

Birth of Isaac (Genesis 21)

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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 in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him.*

Genesis 21 begins with the story of the “visiting” by the Lord which I’ve long thought to be a story of divine if not virginal conception. The translation above, *The Lord dealt with Sarah*, is from the New Revised Standard Version. It uses a possible meaning of the Hebrew verb פָּקַד, but the older Revised Standard Version translated more accurately, *The Lord visited Sarah as he had said*. The Hebrew word means “to visit (for good or evil),” and “to pay attention to.” The Septuagint Greek translators used ἐπεσκέψατο, which means “to observe, examine, inspect, visit” (see Wevers (1993), 299; and Liddell-Scott’s *Greek-English Lexicon*) There is very little in the standard commentaries on Genesis on this matter. Among modern commentaries, I note that Fretheim (1994) (page 486) does link 21:1 to Luke 1:28-31 and reads the פָּקַד of Gen 21:1 as expressing creative divine power. He seems to follow the dualistic frame initiated by Philo (see below). The Genesis authors probably used an old legend of divine conception (royal? heroic?) and reframed it with the broader notion of a covenant between the divinity and all the people in mind. By broadening the idea of covenant and extending it to the whole descendance, the exilic or post-exilic authors reshaped the notion of people and gave it a dignity and depth not dependent on wealth, numbers, or military power.

The most famous story of a divine visit and conception is Luke’s account of Jesus’ conception (Luke 1:26–31). It has been recently argued that the gospel story was expressing a twin, non contradicting paternity by the deity and Joseph (Lincoln (2013)). The same ambiguity may have been meant by the author of Genesis 21. Divine and human agencies would be kept in tension. The role of Abraham is elided in the first verses of this chapter. Commentators and translators have not usually reflected on that perhaps because the preceding chapters stress the role of Abraham in engendering a descendance and lead the readers to assume he is the procreator. An old legend has been reworked by later authors into a broader narrative that celebrates both divine and Abraham’s agencies as being part of a covenant (ברית).

Philo is the one ancient Jewish Hellenistic commentator who was willing to draw on the common Hellenistic idea of divine conception and transform it into a

spiritual conception. Sarah, Rebekah, Lea, and Zipporah (Moses) were turned by Philo into virgins who received divine seeds of virtue and morality from heavens.¹ Philo was able to use gaps like Abraham's relative absence from 21:1–2 to infer that she (a figure of wisdom) conceived from the Lord. Early Christian writers may have borrowed from Philo's allegorical view and developed this notion of divine conception.

Standard Jewish commentaries, on the contrary, tend to do the same as the Septuagint which translated קָפָה as ἐπεσκέψατο (=“took note”). They shy away from comment. Sarna in the Jewish Publication Society's standard commentary is a good example. He keeps to the translation “The Lord took note of Sarah...” but then comments in note on the possible other meanings. The prudence is remarkable. There is no comment on the matter in Rashi, the great mediaeval commentator. The analogy of Gen 21:1 and 1 Sam 2:21 is noted in a Rabbinic commentary from the beginning of our era, Babylonian tractate *Rosh haShanah* 11a, bottom.

Finally, a sociology of knowledge remark: the various translations and commentaries—often through their omissions—are revealing views of people, politics, and divinity that need to be put into a historical framework. This matter, however, is for the long haul.

REFERENCES

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- Lincoln, Andrew T. 2013. “Luke and Jesus' Conception : A Case of Double Paternity?” *JBL* 132: 639–58.
- Wevers, John William. 1993. *Notes on the Greek Text of Genesis*. Atlanta, Ga: Scholars Press.

¹See *De Cherubim* 40–50, especially 45, or *Quod deterius*. 59–60, 124, for Sarah. I'm using a private message from Professor Lincoln about this matter and thank him for his note.