

From *The Duality of Human Existence*

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One of the pervasive themes that runs through the Bible is that there is a *biological role for the male in conception*. We may presume that there was a time in history prior to Biblical times in which this was not known. It is certainly not "obvious." Sexual intercourse can take place without conception. The interval between conception and either the signs of pregnancy or the birth of a child is considerable. And whether a particular woman has had intercourse or not often remains her "secret." If we consider a two-way table with pregnancy-no pregnancy on one axis and intercourse-no intercourse on the other, observation would show that there are instances of pregnancy and no pregnancy with intercourse; and definitive data in the no intercourse cells are hard to come by. We can presume that there was an early "scientist" who made the discovery of the relationship between sexuality and pregnancy. Furthermore, as I have already indicated, the natural development of the male ego does not usually encompass the ejaculated semen; and we might presume that there may have been a good deal of resistance to the acceptance of the validity of this "scientific discovery." In contrast, there was probably no time in human history in which the biological connectedness of the mother to the child was ever in question, the act of childbearing being too prominent a part of experience. In the same way that more recent scientific discoveries have shocked mankind with their implications, so must there have been a time in history when mankind was similarly shocked by this particular "scientific discovery," and its implications. I take it that the Bible is a document which expresses man's efforts to come to grips with the problems presented by the fact that the male has a biological role in conception.

The Bible expresses man's effort to extend the boundary of his ego to include his "seed." This particular metaphor for semen is interesting in that it not only suggests property and food, but also tends to make the male even more important than the female, as seed is the determining factor of the nature of the plant, with the soil, water, and sun playing only enabling roles. The very conception of semen as "seed" which is deposited in the ground is suggestive that the ego has moved to include the semen.

The major personages of the Old Testament are presented principally in their role as fathers to their children. This is particularly evident in the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Even the sonhoods which are represented are transitional to fatherhood. The very name "Abraham" means father. Jacob has two names, Jacob, largely for his sonhood, and Israel, characteristically used to designate his fatherhood. In these figures, there is evident not only the extension of the ego to their "seed" but to the children themselves. Their principal preoccupations are with their children. We can, in fact, interpret the image of the father as presented in the Bible as a kind of "motherization" of the male. These are males who provide for their children. The Biblical patriarchs are affluent; they have flocks and servants and position. It is through their property that they can provide for children; and the economic conditions of their lives are such that by the increase of their children they themselves increase in wealth and power.

The Infanticidal Impulse

The integration [of fatherhood] in the Bible is an uneasy one, reflecting the difficulties of making it. It is manifested in providing abiding care for children, and its failure is manifested in infanticide. Freud had made killing the father central in his various discussions of religion. This feature may be important in psychological development. However, I believe that close examination of the Biblical text indicates that, in addition to the Old Testament being much more patrocetric than filiocentric, the killing of children as a psychological impulse is highly significant. If there was some original holocaust of the kind that Freud envisaged, it appears less likely that it was the killing of the father by the son than the killing of the children by the father. The allusions to the killing of children in the Bible are numerous, and the injunction against it is repeated so often as to indicate that this was not only a psychological tendency, but one which was at least sometimes "acted out." If the characteristics attributed to God come from man

himself, we may note an infanticidal tendency in the numerous references to God killing people, his children, throughout the Old Testament, as exemplified in the Flood and in his killing of the Sodomites, the Egyptians, and so on. God is tempted to kill all of the Children of Israel but is dissuaded by Moses (Exodus 32:9ff.), who then goes down from the mountain and himself kills about three thousand men (Exodus 32:28).

The story of Abraham's move to sacrifice Isaac is indicative not only of the infanticidal impulse, but also of ambivalence about infanticide. God enjoins Abraham to sacrifice Isaac as a burnt offering. Psychologically, Abraham has projected his infanticidal tendency on to God. When he is about to slay Isaac, his arm is restrained (Genesis 22:1ff.). The infanticidal impulse in Abraham is also evident in his treatment of Ishmael, whom he banishes to the wilderness with only bread and a bottle of water for himself and his mother (Genesis 21:14). Abraham is told, after demonstrating his readiness to kill Isaac, "because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son: That in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore" (Genesis 22:16-17). This may be interpreted as a reaction to the infanticidal impulse. God of the Bible is deeply ambivalent about this tendency within him. Its "neurotic" character is indicated by his tendency to kill and then make promises not to do it again (Genesis 9:9ff.). The story of Abraham and Isaac is, as has often been pointed out, a harbinger of the crucifixion of Jesus, in which the arm that would kill the son, referred to as "thine only son," is not restrained.

We can identify two sets of motives for the infanticidal impulse. The first is that the necessities of child care threaten the separatistic tendencies of the male. The second is that, where the ego boundary has extended to include the semen of the male, the authenticity of paternity of children becomes very important. Doubt over this authenticity provokes the tendency to kill the child of doubtful paternity.

Doubt concerning Paternity and Infanticide

My interpretation suggests a reason for the special importance of the first-born in the Bible. It is of interest that the Bible should manifest great ambivalence toward the first-born particularly.

On the one hand, the first-born is favored. The first-born is entitled to the "birth-right" and "blessing" (Genesis 25:29-34; 27:1ff.). The

first-born is to inherit twice as much as the other children and is protected against arbitrary action which would take this away from him (Deuteronomy 21:15-17; II Kings 2:9). The right of succession to rule is given to the first-born (II Chronicles 21:3). Pharaoh, who yields to nothing else, yields to the slaying of the first-born (Exodus 12:31). The favor of God to the Israelites is shown by his so referring to them: "Israel is my son, even my first-born" (Exodus 4:22). Even firstlings among animals are not to be eaten (Deuteronomy 12:17).

On the other hand, there are several instances in the Bible which indicate that the first-born is not favored. God favors the younger Abel over Cain, which is Cain's reason for killing Abel (Genesis 4:3-5). Abraham favors Isaac over Ishmael. Isaac gives the birthright to the younger Jacob. Jacob curses his first-born (Genesis 49:4). Jacob favors Joseph's younger son (Genesis 48:13-20). Er, Judah's first-born, is killed by God (Genesis 38:7). Jephthah kills his oldest daughter (Judges 11:34ff.). The king of Moab kills his first-born (II Kings 3:27). Hosah makes a younger son the chief instead of the first-born (I Chronicles 26:10). And Jesus is a first-born!

The profound ambivalence is shown by making the first-born belong to God. To give the first-born to God entails removing it from one's self. Thus, the Biblical writers attributed to God such things as: "Sanctify unto me all the first-born, whatsoever openeth the womb among the children of Israel, both of man and of beast: it is mine" (Exodus 13:2). And "Thou shalt not delay to offer the first of thy ripe fruits, and of thy liquors: the firstborn of thy sons shalt thou give unto me. Likewise shalt thou do with thine oxen, and with thy sheep: seven days it shall be with his dam; on the eighth day thou shalt give it me" (Exodus 22:29-30). There is little ambiguity throughout the Bible of what it means to "give" a living thing to God. "Giving" to God is a euphemism for killing, with what appears to be divine permission.

The male prior to the birth of the first child, has tenuously moved toward self-integration in his relations with his wife. The first-born is the critical test of this integration. With respect to the child, he needs to be a motherized father. The communion of the mother, which has been directed toward him, tends to turn in the direction of the child, and he regresses toward his earlier separatistic condition. His impulse to say, "You are not my son," is then particularly strong with respect to the first-born.

The way in which the Biblical story of Sarah's conception of Isaac is told raises questions concerning the authenticity of the paternity of Isaac and throws some light on Abraham's temptation to kill him. The

Biblical text has several "difficulties." These allow for an interpretation of dubious paternity of Isaac, if they do not suggest it. (It should be made clear at this point that I am making no effort to attempt to find out what "really happened." It is rather that I am seeking to understand the nature of the Biblical text as a document which renders a state of mind for our understanding.) On two occasions Abraham conceals the fact that Sarah is his wife, allowing her to be married to someone else. This happens once before the visit of the angels, and once afterward. In the first instance, she enters the house of Pharaoh. The text has Pharaoh saying, "I took her to me for a wife," although the Biblical text is sufficiently ambiguous to make it possible for the King James version to render it as "so I might have taken her to me to wife" (Genesis 12:19). Whether she actually has sexual relations with Pharaoh is not so important as is the fact that the Hebrew text would allow one to think so. In the second instance, she is taken into the house of Abimelech, who has a dream which prevents him from having sexual relations with her (Genesis 20:1ff.).

The possibility of Abraham not being the biological father seems to have been enough on the mind of the distinguished commentator Rashi for him to deal with it and deny it. The proof is, according to Rashi, that the text reads, "And these are the generations of Isaac, Abraham's son; Abraham begot Isaac."¹ Why does the Biblical text deviate from its usual pattern here? If these are the "generations of Isaac," why does the Biblical writer go backward to mention Abraham? And why is it necessary to say it twice? Rashi's commentary is: Since the text wrote "Isaac, the son of Abraham," it became necessary to state, "Abraham begot Isaac"; for the scorners of the generation were saying "From Abimelech did Sarah conceive, since for many years she tarried with Abraham and did not conceive from him." What did the Holy One Blessed Be He do? He formed the features of Isaac's face similar to Abraham, and there attested everyone, "Abraham begot Isaac." And that is why it is written here, "Isaac was the son of Abraham," for there is testimony that "Abraham begot Isaac." Needless to say, Rashi and his sources in the *Midrash* had neither photographs nor testimonials. Having to add a facial similarity between Abraham and Isaac would indicate that doubt was suggested by the text.²

Chapter 18 of Genesis, which deals with the visit of the angels, has difficulties. In this chapter it is foretold that Sarah will have a son. In the sixth verse, Abraham instructs Sarah to bake cakes for the guests, while in the seventh verse, he runs off to get and prepare a calf. But in

the eighth verse, where the meal is served, a meal of "butter, and milk, and the calf which he had dressed," there is no mention of the cakes. The text here allows a period of time in which Sarah was supposed to have been baking cakes while Abraham was away, and yet there are no cakes!

This chapter begins with three angels. Then the next chapter begins with only two angels, and there is no indication of what happened to the third angel. The ninth verse is "And they said unto him, Where is Sarah thy wife? And he said, Behold, in the tent." According to Biblical scholars, the next six verses, verses 10 through 15, are a substitution by the J2 author for something which had been put there earlier by the J1 author. These six verses are the critical ones in connection with the birth of Isaac, and one can only speculate that perhaps what is now only hinted at in the text might have been more explicit in the earlier version. The tenth verse is as follows: "And he said, I will certainly return unto thee according to the time of life; and, lo, Sarah thy wife shall have a son. And Sarah heard it in the tent door, *v'hoo acharav.*" I have simply transliterated the Hebrew at this point, rather than rendering the usual translation, "which was behind him." Rashi made it that the door was behind the angel, which probably was the basis for the translation in this manner. It can, however, be translated equally well as "and he behind it," suggesting that the angel was in the tent with Sarah. In one commentary, *Sifte Hakhamin*, it is explicitly suggested that the angel was in the tent and Abraham was outside. Tradition has it that the message was delivered to Sarah secretly. And tradition also has it that Sarah was radiant and that a beam of her beauty struck one of the angels.³

Isaac's name, which can mean "one laughs," the laughter of Sarah, and her denial of it, are also suggestive. Sarah laughs at the prediction that she will have a child, presumably at the irony of it. But it would appear that if she were laughing at the irony of it, she could certainly share this with her husband, who himself laughs at it (Genesis 17:17). The fifteenth verse is "Then Sarah denied, saying, I laughed not; for she was afraid. And he said, Nay; but thou didst laugh." Certainly the irony could provoke laughter. But then why is she afraid? Because she does not want to offend her guests by laughing at their outlandish prediction? The laughter and the denial might also be at Abraham's cuckoldry, with Isaac, "one laughs," the incarnation of the joke.

It is indicated that the angels will appear at the time of the birth of the child. Yet they do not reappear in the Old Testament. It is not until several hundred years later that the men, the wise men from the east

of the New Testament, can be considered to appear again, at the birth of Jesus, "the son of Abraham," as Jesus is described in Matthew (1:1), for whom the delayed fate of Isaac is in store.

What we may presume is that Abraham is a man who, in spite of tendencies and provocation to infanticide, would restrain his arm from killing. The Biblical text at this point provides some further illumination of the conflict and Abraham's handling of it in his personality. The Bible blends the story of the angels' visitation with the story of the destruction of Sodom. It would appear from the Biblical narrative that they stopped off to visit with Abraham on their way to Sodom. Fused here are the two tendencies I have been speaking of, the extension of the ego to include children and the tendency to destroy. The remainder of the chapter contains an interesting dialogue between Abraham and God, God bent on destroying the people of Sodom, and Abraham trying to dissuade him. Within this chapter is an explicit description of Abraham as the "good father." "For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment" (Genesis 18:19). We are now in a position to understand the symbolic significance of circumcision in terms of the conflict within Abraham. By circumcising his children, he puts "his" mark upon them. Thus, even if doubt exists in his mind concerning his paternity, he makes them "his" by putting a mark upon them as he has upon himself and seeks to arrange it so that his offspring will carry this mark indefinitely from generation to generation.

But what is equally important is that the act of circumcising the male child takes place on the eighth day, the day when children are to be "given" to God. The circumcision may be interpreted as a symbolic infanticide, whereby, instead of putting the child to death by the knife, only the foreskin is removed. By this ritual, while making the child "his," he symbolically expresses the infanticidal impulse in a partial "acting out." Later in the Bible, we find that Moses has not circumcised his child. His wife Zipporah performs a hurried circumcision. She "cut off the foreskin of her son, and cast it at his feet, and said, Surely a bloody husband art thou to me. So he let him go: then she said, A bloody husband thou art, because of the circumcision" (Exodus 4:25-26). In this text the association of circumcision and infanticide is strongly suggested.

One cannot hope to plumb the meaning of the Old Testament by any single interpretation. Yet its significance as a document which tells of the crisis involved in becoming a good father to children can-

not be overlooked. I have presumed that there must have been some time in history when the biological role of the male in pregnancy was unknown, and that there must have been some historical period in which this particular fact was discovered and integrated into the social structure. Yet this is not only historical, but must be repeated in the life of the individual male. Abraham, presented as the father of nations, is a paradigmatic figure in whom is formed a transgenerational ego identity.

NOTES

1. The Pentateuch and Rashi's Commentary, trans. Abraham ben Isaiah and Benjamin Sharfman (S. S. & R. Publishers, 1949), Vol. 1, Genesis 25:19.
2. That such doubt may even have been on Paul's mind is suggested by "Neither, because they are the seed of Abraham, are they all children: but, in Isaac shall thy seed be called" (Romans 9:7).
3. Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (Jewish Publication Society, 1913), Vol. 1, p. 244.

Freud and Freudians on Religion

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