

## PROMISES AND BLESSINGS FOR JEWS AND ARABS IN THE PENTATEUCH

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In this study we propose to make three points: that basically the promises made to the Patriarchs in Gen. 12-36 are substantially ancient; that they are already found in the ancient documents of the Pentateuch; and that they are also for the Arabs, brothers of the Jews.<sup>1</sup>

In our day this theme cannot be approached without giving great attention to literary criticism and the first part of this article will be devoted to that subject. Questions about the content and formation of individual patriarchal promises will be taken up in the second part. Finally in the third part we will concern ourselves with those persons who are descendants in the collateral line of the Patriarchs (Laban, Ishmael and Esau). These persons can be considered as the forefathers of the Arabs of today just as the Patriarchs are the forefathers of today's Jews.

### 1. Questions about Literary Criticism

Basically, as far as literary criticism is concerned there are two questions we must consider. The first one is: can we continue to adhere to the document theory of Wellhausen or must we abandon it? Secondly, whether or not we follow the document theory, must we consider the patriarchal promises to be part of the original text, or are they later insertions?

#### *1.1. Is the Document Theory in Difficulty?*

One of the sharpest and most persistent assailants of the document theory today is R. Rendtorff. In his famous book criticizing the document theory,<sup>2</sup> he concludes that in the study of the Pentateuch the literary-critical method (*Formgeschichte*) used in the documentary theory is incompatible with the form-critical method, which he naturally favors. He

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<sup>1</sup>. We treated this theme in the preceding article "Patriarchal Genealogies: Literary, Historical and Theologico-Political Criticism".

<sup>2</sup>. Rendtorff 1977.

seeks to rigorously apply what he perceives to be the principles which the father of form-criticism, H. Gunkel, laid down. And so he seeks to distinguish individual cycles of stories in the Pentateuch as well as their ramifications and then to reconstruct the development of each while carefully keeping them separated. The components and the cycles would then have been combined only later on. The only force holding all these originally heterogeneous pieces together would have been the patriarchal promises. And they, on their part, become broken up into many, many themes, each one with its own separate origin (land, son, numerous posterity, assistance and blessings). After such dismemberment of the patriarchal stories, an effort is made to put the elements back together again, trying to reconstruct the story of their formation. The following are the results: first, what were originally narratives about Abraham were later joined with those about Jacob; then the story of Isaac was inserted. But the theological discourses – that is, the promises – were added much later.

In his recent *Introduction to the Old Testament*,<sup>3</sup> where, in truth, Rendtorff is somewhat less radical than when he began, he continues to claim that

“in the makeup of the longer ‘stories of the Patriarchs’, the discourses which contain promises have increasingly taken on the role of composition and interpretation” (p. 185).

The author reviews the promises (Gen. 13:14-17 and 28:13ff; 12:1-3; 26:1-3 etc.) showing how, by means of them, the various episodes have become intertwined. Then he claims that they reflect the sad situation of the exile including the promises of blessings in 12:3 and 28:14b:

“Through these redactional elements, the stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob/Joseph have been combined to make up a longer, self contained unit. The joining of the story of the Patriarchs with other traditions came about only during a process of a theological reworking done on a wide scale” (p. 186).

As a result, we should abandon the theory that there was a Yahwist document from the time of David and Solomon which fully narrated the stories of the Pentateuch. On the other hand, we should maintain that these stories were slowly formed and joined together over a period of centuries, and that the promises were only inserted four centuries later.

Rendtorff began to exercise greater caution concerning the formation of

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<sup>3</sup>. Rendtorff 1991.

the story of Jacob, after a thesis of one of his students was published in 1984. That study concentrated on the story of Jacob as well as Abraham. Its purpose was to demonstrate scientifically the validity Rendtorff's claims. In his Introduction Rendtorff declared he wanted to follow it.<sup>4</sup>

Really, Blum's study, in a rather *a priori* fashion, removes the promises from the key text of the ancient Jacob story (Gen. 28:10-20) because, in deference to the school to which he belongs, he must maintain that they were inserted much later. For the moment this is not within our purpose. Rather we wish to follow the author in his attempt to reconstruct the history of the formation of the Jacob cycle, the focal point of his study.

The original text of Gen. 28 (see vv.11-13a and 16-19a) is one of the ancient accounts, being an original part of a larger composition (*grössere Komposition*) dating from the time of David and composed to describe the destiny of the people of Israel during that epoch. Instead, the true and proper Jacob story (*Jakoberzählung*) has been enhanced later by combining all this material with later episodes. Further additions in the story of Jacob would be the vow (28:20ff.), the editing in Gen. 31, especially verse 13 etc. Another episode inserted later would be the birth of the sons of Jacob in Gen. 29f. This story of Jacob would be dated before 721, because the Northern Kingdom had a special interest in it and in that year was destroyed. It is of note that it had already been joined to the story of Joseph, which is considered very homogeneous and very ancient.<sup>5</sup>

To say that in the Jacob story we have these two strata is no different than to say, according to the document theory, that we have a Yahwist and an Elohist or a later Redactor. All the more so because the school of Rendtorff (or, as some wish to call it, the school of Heidelberg) admits the existence of a third, completely distinct document or redaction: Priestly. On the other hand, since Wellhausen no one dared claim that the Elohist was a proper parallel document by itself, but they preferred to speak of a Redactor who added the E parts to J.

This is not the time to intensify our negative judgment on the method of the Heidelberg school, nor to survey all the other criticisms directed at the documentary theory in addition to those coming from other schools.<sup>6</sup> In

<sup>4</sup>. Blum 1984.

<sup>5</sup>. Blum 1984, 174-202.

<sup>6</sup>. The critics, it seems, exploded unconsciously in agreement around, let us say, the middle of the 70's. See Cortese 1983, 79-88.

taking up the discussion of this particular opinion it is sufficient to evaluate the point of view contrary to our thesis, which is rather wide spread today. Further, the claims which we have examined have already served to validate the first point: the existence of a sufficiently complete, ancient narrative about the Patriarchs.

### *1.2. Were the Promises Inserted in Later Times?*

Now our concern is to see if the patriarchal promises were a part of this narrative from the very beginning or whether they were inserted later on. This is the second point of the question of literary criticism that we must deal with.

This question was not a creation of the Heidelberg school. It is an old theory, propounded again in the 50's by J. Hoftijzer.<sup>7</sup> He simplifies all the formulas of the promises and reduces them to two groups. There are the Priestly promises of Gen. 17 and the promises of Gen. 15, which he defines simplistically as deuteronomistic and exilic. The influence of Hoftijzer's booklet has been very extensive and persists yet today.

As we talk about this second question of literary criticism we can set out from the claims of Blum instead of those of Hoftijzer. Toward the end of his massive work, he strongly contends that the patriarchal accounts were composed from the very beginning in order to illustrate the origins and destiny of Davidic Israel. He says this out of polemic with Westermann and to refute his claims about the pre-monarchical antiquity of the patriarchal legends.<sup>8</sup> But for now we are not going to concern ourselves with this particular question of Westermann. It is enough to conclude that, according to the Heidelberg school it must be held that in the Davidic-Solomonic period the patriarchal accounts concentrated on the main elements of life in Israel. Such themes concerned the land, the people descended from the Patriarchs, their prosperity, and their relationships with surrounding peoples, described in some genealogies (the antiquity of which is recognized without discussion by Blum).<sup>9</sup> But these are precisely the themes with which the promises are concerned! It can be easily shown that almost all the patriarchal accounts were narrated only because they have something to

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<sup>7</sup>. See Hoftijzer 1956. The author draws from Staerk 1889.

<sup>8</sup>. Blum 1984, 479f.

<sup>9</sup>. Blum 1984, 483ff.

do with the promises or at least serve to highlight them. Anyone who removes the promises from the patriarchal accounts shows that the person understands nothing about them. But certainly we cannot resolve the problem with this slightly *a priori* reasoning. Nor, on the other hand, can we now set about analyzing all the texts of the promises to see which are genuine and which are added.

Let us begin by mentioning that those taking positions contrary to the thesis of Hoftijzer only came along later, and this is just a proof of what a powerful influence his thesis has had.<sup>10</sup> Important scholars have raised their voices to show that one promise or the other, or all of them taken as a whole are, to a great part, ancient and genuine.<sup>11</sup>

C. Westermann<sup>12</sup> is worthy of special mention among all these, both because his specific contribution was so extensive and because it was done as a preparation for his commentary on Genesis. He made a detailed survey of all the promises in the patriarchal stories. He divides them among five elements: son, land, people (numerous posterity), blessings, divine assistance (*Beistandsformel*). Of these five promises, three are found by themselves in the accounts: son, land and divine assistance. Sometimes these three, and the other two always are found mixed in with the others. Here we give an orderly list of all the passages where we find, alone or combined together, the patriarchal promises. In the story of Abraham we have: Gen. 12:1-3.7; 13:14-17; 15:1-6.7-21; 16:7-12; 18:1-16.18f; 21:12; 22:15-18. In the Isaac cycle: 24:7; 26:2-6, 24f. In the Jacob cycle: 27:27f; 28:13ff; 31:3; 32:10-13 and finally 46:3f.

The Priestly texts are to be considered separately. There the promises are lumped together, in Gen. 17 for the Abraham story, and then in the Jacob story they are found in 28,3f; 35,11ff; and finally in 48,3f.

<sup>10</sup>. The great perplexity aroused quickly after the appearance of Hoftijzer's work can be noted in the reviews made by a large number of exegetes of that time: Noth 1957, 430-433; Vaux 1958, 132f; Hempel 1958, 44f; Herbert 1957, 339f.

<sup>11</sup>. Ruprecht 1979, 171-188 and 444-464. Emerton 1982, 14-32. Seebass 1983, 189-209. Scharbert 1985, 359-368. The honor of having been the first or among the first to have answered the attack of Hoftijzer effectively, seems to have been H. Cazelles, in *DBS*, under the word "Promesse".

<sup>12</sup>. Westermann 1976, 92-150.

## 2. History and Content of the Promises

To the extreme thesis of Hoftijzer and Rendtorff, that the promises are a late insertion into the text, it would be possible to give an answer that is just as radical but opposite: that all the passages of the patriarchal story where we encounter the promises are to be considered as genuine. But one could already think *a priori* that the answer must make distinctions. And this is the route taken by the authors which we have cited, even if there is then no uniformity in their indication of which formulations of the promise are primitive and which are late. But when close attention is given to their studies, the variances no longer seem to be so great. For example, it seems to us that Emerton is too extensive in reducing the number and length of genuine passages: 12:7; 16:11; 28:15. But he is one of those who criticizes most severely the over-simplification of Hoftijzer and van Seters<sup>13</sup> in attributing the promises to the Deuteronomist. According to the latter the promises are not later insertions, but the whole Yahwist story of the Pentateuch where they are found is exilic. The general composition of the patriarchal stories, with all the promises is, for Emerton, earlier than Deuteronomy and goes back to the time of Josiah.

Westermann was trying to find some general criteria on the basis of which one could judge whether or not our promises are genuine in each individual passage. His favorite, which to us seems very questionable, is the following: when a promise is found all by itself and with concise formulation, it can be considered as genuine. Another criterion he tries to establish is whether the promises are truly the real object of the narrative or whether they are included incidentally. Using these criteria in the commentary on Genesis, he asserts that the block of promises we have in the story of Jacob in Gen. 28:13ff, is late. Here Westermann seems to be forgetting that two levels are to be distinguished, the pre-literary and J. For the first level, his argument holds. But, in regard to the second level, even he admits that J inserts some details and particulars into the earlier accounts, which also include our promises, this argument does not hold. Moreover, it is difficult to see why the Yahwist couldn't have decided to insert more than one particular at a time. From this point of view, that is, to establish general criteria for judging the genuine character of the promises,

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<sup>13</sup>. See Seters 1975 and many later works, where the author obstinately defends his point of view.

the attempts made by Westermann therefore seem to be questionable. It is better to study the texts case by case.

Westermann's position becomes more valuable in its attempt to go back even before the Davidic-Solomonic period, that is, before the period of the literary documents, so as to discover the very origins of the promises. This attempt to go back to the origins is pursued by Westermann in his commentary on Genesis,<sup>14</sup> where the answer to our questions is elaborated in still more detail. He says it is necessary to distinguish between the various texts not only to establish the genuineness of the promises, but also to see which of them were formulated in the pre-literary phase of the documents in the Pentateuch.

As we introduce the thought of Westermann we already move into the problems of the history and the content of the promises; that is the second question with which we are concerned. Actually it is not possible to completely separate the two parts of our study. Then too, now that we find ourselves in the second part, we cannot keep from turning back to the first. So we will refer briefly to the content of a recent work touching on our theme, which would seem to be very important: the doctoral dissertation of K. Berge on the period of the Yahwist,<sup>15</sup> presented at Oslo in 1985, under the direction of A.J. Bjordalen († 1989).

Berge studies above all Gen. 12:1-3 and 28:10-22. In order to delve more deeply into these texts (to which he dedicates Chap. 2 and 5 of his book respectively), he turns also to the story of Isaac (Gen. 26 in Chap. 3), and the blessing of Isaac to Jacob (27:27b-29 in Chap. 4) and then the promise of divine assistance (Chap. 7). His book ends with two more chapters on the blessing (Chap. 7: Blessing for the people, and Chap. 8: The Promise of Blessing). Especially in these final three chapters every care is taken to compare the respective formulations of promise with those of the Deuteronomist and other late books of the Old Testament. Berge demonstrates that those of our patriarchal accounts are for the most part earlier and independent, contrary to a widely held opinion today, and confirms the results of the preceding section regarding the genuineness of a large part of these texts and dating of them back to the Davidic-Solomonic

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<sup>14</sup>. Westermann 1981. See the first fifty pages of introduction which seem to us to be the best.

<sup>15</sup>. Berge 1990.

period. Now that this last work has been introduced, we can proceed to a short survey of the texts and the question of their authenticity. Then we will attempt to reconstruct the history of the formation and formulation of the promises in the patriarchal accounts.

We will begin with a slight correction and simplification of the subdivision of the promises proposed by Westermann: instead of five points we propose four: land (L), son and numerous posterity (SP), divine assistance (A) and blessing (B). Son and numerous posterity are two themes which Westermann wants to keep separate. According to him one finds two formulations of the same promise but made in two different periods. The first reflects the period of the patriarchal family or clan but before the era of the tribe or people of Israel. The second was formulated in view of or for the people of Israel. Reducing them to one single formulation helps simplify the questions and allows us to more easily recognize that Gen. 28:14 develops the same SP promise that we find in the Abraham story. Besides that the formulations of the promise of land, at the risk of being overly precise, should be divided into two because in the pre-literary phase, namely of the patriarchal family, the interest was not in whole of Palestine as a territory given, but only in that portion desired by a nomad in the process of settling down .

Another clarification to be made is this: we have no intention of going back to the pre-literary phase, because to go back beyond J makes what can be stated less secure and requires more time for discussion. But despite the uncertainties that would grow out of such a search for the origins, one can be fairly sure of the existence of such an ancient phase of the promises – contrary to the opinion of Blum and his noted criticism of Westermann's thought. No one wants to deny what Blum points out: that the story of Gen. 12-36 has been told with regard to Israel. But that is not to say that the material from which it was composed is not more ancient still. And this ancient material, for the reasons we have expressed above, contained the theme of land, posterity, divine assistance and blessing. And indeed it is partly true, as Westermann points out in the introduction to the Jacob story (see his commentary cited above) that the SP and L promises are well rooted in the Abraham cycle. Sometimes they are an essential part of the story, while in the Jacob story they are somewhat peripheral. In contrast, A and B are the promises which are characteristic of the story of Jacob, woven from the themes of benediction and divine assistance. These themes

characterize what was promised to him at Bethel, realized during his entire stay with Laban, again recalled and manifested in the conflict with God at Penuel, and on the occasion of the dreaded meeting with Esau. All this is already proof in itself of the existence of the pre-literary phase of the stories, when the two cycles of legends already had their particular characteristics before being rendered more uniform through the redactional work of the Yahwist.

Let us put aside, for a moment, the pre-literary phase and turn our attention to the passages of the Yahwist version of the patriarchal story which contain the genuine promises. Returning to the general list of Westermann mentioned above we can affirm that in the Abraham cycle, besides SP/B in the introduction (Gen. 12:1ff) these are to be considered genuine: L in 12:7; L/SP in 13:14-17, and SP in 16:7-12 and 18:1-16. Maybe, in regard to Isaac, A in 26:24f is original. And, in the Jacob story these seem to be genuine: B in 27:3f; A in 31:3. All four are present in 28:13ff, but it is precisely this passage, together with 12:1ff, which is the most controversial. In contrast, the following promises are identified as either Elohist or exilic, and therefore of late composition: chapters 15 and 21 as well as 18:18f; 22:15-18; 24:7; 26:2-6; 32:10-13 and 46:3f.

Except for 26:24, this list of genuine passages is exactly the same as Berge's, which we are following, and we refer back to his work for a detailed explanation. Here we limit ourselves to giving added confirmation along with some observations.

If in the Abraham story, where even Westermann has no doubts about the genuineness of the promises in Gen. 12 (SP/B/T), in spite of what said about the redundancy of B, there ought to be also no doubt about 13:14-17 (L/SP) unless one does not accept this author's debatable general criteria mentioned above. It is true that the text can be removed without harming the flow of the account. It is also true that here we are dealing with the matter of redundant phrases. But still the basic reason for telling this story of the separation of Abraham and Lot is to specifically deal with the theme of land. It was promised in 12:7 but in too minimal and obscure a fashion. Just before, there is the embarrassing information that it belongs to the Canaanites, in 12:6b. Some erroneously consider this clause to be a gloss. But through it J explains the trial to which Abraham is exposed, in his faith in the word of God. Now in Gen. 13 the account has already shown its listeners that B has been realized for Abraham, who has just happily returned

from his adventure in Egypt, and was also been realized for Lot. But right at this point (13:9ff) it further appears that L is realized for Lot but not for Abraham. The land chosen by Lot is purposely described in the terms of Paradise. And so it is even more necessary at this point to reconfirm L for Abraham, and with the same emphasis.<sup>16</sup> As far as SP goes, there should be no doubt about 18:10ff. The account really could not make less of such a promise; and it is a very old account. Nor can there be any doubt about Gen. 16:7-12 (SP) which is a promise for Hagar, as we will see in the last part.

As far as Isaac is concerned, if we admit that J had already brought him in as a link between Abraham and Jacob, it seems to me that we must attribute to J the insertion of some of the promises contained in Chap. 26 – at least a nucleus of what is found in verses 24f (A/B/SP). But unfortunately, that is contrary to common opinion.

There ought to be no doubt about the genuineness of 27:27f (B) in the cycle of Jacob. Except for Blum the genuineness of 31:3 (A) seems to be well accepted. On the other hand both Blum and Westermann agree in denying the authenticity of 28,13ff, which is a summary of the promises made by the Yahwist in the central part of the story. The two texts, 12:1ff and 28:13ff, have recently become, so to speak, companions of misfortune under the knife of modern exegetical surgery. The first until a few years ago was considered the keystone of the Yahwist architectural construction.<sup>17</sup> But to say this also meant saying that the Yahwist already had that universalistic message of salvation which actually matured in Israel only with Trito-Isaiah. The conclusion which then spontaneously arose, was either to hold the text to be a late insertion, or else, as did van Seters, to attribute a post-exilic date to J. This is the conclusion favored by a very

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<sup>16</sup>. The comparison “like the dust of the earth;” (13,16) is rare. It is found again in 28:14 and then again in Num. 23:10: “the dust of Jacob,” which seems to support the two preceding texts. Actually the comparison with dust usually carries with it a negative sense (reduce to dust): just look through concordances. The other one, however, “as the stars of the sky,” has a positive nuance and appears frequently in the deuteronomical literature where it points to the greatness of Israel (Exod. 32:13; Deut. 1:10; 10:22; 28:62).

<sup>17</sup>. After his commentary on Genesis (Rad 1963) and his *Theology of the Old Testament* (Rad 1962) the authors who have spoken about it in this way have been Wolff 1964, 345-373 and Steck 1971, 525-554.

questionable study by F Crüsemann:<sup>18</sup> he wants to deny any original relationship between Gen. 1-11 and the subsequent patriarchal story. He forgets, among other things, the importance of the linear J genealogy of Gen. 11:28ff (parallel to that of P in 11:31f) for the rest of the story. Such a view also devalues the ingenious observation made by the authors mentioned above, about the fact that the five “curses” in Gen. 1-11 (3:14.17; 4:11; 5:29; 9:25) are counter-balanced by the five occurrences of the root *brk* (‘blessing’) in our passage of Gen. 12:1-3. Here the work of Berge shows its value in reducing, on the one hand, the universalistic import of the J message, while, on the other hand, defending its genuineness. Only this text, and of course Gen. 28:14 speak of blessing for the *mishpahot* of the land of Abraham and Jacob. But in 18:18; 22:18; 26:4 (probably late texts as we will see soon) *gôyîm* is used and so one can speak of a more universal outlook. The blessing in the primitive text would be therefore only for clans that had not yet even reached the level of a tribe and people. Later on we will speak of them as the kin of the Patriarchs and their descendants.

The discussion regarding Gen. 12:1-3 holds true also for 28:13ff. And for both cases we can finish up by noting that both are key passages of the Yahwist and his theology. If we acknowledge that already this original narrator wanted to speak about the destiny and problems of the people of Israel by means of the patriarchal accounts, then it is right here at this pivotal point of the story that he must break in. If the promises we meet here, as those in the above-mentioned passage, Gen. 13:14-17, seem repetitions, and if in 12 and 28 all four of the themes of the promises are bunched up together, it is precisely because the narrator wished to give them their proper emphasis and also make of them the summation of these promises, which are the basic purpose for his narration.

After this discussion about the genuine texts, we must discuss more briefly the others. Berge considers these passages as late: 18:18f; 22:15ff; and 26:2-6. There we certainly find those deuteronomistic characteristics which, according to the over-simplification of Hoftijzer, cause all the promises to be considered exilic. To these can be added 24:7, if it is true that most or all of this chapter is late. In all of these texts we find, among others, the word *nišbaʿ*, which is a characteristic of the formulation of the promises which we often read in Deuteronomy.

<sup>18</sup>. Crüsemann 1981, 11-29.

The other texts fall in between the two extremes indicated. There are two possibilities. Either the formulations of the promises are from the E document (if someone wants to continue to believe in the existence of such a document), or they must be attributed to the redaction of J during the intermediary period, that is, not later than 620, the time of Josiah.

It only remains for us to take a quick overall glance at the promises of the Priestly document. They are all lumped together in Gen. 17, inasmuch as they regard Abraham. Those made to Jacob are inserted at three places: in the farewell of Isaac, when his son leaves for Paddan-Aram (28:3f); when he went down to Egypt (48:3f); and above all in the key place Bethel where, however, the theophany occurs not during his going as in J, but upon his return journey. In the two middle points, Gen. 17 and 35, P lumps together all the promises. These texts are still more repetitious and emphatic. In Gen. 17 the theme of the *berît* (covenant) is added. This Priestly phase is last in the formulation of the promises to the Patriarchs in the Pentateuch.

### 3. Blessings and Promises for the Arabs

From our considerations of the promises on a general level, we must move down to that level specific to the promises and blessings for the Arabs, whom we consider to be the descendants of Aram, Lot, Ishmael, Midian, and Edom. So, we will make a more detailed examination of the texts concerned with this group. In addition we will see in even greater detail their literary context, which includes those passages which are in some way connected with the promises we are examining. We *did not do* this kind of an analysis of the promises discussed in the second part. There we were content to say that all the episodes narrated in the story of the Patriarchs have to do with the promises and are narrated only because of them.

We begin with a look at the blessing in Gen. 12:2f, a passage which we have just treated along with 28:13ff. We still must examine a point which will function as an introduction to the third part of this work. Yahweh says to Abraham that he will make of him a great people, he will bless him and make his name great. In 12:2b he adds “and you will be a blessing”. The usual translation follows the Masoretic vocalization of the word (*wehyê*) which is an “indirect” imperative. We prefer to follow the suggestion of the

Stuttgart Bible (BHS) and read *wehayâ*, referring the verb to the subject immediately preceding, that is, “the name”. Then all becomes more normal and the verb becomes an inverted perfect, with a future meaning: “it [the name] will be a blessing”. In this way the sentence becomes clearer because we have a simple future and not an imperative which must be given a forced meaning. Moreover the blessing follows in a more normal way by means of a name and not a person. And thus a further clarification is necessary. We do not need to hold, as many people think, that whoever pronounces the name of Abraham, receives the blessing.<sup>19</sup> The blessing is for those who bear the name of Abraham. This seems to be the more obvious meaning. So he blessed them that day, saying, “By you Israel will pronounce blessings, saying, ‘God make you as Ephraim and as Manasseh’.”

This, therefore, is the first blessing, guaranteed by God. The other one is spoken about in the next verse, where J cites a traditional formula which we find in 27:29 and Num. 24:9.<sup>20</sup> This blessing, however, depends on the conduct of the person who pursues it: the one will be blessed who blesses Abraham (Gen 12:3a). Finally (12:3b) we have the clause we spoke about in the second part repeated exactly in 28:14b: “In you and your descendants all the nations of the earth shall find blessing.” It is repeated again elsewhere (26:4), but with *gôyîm* in the place of *mišpaḥot*, while our text accurately distinguishes between Israel *gôy gadôl* (12:2a) and the other groups (*mišpaḥot*) which can be blessed along with him. This last phrase (12:3b), it seems to me, must be considered as the synthesis of the three preceding blessings: the one for Abraham, the one for his relatives and the one for whoever behaves benevolently in their relationship with him.

If so, we must begin by making a clear distinction in the last part of our research: there are three groups destined for the blessing: the direct descendants of Abraham; other blood-relatives who in some way carry his name; and finally, the foreigners who treat him kindly. We have already concerned ourselves with the first group. With regard to the last we mention only certain persons, like Pharaoh and Abimelek, but we will not deal

<sup>19</sup>. Reference is often made to Gen. 48:20 (Jacob’s blessing to the sons of Joseph): “By you one will bless Israel, saying: ‘God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh.’” However, according to the Masoretic text the verse reads: “In you Israel will bless, saying.” Moreover, this reference is misleading because the names of Ephraim and Manasseh, here, are only used as a comparison; they do not transmit the blessing.

<sup>20</sup>. Berge 1990, 11-56.

with this further. Instead, the second group will be the object of our inquiry.

### *3.1. The Distant Relatives*

We begin by studying the literary context of the blessings and promises to the distant relatives of Israel. The attention Lot received from Abraham, who acts towards him as a foster father, has already been noted. At the moment they separate, Abraham gives him the land that seems to be the better part. The angels who destroy Sodom spare both him and his family, including his sons-in-law if they were only willing (19:12ff). Lot acknowledges all this:

“Your servant has already found favor in your sight and you have shown me great mercy in saving my life...” (19:18).

They grant him one last favor: “I will also grant you the favor you now ask. I will not overthrow the town you speak of” (19:21), namely Zoar. Thanks to these favors Moab and Ammon were born, even though the only possibility was the incestuous union of the daughters with their father. On this ancient basis later authors or redactors added other interesting details: the intercession of Abraham for Sodom (18:16-33) and his military expedition against the five kings (14). If Abraham intercedes for Sodom it is because he knows that he is the source of blessings (18:18) and above all because his nephew lives there. As he attempts to intercede, he brings all the way down to ten the number of just people required (18:32) because he thinks about Lot’s family. The reason Abraham undertakes his military expedition is because the five kings carried Lot off.

Let us move on to the figure of Ishmael, who is the character for whom we find the clearest and most numerous formulations of the promise in the group we are considering. In the J account of Gen. 16 one can take for granted the displeasure of Abraham in finding out that the pregnant Hagar had run away into the desert. But the narrator concerns himself above everything in showing the interest that Yahweh’s angel took in her, that in the end she acknowledges this through the words which make up an etiology of the well ‘Lahai-roi’ (16:13f). And as a matter of fact, the announcement of the birth of the son (11) echoes the very words the angel will say to Sarah in announcing the birth of Isaac (18:10). This is a warning not to interpret too negatively the following rather enigmatic phrase:

“He shall be a wild ass of a man, his hand will be against everyone, and every-

one's hand will be against him; in opposition to all his kin shall he encamp" (Gen 16:12).

This should not be taken as a ominous phrase, nor necessarily understood in an exaggeratedly positive sense; rather it has an air of sadness to it. Maybe there is the foreshadowing of the destiny of the Arabs and the incomprehension, for which they are sometimes responsible and of which they are often the victims, in the course of history. The positive ideas about Ishmael are mostly developed by E or a later redaction. Gen. 21 speaks explicitly about Abraham's great displeasure in expelling Hagar and her son who was already born (16:11ff). Here the well becomes a miraculous gift for her dying son. Later on we will see the ample and differentiated formulation of these promises. Finally, the Priestly document presents Ishmael in a particular manner. The central element in the vision of Gen. 17 is the precept of circumcision. Following this is the promise of the son, Isaac. To this Abraham answers:

"Let but Ishmael live on in your favor!" (17:18).

This son is circumcised right away (17:23) so that he will not be cut off from Israel (17:14). By noting his age – thirteen years at the time of his circumcision – he brings him forward from the background of the entire clan of the Patriarch. And the wording of the promise-blessing to Isaac in Gen. 17:20 is very emphatic. At the end, P mentions the two brothers, Isaac and Ishmael, at the burial of the father, without making any distinction between them (25:9).

The blessing for Laban and Esau in the Jacob story is underscored many times. When he learns that Jacob wants to go away, Laban says:

"If I have found favor in your sight... I have learned through divination that God has blessed me because of you" (30:27).

and Jacob is careful not to deny it:

"The little you had before I came has grown beyond measure, and Yahweh has blessed you on my passing by" (30:30).

The Elohist does not dwell on this point because the relationship between Jacob and Laban was very tense.<sup>21</sup> The Priestly document, for its part, completely omits this event with Jacob and so does not deal with our issue.

<sup>21</sup>. Berge 1990, Chap. 3, *passim*.

As far as Esau is concerned, the story of the blessing swindled from him by Jacob is usually interpreted as if nothing remained for him. The blessing upon Jacob made him beneficiary of the agricultural goods (27:28) ruler of the people and leader of his brothers (27:29): this is how the word *gebîr* must be translated.<sup>22</sup> This word appears again in 27:37, where Esau is not called “servant”, as are the other “brothers” subject to Jacob, whoever they might be. Rather Isaac says:

“I have appointed him your master, and I have assigned to him all his kinsmen as his slaves.”

Westermann, in his commentary makes the observation that Isaac’s consoling words for Esau (27:39f) ought to be understood in a positive way: it is a matter of a promise of life – “you will live” by your sword.<sup>23</sup> And if the verb *’bd* “to serve” is used here for the relationship of subjection to Jacob, quickly afterward it is declared that Esau will rise up and break off the yoke. To summarize, there is no personal blessing for Esau, but consoling words are spoken to him and he is said to partake in the blessing of his brother.

One notes the disapproval of the account for Jacob’s cheating. This can be read between the lines of the J text, in the wrestling with God at Peniel (32:25-33) which is placed right in the middle of the dreaded meeting with Esau. We attribute the main episode to the Yahwist, despite the fact that the divine name *’elohîm*, occurs frequently in the section. But this is due to the fact that the mysterious Being with which Jacob fought cannot be named, and that the double etiology (Penu’el and Isra’el) is composed with *’elohîm*, not Yahweh. The word *’bq* (wrestling) is used, so that there could be a word play on the river name *Yabboq*. But through assonance it is also similar to the name of the Patriarch and seems to recall the heel (*’eqeb*) of Esau, which Jacob grabbed so as to exit before him as the firstborn from the womb. This exact etiology of the name Jacob was given in 25:26. Now in the wrestling at Peniel Jacob is wounded in his hip so as to show that God gives him back the injury he inflicted on his brother. After all, only after this wrestling is Jacob fully blessed (25:29f). A more explicit blame

22. *ThWAT* I, 908f. The inferiority of Esau compared to Jacob is seen within an intertribal setting. It is expressed, for example, in Gen. 49:5-7 (superiority of Judah); Deut. 33:13-16 (superiority of Joseph); see Berge 1990, 139.

23. Westermann 1981, 623.

for Jacob's swindle comes in Hos. 12:3ff:

"The Lord has a grievance against Israel: he shall punish Jacob for his conduct, for his deeds he shall repay him. In the womb he supplanted (*'aqeb*) his brother, and as a man he contended with God; He contended with the angel and triumphed, entreating him with tears."

A later redaction (or E?) develops the theme of blessing to Esau, describing the lavish gifts Jacob prepares to win his favor (Gen. 32:15-21 and 33:4-11) and in doing so re-establishes very affectionate relations with his brother. It is interesting that later he says to his brother: "Accept my *birkatî* that has been presented to you, because God has favored me." Here by the use of the word "blessing", the Elohist magnificently bears out the interpretation we have given of the J account. That the other interpretation, which sees the elimination of Esau as the result of the clash between the two brothers, is influenced by prejudice is shown clearly by one simple item: the analogous blessing of Jacob to Ephraim and Manasseh. The grandfather turns the order of things upside-down, as always. Joseph would correct it but Jacob answers:

"That one too (Manasseh) shall become a tribe, and he too shall be great. Nevertheless, his younger brother shall surpass him, and his descendants shall become a multitude of nations" (48:19).

Here no one would dare talk about the elimination of Manasseh! Why, then, claim this for Esau? As far as P is concerned, as we have already mentioned, he has none of these stories and so cannot speak of blessings or promises for Esau.

### 3.2. *Ishmael*

Now that we have finished the first half of the third part of our inquiry, we still have to concentrate on the figure of Ishmael, the most Arabic of Israel's kin,<sup>24</sup> because the traditional formulations of the promises also apply to him. Only L is lacking for him, but not the others: SP/A/B. In the J account the angel of Yahweh says to Hagar:

"I will make your descendants so numerous, that they will be too many to count" (16:10).

The promise of a son or people and the affirmation of perpetual divine

<sup>24</sup>. See Schmid 1976, 76-81 and 119-129. The Rabbis have identified the Ishmaelites and Arabs (p. 125).

assistance are supplied by the redaction (or the E document) in Gen. 21:13.18.20:

“As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a great nation of him also, since he too is your offspring”;

“God was with the boy as he grew up. He lived in the wilderness and became an expert bowman.”

The Priestly writer adds the blessing:

“As for Ishmael, I am heeding you: I hereby bless him. I will make him fertile and will multiply him exceedingly. He shall become the father of twelve chieftains, and I will make of him a great nation. But my covenant I will maintain with Isaac...” (17:20f).

In the above citation we wanted to add this last phrase for objectivity and to give the right picture of the benefits which the patriarchal stories accord to the blood-relatives of Israel. The thesis that we wanted to demonstrate or, in other words, the plan of God which we have tried to discover, does not put on the same level all the persons and groups which we examined, but absolutely does not wish that any one of them be eliminated. On the contrary, God wishes that all be partakers of such benefits, like a family where, without the differences being eliminated, all share in the common goods.

The family to which we allude is not that of humanity in its entirety. It is the family constituted by groups privileged by God. Neither the Canaanites nor the Philistines of Abimelek, nor the natives of Palestine belong to it. The genealogies which we study in the previous paper in this volume clearly confirm that and give the seal of antiquity and genuineness to the fraternal relations of Israel with these kindred people. The fact that Israel later breaks away and each one goes off to follow their own destiny does not contradict our conclusion. During the passing of successive millennia there might have developed different kinds of enmity among these kindred peoples, more enmity than fraternal rapport, but this does not destroy or abnegate the divine plan. We can also refer to the Arabs, with the necessary distinctions that we already mentioned, that which St. Paul says and what we Christians must believe about the Jews:

“In respect to the gospel, they are enemies of God for your sake; in respect to the election, they are beloved by him because of the Patriarchs. For the gifts and call of God are irrevocable” (Rom. 11:28f).

If the plan of God which we have tried to show in the story of the

Patriarchs is for real, we must apply in some way also to the Arabs, what Paul said a little earlier about the Jews:

“Theirs is the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the lawgiving, the worship, and the promises; theirs were the Patriarchs” (9:4f).

We Christians too take glory in belonging to this privileged group. Sometimes taking an extremist view of certain ideas of the New Testament and forgetting that Jesus came not to abolish but to fulfill, we arrogate to ourselves exclusively the privilege of salvation. These words of St. Paul, together with the texts of the Patriarchal stories we have examined, ought to make us a little less arrogant and a little more open to interfaith dialogue. The problem of our relations with Jews and Muslims could be explained through this comparison: there is a banknote of immense value and we three hold it in our hand: Jews, Muslims and Christians. Certainly its true value comes from Christ, according to our conception and our faith. But if we wish to snatch our part of it by tearing it away from that of the other two contenders, the banknote loses its value for all three. The mystery of the grandness of God’s plan consists precisely in this: that each one must leave a piece of it in the hand of the other. If that would happen, if there would be agreement in using it, then indeed it would become the currency of blessing for the whole world.