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HE WHO LAUGHS LAST: SOME NOTES ON LAUGHTER IN ISAAC'S BIRTH STORY

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Resumen

Estas notas se refieren al tema de la risa como hilo conductor del relato de Isaac. Al hacerlo, destaca la elección divina de esta noción según se refleja en la serie de eventos que marcarían para siempre la vida del patriarca y de sus descendientes.

Abstract

These notes refer to laughter as the connecting thread of the Isaac narrative. Accordingly, they emphasize the divine choice of this notion as shown in the series of life events which would affect the patriarch and his offspring's lives for ever.

Why are comedians so often Jewish? Why are Jewish so often comedians?

—Kirkus review on a book on Jewish humor

Isaac's birth story is a well known narration in the Bible. God promised Abraham an heir and, after they imagined it possible, Isaac, the son of promise, was born. Now, perhaps as a consequence of successive translations, not enough attention has been given to the role of laughter in the narration. It is my suggestion that only when we acknowledge the role of laughter as the underlying connecting element are we fully able to grasp the ironical and paradoxical overtones of the story. Accordingly, we will look first at laughter in the context of Genesis 17:17, 19 (Abraham's laugh); then we will move to briefly consider laughter in the context of Genesis 18:12-13, 15 (Sarah's laugh); and thirdly, we will see laughter in the context of Genesis 21:6 (Sarah's second laugh). Finally, we will draw some conclusions by reflecting on "he who laughs last" (God's laugh).

ABRAHAM LAUGHS

Genesis 17:17, 19 reads!:

Then Abraham fell down on his face and he laughed.

He thought to himself:

¹ The biblical quotations are taken from Claus Westermann translation in *Genesis: A Practical Commentary* (trans. by David Green; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1987).

Can a son be born to a man a hundred years old,
and can Sarah, ninety years old, bear a child?
And God said: No, Sarah your wife
shall bear you a son, and you shall call him Isaac.²

The patriarch's name had just been changed from Abram to Abraham, and his wife's name from Sarai to Sarah. Circumcision had just been established as the mark of the covenant between God and his people. What most impresses Abraham, however, is God's promise that his old wife is going to have a baby. He, who has just been given the name of "Father of a multitude" finds it hard to believe that God's promise can be literally accomplished.

There is some division among the scholars as to whether Abraham was laughing out of disbelief or utter amazement. What he says in verse 18 ("If only Ishmael would live out his life before You?"), however, shows that he was not ready to accept God's miraculous intervention in giving him a new son.³ Other scholars, however, persist in trying to show that the patriarch's laughter was actually a way of expressing his joy and surprise, among other things.⁴

Be it what it may, God is apparently not bothered by Abraham's laughter, but he proceeds to show the old patriarch that his promises will come to pass. This is accomplished by assuring Abraham once more that Sarah will be a mother soon and by giving a name to the unborn heir. Commenting on this, J. Cheryl Exum and J. William Whedbee state:

² Westermann, 128.

³ On this point, see the comment in G. Charles Aalders; *Genesis* (transl. by William Heynen; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 309. Also J. Cheryl Exum and J. William Whedbee do not hesitate in defining Abraham's laughter as "skeptical" (J. Cheryl Exum & J. William Whedbee, "Isaac, Samson, and Saul: Reflections on the comic and tragic visions," *On Humor and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Yehuda T. Radday & Athalya Brenner, JSOT Supplement Series 92 [Sheffield: Almond, 1990], 123).

⁴ Leupold, for instance, states that "nothing is indicative of doubt or misgivings in his reply. Consequently, when he falls upon his face, this is an act of worshipful adoration. Also his laughter is a laughter of joy and surprise. A host of glad feelings is called forth in him at this precious promise. So, too, the questions express no doubt but happy wonder (Herbert Carl Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis*, v. 1 [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1942], 527). This is in accordance with the interpretation generally given by Jewish scholars, who believe that "this [the patriarch's laughter] was an expression of Abraham's modesty. They argue that this was not an expression of doubt but rather one of being overwhelmed by what God had announced (Quoted by Aalders, 309). Some others try to combine both attitudes in Abraham's laughter: "The old man's body was prostrate on the ground in worship, his face was wrinkled in involuntary laughter, and his heart was expressing doubt" (Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Genesis: A Devotional Exposition* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973], 140). On this point, Kidner also explains: "Abraham's laughter...was a first, incredulous reaction; real enough, as is shown by his gentle attempt to steer God into a more reasonable path, but open to correction." He also adds that "Abraham's doubt was wonderfully tempered by faith and love in the prayer for Ishmael" (Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary* [Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1967], 130).

YHWH does not allow the sound of laughter to die in Abraham's throat, but rather seizes upon the verb "to laugh" and declares that it will be the name of the coming heir. In so doing YHWH permanently embeds laughter into the line of Israel's ancestors: Isaac will bear in his very being the image of laughter.⁵

Wenham is also among the scholars who reminds us that in Hebrew, the very word "and laughed" spells "and Isaac." And he adds: "So, in laughing at God's promise, Abraham unwittingly confirms it."⁶

SARAH LAUGHS

Now we turn to Genesis 18:12-13, 15, where we read:

Then Sarah laughed to herself and thought:
Now that I am used up, should I still have sexual pleasure?
And my husband is old.
Then Yahweh said to Abraham: Why is Sarah laughing and saying:
Am I really to bear a child now that I am old?

But Sarah denied it, saying: I did not laugh,
because she was afraid.
But he said: No, you did laugh.⁷

In Genesis 18:15, Sarah is the one who laughs skeptically at God's promise. Her laughter is based on incredulity, a visible result of inner unbelief.⁸ In this case there is no doubt about her intentions, and she is even rebuked for it. Confronted with the reality of her unbelief, Sarah tells a lie by denying her laughter. In so doing, she stresses the importance of God's promise by unknowingly playing on the name of the future child. On commenting this point, Wenham explains:

⁵ Exum & Whedbee, 124.

⁶ Gordon J. Wenham, *WBC 2* (Dallas, Tex.: Word, 1994), 26. Wenham also explains that "as usual with names, the Bible is not interested in a historic etymology so much as in the associations evoked by the name" (*ibid.*). On this point, Aalders reminds us that wordplay was a favorite figure of speech among the ancient Israelites. He considers, accordingly, that this is an example where "the inspired writer engaged in a bit of wordplay" (Aalders, 310). On the other hand, other scholars support a much more ambiguous approach. Kidner, for instance, states that "to those who were in the secret, it [Isaac's name] spoke of the laugh, the promise and the miracle that made his birth unique and the covenant predestined beyond all doubt (Kidner, 130).

⁷ Westermann, 134.

⁸ Leupold, 541.

Whatever the thinking, her [Sarah's] denial allowed her to pronounce....the name of her future child (*sabaqti* "I laughed"; *yisbaq* "Isaac"). In this way, Sarah unwittingly confirms the divine promise and provides a simple reiteration. "No so, you did laugh" (*sabaqt*) clinches the discussion.⁹

Nevertheless, this situation should be analyzed within the context of God's promise: "At this time next year I will come back to you" (v. 13). It is then when Sarah will remember having laughed and see the reality of the visitor's message in the name of the child.¹⁰

SARAH LAUGHS AGAIN

Now we move forward to Genesis 21:6, where we read:

*And Sarah said: Laughter has God prepared for me;
everyone who hears it will laugh for me.*¹¹

In face of the fulfillment of the promise, Sarah laughs again, this time out of joy and satisfaction. Once more we are witnesses of a play on words, as Sarah states: "Laughter has God prepared for me" (v. 6a). She even extends her laughter beyond the familiar realm to apply it within a universal context, as she announces that "everyone who hears it will laugh for me" (v. 6b). As Exum and Whedbee explain, however, it is Isaac who becomes "the chief bearer of this richly ambiguous tradition of laughter—for his very name ("he laughs") tells the tale."¹²

GOD LAUGHS

As we carefully consider the underlying significance of Isaac birth's story, we conclude that actually it is God who is laughing all along. After all, it is God who chooses the name of Isaac for the future heir (Genesis 17:19). It is God who also confronts Abraham's skeptical laughter with the renewed and certain promise of a child (17:17). When Sarah also laughs in 18:15, thinking that in no way she could become a mother at old age, it is God who rebukes him by making her confess and remember—through a play on words—not only the certainty of the promise ("At this time next year") but also the chosen name for the coming son. Finally, it is God who symbolically laughs in the fulfillment of the promise through the materialization of the awaited heir. This is done at the appointed time and in such a way that even incredulous

⁹ Wenham, 49.

¹⁰ Westermann, 136.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 152.

¹² Exum & Whedbee, 126.

Sarah feels compelled to admit, again playing on words: “Laughter has God prepared for me.” Confronted with human weakness and unbelief, God chooses the silent but ultimate means of bringing about and end to Abraham and Sarah’s doubts, that is, laughing at their “buts” through the fulfillment of the long-awaited promise. The way in which the promise comes to pass will mark forever not only the life of Isaac but also the whole history of his descendants, who in the centuries to come will be bound to balance between laughter and the shadows of ongoing tragedy.¹³

¹³ Exum & Whedbee remind us that Isaac has usually been represented as a tragic figure. They argue, however, in behalf of an alternative position, stating that “whatever the fate of Isaac in the many ‘afterlives’ of his tale, he is better represented in the biblical narratives as one of the most comical of Israel’s ancestors. The evocation of various forms of laughter in the name ‘Isaac’ precisely finds its most congenial home in a narrative best defined as comedy, a narrative which embodies all the ingredients that have conventionally made up the comic vision” (Ibid., 123).