters 12–14, but we get the first explicit mention of an alternative strategy for securing an heir in chapter 15, as we have seen, with Eliezer's adoption. This is soon ruled out, leading to the experiment in chapter 16 with Hagar and the birth of Ishmael. This would seem to solve the problem of the biological heir for Abraham, but in chapters 17 and 18 we learn that this is still inadequate, at least from YHWH's perspective, because YHWH (and/or his messengers) declares that Sarah will bear a child and that child will be the heir. The eventual birth of Isaac to Sarah supersedes that of Ishmael. If the supersession is not

[152] Contrast Jacob's children, who are always named by Rachel and Leah, even when the biological mothers are Zilpah or Bilhah (Gen 30). According to Ilana Pardes, "Beyond Genesis 3: The Politics of Maternal Naming," in Brenner, *Feminist Companion to Genesis*, 176, "biblical naming … usually reveals more about the character of the name-giver than the recipient." In addition to communicating about the character of the name-giver, the fact that one parent is the name-giver may also communicate about the relationship between the name-giver and the child. Pardes points out that both men and women name (17 and 27 times, respectively; p. 175). Thus the narrator has flexibility to about which parent names, and can therefore imbue that choice with meaning. This hypothesis about the significance of which parent names deserves a study of its own.

immediate, it comes quickly when Abraham sends Hagar and Ishmael away, and the narrative focus shifts to Isaac (his binding in chapter 22 and his marriage in chapter 24).

It is also possible that chapters 12–14 take part in this larger structure, even if their strategies for obtaining an heir are not as explicit. If Abraham's deception in Egypt was an intentional ruse to exchange Sarah for a bride-price that he could use to obtain another wife, as some have suggested, then this too can be seen as an alternative strategy for obtaining an heir.[153] Moreover, if Abraham saw Lot as a potential heir, then the events of chapters 13–14 (the separation of Lot and Abraham and Abraham's rescue of Lot from local kings) can be interpreted as an exploration and resolution of this possible, but ultimately rejected, alternative.

The overall structure of this section of Genesis, then, seems to move from one alternative strategy to another, each in response to Abraham and Sarah's failure to create the ideal heir. The question of the heir is what creates narrative tension and what moves the story along: "the promise of an heir receives major attention and gives the narrative its primary dynamic."[154]

Another feature of Gen 11–24 that helps us understand Abraham's heirship strategies is the tension between Abraham's two sons in relationship to their differing

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[153] Steinberg, *Kinship and Marriage*, 54–55; Rashkow, *Phallacy*, 26–48.

[154] Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 109. There is at least one possible objection to this proposed overarching trajectory. If the narrative's structure is directed toward Isaac's birth, as the prime bio-son, why isn't his birth the climax and culmination of the trajectory? Why does his birth receive so little attention, compared to the events which follow (the expulsion of Ishmael and Hagar, the binding of Isaac, and Isaac's betrothal)? Naomi Steinberg proposes that being the prime bio-son was not the only criteria for the normative heir. In addition, the son had to marry a correct wife; that is, a wife in Terah's lineage (Steinberg, *Kinship and Marriage*, 81–86). That is why Isaac's marriage, rather than his birth, is the culmination of the narrative cycle which concerns Abraham's heir.

statuses (prime bio-son and child of a secondary wife). The primary evidence for this dynamic comes from Gen 17 and Gen 21. YHWH returns in chapter 17 and makes more promises, and Abraham learns that Sarah will also bear a son, Isaac. Abraham's first reaction, in v. 18, is to feel protective of Ishmael ("O that Ishmael might live in your sight!"), suggesting that he understands the problem of his heir to be solved: Ishmael will be his heir. In response, God promises to bless Ishmael and his descendants, but says that the covenant that he made with Abraham will be extended through Isaac.

Later, in chapter 21, Abraham again reveals his attachment to Ishmael when Sarah and God express a preference for Isaac. Sarah asks Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away in order to protect Isaac and his inheritance (vv. 9–10). In response, "The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son" (v. 11). This statement gains greater significance from two subtleties. First, this is a rare example where the narrator directly reports a character's emotion.[155] In addition, note the use of "his son," with reference to Ishmael. At this point, of course, Abraham has two sons; but at this moment Abraham is clearly focused on one, his eldest.[156] However, God still convinces Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away, because he insists that Isaac will be the heir: "it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you," says God (Gen 21:12). When

[155] There are no other examples in Gen 11–24 where the narrator directly informs us of a character's emotions. Two examples, Gen 15:6 and Gen 16:4 come close, in that they give access to a character's psychology, but neither quite expresses an emotion. More commonly, the narrator gives hints about emotions by describing characters' words and actions, for example in Gen 17:17–18. As I point out in chapter 5, such hints can be surprisingly difficult to decipher. Abraham's distress over Isaac in Gen 21:11 is particularly noteworthy given the lack of any such emotional report in the next chapter, when he is asked to sacrifice Isaac.

[156] Cf. Gen 22:2, a similar case of selective filial attention.

Abraham follows through and sends them into the wilderness, any last tension between the different strategies of heirship, manifest here through the two possible heirs, is resolved.[157]

Biblical Parallels for Abraham's Heirship Strategies

In addition to contextualizing Abraham's heirship strategies in the larger narrative in which they are embedded, we can also situate them in relationship to other similar practices in the Bible and in the ancient Near East. With respect to adoption, there are just a few other cases of adoption or potential adoption in the Hebrew Bible. Samuel Feigin argues that polygamy and Levirate marriage combine to provide children to most families, making the need for adoption rare.[158] The most commonly accepted example of adoption is that of Ephraim and Manasseh by Jacob (their grandfather) in Gen 48:5. Feigin also points to the possibility of adoption by Leah and Rachel of their slave-girls' sons (Gen 16:2; 30:3). Finally, his most provocative example is Jephthah, for whom he finds both linguistic and contextual evidence of adoption.

With respect to having a child with a secondary wife, the primary biblical example other than Abraham and Hagar is Jacob with Zilpah and Bilhah, the slave-girls of Leah and Rachel. Jacob, Rachel, and Bilhah's actions in Gen 30:1–8 attest to a very

[157] The question of heirship is not completely settled, but the remaining obstacles to the heir (particularly his near-sacrifice in Gen 22 and his need to find a wife in Gen 24) do not focus on different strategies of heirship. The only other candidates for heirs, Keturah's children, are dispatched with little attention (Gen 25:1–6).

[158] Samuel Feigin, "Some Cases of Adoption in Israel," *JBL* 50 (1931): 186–200. Note that Feigin's argument assumes that adoption is a less-preferred alternative to biological children (people do not adopt because the ideal of biological children is relatively easy to achieve through polygamy and/or the Levirate), thus supporting my argument below that adoption is an alternative to the norm.

similar situation as to what we find among Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar in Gen 16. Rachel is unhappy about being childless, and she offers Bilhah to Jacob as a secondary wife. Bilhah then conceives two sons. One important difference between Abraham's and Jacob's cases is that Jacob was not childless when he had a child with Bilhah. He already had several children with Leah. Therefore, it is less likely that Jacob was motivated by a desire for an heir than it is for Abraham.

The case of Jacob's children with Zilpah adds an additional difference. Bilhah's children appear to somehow alleviate the dilemma posed by Rachel's lack of children. However, Leah is not childless when Jacob has children with her maid Zilpah; she already has four sons. But Leah has ceased bearing, at least temporarily, and she appears to think that Zilpah's children will still benefit her, regardless of the fact that she already has biological children.

Ancient Near Eastern Parallels for Abraham's Heirship Strategies

Adoption

In addition to the Biblical evidence, there is evidence of both adoption and having children with secondary wives across time and space in the ancient Near East.[159] There is evidence for many types of adoption, including adoptions related to marriage, the adoption of orphans, "pseudo-adoptions" that are thought to be fictional adoptions required for certain real estate transactions, and adoption by childless couples or

[159] Jack Goody offers cross-cultural anthropological evidence that adoption is a common strategy used by childless couples to establish an heir (*Production and Reproduction: A Comparative Study of the Domestic Domain* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976]). Cross-cultural support for taking additional wives in the case of childlessness comes from Dora R. Mbuwayesango, "Childlessness and Woman-to-Woman Relationships in Genesis and in African Patriarchal Society: Sarah and Hagar from a Zimbabwean Woman's Perspective (Gen 16:1–16; 21:8–21)," *Semeia* 78 (1997): 27–36.

individuals.[160] The evidence comes primarily from law codes, adoption contracts, and letters.[161]

Among the many laws mentioning adoption, two from the Old Babylonian Laws of Hammurabi (CH; ca. 1750 B.C.E.) are noteworthy. First is a law that states that if a man does not treat his adopted child the same as his biological children, he must return the adopted child to its previous home. “If a man should not reckon the young child whom he took and raised in adoption as equal with his children, that rearling shall return to his father’s house.”[162] The following law, CH 191, is similar, in that it concerns the relationship between adoptive and biological children and their inheritance:

> If a man established his household (by reckoning as equal with any future children) the young child whom he took and raised in adoption, but afterwards he has children (of his own), and then decides to disinherit the rearling, the young child will not depart empty handed; the father who raised him shall give him a one-third share of his property as his inheritance and he shall depart; he will not give him any property from field, orchard, or house.[163]

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[160] Note that people adopt for many reasons, only one of which is to obtain an heir. This means that my depiction of adoption as a legitimate alternative to an ideal heir does not apply to every case of adoption, but only to those in which obtaining an heir is the motivation for the adoption, as it is with Abraham.

[161] Elizabeth C. Stone and David I. Owen, *Adoption in Old Babylonian Nippur and the Archive of Mannum-mešu-lissur* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1991); Jonathan Paradise, “Nuzi Inheritance Practices” (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1972); Peter Raymond Obermark, “Adoption in the Old Babylonian Period” (PhD diss., Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, 1991); A. H. Gardiner, “Adoption Extraordinary,” *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 26 (1941): 23–29; M. P. Maidman, “A Socio-Economic Analysis of a Nuzi Family Archives,” (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1976); Stephen J. Andrews, “The *Šupe”ultu* ‘Exchange’ Transaction at Nuzi,” (PhD diss., Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, 1994); Martha T. Roth, *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor*, 2nd ed. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 50, 64; E. A. Speiser, “New Kirkuk Documents Relating to Family Laws,” *The Annual of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 10 (1928–29): 1–73; Van Seters, *Abraham*, 85–87; Thompson, *Historicity*, 203–230.

[162] Roth, *Law Collections*, 119, CH 185; for other examples, see 50, Sumerian Laws Handbook of Forms iv 25–28; 64, Laws of Eshnunna 35; 163, Middle Assyrian Laws 28.

[163] Roth, *Law Collections*, 119–20, CH 191.

In addition to these examples of adoption in ancient Near Eastern laws, there are many adoption contracts, particularly from the Old Babylonian period. These contracts testify to a wide variety of adoption scenarios, including men adopting one or more sons, couples adopting, step-parents adopting, and, more rarely, single women adopting.[164] Some of the adoptions seem to be intended for other purposes, such as adopting a daughter in order to marry her off and apparently "fictitious" adoptions that may have been conducted in order to transfer land (which was supposed to stay in the family).[165] These contracts use adoption to justify some further end, suggesting that adoption is normative enough to legitimize other relationships or transactions.

Secondary Wives

There is also substantial extra-biblical evidence for having a child with a secondary wife, including in the case of the primary wife's childlessness. One prominent example is a Nuzi adoption/marriage contract (HSS V 67) in which the bride is obligated, if she remains childless, to supply her husband with a concubine for the purposes of child-bearing: "If Gilimninu bears (children,) Šennima shall not take another wife; and if Gilimninu does not bear, Gilimninu a woman of the Lullu as wife for Šennima shall take. As for (the concubine's) offspring, Gilimninu shall [not] send (them) away."[166] This contract is most widely known because of the specification of the rights of the

[164] Stone and Owen, *Adoption in Old Babylonian Nippur*, 4–5.

[165] Maidman, "A Socio-Economic Analysis," 92–123; Jonathan Paradise, "Marriage Contracts of Free Persons at Nuzi," *JCS* 39 (1987), 1–2.

[166] Thompson, *Historicity*, 252–69. Gilimninu is the bride; Šennima is the groom. See also Kerry Lee, "Two Translations of HSS V 67 and Their Significance for Genesis 16, 21 and 30," *JBL* 134 (2015): 59–63; Van Seters, *Abraham*, 68–71.

concubine's children and the implications this might have for Ishmael's fate. But there are many other contracts which similarly specify that a childless wife must provide her husband a concubine.[167] Note, however, that there are also contracts which specify that the husbands cannot take concubines, even in the case of the wife's childlessness. While using a concubine to bear an heir is widely attested, it is by no means the only practice.[168]

As with the marriage contracts, the most often cited ancient Near Eastern law relevant to heirship from a secondary wife is one which not only describes a man bearing a child with a slave, but also specifies the rights of the parties involved: CH 146 provides protections for a wife who is a priestess (*naditu*). Priestesses cannot have children, and the situation in the law is that the priestess "has given a slave girl to her husband and she bears sons." In the case that the slave girl then makes "herself equal to her mistress," the mistress cannot sell her but may mark and treat her as a slave.[169] This law is useful for comparison with Sarah's story because the details about the slave girl making "herself equal to her mistress" seems to match Hagar's looking "with contempt on her mistress" (Gen 16:4). However, there are also important differences between this law and what we find in Abraham's story. For example, the reasons for the woman's childlessness appear to be different and the focus of the law appears to be on the rights of the priestess while the focus of the biblical narrative is more clearly on the man's heir.[170]

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[167] Thompson, *Historicity*, 262, 265.

[168] Thompson, *Historicity*, 258–69.

[169] Van Seters, *Abraham*, 69. See also Roth, *Law Collections*, 109; Thompson, *Historicity*, 262.

[170] It is usually assumed that one aspect of the law does not fit Sarah's case well: the law applies to a woman who is childless because she is a priestess, while Sarah is usually assumed to be childless because she is unable to have children. My interpretation of Sarah's childlessness in chapter 4 challenges this

Finally, note that there is evidence from both the Bible and ancient Near East of polygyny. This means that there were many situations in which a man would take and have children with multiple wives, not just when his primary wife was childless. Having multiple wives is clearly an option for (at least some) men in the Hebrew Bible, as was having children with those wives (e.g., Jacob, Elkanah, David).

The Laws of Lipit-Ishtar 24–27 (LL; ca. 1930 B.C.E.) detail a variety of situations involving multiple wives and multiple children, specifying who in each case should share the inheritance.[171] While these laws all apply to different situations from what we see in Abraham's case, they are all examples of men having children with multiple wives of different statuses, which is one feature of Abraham's narrative. Moreover, they highlight the fact that such situations raised questions about the relative status of children whose mothers had different statuses, perhaps shedding some light on the question of the statuses of Abraham's heirship strategies which I take up below.

Scholarly Reception of Abraham's Strategies

One aspect of description, according to Smith, is that of scholarly reception. Here I offer a brief summary of interpretations of Abraham's heirship strategies, again focusing on norms, legitimacy, and alternativeness. In general, interpreters heavily emphasize the legitimacy of Abraham's strategies. For example, Stuart Briscoe describes

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assumption. While I do not argue that Sarah was a priestess, I do argue that, like a priestess, Sarah's childlessness is a result of some other choice. Just as a priestess chooses her vocational activities over having children, Sarah chooses her sexual activities (or lack thereof) over having children. Savina J. Teubal, *Sarah the Priestess: The First Matriarch of Genesis* (Athens, OH: Swallow, 1984), argues, on the basis of this law, that Sarah may have actually been a priestess. Her argument shares with mine an interpretation in which Sarah is childless by choice

[171] Roth, *Law Collections*, 30–31; Thompson, *Historicity*, 261.

Abraham's possible adoption of Eliezer as "the *perfectly acceptable* practice of regarding a servant as the heir of a childless man" and his use of a secondary wife to conceive an heir as an "apparently normal custom."[172] Similarly, with respect to having a child with a secondary wife, Everett Fox says, "Avram is given the *legitimate* option of producing an heir through her maid, Hagar."[173] Other descriptions of the legitimacy of adoption include, "in accordance with the law of the land,"[174] "in accordance with the slave adoption practices of the time,"[175] and the more implicit formulation, "well attested in ancient Mesopotamian legislation."[176] We find similarly strong language in descriptions of the arrangement with Hagar, which scholars describe as, "well within custom,"[177] "recognized by the law and custom of the time,"[178] an "acceptable practice,"[179] "proper legal practice,"[180] and "a commonplace in the ancient Near East."[181] This emphasis on the legitimacy of Abraham's strategies is intended to counter modern ideas of family that readers might impose on the text, for instance by judging the arrangement with Hagar as

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[172] Briscoe, *Genesis*, 143, 150. Emphasis added.

[173] Everett Fox, *In the Beginning: A New English Rendition of the Book of Genesis* (New York: Schocken Books, 1983), 59. Emphasis added.

[174] Fritsch, *Genesis*, 60.

[175] De la Torre, *Genesis*, 167.

[176] Henry Wansbrough, *Genesis*, Doubleday Bible Commentary (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 30.

[177] Berrigan, *Genesis*, 134.

[178] Atkinson, *The Book of Genesis*, 148.

[179] De la Torre, *Genesis*, 172.

[180] Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 151.

[181] David W. Cotter, *Genesis*, Berit Olam (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2003), 103.

a violation of marriage (i.e., modern heteronormative marriage).[182] But, as I argue below with the help of comparison with queer couplehood institutions, these declarations of legitimacy, on their own, are misleading. They ignore the ways in which Abraham's strategies are not entirely normative, not because they violate modern heteronormativity, but because they fail to achieve the fuller normativity of the prime bio-son as heir.

To be fair, a few interpreters recognize that Abraham's strategies are less than ideal. For example, Walter Bruegemann's formulation of adoption as a "reasonable substitute" adds the alternativeness of "substitute" to the legitimacy of "reasonable."[183] Basil Atkinson describes the arrangement with Hagar as a "secondhand and artificial method,"[184] and M. J. Selman says that Abraham and Sarah had "several alternative solutions" to the problem of their lack of children.[185] But such comments are much rarer than the suggestions of legitimacy and, when they do appear, they are less clear, less strong, and less frequently defended with evidence. In addition, the comments about the imperfect nature of Abraham's strategies often remain at a personal level, attesting to Abraham's preferences. They do not suggest anything about the (lack of) normativity of the practices more generally, so they do not show how Abraham's preferences, such as they are, might be contextualized within systems of both normativity and deviance. Briscoe's comment that adoption "was not what Abram had in mind" is typical of the

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[182] Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 151; Fox, *In the Beginning*, 59; Atkinson, *The Book of Genesis*, 148.

[183] Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 143.

[184] Atkinson, *The Book of Genesis*, 149.

[185] M. J. Selman, "The Social Environment of the Patriarchs," *TynBul* 27 (1976), 127–28.

focus on Abraham's preferences and the lack of attention to how those preferences might be related to the normativity of adoption. The comparison below will help correct both the over-emphasis on legitimacy and the lack of attention to connections between Abraham's preferences and larger systems of normativity.

Description: Queer Couplehood Institutions

A 2011 study reported that over 140,000 same-sex couples had entered into legally recognized unions, including marriage, civil unions, and domestic partnerships. This constituted 22% of all same-sex couples.[186] Since that time, the numbers have undoubtedly grown as the United States has seen tremendous changes in the status of same-sex relationship institutions. Most notably, the Supreme Court's 2015 decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges* legalized same-sex marriage in all fifty states. Until the turn of the twentieth century, such marriages were not an option anywhere. Similarly, civil unions, a formal relationship status that guarantees a couple some or all of the rights and responsibilities of marriage, are a twentieth century creation.[187] In addition, same-sex couples have used commitment ceremonies to formalize their relationships outside the confines of law. While civil unions and commitment ceremonies are likely to diminish with the legalization of same-sex marriage, their importance over the past several decades makes them worth discussing as examples of queer couplehood institutions.

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[186] M. V. Badgett and Jody Herman, *Patterns of Relationship Recognition by Same-Sex Couples in the United States* (Los Angeles: The Williams Institute, 2011), http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/Badgett-Herman-Marriage-Dissolution-Nov-2011.pdf, 1.

[187] Civil unions were first recognized in Denmark in 1989.

Heteronormative Marriage

Because queer couplehood institutions exist in the context of the dominant couplehood institution, heteronormative marriage, I begin with a brief description of heteronormative marriage and its dominant status. Until relatively recently, the unique normativity of heterosexual marriage was inscribed in the law, and it continues to be in many countries. In the United States, the *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision that states are required to sanction same-sex marriages has reduced, if not eliminated the law's role in maintaining the dominance of heteronormative marriage. But the process of legalization of same-sex marriage revealed, and perhaps even heightened, the culturally normative status of opposite-sex marriage: the very fact that there was a debate over same-sex marriage but not over opposite sex marriage reinforces the normativity of opposite-sex marriage, because it reveals how opposite-sex marriage is taken for granted. Unlike with same-sex marriage, there is no mainstream debate about whether heterosexual marriage is appropriate or moral, or whether it should be legal or privileged by law.[188]

Another manifestation of the normativity of straight marriage is the way it constitutes the default against which other relationships are measured and compared. Queer couplehood gains its meaning in part through its relationship with straight marriage. While one aspect of this relationship is a desire for equality (queer couples partly measure the success of their institutions by how well they approximate the legal

[188] There is a debate over these issues within feminism and among some queer activists and theorists. See Pamela J. Lannutti, *Experiencing Same-Sex Marriage: Individuals, Couples, and Social Networks* (New York: Lang, 2014), 38–39; Kathleen H. Hull, *Same-Sex Marriage: The Cultural Politics of Love and Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 78–115.

rights of straight marriage), another important aspect of that relationship is resistance. Kathleen Hull argues that, given the continued widespread intolerance, hostility, and symbolic violence toward gays and lesbians, same-sex commitment rituals (marriage or otherwise) always represent a form of resistance against the hegemony of opposite-sex marriage. The transformation of traditional language and practices in these rituals puts "the dominant understanding of marriage at risk."[189] Queer ceremonies and relationships can be interpreted as resisting the heteronormativity of straight marriage precisely because they are constantly being compared to and judged by the standards (i.e., norm) of heterosexual marriage. This comparison and judgment reflects back onto heterosexual marriage, opening up a space of questioning and possibility rather than simply inevitability.[190]

This normative vision of marriage as heterosexual is constructed, in large part, by cultural representations of weddings. In his cultural analysis of "white weddings," Chrys Ingraham argues that depictions of weddings in the media continue to portray marriage as the normative form of couplehood and as a heterosexual institution.[191] This is why some gays and lesbians, when they realized they were not straight, resigned themselves to not

[189] Hull, *Same-Sex Marriage*, 75. Hull argues that same-sex commitment rituals change how people think about the institution of marriage, expanding their ideas of the institution to include same-sex couples. While this may be true, it is a long-term project, and for the time being straight marriage remains the ideal for American culture at large, regardless of the legal status of same-sex marriage.

[190] Hull, *Same-Sex Marriage*, 26–77.

[191] Chrys Ingraham, *White Weddings: Romancing Heterosexuality in Popular Culture*, 2nd ed. (Hoboken, NJ: Taylor & Francis, 2008).

getting married.[192] When people in the contemporary United States, straight or queer, imagine a generic marriage, they usually imagine a male groom and a female bride. Marriage is overwhelmingly depicted and imagined as a heterosexual institution, even by those of us who support a more inclusive definition.

Couplehood Institutions

Same-Sex Marriage

Same-sex marriage participates in many of the features of heteronormative marriage, but is also marked by certain differences. As for similarities, they both involve two people who, in general (though not always), commit to monogamy and a certain social priority in one another's lives. Legally (as of *Obergefell v. Hodges*), same-sex marriages are identical to opposite-sex marriages. According to Pamela Lannutti, the GLBT people in her study describe this legal equality in terms of "first-class citizenship, financial benefits, and family security."[193] The desire for first-class citizenship is also a theme in queer support for same-sex marriage. It is a common perception that legalizing same-sex marriage makes a cultural as well as legal statement. In addition to bestowing strictly legal benefits, law has the power to legitimize same-sex relationships and the queer couples who marry.[194] Moreover, the legalization of same-sex marriage reflects growing popular support. National surveys repeatedly show that a majority (almost 60%

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192 Lannutti, *Experiencing Same-Sex Marriage*, 24.

193 Lannutti, *Experiencing Same-Sex Marriage*, 10.

194 Hull, *Same-Sex Marriage*, 126–130; 147–151. Hull notes that not only gay and lesbian couples held the perception that legalizing same-sex marriage legitimates homosexuality. This idea was also used in the debates over gay marriage in Hawaii and Vermont, but only by opponents to same-sex marriage (152–195).

in the most recent polls) of Americans support same-sex marriage. [195] This means that in many areas and sectors across the country, couples in same-sex marriages will find their marriages supported and treated as legitimate by those around them.

However, despite newfound legal equality and growing public acceptance, there are reasons to believe that even same-sex marriage (let alone civil unions and commitment ceremonies) does not match the normativity of heteronormative marriage. The power of the law and the pressure of majority opinion may not ever be enough to overcome the strongly held beliefs of the minority who continue to oppose same-sex marriage. Moreover, the very existence of surveys about same-sex marriage is evidence for the distance between same-sex and opposite-sex marriage. Heterosexual marriage is so clearly ingrained as the norm for a romantic or sexual relationship that a survey asking whether or not straight marriage should be legal seems somewhat absurd (despite the feminist and queer opposition to marriage). When it comes to public opinion, heterosexual marriage is literally unquestioned. Given this, the binary between queer and straight is likely to continue, and as long as it continues it is likely to subordinate queerness.[196]

Some opponents of the legalization of same-sex marriage even predict that legalization will increase rather than diminish polarization around the issue, offering the

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[195] For example, see Janet Hook, "Support for Gay Marriage Hits All-Time High—WSJ/NBC News Poll," Washington Wire (blog), *Wall Street Journal,* March 9, 2015, http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2015/03/09/support-for-gay-marriage-hits-all-time-high-wsjnbc-news-poll/.

[196] For one particularly succinct description and critique of how such binaries operate, see Val Plumwood, "Nature, Self, and Gender: Feminism, Environmental Philosophy, and the Critique of Rationalism," *Ecological Feminism* 6 (1991), 11, 17.

legalization of abortion as an analogy.[197] Since the decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges* there have been several high-profile examples of the continued denigration of same-sex marriage which add support to the predictions of continued conflict over same-sex marriage. For example, Indiana and Arkansas found themselves in the middle of a highly contested national debate when they proposed laws that would allow discrimination against same-sex couples in the name of religious liberty.[198] A county clerk made headlines and became an icon for opponents of same-sex marriage when she refused to grant marriage licenses so that she wouldn't have to grant a license to a same-sex couple.[199] And in Alabama, a the Chief Justice of the state Supreme Court ordered judges to stop issuing marriage licenses to same-sex couples.[200] While none of these measures were ultimately effective, they did galvanize opposition to same-sex marriage and keep same-sex marriage as a contested, rather than ideal form of relationship. In another sign that same-sex marriage will continue to be contested, the Republican Party included language opposing *Obergefell v. Hodges* in its 2016 platform.[201] The election of Donald

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[197] Matthew Franck, interview by John Hockenberry, *The Takeaway*, WNYC Radio et al., April 28, 2015, http://www.thetakeaway.org/story/i-thee-wed/. See also Hull, *Same-Sex Marriage*, 149.

[198] Emily Bazelon, "What are the Limits of Religious Liberty?" *New York Times Magazine* (July 7, 2015), http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/12/magazine/what-are-the-limits-of-religious-liberty.html.

[199] Alan Blinder and Tamar Lewin, "Clerk in Kentucky Chooses Jail Over Deal on Same-Sex Marriage," *New York Times* (Sept. 3, 2015), http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/04/us/kim-davis-same-sex-marriage.html.

[200] Alan Blinder, "Top Alabama Judge Orders Halt to Same-Sex Marriage Licenses," *New York Times* (Jan. 6, 2016), http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/07/us/top-alabama-judge-orders-halt-to-same-sex-marriage-licenses.html.

[201] *Republican Platform 2016* (Washington, DC: Republican Party, 2016), https://prod-static-ngop-pbl.s3.amazonaws.com/media/documents/DRAFT_12_FINAL[1]-ben_1468872234.pdf, 32.

Trump and his ability to appoint at least one Supreme Court justice further raises the likelihood that same-sex marriage will continue to be contested.

The kinds of cultural representations that Ingraham studies also suggest that legalization would not immediately lead to cultural equality. The dominance of straight couples in representations of weddings continues to reinforce the higher status of heterosexual marriage over queer couplehood institutions. Until and unless there are drastic changes in the portrayal of weddings and marriages in the media, straight marriage will continue to be the cultural default.

Civil Unions

Same-sex marriage is not the only institution that has provided legal legitimacy for queer couples. A second such institution is that of civil unions, which use different terminology to grant couples the same legal benefits as marriage. Before the legalization of same-sex marriage, several states allowed civil unions with equal legal status to marriage. Internationally, there are many countries that allow civil unions of various types. During the (relatively few) years when civil unions were an important option for same-sex couples in some states, there were still significant differences between civil unions and same-sex marriage. In addition to the cultural differences that are carried through the different terminology itself, civil unions offered no legal benefits at the federal level.[202]

[202] Note that while the Defense of Marriage Act was in effect, the same was true for same-sex marriages. This is a useful reminder that "same-sex marriage" comes in different forms and with different levels of both cultural and legal recognition.

Even more so than same-sex marriage, civil unions' existence was marked by contention. The category of civil unions was created as a compromise between those who insisted that the term "marriage" be preserved solely for heterosexual unions and those who insisted that same-sex couples deserved equal rights under the law. For example, in Vermont, civil unions were created after the state Supreme Court ruled in *Baker v. Vermont* that same-sex couples were entitled to the same relationship rights and benefits as opposite-sex couples. Civil unions were a pragmatic compromise that satisfied the mandate of the court for equal rights under the law while preserving the cultural hegemony of straight marriage.[203] The preservation of the heterosexual claim to marriage was inscribed in the civil union legislation itself, which defined marriage as between a man and a woman.

Colorado offers another telling example of the way that civil unions participate in both the logic of legitimation and subordination through the law. Civil unions were legalized in Colorado at the same time that a constitutional amendment restricted marriage to straight couples.[204] The legal recognition of civil unions signals legitimacy, but the difference between marriage and civil unions signals a difference in legitimacy—

[203] Carey Goldberg, "Vermont Panel Shies from Gay Marriage," *New York Times,* February 10, 2000, http://www.nytimes.com/2000/02/10/us/vermont-panel-shies-from-gay-marriage.html; Carey Goldberg, "Vermont's House Backs Wide Rights for Gay Couples," New York Times, March 17, 2000, http://www.nytimes.com/2000/03/17/us/vermont-s-house-backs-wide-rights-for-gay-co5uples.html; Carey Goldberg, "In Vermont, Gay Couples Head for the Almost-Altar," *New York Times*, July 2, 2000, http://www.nytimes.com/2000/07/02/us/in-vermont-gay-couples-head-for-the-almost-altar.html.

[204] Lynn Bartels, "Colorado Civil Unions Bill Signed by Gov. John Hickenlooper at History Colorado Center," *Denver Post,* March 21, 2013, http://www.denverpost.com/ci_22841921/colorado-civil-unions-hickenlooper-takes-up-pen-sign; Kevin Simpson, "Colorado Amendment 43: Gay Marriage Banned; Domestic Partnerships Also Defeated," *Denver Post,* November 9, 2006, http://www.denverpost.com/ci_4627249.

marriage remains more legitimate, despite the equal rights and benefits under the law.[205] While many queer activists and couples celebrated civil unions, the difference between marriage and civil unions led many to continue to advocate for marriage and to refuse to accept civil unions as an acceptable alternative.[206]

Commitment Ceremonies and Legality

In addition to participating in these formal legal statuses, queer families create their own relationships. Through private rituals and public ceremonies, clergies pronounced couples married under God, and queer couples pronounced themselves married before one another, long before (some of) their marriages became legal possibilities.[207] These "extra-legal" commitment ceremonies perform many of the functions of legal and traditional marriages.[208] For instance, couples say that their commitment rituals make their relationships more formal or official, establish a code of behavior for their relationships, and, in the case of religious ceremonies, bestow their relationships with religious significance and authority.[209] In addition, those ceremonies

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[205] Note that in these examples the difference is not just between legal and cultural equality of civil unions and straight marriages; the difference between civil unions and straight marriages is a legal one, inscribed in the legislation and constitutional amendments, despite the equality of benefits and rights of the two legal statuses.

[206] Evan Wolfson, *Why Marriage Matters: America, Equality, and Gay People's Right to Marry* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 2004), 123–144.

[207] It is not difficult to imagine that polyamorous triads and groups, and not just couples, have had commitment ceremonies, but I have not found textual evidence of such ceremonies.

[208] According to Stephen Haas and Sarah Whitton, "The Significance of Living Together and Importance of Marriage in Same-Sex Couples," *Journal of Homosexuality* 62 (2015): 1241–63, cohabitation has similar symbolic effects, and therefore might be considered yet another couplehood institution.

[209] Hull, *Same-Sex Marriage*, 142–47.

that involve an audience of family and friends function to legitimate the relationship within that group. By their presence at and participation in the ritual, guests communicate their support for the relationship.[210] Though there are important differences between these extra-legal ceremonies and the legal institutions of civil union and marriage, commitment rituals are not meaningless; they too offer an institutional context for queer romantic and sexual relationships.

In her research on same-sex commitment ceremonies, Hull identifies the roll of what she calls “legality” in the participants’ and the public’s understanding of those ceremonies. (Much of this analysis applies to aspects of civil unions and same-sex marriages, as well.) Legality refers to the cultural practices and meanings of law, which include but are not limited to actual law. For example, it is not usually knowledge of official law that impacts behavior; people rarely consult the actual statutes. Rather, cultural practices, sometimes shaped by law, impact behavior. For example, informal knowledge of law is passed through word of mouth. As another example, businesses ask their customers to sign waivers, even when they don’t have to and when those waivers would not be upheld in court. Neither of these examples involves a direct act of law, but both legitimate themselves through an association with law. Whenever the appearance of following the law is just as (or almost as) important as actually following the law, the power of legality (as opposed to the power of the law) is at work. In the case of marriage, Hull argues that the cultural practices of marriage bestow a sense of legality, regardless of the actual legal status of the marriage.

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[210] Hull, *Same-Sex Marriage*, 89.

According to Hull, the dominant idea of marriage in modern America combines the cultural, legal, and often religious meanings of marriage into one inseparable package. Because of this, the legitimacy of law (and religion) is often communicated through cultural (rather than legal or religious) rituals and symbols. The rituals and symbols then maintain this sense of legitimacy even when divorced from law (and/or religion). By drawing on the cultural practices and meanings of marriage, Hull says that same-sex commitment ceremonies (and the committed relationships that result) borrow from and approximate the cultural power of legal weddings and marriages.[211] Queer couples engage this form of legality to legitimate their relationships whenever they have commitment, union, and marriage ceremonies, commit to permanent sexual exclusivity, exchange rings, or call each other husband or wife.

Comparison: Legitimate Alternatives to a Familial Norm

Having introduced and contextualized both Abraham's heirship strategies and queer couplehood institutions, I now compare them. The third term for the comparison is "Legitimate Alternatives to a Familial Norm." Thus, my comparison will demonstrate that the two sets of practices are similar insofar as they are both examples of legitimate alternatives, but they are different insofar as they are distinct and particular examples, thereby demonstrating some of the variety that can exist among legitimate alternatives.

My phrase "legitimate alternative to a norm" is meant to capture a tension between normativity and deviance, between the mainstream and the marginal.[212] A

[211] Hull, *Same-Sex Marriage*, 142.

[212] Scholars of queer families have noted a similar combination of normativity and deviance in queer parenting. Alessandro Pratesi's "respectable scandal" captures the logic of the "legitimate alternative" ("A

legitimate alternative is deviant in that it is an alternative to, and therefore not itself, the norm. It departs from the norm, and often has a lower status. It might be considered "second-class" or "second-rate." Most people, if they could choose, would prefer the norm, even if certain individuals (with a variety of reasons) prefer the alternative. Most people who pursue the alternative do so because their situation demands it, often because the norm is impossible for them to attain.

However, a legitimate alternative is not simply "deviant;" it is also normative insofar as it is legitimate. While not the norm, a legitimate alternative may be authorized, allowed, or established, either by law or custom. Its status as alternative is often recognized; that is, it is accepted that those who cannot obtain the norm may pursue the legitimate alternative. At the same time, it is generally expected that someone who makes use of a legitimate alternative does so as a second choice or back-up option—they would have achieved the norm if they could have. Or, at the very least, it is recognized that the alternative comes with the associated difficulties of a second-class practice and lacks the privileges of the norm.

Norms

In order to talk meaningfully about legitimate alternatives to norms, we must be clear about what constitutes the norm. Norms are, by their very nature, comparative. The norm is normative not in the abstract, but in comparison to other options, and with respect to a third term which defines its scope of normativity. Thus, when I say that the

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Respectable Scandal: Same-Sex Parenthood, Emotional Dynamics, and Social Change," *Journal of GLBT Family Studies* 8 [2012]: 305–33). See also Amy L. Hequembourg and Michael P. Farrell, "Lesbian Motherhood: Negotiating Marginal-Mainstream Identities," *Gender and Society* 4 (1999): 540–57.

prime bio-son is the normative heir in Abraham's context, I am actually claiming that sons of primary wives are more normative than sons of secondary wives, and that biological sons are more normative than adoptive sons, as heirs. Similarly, when I say that heterosexual marriage is normative in the contemporary context, I am claiming that it is more normative than the queer couplehood institutions as couplehood institutions or as family structures. Thus, to demonstrate that these norms are in fact norms, it suffices to show that they are more normative than the other options under consideration. That is, demonstrating the normativity of the norms is equivalent to demonstrating the "alternativeness" of the other practices. I will do this below. In addition, this comparative principle allows me to ignore other questions of normativity that fall outside the scope of this particular comparison, such as the question of which biological son(s) is preferred as heir, if daughters can inherit, or the role that class and race play in the normativity of a marriage.

One similarity that the heirship of the prime bio-son and heteronormative marriage share, as norms, is that they often appear as a natural, unquestioned choice to those who participate in them.[213] Both are enforced and maintained, at least in part, through repetitive practice. Every time a father treated his prime bio-son as heir, whether or not that heirship was contested or even raised to the level of consciousness and discourse, the norm of the prime bio-son as heir was reinforced. The norm would have been maintained by other members of society if they ever assumed that a prime bio-son

[213] Because my comparison is always concerned with the third term, the similarities that I address are those which demonstrate their shared status as norms, and I ignore other similarities, such as the fact that both are concerned in part with the distribution of resources within the family and within society.

would be the heir and acted accordingly, such as by treating that son with additional respect. Similarly, every time a child imagines getting married to someone of the opposite-sex, looks to members of the opposite sex as potential marriage partners, or marries someone of the opposite-sex, especially in a traditional wedding, they reinforce the normativity of heteronormativity. In addition, each time a young man or woman is asked about the existence of a girlfriend or boyfriend, or each time someone is asked if they have a (opposite sex) husband or wife, the normativity of heterosexual marriage is being constructed.

However, there are also important differences between the two norms.[214] Perhaps most notably, especially in the context of the alternatives under consideration, is the fact that heteronormative marriage is being contested in certain organized ways by its alternatives. That is, the normativity of heteronormative marriage has been raised from a place of being taken for granted, the common place for norms to reside, to the level of consciousness, discourse, and contestation. There is no evidence of a similar dynamic for the prime bio-son.

In addition, while both norms are reproduced in part through cultural representations, the degree to which heteronormative marriage has been reinforced through textual, television, advertising, internet and film media far exceeds the representation of heirship in any sort in ancient media. However, where heirship does

[214] Again, I am focusing on their status as norms, showing how different type of norms cohabit the same category, so I ignore many other differences which might be interesting or relevant in another context, such as the fact that one concerns a vertical (parent-child) genealogical relationship while the other concerns a horizontal (spouse-spouse) relationship.

come up in ancient Near Eastern texts, those texts often support the normativity of the prime bio-son as heir.

Finally, I will discuss several other differences in the norms below, including the place of both the law and ethics in establishing normativity. But these differences will be more apparent following the detailed discussions of the legitimacy and alternative nature of the two sets of practices, in which law and ethics will both take their place. I turn to those discussions now.

Legitimacy

Heirship Strategies: Legitimacy

First, both Abraham's heirship strategies and the queer couplehood institutions have some degree of legitimacy. With respect to the heirship strategies, I need not belabor this point because, as I discussed above, commentators tend to stress exactly this. In general, they do so with reference to the other ancient Near Eastern evidence, both biblical and extra-biblical, of similar practices of adoption and having children with secondary wives. Recall, from the descriptions above, that the biblical evidence for such practices included Jacob's adoption of his grandson, Jephthah's possible adoption, and the relationship among Jacob, his two wives, and their slave-girls. Outside the Bible, the evidence for adoption included adoption contracts, which served a variety of functions, as well as law codes that specified the rights of various parties, including the relationship between adoptive and biological children with respect to inheritance. Similarly, marriage contracts often specified whether the husband could take a secondary wife, and in which situations, including the childlessness of the primary wife. As with adoption, the relevant legal codes discuss particular cases of different types of wives and their heirs and specify the rights and obligations due to various parties. Also recall that it is not just that the laws and contracts show that the heirship strategies were practiced, but that the strategies are represented as reasonable and, to some degree, protected.

Less commonly noted are the clues in the Abraham narrative itself for the normativity of adoption and having a child with a secondary wife. For example, note how Abraham seems to take it for granted that he will adopt an heir, since he does not have a son. “You have given me no offspring,” he says, “and so a slave in my house is to be my heir” (Gen 15:3). He may not be happy about this strategy (a fact which I discuss below as evidence for adoption’s “alternativeness”), but nevertheless the text depicts adoption as a reasonable and, perhaps, expected course of action for someone in Abraham’s situation.

In the case of having a child with a secondary wife, the textual representation of the arrangement again suggests that there is nothing out of the ordinary. When Sarah proposes that Abraham take Hagar as a secondary wife, she says that she hopes to be “built up” through her (Gen 16:2, my translation). While the text is not explicit about exactly what benefits Sarah expected, it is likely that at least some of the benefit had to do with social considerations, such as status. In general, status benefits are associated with normativity, not deviance. Moreover, Abraham immediately accepts Sarah’s offer, no questions asked, suggesting that he, too, understood the practice and saw it as a reasonable strategy.

Couplehood Institutions: Legitimacy

Similarly, the queer couplehood institutions are also legitimate (to varying degrees). First, queer couples have the legitimacy of widespread social approval, as demonstrated by the majority support for same-sex marriage in the polls cited above. Since same-sex marriage is the queer couplehood institution that has been most contested, one would expect that the other institutions would have even more public support.

In addition, queer couplehood institutions have recently been legitimized by law. In addition to the direct legitimacy that legal status brings, the legalization of same-sex marriage also has indirect benefits, in that legalization bolsters the cultural acceptability of same-sex marriage in addition to the strictly legal benefits it offers. As discussed above, law and culture are deeply intertwined in modern American culture, and the law has significant power to impact culture. Couples with same-sex marriages often report that they believe legalization brings legitimation: if same-sex marriages are equal under the law, cultural legitimation will follow. This argument also comes up in the debate within the queer community over the importance of same-sex marriage. Against those in the queer community who see marriage as assimilation to heteronormativity, queer advocates of marriage see legalized same-sex marriage as the route to full equality, because legal acceptance will lead to social acceptance. Conservative opponents of same-sex marriage often agree, citing the legitimizing power of law as one of the reasons for their opposition. Such activists fear that legalization will bring about a world in which the marginal aspect of queer couplehood is completely erased by its mainstream component.[215]

In addition, even before the legalization of same-sex marriage, queer relationships gained legitimacy from legality, discussed above in the case of commitment ceremonies. Queer practices of couplehood take advantage of an association with legal marriage to claim for themselves some measure of legitimacy. By enacting all but the legal rituals of marriage, using its terminology, and presenting themselves in ways that suggest marriage (in all but the most strictly legal situations), queer couples take advantage of legality to legitimize their relationships. Of course, this legitimacy is uncertain and unstable, depending to a large degree on the particular contexts in which the couples find themselves. But to the degree that the people around the couple treat them as married, the couple achieves legitimacy for their relationship.

Finally, there is the simple fact that all the forms of queer couplehood institutions are recognized by most of the public as *institutions*. Even those who oppose queer relationships in any form understand the institutions being invoked. When a couple enters such an institution, they are not breaking new ground, as is sometimes the case in queer lives (see my discussion of Sara Ahmed's queer disorientation in chapter 1). Rather, they are participating in a precedented, well-structured practice known to them from previous examples and media exposure (both news and, to some extent, popular media). This institutional aspect of same-sex marriage, civil unions, and commitment ceremonies is an

[215] Supporting this perspective, see Andrew Flores and Scott Barclay, "Backlash, Consensus Legitimacy, or Polarization: The Effect of Same-Sex Marriage Policy on Mass Attitudes," *Political Research Quarterly* 69 (2016): 43–56.

important part of what makes them appear legitimate to their participants, to the larger queer community, and to many other supporters throughout the country.

Different Legitimacies

The queer couplehood institutions share with Abraham's heirship strategies the fact that both are legitimate practices in their respective cultures. But there are important differences in the legitimacy evidenced in the two cases. The biggest difference is the role that law plays in that legitimacy. In the case of queer couplehood institutions, official law plays a major role. Whatever queer couplehood institution is under consideration (commitment ceremony, civil union, or marriage), the legal status of the institution is always in view. Queer couples are acutely aware of what rights and benefits, if any, their couplehood will legally bestow. Moreover, queer couples recognize the power the law plays in American culture and in the social meaning of their relationship, above and beyond any strict legal consequences. For the couplehood institutions, the law, or at least its appearance, has enormous power to legitimize.

In contrast, ancient Near Eastern law had comparatively little power. Law is apparently not a major issue in the Genesis narratives, where it never makes an explicit appearance. In the ancient Near East more broadly, there is considerable debate about the nature of law codes and the practices of law.[216] While it is likely that they played some role in legitimizing certain practices, their importance was far less than in the American context. In addition, the law codes that do exist probably did not serve the same purposes

[216] For an introduction to the debate, and one description of the operation of law in the biblical context, see Douglas Knight, *Law, Power, and Justice in Ancient Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011).

that modern American laws serve; they seem to have been more a deposit of previous rulings to provide a general guide for future situations (i.e., precedent), not a comprehensive set of prescriptions intended as a reference for decision-making officials (i.e., legislation).[217] Moreover, relationships of power were often imagined in the personal terms of household relationships rather than in the impersonal terms of American legal codes.[218] In Abraham's context, it appears that the kind of negotiations we see between Abraham and local rulers takes the place, for the purposes of decision making, of legal codes and precedents (Gen 12:18–20; 13:8–11; 14:17–24; 20:10–18; 21:22–34; 23:2–20).

Alternativeness

So far in my comparison of Abraham's heirship strategies and the queer couplehood institutions I have discussed both the respective norms and the legitimacy of the other practices. To the extent that legitimacy is a kind of normativity, I have not yet distinguished the norm from the legitimate alternatives: based on the argument so far, all are normative, at least to some degree. The arguments in this section differentiate Abraham's strategies and the couplehood institutions from their respective norms by demonstrating the practices under consideration are less normative than their respective norms. That is, they represent lower status, less preferred, or otherwise alternative options to the norm. This will complete the argument that both sets of practices are (distinct)

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[217] Joshua Berman, "The History of Legal Theory and the Study of Biblical Law," *CBQ* 76 (2014), 25.

[218] David Schloen, *The House of the Father as Fact and Symbol: Patrimonialism in Ugarit and the Ancient Near East* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2001). See also Jonathan Burnside, *God, Justice, and Society: Aspects of Law and Legality in the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 11–14.

examples of the third term, "legitimate alternatives to a familial norm," and will therefore complete the *comparison* step of Smith's method.

Heirship Strategies as Alternatives

Because the emphasis in the secondary literature has been on the legitimacy of Abraham's strategies, the argument in this section, for the alternativeness of those strategies, will be a bit more extensive than previous sections. The evidence under consideration is the same as that which showed the legitimacy of Abraham's actions. Attention to different details highlights that, while legitimate, his heirship strategies are constructed in both Abraham's narrative and in other ancient Near Eastern cases as alternatives to the norm.

Reading Abraham's Narratives for the Alternative

Consider first the evidence of Abraham's narrative. As described above, the beginning of Genesis 15 is usually interpreted in terms of Abraham's plan to adopt Eliezer, a member of his household. When God promises to reward Abraham, Abraham responds in a complaint that consists of two parallel verses (Gen 15:2–3). In both, Abraham begins with his lack of children: "I continue childless" (v. 2) and "you have given me no offspring" (v. 3). These laments of childlessness are followed by Abraham's statements about his substitute, presumably adoptive heir: "the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus" (v. 2) and "a slave born in my house is to be my heir" (v. 3). Each verse establishes Abraham's lack of children as the context and explanation for the adoption of Eliezer. This creates the implication that the adoption of Eliezer was a consequence of Abraham's lack of children, that it only makes sense in that context, and that it is therefore an alternative to the preferred option, namely an heir who is a biological child.

There are additional signals in the text that adoption is an imperfect alternative to a biological heir. First, the descriptions of Eliezer emphasize the fact that he is not Abraham's biological child. In verse 2, "of Damascus" signals the non-familial relationship between Abraham and Eliezer. This is made explicit in verse 3, where Eliezer's status as "slave born in my house" emphasizes both that Eliezer is a slave rather than a son and that he was born to another.

These English translations are disputed and uncertain, but there seems to be a similar dynamic at work in the Hebrew. Verse 2 seems to describe Eliezer as בֶן־מֶשֶׁק בֵּיתִי. The word מֶשֶׁק appears only here in the Hebrew Bible, and its meaning is unknown. But the rest of the words in the phrase are clear: "son" and "my house." The description in verse 3 uses the same words, but without the troublesome מֶשֶׁק: Abraham describes Eliezer as בֶן־בֵּיתִי, literally "son of my house," (often interpreted as a servant or steward). While there are numerous ambiguities and uncertainties about these descriptions, note the repeated use of בן and ביתי, the words for "son" and "my house." While "house" can mean the actual building, it often refers to a household, family, and kinship structure.[219]

[219] Shunya Bendor, *The Social Structure of Ancient Israel: The Institution of the Family (beit 'ab) from the Settlement to the End of the Monarchy* (Jerusalem: Simor, 1996); Schloen, *The House of the Father*. The emphasis on family forms is strengthened by the precise phrase, בן־בית, "son-house," a reversal of the term for the basic Israelite unit of kinship, the בת־אב, "house-father."

Thus, there is an emphatic repetition of words which are strongly associated with biological children and progeny. This emphasis, in the context of Abraham's complaint about his childlessness and his reluctant acceptance of an unrelated heir, uses irony to underscore the fact that the heir is not, in fact, a "son," or strictly "of his house," adding additional support to the argument that Eliezer's adoption is a second-choice alternative to the ideal of a biological son.

YHWH's response to Abraham also suggests that a biological son is preferred. "But the word of the LORD came to him, 'This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir'" (Gen 15:4). YHWH's response, which seems to be intended to reassure Abraham, accentuates the distinction between biological and non-biological (i.e., adopted) heirs, and carries with it an implied recognition that biological heirs are better. Of course, "biological" is a modern term; the Hebrew idiom used, יצא ממעיך, refers to one who "comes out of your belly." This phrase is the site where the ideal heir is described and constructed as one who "comes out of your belly," an heir which is defined partly in contrast with the second-class alternative of the adopted heir.

Moving from Gen 15 to Gen 16, note the similar dynamic: just as both verses of Abraham's complaint in chapter 15 begin with a statement of his childlessness, Gen 16 begins with a reminder of Sarah's childlessness. The reminder of Sarah's lack of children is immediately followed by a description of Sarah's plan for Abraham to take Hagar in order to have a child. The conjunction of Sarah's lack of children with her plan suggests that the plan only makes sense in this context of childlessness. That is, it creates the impression that Abraham would have had little interest in conceiving a child with Hagar if he had been able to father an heir with Sarah, his higher status primary wife. It appears that Sarah's lack of children serves as an explanation for the plan. As with Abraham's possible adoption of Eliezer, the text constructs the plan of Abraham taking a secondary wife as an alternative, and therefore lesser, strategy which Abraham will agree to only because it is a necessity.

Extra-Biblical Evidence of Alternativeness

Consider again the ancient Near Eastern laws and contracts attesting to adoption. Many of these examples implicitly construct adoption as a less preferred or inferior alternative to biological children. For example, CH 191 describes the situation in which a man wants to disinherit his adopted son. While this law does offer some protection to the adopted son, guaranteeing he receives something from the adoptive father, those protections are quite limited. In addition to not receiving the inheritance due the firstborn (even though the biological children come "afterwards"), the share of property he receives specifically excludes the most important economic assets ("field, orchard, or house").

Or consider CH 190, which stipulates that an adopted child must be treated equally to biological children or be sent to "his father's house." Such a law would appear to demonstrate the normativity of adoption with respect to biological children, but the existence of the law assumes that such unequal treatment was possible, and perhaps even common, and thus warranted a law (not to mention that sending the adopted child back to his family of origin remained a possibility, according to this law). There is no parallel law protecting the biological children from unequal treatment, presumably because people did not favor their adopted children over their biological children. This is further evidence that adoption was viewed as an alternative to the ideal of biological children (even if the law code attempts to mitigate this bias).

It may appear that, by using the same evidence to support both the legitimacy and the alternativeness of adoption, I am trying to have it both ways. First I assert that the law's support for adoptive heirs is evidence for legitimacy (above), but then I turn around and argue that the law's support for adoptive heirs demonstrates that they needed protection because they were regarded as a lower status alternative than biological heirs. But this is not a contradiction: this is precisely my argument, that the evidence suggests a combination of legitimacy and non-normativity. A law like this constructs legitimacy even as it attests to adoption's status as alternative. My analysis below of laws and contracts concerned with secondary wives operates similarly.

Moving from the broad meaning of the laws to their details, the specific words used in these laws also suggest that biological children were assumed to be the default, normative heir. Note the contrast in language used to describe adopted and biological children. For example, CH 190 compares "the young child whom he took and raised in adoption," and "his children," which I take to mean specifically biological children. The biological children are the "unmarked case," suggesting they are the natural and ideal exemplar of the larger category of "children." The absence of modifiers for the biological children demonstrates that they were the ones who were, in the cultural imagination, most easily imagined as "his children."

CH 191 also reinforces the idea that biological children belong to the parent in a way that an adopted child does not: they are described as children "of his own." In addition, the clarification that the adopted child was reckoned "as equal with any future children" suggests that the adopter did not have any biological children at the time of adoption, suggesting in turn that the purpose for the adoption was to procure an heir. The situation which seems to be imagined here is precisely that of the alternative to a norm: a childless man adopts an heir, but the fact that he only did so because he had no biological children is apparent from the fact that he wants to disinherit the adoptee when he has a biological child. These laws thus support the same conclusion as the biblical evidence, that adoption, when it took place in order to secure an heir, was seen as an alternative to the preferable norm of biological children.

Similarly, the laws and contracts concerning the inheritance of children of secondary wives also support an interpretation in which such heirs are less normative than children of primary wives. For example, consider LL 27, which protects the right of a prostitute's children to inherit. "If a man's wife does not bear him a child but a prostitute from the street does bear him a child, … the child whom the prostitute bore him shall be his heir."[220] Note that this law insists that the man's primary wife is childless. Presumably, this clause is necessary because if the primary wife had children, they would be the clear first choice for heirs, and the prostitute's children would no longer inherit.

Now, the law code in question (LL) distinguishes between prostitutes and secondary wives. And it is true that the law concerning secondary wives (LL 24) grants

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[220] Roth, *Law Collections*, 31.

their children more rights than those of prostitutes: “If the second wife who he marries bears him a child, … the children of the first-ranking wife and the children of the second wife shall divide the property of their father equally.”[221] As with the laws treating adoptive and biological sons equally, this law implies, by its very necessity, a lower status for the second wife’s children in the society’s cultural imagination. Only if those children were at least sometimes perceived to be lower status would such a law be necessary. This interpretation is supported by the fact that the emphasis in the law is on the rights of the second wife’s children, not on the rights of the first wife’s children, which were taken for granted.

Similarly, many of the marriage contracts specify that the primary wife be childless before a secondary wife is taken for the purpose of having children. For example, the contract involving Gilimninu and Šennima (HSS V 67), which I quoted above, follows precisely this pattern.[222] Such contracts clearly demonstrate a pure logic of the legitimate alternative: children of a secondary wife may inherit, but only if the primary wife is childless. Granted, this is only one contract among many, and other contracts have other conditions. For example, some contracts forbid the husband from taking other wives, while still others allow the husband to have other wives but specify that only the primary wife’s children will be the husband’s heirs.[223] Critically, there are

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[221] Roth, *Law Collections*, 30–31.

[222] Thompson, *Historicity*, 253. For another example, see HSS V 80 (Thompson, *Historicity*, 259).

[223] Thompson, *Historicity*, 259–60. The relevant contracts include the following: Robert H. Pfeiffer and E. A. Speiser, “One Hundred New Selected Nuzi Texts,” *Annual of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 16 (1935–36), 38–39, 105–106, #55; Robert H. Pfeiffer, *The Archives of Silwateshub*, vol. 1 of *Excavations at Nuzi*, HSS 9 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1932), #24; C. J. Gadd, “Tablets from Kirkuk,” *RA* 23 (1926), 97–98, 126–27, #12, 51; Ernest R. Lacheman and Maynard P. Maidman, eds., *Joint*

no contracts in which the primary wife's children are excluded as heirs; the question is only if others will be included as well. That is, all the contracts take for granted that the primary wife's children will be heirs, and so as a collection they clearly demonstrate the normativity of this practice. In contrast, the heirship of children of secondary wives appears legitimate only on an occasional basis: it is less normative than the prime bio-son as heir.

The alternativeness of Abraham's heirship strategies supplements the legitimacy I demonstrated above, completing the argument that these strategies are legitimate alternatives to the norm of the prime bio-son as heir. I now finish the argument for the couplehood institutions, before noting additional differences between these two examples of legitimate alternatives to familial norms.

Queer Couplehood Institutions as Alternatives

While the alternative status of the queer couplehood institutions may seem obvious (they are *queer,* after all), I here briefly describe some of dimensions of that alternativeness. First, consider the legal dimension. The three couplehood institutions under consideration lie on a spectrum of legal normativity. At the lower end of the spectrum, commitment ceremonies have no legal status. I argued above that they achieve some legitimacy by associating themselves with legal practices, and thereby participating in legality. But to the extent that the law itself offers normativity, commitment ceremonies are far less normative than heterosexual marriage.

Expedition with the Iraq Museum at Nuzi VII—Miscellaneous Texts, SCCNH 3 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1989), #666, 671.

In the middle of the spectrum, civil unions have equal legal rights as opposite-sex marriages (from the point of view of the states that granted them). But, as described above, they also inscribe into law a difference between marriage, which is reserved for opposite-sex couples, and civil unions, which are available to any couple but which are expected to be used by same-sex couples. The very fact that one institution is more restrictive than the other demonstrates their non-equality. The rich cultural discourse around marriage (and not civil unions) and its value further reinforce this difference, and further demonstrate the lower status of civil unions. The fact that language exists to describe one's partner in marriage (spouse, husband, wife), but no such language exists for civil unions, is one small example, among many, of the pragmatic difference of supposedly equal institutions.

At the top of the spectrum, particularly after *Obergefell v. Hodges*, same-sex marriages are legally equal to opposite-sex marriages. In fact, the theory is that, from a purely legal standpoint, there should only be marriage, available to any couple, regardless of sex or gender.[224] And yet, even here, the examples of ancient Near Eastern laws alert us to a way in which we see the alternative cultural status of same-sex marriage in the very laws that secure its legal normativity. Recall how the laws which stipulate equality between adopted and biological children and between children of primary and secondary wives attest to the alternative nature of adopted children and children of secondary wives as heirs. The laws insist on equality because people did not naturally practice that

[224] Of course, they must still qualify according to other criteria, such as age, degree of relatedness, and marital status.

equality. Similarly, we can read the decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges* as evidence that same-sex marriage is contested, and that for many people in our society (including four dissenting justices), same-sex marriage is not at all normative.[225] There has never been a Supreme Court case permitting heterosexual marriage, because there has never been a need: such marriages have always been allowed and provided for by U.S. law.[226]

In addition, while same-sex marriages now have equal legal status, their cultural status remains lower than that of heteronormative marriage. As described above, same-sex marriage continues to be contested, including by public officials. Moreover, heteronormative marriages continue to be dominant in a wide variety of representations, from bridal magazines to film, television, and fiction. As with biological children in ancient legal material, heteronormative marriages are the "unmarked case." To whatever degree same-sex marriage is less normative than its heterosexual counterpart, civil unions and commitment ceremonies will be even less so, given their reduced benefits from legal legitimacy.

Different Alterities

While both Abraham's heirship strategies and queer couplehood institutions are legitimate alternatives to familial norms, there are several additional differences between the ways in which they are alternatives to their norms. First, the role of ethical or moral judgments is a difference between the alternativeness of Abraham's strategies and that of the couplehood institutions. A sizable minority of Americans continue to reject any

[225] This perspective on *Obergefell v. Hodges* is one redescription that the comparison allows.

[226] Although not without limits, as *Loving v. Virginia* demonstrated.

legitimacy of queer couples due to moral and ethical objections. For these people, queer couplehood is not just a back-up plan, it is a moral failing.[227] This perspective is loudly proclaimed in American society, and contributes to the lower-class status of queer couplehood as opposed to heteronormative marriage. That is, an important part of what underlies the alternative status of queer couplehood institutions is the accusation that they are morally wrong.

In contrast, there is little evidence that Abraham's adoption of Eliezer or taking Hagar as a secondary wife would have been seen as ethically problematic.[228] As far as we can tell, the problem with Abraham's alternative strategies has more to do with status and social standing than with ethics. In addition, with respect to having children with secondary wives, it is likely that most of the problems of status concerned the wives and

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[227] Among the top hits for a google search for "homosexuality" are the following representatives of this perspective: "Same-Sex Attraction," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, accessed May 17, 2017, https://www.lds.org/topics/same-sex-attraction?lang=eng; John Piper, "So-Called Same-Sex Marriage: Lamenting the New Calamity," *desiringGod* (blog), June 26, 2015, http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/so-called-same-sex-marriage; Jonathan Parnell, "Why Homosexuality Is Not Like Other Sins," *desiringGod* (blog), April 21, 2014, http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/why-homosexuality-is-not-like-other-sins; "Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination: Guidelines for Pastoral Care," United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2006, http://www.usccb.org/about/doctrine/publications/homosexual-inclination-guidelines-page-set.cfm, 3–4.

[228] It is true that biblical commentators sometimes cast their own moral judgment against Abraham or Sarah and their heirship strategies, particularly for the arrangement with Hagar. But the ethical failure is almost always cast in terms of a failure of faith (Abraham and Sarah take the matter of an heir into their own hands rather than trusting in God to provide) or in terms of the mistreatment of Hagar (her lack of agency and the couple's use of her body in the context of slavery). The strategy of taking a secondary wife is never ethically condemned in and of itself. See Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 156; Brodie, *Genesis as Dialogue*, 119–121; Kinder, *Genesis*, 123.

It is also true that, by overriding Abraham's heirship strategies and creating a prime bio-son, YHWH is expressing a preference that may have a moral or ethical dimension, especially given the (debatable) possibility that YHWH is considered a source of ethics in these stories. But even if YHWH's preference for a prime bio-son is given ethical weight, what is clearly absent is any sort of ethical condemnation or rebuke of Abraham for his heirship plans and actions. That is, while YHWH overrides Abraham's plans, it is not at all clear that he does do because Abraham's plans were unethical.

children more than the husband. For instance, the marriage contracts suggest that the more powerful the primary wife or her father, the less likely it is that the husband will be able to take another wife, and the more likely it is that her children will be exclusive heirs.[229] In general, however, we actually have very little information about the kinds of concerns that were behind the alternative nature of the heirship strategies. It is easy to imagine and impose a variety of reasons, from social to ethical to practical, but the texts do not make this explicit for us.

Another difference concerns the participants' relationship to the legitimate alternatives. In general, queer couples prefer to participate in their couplehood institutions rather than in heteronormative marriage, even if they also wish these institutions were more normative. The reason that they prefer their same-sex institutions is, at one level, obvious: they want to marry (or otherwise commit to) someone of the same sex, and not someone of the opposite sex. In addition, the desire to marry someone of the same sex is often associated with a particular sexual identity, an identity which may be embraced. That is, the participants may have pride in their queer identity, a pride that would then be attached to their relationship, whatever its cultural status.

Thus, there is a difference in the perception of the couplehood institutions between those who participate in them (who prefer them) and the wider culture (which sees them as a lower status version of heteronormative marriage). This contrast is part of what constitutes the particular combination of legitimacy and alternativeness that characterizes the institutions. For example, a person in a same-sex marriage will likely

[229] Thompson, *Historicity*, 260.

see their marriage as normative, and certainly legitimate, and at the same time perceive the ways in which their marriage is treated as less normative by others.

In the Abraham narrative, however, there appears to be little or none of this contrast between the participants' perspective and that of the larger culture. Abraham's perspective, that of the biblical narrator, and the evidence in ancient Near Eastern parallels all seem to coincide, at least roughly, in seeing the prime bio-son as the most normative heir and seeing the other options as less preferred, albeit legitimate, alternatives. The heirship strategies do not appear to be connected to identities of any sort, nor to anything like queer pride. While the text does not portray the necessity of the alternative heirship strategies as overwhelmingly tragic, neither is there a sense that Abraham sees anything positive in these strategies, except that they are better than nothing (as for Sarah, see below, and chapters 4–5).

Finally, there is a difference between the two examples of legitimate alternatives in the relative emphasis on legitimacy or alternativeness. While perspectives of course vary, there appears to be more emphasis on the *legitimacy* of Abraham's strategies and on the *alternativeness* of the queer couplehood institutions. With regard to Abraham's strategies, see the section above on the scholarly reception of those strategies, which I demonstrated skewed toward legitimacy. Consider, too, the general construction and reception of Abraham: deviance and alternativeness are rarely characteristics that are attributed to him. In contrast, many people's impressions and understandings of queer couplehood, even those who support the right of queer couples to marry, primarily concern its alternative nature in relation to heteronormative marriage. These institutions are queer, after all: their alternative nature is embedded in the very language that I and others use to describe them. Even when the legitimacy of such relationships is recognized, the focus and emphasis is often on the difference between same-sex institutions and "regular marriage," as it might be called in such contexts.

Redescription: Queering Abraham's Strategies and Legitimizing Queer Relationships

My redescriptions in this section result from putting the similarities and differences in conversation with each other, asking in which way each might pull the other in its direction. I begin with the last difference above, regarding the emphasis placed on legitimacy or alternativeness. I want to argue for the pull of similarity across this difference, so that this difference might be lessened. That is, on the basis of the similarities in legitimacy and alternativeness sketched above, might we shift the emphasis on Abraham's legitimacy to a perspective that takes better account of his less-than-normativity? And might we see more clearly—when we imagine queer commitment ceremonies, civil unions, and marriages—the legitimacy of these relationships? If we can understand both sets of strategies as examples of the same phenomenon (the spectrums, combinations, and tensions of normativity and deviance that I have dubbed legitimate alternatives to familial norms), might we begin to evaluate them and understand them more in alignment with one another?

The movement I propose begins with an importation of Abraham's legitimacy onto the queer institutions. In line with this, I want to transfer some of the apparent ethical neutrality of Abraham's strategies onto the queer case. I propose that we reimagine the nature of same-sex relationships by emphasizing their normativity more than their deviance, and by seeing them as familial options for a greater diversity of situations, not as moral failings.

While this movement across difference has its own ethical imperative, in terms of the goals of this dissertation it is a means to an end. My focus in this project is on the interpretation of Genesis, and that focus requires that we move back across the gap of difference, seeing how our new, improved understanding of queer institutions can help us reimagine Abraham and his narrative.

First, reverse the discussion above, and bring the queer emphasis on alternativeness to bear on Abraham. But it is not *just* the reverse, because this is the next step in a back-and-forth dialectic between the similarities and differences. When we let the queer institutions speak back to Abraham's strategies, they do in their altered, more legitimate state: I want to think about Abraham's strategies in light of a "legitimate queerness." I don't want to completely ignore the legitimacy of his strategies, but I do want to draw more attention to the fact of their deviance, to emphasize that Abraham does share with queer couples an experience of participating in a non-normative social institution, of being excluded (for whatever reason) from normative familial life and having to make do with alternative methods of creating family. Moreover, in contrast to scholars who describe the alternativeness in personal, preferential terms, the comparison helps us to see Abraham's strategies as social institutions. It is not simply that he doesn't want to adopt, for instance; we must recognize how Abraham's reluctance to adopt is embedded in the non-normativity of adoption in his culture. This is the import of this chapter's comparison for my claim that Abraham and Sarah are Queer, and this is what the comparison brings to my rectification of Queerness: the use by Queer people of legitimate alternatives to familial norms.

Second, consider the difference between the participants' attitudes toward their institutions. I argued above that Abraham shared in the perception that his strategies were less normative alternatives to the prime bio-son as heir, while queer couples have pride and fully embrace their same-sex relationships, in contrast with the ways that the larger culture renders those relationships as less-than-normative. What if, motivated by the other similarities with queer couples, we consider the possibility that Abraham's perspective is actually similar to the queer couples in this respect, as well?

Such a possibility is most evident with respect to Abraham's child with a secondary wife: Ishmael. Recall from my description of Abraham's heirship strategies that twice Abraham expresses concern for Ishmael, first when told about Isaac's impending conception and later when Sarah asks for Hagar and Ishmael's expulsion. What is the significance of this concern, with respect to normativity and deviance, legitimacy and alternativeness? There are several possibilities, but at least one suggests that Abraham, like queer couples, had a stronger preference for the alternative than was the norm. The analysis of these possibilities will trace a thread through the argument of this chapter, and so makes a fitting conclusion.

First, Abraham's concern for Ishmael is evidence for the legitimacy of Ishmael, the secondary wife's child, as heir. With Ishmael's birth, Abraham considers the problem of heirship to be solved, because Ishmael is a perfectly legitimate (if not the *most* normative) heir. That is why, when YHWH tells him that Sarah will conceive, one of Abraham's first reactions is to worry about Ishmael and his claim to the inheritance: "O that Ishmael might live in your sight!" (Gen 17:18). Similarly, recall the narrator's comment when Sarah asks him to expel Hagar and Ishmael after Isaac's birth: "the matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son" (Gen 21: 11). Recall, too, that both the narrator's identification of Abraham's emotions and the use of "his son" add emphasis to this remark, highlighting precisely Abraham's understanding of Ishmael as his son and heir.

In fact, Abraham's concern, precisely at these moments when Isaac's heirship is brought to the fore, appears to cast Ishmael's heirship as even more normative than Isaac's, at least from Abraham's perspective. Is this evidence, contradicting my argument above, that the child of a secondary wife is not an alternative, but is just as much a normative heir as the child of a primary wife? I argue here that Abraham's concern for Ishmael is compatible with the normativity of the heirship of the prime bio-son. There are three pieces to this argument, each of which presents one way of interpreting Abraham's concern for Ishmael: (1) with respect to Gen 17, I consider the difference between an actual and a potential child; (2) with respect to Gen 21, I consider the contrast between the prime son (i.e., the son of the primary wife) and the eldest son; (3) in both cases I consider the contrast between different perspectives and preferences. It is this final reflection on Abraham's preferences, and their possible difference from the cultural norm, that leads me back to the redescription of Abraham as claiming the less normative strategy as his own personal preference.[230]

In chapter 17, when Abraham shows concern for Ishmael, he is expressing his feelings for an actual thirteen-year-old child as opposed to the not-yet-existent Isaac. Abraham is not comparing the norm of the prime bio-son with the alternative of a child of a secondary wife; he is comparing his son Ishmael to a potential child. In this light, it comes as little surprise that Abraham would prefer Ishmael. People may have ideals about the origins of their children, but those ideals do not necessarily correlate with their relationships with their actual children. That is, parents love their children despite the sometimes non-ideal circumstances of the children's conceptions, birth, or adoption. This love does not mean that the parents might not also wish that the conception, birth, or adoption of the child could have been different. Many modern heterosexual couples that have trouble conceiving demonstrate this: while they would have preferred to conceive by having sex, that does not diminish their love for their adopted children or for their children conceived with technological and medical assistance. [231]

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[230] Note that I am filling a gap: Abraham's perspective on heirship and the relationship between that perspective and the dominant norms of his culture. There are several indications that this is a gap, and not a blank (see chapter 1). First, the juxtaposition of Abraham's and YHWH's perspectives is repeated in Gen 17 and 21, emphasizing the tension between different possible heirs. In addition, YHWH's enforcement of his preference for a particular heir makes that preference act as a kind of norm. Finally, while the narrative does not require this gap to be filled to be coherent, different ways of filling it lead to radically different effects. Chapter 5 offers a fuller version of a similar dynamic with respect to Sarah.

[231] For one example, see Kelly Russell, "These Foreign Places We Call Home," in *Somebody's Child: Stories about Adoption*, ed. Bruce Gillespie and Lynne Van Luven (Surrey, BC: Touchwood Editions, 2011), 35–45.

In Gen 21, Isaac has been born, so he is no longer a potential child. But there is another important distinction between Isaac and Ishmael, one that is in tension with the distinction between primary and secondary wives: Ishmael is first-born. There is some debate about whether or not the firstborn son could expect a particular inheritance share based on his status as firstborn.[232] The biblical examples of Esau (Gen 27:1–28:4) and Reuben (Gen 49:3–4) both suggest that the norm was for the firstborn to at least inherit the largest share (if not the entire inheritance).[233] While neither ends up inheriting a special share, the text explains why exceptions were made in both cases, thus suggesting that they would have otherwise had a special share.

A norm involving greater inheritance by the first-born also explains the dynamics in Gen 21. In that case, there would be a tension between two competing norms. On one hand is the expectation that the firstborn son will inherit. On the other is the expectation that the son of the primary wife will have priority over the son of a secondary wife. Birth order and the mother's status both bring their respective norms of inheritance, and in this case those norms are in competition. What we see in Gen 21 is the victory of the latter norm, concerning the status of the mother, over birth order.

This interpretation is bolstered by the extra-biblical evidence, because that evidence suggests that in Abraham's case any conflicts between competing norms would have to be negotiated by the participants themselves. The laws and contracts regarding

[232] Eryl Davies, "The Inheritance of the First-born in Israel and the Ancient Near East," *JSS* 38 (1993), 175–91; Frederick Greenspahn, *When Brothers Dwell Together: The Preeminence of Younger Siblings in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Van Seters, *Abraham*, 87–95.

[233] On Reuben's loss of his expected firstborn inheritance, see Sarna, *Genesis*, 332.

children of secondary wives that I cited above are often used to interpret Hagar and Ishmael's status in Gen 16 and 21.[234] These documents concern the rights and obligations of various parties when a man takes a secondary wife or concubine on account of his first wife's childlessness. The contracts clarify for the parties involved who is due what; the laws do the same for those under their power.[235] In the absence of such clarifying laws and contracts, the rights and responsibilities of the situation are ambiguous and therefore a source of conflict. The laws and contracts exist precisely because social custom was not strong enough to provide guidance.

Because Abraham and his family do not seem to be governed by such laws or contracts, they were left to negotiate the situation on their own, without a clear norm to follow.[236] When Sarah asks Abraham to expel Hagar and Ishmael, Abraham's reactions—both his concern for Ishmael and his ultimate willingness to expel him—show both sides of the tension between the expected inheritance of the firstborn versus that of the prime bio-son. The norm of the firstborn as primary heir is supported by Abraham's concern, while Ishmael's expulsion supports the normativity of the prime bio-son as heir. While Isaac ends up inheriting, this outcome might not have been clear from the outset. It

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[234] Thompson, *Historicity*, 252–69; Speiser, *Genesis*, 121; Van Seters, *Abraham*, 91.

[235] At least theoretically. Berman, "The History of Legal Practice," 24–25, describes the growing consensus that, in fact, laws in the ancient Near East primarily reflect rather than regulate common practice.

[236] Note that this uncertainty over the proper heir is another example of disorientation—of having to make one's own way without being able to follow a clearly defined path. This disorientation represents another point of similarity with queer couplehood institutions. Queer couples must decide for themselves what it means to be a queer couple. Even when they adopt the rituals and roles of opposite-sex marriage, they are forced to do so as an intentional choice rather than being able to simply "get married" in the traditional way. Even if they choose to stay on the well-worn path of marriage, that path is more difficult because it is one path among other options, and because they are often forced to leave the path, perhaps just for a short time, but often at crucial moments.

may not be the case that the prime bio-son was clearly more normative than a firstborn son of a secondary wife as heir, but that such situations were resolved on a case-by-case basis. But this does not mean that the son of a secondary wife was as normative as the son of a primary wife, independent of birth order. In fact, the conflict represented in Gen 21 makes the most sense under the assumption that the there is a normative preference for children of the primary wife (independent of birth order). If there was not such a preference, Ishmael would be the clear, unencumbered heir (again, assuming the eldest son was generally expected to inherit, as seems to be the case).

A third way to interpret Abraham's concern for Ishmael, in terms of what it tells us about the normativity of different heirs, is to note the possibility of differences between different perspectives. There are at least three perspectives in view: Abraham, YHWH, and the dominant culture of the story world. (In theory the narrator offers a distinct perspective, but in these texts the narrator's perspective appears close enough to that of YHWH that I see no value in dwelling on that distinction. I consider Sarah's and Hagar's perspectives in later chapters.) Up to this point, I have assumed all of these perspectives are in alignment with each other. But the comparison with queer couples, who have a different view of their familial norms than that of the larger culture, encourages us to question this assumption. What happens if we look for a difference in perspectives?

First, consider the possibility that Abraham's perspective differs from that of YHWH and the larger culture. This leads to a different interpretation of Abraham's concern, in which that concern is not reconciled with the normativity of the prime bio-son, but competes with it. In this case, YHWH and the larger culture see the prime bio-son as normative. But Abraham chooses a different route, valuing his culturally non-normative son Ishmael as highly as a prime bio-son. In this interpretation, Abraham's protection of and concern for Ishmael reflect a different view of norms from those of his culture and his god.

In this reading, Abraham's relationship to one of his legitimate alternatives, having a child with a secondary wife, is similar to that of queer couples to their couplehood institutions. While they recognize their lack of normativity in the larger culture, they still prefer their strategies and practices to those of the dominant norm; indeed, they embrace them with pride. They may also wish that their institutions or strategies were more normative—Abraham's responses to God can be seen as arguments for something like this, a plea for more normativity for his preferred heir. But this interpretation also raises an additional difference. While he may prefer (or at least equally value) the less normative strategy, in the end his heir is the normative prime bio-son, Isaac. Through some combination of force and submission, Abraham ends up with the normative heir in the end.

Conclusion

The comparison in this chapter between Abraham's heirship strategies and queer couplehood institutions led to several new conclusions about the two comparands. First, I demonstrated how both participate in a combination of legitimacy and alternativeness (which are closely related to normativity and deviance), and are therefore examples of legitimate alternatives to familial norms. This helped us to see the alternative nature of

Abraham's strategies more clearly, which contributes to my larger argument that Abraham is Queer. Conversely, the comparison also helped us to see the legitimacy of queer couplehood institutions. I suggested that we think about queer couplehood more like we often think of Abraham's strategies: not as ethically problematic but as a menu of options for people in particular, diverse situations. I also sketched a possible interpretation of Abraham in which he resists his culture's, and even his god's ideas of normativity, valuing Ishmael at least as much as Isaac, and advocating on his behalf.

Finally, this chapter contributes to my rectification of Queerness: one aspect of Queerness is that it often involves legitimate alternatives to familial norms. This reminds us that Queerness will not be entirely about deviance, but will often participate in various combinations of both normativity and deviance, both of which will sometimes be contested by the Queer people involved, the larger culture, or both.

CHAPTER FOUR: CHILDLESSNESS

> Now Sarai was barren; she had no child. (Gen 11:30)
>
> Now Sarai, Abram's wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian slave-girl whose name was Hagar, and Sarai said to Abram, “You see that the LORD has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my slave-girl; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.” (Gen 16:1–2)

Several collections of essays about the experience of childlessness have recently been published.[237] The authors report many reasons for their childlessness, and they have varied and sometimes complicated emotional relationships to their lack of children. They often feel misunderstood, stigmatized, or marginalized. Some have substitute or “pseudo” children, including community members, professional projects, relatives or step-children. Some are queer, and associate their childlessness with their queerness.

For most of her story, Sarah has no children. In addition, the biblical text rarely allows her to speak about her childlessness. This silence begs the question: what would Sarah have to say about her lack of children? If Sarah could author a personal essay in an anthology of childless writers, what story would she tell?

Biblical interpreters, based primarily on comparisons with other biblical childless women, have told Sarah’s story in a consistent way: Sarah laments her childlessness and

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[237] Lynne Van Luven and Shelagh Rogers, eds., *Nobody’s Mother: Life without Kids* (Victoria, BC: Touchwood, 2006); Lynn Van Luven and Bruce Gillespie, eds., *Nobody’s Father: Life without Kids* (Victoria, BC: Touchwood, 2008); Meghan Daum, ed., *Selfish, Shallow, and Self-absorbed: Sixteen Writers on the Decision Not to Have Kids* (New York: Picador, 2015).

would do anything to bear children. In doing so, they have filled Sarah's silence with the voices of other women, and with their own. While this interpretation is compelling, it has made it difficult for us to see other possibilities—queerer possibilities—that might be hidden behind Sarah's silence. In this chapter, I use a comparison between Sarah's lack of children with that of some queer people and families to call attention to how scholars have filled the gaps in Sarah's story with heteronormative explanations, and to suggest other ways of filling those gaps.

The third term for this chapter is "childlessness," so this is the focus of my descriptions and comparisons, and I will argue that both Sarah and the queer people I describe are examples of childlessness. More important, though, are the resulting redescriptions of both the category of childlessness and Sarah's childlessness in particular. By playing across the apparent similarities and differences (that is, showing how the similarities help us to moderate the differences, and vice versa), I will argue that the nature of Sarah's childlessness is different from what previous interpreters have assumed. In contrast to other ancient and biblical childless women, the reasons behind Sarah's childlessness and her feelings about her lack of children are gapped. This allows for the possibility that Sarah chooses to be childless, and that her lack of children is not forced upon her by her biology or by divine forces. Moreover, it highlights the ways in which childlessness can arise from a complicated interplay between agency and context, rather than being strictly determined by one or the other.

Description: Sarah's Childlessness

When we first meet Sarah in Genesis 11:29–30, she is married to Abraham and she is childless. The importance of these two facts quickly becomes apparent when YHWH promises Abraham that he will become a "great nation" and that his "offspring" will inherit Canaanite land (12:1–3; 7).[238] Given Sarah's apparent inability to have children, we begin to wonder where these children will come from. Over many years, the couple makes little progress towards having children, but YHWH repeats and enhances his promise of progeny (13:14–17; 15:4–5).

Eventually, Sarah takes matters into her own hands. She proposes that Abraham have sex with her "slave-girl," Hagar, in order to conceive a child. While she may be motivated in part to help Abraham in light of YHWH's promises, the text reports only her own interest, that she will "obtain children by [Hagar]" (Gen 16:2). The strategy is successful, in that Hagar conceives. However, Hagar's conception also leads to complications. She begins to look down on Sarah. Sarah resents what she perceives as a lack of appropriate respect, and begins to "deal harshly" with Hagar, who then flees (16:4–6).

After an encounter with a messenger from YHWH, Hagar returns and bears a son, Ishmael (16:7–16). This would seem to resolve the tension between YHWH's promises and Sarah's childlessness, because Abraham now has his promised child. But YHWH refuses to let the matter rest. He specifies that Sarah will have a son, Isaac, and that this son will be the one through whom the promises of land and blessing will continue (Gen

[238] Cotter, *Genesis*, 73; Towner, *Genesis,* 120; Westermann, *Genesis,* 138, 141.

17:15–21). Abraham and Sarah, who at this point are both approaching one hundred years, both respond to this promise with laughter (17:17; 18:12). But Sarah does conceive and give birth to Isaac (21:1–3), through whom YHWH's promises and the Genesis narrative continue. At this point Sarah again moves against Hagar, this time convincing Abraham to expel Hagar and Ishmael in order to protect Isaac's inheritance (21:8–21).

How are we to understand Sarah's childlessness? What might her lack of children have meant to her and her family? The usual approach to these questions involves comparing the Genesis narratives with other biblical and ancient Near Eastern evidence. The evidence suggests that having children had enormous importance for women in the ancient Near East.[239] Wilbur Williams puts it strongly: "The text states that Sarai was barren (11:30), a fact that was considered unbearable, especially to women. A women's whole purpose in life was to grow up, get married, and have children. A life of barrenness was almost totally unacceptable…"[240]

The evidence for this strong conclusion about the place of childlessness in ancient Near Eastern life comes from biblical and non-biblical sources. When applied to Sarah, interpreters assume that Sarah fits the model set by other women. In other words,

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[239] See Joel S. Baden, "The Nature of Barrenness in the Hebrew Bible," in *Disability Studies and Biblical Literature*, ed. Candida R. Moss and Jeremy Schipper (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 13–28; Susan Ackerman, "The Blind, the Lame, and the Barren Shall Not Come into the House," in Moss and Schipper, *Disability Studies*, 29–45; David Tabb Stewart, "Sexual Disabilities in the Hebrew Bible," in Moss and Schipper, *Disability Studies*, 67–87; Karen Rhea Nemet-Nejat, *Daily Life in Ancient Mesopotamia* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 152; Hennie J. Marsman, *Women in Ugarit and Israel: Their Social and Religious Position in the Context of the Ancient Near East* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 191; Westermann, *Genesis*, 237; Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 7; Marten Stol, *Birth in Babylonia and the Bible: Its Mediterranean Setting*, Cuneiform Monographs 14 (Groningen: Styx, 2000), 34.

[240] Williams, *Genesis*, 118.

interpreters focus on the similarity between Sarah and the other women, in that both are childless. In doing so, they ignore the important differences between Sarah and the other examples, thus misconstruing the narrative account of Sarah's lack of children. They miss the fact that, in contrast to the other accounts of childlessness, and especially the other biblical accounts, the reasons and emotions behind Sarah's childlessness are gapped.

Sarah's Childlessness in Context

Comparisons with other childless women in the Bible reinforce the centrality of motherhood for women's identities. Two of these women, Rachel and Hannah, express a clear and strong desire for children. In Genesis 30:1, Rachel exclaims, "Give me children, or I shall die!" Similarly, Hannah prays for a son, and promises that if she has a son she will dedicate him to YHWH. "O LORD of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a nazirite until the day of his death" (1 Sam 1:11). Rebekah and Hannah conform to the standard reconstruction of ancient Near Eastern gender norms: women want to have children, and those who have not conceived are desperate to do so.

Other evidence that attests to the importance to women of having children comes from law codes and marriage contracts.[241] Both make provisions for what happens if a woman doesn't have children. For example, sometimes the husband can take an additional wife, or the wife can give the husband a slave-girl. Divorce was also a

[241] For discussion of the relevant texts, see John Van Seters, "The Problem of Childlessness in Near Eastern Law and the Patriarchs of Israel," *JBL* 87 (1968): 401–408; Thompson, *Historicity*, 252–69; Westermann, *Genesis*, 239.

possibility. These laws and contracts suggest that having children was an expectation for women, and failure to have children represented failure as a wife.

Together, this evidence strongly suggests that the norm for women in the ancient Near East was to want and to have children. Moreover, it appears that women who did not have children faced social stigma and shame. The usual understanding of Sarah and her childlessness is that she exemplifies these norms. Like other childless women in her general context, this interpretation suggests, she lamented her lack of children and acted (through the arrangement with Hagar) to try to remedy that lack.

Notice, however, how this interpretation works. Presented with the simple fact of Sarah's childlessness, interpreters fill in the rest of the gap by assuming an essential similarity between Sarah and the other ancient Near Eastern women. But a comparison between Sarah's statements about children and those of her biblical counterparts which focuses on differences, rather than similarities, suggests that Sarah may not fit the model of childless women that has been reconstructed, with a rather broad brush, by biblical scholars.

Consider again Rachel and Hannah. They make their desires for children perfectly clear. Rachel says "Give me children or I shall die" (Gen. 30:1) and Hannah prays for a "male child" (1 Sam 1:11). What does Sarah say? In her only comments on the matter, when introducing her plan for Hagar to conceive a child with Abraham, Sarah says, "You see that the LORD has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my slave-girl; it may be that I shall obtain children by her" (Gen 16:2). It may seem at first that Sarah's desire to "obtain children" is similar to Rachel's demand and Hannah's prayer. But there are two important differences here. First, Sarah is not expressing a desire for a biological child of her own, but for Hagar to have children. While Rachel also expresses a desire for her maidservant to have children (Gen 30:3), this is in addition to her desire for a child of her own (Gen 30:1). In contrast, Sarah's narrative lacks a clear statement of desire for her own child.

The other important consideration is that the Hebrew text, unlike the NRSV translation, says nothing explicit about "obtaining children," but instead uses figurative language of being "built up" (root בנה). That is, Sarah does not express a desire to obtain children, but to somehow be built up through Hagar's children. This contrasts with the language used by Rachel and Hannah: in the Hebrew Rachel demands children (Gen 30:1; בנים) and Hannah prays for male offspring (זרע אנשים).s Again, the differences in the details reveals that, while Rachel and Hannah clearly want children, that clarity is conspicuously absent in Sarah's words. Rachel and Sarah both express a desire to be built up through their maidservants, but only Rachel says she wants children of her own.

These contrasts between Sarah and her childless biblical counterparts create a gap. Recall that one criterion for recognizing a gap, rather than a meaningless blank, is juxtaposition with another, similar case in which the detail is not missing. This is precisely what I have described: Rachel's and Hannah's desires are clearly articulated, while Sarah's are ambiguous at best. Additional evidence that Sarah's (lack of) desire is gapped comes from her laughing reactions to the news of Isaac's conception and birth, which are the primary focus of chapter 5.

While Sarah does not express a direct desire for children, she does explain her lack of children: "You see that the LORD has prevented me from bearing children." This, too, is usually interpreted as revealing Sarah's desire for children: she wants to have children, and would choose to have them, but she is being prevented from having them. And that very well may be the case. But those are gap-filling interpretations, not what Sarah or the text say, and there are other ways to fill the gaps about Sarah's desires and for the reasons behind her childlessness. For example, it may be that the Lord prevented Sarah from bearing children, but Sarah is happy about having been prevented from bearing children. It may also be, as I will argue below, that we have reason to distrust Sarah's account of her childlessness, especially in this situation, and that she might have more to do with her own childlessness than she admits. Notice, too, how Sarah's explanation for her childlessness deflects attention from her lack of desire for children as effectively as the most evasive politician. In part because of this (possibly partial, possibly misleading) explanation, even the most astute interpreters have failed to notice Sarah's lack of desire for children.

In addition to the contrast between Sarah and the other childless biblical women, non-biblical evidence that women in the ancient Near East did not always want to have children is often ignored in interpretations of Sarah and her childlessness. For example, there is evidence of Egyptian knowledge of both contraception and methods of abortion from several different times and places in the second millennium BCE.[242] Similar

[242] John M. Riddle, *Contraception and Abortion from the Ancient World to the Renaissance* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 66–73.

practices, including lists of plants and minerals that help to avoid conception and a recipe for a liquid intended to cause abortion, are attested for ancient Mesopotamia, as well.[243]

Drawing on this comparative evidence and anthropological considerations, Athalya Brenner argues that ancient Israelite women were almost certainly aware of and utilized methods of contraception and abortion.[244] Brenner then addresses the question of why these topics are so thoroughly absent in the Hebrew Bible. She tentatively suggests that such topics were omitted by the male authors because they were considered to be "within the province of women's interest and praxis."[245] Brenner argues that a few passages reveal traces of this omitted knowledge, including Onan's *coitus interruptus* (Gen 38:8–10), an oral abortion method in an adultery ordeal (Num 5:18–18), the prohibited "sorceress" of Exod 22:17 who may have been an anti-fertility expert, and the plants in the garden in the Song of Songs, many of which "have been used as female contraceptives and abortifacients throughout the Mediterranean world for, quite literally, ages."[246] My argument adds Sarah to the list of possible traces of evidence of women's non-participation in the pro-natalist ideology that dominates the Hebrew Bible.[247]

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[243] Stol, *Birth in Babylonia*, 37–48; R. D. Biggs, "Conception, Contraception, and Abortion in Ancient Mesopotamia," in *Wisdom, Gods and Literature: Studies in Assyriology in Honour of W. G. Lambert*, ed. A. R. George and I. L. Finkel (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2000), 1–13.

[244] Athalya Brenner, *The Intercourse of Knowledge: On Gendering Desire and 'Sexuality' in the Hebrew Bible* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 82.

[245] Brenner, *Intercourse*, 83.

[246] Brenner, *Intercourse*, 69–90, 84–88.

[247] For her part, Brenner misses the possibility that Sarah might have used some of the techniques she discusses, declaring, "no woman in the HB is described as resisting motherhood" (*Intercourse*, 57).

Another non-biblical example of ancient Near Eastern women who chose to remain childless are the Mesopotamian priestesses, including those with the title *naditu*.[248] Scholars have often used the *naditu* as a comparison for Sarah, but almost exclusively by comparing the arrangement with Hagar to the law which specifies that a *naditu* may give her husband a maidservant so that he can conceive a child.[249] But Savina Teubal identifies additional similarities between Sarah and Mesopotamian priestesses, arguing that Sarah had an official religious role that explains her childlessness.[250] Teubal is the only scholar of which I am aware who has considered the possibility that Sarah was able to have children, but for some reason did not.[251] She also highlights a whole group of ancient women who did not have children, adding further evidence that assertions of a universal desire for children among ancient Near Eastern women requires correction.

[248] Teubal, *Sarah the Priestess*, 77–87.

[249] Van Seters, *Abraham*, 69.

[250] Teubal, *Sarah the Priestess*, 102–103.

[251] Recently, Candida R. Moss and Joel S. Baden (*Reconceiving Infertility: Biblical Perspectives on Procreation and Childlessness* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015]) approach the possibility that Sarah might not have wanted children, but they too miss the difference between Sarah and her biblical counterparts. Their contribution is to raise new questions, such as, "why do we—or, better, why do the biblical authors of these stories—assume that these women would want to bear children in the first place?" (25). They also recognize the possibility that a childless woman might not desire children, although they differ from me in that they interpret "barren" as implying a desire for children (25), while I argue below that the Hebrew עקרה means only "childless." Unfortunately, this difference and their willingness to "grant the biblical authors the assumption that these women all wanted to have children" (25) leads to the kind of over-generalizations that are typical in this area. For example, they assert that "ancient Israelite economy and custom effectively demanded offspring. A family could survive neither literally nor figuratively without children to sustain it" (29–30). I argue that Abraham and Sarah are a compelling counterexample, or at least exception, to this statement.

Description: Queer Families and Their (Lack of) Children

As I argued above, in order to fill the gaps in Sarah's narrative regarding her lack of children, scholars have usually turned to comparisons with other childless ancient Near Eastern women. This chapter suggests an alternative method of gap-filling (i.e., an alternative interpretation, in that all interpretation is gap-filling) based on a different comparison: queer childless men and women. In this section I describe such queer families and individuals and contextualize them in a cultural history of queer childlessness.

Rosemary Rowe

Rosemary Rowe is a lesbian who does not have children, and has seldom had any desire to have children. She attests that her sexuality and her childlessness go well together in that being gay gives her an easy excuse to not have children: "I figured that lesbianism would preclude anyone asking me to reproduce. . . as far as 'having a family' was concerned, I was off the heterosexual hook."[252]

Rowe describes, with humor, how these assumptions were undermined by changes in her community and parallel changes in depictions of lesbians and gay men in popular culture.

> In the early days of my gayness, in the mid-1990s, my conviction that gay people were not expected to have families was backed up by the queer characters in film and on TV. None of these TV gays had families. Instead, it seemed the men were all dying of AIDs and the lesbians . . . ha! That's right, there were no lesbians. Then, later, when shows like Queer as Folk came to Canada, it seemed like TV's

[252] Rosemary Rowe, "Aspiring Lesbian Aunt," in *A Family by Any Other Name: Exploring Queer Relationships*, ed. Bruce Gillespie (Victoria, BC: Touchwood, 2014), 117.

> gay men were all having hot, no-strings-attached, man-on-man sex and the lesbians were having . . . babies. Waaaaait a minute.
>
> Meanwhile, in real life, there began a seemingly never-ending baby boom among my friends and cousins. Some of them were queer, some were straight. . .[253]

This baby boom prompted Rowe to reconsider her own refusal to have children. But rather than reverse course altogether, she ended up with what she calls a "compromise": she wouldn't actively pursue having children, but if she found a partner who had children or wanted them, she would "wholeheartedly" get on board.[254]

As it turns out, she met a partner who also did not want children. Rowe admits that she is relieved that things turned out this way. "Now that I've married a woman who also does not care for children, I realize how totally relieved I am that I will not have to do this."[255]

Brian Day

Brian Day wanted to be a father, but when he realized he was gay he assumed he would have to give up this desire. "I did not for a moment consider that being gay and being a father could be compatible."[256] He describes with sorrow the process of parting with the idea of being a father to a son, saying that "it was challenging, especially in the first year or two."[257] He also describes how his vocation as a teacher and writer helped

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[253] Rowe, "Aspiring Lesbian Aunt," 118.

[254] Rowe, "Aspiring Lesbian Aunt," 118.

[255] Rowe, "Aspiring Lesbian Aunt," 122.

[256] Brian Day, "Fatherhood and Me," in Van Luven and Gillespie, *Nobody's Father*, 177.

[257] Day, "Fatherhood," 177–178.

him to deal with the loss of possible fatherhood, helping him to feel "quite satisfied with the life I had constructed and its potential for shaping the world."[258] He also describes how, despite this overall satisfaction, he would sometimes have moments in which he felt his lack of children more acutely.

At one point, Day's partner suggested that the two of them adopt a child. This came early in the 21st century, when it was becoming more common for gay men to have children, often through adoption. However, Day decided that, at this point in his life, he no longer wanted to have children. He felt overwhelmed by the prospect of teaching all day and then coming home to more children, rather than to his preferred ways of spending his time, such as writing and going to the gym.

Finally, Day describes donating sperm to a lesbian couple, and how after several tries there was a successful pregnancy. For Day the arrangement was ideal: "there would be an ongoing engagement with a growing child without the pressing daily responsibilities of parenting."[259] Day concludes with a reflection on his procreative self-identity: "I will not be in any conventional sense a father. The child will have two mothers and a couple of visiting uncles. And now when I ponder this, I recognize that there is really nothing more that I want."[260]

[258] Day, "Fatherhood," 179.

[259] Day, "Fatherhood," 181.

[260] Day, "Fatherhood," 183.

Cultural Associations between Queerness and Childlessness

Rowe's and Day's stories of childlessness can be contextualized in the long (but evolving) history of cultural associations between queerness and a lack of children. Several theorists have also identified a connection between queerness and childlessness. Judith Halberstam claims that "queer uses of times and space develop, at least in part, in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction."[261] Halberstam links heterosexuality with the family and reproduction, and contrasts queerness with all three. Focusing on literary and cultural figuration, Lee Edelman identifies the way that homosexuality is often positioned against the figure of "The Child" and how homosexuality is constructed and portrayed as anti-child and a threat to children.[262] Michael Warner analyzes the queer contempt of reproduction captured by the slang term "breeder." "In Anglo-American culture the colloquial term by which many queer people define the enemy is not 'straights' but, bitterly, 'breeders.'"[263] He goes on to explain that "breeder" critiques the ideology of "reprosexuality," which insists on a connection between sexuality and reproduction.[264]

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[261] Halberstam, *Queer Time*, 1.

[262] Edelman, *No Future*.

[263] Warner, "Introduction," 9.

[264] Warner, "Fear of a Queer Planet," 9–10. See also Rachel Carroll's (*Rereading Heterosexuality*, 17–18, 137–39) identification of reproduction as an integral component of normative female heterosexuality, with the consequence that women who do not have children participate in a non-normative (hetero)sexuality which can serve to highlight the constructed, non-natural, and fragile nature of heteronormativity (and therefore, I would add, such women are arguably queer).

In her study of ghostly representations of lesbians, Terry Castle offers several examples in which the haunted lesbians are childless.[265] She quotes Swinburne's 1862 poem "Faustine," in which an important feature of the title character is her childlessness: "What sterile growths of sexless root / Or epicene? / What flower of kisses without fruit / Of love, Faustine?" Castle also cites Radclyffe Hall's early lesbian classic, *The Well of Loneliness*. Describing the climactic haunting of Stephen, the tragic lesbian protagonist, Hall writes that "her barren womb became fruitful" through the possession of lesbian ghosts.[266]

Opposition to same-sex marriage, including that used in legal battles, often involves an association between queerness and childlessness, as well. For example, consider Chief Justice John Roberts' dissenting opinion in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, the Supreme Court case that ruled that states must allow same-sex couples to marry.

> Procreation occurs through sexual relations between a man and a woman. When sexual relations result in the conception of a child, that child's prospects are generally better if the mother and father stay together rather than going their separate ways. Therefore, for the good of children and society, sexual relations that can lead to procreation should occur only between a man and a woman committed to a lasting bond.[267]

What this syllogism excludes is the fact that same-sex couples have children. The underlying assumption of this exclusion is an intimate connection between

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[265] Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 37–38, 51.

[266] Radclyffe Hall, *The Well of Loneliness* (Ware, UK; Wordsworth Editions, 2005), 399. Stephen's otherworldly impregnation here resonates with YHWH's active role in the conception of Isaac, as I discuss in chapter 5.

[267] *Obergefell v. Hodges*, 576 U.S. at 5 (2015).

heterosexuality and procreation on the one hand, and between queerness and childlessness on the other.

Another argument used by opponents of same-sex marriage focuses on the harm done to children in families headed by a same-sex couple.[268] *The New York Times* reported in 2014 about a legal battle over Michigan's constitutional ban of same-sex marriage, explaining how the opposition between queerness and children operated in that legal battle. "Opponents of same-sex marriage have a new chance this week to play one of their most emotional and, they hope, potent cards: the claim that having parents of the same sex is bad for children."[269] While this argument implicitly admits that many queer couples do indeed have children, it continues the tendency to oppose queerness and children.

The traditional association between queerness and childlessness is being undermined by the rise of technologies that make it easier for queer couples to have children, by increases in the number of queer families with children, and by increasing public acceptance of queer relationships and queer parenting. But the association between queerness and childlessness persists, even in the face of increasing numbers of queer

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[268] Jeffrey Weeks, Brian Heaphy, and Catherine Donovan, *Same Sex Intimacies: Families of Choice and Other Life Experiments* (London: Routledge, 2001), 157–60; Stacey Barchenger, "TN AG: Procreation a Strike Against Gay Marriage," *The Tennessean* (March 27, 2015), http://www.tennessean.com/story/news/2015/03/27/procreation-states-rights-supreme-court-gay-marriage-appeal/70574322/.

[269] Erik Eckholm, "Opponents of Same-Sex Marriage Take Bad-For-Children Argument to Court," *New York Times* (Feb. 22, 2014), http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/23/us/opponents-of-same-sex-marriage-take-bad-for-children-argument-to-court.html?_r=0.

parents (and sometimes shifting slightly to accommodate this increase), as the current debates over same-sex marriage demonstrate.

The view that queerness is somehow incompatible with having children is not limited to the opponents of same-sex marriage. Many queer people harbor this assumption, as well, especially in the early stages of their lesbian or gay identity formation. Rowe and Day are both examples of this dynamic, but other similar accounts and research on the backgrounds of queer parents demonstrate that the assumption that an emerging queer identity would not be compatible with parenthood is not unusual.[270] This assumption also emerges in studies of mixed-orientation marriages, in which one partner is heterosexual and the other is either homosexual or bisexual. Gay men and lesbians report entering such marriages, in part, because they see a heterosexual marriage as the only way to have children.[271] From over one hundred years of literary representation to contemporary queer theory, and from queer people themselves to their political opponents, there has been a strong association between queer identities and childlessness.

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[270] Dean Murphy, "The Desire for Parenthood: Gay Men Choosing to Become Parents Through Surrogcay," *Journal of Family Issues* 34 (2013), 1110–11. See also Maya Sabil, "About a Butch," in Gillespie, *A Family By Any Other Name*, 154–55; Mark Gianino, "Adaptation and Transformation: The Transition to Adoptive Parenthood for Gay Male Couples," *Journal of GLBT Family Studies* 4 (2008), 206; John Barton, "Adding Nothing to the Flow: Greening the Pregnant Man," in Van Luven and Gillespie, *Nobody's Father,* 142–43; Don Maybin, "Everyone's Uncle," in Van Luven and Gillespie, *Nobody's Father*, 223; Weeks, Heaphy, and Donovan, *Same Sex Intimacies*, 161–63; Dana Berkowitz and William Marsiglio, "Gay Men: Negotiating Procreative, Father, and Family Identities," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 69 (2007), 367–68.

[271] Michelle Wolkomir, "Making Heteronormative Reconciliations: The Story of Romantic Love, Sexuality, and Gender in Mixed-Orientation Marriages," *Gender and Society* 23 (2009), 497.

Comparison: Childlessness

Having described both the sterile reading of Sarah and her childlessness and some examples of contemporary queer families, I now examine some of the similarities and differences between them. The basic similarity which motivates the comparison is childlessness: Rowe, Day, and Sarah are all childless. Of course, Sarah eventually has a child, begging several questions about how that effects Sarah's normativity and deviance. Those questions will be addressed in chapter 5. For now, my focus is on Sarah's situation before the birth of Isaac.

Another similarity is that, in the case of both Sarah and Day, there is some ambiguity about what constitutes childlessness. While Sarah does not have a biological child, there is evidence that Ishmael might be considered social offspring of some sort. Sarah expresses an expectation of a social relationship to Hagar's child when she says that she will be built up through Hagar's child. Of course, if there was such a relationship, no direct evidence is given in the text.[272]

In Day's case, the ambiguity arises from the opposite situation: he has a biological child but is not a social parent. He denies being a father "in any conventional sense." While it is easy to understand Day's meaning, this formulation is misleading in that biological parenthood is one of the most conventional senses of fatherhood. However, it is a sense from which Day wants to distance himself: he considers himself childless in the sense that he is not a social father.

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[272] However, note that there are no direct references to Sarah's childlessness after the birth of Ishmael.

One important difference between Sarah and the queer childless examples concerns the amount of knowledge we have about the childlessness. With the queer examples, we have relatively in-depth, first person accounts of the childlessness, its context, and its motivation, as well as descriptions of the larger cultural context of childlessness. In addition, we have little reason to distrust these accounts. In contrast, we know almost nothing about the circumstances of Sarah's childlessness. We have some limited, indirect evidence about what childlessness might have meant in Sarah's culture, in general, but with respect to Sarah specifically almost everything is gapped, and the little information that is given is embedded in a complicated narrative which can bear multiple interpretations.[273]

Another similarity is that in both Sarah's context and that of Rowe and Day, childlessness carries some degree of stigma and marginalization. As discussed above, childlessness was seen as a failure for women in the ancient Near East. Moreover, childless women suffered social consequences such as stigma and economic vulnerability due to their lack of children. Similarly, motherhood is the assumed status for women in modern Western societies, and childlessness, whether chosen or otherwise, is seen as deviant, unnatural, and in need of explanation. Several recent studies describe the lives of childless women and the representation of childless women in Australia. In terms of the experience of being a childless woman, Stephanie Rich et al. conclude that "being a childless woman continues to be a minority and marginalised social position. . . . Living

[273] In this respect Sarah is similar to many of the childless people—acquaintances or friends—that we may know in our twenty-first century lives. Often, the details of childlessness are not openly discussed: they remain gapped.

in a pronatalist society renders childless women as deviant and unnatural."[274] Rich and Melissa Graham argue that the media help to perpetuate this marginalized status.

> The analysis presented here revealed childless women were presented in the Australian print media through four main representations: "sympathy worthy women"; "childless career women"; "the artefact of feminism"; and "reprimanded women." Pervading these representations were pronatalist aims and ideologies in which bearing children was encouraged and motherhood depicted as women's most valued role and contribution.[275]

While these studies took place in Australia, there is evidence that similar attitudes and representations can be found in the United States, as well. A recent anthology of essays titled *Selfish, Shallow, and Self-absorbed: Sixteen Writers on the Decision Not to Have Kids* was written precisely to combat such stereotypes of childlessness, and many of the contributors report the stigmatization that has accompanied their childlessness.[276]

One manifestation of this stigma is terminological. Most terms for people who do not have children are inherently negative, portraying a lack rather than representing the positivity and wholeness that many people without children experience. "Barren," "sterile," infertile," "childless": all assume having children as the natural state and a lack

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[274] Stephanie Rich et al., "'Unnatural', 'Unwomanly', 'Uncreditable' and 'Undervalued': The Significance of Being a Childless Woman in Australian Society," *Gender Issues* 28 (2011), 243.

[275] Stephanie Rich and Melissa Graham, "Representations of Childless Women in the Australian Print Media," *Feminist Media Studies* 14 (2014), 514–15.

[276] Danielle Henderson, "Save Yourself," in Daum, *Selfish*, 157–59; Sigrid Nunez, "The Most Important Thing," in Daum, *Selfish*, 101, 109–110; Meghan Daum, "Introduction," in Daum, *Selfish*, 2–5; Courtney Hodell, "Babes in the Woods," in Daum, *Selfish*, 18, 20; Laura Kipnis, "Maternal Instincts," in Daum, *Selfish*, 39; Rosemary Mahoney, "The Hardest Art," in Daum, *Selfish*, 228–29; Tim Kreider, "The End of the Line," in Daum, *Selfish*, 262–63, 272. See also L. Serene Jones, "Hope Deferred: Theological Reflections on Reproductive Loss (Infertility, Miscarriage, Stillbirth)," *Modern Theology* 17 (2001), 230–31.

of children as a departure.[277] One alternative is "childfree," though some are reluctant to embrace what they perceive as an "anti-children" term, because it does not adequately capture their identity and relationship to children.[278]

The presence of deviance, stigma, and marginalization is a critical similarity between Sarah's childlessness and modern childlessness, including queer childlessness. But there are important differences in the degree and operation of these cultural judgments of childlessness. For one thing, there is now an increasing counter-discourse, including the studies and anthology I described above, combatting the stereotypes of childlessness and protesting against the marginalization of people without children. There is no evidence of such a counter-discourse from the ancient Near East. To the extent that Sarah's story can itself be read as a positive account of childlessness, it does so as an apparently unique departure from its context.

A related difference is that modern childlessness takes place in a context of proliferating family forms and increasing opportunities for women to find acceptance in fulfillment in roles other than that of mother. In contrast, the biblical record suggests that there were few satisfying roles for women outside of motherhood, and those that did exist were almost always reserved for elite or otherwise exceptional women.[279]

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[277] Lorna Crozier, "A Woman Without," in Van Luven and Rogers, *Nobody's Mother*, 27–29; Adrienne Munro, "The Barren Sister," in Van Luven and Rogers, *Nobody's Mother*, 169–70.

[278] Crozier, "A Woman Without," 27; Tim Kreider, "The End," 264; Jeanne Safer, "Beyond *Beyond Motherhood*," in Daum, *Selfish*, 195.

[279] See Athalya Brenner, *The Israelite Woman: Social Role and Literary Type in Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985).

In addition, childlessness in Sarah's context often had an economic context which is generally absent in the modern West. A primary motivation for many women to have children concerned the economics of survival: children, when old enough, would support the household through their labor, and then provide support for the parents in their old age.[280] While many children today support their parents economically in various ways, children are rarely seen as a financial necessity, and more importantly the value of children is rarely construed in terms of finances and household maintenance or survival.

Why Childless?

I turn now to the different reasons for the childlessness. This is the difference which, under the influence of the similarities I have already described, I will call into question and moderate (across which I will "play," in Smith's figurative description). The basic difference is that Sarah was unable to have children, while Rowe and Day chose not to have them.[281] Sarah, as a woman in the ancient Near East, probably had many reasons to want children, so her lack of children can easily be attributed to an inability of some sort. Candida Moss and Joel Baden argue that the biblical view was that women were "naturally" infertile, and only became fertile through divine action, the opening of the womb.[282] In this worldview, Sarah's lack of children was a result of God's lack of action, whether purposeful or an accident of arbitrary divine attention. Moss and Baden's

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[280] Meyers, *Discovering Eve*, 122–188; Laurel W. Koepf-Taylor, *Give Me Children or I Shall Die: Children and Communal Survival in Biblical Literature* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 33–63.

[281] It is possible that Rowe was also unable to have children. Since she never tried, the question is moot. See Moss and Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility*, 26.

[282] Moss and Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility*, 53–62.

argument is a corrective against other interpretations, in which scholars assumed that biblical barrenness, including Sarah's, matched the modern medical understanding of infertility. In any case, most scholars agree that Sarah wanted children and tried to have them but was unable to: she couldn't conceive.[283]

In contrast, childless queers like Rowe and Day choose not to have children. Rowe never wants to have children, never tries, and never has them. While Day wanted children early on, he never tried to have them, and he later decides, when given an opportunity to adopt, not to do so. There is a clear difference between Rowe's and Day's decisions not to have kids and Sarah's barrenness. We might label these two types of childlessness "chosen" and "disabled."[284] While both groups may be stigmatized and marginalized, their experiences differ significantly, so the distinction is a useful one.

Under the pressure of the similarities, however, we might begin to examine this distinction more carefully, and to see if there is more similarity across this difference than it first appears. Looking first at the queer examples, the assertion that Day chose his childlessness may be appropriate when he decided not to adopt in his mid-40's, but is more questionable when applied to his early life, when he clearly wanted children and grieved their lack in his life. While in some abstract sense Day may have had a choice, in

[283] As discussed above, Teubal's argument that Sarah intentionally did not have children because she held religious office is an exception (*Sarah the Priestess*).

[284] My use of "disability" intentionally invokes that body of theory. On childlessness and disability in the Bible, see the essays by Baden, Ackerman, and Stewart in Moss and Schipper, *Disability Studies and Biblical Literature*.

a more practical, experiential sense Day was not able to choose to have children, given the other realities in his life.[285]

In particular, Day attributes his lack of choice to his queerness and, implicitly, to his understanding, inherited from his culture, that gay men could not be fathers. This begs the question of whether Day's queerness was a choice; if he chose to be queer, then it is more reasonable to construe his childlessness as an indirect choice, a predictable consequence of another choice. The role of choice in queerness is a fraught question which has often been rejected by queer scholars.[286] But Day's language, both about his sexual identity and about his childlessness, suggest that he did not experience either as a choice. He talks of "coming into my identity as a gay man," and says that because of this identity, and the lack of "visible models beyond that of normative heterosexual fatherhood," he "concluded that any part in fatherhood was lost."[287] The sense that Day gives is one of yearning for what cannot be, not deciding to live without children.

Rowe's story illustrates another way in which the distinction between choice and ability falters. Recall that, while Rowe did not want to have children, she decided that she would be willing to for a partner who wanted them. In the end, she did not have children, but we cannot attribute this result entirely to choice: if Rowe is being honest about her intentions, her childlessness has as much to do with the accidents of life which brought

[285] This insight, made possible in part by the comparison, could lead to a redescription of queer childlessness which focuses on all the ways that such childlessness is proscribed, constrained, or determined.

[286] Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 40–44; Halperin, *One Hundred Years*, 41–53.

[287] Day, "Fatherhood," 177.

her together with her partner, who also did not want kids, as with Rowe's parenting choices. That is, Rowe's childlessness is, at least in part, situational and contextual, shaped by forces beyond Rowe's control, and not a pure act of agency.

Just as Day and Rowe destabilize the distinction between choice and ability that supposedly differentiate them from Sarah, is it possible that Sarah's inability to have children is also less certain that it has appeared? The comparison with queer childlessness prompts me to question this unexamined assumption. Can we confidently read the text in terms of Sarah's disability with regard to conceiving a child, or might the situation, as with many queer families, be more complicated? I argue in what follows that the text leaves ample room for the possibility that Sarah chose to be childfree.

Even within the usual interpretation, there are significant differences between Sarah and contemporary infertile men and women which call into question her categorization as childless due to disability. For one thing, Sarah ends up conceiving a child, which is not the case for most families that are childless due to infertility. Moreover, as mentioned above, in the biblical context it was commonly understood that the gods were in control of fertility. While contemporary medical understandings of infertility locate the disability within the body, ancient understandings located fertility problems in the divine realm. While ancient women could still suffer the consequences of divine (in)action, the constructions of "disabled" childlessness in the two contexts are radically different.

I engage the role of YHWH in Sarah's eventual conception more deeply in chapter 5. For now I simply want to question the easy placement of Sarah on the disabled side of the (imperfect) chosen/disabled dichotomy. That is, interpreters' common assumption that Sarah is unable to have children, in the sense that modern science judges some women to be infertile, is not adequate. This inadequacy, coupled with the comparison to queer childlessness, reopens the question of why Sarah is childless.

Redescription: Sarah as Childfree

In this section I argue that Sarah and Abraham's narrative allows for the possibility that Sarah's childlessness was not the result of a disability, but was due to her choice not to have children. Because the "disability" interpretation has been so common, to the point that it is taken for granted, my redescription requires attention to several key moments. In this chapter I first address the linguistic question, arguing that the Hebrew עקרה means "childless" rather than "unable to have children." (In fact, the common "barren" is a good translation, insofar as the basic meaning of "barren" is in fact childless, but because "barren" has accumulated strong connotations of infertility, I prefer to use "childless.") I then turn to the arrangement with Hagar, and Sarah's comments justifying that arrangement, arguing that they too are compatible with an interpretation in which Sarah chooses her childlessness. In chapter 5 I interpret Sarah's ambiguous reactions to predictions of her conception and to the birth of Isaac, arguing that these, too, are compatible with her childlessness being a choice.

The Meaning of עקרה

All the attestations of the Hebrew word which is applied to Sarah, עקרה, support or allow a definition that is restricted to "childless" rather than "unable to have children."[288] There are ten instances of עקרה, along with one case of the male version, עקר. Three of these verses are pivotal, in that they seem to define the word in context: Gen 11:30, Judg 13:2–3, and Isa 54:1. None of the eleven cases requires the narrower sense, which is so often assumed, of an inability to have children.

Genesis 11:30 reads, "Now Sarai was [childless] (עקרה); she had no child." I argue that this verse gives us a clear definition of עקרה: it means that she did not have children. The second half of the verse, "she had no child," simply restates the first, "Sarai was עקרה."[289]

Judges 13:2–3 is similar:

> There was a certain man of Zorah, of the tribe of the Danites, whose name was Manoah. His wife was [childless] (עקרה), having borne no children. And the angel of the LORD appeared to the woman and said to her, 'Although you are [childless] (עקרה), having borne no children, you shall conceive and bear a son.'

Again, the text tells us what it means to be an עקרה; it means that she has not borne any children. Both here and in Gen 11:30, the text could easily have told us that the women

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[288] It is usual to treat עקרה as an adjective rather than a noun. However, several instances call for a noun, in which case translations use the adjective as a substantive. It turns out that treating עקרה as a noun works in all cases, but to avoid distractions form my primary argument I maintain the usual adjectival translation.

[289] Sarna, *Genesis*, 87, is a rare commentator who has asserted this position. It is possible that the second half of the verse restricts rather than restates the first half. If so, there is no evidence indicating in what way it restricts. But see Moss and Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility*, 60–61, for an argument about the similar "redundancy" in the case of Samson's mother (Judg 13:2–3). In my decision to assume the broader sense of the word, I am following linguist Charles Ruhl's advice to assume "monosemy," a single broad, flexible meaning for a word, rather than several more restrictive senses (*On Monosemy: A Study in Linguistic Semantics* [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989], 3–5).

were unable to have children. But this idea was foreign to the biblical context, where all that was known was that the women had not had children. Inferences may have been made about why they did not have children, but the term עקרה refers only to their childless status.

The third example which reinforces this definition is Isa 54:1. "Sing, O [childless one] (עקרה) who did not bear; burst into song and shout, you who have not been in labor! For the children of the desolate woman will be more than the children of her that is married, says the LORD." Note how this verse locates the meaning of עקרה in the past, not the future. She *did not* bear. She *has not been* in labor. This, I argue, is the meaning of עקרה. Moreover, the second half of the verse suggests the possibility that these women will have children, that an עקרה might become a mother.

This understanding of עקרה as a woman who is childless for unspecified reasons also fits perfectly well with its other attestations (Gen 25:21; 29:31; Exo 23:26; Deut 7:14; 1 Sam 2:5; Job 24:21; Ps 113:9). Moreover, several of the verses emphasize the fact of (unspecified) childlessness by contrasting a lack of children with the presence of children (not with fertility or the ability to have children, as we would expect if עקרה meant an inability to have children). For example, consider 1 Sam 2:5: "Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry are fat with spoil. The [childless woman] (עקרה) has borne seven, but she who has many children is forlorn." The reversal focuses on the lack or presence of children, not an inability or ability to have them: “no children” is transformed to “seven children” (the contrasts in Gen 25:21, 29:31, and Ps 113:9 work similarly). These contrasts, together with the verses which clearly describe a lack of children rather than an inability to have children (Gen 11:30, Judg 13:2–3; Isa 54:1), provide strong evidence that עקרה refers simply to a childless state, and does not specify the reason for that lack of children.

In addition to the biblical use of עקרה, which consistently allows and often supports a meaning of “childless,” the biblical and ancient Near Eastern contexts suggest that it is a mistake to interpret עקרה in terms of an inability to have children. To begin with, all the specific women who are referred to as עקרה end up having children (Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and the woman in Judg 13).[290] More significantly, in a context without medical technology that allows for the accurate diagnosis of infertility, it would have been impossible to tell if a woman could not have children or if she just had not had them yet.[291]

Sarah Wilson makes this point when she contrasts her own situation with that of the biblical women. “We learned of our barrenness,” she writes, “not from time and dying hope, but from doctors.”[292] Wilson recognizes that women in the biblical context would never have been able to be certain about their ability to have children in the future,

[290] Kamila Blessing, “Desolate Jerusalem and Barren Matriarch: Two Distinct Figures in the Pseudepigrapha,” *JSP* 18 (1998), 53. See also Moss and Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility*, 60–61.

[291] Moss and Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility*, 26.

[292] Sarah Hinlicky Wilson, “Blessed are the Barren,” *Christianity Today* (December, 2007), 24.

at least until menopause. Modern conceptions of fertility, and the ability to categorize a person as "infertile," depend on twentieth-century medical culture and so are relatively recent. According to Shelley Park, "In the late twentieth century, there emerged a type of person who is fertile or infertile."[293] Before this time period, childlessness and its causes were understood differently (and variously, depending on the time and place). Ann Allen et al. agree that the concept of infertility is specifically related to the available medical technology. "The individual infertile woman, as of the late 1980s, experiences her infertility in relation to the new technologies; an infertile woman in 1950 or 1850 experienced infertility in a totally different way."[294] Women in the ancient world experienced childlessness in yet another way.

Susan Ackerman explains the primary problem with thinking of biblical barrenness in terms of a lack of ability. Comparing female barrenness with male counterparts, which involve visible physical genital damage, Ackerman asks, "How would Israelite religious practitioners determine whether a woman was analogously disabled (i.e., barren) or whether she had just not yet borne a child?"[295] Ackerman's solution is that time was determinative: after a certain amount of time, a married woman who had not had children was considered barren. I agree with Ackerman that diagnosing an inability to have children would have been problematic in the ancient world, and her

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[293] Shelley M. Park, "Adoptive Maternal Bodies: A Queer Paradigm for Rethinking Mothering?" *Hypatia* 21 (2006), 210.

[294] Ann T. Allen, Julia Dietrich, M. Nawal Lutfiyya, and Nancy M. Theriot, "Response to Margarete Sandelowski's 'Fault Lines: Infertility and Imperiled Sisterhood,'" *Feminist Studies* 17 (1991), 149–50.

[295] Susan Ackerman, "The Blind," 39.

solution is a reasonable way to fill a biblical gap, but there is no evidence that עקרה had the meaning Ackerman suggests.

Another feature of the ancient Near Eastern construction of fertility which impacts our understanding of Sarah's childlessness is the role of gods in opening and closing women's wombs.[296] The notion that a woman's fertility was in the control of divine actors was widespread throughout the ancient Near East. It is also well attested in biblical texts. Sarah herself says "the LORD has prevented me from having children" (Gen 16:2). More usual is the language of opening or closing wombs, as when YHWH opened Leah's (Gen 29:31) and Rachel's (Gen 30:22) and closed Hannah's (1 Sam 1:5–6).[297] This attribution of fertility or its lack to divine powers shows again how biblical understandings of childlessness differed from modern notions of infertility.[298] The reason for their lack of children did not lie in their bodies, but in divine (in)action.[299] Note too that the concept of a divinely opened or shut womb was no more certain than a woman's (in)ability to have children would have been. Any individual could not know when her womb might be opened or closed, except in retrospect.

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[296] Baden, "The Nature of Barrenness," 19; Rivkah Harris, *Gender and Aging in Mesopotamia: The* Gilgamesh Epic *and Other Ancient Literature* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000), 5; Stol, *Birth in Babylonia*, 33–37; Otwell, *And Sarah Laughed*, 56–58.

[297] See also Isa 66:9; Gen 30:1–2.

[298] To be fair, there is no single "modern" notion, and medical concepts of fertility are often mixed with other understandings, including divine action. See Amrita Pande, *Wombs in Labor: Transnational Commercial Surrogacy in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 81.

[299] This does not mean that women did not suffer very real consequences because of their childlessness, such as the loss of familial and social status or divorce. See Paradise, "Marriage Contracts."

If, according to Gen 11:30 and my interpretation of עקרה, Sarah was childless, but not necessarily unable to have children, we have the freedom to imagine other reasons that Sarah might have been childless. We can consider the possibility that, like many queer families, she chose to be childless. (This is, of course, one possibility among others for why Sarah remained childless, but it is one that has been ignored by previous interpreters.) This interpretation is strengthened by Sarah's relative silence about her childlessness, which stands in stark contrast to Rachel's pleas and Hannah's prayer, as discussed above.

Re-reading Sarah's Childlessness

My revised explanation for Sarah's childlessness is supported by re-reading the texts in which she is involved. All of them allow for, and some are arguably enriched by introducing the possibility that she chose not to have children. I first turn to Gen 16, the text in which Sarah speaks most clearly (although still not explicitly) about her desire for children and the reasons for her childlessness. The other central texts, Gen 18 and 21, receive a thorough interpretation in chapter 5.

Genesis 16 opens with Sarah's explanations for her childfree status and her desires for the future. Sarah expresses her motivation for the arrangement with Hagar: "that I shall obtain children by her" (v. 2). At first, and especially given the dominance of the "disability" interpretation, this appears to contradict my proposal that Sarah did not want children. It appears that Sarah is claiming that she does want children, and offering that desire as the justification for offering Hagar to Abraham. However, a closer look at

Sarah's statement reveals that it does not contradict my claim that the text allows that Sarah chooses to be childless.

First, as I discussed above, the Hebrew is more figural than the NSRV translation suggests; the root that the NRSV translates as "obtain children" is בנה, which almost always means "to build." Thus, we might translate as "that I shall be built up by her." There are a few other examples of a figurative usage for בנה in which it means "to be built up" (i.e., to be generally better off), "to be established," or "to be restored" (Jer 12:16; Mal 3:15; Job 22:23; Psa 89:3; Prov 24:3). This and the parallel statement of Rachel's (Gen 30:3) are the only cases in which בנה is used in a specifically familial sense or with this specific sense of "obtaining children." Could it be that there is some other way in which Hagar's child would "build up" Sarah, perhaps by raising her status? In that case, it would not be so much that she wants a child, but rather that she wants the benefits that come with and through having a child, or more specifically with having her handmaid bear a child.[300]

But let us accept that Sarah's use of בנה here signifies her desire for children, even if part of that desire might be tied up with benefits like an improved status in the community. In this case, Sarah imagines that Hagar's children will be her own children as well (there is little evidence that they would be Sarah's *instead* of Hagar's). It may be that Sarah does not want children of her own, but she does desire children in this

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[300] Sarah is not called עקרה after the birth of Ishmael, supporting the possibility that Ishmael's birth somehow changed Sarah's status.

particular arrangement. In this interpretation, Sarah is similar to Day and his enjoyment of being a sperm donor "uncle" while still not wanting to be a social father. Butch lesbian Maya Sabil offers another partial analog, writing, "I, too, had always envisioned myself with kids but not pregnant. I actually specifically did not want to be pregnant."[301]

In the end, it appears that Sarah does not "obtain" Ishmael, nor is she "built up" through Hagar or through Ishmael. The conclusion of chapter 16 reinforces the sense that Sarah's expectations in this regard were disappointed: "Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram named his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael" (Gen 16:15–16). The repetition of Hagar and Abram's names highlights the exclusion of Sarah from participation in this birth. Sarah and her desire to be built up through Hagar are nowhere in view. But the fact remains that, at first, Sarah thought she could have something like what Day describes as an "ideal situation," enjoying certain desirable parts of parenthood (in Sarah's case, perhaps some of the social benefits of motherhood) while avoiding others.

In addition to signaling her desire to be built up through the arrangement with Hagar, Sarah also explains her childlessness. Justifying her proposal to Abraham that he "go in to" Hagar, Sarah says, "You see that the LORD has prevented me from bearing children" (Gen 16:2). Sarah does not tell Abraham that she has chosen to be childless. Instead, she attributes her lack of children to YHWH. This is in accord with the evidence elsewhere in the Bible and the ancient Near East, discussed above, that people believed that fertility—both the opening and closing of wombs—was under the control of gods.

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301 Sabil, "About a Butch," 155.

However, there are good reasons not to take Sarah's statement as the whole truth about the reasons for her childlessness.

In his "narrative appraisal" of the character named YHWH, W. Lee Humphreys argues that there are multiple levels of evidence about characters.[302] One type of evidence is what other characters say. Humphreys argues that this type of evidence is the weakest, the least certain. "They are secondhand, inferences by another character and informed by his or her own values and interests. Thereby, they must be tempered by what we can know or infer about the character making the statement and the context in which it is made."[303] Sarah's statement about YHWH and his role in her childlessness is precisely this sort of statement. We need not take her statement as the final say on the matter. It may be that Sarah has reasons to withhold some of the truth, to redirect attention away from herself, or to mislead. As Humphreys says, "at points we may decide that such statements about God by other characters tell us more about the one making them than about the one of whom they speak."[304] Sternberg makes a similar point when he categorizes statements by characters as "half-directions," implying that they are only sometimes reliable.[305]

I suggest two possible explanations for Sarah's comment that "the LORD prevented [her] from bearing children." First, it is possible that Sarah understood the

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[302] Humphreys, *The Character of God*, 8–14.

[303] Humphreys, *The Character of God*, 10.

[304] Humphreys, *The Character of God*, 10.

[305] Sternberg, *Poetics*, 259.

situation to involve a combination of divine and human forces, but that she chooses to only mention YHWH's role. It is not that YHWH had closed her womb and prevented her sex with Abraham from being effective, but that YHWH had prevented her from wanting to have children at all.[306] That is, she is assigning responsibility for her avoidance of children to YHWH. This is Sarah's way of saying, "I know I haven't given you children, but it's not my fault—I was born this way." As in similar queer claims, the appeal to the inevitability of identity, whether though nature, fate, or the divine, serves a critical purpose in the struggle for survival and resistance. Sarah strategically invokes the well-known cultural concept that gods are responsible for fertility problems, redeploying it in a new context to further her own ends and to protect herself in the process.[307] Moreover, in making such a claim, Sarah is not necessarily being deceptive; it may reflect her actual understanding of her situation. Recall how Day explained his childlessness in terms of his gay identity, implicitly denying any personal agency either in his gayness or in his childlessness. In doing so, Day was not being dishonest about the role his choices played, but articulating honestly how he experienced those dimensions of his life as givens rather than as choices.

Another possibility is that Sarah is employing a common cultural explanation to obscure the actual reason behind her childlessness.[308] Keep in mind that Sarah is speaking

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[306] The language of opening or closing the womb is never used with Sarah, as it is with Leah (Gen 29:31), Rachel (Gen 30:22), and Hannah (1 Sam 1:5–6).

[307] Postcolonial theory would describe Sarah's attribution of responsibility to YHWH as an example of mimcry. See Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

[308] For a similar argument regarding Sarah's statement, although still in the context of her barrenness, see Bernard P. Robinson, "Characterization in the Hagar and Ishmael Narratives," *SJOT* 27 (2013), 201.

to Abraham, who seems to have wanted children and had been promised children by YHWH. If Sarah was choosing not to have children, Abraham would probably have been aware of that fact and possibly unhappy about it. But Sarah would not want to remind him that she is the reason for his lack of children. She would not want to say, "Since I won't have your children, why don't you have them with Hagar instead?" Instead, she softens the blow and diverts responsibility from herself. She invokes the divine to naturalize and to justify her own choices, as so many of us do.

These are some of the considerations about Sarah and her context that might inform our assessment of Sarah's statement and its reliability as information about YHWH and his actions. Sarah's claim that YHWH is behind her childlessness does not eliminate the possibility that she had a role in choosing that state for herself; rather, it coheres well with what we might expect of a woman who, in choosing to remain childless, was resisting both cultural normativity and the likely desires of her husband.

Reading Sarah's words with some suspicion is warranted, given her willingness to deceive elsewhere and the biblical tendency to depict women as deceptive. In Gen 18, the narrator reports that Sarah laughs to herself, but when YHWH questions her about that laughter she flatly denies it. She also participates with Abraham in hiding their marriage, although it is unclear to what extent she had a real choice in the matter. Sarah's pattern of deception fits into the pattern identified by Esther Fuchs, in which women are represented as inherently deceptive (with patriarchal consequences).[309]

[309] Esther Fuchs, "'For I Have the Way of Women': Deception, Gender, and Ideology in Biblical Narrative," *Semeia* 42 (1988), 69, 70.

Finally, while I address Sarah's reactions to the news that she will conceive and to Isaac's birth more fully in chapter 5, I mention one aspect of those accounts here. While both the narrator and Sarah mention reasons to be surprised about Sarah's pregnancy, Sarah's "barrenness" is not one of them. Rather, they put forward Sarah's old age, Abraham's old age, and Sarah's lack of menstruation as the obstacles to a pregnancy and the reasons that such a pregnancy would be surprising (Gen 18:11–13; 21:6–7). If Sarah is supposed to be incapable of having children, we would expect this to be listed, alongside age and menopause, as one of the obstacles that YHWH overcomes and as an additional factor in Sarah's and others' surprise at this turn of events.

Conclusion

In line with Smith's method, the comparison in this chapter does not simply lead to a redescription of Sarah's narrative, but also to a rectification of the third term, childlessness. What the comparison helps us see is the inadequacy of the choice vs. disability binary as explanations for childlessness. The queer childless examples, Rowe and Day, chose to be childless but did so in the context of a culture, a situation, and other decisions which effected or even determined their decisions not to have children. The reasons for Sarah's childlessness are less clear; in this chapter I argued that the gaps in the text allow for the possibility that Sarah chose not to have children. But this also means that the text allows for a more complicated situation, in which Sarah plays some sort of active role, but perhaps is constrained or impelled by other factors, perhaps having to do with her relationship with Abram, her sexual desires, her social status or background, her religious life (in line with Teubal's argument), or any number of other factors.

In addition, my argument reinterprets the role of fertility and childlessness in women's lives in the ancient Near East. Scholars have overwhelmingly emphasized those cases in which women strongly desired children and the benefits that children would have brought to women's lives. In doing so, they often ignore or downplay the evidence, such as contraception and abortion, that the kind of desire for children shown by Rachel did not apply universally to all women. Sarah offers an example or model for the possibility of, at the very least, a dissenting minority of women who did not accept that having children was essential for women in the ancient Near East.

Finally, my redescriptions in this chapter also contribute to my larger project of rectifying the category of Queerness and my argument that Abraham and Sarah are Queer. While childlessness is clearly not a necessary component of Queerness, it may be a signal that Queerness might be in view. More specifically, what Sarah and the queer examples seem to share that might be important to Queerness is a willingness and/or necessity to resist norms around having children. It is not just that Sarah might choose to remain childless, but that in doing so she is transgressing what appear to be very strong norms—so strong that interpreters have always assumed that Sarah could not possibly transgress them on purpose. Moreover, in choosing to remain childless she is probably exposing herself to the stigma and marginalization that comes with deviance. It is this transgression of reproductive norms that contributes to a cross-cultural definition of Queer and that justifies a redescription of Sarah as Queer.

CHAPTER FIVE: INVERTED TRAGIC REPRESENTATION

> So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?" (Gen 18:12)

> The LORD dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as he had promised. Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. . . . Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. Now Sarah said, "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me." (Gen 21:1–2, 5–6)

In the previous chapter, I argued that the reasons for Sarah's childlessness are gapped, and therefore the text allows for the possibility that Sarah chose, at least partially, to remain childless. However, I omitted discussion of Sarah's reactions to the news predicting Isaac's conception and to Isaac's birth. In both cases, she laughs. If Sarah chose to be childless, what does this laughter signify? The focus of this chapter is to interpret Sarah's laughter and other reactions to Isaac's conception and birth in relationship to my argument that she chose to be childless. I argue that Sarah's laughter is ambiguous: it might signify Sarah's joy about having a child, or it might signify her sarcastic, mocking response. In either case, however, I argue that, from a queer perspective, Isaac's birth is a tragic turn in Sarah's story. Either it is a tragedy for Sarah (if her laughter represents a rejection of Isaac) or it is a tragedy for queer readers (if her laughter represents joy and therefore a rejection of her previous Queerness).

The comparison in this chapter is different from those in the other chapters. In the other chapters I compared Abraham and/or Sarah with examples of queer individuals or families. In this chapter, I compare the representation or literary dynamic of Sarah's narrative with modern representations and narratives which have been interpreted from queer perspectives. The third term for this comparison is "inverted tragic representation," in the double sense of tragic for the characters or tragic from the perspective of certain readers because of what the text requires of its characters. The modifier "inverted" signifies the way that the representation's tragedy stands in opposition to another, happier interpretation. That is, the tragedy becomes apparent when the focus is shifted, for example from a protagonist to an antagonist, or from a character to a reading community. Thus, this chapter contributes to my overall argument that Abraham and Sarah are Queer by showing that the text participates in patterns that are characteristic for representations of Queerness. It contributes to my accumulating definition of Queerness the proposition that Queerness is represented in a culture's texts through inverted tragedy.

The patterns of queer representation that comprise this chapter's queer comparand come from the scholarship of two queer theorists of texts (broadly defined), Dustin Goltz and Lee Edelman. Goltz helps us see how a joyful Sarah exemplifies a pattern in which queers are represented as happy only to the extent that they assimilate to straightness. On the other hand Edelman demonstrates how, if Sarah rejects the birth of Isaac, she participates in a pattern of queer rejection of the figure of the Child, and how the text represents YHWH's imposition of the Child despite Sarah's resistance.

In accordance with Smith's comparative method, I begin with descriptions, first of Sarah's laughing reactions, including a summary of laughter in the Hebrew Bible, and then with Goltz's and Edelman's analyses of inverted tragic queer representations. I then identify similarities and differences between the biblical narrative and the patterns of queer representations, which will lead to redescriptions of Sarah's laughter as inverted tragedy.

Description: Sarah's Laughter

The first laughing response to news of Isaac's conception belongs to Abraham, not to Sarah, but it is part of the context for Sarah's subsequent laughter. Abraham is ninety-nine years old; Sarah is ninety. This is thirteen years after the birth of Ishmael, but in the text the promise of Isaac's birth follows immediately after the birth of Ishmael. YHWH appears to Abraham and reiterates his promises, this time in the form of the covenant. YHWH promises to make Abraham the ancestor of many nations, and to give those offspring nations the land of Canaan and to be their god (Gen 17:1–8). In return, Abraham is commanded to circumcise himself and all his male offspring (vv. 9–14).

But then YHWH surprises Abraham by telling him that the covenant will pass through Isaac, who will be Sarah's son, not through Ishmael (vv. 15–16, 19–21). Abraham responds with laughter, asking if a couple so old can have a child (v. 17). He also expresses concern for Ishmael's fate (v. 18). YHWH reiterates that Sarah will have a child, and announces that it will come "at this season next year" (v. 21). He also reassures Abraham that even though Ishmael will not inherit the covenant, he will still be "the father of twelve princes" and "a great nation" (vv. 20–21). This is also the occasion on which YHWH changes their names from Abram and Sarai to Abraham and Sarah (vv. 5, 15).

This divine appearance in Gen 17 is followed up by another vision and/or visitation in Gen 18, which begins, "The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground" (vv. 1–2). Through most of the visit, Abraham interacts with the three men, but then in v. 13 YHWH speaks to Abraham about what has been happening. While the confusion between the visitors and YHWH may be a result of the text's history, the final form leaves the precise relationship between the three men and YHWH ambiguous.[310] Are they divine messengers? Is one of them YHWH?

Whatever their status, after being greeted with food one of the men says, "'I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son'" (Gen 18:10). (This reinforces the possible identification of this man with YHWH, since it is YHWH who will visit Sarah when she conceives Isaac.) Sarah, who has been listening, laughs at this news, just as Abraham did in the previous chapter. An interesting triangular conversation ensues:

> So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?" The LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too wonderful for the LORD? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son." But Sarah denied, saying, "I did not laugh"; for she was afraid. He said, "Oh yes, you did laugh." (Gen 18:12–15)

These few verses, focused on Sarah's laughter, raise more questions than they answer. In addition to questions about who is participating in the conversation (If YHWH is only

[310] Westermann, *Genesis*, 274–81; von Rad, *Genesis*, 204–206; Gunkel, *Genesis*, 192–194, 199; Speiser, *Genesis*, 130–31.

speaking to Abraham, why and to whom does Sarah respond? Who is the "he" in the final verse?), YHWH raises an interesting question: why *did* Sarah laugh? Moreover, why does YHWH care about Sarah's laughter: why did YHWH ask why Sarah laughed? Why did Sarah deny it? And why is someone (YHWH?) so insistent that she did ("Oh, yes, you did laugh")?

The usual answer for why Sarah laughed is that she was incredulous at the prospect of bearing a child at her advanced age, given her menopausal condition, and given her barrenness.[311] This interpretation is supported by the comments, offered by both the narrator and Sarah, about Sarah and Abraham's advanced age. Moreover, the narrator indicates that "it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women," (Gen 18:11) which is usually interpreted as menopause.

Some interpreters, however, see in Sarah's laughter something darker than mere incredulity. Esther Shkop, for example, argues that Sarah's laughter is "self-mocking," "bitter and maybe even angry," arguing that Sarah receives the news of Isaac's birth in the context of the previous difficulties with Hagar and anticipating further familial dysfunction.[312] Her conclusion is based, in part, on the fact that the Hebrew root used

[311] A. Dillmann, *Genesis: Critically and Exegetically Expounded*, trans. W. B. Stevenson, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1987), 2:96; Franz Delitzsch, *New Commentary on Genesis*, trans. Sophia Taylor, 2 vols. (1888; repr., Minneapolis: Klock & Klock Christian Publishers, 1978), 2:43; Sharon Pace Jeansonne, *The Women of Genesis: From Sarah to Potiphar's Wife* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 23; Speiser, *Genesis*, 128–29; Gunkel, *Genesis*, 197; Westermann, *Genesis*, 281; Sarna, *Genesis*, 130; Skinner, *Genesis*, 301.

[312] Esther M. Shkop, "And Sarah Laughed," *Tradition* 31 (1997), 47.

(צחק) often has strongly negative connotations. David Zucker also emphasizes the "bitter" aspect of Sarah's laughter, though still in the context of incredulity.[313]

From this laughter-filled announcement of Isaac's birth the text transitions to the impending destruction of Sodom, which follows in chapters 19 and 20. Immediately following this catastrophic story, Gen 21 begins with Isaac's birth. "The LORD dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as he had promised. Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him" (vv. 1–2). Abraham, who the text reminds us is now one hundred years old, names and circumcises Isaac. (His name was given by YHWH back in 17:19. Since that time, the reason that YHWH chose a name associated with laughter has become increasingly clear.)

Then we hear directly from Sarah about her response to the birth, but again Sarah's meaning remains uncertain. "Now Sarah said, 'God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.' And she said, 'Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age'" (vv. 6–7). Sarah appears surprised here ("who would ever have said?"). And in this NRSV translation it seems that Sarah refers to her laughter to indicate her joy. But the Hebrew (צחק עשה לי אלהים כל־השמע יצחק־לי) can just as easily be translated in a more somber tone: "God has brought laughter against me; everyone who hears will laugh at me."

[313] David Zucker, "Isaac: A Life of Bitter Laughter," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 40 (2012), 106.

Directly following Sarah's short speech about the laughter that Isaac's birth provokes, the action jumps several years to when Isaac is weaned. Sarah gets worried about Isaac's inheritance, and insists that Hagar and Ishmael be sent away. Abraham agrees, and the mother and child are sent into the wilderness, where God protects them. There is a short story involving negotiations between Abimelech and Abraham, and then Genesis 22 continues with the well-known story of the binding and near-sacrifice of Isaac.

The Meaning of Laughter

In my accounts of Sarah's laughter, both before and after Isaac's birth, I suggested that the cause and meaning of her laughter is uncertain. In this section, I deepen this argument with a summary of the use of laughter in the Hebrew Bible. The root used for laughter in Abraham and Sarah's story, צחק, is also the one invoked by Isaac's name. An investigation of the Hebrew Bible's use of צחק reveals that it has multiple meanings, and that it is difficult to choose one sense with any certainty for Abraham and Sarah's reactions to Isaac's birth.

First, any analysis of צחק must account for the closely related root שׂחק. While there are some differences in usage, there do not seem to be any clear differences in meaning, so for the purpose of understanding their meaning I treat them together as a single verb.[314] The evidence suggests several clear meanings, the most common of which

[314] R. Bartlemus, "צחק/שׂחק," *TDOT* 15:58–72.

is “mock” or “exult over.”[315] But it can also mean “rejoice,” “play a musical instrument,” “joke,” or simply “play.”[316] In addition, שׂחק likely means “sexual play” in Gen 26:8 (Abimelech seeing Isaac and Rebekah) and possibly in Gen 39:14 (Potiphar’s wife accusing Joseph), although this case might also be another example of “mock.” Finally, both שׂחק and צחק are used in the conclusion of the Samson narrative to describe what Samson was forced to do in front of the Philistines, probably entertainment of some kind (Judg 16:25, 27).

Given the wide semantic range of שׂחק/צחק, the specific meaning for a given attestation depends on the context.[317] In some contexts, more than one meaning might fit the context, and different choices of meanings might lead to different interpretations for the larger context. Conversely, a different interpretation of the context might suggest a different meaning for שׂחק/צחק . This will be the case in my redescription of Sarah’s laughter below.

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[315] Ezek 23:32; 2 Chron 30:10; Job 5:22; 30:1; 39:7, 18, 22; 41:29; Ps 2:4; 37:13; 52:6; 59:8; Prov 1:26; 31:25; Lam 1:7; Hab 1:10.

[316] Rejoice: Job 29:24; Prov 8:30, 31; 29:9; Jer 15:17; 30:19; 31:4; Ecc 3:4. Play a musical instrument: 1 Sam 18:7; 2 Sam 2:14; 6:5,21; 1 Chron 13:8; 15:29; cf. Jer 31:4. Play: Zech 8:5; Ps 104:26. Joke: Prov 26:19; Gen 19:14.

[317] Some interpreters insist that the lack of a preposition eliminates “mock” as a possible meaning (e.g., Speiser, *Genesis*, 155). However, this restriction is undermined by the fact that many of these same interpreters also give Sarah’s laughter in Gen 18:12 a negative connotation, like derision, despite its lack of preposition (e.g., Speiser, *Genesis*, 131). The difference between laughing in derision and mocking seems too little to sustain a grammatical distinction. For further support of my position, see Bartlemus, “צחק/שׂחק.”

With respect to Sarah's laughter, we can approach the linguistic ambiguity from two directions. First, we could consider possible translations for צחק, and then explore the implications of each translation for an interpretation of Sarah's reactions. Can we understand her "laughter" as mocking? If so, what do we learn about Sarah and her situation from the fact that she mocks? We could then ask similar questions about each of the other possible meanings of צחק.

On the other hand, we can begin with a provisional interpretation of the context, and ask what meaning of צחק, if any, fits with the new interpretation. This is the approach I take here. I have proposed a new interpretation of Sarah and her childlessness, and my interest is in which meaning(s) of צחק, if any, offers a coherent and compelling interpretation of Sarah's reactions in this redescribed context. The point of this brief account of the multiple meanings of צחק/שׂחק is to demonstrate the versatility of the word, and how it offers relatively little constraint on interpretation.

Previous interpreters have recognized, or at least exploited, the relative freedom that צחק offers. It matters little whether this particular uncertainty should be counted as an unintentional blank or an intentional gap; in either case, interpreters have chosen the meaning of צחק that fits their interpretation of Sarah, her character, and her childlessness.[318] The most common interpretation of Sarah's laughter in Gen 18:12, when she overhears the prediction that she will have a child, is incredulity.[319] The most common interpretation of the references to laughter in Gen 21:6, after Isaac's birth, are in terms of Sarah's joy mixed with her anticipation of being mocked.[320] However, among the five cases of צחק in Gen 17:17; 18:12; 21:6; and 21:9, we find scholars supporting all of the following meanings: incredulity, dismissiveness, joy, smiling, surprise, amusement, embarrassment, disbelief, defiance, bitterness, derisiveness, playing, mocking, sexual play or molestation, and impersonating.[321] In addition, there are several scholars who acknowledge or even emphasize the ambiguous nature of Sarah's reaction.[322] My interpretation also emphasizes the ambiguity, but in the context of a different strategy for filling the gaps of Sarah's motivations and emotional reactions.

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[318] The repetition of צחק in contexts that suggest different connotations, and the lack of clear explanations both suggest this is a gap rather than a blank.

[319] Westermann, *Genesis*, 281; Dillmann, *Genesis*, 2:96; Jeansonne, *Women of Genesis*, 23; Delitzsch, *Genesis*, 43; von Rad, *Genesis*, 207; Mignon Jacobs, *Gender, Power, and Persuasion: The Genesis Narratives and Contemporary Portraits* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 150; Skinner, *Genesis*, 321; Sarna, *Genesis*, 146; Fritsch, *Genesis*, 66; De la Torre, *Genesis*, 186; Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 79; Brodie, *Genesis as Dialogue*, 248.

[320] Westermann, *Genesis*, 333–335; Dillmann, *Genesis*, 2:128; Gunkel, *Genesis*, 225; Jeansonne, *Women of Genesis*, 27; Delitzsch, *Genesis*, 74; von Rad, *Genesis*, 231; Sarna, *Genesis*, 146; Skinner, *Genesis*, 321; Fritsch, *Genesis*, 71; Williams, *Genesis*, 167; Alter, *Genesis*, 97.

[321] In addition to the citations in notes 315 and 316 above, see Westermann, *Genesis*, 268, 339; Dillmann, *Genesis*, 2:87, 129; Gunkel, *Genesis*, 226; Speiser, *Genesis*, 125, 131, 155; Jeansonne, 28; Delitzsch, *Genesis*, 75–76; von Rad, *Genesis*, 203, 232; Skinner, *Genesis*, 322; George W. Coats, *Genesis: With an Introduction to Narrative Literature*, FOTL (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 135, 153; Briscoe, *Genesis*, 184; Fritsch, *Genesis*, 65, 72; Bennett, *Genesis*, 232; De la Torre, *Genesis*, 212; Williams, *Genesis*, 168; Alter, *Genesis*, 75, 98; Brodie, *Genesis as Dialogue*, 260.

[322] Sarna, *Genesis*, 126, 130; Arie Troost, "Reading for the Author's Signature: Genesis 21.1–21 and Luke 15.11–32 as Intertexts," in Brenner, *Feminist Companion to Genesis*, 261; Coats, *Genesis*, 153; Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *Genesis: The Beginning of Desire* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1995), 99–100, 113; von Rad, *Genesis*, 232; Burton L. Visotsky, *The Genesis of Ethics: How the Tormented Family of*

Description: Inverted Tragic Queer Representation

Given this description of Sarah's reactions to the news that she will conceive a child and to the birth of Isaac, the guiding question of this chapter is how to interpret these reactions in the context of my redescription in chapter 4 of Sarah as choosing not to have children. I suggest in the redescription below that her reaction is ambiguous, and that ambiguity leads to two possible interpretations: one in which Sarah changes her mind and joyfully welcomes her child, and the other in which Sarah continues to not want the child but is overruled by YHWH, who imposes Isaac on her despite her desires to the contrary. This redescription will be facilitated by the comparison with the theories of Goltz and Edelman, which I describe in this section.

Dustin Goltz and Representations of Gay Futures

Goltz's research focuses on the representation of gay men in the popular media. Goltz is interested in the models that the media offers young gay men for what their older selves might be like. What futures might await a young gay male in our society, based on the images purveyed by the media? Goltz argues that tragedy is the dominant mode of the representation of gay men in the media.

There are many forms of tragic gay portrayals—those in which gays or gay life fare poorly. Following an era of censorship when gays were not portrayed at all, beginning in the 1960s queer characters began to emerge as villains to be defeated.[323]

Genesis Leads Us to Moral Development New York: Three Rivers, 1996), 60–61, 89, 96; Jacobs, *Gender, Power, and Persuasion*, 150.

[323] Goltz, *Queer Temporalities*, 28–34.

This began to change with increasingly positive portrayals of queer characters, especially in the 1990s and into the first decades of the new millennium. But Goltz argues that most portrayals of gays are still tragic, and that there are several forms of this new tragedy. For example, many gay characters are portrayed positively but their lives continue to be tragic: they are unhappy, fail to find romantic relationships, and live outside of community. When they do find happiness, it is through identification with heteronormative values like couplehood, marriage, and children. Goltz argues that this represents a tragic sacrificing of gay lifestyles and communities.[324] In addition, Goltz argues that gay aging is portrayed particularly negatively, relating it not only to tragedy but also to horror.[325]

With respect to children specifically, Goltz argues that portrayals of gay men that show them desiring, raising, loving, nurturing, and otherwise being nice to children allow the heteronormative audience to identify with them. "The creation of identification with family values and the gay community further works to bridge gay males into heteronormative systems."[326] This becomes tragedy, however, because it limits portrayals of happy gay males to those who act like good straights. "Cultural discourses construct a tragic frame where identification with this, however limited, conception of future is required to construct identification with a future of happiness."[327] The message is that gay

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[324] Goltz, *Queer Temporalities*, 34–40.

[325] Goltz, *Queer Temporalities*, 47–80.

[326] Goltz, *Queer Temporalities*, 90.

[327] Goltz, *Queer Temporalities*, 92.

men can be happy as long as they act straight. Goltz sees this pattern as a form of tragedy because it involves an implicit denigration of all those forms of queerness that refuse to assimilate to straight familial norms. I introduce the notion of "inverted tragedy" to describe how what appears in the plot as a happy ending has a tragic dimension for queer audiences, because of the ideology that such happy endings communicate.

Lee Edelman and the Figure of the Child

Edelman offers another perspective on why a focus on children can be tragic for queers in his psychoanalytic reflections on queer futurity, *No Future*.[328] Edelman argues that our culture and psyches create two opposed sets of associations: children, an idealized future, heterosexuality, and the heteronormative family are opposed to anti-relationality, a denial of the fantasy of future wholeness, homosexuality, and queerness. He traces these associations and oppositions through a variety of films and novels to argue that queers should accept and affirm them. Edelman redescribes a queer denial of the family and of the future by arguing that such denials illuminate something real and important about the world and about being human that is usually denied or obscured. Queers thus become the bearers of a truth that the world needs to learn—in them, "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen 12:3).

What is this truth that queers affirm when they deny the "figure of the Child" and its idealized, fantasy future? Edelman follows Lacan in arguing for an inevitable gap between our mental constructions of the world (our representations of the world, including language and other images) and the actual world. This gap causes us distress, in

[328] Edelman, *No Future*.

that we constantly try to reconcile our constructions with the reality of the world, but we always fail. The death drive, which plays a pivotal role in Edelman's account, is constituted by a repetitious destruction of our constructions and reconstructions of the world, each time trying to get a closer match with reality, but each time failing to bridge the gap. Edelman argues that the figure of the Child (capitalized to avoid confusion with actual children) represents the fantasy that this division between our constructions and the actual world can someday be bridged. Despite our own inevitable failure, we deceive ourselves into thinking that wholeness can come in the next generation, or perhaps the next. We therefore tell each other that we must protect the future by protecting the children, even if it means sacrificing in the present. Perhaps most disturbingly, many proclaim that it means sacrificing in the present even in ways that hurt actual present-day children (e.g., queer children and the children of queer parents, among others).

In the texts that Edelman interprets, there is always a threat to the Child, to heteronormativity, or to futurity, and this threat is always resolved. The Child and its set of associations always prevails. Charles Dickens's *The Christmas Carol* is a paradigmatic example of this pattern. Ebenezer Scrooge is anti-family, anti-child, and anti-relational in general. *The Christmas Carol* presents these characteristics as vices; the reversal, in which Scrooge embraces the Child (especially through his care of Tiny Tim and renewed interest in his nephew) is represented as a happy ending. Edelman argues that those who refuse to be transformed on behalf of the Child are not so lucky; they usually end up dead. These texts valorize the protection of the Child at the expense of the one who is anti-relational and anti-Child—in other words, the queer. Edelman wants queers to embrace the anti-relationality of these literary and silver-screen villains. In doing so, Edelman identifies with the defeated villains and pre-transformation Scrooge, revealing how the protagonists' happy endings are tragic from the anti-Child perspective. This is another example of inverted tragedy.

Comparison: Inverted Tragic Representation

Having described both Sarah's laughter in the context of the conception and birth of Isaac and the theories of Goltz and Edelman (with attention to their respective accounts of tragic representations), in this section I compare them. The focus of the comparison is the third term, "inverted tragic representation."

At first glance, the differences are more pronounced than the similarities. For example, Goltz's theory derives specifically from representations of gay men in modern popular culture, while Sarah's narrative has no gay men in view. Even if one accepts my arguments about Abraham and Sarah being Queer, this is not at all the same as Abraham being a gay man, and in any case, the focus of this chapter is Sarah, not Abraham. Turning to Edelman, the differences with Sarah's narrative are just as stark. While Edelman identifies a pattern of a queer figure who opposes the figure of the Child and is ultimately defeated, in Sarah's narrative there is a child (Isaac) who appears to be desired and welcomed. It is unclear who or what might be the queer figure, and in the usual interpretation Isaac is unopposed.[329]

[329] While Gen 22 is outside the scope of this dissertation, the binding of Isaac is a text that appears to be tailor-made for Edelman's theory of queer opposition to the Child.

Looking explicitly at the third terms of "inverted tragic representation," our initial descriptions of Sarah's laughter suggest anything but tragedy. While Sarah may be incredulous or dismissive when she learns of Isaac's birth, most interpreters assume that such a birth would be welcomed. And when the birth comes, this assumption appears justified by Sarah's joyful laughter, brought on by the amazing happy ending to her childless life. For interpreters who see motherhood as the primary or even exclusive method of fulfillment for ancient Near Eastern women, the birth of Isaac represents a miraculous last-minute redemption of Sarah's otherwise empty life. I know of no interpreter who has suggested that the birth of Isaac is tragic. In contrast, Goltz uses the word "tragic" to describe the pattern he sees in which popular representations of gay men limit the options for what constitutes a happy gay life. And while Edelman's focus is not on tragedy, it is clear that Edelman laments the pattern he identifies (the persistence of the Child at the expense of queerness).

On the other hand (and here we begin the dialectic of similarity and difference), recall that Goltz and Edelman's analyses both involve *inverted* tragedy. Like Sarah's narrative, at face value the representations Goltz and Edelman study generally end happily. For Goltz, the tragic portrayals are those in which the gay men find their happiness through assimilation into straight culture. That is, the gay men end up happy, even if Goltz finds these endings unhappy because of the way the gay men end up less gay, and because of the implication that their happiness came at the expense of their gayness. Similarly, Edelman's texts all have happy endings, insofar as the child survives and prospers. Few would call *A Christmas Carol* a tragedy. And yet, happy endings are easily reversed if one allows for identification with the (queer) villain rather than with the Child. From the point of view of the not-yet-transformed Scrooge, Tiny Tim's recovery appears, if not tragic, then at least less fulfilling. Thus, the apparent happy ending in Sarah's narrative is actually a similarity to the texts which Goltz and Edelman interpret; it is the interpretation of Isaac's birth as joyful and the scholarly acceptance of that joy which departs from Goltz's and Edelman's interpretations. This raises the possibility that Goltz and Edelman can help us redescribe, through a similar inversion, the apparent joy in Sarah's narrative as something more tragic.

In fact, the pro-natalist sense of the narratives surrounding Isaac's birth is an important similarity between these narratives and those which Goltz and Edelman critique. Goltz observes that one of the ways that the gay men assimilate to straight culture is by having kids, while the importance of children is the focus of Edelman's attention, in that children represent the figure of the Child and its impossible promise of future perfection.

In addition, while Goltz's texts all include explicitly gay men, creating the difference identified above, Edelman's texts do not. The connection between Edelman's queer figures (who he identifies as "sinthomosexuals" in a play on words combining Lacan's psychoanalytic "sinthome" with "homosexual") and actual queers is subtle, connotative, and cultural, rather than explicit.[330] Thus, there need not be an explicitly queer character in order for Edelman's theory to apply. Instead, all that is needed is

[330] In fact, the identification of Edelman's sinthomosexuals with queerness might be elucidated through something like my Queer category, which facilitates Queer identifications beyond same-sex desires and identities.

someone or something that stands in opposition to the Child, and in that respect becomes associated with queerness.

Thus, while Isaac's birth appears at first to resist a tragic interpretation, and has never been interpreted as tragedy, the similarities between these narratives and those which Goltz and Edelman interpret suggest that we may be able to play across this gap of difference and identify ways in which Isaac's birth is indeed tragic, either for Sarah or for some critical readers. In my redescription below, I offer two such interpretations, one inspired by Goltz's observations, and one by Edelman's.

Redescription: Sarah's Tragic Laughter

I now turn to my redescription of Sarah's reactions to the prediction of Isaac's conception and to his birth. Recall that the basis for this interpretation was laid in chapter 4, where I argued that Sarah chose to be childless. I interpret Sarah's reactions to her child in light of that choice to be childless. The ambiguity in the meaning of laughter, which I described above, leads to multiple possible interpretations corresponding to the joyful and mocking poles in the meaning of צחק. Either Sarah rejects her earlier childlessness and rejoices, or else she derides the prediction of a child and expresses her shame after Isaac's birth.

Joyful Laughter

First, let us interpret Sarah's laughter as joyful. Overhearing the prediction that she will conceive, "Sarah laughed to herself, saying, 'After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?'" (Gen 18:12). Assuming a joyful connotation to the laughter, we see a kind of delighted surprise, perhaps mixed with some wary skepticism. Sarah knows the limits that her and Abraham's ages bring, and so perhaps doubts that the prediction is true. Nevertheless she can't help but laugh with delight at the idea. Sarah even imagines the pleasure that the prediction would bring.

While lexica and commentators prefer a sexual interpretation of Sarah's pleasure, such a precise definition of עדנה has little support.[331] A few interpreters argue that Sarah's pleasure is maternal, and that she is imagining the pleasure of finally having a child.[332] This interpretation fits better with Sarah's joyful response to the news about having a child. Sarah is imagining, warily, the possibility of a child and the pleasure that will bring to her.

Similarly, Sarah's comments after the birth of Isaac can be read as confirmation that her imagined joy and pleasure have come to fruition. The NRSV translation of Gen 21:6 captures this sense of joyful pleasure well, "Now Sarah said, 'God has brought

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331 Among those commentators who see some form of sensuous or sexual pleasure are Dillmann, *Genesis*, 2:96; von Rad, *Genesis*, 207; Gunkel, *Genesis*, 197; Tammi Schneider, *Mothers of Promise: Women in the Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 32; Skinner, *Genesis*, 302; Westermann, *Genesis*, 280; Gibson, *Genesis*, 2:78; Viviano, *Genesis*, 59. See also the lexicons, e.g., *DCH*, 6:284; BDB, 726. Sarna, *Genesis*, 132, also supports a sexual sense in his citation of the meaning "abundant moisture;" see also Towner, *Genesis*, 169; Alter, *Genesis*, 79.

There is little basis on which to choose one interpretation of Sarah's pleasure over another. The Hebrew עדנה appears to be related to עדן, the original garden and a word for "luxuries" or "delights." None of the three occurrences of עדן as a common noun are specifically sexual or maternal (2 Sam 1:24; Ps 36:8; Jer 51:34; cf. Neh. 9:25; Gen 49:20; Lam 4:5; Prov 29:17). One could argue that they all seem to refer to superficial or sensual pleasures, but there are too few occurrences with too varied contexts that it would be unwise to base an argument on any sense of the word more specific than "pleasure." Moreover, the linguistic principle of monosemy suggests we assume the basic meaning of the word is general, and that it takes on more specific meanings in context (Ruhl, *On Monosemy*, 3–5).

332 Jeansonne, *Women of Genesis*, 23; Hartley, *Genesis*, 179; Jacob, *Genesis*, 118. A maternal interpretation is implied by G. C. Aalders, *Genesis*, trans. William Heynen, 2 vols., BSC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 2:6.

laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.'" Whatever her previous feelings about having children and whatever her motivations for childlessness had been, in this interpretation those have been replaced by a joyful response to bearing a child.

At first glance, this might appear to contradict my interpretation that Sarah chose to remain childless. But Goltz's analysis helps us to read this as a transformation of Sarah's previous attitude, rather than its contradiction. Such a transformation would be similar to some of the narratives that Goltz analyzes: those in which queer characters become happy through participation in "homonormative" lifestyles. They get married, have children, and settle down, echoing heteronormativity with the only exception being the gender of their partner.

Similarly, if Sarah finds joy through the birth of Isaac, then Isaac's birth can be read in terms of Sarah's assimilation to heteronormativity. Sarah's choice to remain childless is what cast her outside of her culture's normativity. When she has Isaac, her deviance dissipates. She is no longer childless, and therefore slides from Queerness to normativity, or at least approximates it (one could argue that her old age at childbirth continues to render her somewhat deviant). In this respect, Sarah's story appears to fit Goltz's pattern. And to the extent that she fits Goltz's pattern, the narrative implies a tragic message for all those queers who choose not to assimilate. The text implies that Sarah finds joy only at the expense of her Queerness.

Mocking Laughter

Now we turn to an interpretation of Sarah's laugher as negative. When she first laughs to herself in Gen 18:12, it is mocking, derisive, or insulting laughter, which as I discussed above is the most common connotation of שׂחק/צחק. She asks, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?" In this interpretation, Sarah's reference to old age can be seen as an affirmation of Sarah's resistance. The advanced age of the couple demonstrates Sarah's persistence and determination in not having a child. After she has resisted so long, she can't imagine relenting at this point, and considers the idea laughably ridiculous. If Sarah chose not to have children when they were young, and she had so much to gain, why would she do it now as they approach the end of their lives? Abraham and Sarah were old, and Sarah had chosen not have children. So when Sarah is promised that she'll bear a child, she laughs. "*That* ain't gonna happen," her laughter says. Sarah's rhetorical question about having pleasure also participates in the dismissive sarcasm of her overall response. No matter whether the word signifies sexual, maternal, or some other pleasure, Sarah mocks the possibility that such pleasure is in store or that the promised child will bring her pleasure.

But then, despite Sarah's continued opposition to have children, she does. If Sarah did not want children, the details of Isaac's birth appear in a quite different light. Recall YHWH's actions in Gen 21:1: "The LORD dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as he had promised." If Sarah wanted a child, this "dealing with" and "doing for" would have been welcome. But if Sarah does not want a child, then YHWH appears to be imposing on Sarah rather than granting her a gift. YHWH's actions forcibly overcome Sarah's resistance to children. Isaac comes not as a miraculous blessing to Sarah, but as her defeat.

In this context, Sarah's use of צחק in Gen 21:6 again carries negative connotations. Sarah laments Isaac's birth and her shame at having been forced to have children, or at being used in this way by YHWH. "Now Sarah said, 'God has brought laughter [against] me; everyone who hears will laugh [at] me.' And she said, 'Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age'" (vv. 6-7, my translations in brackets). Sarah is still processing her disbelief about what has happened to her. Her resistance had lasted so long, and only now, in her old age, was it overcome. She is amazed, ashamed, and distraught.

In this interpretation, YHWH's role in bringing about Isaac's birth is tragic, insofar as it represses, subdues, or defeats Sarah's resistance to children. Assuming Sarah's childlessness was chosen, the text suggests (or at least allows) that Sarah was consistent over many years in her disinterest in having children. It was consistent enough that we might begin to see this refusal as an important aspect of Sarah's identity, an aspect that YHWH squelches in his pursuit of a child and his appointed future.

The tragic element in this interpretation is clear. The birth of the promised child is a tragedy for Sarah: her will is ignored and she is made to be the bearer of a child she did not want. In this respect, Sarah is similar to one of Edelman's (queer) villains who is defeated or transformed in the name of the figure of the Child.

In Sarah's story, Isaac is the clear candidate for representing the figure of the Child. He literally embodies a promise for the future: YHWH indicates that his covenant—a promise of future land and nationhood—will pass through Isaac. This is not a promise of a match between representation and reality (which the figure of the Child represents), but it never is in Edelman's examples. Edelman sees the psychoanalytic dilemma in representations of future wholeness, utopia, or completion. The Biblical example fits Edelman's psychoanalytic model precisely because it takes the form of a promised future. During Abraham's lifetime, many of YHWH's words do not match reality: Abraham is not a great nation occupying the promised land. But the narrative insists that the words and reality will one day match, and that it is the child Isaac who will make this coherence possible.

In Edelman's theory there is often a character who, like Scrooge, threatens the Child. In this situation, Sarah appears as this anti-relational, anti-Child, anti-future character. Sarah's chosen childlessness opposes reproductive heteronormativity and futurity. As we have seen, much of Sarah's narrative gains its momentum from the fact of Sarah's childlessness, representing that childlessness as a problem to be solved. It is a problem precisely because it threatens the future.

At first glance, it appears that Sarah is different from Edelman's examples in that she does not threaten existing children, but instead opposes the figure of the Child by refusing to have one. But this aspect of the comparison reminds us that, in fact, Sarah twice threatens an actual child: Ishmael. Her oppression of Hagar leads to Hagar's flight, which puts Ishmael at risk even before he is born (Gen 16:6–13). While the risk to Ishmael is not emphasized in the Gen 16 account, Sarah's active role and the threat to Ishmael are both more pronounced in the events of Gen 21. Here Sarah demands the expulsion of Ishmael and his mother, the pair run out of water in their wanderings in the wilderness, and Hagar fears that Ishmael is going to die imminently (21:10, 14–16).

Sarah does not just threaten the Child by refusing to have her own child, but also by the ways that she jeopardizes Ishmael and his future.

Another important aspect of Edelman's examples is that the Child always emerges victorious, through the death or reformation of its queer opponents. Scrooge is converted, and the climactic signs of that conversion are his celebrating Christmas with his nephew and, more importantly, his care for Tiny Tim. These stories allow the illusion of future wholeness to stand. All threats to that illusion—all that would expose the failure and impossibility of wholeness—is defeated.

Sarah's story fits this pattern in that it involves the preservation of children. YHWH overcomes the threats against both Isaac and Ishmael, ensuring their survival. Until Isaac's conception, Sarah's decision to not have children threatens to prevent Isaac from ever being born. In Gen 21:1, YHWH undoes this threat by enabling the conception of Isaac. In doing so, he fulfills the promise of the child (thereby preserving the promise of the Child and the promise of future fulfillment that the Child represents). The language of Gen 21:1 highlights the connection between this particular child and the fulfillment of promises. "The LORD dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as he had promised." Edelman theorizes that the figure of the Child represents the promise of the perfect reconciliation between reality and representation. Here in Genesis Isaac is explicitly represented as the reconciliation between words (the promise, what "he had said") and reality. Genesis differs from Edelman's account in that the biblical text declares the coherence between representation and reality now, in Isaac's birth, and not just in the future. Edelman's examples all project this coherence as a future vision.

In addition to enabling Isaac's existence and survival, YHWH also protects Ishmael. Moreover, YHWH projects future promises onto Ishmael, just as he does for Isaac. This is most clear in Gen 21. Sarah convinces Abraham to expel Hagar and Ishmael. Abraham is reluctant, but YHWH softens the blow with a pair of promises:

> Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you. As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring (vv. 12–13).

In the wilderness, Hagar and Ishmael run out of water, and Hagar is convinced that Ishmael is on the brink of death. "Do not let me look on the death of the child," she says (v. 16). The "angel of God" reassures her, and repeats the promise made to Abraham: "I will make a great nation of him" (v. 18). Then Hagar sees a spring she had not seen before, the implication being that the angel/YHWH provided water so that the pair could survive. In the final verse of this story we learn that "God was with the boy" (v. 20).

The expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael, like YHWH's overriding of Sarah's choice to be childless, reflects the basic elements of Edelman's pattern. A child is threatened: Ishmael is cast into the wilderness. It is not hard to see Sarah, who we have already identified as a threat to children, as a primary cause for Ishmael's possible death. But then the threat to the child is defeated, the child's future is ensured, and great hopes are pinned on this future. While Sarah is not defeated in this story, the more direct threat of terminal dehydration is extinguished. With the salvation of the child comes the salvation of hope for a glorious future, in this case figured by the promise of a "great nation." In addition, recall that an important aspect of Edelman's argument is that the figure of the Child is often used to promote policies and actions that hurt actual children. Something similar is happening in Gen 21 when YHWH tells Abraham to expel Hagar and Ishmael, justifying the expulsion based on visions of the children's future: "it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you. As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also. . ." (vv. 12–13). The better future promised by the Child is used here as an excuse for the real harm being done to an actual child in the present.[333]

Who is Isaac's Father?

There is one final detail that adds further support to these redescriptions of Sarah's reactions. Recall Gen 21:1–2, "The LORD dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as he had promised. Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son…" Note the combination of YHWH's active role and Abraham's absence in this report of the conception of Isaac. The NRSV uses "dealt with" to translate פקד, which is often translated as "visit." The verb generally involves personal attention, as it clearly does here. While YHWH is attending to Sarah, Abraham is noticeably passive, receiving the child who Sarah conceives and bears after a visit from YHWH. No sexual contact is reported between Abraham and Sarah (here or elsewhere). If there is any sexuality in the account, it is between YHWH and Sarah, in YHWH's visitation and his "doing" Sarah.[334]

A brief review of other conceptions in the Hebrew Bible shows that this combination of an absent father and an active YHWH is difficult to find outside of Sarah

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[333] Note that the version of the expulsion of Hagar in Gen 16, while containing similar features to the narrative in Gen 21, does not fit Edelman's pattern as clearly. For example, YHWH does not promise future wholeness, but rather the opposite: "He shall be a wild ass of a man, with his hand against everyone, and everyone's hand against him; and he shall live at odds with all his kin" (Gen 16:12).

[334] Berrigan, *Genesis*, 151, notes the possibility of sexuality in the verse.

and Isaac's story.[335] Normally, a report of conception is preceded by a report of sexual activity. In Genesis, Adam "knew" Eve (Gen 4:1, 25), Cain "knew" his wife (4:17); Abraham "went in" to Hagar (16:4), Jacob "went in" to Leah and Rachel (29:23, 30),[336] and Judah "went in" to his wife and Tamar (38:2, 18). Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, Boaz and Ruth "came together" (Ruth 4:13), Elkanah "knew" Hannah (1 Sam 1:19), David "lay with" Bathsheba (2 Sam 11:4), and Ephraim "went in" to his wife (1 Chron 7:23). In contrast to these cases, the report of sexual contact is missing in the case of Isaac's conception, at least as far as Abraham is concerned. In its place, we have the report of YHWH's action.

To be fair, there are other cases besides that of Sarah in which the sex is absent and only the conception is narrated. Moses' conception (Ex 2:1–2), the pregnancy of Hosea's wife Gomer (Hos 1:3, 6, 8), and Rebekah's pregnancy (Gen 25:21) all omit references to sex. However, in none of these examples does YHWH play an explicit, active role while the father remains passive.[337] The closest parallels to YHWH's direct involvement with Sarah's pregnancy are the conception of Samson (Judg 13:3–14, 24) and the pregnancy of the Shunammite woman (2 Kgs 4:14–17). Like with Gen 21:1–2,

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335 Contrast Jacobs, *Gender, Power, and Persuasion*, 137.

336 Unlike the other examples, Jacob's "going in" is not directly connected to the conception of his children. In those birth reports, the women are the active agents, with no male involvement reported (e.g., "Leah conceived and bore a son," [29:32]).

337 There are other characteristics of these stories which differentiate them or explain the lack of reference to sex. In Moses's case, the lack of sex can partially be explained by the strong focus on Moses, rather than the parents. The parents are not even named, so we should not expect to hear about their sexual activity. Hosea constructs Gomer as promiscuous and unfaithful (e.g., 2:5), and the lack of male agency in the conceptions reinforces that theme. We are not told that these conceptions are a result of sex between Hosea and Gomer because Hosea's paternity is meant to remain ambiguous. In Rebekah's case, Isaac takes an active role (he prays), and YHWH interacts with Isaac (he answers *his* prayer), not with Rebekah.

these stories allow for interpretations in which paternity is unclear, and in which YHWH or one of his representatives appears to be the primary agent of conception. Even in these close parallels, YHWH's role is never so clear as it is with Sarah.

These other birth reports, including those that minimize or eliminate the human male role in reproduction, serve to highlight what is unique (or at the very least unusual) about Isaac's birth. Not only is the man missing (which is already unusual), but YHWH directly causes Sarah's conception. While YHWH's role as "conceiver" is suggested by some of the other accounts, it is almost explicit with Sarah.

Understanding Isaac as a kind of "virgin birth" is not new.[338] Early Jewish and Christian interpreters noticed this textual feature, as well, and Christians have long used it as one important component of their typological interpretations of Isaac.[339] Just as the binding of Isaac prefigured Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, Isaac's Abraham-free conception prefigures Jesus' virgin birth. Here I deploy this long recognized textual feature—YHWH's apparent impregnation of Sarah—as a supporting detail of my redescriptions of Isaac's birth.

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[338] Michael Carden, "Genesis/Bereshit," in *The Queer Bible Commentary*, ed. Deryn Guest et al. (London: SCM, 2006), 40.

[339] For details, see Michael Carden, "Endangered Ancestress Revisited: Sarah's Miraculous Motherhood and the Restoration of Eden," *The Bible and Critical Theory* 1 (2005), 7–11; Leroy Huizenga, *The New Isaac: Tradition and Intertextuality in the Gospel of Matthew*, SuppNT 131 (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 144–151; see also Michael Carden, "Dying to Bring Heaven Down to Earth: The Mother of Melchizedek and the Miraculous, Messianic Mothers in the Bible," in *The One Who Reads May Run: Essays in Honour of Edgar W. Conrad*, ed. Roland Boer, Michael Carden, and Julie Kelso (New York: T&T Clark, 2012), 226.

YHWH's exclusive role in Sarah's pregnancy is particularly relevant to the second interpretation, in which YHWH overcomes Sarah's refusal to have children. Attention to how YHWH "deals with" Sarah, against her wishes, reveals the intensely personal and bodily nature of YHWH's "victory" over Sarah's queer opposition to the Child. While YHWH's actions may not constitute rape (if the divine conception is asexual), non-consensual conception is similarly problematic, adding to the tragic nature of Isaac's birth from a perspective attuned to Sarah and her desires.

That YHWH, not Abraham, plays the active role in Isaac's conception also suggests a possible reason for Sarah's change of heart in the first interpretation: why she is happy to have a child despite her previous opposition. If Sarah's resistance to having a child was rooted in some kind of opposition to having sex, or to having sex with Abraham, rather than to bearing a child in and of itself, then she might have welcomed a conception through divine visitation. What appears as a transformation of Sarah's desires might instead reveal the specificity of her desires and her resistance; she was happy to have children, but not if it involved sex with Abraham.

Ambiguous Representations, Recipe for Happiness, and Foundational Texts

In addition to redescribing Isaac's birth as inverted tragedy, the comparison between Sarah's reactions and Goltz's and Edelman's theories motivates other redescriptions, as well. I sketch three additional insights to which this comparison might contribute.

First, one of the major differences between Sarah and the queer representations discussed by Goltz and Edelman is the ambiguity of Sarah's reaction. We cannot decide with certainty whether Isaac's birth represents a happy or tragic turn of events, from Sarah's perspective. The comparison suggests that we consider the possibility of ambiguity in the modern texts, as well. When we read or view a text in which an unhappy gay character finds happiness in a homonormative life, we might begin to question that happiness. Is the character's happiness as unambiguous as Goltz assumed, or are there sometimes suggestions of an unfulfilled queerness? Is it possible that heteronormativity has so trained us, as textual consumers, to equate heteronormativity with happiness that we assume the text represents a similar equation? At the very least, the comparison can motivate us to be on the lookout for texts in which the equation is denied, or at the very least gapped: texts in which the loss of queerness might be presented as a true loss.[340]

Second, note the way that Isaac's birth represents an inverted tragedy at both poles of Sarah's reaction. That is, whether Sarah was angry or joyous, I interpret her story as inverted tragedy in either case. Similarly, the tragedy that Goltz identifies when gay characters find homonormative joy in family life would not be eliminated if those characters were coerced into and therefore resentful of their family life; the tragedy would just shift. This raises the question: what does it take to avoid an inverted Queer tragedy? The answer, of course, is a Queer character who finds fulfillment in and through their Queerness, not as a result of participation in heteronormativity. To some extent, Rosemary Rowe and Brian Day, the childless lesbian and gay man I introduced in chapter 4, are models of non-tragic Queer lives. If we are willing to embroider Sarah's narrative

[340] Similar questions apply to Edelman's readings. I focus in these brief remarks on Goltz's analyses because they are more straightforward.

with a few additional gap-filling details, we might catch a glimpse of such a model in her, as well. Specifically, my suggestion that Sarah might have chosen to be childless not because she didn't want kids, but because she didn't want to have them the usual way (i.e., through sex with Abraham) would allow her to retain her Queerness (her avoidance of sex with Abraham) while welcoming Isaac's birth.

Finally, the texts that Goltz and Edelman read are different from the Bible in many ways, including that the Bible possesses a cultural importance that the other texts do not. This means that the stakes are different when we identify inverted tragedy in the Bible from when they identify them in other texts. There is an implicit call in Goltz's and Edelman's interpretations not only to be aware of and critique heteronormative patterns, but also to create new, better texts which are less tragic from a queer perspective. For many readers, a similar call to critique (let alone to change) the Bible and its importance is not even a thinkable proposition, given the foundational role the Bible plays in their lives. But once we are aware of these tragic patterns, it is difficult to avoid asking what we can do about it. The comparison suggests one route, which is to think of the Bible as more similar to these modern texts and media than we had previously thought. If they contain similar patterns, they may be subject to similar critique. But perhaps rather than changing the text to make for a happier result, the biblical solution is to search for a happier interpretation, such as the one I just sketched for Sarah's joyous but still Queer parenthood.

Conclusion

The comparison and redescription in this chapter finished the work begun in Chapter 4, showing how Sarah's childlessness can be redescribed as chosen, and that Sarah's "laughing" reactions to the news of her imminent conception and to the birth of Isaac cohere with such an interpretation. In fact, I have offered two such interpretations, based in the multiple meanings of צחק. In addition, I argued that, no matter how we understand Sarah's laughter, and no matter which interpretation we follow, the conclusion of Sarah's narrative is tragic. In the language of Smith's comparative method, both Sarah's narrative and the representations of queerness that Goltz and Edelman analyze are examples of the third term, inverted tragic representations.[341]

As with the previous chapters, the comparison in this chapter contributes to an understanding of Queerness as a cross-cultural category. Queerness, it appears, is represented as inverted tragedy. Normative representations depict happy endings that come at the expense of Queerness, and the perpetuation of the figure of the Child at the expense of Queer characters (or, as with Scrooge, their Queerness).

[341] Reading biblical narrative as inverted tragedy has a long history. See Robert Allen Warrior, "Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians: Deliverance, Conquest, and Liberation Theology Today," *Christianity and Crisis* 49 (1989): 261–65; Sprinkle, "A God at the Margins."

CHAPTER SIX: INTERSECTING DIFFERENCES

> So, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her slave-girl, and gave her to her husband Abram as a wife. (Gen 16:3)
>
> Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she ran away from her. (Gen 16:6)
>
> And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-Sheba. (Gen 21:14)

In chapter 3, I addressed the arrangement between Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar from the perspective of Abraham and his heirship strategies. In this chapter, I turn my attention more clearly toward Hagar's role in Abraham and Sarah's narrative, comparing the relationships among the biblical characters to Indian commercial gestational surrogates and the queer couples who use their services.[342] The third term for this comparison is "non-normative families who use ethnic and class difference to pursue greater normativity." In other words, my comparison demonstrates that both Abraham and Sarah and some contemporary queer families increase their familial normativity in part through the effects of ethnic and class inequalities. I argue that this is a redescription of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar's narrative, in that it shows how Hagar's ethnic and class differences (which are the subject of substantial prior interpretation) relate to the

[342] Gestational surrogacy is when a woman gestates a baby which is implanted in her uterus, but does not contribute the egg, in contrast to traditional surrogacy in which the surrogate is artificially inseminated, and the baby that results is then genetically related to the surrogate. "Commercial" refers to the fact that the surrogate is paid for gestating the baby, in opposition to when a friend or family member acts as a surrogate in an informal arrangement.

questions of normativity and deviance with which this dissertation is concerned. Moreover, this comparison demonstrates an additional similarity between Abraham and Sarah and contemporary queer families. In the language of the overall comparison of this dissertation, the relationship between ethnic and class differences and normativity adds an additional component to our understanding of cross-cultural Queerness—the Queerness which, I argue, Abraham and Sarah exemplify. I begin with a description of Hagar's narrative before moving on to a description of queer involvement in transnational commercial surrogacy, the comparisons, and the concluding redescription.

Description: Hagar's Narrative

As we have seen, Hagar appears in two chapters, Gen 16 and 21. We are first introduced to her as Sarah's Egyptian handmaid. "Now Sarai, Abram's wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian slave-girl whose name was Hagar" (Gen 16:1). This verse concentrates several of the major themes and questions in Hagar's story which will be relevant to my comparison and its third term (e.g., Queer normativity and its relationship with other status inequalities). First, Hagar's narrative is situated in the interrelated contexts of Sarah's childlessness and the relationships among Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar. At least at first, Hagar's role is inseparable from Sarah's childlessness. As will immediately become clear, she is to have the child that Sarah does not.

But just as important is the fact that she is Sarah's "Egyptian slave-girl," not Abraham's wife. While the precise meaning of "slave-girl" is often contested, the simple fact of Hagar's status as Sarah's slave is sufficient for understanding the context of her narrative.[343] But this begs the question: what did it mean to be a slave in the context of this narrative? Aside from the short passage in which Sarah appears slight in her eyes and Sarah responds with harsh treatment, we have little evidence of what Hagar's experience in Abraham's household might have been like. What we do know is that Hagar's slavery involved complete control by Sarah. She would have been expected to do whatever Sarah demanded of her, and she could be sold or mistreated. There would have been few restrictions on Sarah's actions toward her, and Hagar would have had few rights or protections, although ancient law codes, including those in the Bible, did afford some meager protections, especially for particular categories of slaves (Exo 21:2–11, 20–21, 26–27; Deut 15:12–18; 21:10–14). Once she became Abraham's secondary wife, the only change in her status would be that, in addition to being under the control of Sarah, Abraham also would have had a say. Nahman Avigad highlights the lack of generalities in ancient Near Eastern experiences of slavery, noting that each case depended on the particularities of the situation. "Legally, the *amah* was a bondswoman, but in practice her rank in the household depended entirely upon the position her master wished to give her."[344] While this statement refers to Hagar's relationship with Abraham, it seems apt

[343] The debate focuses on the difference between two terms used to refer to female slaves, שִׁפחה and עמה. Both terms are used to refer to Hagar, although the former is more common. See Alfred Jepsen, "Ama und Schiphchah," *VT* 8 (1958): 293–97; Raymond Westbrook, "The Female Slave," in *Gender and Law in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East*, ed. Tikva Frymer-Kensky, Bernard Levinson, and Victor Matthews (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998), 232; Schneider, *Mothers of Promise*, 104–08; Jacobs, *Gender, Power, and Persuasion*, 143–44; J. Cheryl Exum, "Hagar *En Procés*: The Abject in Search of Subjectivity," in *From the Margins 1: Women of the Hebrew Bible and Their Afterlives*, ed. Peter S. Hawkins and Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2009), 7, n. 19; Westermann, *Genesis*, 238.

[344] Nahman Avigad, "The Epitaph of a Royal Steward from Siloam Village," *Israel Exploration Journal* 3 (1953), 143.

for her relationship with Sarah, as well. Legally, Hagar was a slave, but in practice her place in the household depended entirely on the way Sarah wished to treat her.

The introduction to Hagar in Gen 16:1 also mentions that she is Egyptian. The text emphasizes Hagar's Egyptian status through repetition (in addition to Gen 16:1, see Gen 16:3; 21:9, 21; note, too, that when Hagar flees in 16:7 and 21:14 she does so towards Egypt). But the precise significance of the text's interest in her Egyptian-ness is not entirely clear. One function of Hagar's ethnicity that is relatively clear is that it differentiates her from Abraham and Sarah. In general, Abraham and Sarah's ethnicity is unmarked. The only exception is their Mesopotamian origins: "They went out together from Ur of the Chaldeans," (Gen 11:31; cf. 15:7).[345] Throughout their narrative, the text emphasizes Abraham and Sarah's difference from the people they interact with, explicitly naming these other ethnicities, but never again naming Abraham and Sarah's ethnicity (Gen 12:6, 10–14; 13:7, 13; 14:1–24; 15:18–21; 20:1; 21:32–34; 23:3–20; 24:3). This privileges their ethnicity, creating the sense that their ethnicity is the natural, normal one, in contrast with the explicitly designated foreign others that they interact with, including Hagar the Egyptian. Rosalyn Murphy suggests that Hagar's different ethnicity may have lowered Hagar's status in Abraham's household; Hagar has a lower status not because she is Egyptian specifically, but simply because her ethnicity is different.[346] The biblical

[345] The fact that the text almost never names Abraham and Sarah's ethnicity functions to reinforce the idea that Abraham has left his "country," his "kindred," and his "father's house" (Gen 12:1) and is making a fresh start as the ur-ancestor of the Israelites.

[346] Rosalyn Murphy, "Sista-Hoods: Revealing the Meaning in Hagar's Narrative," *Biblical Theology* 10 (2012), 81. See also Elsa Tamez, "The Woman Who Complicated Salvation," *Cross Currents* 36 (1986), 131.

law codes support such an argument, in that Israelite slaves are afforded rights and protections that do not apply to their non-Israelite counterparts (Exod 21:2; Deut 15:12–13).

While Hagar's otherness is certainly one function of Hagar's ethnicity, is there significance in the fact that it is a specifically Egyptian otherness? Could Hagar's ethnicity be interchanged with another? Is Hagar an Egyptian by a sort of geographic accident? Or does Hagar's Egyptian-ness bring with it connotations that bear on her narrative?

One explanation is that Hagar's ethnicity serves both an etiological and ideological purpose: it explains the difference between later Israelites and Ishmaelites and the association between those Ishmaelites and Egypt. But such explanations offer little help in understanding what connection there may be between Hagar's Egyptian ethnicity and the reproductive relationship with Abraham and Sarah. For this, we need to inquire into the associations which Egypt carries in the Hebrew Bible.

Unfortunately, these associations are quite diverse. Both F. V. Greifenhagen and Rainer Kessler argue that the biblical text constructs both negative and positive associations with Egypt, in the Pentateuch and in the Hebrew Bible more widely.[347] Most commonly, interpreters of Hagar connect her ethnicity with the wife-sister story or with the Israelite enslavement in and exodus from Egypt.[348] In both cases, commentators note

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[347] F. V. Greifenhagen, *Egypt on the Pentateuch's Ideological Map: Constructing Biblical Israel's Identity* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2002); Rainer Kessler, "The Threefold Image of Egypt in the Hebrew Bible," *Scriptura* 90 (2005): 878–84.

[348] References to Egypt in the Prophets and the Writings are seldom taken into account.

the reversals. With respect to the wife sister stories, Sarah gives control of Egyptian Hagar's sexuality to Abraham by a kind of disavowal of their marriage, just as Abraham had given control of Sarah's sexuality to Egyptian Pharaoh by a disavowal of their marriage.[349] Alternatively, the wife-sister story represents the threat to ideology or nationhood of one form of exogamy (women going elsewhere) while Hagar's narrative represents the same threat from the other perspective (outsider women coming in). With respect to the exodus, Hagar is a mistreated Egyptian slave in Abraham's household who encounters and is guided by YHWH while wandering in the wilderness, reversing the Exodus narrative of mistreated Israelite slaves in Egypt who encounter and are guided by YHWH while wandering in the wilderness.[350] But these two associations can result in widely divergent interpretations, because Egypt appears favorably in the wife-sister stories but less so in Exodus.

Moreover, even if one restricts the evidence to that found in Abraham and Sarah's narrative, scholars draw radically different conclusions about Egypt's role in the Hagar accounts. Consider, as two examples, the arguments of Iain Duguid and Tammi Schneider. Duguid argues that the Abrahamic cycle depicts Egypt as particularly fertile,

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[349] L. R. Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003), 278; Phyllis Trible, "Ominous Beginnings for a Promise of Blessing," in *Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives*, ed. Phyllis Trible and Letty M. Russell (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 38.

[350] Thomas S. Dozeman, "The Wilderness and Salvation History in the Hagar Story," *JBL* 117 (1995): 23–43; Robinson, "Characterization," 204, 206, 209, 213; Tamez, "The Woman," 137; Pamela Tamarkin Reis, "Hagar Requited," *JSOT* 87 (2000), 88, 103–09; Phyllis Trible, "A Literary and Theological Study of the Hagar Narratives," in *Understanding the Word: Essays in Honor of Bernhard W. Andersen*, ed. James T. Butler, Edgar W. Conrad, and Ben C. Ollenburger (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), 225–26; Trible, "Ominous Beginnings," 40, 47; Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), 232–35.

in contrast with the barren promised land, and warns against Egypt's fertile temptation. The message of the Egypt motif (including Hagar's ethnicity), according to Duguid, is that "choosing the fertility of Egypt over faithfulness to the promise leads to disastrous consequences."[351] He finds evidence of this motif throughout Abraham's cycle, including the famine that sends Abraham and his household to Egypt in Gen 12, the contrast between Abraham's and Lot's lands, and Hagar's fertility. In contrast, Tammi Schneider suggests that the text's intended association to Egypt is primarily negative, as a place that is feared and disliked.[352] In trying to explain Sarah's harsh treatment of Hagar, Schneider looks to the wife-sister stories: Sarah was persuaded to pass because she feared or thought poorly of the Egyptians. This dislike for the Egyptians would have colored her relationship with Hagar, resulting in mistreatment and the eventual demand for Hagar's expulsion.

Finally, in addition to the ambiguity in the connotations of Egypt, Abraham and Sarah's ethnicity brings ambiguities of its own. As I mentioned above, Abraham and Sarah's ethnicity is generally unmarked, and therefore often taken for granted by interpreters.[353] And, as I mentioned, unmarked ethnicity often implies normativity. But at the same time Abraham and Sarah are depicted as ethnic outsiders: they are constantly

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[351] Iain Duguid, "Hagar the Egyptian: A Note on the Allure of Egypt in the Abraham Cycle," *Westminster Theological Journal* 56 (1994), 420. See also Exum, "Hagar *En Procés*," 3–4.

[352] Schneider, *Mothers of Promise,* 105–06.

[353] One useful exception which discusses race with respect to Hagar, Sarah, and Abraham is Alan Cooper, "Hagar in and out of Context," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 55 (2001), 43–44. For a more in-depth investigation of the meaning of one particular ethnicity in the Hebrew Bible and the issues it raises when compared with modern constructions of race, see Rodney Saler, *Can a Cushite Change His Skin? An Examination of Race, Ethnicity, and Othering in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: T&T Clark, 2005).

living among and interacting with people whose ethnicities are different from their own (Gen 11:31; 12:1, 6, 10; 13:7; 14:1–24; 15:18–21; 20:1; 21:22–34; 23:1–20). With respect to Egypt specifically, the text does not support an interpretation in which Abraham and Sarah's ethnicity is dominant, normative, or privileged. Rather, Egypt is constructed as an established, powerful kingdom in relation to which Abraham and Sarah are vulnerable and in which they require divine assistance (although it is also worth noting that, with such assistance, they do quite well for themselves; see Gen 12).

What can we say, then, about Hagar's ethnic identity? First, it highlights a difference between her and Abraham and Sarah. While Abraham and Sarah might be vulnerable outsiders while in Egypt, it seems that the same is true for the Egyptian Hagar in Abraham's household. This suggests that one cannot simply import a connotation of "Egyptian" from other contexts; the meaning of any particular ethnicity seems to come in large part in context, and especially in the context of particular relationships. For Hagar, this means that the meaning of her ethnicity is difficult, if not impossible, to separate from her status as slave. She is a slave who, on top of that, is an ethnic outsider; she is an ethnic outsider who, in part because of that, is a slave.

With introductions out of the way, the text quickly moves on to a concise description of Sarah's plan for Hagar to bear Abraham a child. "Go in to my slave-girl," she tells him, "it may be that I shall obtain children by her" (16:2). Hagar's lack of textual voice here is clear, and reflects her subservient status as Sarah's slave. The narrative gives her no agency. With respect to the surrogacy arrangement, Hagar is the object of verbs, never the subject. Sarah "took" and "gave" her, and Abraham "went in to" her (vv. 3–4). The only exception is that she "conceived" (v. 4). Even when Hagar departs from expectations and "looked with contempt on her mistress," the Hebrew constructs Sarah as the grammatical subject: ותקל גברתה בעיניה, "her mistress was slight in her eyes" (v. 4). The text continues to omit Hagar's own words, voice, and perspective.

It appears that the change in Hagar's perception of Sarah is related to Hagar's conception: "when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress" (v. 4). Sarah is upset by this, and again Sarah and Abraham discuss Hagar's fate. Sarah complains to Abraham about Hagar, who in turn deflects responsibility. "Your slave-girl is in your power," Abraham tells her, "do to her as you please" (v. 6). Again, we see the entanglement of relationships. Abraham has taken Hagar as a wife, a relationship that supplements but does not replace Hagar's status as Sarah's slave. This means that Sarah's power over Hagar may be constrained by the fact that Hagar is also Abraham's wife, so Sarah requires Abraham's participation when she wants to punish Hagar.[354] But once Abraham agrees, Hagar's role as slave means that Sarah is able to mistreat her. "Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she ran away from her" (v. 6). Note all of the pronouns used here. Hagar's name has not appeared since she conceived. The pronouns allow the narrator to continue to devalue Hagar, her voice, and her actions.

Nonetheless, Hagar is active, both physically and grammatically, when she flees Sarah's "affliction" or "oppression," common translations for what Sarah does to Hagar. At this point, the focus of the story shifts briefly to Hagar, and her interaction with "the

[354] Jacobs, *Gender, Power, and Persuasion*, 144–46; Westbrook, "The Female Slave," 228.

angel of the LORD" (v. 7). The angel addresses her, "Hagar, slave-girl of Sarai" (v. 8), invoking both her name and her status, then asks her where she is coming from and going to. Hagar responds that she is running from her mistress, and the angel tells her to return. He also makes several promises about her son's future, promises which both reflect and differ from the promises YHWH had made to Abraham. On the one hand, the angel says "I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude," (v. 10), but on the other hand she learns that her son Ishmael "shall be a wild ass of a man, with his hand against everyone, and everyone's hand against him, and he shall live at odds with all his kin" (v. 12). Hagar then names YHWH as "El-roi," ("God of Seeing") and says "Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?" (v. 13). These statements are often interpreted as revealing the unusually close relationship that Hagar has with YHWH.[355]

Hagar apparently follows the angel's orders and returns to Abraham's household, for the text next reports that "Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram named his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael" (v.15). The emphasis here has turned squarely towards the relationship between Abraham and Hagar, now as joint parents of Ishmael.

Having apparently served her purpose, Hagar drops from the narrative for several chapters while Sarah and Abraham receive visions, visitors, and promises of progeny. We also hear about Sarah and Abraham's interactions with Abimelech and his household, and

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[355] Murphy, "Sista-Hoods," 86; Trible, "The Other Woman," 238; LaVerne McCain Gill, *Daughters of Dignity: African Women in the Bible and the Virtues of Black Womanhood* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2000), 13–17; Trible, "Ominous Beginnings," 41; Schneider, *Mothers of Promise*, 103, 110, 117; Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 18; Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis 1993), 23–26.

about the destruction of Sodom and its incestuous aftermath. But when Sarah conceives and bears Isaac we get a second brief account of Hagar and her unfortunate interactions with her mistress's wrath and her husband's household.

When Isaac is weaned, Abraham "made a great feast" (21:8). Then the narrator reports that "Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac" (v. 9). Again, note the complex network of relationships at work, and Hagar's identification as Egyptian (but not as Sarah's slave-girl). Also, the Hebrew word for "playing" is the same word that elsewhere means "laughing," "mocking," or even something sexual, and interpreters have offered all of these as possibilities for the interaction between Isaac and Ishmael that Sarah witnesses.[356] Something about this situation (perhaps something as benign as being reminded of Ishmael's presence, or perhaps something involving Isaac's mistreatment at Ishmael's hand) apparently leads Sarah to request that Abraham "cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac" (v. 10). Note Sarah's repetition of the label "slave woman" for Hagar. The dynamics here repeat those of Gen 16. While Sarah has power over her slave, that power is constrained by Hagar's status as Abraham's wife. Thus, Sarah requires Abraham's participation in Hagar and Ishmael's expulsion.

At this point YHWH tells Abraham to fulfill Sarah's request, reassuring him both that Isaac shall be his heir ("it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you") and that Ishmael will have a future of his own ("As for the son of the slave woman, I will

[356] See chapter 5 above.

make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring" [vv. 12–13]). (Note that YHWH mimics Sarah, using the same language to refer to Ishmael and Hagar, "the son of the אמה.")

Abraham "sent her away" along with Ishmael, and Hagar once again finds herself outside of Abraham's household, in the wilderness, this time by force rather than choice. This time, the narrator emphasizes her tragic plight and the threat that the stark wilderness poses to the mother and son. The text reports that she "wandered about in the wilderness," (v. 14) using the same verb תעה that Abraham used to describe his own disoriented, arguably Queer wandering when he defended himself before Abimelech.[357] They soon run out of water, and Hagar leaves Ishmael under a bush because she does not want to "look on the death of the child" (v. 16).

At this point, YHWH again comes to Hagar, this time to save her and her child rather than send them back home. YHWH repeats his promise to "make a great nation" of Ishmael, and then "God opened [Hagar's] eyes and she saw a well of water" (vv. 18–19). Thus Hagar and Ishmael survive and, indeed, thrive: "God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow" (v. 20). Hagar's story concludes with the report that she "got a wife for him from the land of Egypt," (v. 21) closing a bookend with her introduction in chapter 16 as Sarah's "Egyptian slave-girl" (16:1).

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[357] See chapter 2 above.

Description: Indian Commercial Gestational Surrogacy

Surrogacy is an extensive topic with many varieties, a long and complicated history, a significant body of literature (both academic and popular), and surrounded by legal and medical controversies.[358] Recently, there has been an increasing trend of gay male couples from Australia, Europe, and North America who contract with surrogacy institutes in India to use the services of Indian gestational surrogates. This trend among gay male couples parallels a broader increase in the use of Indian surrogates.[359] The most common reasons that couples and individuals use Indian surrogates include regulations in many countries that prohibit surrogacy and the relatively small expense of Indian surrogacy when compared with other countries where it is legal (for example, Indian surrogacy tends to be about one-third the price of surrogacy in the United States).[360]

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[358] For a small sample of the range of studies on surrogacy from a variety of perspectives and across disciplines, see Cheryl Sander "Surrogate Motherhood and Reproductive Technologies: An African American Perspective," *Creighton Law Review* 25 (1992): 1707–23; Maneesha Deckha, "Situating Canada's Commercial Surrogacy Ban in a Transnational Context: A Postcolonial Feminist Call for Legalization and Public Funding," *McGill Law Journal* 61 (2015): 31–87; Ruth McElroy, "Whose Body, Whose Nation? Surrogate Motherhood and Its Representation," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 5 (2002): 325–42; Nicky Hudson et al., "Cross-Border Reproductive Care: A Review of the Literature," *Reproductive Biomedicine Online* 22 (2011): 673–85; Vasanti Jadva et al., "The Experiences of Surrogate Mothers," *Human Reproduction* 18 (2003): 2196–204; Sharon Jacob, "Violent Love, Oppressive Liberation: Reading Mary in the Infancy Narratives of Matthew and Luke alongside Surrogate Indian Mothers" (PhD diss., Drew University, 2013); Diksha Munjal-Shankar, "Autonomy, Choices, and Consent in Commercial Surrogacy: Viewing Through the Indian Lens" *Asian Bioethics Review* 7 (2015): 380–93; Stephen Wilkinson, "Exploitation in International Paid Surrogacy Arrangements," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 33 (2016): 125–45.

[359] Karen Smith Rotabi and Nicole Footen Bromfield, "The Decline in Intercountry Adoptions and New Practices of Global Surrogacy: Global Exploitation and Human Rights Concerns," *Affilia: Journal of Women and Social Work* 27 (2012), 129–30; Damien Riggs and Clemence Due, "Gay Men, Race Privilege and Surrogacy in India," *Outskirts* 22 (2010), http://www.outskirts.arts.uwa.edu.au/volumes/volume-22/riggs; Deborah Dempsey, "Surrogacy, Gay Male Couples, and the Significance of Biogenetic Paternity," *New Genetics and Society* 32 (2013), 37–38.

[360] Dempsey, "Surrogacy," 38; Anna Pia Ferraretti et al., "Cross-Border Reproductive Care: A Phenomenon Expressing the Controversial Aspects of Reproductive Technologies," *Reproductive*

Some intended parents also say that they chose to use Indian surrogates because they wanted to support women who are both needy and worthy (i.e., won't waste the money on alcohol or drugs).[361]

Much of the literature about surrogacy focuses on arguments over its ethics or legality. The primary arguments concern the rights and possible exploitation of the surrogates, the inherent problems of commodifying bodies, and how surrogacy involves complex interconnections among race, sex, class, and ideologies of reproduction. On the one hand, some commentators argue that surrogacy is inherently exploitative and alienates a woman's body from herself. They also argue that true consent is impossible in many cases because of the surrogates' lack of education or the coercive situations in which they find themselves. Others counter that the surrogates have the right to make their own choices about their bodies and that surrogacy can reasonably be seen as better for many women than the other options available to them. Several scholars have proposed that surrogacy be regulated according to a fair trade model in order to ensure that the surrogates are not exploited and that they receive a fair share of the price of surrogacy.[362]

Biomedicine Online 20 (2010), 262–63; Vida Panitch, "Surrogate Tourism and Reproductive Rights," *Hypatia* 28 (2013), 282.

[361] Pande, *Wombs in Labor*, 86.

[362] For a range of views on these issues, see Alison Bailey, "Reconceiving Surrogacy: Toward a Reproductive Justice Account of Indian Surrogacy," *Hypatia* 26 (2011): 715–41; Wilkinson, "Exploitation," 125–45; Amrita Banerjee, "Race and a Transnational Reproductive Caste System: Indian Transnational Surrogacy," *Hypatia* 29 (2014): 113–28; Pande, *Wombs in Labor*, 142–46; Casey Humbyrd, "Fair Trade International Surrogacy," *Developing World Bioethics* 9 (2009): 111–18; Peter Omonzejele, "The Ethics of Commercial Surrogate Mothering: A Response to Casey Humbyrd," *Human Reproduction & Genetic Ethics* 17 (2011): 110–21.

In addition to the general concerns about surrogacy and the exploitation that is possible as a result of the class differences between the intended parents and the surrogates, several scholars have also noted how race is implicated in Indian gestational surrogacy. First, there are disparities between who accesses gestational surrogacy and who serves as gestational surrogates that correspond with race, class, and caste privilege. One way of framing this divide is that the reproductive technology industry is divided into privileged "egg-makers" and less privileged "egg-nesters."[363] Women with lighter skin or of a higher caste are more in demand as egg donors, and they receive higher prices for their eggs, while people with darker skin and a lower caste, as well as people with less money, are more likely to work as gestational surrogates. This differential is a result of and perpetuates the social construction of race in which race is imagined as transmitted through genetics. This construction of race as genetic serves to legitimize intended parents and to minimize the connection between a gestational surrogate and the child she gestates (despite the very real biological connection between a child and a surrogate, for instance in their sharing of blood and through the strong influence of the uterine environment on later development).[364]

Surrogacy also reveals the high value placed on a specific kind of biogenetic connection in reproduction, a value which is closely related to racial privilege and desires to maintain racial purity. In the case of gay male intended fathers, it is precisely this

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[363] Banerjee, "Reproductive Caste System," 125.

[364] Laura Harrison, "Brown Bodies, White Babies: The Politics of Crossracial Gestational Surrogacy" (PhD diss., Indiana University, 2012), 197–98.

genetic connection, created by the intended fathers' sperm, that makes men willing to accept the expense, difficulty, and ethical dangers of surrogacy instead of adopting children.[365]

Part of the comparison between surrogacy and Hagar's story will be based on these general contours of surrogacy and the themes of the critical literature about surrogacy. But it will also be helpful to consider the experiences of surrogates. Amrita Pande conducted an extensive ethnography of surrogates at one Indian fertility clinic. Like many surrogates, these women lived in isolated surrogate hostels that serve multiple purposes and interests, including providing a place for women to stay who do not want their communities to know that they are surrogates, and providing supervision of the women to ensure that they follow the rules established by the surrogacy agency (such as no sex or manual labor, including basic housework).

In analyzing the degree of agency with which the women became surrogates, Pande divides the surrogates into three groups. Women in the first group, who tended to be better educated and wealthier, were active agents in choosing surrogacy. They heard about surrogacy and pursued it on their own, sometimes against their families' wishes. Women in the second group were recruited by brokers, and often describe themselves as knowing very little about the process or its potential benefits. Women in the third and final group were persuaded or coerced by family members to become surrogates. In one extreme case, a woman was brought to the clinic in tears by her family.[366] Pande

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[365] Riggs and Due, "Gay Men."

[366] Pande, *Wombs in Labor*, 51.

emphasizes, however, that the manner in which women became surrogates did not determine their experience of surrogacy. Some women who chose it had negative experiences, while others who resisted had satisfying experiences and decided to become surrogates again.[367] Pande also concludes that, while many of the surrogates had visions of how the money they earned as a surrogate would dramatically change their life, such dramatic changes were the exception. In almost every case, the money was spent (by the women or her family members) in ways that had little enduring effect on the women's day-to-day lives (at least in Pande's estimation).[368]

Queer Liberalism and Race

In my analysis above, I provided evidence that surrogacy is one way in which queer families perpetuate normative ideologies. Specifically, queer men's use of surrogacy reinforces ideologies of white and upper class privilege and of biogenetic reproduction and kinship. Here I briefly situate this dynamic as an example of the intertwining of queerness with the privileged side of other forms of difference.

Queer men's use of surrogacy fits well into a growing body of literature which shows how queer inclusion (i.e., the increasing cultural normativity of some queer people and queer families) is implicated in the perpetuation of policies and practices of subjection and discrimination across racial and national lines. For example, Jaspir Puar's concept of homonationalism describes how the partial inclusion of some queers is used to

[367] Pande, *Wombs in Labor*, 56–58.

[368] Pande, *Wombs in Labor*, 156.

justify or hide imperialist and racist practices.[369] Puar's examples include the sexual exceptionalism that contrasted the supposed tolerance of the United States toward sexual minorities with the supposed repression, particularly of gay men, of the Muslim world, even while the United States continued to reject queers as full citizens (for example through the military's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy which was still in force at the time of Puar's analysis).

One further example, which closely parallels that of queer men's use of surrogacy, is David Eng's critique of queer couples' use of transnational adoption. Eng argues that queer liberalism—the increasing attainment by "particular gay and lesbian U.S. citizen-subjects" of "rights and recognition before the law"—supports the disavowal of racial difference even while racial (as well as sexual and economic) disparities continue.[370] That is, queer inclusion is both a result of and perpetuates a claim of colorblindness, in part through a failure to attend to the ways that sexuality is raced and race is sexualized (i.e., intersectionality).

With respect to adoption, Eng situates increases in transnational adoption by same-sex couples in the context of this queer liberalism and queer inclusion. In particular, he argues that an important aspect of queer liberalism involves queer participation in what had previously been regarded as heterosexual domains, such as family and reproduction. "While gays and lesbians were once decidedly excluded from the

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[369] Jaspir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

[370] David Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 3–5.

normative structures of family and kinship, today they are re-inhabiting them in growing numbers and in increasingly public ways."[371] Moreover, heteronormativity pressures queer families to participate as fully as possible in these normative structures in order to be recognized as families.

> The desire for parenthood as economic entitlement and legal right … not only by heterosexuals but also, and increasingly, by homosexuals seems to stem in large part from an unexamined belief in the traditional ideals of the nuclear family as the primary contemporary measure of social respectability and value.[372]

This desire for social respectability and value via the nuclear family, Eng argues, leads queer families (along with many heterosexuals) to turn to transnational adoption.

But Eng argues that transnational adoption has some unfortunate consequences, largely stemming from the way that racial difference is erased. Because one purpose of transnational adoption is to participate in heteronormative family, the normativity of which includes racial sameness, families tend to endorse colorblindness with respect to their transnational adoption, insisting that the race of the child does not matter. Eng argues that this dynamic, along with the narrative of "saving" children from problematic national contexts, displaces collective political histories, including colonial histories which are implicated in the problems from which those children are now being "saved." These political histories and disparities are transformed from public to private and from corporate to individual, making effective political action appear inappropriate: "the public and political are contracted into the domain of private life, and this contraction

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[371] Eng, *Feeling of Kinship*, 3.

[372] Eng, *Feeling of Kinship*, 101.

makes collective forms of political analysis and activism seem untenable or even extreme."[373] Finally, Eng argues that the adoptees sometimes experience this displacement and the erasure of their racial difference as psychological dilemmas. Note that it is not the practice of transnational adoption itself that is the primary target of Eng's critique. Rather, Eng critiques the erasure of racial and national difference (sometimes a result, at least in part, of pressures on queer families to conform as much as possible to heteronormative family structures) as the source of problems both for individual adoptees and for collective reflection and action around colonialism, capitalist exploitation, and immigration policies.

I describe Puar's and Eng's scholarship because they help us contextualize the use of Indian surrogacy by queer individuals, couples and families. I argue that such queer surrogacy is a further example of the dynamic which Puar and Eng address, whereby greater normativity for some queer people is made possible by inequalities in other areas. That is, we can begin to see queer surrogacy as one example of a larger phenomenon—one to which Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar are connected, as I argue below.

Comparison: Benefits and Inequalities

I move now to a comparison of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar with queer couples and the Indian surrogates they employ to birth "their" babies. My comparisons focus on two areas. First, I compare with respect to the benefits bestowed on the "intended parents" by the arrangement with Hagar and by surrogacy: while the details of the arrangements and their outcomes differ, both situations allow the intended parents to

[373] Eng, *Feeling of Kinship*, 103.

more closely approximate normative families. The second focus of the comparison is the role of ethnic and class difference in the arrangements. In both cases the participants in the agreement come from backgrounds marked by relative inequality, even as Hagar's status as Egyptian slave implies a different set of relations from the surrogates' status as lower-class (in comparison to the intended parents) Indians. Taken together, this comparison demonstrates that both the arrangement between Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar and the surrogacy agreements are examples of how ethnic and class inequality can be used by non-normative families to achieve some degree of normativity.

Increased Normativity and Breeding Relationships

According to Bernard Jackson, a "tripartite breeding relationship" is "an arrangement to use the reproductive capacities of two members of a household for the benefit of a third member."[374] In Gen 16 and 21, Sarah benefits from the reproductive capacities of Abraham and Hagar, and the queer intended parents benefit from the reproductive capacities of the surrogates. Thus, while gestational surrogacy sometimes involves more or less than three parties (in the case of intended parents who use both an egg donor and a separate gestational surrogate or a single intended parent), both comparands roughly fit Jackson's definition of tripartite breeding relationships. This section is concerned with the nature of the benefits that such relationships allow, particularly with respect to normativity. While Hagar and the surrogates both accrue benefits from their respective arrangements, the larger purpose of my comparison leads

[374] Bernard S. Jackson, "Gender Critical Observations on Tripartite Breeding Relationships in the Hebrew Bible," in *A Question of Sex? Gender Difference in the Hebrew Bible and Beyond*, ed. Deborah W. Rooke (Sheffield: Phoenix, 2007), 39.

me to focus on Abraham and Sarah's benefits, and how those compare with those of the intended parents of surrogacy relationships.[375]

Abraham and Sarah's Normativity and Hagar's Child

With respect to Abraham and Sarah, Abraham is the clearest beneficiary. In Gen 15:2–3, Abraham expresses his desire for a biological heir, and that is exactly what the arrangement with Hagar provides. As I argued in chapter 3, an adopted heir appears to be a less preferred alternative to the norm of a biological heir. Thus, Abraham is non-normative because he lacks a biological heir (indeed, since he has not yet adopted, he technically lacks any heir), and having a child with Hagar allows Abraham to achieve a greater degree of normativity.

The situation with Sarah is less clear. There is evidence that she expects and possibly obtains some benefit from the arrangement, and that this benefit is related to her childless non-normativity. But the precise nature of that benefit is unclear. As discussed in the description above and in chapter 4, Sarah imagines being "built up" by Hagar having a child. This suggests that she expects some sort of benefit from that child's birth. A common interpretation is that Sarah benefits because Hagar's child will be counted as Sarah's, thereby eliminating, or at least reducing, the stigma of childlessness.[376] In other words, Sarah is non-normative due to her childlessness, and to the extent that Hagar's child can be counted as partially Sarah's, that non-normativity will be mitigated.

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[375] Hagar's benefits include the status of wife to Abraham, the social prestige associated with having children, two divine encounters, and the honor of being matriarch to a nation. The surrogates' benefits include health care during their pregnancies, payments for their services, and for some the enjoyment of pregnancy and of helping their intended parents.

[376] See chapters 4–5 above.

Aside from Sarah's statement about being built up, there is little evidence regarding Sarah's benefits within Abraham and Sarah's story itself. In the similar situation in which Rachel's and Leah's maidservants have children on behalf of their mistresses, there is evidence that Rachael and Leah participate in a kind of pseudo-motherhood with respect to their maidservants' children. Rachel states that she will benefit from the arrangements with her "maid," and she does so more explicitly than Sarah: "There is my maid Bilhah; go in to her, that she may bear upon my knees and that I too may have children through her" (Gen 30:3). The idea that the child is indeed Rachel's son, and that Rachel sees some benefit of this, is reinforced when it is Rachel who names the child, saying "'God has judged me, and has also heard my voice and given me a son'; therefore, she named him Dan" (30:6). While Leah does not say anything as explicit as Rachel's comments, the fact that she gives Zilpah "to Jacob as a wife" (30:9) suggests that she also saw some benefit in the arrangement, even though she already had biological children of her own.[377] Similarly Rachel and Leah name the other children of their maids, too (30:8–13).

We must note, however, that whatever benefit Rachel and Leah achieve through the children of their maidservants, it is not equivalent to biological motherhood. This can be seen in the differences which are preserved between children of maidservants and children of wives. For example, Jackson points out that the six of Jacob's children who

[377] The fact that Leah gives Zilpah to Jacob as a wife even though she already has biological children is often overlooked in interpretations of biblical childlessness and surrogacy. It complicates any simple explanation that sees childlessness as the only motivation for a wife to give her slave to her husband as a wife for the purpose of reproduction. It suggests that there isn't simply a division between women who have children and those who do not, but that the benefits to women in having children (probably primarily status) increase with the number of children.

receive a blessing are all biological children of Rachel and Leah.[378] Similarly, the biblical genealogies consistently remember the biological mothers of Jacob's children and organize their lists according to the mothers (Gen 35:25–26; 46:16–18, 23–25; cf. Gen 37:2; 1 Chron 7:13; cf. Gen 25:12).

In Sarah's case, it is not clear to what extent her expectations of being built up through Hagar are realized (this is gapped in the text). There is no direct evidence that they were.[379] In fact, the text seems to emphasize Hagar's motherhood, suggesting that the omission of any reference to Sarah's maternal claim on Ishmael may be intentional. Recall, for instance, the language of Ishmael's birth: "Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram named his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael" (Gen 16:15–16). The repetition of Hagar's name reinforces her motherhood, and contrasts with Sarah's absence from the scene. Similarly, Abram's naming of Ishmael (the same name which Hagar had already heard from "the angel of the LORD" [Gen 16:11]) contrasts with Rachel's and Leah's naming of their maidservants' children. One function of the emphasis on Hagar's motherhood of Ishmael is probably to differentiate Ishmael from Isaac, even before the birth of Isaac, but it also suggests that Sarah may not have benefitted as much as she had hoped.

In sum, both Abraham and Sarah achieve greater normativity through Hagar's giving birth to Ishmael. Ishmael is a more normative heir for Abraham than an adopted

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[378] Jackson, "Tripartite Breeding Relationships," 48.

[379] Reis, "Hagar Requited," 77–79, argues that Sarah's being built up does not have anything to do with Hagar's child, but rather with the act of giving Hagar to Abraham. Reis's is a variation on the argument in S. Kardimon, "Adoption as a Remedy for Infertility in the Period of the Patriarchs," *JSS* 3 (1958): 123–26. See also Sarna, *Genesis*, 119.

son, and Sarah seems to expect that Ishmael will be counted, at least on some level, as a son for her as well. While Sarah's case is less clear than Abraham's I will continue to refer to both Abraham and Sarah as beneficiaries of increased normativity, trusting the reader to remember that Sarah's benefit from the arrangement with Hagar is much less clear than Abraham's.

Queer Intended Parents' Normativity and Surrogacy

The primary benefit of surrogacy to the intended parents is a child. Studies suggest that intended parents' expectations about the benefits of having children are widely variable, but fall into six general categories: happiness, parenthood (e.g., giving and/or receiving love), identity, well-being, continuity (genetic and/or familial), and social.[380] The categories of "identity" and "social" motivations are associated with a sense that having children will help the intended parents achieve greater normativity. For example, in one study the social category includes statements like "Your environment (others, family) expect it of you," "Others around me having children," and "To avoid being an outsider." The identity category includes "It is obvious to have children," "It is a

[380] Silke Dyer et al., "Motives for Parenthood Among Couples Attending a Level 3 Infertility Clinic in the Public Health Sector in South Africa," *Human Reproduction* 23 (2008): 352–57; A. Indekeu et al., "Parenthood Motives, Well-being, and Disclosure Among Men From Couples Ready to Start Treatment with Intrauterine Insemination Using Their Own Sperm or Donor Sperm" *Human Reproduction* 27 (2012): 159–66; Tom Cassidy and Penelopi Sintrovani, "Motives for Parenthood, Psychosocial Factors and Health in Women Undergoing IVF," *Journal of Reproductive and Infant Psychology* 26 (2008): 4–17. Note that, while these studies focused on people who were about to use fertility treatments, not surrogacy, we can expect that many of the motivations would be similar. I am not aware of any studies that specifically address the parenthood motivations of intended parents using surrogates. These studies all focus on the expected benefits of having children; for the actual impact of having children, see Amber Johnson and Joseph Rodgers, "The Impact of Having Children on the Lives of Women: The Effects of Children Questionaire," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 36 (2006): 2685–2714.

sign of being grown up," and "It is the nature of man/woman."[381] While these motivations are not the top motivations in rankings by intended parents, they are important for over two-thirds of respondents.[382] Another study included "Part of a woman's role" and "To enhance femininity" under "identity" and "Most friends have children," "Pressure from family," and "Pressure from friends" under "social pressure."[383] Again, all of these factors were important to a significant percentage of respondents. These identity and social motivations illustrate that these intended parents expect that their use of infertility treatments will help them mitigate the non-normativity associated with their childlessness; it is reasonable to assume that intended parents using surrogacy would have similar expectations.

In a study of gay men who have children via surrogacy, Bergman et al. identify several indications that the men have participated in increased normativity. One example is the improved relationships between such parents and their families of origin: "on average, the respondents reported that their relationships with members of their families of origin (including parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, and cousins) had become 'somewhat closer.'"[384] One respondent implicitly connects this closer relationship with issues of normativity: "Our baby is a very interesting acknowledgement of us as a family."[385] The

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[381] Dyer et al., "Motives for Parenthood," 353.

[382] Dyer et al., "Motives for Parenthood," 354.

[383] Cassidy and Sintrovani, "Motives for Parenthood," 10.

[384] K. Bergman et al., "Gay Men Who Become Fathers via Surrogacy: The Transition to Parenthood," *Journal of GLBT Family Studies* 6 (2010), 125–26.

[385] Bergman et al., "Gay Men," 125.

suggestion is that the baby makes the father (and, presumably, his male partner) appear more normative in the eyes of his family of origin.[386]

Another example is that many of the men indicated shifts in their social circles from single gay men to straight couples with children. That is, they had fewer relationships with queer people and more with heteronormative people. Two responses illustrating this dynamic suggest how these changes in relationships are related to changes in normativity. According to one respondent, “Most neighbors are straight with children. These are who we socialize with. We have more in common with them.”[387] Another says, “After having a baby, we didn’t have much in common with our single gay friends.”[388] I suggest that normativity is one aspect of what they have in common with their straight friends, and that they no longer share so deeply in the non-normativity that once connected them to their single gay friends. That is, an important factor in their shifting relationships is shifts in their normativity.

A final example from Bergman et al.’s study demonstrating that surrogacy allowed the gay men in the study to become normative involves changes in the men’s self-image. The study identifies a variety of improvements in the men’s self-esteem. One example with a clear relationship to normativity is this statement of improved self-esteem: “There’s been a validation as a member of the community that is encouraging

[386] It is important to note that such experiences are not universal. Bergman et al. report that in a few cases the inclusion of a baby into the family had the opposite effect. The families of origin perceived the gay men’s parenthood as less normative, not more so; “Gay Men,” 126.

[387] Bergman et al., “Gay Men,” 128.

[388] Bergman et al., “Gay Men,” 128.

that wasn't there before."[389] The combination of "validation" and "community" strongly suggest that this man is experiencing a sense of normativity that he didn't have before he had kids through surrogacy. Other comments that are less clear, but that may be connected to increased normativity, include "I like myself better as a father than I ever did before," and "I have additional confidence, self-esteem, and pride in being a parent."[390] It is possible that increased normativity is one factor in these improvements in the men's self-images.

While all the motivations and comments so far could have come from any queer parent, access to normativity is involved in one of the reasons that gay men choose surrogacy in particular, instead of adoption. In my description of surrogacy above I mentioned the importance that a biogenetic connection plays in gay men's decisions to use surrogacy. There may be a variety of reasons for this desire, but the fact that biological connection is part of the normative construction of families means that, in choosing surrogacy over adoption, gay men are pursuing the more normative option. Again, not everyone who values a biogenetic connection does so purely out of a desire for normativity; however, the normativity of biology cannot easily be disentangled from such a decision. Together with motivations for childless people to pursue fertility treatments and the life changes reported by gay fathers who use surrogacy, the role played by biogenetic paternity in surrogacy decisions further supports the notion that queer people often increase their participation in normativity through surrogacy.

[389] Bergman et al., "Gay Men," 129.

[390] Bergman et al., "Gay Men," 129.

This demonstrates one part of the similarity between this queer use of surrogacy and Abraham and Sarah's arrangement with Hagar, that both involve a shift towards normativity. Before moving on to the second part, the role that ethnic and class inequality plays in enabling this shift, I highlight a few of the differences between the comparands, again focusing on the shift toward normativity, and even more particularly on those aspects of this shift that will allow for the redescription below.

First, each comparand introduces an additional identity difference as a factor in how the reproductive arrangements affect normativity. In the biblical example, gender difference is important: the arrangement with Hagar benefits Abraham much more so than it does Sarah, despite the text's portrayal of the arrangement as Sarah's idea and of Sarah as the one who expresses hopeful expectations. Abraham gains a son and heir, with all of the status, economic, and religious benefits such a son would bring; Sarah hoped to be "built up" but seems to gain nothing but Hagar's derision. The queer intended parents who use surrogacy are all men, so gender difference does not play a directly comparable role in their case. However, the attention that the comparison brings to gender difference and their role in normativity might prompt us to ask whether the gay men are, like Abraham, experiencing some benefit which is specifically related to their masculinity. Indeed, some commentators critique surrogacy for its patriarchal bias. They argue that for opposite-sex couples surrogacy most benefits intended fathers by satisfying their desires for genetic offspring, pointing out that for many intended mothers there is no genetic relationship so that adoption would provide a similar benefit.[391] Damien Riggs and

[391] Barbara Katz Rothman, "The Legacy of Patriarchy as Context for Surrogacy: Or Why Are We Quibbling Over This?" *American Journal of Bioethics* 14 (2014): 36–37; George Harris, "Surrogacy,

Clemence Due argue that some of the ways in which surrogacy is patriarchal extend to gay male couples, and that the privilege of white males with respect to surrogacy obligates such couples to certain attitudes, responses, and actions, for example by including the surrogate in their kinship narratives.[392]

While Abraham and Sarah's arrangement with Hagar highlights the importance of gender, the queer couple's increased normativity through surrogacy highlights the importance of sexuality. Note that the queer couples' deviance from heteronormativity involves but is not exhausted by their childlessness. That is, the gay men's lack of children is not identical to that of childless heterosexuals undergoing fertility treatments, in part because it is interrelated with their queerness. For example, when gay male couples are childless, it is seen as a natural consequence of their sexuality (see my discussion of the historical association between queerness and childlessness in chapter 4). Moreover, queer methods of forming a family are impacted at every turn by their queerness, for example through laws and policies regulating adoption, surrogacy, and citizenship that discriminate between queer and straight families. One consequence of this interrelationship between childlessness and queerness is that, even when the transition from childlessness to children increases their normativity, queer couples retain the non-normativity of their queerness. Of course, both Abraham and Sarah and the queer couples remain non-normative, in that Ishmael is not a *prime* bio-son and the queer

Patriarchy, and Contracts," *Public Affairs Quarterly* 6 (1992), 255–57; Christine Overall, *Ethics and Human Reproduction: A Feminist Analysis* (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1987), 117–19.

392 Riggs and Due, "Gay Men."

couples do not have a child genetically related to both parents. But in addition the queer couples remain excluded from the most normative version of family: the heterosexual, biologically related nuclear family. Moreover, unlike Abraham and Sarah, who eventually obtain the full normativity of the prime bio-son, the queer couples will never create a fully normative family without a change in constructions of normativity.

A final difference is one that is important methodologically. This comparison and the redescription of Abraham and Sarah that it allows is made possible in part through the attention which has been paid in academic literature to the effects of having children on the normativity of queer families. The work by Puar and Eng on the relationship between race and queer inclusion into normative family structures is one example. Another example is scholarship on homonormativity, which sees in the familial trend among many lesbians and gays a reinforcement of normativity and a rejection of queerness. The similarity in the comparison raises the possibility of reflection on Abraham and Sarah in light of this literature, reinforcing the conclusion that their situation is an example of a similar phenomenon.

Ethnic and Class Inequalities

I move now to the second aspect of the third term of the comparison. Having shown how Abraham and Sarah and the queer intended parents use reproductive relationships to increase their normativity, I now address the role that ethnic and class inequalities play in the two contexts. For each comparand, I first highlight the ethnic and class inequalities which appeared in the descriptions above, both between Abraham/Sarah and Hagar and between the queer intended parents and their surrogates. I then argue that these inequalities facilitate the shifts toward normativities that Abraham, Sarah, and the intended parents enjoy. This demonstrates that both comparands are examples of the third term, "non-normative families who use relative ethnic and class difference to pursue greater normativity."

For the biblical context, the inequality between Hagar on the one hand and Abraham and Sarah on the other is stark. Abraham and Sarah are wealthy slave owners, and Hagar is their foreign slave. There is little doubt that this relationship, including the inequality, is what allows Sarah to give Hagar to Abraham as a secondary wife for reproductive purposes. Recall that, while the general conditions of slavery were diverse, and we do not know about Hagar's conditions outside of the few details given by the Bible, what we do know is that Hagar was subject to Sarah's demands. As Pamela Tamarkind Reis says, Hagar's slavery "enabled Sarai to propose a fertility technique to Abram."[393]

The differences between Indian surrogates and the intended parents for whom they give birth is similarly stark. This is particularly the case when the intended parents are couples from the first-world. Surrogacy is expensive, so intended parents are among the wealthy, even when compared with their first-world peers, and even more so when compared with much of the population of India. In contrast, because financial motivations are primary for surrogates, they are often among the poorer women in their communities.[394] This financial disparity is a primary factor in allowing the surrogacy

[393] Reis, "Hagar Requited," 77.

[394] Panitch, "Surrogate Tourism," 282.

relationship to take place. The intended parents can have a child borne to a surrogate because they have enough money to convince surrogates to participate, and the surrogates are convinced by the money because they have such limited financial resources.

Immediately, we can see both similarities to and differences from the biblical example. In both cases class inequalities facilitate the reproductive relationship.[395] But the power of a slave owner over her slave is very different from the power relationship between intended parents and surrogates. Sarah has direct power over her slave, and Hagar has almost no agency in the relationship. In contrast, the power dynamics of money are more complicated. While the surrogates' options may be limited, especially in comparison with those of the intended parents, many of them do have some degree of choice. Several of the surrogates interviewed by Pande had jobs before becoming surrogates, and according to Pande most of the women's lives were not significantly impacted by the additional money. The Indian surrogates' socio-economic status may contribute to their decision to become surrogates, but it does not completely determine that decision. While Hagar may have a few other options available (such as running away, as demonstrated by her actions after she is mistreated by Sarah), her participation is much more directly and unilaterally determined by her status as slave.

With respect to their ethnicity, there are two ways in which the surrogates' Indian ethnicity contributes to the reproductive relationship. First, the fact that they are Indian is interrelated with their lower class status. According to Vida Panitch, Indian surrogates are

[395] My use of "class" here is loose; slavery is not a class status in the same way that different incomes represent different classes in the contemporary world, and in neither context do I intend the technical Marxist sense of class in terms of relations of capital and labor.

paid approximately one-tenth what American surrogates are paid ($1,500 to $5,000 for Indian surrogates compared to $25,000 to $40,000 for Americans).[396] Even when cost of living is taken into account, the Indian surrogates are paid less. Further, Panitch argues that people use Indian surrogates precisely because they can pay them less: “Why is it that American and Indian surrogates command such differential benefits? It has to be that the prospective parents who contract the services of an Indian surrogate do so precisely because they can get away with paying her less.”[397] This comparison with American surrogates quantifies the role that ethnicity plays in the class inequality between surrogates and intended parents (even if it is confounded by complicating factors related to politics and geography).[398]

In addition, the fact of ethnic difference makes Indian surrogates more attractive to some intended parents. As I noted in the description above, the difference in the ethnicity of the surrogate mother and the baby she bears helps to legitimize the intended parents’ claim on the baby and to minimize the connection between the baby and the surrogate. Again, we can note similarities and differences to the arrangement with Hagar. In both cases ethnic difference in and of itself, rather than any specific ethnicity, plays a role in the reproductive arrangement. For Hagar her ethnic difference is a factor in her

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[396] Panitch, “Surrogate Tourism,” 282.

[397] Panitch, “Surrogate Tourism,” 283.

[398] I acknowledge that ethnicity probably does not capture the entirety of this difference, in that an American citizen of South Indian descent living in the United States would probably be paid the larger amount. The differences between American and Indian surrogates are also dependent on both global and local economic factors. However, these are not innocent of ethnicity; ethnicity is an important factor in the global economic inequalities between India and the United States.

slavery, while for the surrogates it makes them more attractive as surrogates because it reduces the threat of conflict over custody. But there is a difference here, as well: the surrogates' ethnicity is different not only from the intended parents, but also from the baby (when they are only gestational surrogates and not also egg donors). But the relationship between Hagar's Egyptian-ness and the ethnicity of her baby is more complicated. The tension between the ethnic identities of Ishmael's two parents can be seen in the competing tensions surrounding his inheritance, his expulsion from Abraham's household, and the later relationship between Israelites and Ishmaelites. I address these issues more in the redescription below.

These comparisons highlight how ethnic and class differences facilitate and allow for the reproductive relationships in the biblical and contemporary contexts. Combining this with the arguments above, regarding how those reproductive relationships facilitate and allow for a shift from non-normativity to normativity, we can see how those shifts are dependent on the ethnic and class inequalities. That is, both comparands are indeed examples of the third term.

In the case of gay men using Indian surrogacy, the ethnic and class difference of the Indian surrogates enables the men to have genetically-related children, and thereby create a homonormative family. Having genetically-related children is one aspect of the heteronormative family, and gay men's pursuits of such children can be seen as one manifestation of gay inclusion in normativity, akin to the homonationalism that Puar describes or the queer use of transnational adoption that Eng describes. Indian surrogacy shows how queer inclusion in these heteronormative institutions is supported by ethnic and class differences. Moreover, the discourse in which genetic ties are favored over gestational ones helps to hide the role of ethnic difference, in that it allows the gay fathers to disavow the role played by the ethnic other (the surrogate) in the creation of their family.

A similar dynamic is at work in Hagar's story. Similar to how Indian surrogacy allows gay men to participate in normative family structures, Hagar's participation in the breeding arrangement allows Abraham and Sarah to participate in, or at least approximate, normative family structures. Sarah's childlessness meant that Abraham and Sarah were excluded from achieving the ideal family. Hagar's having a child with Abraham allowed the biblical couple to come closer to that ideal, just as gay men come closer to the heteronormative family through the use of surrogates. And, as I argued above, Hagar's status difference is heavily implicated in her participation in the breeding relationship. Thus, Abraham and Sarah's inclusion in normativity takes place, to a large degree, through the operations of a power imbalance.

Redescription: Inclusion in Normativity Constituted by Ethnic and Class Difference

The first redescription enabled by this comparison is that Abraham and Sarah's moves toward normativity are made possible in part through the inequality between their status and that of Hagar. That is, the fact that the arrangement between Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar is indeed similar to queer families' use of Indian surrogates in this particular way, is already a redescription. While I noted in chapter 3 how the arrangement with Hagar can be understood as Abraham's strategy for achieving greater normativity, and while many interpreters have noted the inequalities between Hagar and her owners, the argument in this chapter brings those two aspects together to highlight how one (the strategy of normativity) is dependent on the other (the inequalities).

Moreover, one of the differences between the biblical and contemporary cases further enhances this redescription. Queer use of Indian surrogates fits into the larger context of the complex interrelationship of race, class, and queer inclusion that is described by Eng and Puar. This is different from Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar: there is no scholarship addressing the parallel dynamic in the biblical story. But given the similarity between the biblical example and queer transnational surrogacy, this might be a difference that will begin to play across the gap. We can begin to see how it is not just that Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar are similar to this specific queer situation, but in that similarity we can see that the biblical characters are also related to this broader phenomenon. Taken together, the contemporary queer examples (queer use of Indian surrogates, Eng, Puar, etc.) begin to form a category: queer inclusion into normativity interrelated with inequality in other areas (race, ethnicity, nationality, class, etc.), a category we might call "homoprivilege" as a generalization of Puar's "homonationalism." If we then generalize one step further, we get something like "Queerprivilege" (note the capital Q) which encompasses both the contemporary queer examples of homoprivilege and the biblical example.

One implication of this redescription is the nuance it brings to my previous chapters on Abraham and Sarah's Queerness. Theirs is a specific Queerness, and the fact that I have identified specific similarities between them and contemporary queer people does not mean that they are similar to *all* contemporary queer people. The comparison in this chapter reminds us that one aspect of their Queerness is a desire for normativity and a pursuit of that normativity, even at the (arguable) expense of others who are less privileged, at least on some axes, than themselves. To some—those who critique homonormativity, for example—this desire and pursuit calls into question their Queerness. Insofar as queer (in the contemporary sense) involves an affirmation of non-normativity and a rejection of particular forms of matrimonial and reproductive normativity, the comparison in this chapter would suggest that Abraham and Sarah are more "Homonormative" (with a capital H) than Queer. But this dissertation assumes a more inclusive sense of queer (and therefore also of Queer), one that includes not only those who reject marriage, biological reproduction, and family structures modeled on the heteronormative nuclear family, but also those who choose to participate in such institutions and family forms.

Another difference, mentioned above, is the specific way that ethnicity operates in the two cases. Recall that, for Indian surrogates, their ethnic otherness is part of their appeal. That is, they are desired as surrogates precisely because they are ethnically different from the intended parents. In contrast, Hagar' ethnic difference contributed to her slavery, and thereby to the reproductive arrangement. Again, let us consider what happens to this difference in light of the similarities. Might the more direct role played by the surrogates' ethnicity prompt us to look again at the way ethnicity functions in Hagar's story, especially with respect to the dynamics of normativity described in the comparison? It turns out that Hagar's ethnicity does seems to be closely related to the normativity of Abraham's heirship strategies.

It appears, based on the contexts in which Hagar's Egyptian-ness is either mentioned or omitted, that her ethnicity is seen as an obstacle to the normativity of Ishmael as an heir. That is, when the text appears to position Ishmael as heir, Hagar's ethnicity is never mentioned, but as soon as Isaac is meant to displace him, the fact that Hagar is an Egyptian again becomes prominent, apparently because this fact reinforces the normativity of Isaac in relationship to Ishmael. In other words, Abraham's attempts to normalize his family tend first to elide and then to exploit Hagar's ethnic and class difference.

Consider the textual references to Hagar's Egyptian-ness. During the time when Ishmael appears to be Abraham's heir, the fact that he is the son of an Egyptian slave is never mentioned. When Ishmael is born, Hagar is called by her name, and there is no reference to her ethnicity or status as a slave (Gen 16:15). When Abraham learns that Sarah is to have a son, he is concerned with Ishmael's fate (Gen 17:18). Again, there is no reference to ethnic or class differences. Later, when Abraham circumcises the men of his household, Ishmael's status as Abraham's son is contrasted with that of Abraham's slaves.

> Then Abraham took his son Ishmael and all the slaves born in his house or bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham's house, and he circumcised the flesh of their foreskins that very day, just as God had said to him.… That very day Abraham and his son were circumcised, and all the men of his house, slaves born in the house and those bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him. (Gen 17:23, 26–27)

The text emphasizes that Ishmael is Abraham's son, distancing him from the slaves in Abraham's household, and eliding the role that ethnic and class differences played in his sonship.

In contrast, once Isaac (the ideal son) is born and displaces Ishmael, this displacement exploits the ethnic and class differences that had been elided in order to situate Ishmael as the heir. When Sarah asks Abraham to cast out Hagar and Ishmael, Ishmael's name disappears and is replaced with references to Hagar's ethnicity and status as a slave.

> But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. So she said to Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac." The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. But God said to Abraham, "Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you. As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring." (Gen 21:9–13)

This moment highlights the way that the use of a legitimate alternative coincides with an erasure of ethnicity and class because it is precisely at the moment when the legitimate alternative is no longer needed that ethnicity and class are again highlighted. This is particularly the case when the text is presenting the perspective of Sarah and YHWH, who are advocating for Isaac's status as heir. Both refer to Ishmael as the "son of the slave woman." The narrator participates in this perspective as well, referring to "Hagar the son of the Egyptian." Only Abraham, not ready to give up on Ishmael's normativity, continues to emphasize his status as "his son." Even this changes once the final decision has been made, and when Hagar and Ishmael leave, Ishmael is referred to as "the child" (v. 14). In order for the legitimate alternative to best approximate the norm, its dependence on ethnicity and class must be concealed. When that alternative is no longer needed, and the text instead wants to emphasize the difference between the alternative and the norm, those ethnic and class distinctions once again become prominent.

These observations demonstrate that Hagar's ethnicity does play an important role in relationship to Abraham's (and to a lesser degree Sarah's) strategies of normativity. With respect to Ishmael, that role is a negative one. It appears that, before Isaac's birth, the text omits Hagar's ethnicity because it would have been seen as an obstacle to Ishmael's normativity. But when Isaac is born and displaces Ishmael, Hagar's ethnicity supports this displacement and therefore enables Abraham's further participation in normativity through the displacement of a secondary bio-son with a prime bio-son. Notice how this demonstrates that not only does Hagar's ethnicity support Abraham's normativity in that it enables the arrangement whereby Hagar gives Abraham a biological son, but it continues to support his normativity even in the displacement of that biological son with another. Moreover, not only Hagar's but also Ishmael's ethnic difference allows for Abraham's even greater participation in normativity, in that it contributes to Ishmael's displacement and the ultimate heirship of the prime bio-son. Finally, note that these redescriptions were motivated by the interplay of similarities and differences in the relationship between ethnicity inequalities and normativity in the two comparands.[399]

[399] There is another possible redescription that could result from this comparison: a renewed emphasis on the legitimacy of the Indian surrogates and their class and ethic difference. While I have not focused and elaborated on all of the necessary details, this redescription results from contrasting the legitimacy of Ishmael (chapter 3) with the non-normativity of the Indian surrogates from the perspective of the gay men (and others) who use their services in an effort to have a "biologically pure" child. The similarities lead us to reconsider this difference and to therefore question any sense of "deviance" associated with surrogates' ethnic or class difference.

Conclusion

No interpretation of Abraham and Sarah would be complete if it did not take into account, at least to some degree, Hagar's role in the narrative. Similarly, race and ethnicity are often critical categories in queer lives. My comparison between the arrangement with Hagar and transnational gestational surrogacy in this chapter barely scratches the surface of both of these topics. It suggests that further queer analysis of Hagar may be fruitful, and reminds us to attend further to the intersections of queerness with other identity categories.

The argument in this chapter combines with that of chapter 3, on legitimate alternatives, to complicate any definition of Queerness based on non-normativity, because it highlights the ways in which Queerness partakes in normativity. In chapter 3 I showed how Queer institutions and strategies combined normativity and non-normativity, while in this chapter I argued that normativity in one category is used to leverage increased normativity in another. While some might dispute my account arguing that such participation in or desire for normativity indicates that there is actually no queerness involved (those who argue that same-sex couples who marry, have children, and live in the suburbs are not queer), I suspect that most, if not all queer lives participate in similar combinations of normativity and non-normativity.

This comparison will contribute to the rectification of queer into Queer that I complete in chapter 7. Specifically, this comparison shows that Queerness includes the use or exploitation of class, ethnic, or other privilege by some Queer people in order to allow their greater participation in normativity. The cross-cultural relevance of this aspect of Queerness is one of the more surprising results of the research which led to this dissertation. While I expected when I began my research that various forms of familial deviance and normativity would be similar across cultures, I was surprised to find that the intersections of familial normativity with other kinds of difference that have been identified in contemporary queer life would also participate in broader patterns.

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

This dissertation uses Jonathan Z. Smith's comparative method to argue that Abraham and Sarah are Queer. This conclusion is based on a comparison between the narratives of Abraham and Sarah and accounts of contemporary queer people and their families. Of Smith's four steps, the first two—descriptions of the comparands and their comparison (addressing both similarities and differences with respect to a third term of which the comparands are both examples)—can be found in chapters 2–6. The primary task of this concluding chapter is to complete the final two steps: redescription of the comparands (with a focus on the biblical text) and the rectification of a category. Recall that the category that requires rectification is the third term of the comparison, in this case "queer." This means that both comparands are examples of queerness—but my rectification will be an adjustment which generalizes contemporary queerness to a broader category, Queerness. This capitalized "Queer," I argue, is useful for comparing varieties of normativities and deviances across cultures. Contemporary queer families are particular instances of Queerness, as are Abraham and Sarah. If it is a useful category, as I suspect, others will be able to find other examples in other cultures. In addition, some people or phenomena that have previously been described as simply queer might be profitably redescribed as Queer to bring more precision and attention to differences across multiple instances of Queerness.

For the most part, the redescriptions took place in chapter-level comparisons. However, the final redescription, that Abraham and Sarah are Queer, requires the rectification of queer into Queer. Moreover, this redescription will follow immediately from that shift to Queerness, because the definition of Queerness will be derived directly from the chapter-level comparisons. Because these comparisons all account for Abraham and Sarah's narrative, Abraham and Sarah's inclusion in the category of Queerness will be built in.

This process is both less complex and less circular than it appears. Yes, the general category "Queer" is custom-built so that Abraham and Sarah will be included. But this does not mean that Queer is self-identical to Abraham and Sarah. Rather, Queer captures the complex set of similarities to and differences from contemporary queerness that I have identified throughout this dissertation. To say that Abraham and Sarah are Queer is to say that they share very specific characteristics with contemporary queer families, but that they are different enough from those families that a new, more inclusive term seems warranted.

In short, the characteristics of Queerness that I have identified through my comparisons are the following. (1) Queerness often involves non-normative relationships. The non-normativity of those relationships can lead to negative social consequences including stigmatization, economic losses, threats of violence, and actual violence. Because people seek to avoid these unwanted outcomes, they often hide or disguise the non-normative relationships or the non-normativity of the relationships. This can be summarized as "Queers often pass." (2) Queerness can be seen in deviations from familial norms. That is, non-normative families suggest that Queerness may be involved. More specifically, Queerness involves complex combinations of normativity and deviance, including the specific combination that can be called a "legitimate alternative to a (familial) norm." The parentheses indicate that, while this dissertation illustrated this dimension of Queerness with respect to familial norms, it is likely that Queerness can include other types of legitimate alternatives to norms. (3) Resistance to norms of reproduction constitutes evidence of Queerness. (4) Queerness is often represented as inverted tragedy. Finally, (5) Queer people with ethnic and/or class privilege can sometimes use that privilege to achieve greater inclusion into normativity. This involves the participation and/or exploitation of people on the underside of ethnic and class difference. These five statements, taken together, comprise my claim. "Abraham and Sarah are Queer" means that these five characteristics apply to both Abraham and Sarah and to contemporary queer families.

Of course, this is not a complete description of Queerness, but merely those aspects of Queerness that can be identified in the Abraham and Sarah narratives. Undoubtedly there are many other characteristics that should be included under the category of Queer. My argument is that these characteristics are sufficient to justify Abraham and Sarah's inclusion in the category. Moreover, I propose these characteristics as a starting point for further elaboration and definition of Queer as a tool for cross-cultural reflection on Queerness.

Summaries of Supporting Redescriptions

In addition to supporting this conclusion that Abraham and Sarah are Queer, the individual chapters each contributed specific re-interpretations of aspects of Abraham and Sarah's narrative. In chapter 2 I offered a new interpretation for Abraham and Sarah's decision to pass as siblings rather than spouses. Refuting the poorly supported argument that Abraham feared he would be killed so that someone could steal Sarah as a wife, I argued that Abraham's fear of being killed was related to something non-normative about his marriage. Possibilities for that non-normativity include incest and childlessness. Recall that this argument, that Abraham and Sarah's passing was related to non-normativity in their relationship, both supports and is supported by the larger thesis that Abraham and Sarah are Queer. Now that all the evidence is on the table, this comment can be fully appreciated and evaluated. Chapters 3–6 provide additional evidence for Abraham and Sarah's non-normativity. This additional evidence also supports the argument that the passing in the wife-sister stories was related to non-normativity.

In chapter 3 I noted the tendency for biblical scholars to emphasize the legitimacy of Abraham's heirship strategy, thereby failing to portray the non-normativity of his situation and his options. I corrected this by introducing the concept of a "legitimate alternative," which I argue describes the combination of normativity and deviance involved both with queer couplehood institutions and with Abraham's heirship strategies. One result of highlighting the normative and deviant dimensions of Abraham's strategies was to open the possibility that Abraham's advocacy for Ishmael indicates resistance to cultural and/or divine norms.

Chapter 4 challenged the common interpretation of the word עקרה in terms of an inability to have children, arguing instead that it simply means "childless." This interpretation, based on an analysis of all the biblical attestations of the word, allows new possibilities for filling in the textual gap about why Sarah is childless; in particular, she might have chosen to be childless. I noted how this interpretation is consistent with the text, because in contrast with our evidence about other childless women, there is no evidence that Sarah wanted children. All the passages which are used to demonstrate her desire for children can be interpreted otherwise.

Chapter 5 builds on the interpretation of chapter 4, describing the implications of Sarah's chosen childlessness for the interpretation of Isaac's conception and birth. I offer two competing interpretations. (1) We can read Isaac's birth and conception as YHWH's imposition of straightness upon Sarah and against her will. (2) Alternatively, Sarah welcomes the birth of Isaac. In either case, I identify the tragic dimension in what is usually interpreted as a joyous fulfillment of Sarah's desire. In one case, YHWH's happy ending is a tragedy for Sarah, whose desires are ignored and whose body is used for others' ends; in the other, Sarah's happy ending is a tragedy for Queer readers, in that it represents yet another example of an influential representation of Queer life in which happiness for Queer people comes only when they are willing to assimilate into familial normativity. Which interpretation we use will depend on how we choose to fill the gaps in the accounts of Sarah's laughter.

I do not offer a new interpretation in chapter 6 so much as I highlight a particular dynamic in the interactions between Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar. While interpreters have long demonstrated the importance of class and ethnic inequalities in their relationships, I show how these inequalities are related to normativity and deviance: Abraham and Sarah take advantage of their relative ethnic and class difference to pursue greater normativity. This reveals the intersections between ethnicity, class, and the particular species of familial Queerness that Abraham and Sarah inhabit. As with my argument about passing in chapter 2, my insights about intersections of differences in chapter 6 both support and are supported by my other arguments about Abraham and Sarah's Queerness. The more clearly we see Abraham and Sarah's Queerness, the more easily we can see how their arrangement with Hagar seeks to mitigate some of their non-normativity. Moreover, connecting this dynamic with queer examples, such as queer couples' use of Indian gestational surrogates, reinforces Abraham and Sarah's Queerness.

Final Redescriptions

As I near conclusion, I repeat a redescription that my comparison encourages which recurs throughout this dissertation. In several chapters, I argued that comparing Abraham and Sarah to contemporary queers helps us to judge each in light of the other. Specifically, we can see more clearly Abraham and Sarah's participation in, failure to achieve, and resistance to norms. The appearance of Queerness that results destabilizes the history of interpretation in which Abraham and Sarah are either rendered completely normative (by arguing that their actions are normative for their context) or else they are judged as ethical failures (usually with reference to contemporary ethical standards). More importantly, this comparison helps us see that Queerness has a foundational place in biblical literature, and therefore in the communities which value that literature. It gives new meaning to Abraham and Sarah's roles as patriarch and matriarch.

Conversely, the comparison encourages us to bring some of our esteem for Abraham and Sarah to bear on contemporary queer people, their families, and their communities. While commentators have long recognized Abraham and Sarah's imperfections, the tendency is to forgive them their faults, recognizing the difficulties of their situation. We can easily recognize Abraham and Sarah's humanity, and we can understand their choices as reasonable strategies and responses to their context. My comparison suggests that readers of the Bible might seek similar understanding and recognition of queer lives and queer humanity.

The comparison also allows for a further redescription of queerness. Situating contemporary forms of queerness in the context of a more general category helps us to see those forms from a different perspective. Rather than simply being an idiosyncratic system of organizing sexuality unique to the modern world (which it is), queerness also reflects larger, more common patterns of deviance and normativity, particularly in families, that transcend boundaries of time and place. This is the essential insight of the similarities among different forms of Queerness. The essential insight of the differences is the de-naturalization of our modern ideologies of sexuality. The different forms of Queerness help us see how our own form might be different: how we might approach and respond differently to the deviances and normativities of queerness. In too many ways, the Bible is a poor guide for dealing with human differences. But my comparisons suggest that there are elements (at least) of Abraham and Sarah's narratives that have something to teach us about how to value deviance.

Queerer and Queerer

Of course, the comparisons in this dissertation do not exhaust the possibilities of Queerness in these narratives or of comparisons to contemporary queer life. The structure imposed by my comparative method and the practical limits of a dissertation necessitated the omission of several additional comparisons and observations, which I list here: (1) the arrangement between Sarah, Abraham, and Hagar, compared with queer co-parenting; (2) Hagar's expulsion, compared with homeless queer youth; (3) Abraham and Sarah's privilege and Hagar's servile status, compared with Goltz's observation that popular representations of gay men use racial, class, and gender privilege to help straight audiences identify with gay characters; (4) a deeper comparison of Abraham's wandering (along with many other biblical wanderings) with queer deviations and disorientations; (5) a possibly midrashic extension of my suggestion, in chapter 5, that Sarah chose to be childless because she was avoiding sex with Abraham, including implications for her time in Pharaoh's and Abimelech's households and a comparison with queer couples who wish that they could have a biological child with each other; (6) the delay in Abraham and Sarah's childbearing, and Isaac's conception and birth taking place at a special appointed time, with queer temporal deviations, including delays and reversals in the heteronormative timeline; and (7) additional interpretations based on Edelman's analysis of the Figure of the Child and its queer opposition, including YHWH's occasional opposition to fertility, such as in Pharaoh's and Abimelech's households, and the binding of Isaac in Gen 22.

The Queerness of Abraham and Sarah also has implications that transcend their narratives. As many scholars have noted, the promises to Abraham are a central theme not only of Genesis but of the Pentateuch and, arguably, large sections of the Hebrew Bible.[400] If, as I have argued, there is Queerness at the heart of the promise (if only because its initial recipient is Queer), surely that Queerness impacts the ongoing story of that promise and its (semi-)fulfillment in later chapters and books. Tracing the ways that Abraham and Sarah's Queerness might inflect these later biblical materials, insofar as they are related to the promises to Abraham, is a natural extension of this dissertation.

In addition, there may be other texts in the Hebrew Bible that would benefit from reinterpretations inspired by comparisons with queer families. Some of these reinterpretations have already been suggested, but even in these cases it would be useful to reframe the interpretations as comparisons in an effort to build up the catalog of cross-cultural Queerness. Within the patriarchal narratives, consider comparing Abimelech's witnessing of Isaac and Rebekah's sexual play with public queer sex, including its political aspects, or revisiting the comparisons between Jacob and self-identified sissies, or between Joseph and "flamboyant queens."[401] Looking farther afield, some other texts that might be profitably applied to contemporary queerness, or in which a more careful

[400] Claus Westermann, *The Promises to the Fathers: Studies on the Patriarchal Narratives*, trans. David E. Green (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980); David J. A. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1978);

[401] Pat Califa, "Public Sex," in *Public Sex: The Culture of Radical Sex,* 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Cleis, 2000), 14–27; Carden, "Genesis/Bereshit," 47, 52–54.

comparative method might bolster comparisons that have already been made, include the language of crookedness and perversity that pervades biblical texts, especially Proverbs and the Psalms, the female figures in Prov 1–8, and the Song of Songs. There is no reason to limit the texts, however: comparison between any text and queerness is likely to help the reader identify the dynamics of normativity and deviance that might be at work in the text, even if it does not result in a shared "Queerness."

The true potential of Queerness, however, transcends biblical interpretation. The category of Queer is available to aid in the investigation of any culture or time period. Its use can allow scholars to deepen their understanding of how queerness relates to phenomena in cultures in which "queerness" is not endemic. Moreover, Queerness provides a language for understanding the complicated dynamics of normativity and deviance in any culture, and specifically for identifying and highlighting those people, situations, or actions that are more deviant than they first appear (or vice versa). Moreover, the use of a comparative Queerness can help the scholar to imagine a variety of perspectives on whatever normativity or deviance they identify. Queer activists and scholars remind us that there are critics of normativity and lovers of deviance today; thinking Queerly reminds us to allow for such possibilities in other cultures, as well, and not to assume that every person participated equally in the dominant regimes of normativity.

The Scholar's Purpose

In conclusion, I return to Jonathan Z. Smith, and his insistence that comparison serves the scholar's purposes. While the most direct purpose for the comparisons in this dissertation is the redescription of Abraham and Sarah in order to highlight the familial deviance that saturates their lives, this project contributes to other purposes, as well: to help people read the Bible differently, to reframe the relationship between the Bible and queerness, and ultimately to support queer political interests.

My interest in biblical interpretation was sparked by, and continues to be sustained by, the vast differences between what the Bible says and what most people think it says. Most people's understanding of the Hebrew Bible consists of gap-filling, and most readers do not distinguish between the text itself and the gap-filling explanations which they have inherited as a necessary means for making sense of the Bible. All too often, this generalization includes academic interpreters, as I have argued throughout this dissertation. In my experience, the Bible is far richer with its gaps open then it is with them pre-filled. Thus, one of the larger purposes of this dissertation is to help readers experience the openness and possibility that the Bible allows and encourages, if only one can remove the interpretations which have not only filled gaps, but created the illusion that there were not gaps in the first place.[402] This dissertation contributes one more example of what such a gap-opening interpretation might look like.[403]

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[402] In other words, like heteronormativity these interpretations have become part of an ideology of the Bible which creates its own sense of given-ness, naturalness, and inevitability.

[403] Other scholarship that has had this effect on my understanding of the Bible includes Mark Brummitt, "Of Secretaries, Secrets, and Scrolls: Jeremiah 36 and the Irritating Word of God," in *Derrida's Bible (Reading a Page of Scripture with a Little Help from Derrida)*, ed. Yvonne Sherwood (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004); Yvonne Sherwood, *The Prostitute and the Prophet: Reading Hosea in the Late Twentieth Century* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996); Trible, *Texts of Terror*; Joseph A. Marchal, "Bodies Bound for Circumcision and Baptism: An Intersex Critique and the Interpretation of Galatians," *Theology and Sexuality* 16 (2010): 163–82; and Mieke Bal's trilogy: *Lethal Love* (Bloomington: Indiana

In addition to inspiring people to read the Bible differently in general, I also want to change the perceived relationship between the Bible and queerness. The dominant narrative in our society is that the two are opposed. Guided by the relatively new field of queer biblical studies, to which this dissertation contributes, I strongly dispute and aim to disrupt this narrative. Not only are the few passages which are used to condemn homosexuality grossly misunderstood, many aspects of the Bible can be used for reflection on or advocacy for queer people and politics. While there is little or no queerness in the Bible, there is plenty of Queerness, and therefore the Bible is a rich queer resource. The Queerness in Abraham and Sarah's narrative is one example of how the Bible is compatible with and useful for a perspective which affirms queer identities and desires. Ultimately, this dissertation strives toward and imagines this redescription of the Bible, along with a corresponding reformulation of the impact of the Bible on queer lives.

University Press, 1987); *Murder and Difference* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988); and *Death and Dissymmetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

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