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THE WIFE/SISTER INCIDENTS OF GENESIS: ORAL VARIANTS?

T.D. Alexander

The fact that the book of Genesis contains three episodes in which a patriarch pretends that his wife is his sister is quite remarkable. Not surprisingly, these narratives have attracted considerable attention. To explain this unusual phenomenon, it is frequently suggested that the three accounts are variant traditions which arose from one original story, or possibly two. On the basis of this assumption, attempts have been made (a) to determine the form of the original tradition(s), and (b) to explain their subsequent development.

In theory it is possible to explain the relationship between the accounts as follows:¹

(i) the three accounts are completely independent:

A B C

(ii) two of the accounts are independent, and the third is dependent upon one of the others:

A B	A B	B C	B C	C A	C A
C	C	A	A	B	B

(iii) two of the accounts are independent, and the third is dependent upon both of the others:

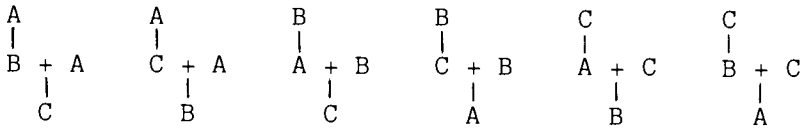
A B	B C	A C
\ /	\ /	\ /
C	A	B

(iv) one account is original, and the others are developments of it:

A	A	B	B	C	C
B	C	A	C	A	B
C	B	C	A	B	A

(v) one account is original, another is dependent upon

it, and the third is dependent upon both of these earlier accounts:



Since it is impractical to consider in detail all of these possibilities we shall adopt the following procedure. If, as is widely held, all three accounts are variants of one tradition, it ought to be possible to demonstrate this for any two of the episodes. We shall, therefore, compare initially 12:10-13:1 and 26:1-13. Apart from being the most dissimilar, both narratives are usually ascribed to the Yahwistic source on the basis of style and vocabulary. The fact that duplicate accounts of the same incident should be preserved in one source is unusual, and merits special attention.

Before comparing the two accounts one problem must be resolved. This concerns the extent of the pericopes. Most scholars take 12:10-20 as the basic Abraham/Sarah account.² However, there are those who wish to extend the final form of the narrative to include 13:1,³ and Cassuto and Weimar maintain that, in its present form, the story concludes in 13:4.⁴ Of these options it is probably best to regard the narrative as extending from 12:10-13:1. The return of Abraham to the Negeb provides a fitting conclusion to the account of his journey into Egypt.

As regards chap. 26, Delitzsch, Dillmann, Holzinger, Skinner, Maly, von Rad, and Zimmerli base their comparison with 12:10-13:1 on vv 7-11.⁵ Driver, Gunkel, König and Speiser also include v 6.⁶ Westermann uses for his comparison vv 1-11,⁷ and Koch vv 1-13.⁸ Procksch, Hooke and Schmitt include all the material in 26:1-14.⁹ Culley, however, remains undecided as to whether v 14 should be included along with vv 1-13.¹⁰ With such a variety of possibilities it is apparent that no consensus exists regarding how much of chap. 26 should

be compared with 12:10-13:1.

In its present form Gen 26:1 commences with an 'initial disjunctive clause'. However, it is no easy task to determine where the subsequent narrative ends. To interrupt the account before v 25 is difficult, and it is even possible to argue that the narrative only comes to a natural break in v 33. However, for our present purpose we shall regard the first section of the chapter as extending to v 13.

To assist us in our comparison of 12:10-13:1 and 26:1-13 we shall examine the two episodes under the headings (1) motif, (2) narrative details and (3) structure.

1. Motif

Petersen suggests that the wife-sister motif is comprised of the following features:¹¹

- (1) travel to a place in which the husband and wife are unknown (if such travel were not present, the ruse could not be undertaken);
- (2) a claim that the man's wife is his sister;
- (3) discovery of the ruse;
- (4) resolution of the situation created by the false identity.

This definition of the wife/sister motif is helpful. However, one feature ought to be added to those suggested by Petersen. The second element should be expanded to include the reason why the husband acts as he does: he claims that his wife is his sister, because he fears that he will be killed on her account. Without this additional element there is no rationale for the deception. The fear of death is the motivating factor behind the ruse. Incorporating this element into Petersen's proposal we obtain the following definition of the wife/sister motif:

1. Travel to a place in which the husband and wife are unknown (if such travel were not present, the ruse could not be undertaken).
2. A claim that the man's wife is his sister because

he fears being killed on account of her.

3. Discovery of the ruse.

4. Resolution of the situation created by the false identity.

This motif is clearly present in each of the accounts in 12:1-13:1 and 26:1-13.

2. Narrative Details

Although the wife/sister episodes in chaps. 12 and 26 employ the same motif, they differ considerably regarding the actual details of the incidents. There are at least eight differences worthy of note.

(1) The cast of characters varies in the two accounts. In 12:10-13:1 the main participants are Abram (Abraham), Sarai (Sarah), Pharaoh and the princes of Pharaoh. In 26:1-13 we encounter Isaac, Rebekah, Abimelech and the men of Gerar.

(2) The events occur in different locations. A famine in Canaan causes Abraham to go down to Egypt (12:1). When Isaac confronts a similar situation, he journeys to Gerar (26:1). There Yahweh appears to him and commands him to remain in Gerar rather than continue on into Egypt (26:2-6). Significantly, 26:1 refers back to the famine mentioned in 12:10: "Now there was a famine in the land, besides the former famine that was in the days of Abraham".

(3) The narratives differ in the way the reader learns of the ruse. In chap. 12 the deception is revealed through Abraham's speech to Sarah prior to their entry into Egypt (12:11-13). Fearing death on her account, Abraham asks Sarah to tell the Egyptians that she is his sister. In chap. 26 we learn of the deception in Isaac's reply to an inquiry by the men of Gerar concerning Rebekah (26:6-7). The rationale for Isaac's response is provided by the narrator, who reveals to us Isaac's thoughts on the matter (26:7). Rebekah, unlike Sarah, instigates the deception.

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(4) After the ruse has been revealed to the reader the narratives diverge considerably. Whereas Sarah is taken away from Abraham, Rebekah remains with Isaac. Here we encounter a major difference between the two incidents. The Egyptians observe Sarah's beauty, and consequently she is taken to Pharaoh's house (12:14-16). Ironically, Abraham prospers on account of Sarah's departure. Rebekah, however, never leaves Isaac. They remain together as husband and wife, although to others they appear as brother and sister.

(5) The deceptions are discovered by different means. In chap. 12 Yahweh sends plagues upon Pharaoh's household (12:17). As a result of this divine intervention Pharaoh realizes his mistake and summons Abraham to appear before him. In chap. 26 there is no divine intervention. Abimelech, by chance, observes Isaac fondling Rebekah, and so uncovers the ruse. Summoning Isaac, he demands an explanation.

(6) The interviews between the respective rulers and patriarchs proceed differently. In chap. 12 only Pharaoh is recorded as speaking. The questions directed at Abraham receive no reply. Pharaoh makes it plain that he, and he alone, has been the victim of the ruse. Then, without giving Abraham an opportunity to respond, he commands that the couple be expelled from Egypt (12:20). Abimelech, on the other hand, makes an initial inquiry of Isaac and receives a reply. He then expresses his horror at Isaac's action and highlights the terrible consequences which might have befallen the whole nation. Abimelech, unlike Pharaoh, is primarily concerned with the potential danger of the situation. He proceeds to warn his subjects, providing protection for Isaac and Rebekah against bodily and sexual assault respectively.

(7) The incidents are dissimilar in their conclusions. Pharaoh's speech leads to the swift departure of Abraham and Sarah from Egypt (12:20-13:1). Isaac, however, remains in Gerar under the protection of

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Abimelech. There Yahweh blesses him with an abundant harvest, and he prospers remarkably. Whereas Abraham grows rich as a direct consequence of pretending that Sarah is his wife (12:16), Isaac's prosperity is only very indirectly related to the wife/sister deception.

(8) The episodes may be distinguished by the feature of 'completeness'. The events in chap. 12 leave many questions unanswered. Did Abraham actually allow Pharaoh to take Sarah without objecting? Did Pharaoh commit adultery with Sarah? How did Pharaoh discover that the plagues were due to his abduction of Sarah? Moreover, not only do such questions remain unanswered, but there is no description of how the characters were affected emotionally. In contrast, the chap. 26 account leaves few, if any, questions to be answered. Also, it portrays the feelings of the characters in greater detail. For this reason it is more complete.

This brief comparison of the accounts reveals a number of substantial differences between the two plots. Although both accounts use the same motif, they differ significantly in their narrative details.

3. Structure

Not only are the episodes in chaps. 12 and 26 dissimilar concerning their narrative details, but they also exhibit different structures. Weimar outlines the structure of 12:10-20 as follows:¹²

A	<u>Exposition</u>	12,10	Action (<u>Abraham</u>)
B	1. Scene	12,11-13	<u>Speech of Abraham</u> (addressing Sarai)
C	2. Scene	12,14-16a	Action (Egyptians/courtiers of Pharaoh/Pharaoh)
B'	3. Scene	12,17-19	<u>Speech of Pharaoh</u> (addressing Abraham)
A'	<u>Conclusion</u>	12,20	Action (Pharaoh)

The account is constructed around the monologues of

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Abraham (vv 11-13) and Pharaoh (vv 18-19). The symmetry of the structure is improved by the inclusion of 13:1 which reverses Abraham's action in 12:10. Licht suggests that v 15 forms a tricolon "describing the pivotal fact of the story":¹³

"So they saw her, the courtiers of Pharaoh
and they praised her to Pharaoh

and the woman was taken to the house of Pharaoh".

He also suggests that on either side of this tricolon the phrases 'my sister' (vv 13,19) and 'go well' (vv 13,16) are repeated in reverse order to form a "carefully balanced composition".

As regards 26:1-13 Weimar suggests the following structure:¹⁴

Exposition (26,1a**x**b)

I. Scene (26,2a**x**.3a.6): Jahweh-Isaac

1. Appearance speech of Jahweh (26,2a**x**,3a)
2. Fulfilment notice (Isaac) (26,6)

II. Scene (26,7-9,11): Gerarites-Abimelek-Isaac

1. Report-Speech-Report (26,7-8)
2. Dialogue Abimelek-Isaac + Edict of Abimelek (26,9+11)

III. Scene (26,12-13): Isaac

1. Report (Blessing of Jahweh) (26,12)
2. Concluding Notice (26,13)

Although both accounts contain three scenes, they are in no way comparable. Furthermore, it is apparent that 12:10-13:1 has a much more clearly defined structure based upon a concentric pattern.

Van Seters offers an alternative way of viewing the structure of 12:10-20. He suggests the the narrative follows a 'relatively simple and straightforward' structure commonly found in folk literature:¹⁵

a) a situation of need, problem, or crisis

v 10

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- b) a plan to deal with the problem vv 11-13
- c) execution of the plan with some complication vv 14-16
- d) an unexpected outside intervention v 17a
- e) fortunate or unfortunate consequences vv 17b-20

This structure, however, cannot be applied to 26:1-13. A difficulty arises with part (d) 'an unexpected outside intervention'. In 12:17a Yahweh intervenes by sending plagues on Pharaoh's household. In chap. 26, however, there is no divine intervention. After the introduction of the deception the only unexpected intervention which occurs comes from Abimelech (vv 8-9). Yet it is this very action which complicates the initial plan (cf. part c). Clearly, the account in chap. 26 cannot be made to fit the structure suggested by van Seters for 12:10-13:1. Thus, whether one adopts the approach of Weimar or van Seters, it is apparent that 12:10-13:1 and 26:1-13 exhibit quite different structures.

Our comparison of the wife/sister incidents in chaps. 12 and 26 suggests that although the episodes employ the same motif, they are very dissimilar when one considers such features as narrative details and structure. If both stories are variant accounts of the same event, it is obvious that in the process of transmission very substantial alterations have been made, either to one or both of the accounts. Alternatively, it is equally possible that we have here reports of two quite separate events.¹⁶ At present the weight of evidence would tend to favour this latter possibility, especially when one recalls that both episodes are normally assigned to the Yahwistic source.

Having compared 12:10-13:1 and 26:1-13, let us now introduce the third wife/sister story, 20:1-18, into our discussion. How does this episode relate to those we have already considered?

1. Motif

The account of Abraham's sojourn in Gerar (20:1-18) contains all the elements of the wife/sister motif as outlined above. Abraham's move to the region of Gerar causes him to pretend that Sarah is his sister (vv 1-2a). When Abimelech takes her (v 2b), God intervenes and reveals the deception (vv 3-7). Finally, Abimelech restores Sarah to Abraham along with various gifts (vv 9-16).

2. Narrative Details

The wife/sister account in chap. 20 differs in various ways from those found in chaps. 12 and 26.

(1) The cast of chap. 20 brings together characters from both 12:10-13:1 and 26:1-13; Abraham and Sarah encounter Abimelech king of Gerar. Yet, whereas the other episodes refer to God as Yahweh, chap. 20, apart from v 18, uses the designation Elohim.

(2) The setting in chap. 20 is Gerar. This locale obviously excludes the possibility of Pharaoh being the foreign ruler. Significantly, chap. 20 differs from 12:10-13:1 and 26:1-13 regarding the motive for the patriarch's journey to Gerar. Famine caused Abraham and Isaac to move to alien regions in chaps. 12 and 26 respectively. In chap. 20, however, there is no mention of a famine. Indeed no explanation is offered for Abraham's journey to Gerar.

(3) The way in which the deception is introduced to the reader in chap. 20 differs considerably from that found in the other accounts. In half a verse we are informed: 'Abraham said of Sarah his wife, "She is my sister"' (v 2a). The very minimum of detail is given. At this stage no reason is provided for Abraham's action; only subsequently is an explanation given (vv 11-13). In chaps. 12 and 26, however, the rationale for the deception comes towards the beginning of the accounts (12:11-13; 26:6-7). Also, Sarah's beauty is not

mentioned directly in chap. 20. Yet the beauty of the patriarch's wife plays a prominent role in the other accounts (cf. 12:11,15; 26:7).

(4) The plot in chap. 20 involves the separation of husband and wife. This makes it resemble more closely 12:10-13:1. No such separation occurs in 26:1-13. The brief description of the deception in v 2a is immediately followed by the statement that Abimelech sent for and took Sarah (v 2b). How he came to know of her is unrecorded; there is no mention of Sarah being praised to Abimelech by others (cf. 12:15). Also, there is no suggestion that Abraham received gifts following Sarah's departure (cf. 12:16). Significantly, what requires six verses in episode A for the progression of the plot (12:11-16) is compressed into one verse (v 2) in chap. 20.

(5) The way in which the ruse is discovered in chap. 20 finds no parallel in the other episodes. God appears to Abimelech in a dream and reveals the full consequences of his actions. In chap. 12 Yahweh sends plagues upon Pharaoh and his household, and in chap. 26 Abimelech observes Isaac fondling Rebekah. Although it is later revealed that God did send a plague upon Abimelech's house (20:17-18), this only becomes relevant towards the end of the account. It is the dream, rather than the plague, which leads to the discovery of the ruse.

The dream, according to Petersen, performs two main functions within the narrative:¹⁷ (a) it comes as a timely intervention preventing actual adultery; (b) it allows the author to introduce the theme of guilt/innocence. The dialogue which constitutes the dream revolves around the issue of Abimelech's innocence; he will not die for taking another man's wife (20:3-7). God acknowledges the truth of this statement, and comments that he actually intervened in order to prevent Abimelech touching Sarah. Here the dream introduces an issue which neither of the other stories considers.

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(6) Abimelech's interview with Abraham is quite dissimilar from the parallels in 12:10-13:1 and 26:1-13. The encounter in 20:9-16 is approximately four times longer than the respective accounts in 12:18-19 and 26:9-10, and as such it provides the fullest explanation as to why Abraham called Sarah his sister. Abraham not only informs Abimelech that this was his usual practice wherever he went, but he also defends his action by indicating that Sarah was indeed his half-sister.¹⁸ Significantly, Abimelech concedes that Abraham is in the right, and he himself in the wrong. He then compensates both Abraham and Sarah. In chap. 12, however, Pharaoh apparently acknowledges no guilt on his own part. Whereas Abimelech offers Abraham the freedom to live where he chooses, Pharaoh expels him from Egypt. In Isaac's encounter with Abimelech (26:9-11) the discussion centres on what might have happened had Abimelech not uncovered the ruse.

Another difference between the accounts concerns the way in which the patriarch gains wealth. In chap. 20 Abraham is enriched when Sarah is returned (v 16). In chap. 12, however, Abraham receives riches when Sarah is taken into Pharaoh's household (v 16). Isaac, on the other hand, blessed by Yahweh, grows wealthy through his own labours as a farmer (26:12-13).

(7) The events in the final verses of chap. 20 are unique to this account. Abraham, as a prophet (cf. v 7), prays to God to heal Abimelech, his wife and female slaves; a divine plague prevents Abimelech's household from bearing children. Abraham's intercession restores things to their former order. In the other incidents the patriarch does not exercise such a mediatorial role.

(8) When compared for 'completeness' chap. 20 offers the fullest explanation of Abraham's motive for declaring that his wife is his sister (20:11-13). Also, the topic of guilt receives greater treatment. Yet, in marked contrast, chap. 20 contains the shortest account of the actual deception and abduction.

From this comparison of the narrative details it appears that chap. 20 differs from the other accounts in a variety of ways. Although some similarities exist, 20:1-18 has quite a number of distinctive features.

3. Structure

As regards the structure of 20:1-18 Weimar proposes the following outline:¹⁹

Exposition (20,1.2): Abraham-Abimelek

- I. Scene (20,3-7): Elohim-Abimelek
 1. Speech of Elohim (in dream) (20,3.4a)
 2. Speech of Abimelek (to Elohim) (20,4b.5)
 3. Speech of Elohim (in dream) (20,6.7)

- II. Scene (20,8.9a.10-12): Abimelek-servants-Abraham
 1. Action (+ Speech) of Abimelek (Servants) (20,8)
 2. Speech(es) of Abimelek (to Abraham) (20,9a.10)
 3. Speech of Abraham (to Abimelek) (20,11.12)

- III. Scene (20,14-18): Abimelek-Abraham-Sarah
 1. Action of Abimelek (Abraham) (20,14)
 2. Speech of Abimelek (to Abraham und Sarah) (20,15.16)
 3. Action (Intercession of Abraham + healing by Elohim) (20,17.18)

Weimar's division of the narrative into three scenes reflects his own supposition that the oldest form of the tradition contained three scenes.²⁰ Yet, as it stands at present, the narrative consists of only two main scenes (vv 3-7; 8-17). The former scene occurs during the night, the latter by day. Whereas the first scene consists of a carefully constructed palistrophe, the second makes use of parallel panels:

Introduction (20:1-2): Abraham - Abimelech

1. Travel to Gerar (v 1)
2. Deception and abduction (v 2)

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Scene I. (20:3-7): God appears to Abimelech in a dream by night

- A v 3 Behold you are a dead man
- B v 3 You have taken a man's wife
- C v 4 Abimelech has not approached her
- D v 4 Abimelech claims to be innocent
- E v 5 In the integrity of my heart
- F v 6 God said to him in a dream
- E' v 6 In the integrity of my heart
- D' v 6 God kept him from sinning
- C' v 6 I did not let you touch her
- B' v 7 Restore the man's wife
- A' v 7 You shall live; if not you shall die

Scene II. (20:8-17a): Abraham appears before Abimelech by day

- A Abimelech reveals his dream to his servants (v 8)
- B Abimelech questions Abraham (v 9)
- C Abimelech again questions Abraham (v 10)
- D Abraham explains his actions (vv 11-13)
- A' Abimelech gives Abraham gifts (v 14)
- B' Abimelech offers Abraham land (v 15)
- C' Abimelech vindicates Sarah (v 16)
- D' Abraham prays for Abimelech (v 17a)

Conclusion (20:17b-18): God - Abimelech

1. God heals Abimelech's household (vv 17b-18)

Although scene I reveals a carefully constructed palistrophe, the structure of scene II is perhaps less obvious. Verses 8-17a comprise eight paragraphs, the initial subject of each of the first four paragraphs being paralleled in the second half of the structure.

When 20:1-18 is considered in the light of van Seters' treatment of 12:10-20, the first three elements of his structure constitute merely two verses out of eighteen (vv 1-2). On the other hand, whereas chap. 12 takes only three verses to record the discovery of the

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ruse and Abraham's subsequent encounter with Pharaoh, the equivalent events in chap. 20 are expanded to fourteen verses (3-16).

From the above discussion it is clear that although all three wife/sister stories employ the same motif, they differ considerably regarding narrative details and structure.

If the wife/sister accounts are duplicate records of the same original event, how does one account for the differences which now exist between them? Koch explains the variations between the separate episodes as the result of oral transmission: "The divergences in the three narratives do not seem to have arisen intentionally, but rather through the course of oral transmission which will probably have taken place in different regions, and perhaps at different times."²¹ He also assumes that, "all three tales about the ancestress of Israel once circulated as independent narratives."²² But is Koch correct in assuming that (a) the divergence between the accounts is unintentional, and (b) the three accounts circulated independently of one another?

When the three episodes are placed side by side it is remarkable that no two narratives expand on the same part of the tradition. This may be illustrated as follows:

	<u>chap. 12</u>	<u>chap. 20</u>	<u>chap. 26</u>
Reason for local	v 10	v 1	vv 1-6a
The deception occurs	vv 11-13	v 2a	vv 6b-7
Abduction of wife	vv 14-16	v 2b	-
Discovery of ruse	v 17	vv 3-7	v 8
Interview with foreign ruler	vv 18-19	vv 8-16	vv 9-10
Final outcome	v 20,13:1	vv 17-18	vv 11-13

This comparison of the accounts suggests that they have been harmonised to prevent any unnecessary

duplication when viewed as part of a larger work. Thus, for example, in chap. 20 the plan of the deception and Sarah's abduction are described in one verse. In chap. 12, however, this part of the account occupies six verses. On the other hand, Abraham's encounter with Abimelech (20:8-16) is recounted in substantially more detail than the equivalent encounter with Pharaoh (12:18-19). That the narratives assumed this form due to oral development alone seems most unlikely. Koch's view that, "the divergence in the three narratives do not seem to have arisen intentionally", must be rejected. If the episodes were true oral variants we would surely observe a greater degree of overlap between them.

Nor is it apparent that all three accounts originally circulated in oral form independently of one another. Thus van Seters argues that the narratives in chaps. 20 and 26 never existed orally. Rather, they are literary compositions based upon the account in 12:10-20.²³

Central to van Seters's approach is the belief that the chap. 12 account represents the oldest form of the wife/sister tradition.²⁴ The structure of 12:10-20, and its self-contained nature, both indicate that the narrative had an oral background.²⁵ As regards 20:1-18, he concludes that it was composed as a literary work dependent on 12:10-20:

Story B is not simply a variant tradition that has slowly evolved somewhat differently from that of story A. It bears no marks of such an oral tradition, either in its basic structure or in its manner of telling. At every point where there is a difference between story A and story B, the latter has given up the folktale point of interest for moral and theological concerns. Finally, story B exhibits a number of "blind motifs," foreshortening, and backward allusions that can only be accounted for by viewing it as directly dependent upon story A.²⁶

This last observation is worth underlining. The brief way in which chap. 20 outlines Abraham's plan (v 2a) and

Abimelech's abduction of Sarah (v 2b) clearly presupposes that the reader is already aware of a similar development. Without prior knowledge of 12:11-15 the events recorded in 20:2 are incomprehensible. Similarly, the comment in 20:13, "at every place to which we come", suggests that the author of this verse was already familiar with an account in which Abraham pretends that Sarah is his sister. As Westermann observes, "Ch. 20 presumes a knowledge of ch. 12."²⁷

The same arguments apply to 26:1-13. Van Seters suggests that the form of the story in chap. 26 does not follow a folktale model.²⁸ Rather story C is a "literary conflation of both the other stories" with the purpose of paralleling the life of Isaac with that of Abraham.²⁹ Westermann also accepts that 26:1-13 presupposes the earlier wife/sister episodes: "Gen 26:1-11 is no more an independent and originally oral narrative that is 20:1-18. It is a literary imitation of 12:10-20 which at the same time takes up motifs from 20:1-18."³⁰

There are, however, a number of scholars who argue that 26:1-13 reflects the earliest form of the wife/sister narrative.³¹ This view is based on the assumption that story C reflects a more natural, and therefore more original, form of the tradition. It is argued, for example, that the most primitive version of the story lacked any divine intervention. Only as the tradition developed was this element introduced.³² For the same reason, Abimelech and Gerar are taken to be more original than Pharaoh and Egypt. "It is much easier to imagine a story being transferred from a relatively small and insignificant king and country to one that is generally known, such as Egypt and its ruler, than it would be the other way round."³³ Similarly, Isaac is thought to be more original than Abraham.

The general rule in the transmission of the saga is that the least known figure is the original (compare the change from the king of Gerar to the Pharaoh of Egypt). Accordingly Isaac was originally the subject; he was later replaced by Abraham, who for

the Israelites represented their ideal of the god-fearing Israelite.³⁴

These arguments for the priority of 26:1-13 depend upon two important assumptions. First, oral traditions always develop in exactly the same way: the more natural account may be reckoned to be the oldest; the least known figure is the more original. Secondly, the account in chap. 26 circulated orally prior to its inclusion in Genesis. Yet both of these assumptions are highly questionable. It is extremely difficult to verify or falsify general statements about the way in which oral accounts may have developed. Can one assume that, without exception, all oral traditions develop in exactly the same way? Probably not! A more immediate problem, however, is whether or not the account in chap. 26 ever circulated as an independent oral story. Van Seters rejects the oral origin of story C. Furthermore, he and Westermann both accept that 26:1-13 presupposes the other wife/sister episodes. These observations hardly sustain the view that story C is the most primitive account.

On the basis of the preceding discussion we may make three general observations regarding the wife/sister episodes in Genesis. First, apart from having the same basic motif, they diverge considerably regarding narrative details and structure. If the episodes are duplicate accounts of the same event, they must have had a long oral history in order for the stories to have developed such differing features. The existing differences could hardly have arisen over a short period of time. Secondly, the narratives avoid unnecessary repetition of details and expand upon quite different aspects of the wife/sister motif. These differences cannot be explained solely on the basis of oral transmission. The narratives have been shaped to some extent by a literary process. Thirdly, the episodes in chaps. 20 and 26 presuppose that the reader is already familiar with the account in chap. 12. This also points to a process of literary composition in, at least, the later stages of the development of accounts B and C. Clearly these three factors have important implications

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for our understanding of the process by which these accounts were composed and incorporated into the book of Genesis.

Unfortunately, in the past, many scholars have jumped too quickly to the assumption that the wife/sister episodes must all relate to one original incident, and that the differences between them are due to the process of oral transmission. But, as we have demonstrated above, one cannot assume that the present shape of the narratives represents accurately their form during oral transmission. The task of reconstructing the oral and redactional history of these accounts is much more involved than is generally acknowledged.

Notes

1. For convenience we shall refer to the three accounts as A (12:10-13:1), B (20:1-18) and C (26:1-13).
2. A. Dillmann, Genesis (2 vols.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1897) 16-21; E. H. Maly, "Genesis 12,10-20; 20,1-18; 26:7-11 and the Pentateuchal Question," CBQ 18 (1956) 255-62; E. A. Speiser, Genesis (AB; Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1964) 89-94; W. Zimmerli, 1. Mose 12-25: Abraham (Zürich: Theologischer, 1976) 24-29; C. Westermann, Genesis 12-36 (SPCK, 1986) 159-168.
3. H. Gunkel, Genesis (2d ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1910) 168-73; J. Skinner, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis (ICC; 2d ed.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1930) 247-51; K. Koch, The Growth of the Biblical Tradition (London: Black, 1969) 111-32; G. von Rad, Genesis. A Commentary (OTL; revised ed.; London: SCM, 1972) 167-70; D. L. Petersen, "A Thrice-told Tale: Genre, Theme and Motif," BR 18 (1973) 30-43.
4. U. Cassuto, A Commentary on the Book of Genesis (2 vols.; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1964) 2, 334-65; P. Weimar, Untersuchungen zur Redaktionsgeschichte des Pentateuch (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1977)

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5. F. J. Delitzsch, New Commentary on Genesis (2 vols.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1888/89) 2, 139-40; A. Dillmann, Genesis, 204-205; H. Holzinger, Genesis (Leipzig/Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1898) 175-76; Skinner, Genesis, 363-65; Maly, "Genesis 12,10-20; 20,1-18; 26:7-11," 255-62; von Rad, Genesis, 271; Zimmerli, 1. Mose 12-25, 24-29.
6. S. R. Driver, The Book of Genesis (Westminster Commentaries; London: Methuen, 1905) 251; Gunkel, Genesis, 301; E. König, Die Genesis (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1925) 580-82; Speiser, Genesis, 91.
7. Westermann, Genesis 12-36, 424-426.
8. Koch, Growth, 111-32.
9. O. Procksch, Die Genesis (Leipzig: A. Deichertsche, 1924) 155-58; S. H. Hooke, In the Beginning (Clarendon Bible; Oxford: Clarendon, 1947) 95-96; G. Schmitt, "Zu Gen 26:1-14," ZAW 85 (1973) 143-56.
10. R. C. Culley, Studies in the Structure of Hebrew Narrative (Philadelphia/Missoula: Fortress/Scholars, 1976) 33-41.
11. Petersen, "Thrice-told Tale," 35-36.
12. Weimar, Redaktionsgeschichte, 16.
13. J. Licht, Storytelling in the Bible (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1978) 91-92.
14. Weimar, Redaktionsgeschichte, 93.
15. Van Seters, Abraham, 168-69.
16. Speiser (Genesis, 151; cf. Delitzsch, Genesis, 1, 383-84) comments: "The two narratives are...entirely appropriate in a work by an individual author...J knew of two occasions (a,c) when a patriarch thought it necessary to introduce his wife as a sister; there is in them no duplication of principals, locale, or generations."
17. Petersen "Thrice-told Tale," 38-39.
18. I.e., Abraham and Sarah have the same father but different mothers. The response of Abraham to Abimelech raises an interesting problem when viewed in the light of Lev 18:9, which legislates against a man marrying his half-sister. Either the author of Genesis 20 was unaware of this regulation, or he

- preferred to ignore it. M. Noth (A History of Pentateuchal Traditions /Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1965/ 136) attempts to reconcile the two passages: "The prohibition of sexual intercourse with a half-sister (v. 9) does not necessarily include a veto on marriage with a half-sister (cf. Gen. 20.12)." However, G. W. Ramsey (The Quest for the Historical Israel /London: SCM, 1982/ 143, n. 119) suggests that the conflict between Genesis 20 and Leviticus 18 argues for the antiquity of the Genesis tradition.
19. Weimar, Redaktionsgeschichte, 71.
 20. Ibid. 69.
 21. Koch, Growth, 122.
 22. Ibid. 118.
 23. Van Seters, Abraham, 167-83.
 24. This is the view not only of Gunkel (Genesis, 225-26), whom van Seters follows, but also, among others, of Procksch (Genesis, 100), Skinner (Genesis, 264-65), Petersen, "Thrice-told Tale," 30-43) and more recently Westermann (Genesis 12-36, 159-168) and R. Aharoni, "Three Similar Stories in Genesis", Beth Mikra 77 (1979) 213-23.
 25. Cf. van Seters, Abraham, 167-71. To support this view he invokes the "epic laws" of Axel Olrik, "Epische Gesetze der Volksdichtung," Zeitschrift für Deutsches Altertum 51 (1909) 1-12. It is doubtful, however, if these "epic laws" are sufficiently refined in order to distinguish oral and written works; cf. D. M. Gunn, "On Oral Tradition: A Response to John van Seters," Semeia 5 (1976) 159; W. O. Hendricks, "Folklore and the Structural Analysis of Literary Texts," Language and Style 3 1970 86; S. M. Warner, "Primitive Saga Men," VT 29 (1979) 335. It should also be noted that as the first of the wife/sister episodes which the reader encounters in the Genesis, 12:10-13:1 must of necessity be able to stand alone.
 26. Van Seters, Abraham, 175.
 27. Westermann, Genesis 12-36, 318; cf. E. Jacob, Das erste Buch der Tora: Genesis (Berlin: Schocken, 1934)

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547-51; S. McEvenue, "Review of John van Seters, Abraham in History and Tradition", Bib 58 (1977) 575. G. W. Coats (Genesis with an Introduction to Narrative Literature /FOTL 1; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983/ 151) comments, "It (chap. 20) cannot be shunted aside from ch. 12 as a duplicate source or as an independent version."

28. Van Seters, Abraham, 176.
29. Ibid. 183.
30. Westermann, Genesis 12-36, 424; cf. Schmitt, "Zu Gen 26:1-14," 143-55.
31. These include A. Kuenen, An Historio-critical Inquiry into the Origin and Composition of the Hexateuch, (London: Macmillan, 1886) 234-35; J. Wellhausen, Die Composition des Hexateuchs und der Historischen Bücher des Alten Testaments (Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1889) 23; Holzinger, Genesis, 176; Maly, "Genesis 12,10-20; 20:1-18; 26:7-11," 260-61; Noth, Pentateuchal Traditions, 105; R. Kilian, Die vorpriesterlichen Abrahamsüberlieferungen (Bonn: Peter Hanstein, 1966) 213-15; S. Nomoto, "Entstehung und Entwicklung der Erzählung von der Gefährdung der Ahnfrau," Annual of the Japanese Biblical Institute 2 (1976) 3-27; Zimmerli, 1. Mose 12-25, 25; R. Rendtorff, Das Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Problem des Pentateuch (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1977) 31-32; Weimar, Redaktionsgeschichte, 102-107.
32. Cf. Kuenen, Historio-critical Inquiry, 235; Noth, Pentateuchal Traditions, 105; Koch, Growth, 125.
33. Koch, Growth, 125.
34. Ibid. 126.