

# Structure, Contradiction, and “Resolution” in Mythology: Father’s Brother’s Daughter Marriage and the Treatment of Women in Genesis 11–50<sup>1</sup>

NATHANIEL WANDER

University of California, San Diego

MYTHOLOGY,<sup>n</sup> The body of a primitive people’s beliefs concerning its origin, early history, heroes, deities and so forth as distinguished from the true accounts which it invents later.<sup>2</sup>

The Bible, I would assert, while it is composed of many kinds of texts including history, poetry, theology, and law, is predominantly myth. By *myth* I mean a particular rhetorical form characterized by social rather than individual authorship—Lévi-Strauss’ *pensée anonyme*—in which meanings are “spoken” not in explicit and self-conscious argument, but through a peculiarly overdetermined kind of structure. The interpretation of myth then is the analysis of structure, and though the rules of structuring may derive from some general properties of the human mind, the forms and contents of given structures derive from particular societies. Hence, the analysis of structure can only be

1 The materials for this essay, though considerably elaborated since, were first developed in a pair of undergraduate papers (“Paradigms and Patriarchs,” and “Semitic Kinship Terminology”) and a graduate paper (“The Tuareg as ‘Anti-Arab’”) at Columbia University in 1972, and much of the critical approach to structuralist method and theory developed further in the course of writing my doctoral dissertation, *Caste as Conceptual Scheme: A Structural Study of the Attribution of Order through Caste, Sacrifice and Mythology* (Columbia University, 1980). This project has been rethought and refought in presenting versions of it to the students of Professor Edward L. Greenstein’s course in “Critical Methodologies in the Study of the Bible” at the Jewish Theological Seminary in 1979 and 1981. For their advice and criticism I am indebted to Professors Alexander Alland, Jr., Conrad Arensberg, Robert Murphy, Abraham Rosman, and Paula Rubel of the Department of Anthropology, Columbia University, to Professor Michael E. Meeker of the Department of Anthropology, University of California at San Diego, and especially, to Professor Greenstein and his students at the Seminary.

2 A. Bierce in E. J. Hopkins, ed., *The Enlarged Devil’s Dictionary by Ambrose Bierce* (New York, 1967).

practiced in the context of ethnographic and/or historical descriptions of those societies.

For want of ethnographic or historical texts coeval with yet independent of the Bible—for myth does not passively mirror social reality but actively transforms it—how can we proceed in this case? I suggest it is possible to turn to descriptions of contemporary Semitic societies (those of Jews, Arabs, and various Asian and African peoples who have adopted Islamic practices) that are historically and structurally connected to the society represented in Genesis.

There appears to be a contradiction of wide provenience among Semitic societies (its roots buried deep within the history of these societies) between important instruments of political and social organization. These instruments include: 1) a peculiar form of ingroup marriage—that of a man and his father's brother's daughter (FBD); 2) a definition of group membership based upon kinship relations between males (patrilineal descent); 3) an ideology of patriarchal authority (patripotestality); 4) the use of genealogy to order relationships between groups. While all of these institutions seemingly originated in a common historical need, once called into existence the marriage form works to undermine the usefulness of the others. Anthropologists have suggested that a need to control women was both a cause<sup>3</sup> and a consequence<sup>4</sup> of this contradictory state of affairs and worse, that one attempt to resolve (or better, to obfuscate) this contradiction was through the exercise of a further kind of control over women: veiling them, secluding them, dropping their names from genealogical records and otherwise attempting to disguise or deny their importance and identity as individuals.<sup>5</sup> I propose to show that such a mystification of women appears in the texts of Genesis 11-50 and that it is best understood in terms of this contradiction.

### *Structuralism and Biblical Criticism*

In 1955, the French ethnologist Claude Lévi-Strauss published his first programmatic statements concerning "The Structural Study of Myth."<sup>6</sup> While this essay was highly rhetorical, a prolegomenon to a future analysis rather than a full-fledged or self-sufficient analysis in its own right, it has long remained the chief recipient of appreciations, revisions, criticisms, and objections to structural myth analysis.<sup>7</sup>

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3 M. E. Meeker, "Meaning and Society in the Near East. Examples from the Black Sea Turks and the Levantine Arabs," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 7 (1976), 234-70, 383-422.

4 R. F. Murphy and L. Kasdan, "The Structure of Parallel Cousin Marriage," *American Anthropologist* 61 (1959), 17-29; "Agnation and Endogamy: Some Further Considerations," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 23 (1967), 1-14.

5 This general line of argument traces to R. F. Murphy and L. Kasdan's *The Structure of Parallel Cousin Marriage* (see note 4) and to many discussions with Murphy over the years. In addition to the institutions I have noted here, I would also remark legal practices that sharply divide the role of "woman" between those of "wife" and "mother." For example, cf. page 91 below.

6 C. Lévi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth," *Journal of American Folklore* 68 (1955), 428-44; reprinted in Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* (New York, 1967).

7 Two or more less appreciative revisions—T. Turner, "Oedipus: Time and Structure in Narrative Form," in R. F. Spencer, ed., *Forms of Symbolic Action* (Seattle, 1969), and M. P. Carroll, "Lévi-Strauss on the Oedipus

"The Structural Study of Myth" is a curious essay in several regards, for its practices as much as for its contents. On the one hand, it violates any number of its own methodological prescriptions while on the other, it deals with the body of classical mythology—the foundation myths of Thebes—that Lévi-Strauss has generally since avoided, preferring for both practical and theoretical reasons to work with the mythologies of non-literate peoples. While a group of French classicists, notably Marcel Detienne,<sup>8</sup> have chosen to follow Lévi-Strauss' path further into Greek materials—though the charter for their project owes originally to the work of Georges Dumézil—anthropologists have generally followed the tack away from high culture materials and remained with the kinds of societies they have traditionally studied.<sup>9</sup> The exception to this, however, has been in the growing number of attempts by anthropologists and others to apply the Lévi-Straussian analytic to Biblical studies and especially to the Book of Genesis.

This movement was initiated by the British anthropologist Edmund Leach<sup>10</sup> and has, perhaps, been too often informed by Leach and not sufficiently by Lévi-Strauss. Yet, from the beginning, Leach's analyses however arguable have been interesting for their constant focus on broad sociological questions such as the problems of succession in patrilineal society, or the political implications of the Solomonic genealogy.<sup>11</sup> With Leach as exemplar, Mary Douglas<sup>12</sup> also began to take up the structural analysis of Biblical materials (focusing on classification rather than on myth *per se*), her work too showing its origins in British social anthropology. With the republication of three of Leach's essays in book form in 1969,<sup>13</sup> structuralist Biblical criticism was given considerable impetus and a number of books and essays appeared throughout the next

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Myth: A Reconsideration," *American Anthropologist* 80 (1977), 805–14—have asserted respectively that: "It would be ludicrous to use it as an example of Lévi-Strauss' total *oeuvre* or current position in the field of myth analysis (26)"; and: "Virtually all the theoretical ideas that underlie the new approach [of the four volume *Mythologique*] are contained in his 'The Structural Study of Myth' (805)." Both, of course, are correct.

8 Two of M. Detienne's principal works are now available in English as: *The Gardens of Adonis: Spices in Greek Mythology* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ, 1977) and *Dionysos Slain* (Baltimore, 1979).

9 T. Turner, *Oedipus: Time and Structure in Narrative Form*, and M. P. Carroll, *Lévi-Strauss on the Oedipus Myth: A Reconsideration* (see note 7) have both worked upon the Oedipus materials at least long enough to criticize and rethink Lévi-Strauss' analysis, and I have begun outlining a project that would set the Theban materials in the context of the foundation myths of other Greek city-states. I have also, in my doctoral dissertation—*Caste as Conceptual Scheme: A Structural Study of the Attribution of Order through Caste, Sacrifice and Mythology*—begun working on another body of classical mythology, that of India.

10 E. R. Leach, "Lévi-Strauss in the Garden of Eden: An Examination of Some Recent Developments in the Analysis of Myths," *Transactions of the New York Academy of Sciences*, Series III, 23 (1961), 386–96, reprinted in E. N. and T. Hayes, eds., *Claude Lévi-Strauss: The Anthropologist as Hero* (Cambridge, MA, 1970); "Genesis as Myth," *Discovery* 32 (1962), reprinted in Leach, *Genesis as Myth and Other Essays* (London, 1969), 7–23.

11 E. R. Leach, "The Legitimacy of Solomon," *European Journal of Sociology* 7 (1966), 58–101, reprinted in *Genesis as Myth*, 25–83.

12 M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London, 1966).

13 E. R. Leach, *Genesis as Myth*.

decade.<sup>14</sup> In the first half of 1981 alone, three new articles joined the list.<sup>15</sup>

While each of these works makes some useful contribution to Biblical criticism and/or to structuralist theory<sup>16</sup>, nonetheless they all fail at a crucial juncture. From the perspective of an anthropologist or historian, it is not (it should not be) acceptable practice to analyze textual materials in an ethnographic or historical vacuum. This problem is not resolved by Karen Andriolo's observation that biblical narrative is composed of both mythic and historical dimensions (as she productively defines them),<sup>17</sup> and it is scarcely dealt with at all by treating Biblical material as both text and ethnography/history, sometimes as one, sometimes as the other, as it suits the analyst's needs.

It is a principal tenet of structuralism that myths are transformations (and not just simple reflections) of real social and political processes and problems. Hence, without the specific knowledge of the historian or ethnographer, it is impossible to determine what is figure and what ground, what is *praxis* and what ideology, which is the theme and which the variations. Structural analyses that do not refer to empirically determinable features of real cultures and histories are hermetic and sterile and are eminently liable to the charges of being idiosyncratic and unverifiable. For this reason,

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14 Among the most important of these are: K. R. Andriolo, "A Structural Analysis of Genealogy and Worldview in the Old Testament," *American Anthropologist* 75 (1973), 1657-69; R. Barthes, "The Struggle with the Angel," in idem et al., *Structural Analysis and Biblical Exegesis* (Pittsburgh, 1974), 21-33, reprinted in Barthes, *Image/Music/Text* (New York, 1977), 125-41; M. P. Carroll, "Leach, Genesis and Structural Analysis: A Critical Evaluation," *American Ethnologist* 4 (1977), 663-77; M. Douglas, "Deciphering a Meal," *Daedalus* (Winter 1972), 61-81; A. W. Miller, "Claude Lévi-Strauss and Genesis 37-Exodus 20," in R. A. Brauner, ed., *Shiv'im: Essays and Studies in Honor of Ira Eisenstein* (Philadelphia/New York, 1977), 21-52; J. W. Rogerson, *Anthropology and the Old Testament* (Atlanta, 1978); R. C. Marshall, "Heroes and Hebrews: The Priest in the Promised Land," *American Ethnologist* 6 (1979), 772-90; J. Soler, "The Dietary Prohibitions of the Hebrews," *New York Review of Books* 26 (1979), 24-30.

15 K. R. Andriolo, "Myth and History: A General Model and Its Application to the Bible," *American Anthropologist* 83 (1981), 261-84; M. E. Donaldson, "Kinship Theory in the Patriarchal Narratives: The Case of the Barren Wife," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 49 (1981), 77-87; T. J. Prewitt, "Kinship Structures and the Genesis Genealogy," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 40 (1981), 87-98. From their titles, both Donaldson and Prewitt might seem to cover much of the same territory as the present essay. Prewitt's approach, however, despite its appeals to Lévi-Strauss, does not really fall within the structuralist tradition at all and Donaldson's work suffers from a lack of familiarity with Semitic marriage practices. Thus, she attempts to understand the material in terms of marriage of the mother's brother's daughter type (MBD), rather than of the father's brother's daughter type (FBD). Admittedly the first is the more common throughout the world in general, but the second is the particular problem of Semitic societies. Where FBD marriage is practiced, as R. Murphy and L. Kasdan, *The Structure of Parallel Cousin Marriage*, have noted, other cousin marriages tend to be assimilated to it. That is to say, kin relations become so entangled that all other cousin marriages tend to become extensions of the FBD type. People then get to choose, as it were, whether to recognize any given marriage as matrilineal cross-cousin (MBD) or patrilineal parallel cousin (FBD). (For the distinction between cross and parallel cousins, see note 32). There is evidence that the people themselves recognize this and clearly manipulate the designation of marriages stressing the matrilineal aspect when they wish a particular marriage to signify an alliance between groups and stressing the patrilineal aspect when they wish to symbolize solidarity within a particular group. On this latter see E. Marx, *Bedouin of the Negev* (New York, 1966). We will see an example of this situation when we come to consider the apparently matrilineal marriages of Jacob to Rachel and Leah.

16 I would single out especially K. R. Andriolo, *Myth and History: A General Model and Its Application to the Bible*; M. Douglas, *Deciphering a Meal*; and E. R. Leach, *The Legitimacy of Solomon*.

17 K. R. Andriolo, *Myth and History: A General Model and Its Application to the Bible*.

Lévi-Strauss concluded<sup>18</sup> that the Bible was not amenable to his methods of analysis. Where could one possibly seek for an ethnographic or historical contra-text within which to examine the Biblical materials?

### *Text and Con(tra)text*

One possible answer is: through the comparative analysis of documents from other ancient near eastern societies. But, while the comparative analysis of texts is far preferable to no comparison at all (and will ultimately be necessary, I believe, for any complete Biblical analysis), it would still confine us within the realm of texts and of texts whose status (as myth or ethnography) may be finally indeterminable. For an anthropologist such as myself familiar with none of the languages necessary to a study of this sort save only Hebrew, this type of comparison is simply not possible.<sup>19</sup>

For reasons of both weakness and strength, I propose an alternative: to turn to the ethnography of contemporary Semitic societies. Naturally, there are problems with this approach as well, the gist of which is that it might seem to ignore three thousand years of Middle Eastern history. Allan Gilbert, an archaeologist, has fairly summed up this objection in his argument against the use of materials on contemporary nomads to enlighten the prehistory of nomadism,<sup>20</sup> and several of his criticisms apply equally well if one *only* wants to travel as far back as "Biblical times."

As Gilbert correctly notes, modern nomads live in a technological, economic, and political environment radically transformed from that of their ancestors. Modern pastoralists have available to them a host of technologies and resources quite other than did their ancestors—and both goods and techniques have undoubtedly been lost as well as gained—and they have been integrated into a complex regional economy mostly dominated by peasantry, itself integrated into an even more complex world economy mostly dominated by investment banking. Surely there have been profound changes in domestic and political organization, etc., etc. and consequently in the whole nexus of values and meanings through which men only indirectly act in and upon the world. For all these reasons and many others, retrospection from contemporary to ancient near eastern societies is at best a dubious sort of venture.

However, and this is both a very large and very qualified however, there is good

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18 C. Lévi-Strauss, personal communication, Spring 1972.

19 This want of training (especially) in ancient languages is often taken by classical scholars as unforgivable evidence of the anthropologist's presumptuousness in deigning to enter their territory. Yet, as they know only too well, the serious study of these languages is itself a full-time discipline debarring or, at least, making exceedingly difficult the acquisition of another such as anthropology. If anthropology has anything to offer to the understanding of contemporary societies, it likely has something to offer to the understanding of ancient ones as well. Classicists, historians, and anthropologists need to work together with respect for each other's credentials, to share disciplinary expertise, and to criticize the *substance* of each other's analyses. Little is gained for knowledge (though much may be gained for the institutional divisions of the university system) by crying "What temerity!" and so putting an end to all exchange.

20 A. S. Gilbert, "Modern Nomads and Prehistoric Pastoralists: The Limits of Analogy," *JANES* 7 (1975), 53-72.

evidence that some major social practices have persisted into modern times—perhaps even grown in significance—and, moreover, I do not intend to project the present into the past in the pretense of doing historiography. Rather, I would like to open up a dialogue between the ages to see just how far it is possible to go in transforming a historical dimension into a structural one. Whether acknowledged or not and though we typically work with time spans no longer than those of our own field stays, this has always been one of the principal activities of anthropology.

Obviously, this practice can only be legitimate so long as one does succeed in mapping history onto some equally valid form of description and never if one merely discards history for the sake of convenience. This means, in the first instance, that one must never forget the obvious fact that the Bible itself has had an exceedingly long history, that not only has the text undergone a protracted process of redaction, but it has surely meant some very different things to different peoples in a series of historically connected but discrete epochs. (Hence, my placing the phrase “Biblical times” between quotes.) While many of the authors cited here seem to have been interested in what Genesis might have meant for pre-state pastoral nomads, this is not exclusively the case. Leach<sup>21</sup> was quite clearly interested in what it might have signified for perhaps only a single class and towards the end of the First Kingdom, while Judah Goldin has written on its meanings for some unspecified “the people,” as well as for scholars ancient, medieval, and modern.<sup>22</sup> Alan Miller chose to focus upon how the texts might have been understood by Exilic Jewry most generally and, it would seem, how they could be understood by contemporary American Jews.<sup>23</sup> While I should not want to guarantee that any of these analyses is correct, I do accept that each is potentially valid in terms of the particular understanding of a particular epoch and a particular audience.

### *The Ethnographic Context*

The epoch I imagine myself to be interested in is not so much that of a naive pre-state pastoralism but of the transition through a mixed herding, farming, and mercantile society upon which the first Hebrew state would come to be built. That is, I am interested in what the tales of the patriarchs might have signified to a people engaged in moving away from just such a life or, perhaps, having recently completed that

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21 E. R. Leach, *The Legitimacy of Solomon*.

22 J. Goldin, “The Youngest Son or Where Does Genesis 38 Belong,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 96 (1977), 27–44. I believe that I can show this “problem of the youngest son”—the repetition of near fratricidal quarrels between brothers which are regularly resolved in the favor of the younger who then, under an ostensible system of primogeniture, succeeds to the “birthright” and the status of patriarch—to be part of the complex at issue here. While I will return to this issue briefly in my closing remarks, to do so thoroughly would require the introduction of considerably more Biblical reference as well as materials on politics and inheritance in contemporary Semitic societies. As this essay is already overburdened, I would prefer to leave it for another. I would add that Goldin comes amazingly close to such an analysis but ultimately wants for both the ethnographic materials and the structural framework.

23 A. W. Miller, *Claude Lévi-Strauss and Genesis 37—Exodus 20*.

movement. I suspect that for a society in this position many of the contradictions of the *ancien régime* might have been more obvious and disturbing than even for those who actually lived through them. Moreover, if as I believe, some of the most disturbing of those contradictions derive from a clash of institutions that carried over from the old order into the new and possibly even increased in force, then the need to work through and apparently resolve (if not mystify) those contradictions must have been at its most powerful. I say apparently resolve for, if Levi-Strauss and logic are anything to go by, while "the purpose of myth" may be "to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction," this hopeful task is really quite hopeless, "*an impossible achievement if, as it happens, the contradiction is real.*"<sup>24</sup> In this aspect, at least, myths are like neurotic defense mechanisms: *ultimately* flawed, even useless solutions, but solutions to problems requiring *immediate* solace.

The particular contradiction I have in mind, as I indicated earlier, involves a clash between institutions of marriage and other instruments of political and social organization. It was first noted among Bedouins by the anthropologists Robert Murphy and Leonard Kasdan,<sup>25</sup> who argued that the peculiar type of in-group marriage found among these peoples would tend to undermine the usefulness of principles of descent and genealogy. That is to say, the advantages of organizing a society along clear lines of descent (in this case, through males) and of reckoning the relations between such descent groups in terms of genealogy, tend to be lost when wives are taken from within these groups rather than from "strangers."<sup>26</sup> In such circumstances, the lines of descent become obscured as the group of people actually living and working together are all equally related through females as through males. The ideal of unilineality (or descent measured in a single line) is falsified and the use of genealogy to order relationships of power, authority, succession, inheritance is called into question by a contrary reality. The potential for conflict between groups is exacerbated and since marriages are largely confined within single groups, the value of marriage for making alliances between groups is limited.

According to Murphy and Kasdan (and Murphy writing of a symmetrical problem among the Tuareg of North Africa),<sup>27</sup> with the reality of unilineality so severely compromised, the response was to work the ideology of patrilineality and patripotestality (patriarchal authority) even harder. Hence the attempts to hide, disguise, or deny the importance, not to say the existence, of women through such customs as veiling,

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24 C. Lévi-Strauss, *The Structural Study of Myth*, 443.

25 R. F. Murphy and L. Kasdan, *The Structure of Parallel Cousin Marriage and Agnation and Endogamy: Some Further Considerations*.

26 These benefits have been traditionally understood to include the creation of corporate resource holding and using groups defined in terms of genealogical relationships (lineages), the structuring of relations of power, authority, and succession within lineages, and the creation of alliances between such lineages through marriage and other forms of exchange. In-group (endogamous) marriages, however, can potentially obscure lineality, impair incorporation, and turn the smaller segments of a larger structure back on themselves. This process would confuse issues of succession and authority, undermine the use of genealogy as an instrument of political organization, and enhance rather than reduce the possibilities for conflict between segments and between lineages.

27 R. F. Murphy, "Social Distance and the Veil," *American Anthropologist* 66 (1964), Part II:1257-74; "Tuareg Kinship," *American Anthropologist* 69 (1967), 163-70.

seclusion, and the dropping of their names from genealogical memory. It is precisely these processes that I find at work in the Biblical texts.<sup>28</sup>

What I propose to look at here are a few Biblical *mythemes* as they come to compose *fields* concerned with matters of women and marriage. A mytheme may be described as a set of related "events," for example, the barrenness of Sarah, of Rebekah, and of Rachel, while a field may be described as the "subject" of a number of mythemes, as I am defining the field of women here to include the mytheme of barrenness as well as that of the replacement of one wife by another.<sup>29</sup> These fields are undoubtedly comprised of more mythemes than the handful I note—chiefly the marriages of the matriarchs and patriarchs and the repeated doubts about the fertility, effectiveness, and identity of the matriarchs. The field of marriage is certainly comprised of more than just the FBD type I focus on here (the levirate, for example), and, within the field of women, I will only be looking at the roles of "mother" and of "wife."

Many of the events I will point to might have been parsed in more than one way and hence assigned to different mytheme groups than the ones I have chosen. I do not find this to be a problem, for while I am sure that some parsings can be shown to be better or more useful (if not more correct) than others, several parsings are likely to prove useful for different purposes of analysis. As Lévi-Strauss noted early on,<sup>30</sup> myths typically span several levels of significance, acquiring new meanings as they persist through time without ever discarding the old. *Myths never forget*. Surely, several

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28 Although I am treating the question of FBD marriage and its implications here as if Murphy and Kasdan's analysis is absolutely straightforward and unobjectionable, that is not the case. The first Murphy and Kasdan paper, *The Structure of Parallel Cousin Marriage*, was itself a rethinking of earlier approaches to the subject—including F. Barth, "Father's Brother's Daughter Marriage in Kurdistan," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 10 (1954), 164–71; H. R. P. Dickson, *The Arab of the Desert. A Glimpse into Badawin Life in Kuwait and Sau'di Arabia* (London, 1951); A. Musil, *The Manners and Customs of the Rwala Bedouins* (New York, 1928)—and it stirred up a continuing debate on this topic. An earlier draft of this paper explicated the Murphy and Kasdan position in some detail and dealt at length with the history of the argument since then. The editors of *JANES* felt that this presentation was highly technical and not entirely appropriate here; that to make it so, it would either have to be elaborated considerably or else cut to approximately its present size. (The debate is necessarily replete with the language and concepts of the Arabist and the anthropologist and to make it intelligible to the non-specialist would require innumerable and awkward explanations and definitions much as I have been struggling with here such as of patrilineality or endogamy, for example.) I am presently preparing an analysis of this issue for publication elsewhere but would be glad to share my material with any interested reader.

29 If readers have come away from the *The Structural Study of Myth* with anything, it is with the saw that in addition to a syntactic, or syntagmatic, or narrative dimension to the organization of a myth or a myth cycle, there is a paradigmatic dimension as well. Not only do events follow each other in sequence or time— $N_1$  begat  $N_2$  who begat  $N_3$  who begat . . .  $N_n$ —but they replicate (with transformation) each other as well— $N_1$  begat  $N_2$  who begat both  $N_3$  and  $N_4$  but  $N_3$  died before he could beget and  $N_4$  . . .  $N_j$ . Lévi-Strauss dissected out a handful of such events from the Theban myth cycle and arrayed them in columns according to the two dimensions which he compared to the melodic and harmonic aspects of a symphonic score. This early display device was somewhat procrustean and has been productively criticized from within structuralism by such as T. Turner's *Oedipus: Time and Structure in Narrative Form* and M. Detienne's *Dionysos Slain*. Lévi-Strauss' handling of mythic structure, however, has constantly evolved both in response to its confrontation with new materials and to the development of its own insights. If we are stuck with the awkward display device used in *The Structural Study of Myth* as anything more than a historical curiosity, it is not for Lévi-Strauss' fault but rather for that of the swarm of *soi-disant* structuralists and anti-structuralists who mistook the original essay for a cookbook rather than the treatise on gastronomy it really is.

30 C. Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked* (New York, 1969).

parsings have been/are used by the various societies for whom Genesis was/is part of a living culture.

### *Genesis and the Field of Marriage*

*And Laban said, "Better I should give her to you than that I should give her to another man." (Gen. 29:19)*

To discover FBD marriage—or, at least, a preference for marriage within the patrilineage—in the Biblical materials is anything but a surprise. It is, after all, a Semitic practice of long duration and wide diffusion.<sup>31</sup> What is interesting is that marriages of the FBD type in Genesis have all been described by Biblical narrators as much as by scholarly analysts as just about everything and anything else. The marriage between Abraham and Sarah is given as one between half-siblings. That between Isaac and Rebekah is described as one within the ethnic group, though it quickly reveals itself even to the participants as a FBD marriage. Jacob's marriages to Leah/Rachel are described as both intra-ethnic and as matrilineal, i.e., mother's brother's daughter (MBD) types. Esau's marriage to Basemat is cast as a marriage outside the people of Israel. Finally, Lot's unions with his daughter's are described, though curiously without moralizing, as nothing more than incest. Each of these unions, however, may easily be seen as a variation of the FBD marriage theme.

Indeed, each of these marriages may well be something else in addition to being of the FBD type and this for reasons of social practice as much as of mythological method. As Murphy and Kasdan have noted, a system of endogamous (parallel) cousin marriage<sup>32</sup> loops the strands of genealogy back upon themselves so that after a minimum of only three generations matrikin and patrikin overlap to the extent that one's relationship to virtually any cousin can be traced either matri- or patrilineally. As Marx noted for Israeli Bedouin,<sup>33</sup> how participants choose to label their cousin marriages is a matter of rhetoric rather than kinship *per se*. That is, marriages intended to create relations between two groups tend to be called MBD marriages, while those intended to intensify relationships within the group tend to be referred to as FBD. Moreover, if Murphy and Kasdan are correct in asserting that the preference for

31 See H. Goldberg, "FRD Marriage and Demography among Tripolitanian Jews in Israel," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 23 (1967), 176–91; F. Barth, *Father's Brother's Daughter Marriage in Kurdistan and Nomads of South Persia* (Boston, 1961); E. Marx, *Bedouin of the Negev*; R. F. Murphy, *Social Distance and the Veil*, and *Tuareg Kinship*, etc. (And, of course, this marriage practice is to be found among Islamicized peoples of South and Southeast Asia and the Pacific as well.) Correspondingly, it is extremely rare outside the Semitic or Islamic world and, with the possible exception of Bali, there does not seem to be a single Old World case that can definitely be shown to be free of all Semitic influences.

32 Parallel cousins are descended from siblings of the same sex—two brothers or two sisters. They can be distinguished from cross cousins who are descended from siblings of opposite sexes—a brother/sister pair. In societies that only recognize kinship through relatives of one sex or the other but not both (societies with unilineal systems of descent), parallel cousins will be thought to belong to the same kinship groups as each other, but cross cousins will be assigned to two different kin groups.

33 E. Marx, *Bedouin of the Negev*.

marriages of the FBD type is really an expression of a more general preference for kin-group endogamy rather than for a particular marriage type—and Marx's observations with regard to other marriage forms such as father's sister's daughter (FSD) marriage support this position—then it is not FBD marriage so much as a class of endogamous marriages which is our proper subject here. Lastly, the appearance of these marriages in a mythic text rather than a social context means that they will carry additional burdens. Myth does not report upon social affairs so much as it meditates upon them arguing with social realities, testing out alternatives, and struggling to resolve (mystify) contradictions. Whatever myths are, they are not newspapers (though much of journalism turns out to be myth in exactly the sense I mean it here).

### *When Is a Sister a FBD?*

Consider the marriage of Abraham and Sarah. Abraham refers to her on two occasions as "my sister" (Gen. 12:13 & 20:2), both times in contexts he explains as protecting his life from a lustful king who could exchange for a sister but would kill for a wife. Yet he is ardent in insisting that Sarah *really* is his sister and his insistence takes the form:

She is the daughter of my father but not the daughter of my mother (20:12).

While this expression is often glossed in the most explicit possible way as "half-sister," I suggest it would be better understood as "kinswoman closely related to me in the paternal line," a patrilineal cousin, in fact. Semitic kinship terminology is of the sort called *descriptive*. Every relative is properly named in terms of distinct genealogical relations and there are generally no *classificatory* terms such as 'uncle,' only father's brother, father's sister's husband, mother's sister's husband, mother's brother.<sup>34</sup> In fact though, following Millicent Ayoub<sup>35</sup> and others, this kind of terminology is commonly manipulated for instrumental purposes, and cousins in particular tend to call each other by the terms convenient for bringing each other closer or holding each other at greater genealogical distance as circumstances make desirable.

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34 Strictly speaking this is not entirely true. There is the very common usage in Arabic of *ʿam* for 'father's brother,' 'father-in-law,' and 'respected elder male.' There is also the use of essentially non-kin terms as well, such as *hennati* (from the red hair stain, hennah) for 'grandmother' among the Bedouin of Saudi Arabia (G. Dalton, personal communication, Spring, 1972). How closely Biblical Hebrew corresponds to what I have described as Semitic kinship terminology (Wander, "Semitic Kinship Terminology," unpublished paper, 1972) is not entirely clear to me. Descriptive terms are generally applied, but there are exceptions. Thus, in Leviticus the terms *ʾāḥōi ʾābīkā* and *ʾāḥōi ʾimmekā* are generally used for father's sister (18:12) and mother's sister (18:13) respectively. Father's brother's wife, however, is referred to as both *ʾēšet ʾāḥi ʾābīkā* 'the wife of your father's brother' and *dōdatkā* 'your aunt' (18:14). In Lev. 20:19, the descriptive terms for father's sister and mother's sister both reappear, but *dōdātō* is used apparently for both FB and MB in 20:20. It would be interesting to know when the couple *dōd/dōdā* for 'uncle' and 'aunt' appeared in Hebrew and whether their usage was more restricted than the general Indo-European terms.

35 M. R. Ayoub, "Bipolarity in Arabic Kinship Terms," *Ninth International Congress of Linguists*, Janua Linguarum, Series Maior 17 (The Hague, 1964), 1100-6.

Father's father's brother's son's sons (what we would call second cousins) are called father's brother's sons (first cousins in our usage), and father's brother's sons may be called brothers. (See Figure 1.) If Sarah were a FBD then Abraham could be seen performing a maneuver of this sort, i.e., calling a cousin sister (FBD → FD). In a system of patrilineal reckoning, Sarah *should* be no relative of Abraham's mother but only of his father, for such a system only acknowledges kinship links through males. If Abraham's father himself had married a FBD, then she (Abraham's mother) would be related to Sarah as patrilineal cousin, specifically a FFBD, as would Sarah's own mother as well! (See Figure 2.) This is precisely the kind of genealogical tangling that threatens to obscure the clear lines of patrilineality. We will see more of this as well as of the manipulation of degrees of genealogical distance below.

### KEY

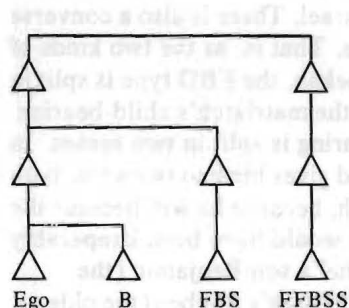
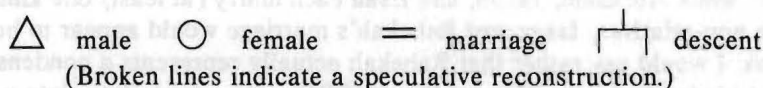


Figure 1

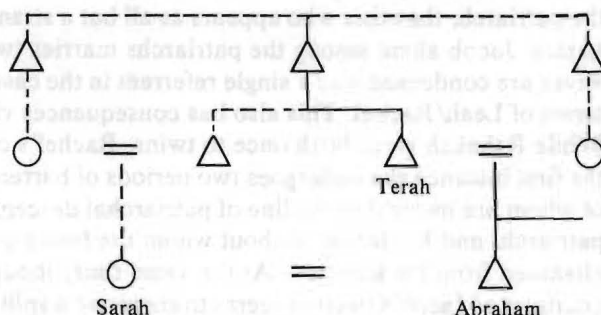


Figure 2

### When Is an Israelite a FBD?

Though the seeking of a wife for Isaac is framed by his father in principally ethnic terms, yet it quickly emerges that Rebekah is more to Isaac than just a tribeswoman or even just any relative. Abraham charges his retainer:

Do not take a wife for my son from among the daughters of the Canaanites. (Gen. 24:3)

but rather:

Go to my land and to my birthplace and take a wife for my son.(24:4)

Though the servant repeats this instruction to Rebekah's brother Laban (24:37–38), soon after he refers to Rebekah as "my master's brother's daughter" (24:48).

This last is interesting not only for its clear reference to FBD marriage, but for the fact that to make that reference explicit the servant performs a genealogical reduction. Strictly speaking Rebekah is not Abraham's brother's daughter (BD) but rather Abraham's brother's son's daughter (BSD). Hence, Rebekah's relationship to Isaac is FBSD rather than FBD in the most limited sense. (See Figure 3.) Abraham's brother's son Bethuel has simply been dropped from the servant's formulation. Later, when Jacob comes seeking his uncle, he too omits Bethuel from the genealogical record asking after Laban ben Nahor rather than Laban ben Bethuel ben Nahor (Gen. 29:5).

In the sense that the acknowledgement of FBD marriage in this variant is so overt, it seems rather weak when compared to the other members of the FBD mytheme. When we come to consider Rebekah's case with regard to the barrenness mytheme, we will note that it too is relatively weak when compared to the case of the other matriarchs. Neither does Rebekah give birth at such an improbably old age as does Sarah, nor does childbirth lead to her death as in the case of Rachel.

Moreover, while Abraham, Jacob, and Esau each marry (at least) one kinswoman and one or more non-relatives, Isaac and Rebekah's marriage would appear to be monogamous. I would say rather that Rebekah actually represents a condensation of the two different kinds of wives—close relative = FBD and non-relative—into a single referent. Consequently, she bears twin (i.e., condensed) sons, one of whom can become the patriarch, the other who appears as all but a stranger to Israel. There is also a converse to this. Jacob alone among the patriarchs marries two FBDs. That is, as the two kinds of wives are condensed into a single referent in the case of Rebekah, the FBD type is split in terms of Leah/Rachel. This also has consequences vis-à-vis the matriarch's child-bearing. While Rebekah gives birth once to twins, Rachel's child-bearing is split in two senses. In the first instance she undergoes two periods of barrenness and gives birth to two sons, both of whom are integral to the line of patriarchal descent: Joseph, because he will become the patriarch, and Benjamin, without whom the future patriarch would have been irreparably alienated from his kinsmen. At the same time, though, Rachel's son Benjamin (the youngest of Jacob's twelve) seems to comprise a split pair with Leah's Reuben (the oldest). In fact, they share the function of mediating Joseph's reconciliation with his kinsmen in that Reuben tries unsuccessfully to prevent the disjunction at its outset as Benjamin succeeds at its conclusion.<sup>36</sup>

### *When Is a MBD a FBD?*

On the face of it, Jacob's marriages to Leah/Rachel are straightforward marriages of the MBD (mother's brother's daughter) type and so all the actors describe them. (They are

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<sup>36</sup> Briefly in the two preceding paragraphs I have touched upon a number of formal processes in myth; condensation, splitting, perhaps a symmetrical relationship between the two, and the connection between paradigm (e.g., Rebekah's status as wife as compared to Rachel's) and syntagm (e.g., a matriarch's status as wife and its relationship to her status as mother). I will return to these formal aspects of myth when I have had the chance to present more of the textural material to illustrate them. See also n. 45 below.

also placed in the context, as was Isaac's, of not being with Canaanites [Gen. 28:1].) Jacob is commanded by his father:

And take yourself . . . a wife from among the daughters of Laban your mother's brother.  
(28:2)

As Murphy and Kasdan have pointed out, however,<sup>37</sup> after two generations of FBD parallel cousin marriage—Abraham's and Isaac's—Jacob's MBD cross-cousin marriages turn out to be second degree parallel cousin marriages as well. (See Figure 4.)<sup>38</sup> The choice of how to regard these marriages—as FBD type and representing group encystment or as MBD type and representing inter-group alliance—belongs to the participants.

How do the participants view these marriages? While Jacob and Laban generally refer to each other in the terminology of patrilineality,<sup>39</sup> the marriages are spoken of as of the

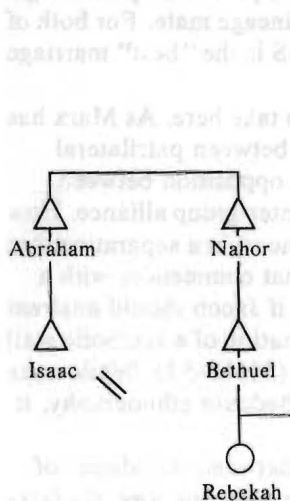


Figure 3

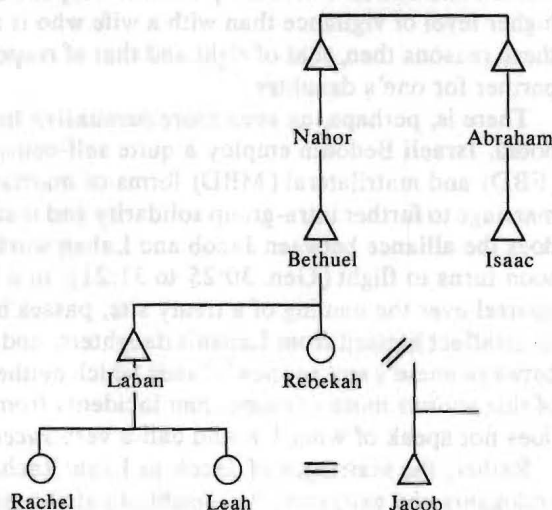
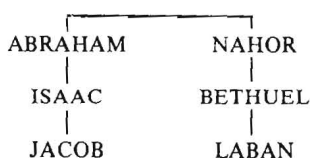


Figure 4

37 R. F. Murphy and L. Kasdan, *The Structure of Parallel Cousin Marriage*, 22–23.

38 As per Figure 4, one can see that while Jacob and Laban are uncle and nephew, they are also cousin to each other: Laban is Jacob's FFBSS, what we'd likely call in American kin parlance a first cousin twice removed. Indeed, Jacob's mother Rebekah is also his cousin in the same degree. Again, witness the twisting of the genealogical threads I've been speaking of.

39 Jacob refers to Laban as 'father's brother' (Gen. 29:12); Laban calls Jacob 'brother' (29:15); Laban invokes the patrilineal relationship:



in order to categorize the relationship between Jacob and himself (31:53).

MBD type. So Rebekah terms them (27:43–46) as does Isaac (28:2) and Laban refers to Jacob at least once as sister's son (28:13). Other details tend to countervene.

The first is Laban's speech cited at the outset of this section: "Better that I should give her to you than that I should give her to another man" (Gen. 29:19). While this might simply gloss: "better to *any* relative than to a non-relative" and that relationship be understood as mother's brother/sister's son, it is reminiscent of a rhetorical pattern that accompanies FBD marriage as it is practiced in contemporary Semitic societies. In these societies the FBS typically has a quasi-legal right to marriage with his FBD, a right he must formally relinquish if she is to wed any other man. Further, according to Michael Meeker,<sup>40</sup> it is the father's brother's son who, above all patrilineal relatives, is most nearly identified with his paternal uncle in terms of the two-dimensional code of honor, the *sharaf* 'honor' of the lineage and the *ard* 'sexual honor' of a man vis-à-vis his wife. Thus the father's brother's son shares the general lineage responsibility of preserving the honor of its women and unites it with the particular responsibility of a husband, presumably insuring a higher level of vigilance than with a wife who is not also a close lineage mate. For both of these reasons then, that of right and that of responsibility, the FBS is the "best" marriage partner for one's daughter.

There is, perhaps, an even more persuasive line of argument to take here. As Marx has noted, Israeli Bedouin employ a quite self-conscious distinction between patrilateral (FBD) and matrilateral (MBD) forms of marriage to express an opposition between marriage to further intra-group solidarity and marriage to further inter-group alliance. How does the alliance between Jacob and Laban work itself out? In rancor, in a separation that soon turns to flight (Gen. 30:25 to 31:21); in a tenuous peace that commences with a quarrel over the naming of a treaty site, passes by way of threats if Jacob should mistreat or disaffect himself from Laban's daughters, and ends with the creation of a symbolic wall between uncle's and nephew's lands which neither is ever to cross (31:44–53). While none of this sounds more extreme than incidents from contemporary Bedouin ethnography, it does not speak of what I would call a very *successful* alliance.

Rather, the marriages of Jacob to Leah/Rachel seem to slide between the idioms of endogamy and exogamy, the weight of patrilineal ideology pulling them one way, the facts of marriage and of the value of alliance pulling them the other. "Cross cousin marriage within a system structured primarily by parallel cousin marriage" is necessarily chimerical, part this, part that, part the other, and extremely labile in practical consequences however hard the participants work at "thinking" it stable. It should be understandable then why of all the patriarchal marriages this one and the affinal (in-law) relationships built upon it are the most problematic.

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40 M. E. Meeker, *Meaning and Society in the Near East. Examples from the Black Sea Turks and the Levantine Arabs*, Part II.

### When Is a Non-Israelite a FBD?

As the marriages of Isaac and Jacob are spoken of as marriages within the 'am 'people,' those of Esau are explicitly characterized as marriages with foreigners. Indeed, Esau himself is all but cast as a foreigner: "He is Edom" (Gen. 36:1) who "took his wives from among the daughters of Canaan" (36:2). Two Canaanite women are named but in a third verse Basemat, Ishmael's daughter, is "slipped" into the list without any reference to either her kinship or her nationality. She might as well be another Canaanite, perhaps, as she is not of Israel either through her Egyptian mother or her father (the disinherited Ishmael), but she is certainly Esau's kinswoman and his FBD or,  $F\frac{1}{2}BD$  at the very least. (See Figure 5.) Even this marriage with outsiders is marked if not remarked as FBD type.

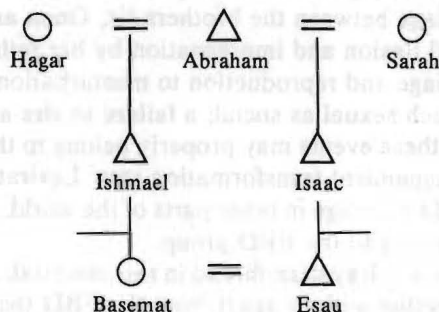


Figure 5

Indeed, in their transformation Esau's marriages parallel those of his brother Jacob quite closely. Where Jacob marries two kinswomen—who, as I have noted, might be thought of as a single split referent—and then two strangers, Esau first marries two strangers and then a single kinswoman. Again, while Jacob's wives bear him twelve sons and a daughter, Esau's wife Basemat is herself a sister with twelve brothers. This sort of symmetry, replication with transformation, both distinguishes Jacob and Esau from each other at one level of meaning while it identifies the two at a level of structure.

### When Is Endogamy Finally Incest?

The case of Lot and his daughters is surely the most interesting member of the transformation set as the term  $FBD \rightarrow D$  and the relationship *marriage*  $\rightarrow$  *incest*. Yet, it has never received an adequate or appropriate discussion because it has never been correctly identified as a variant within the FBD mytheme. While critics have been engaged, fascinated, shocked by these unions, the Biblical narrative (Gen. 19:30-38) is remarkably phlegmatic about them. They are presented in an entirely neutral tone, no untoward results are attributed to them, and the births they lead to are treated formulaically just as are those of the founders of any other Canaanite people.

Carroll<sup>41</sup> has come closest to a proper understanding of these unions in terms of the theory of marriage exchange and alliance, but since he is apparently unaware of the Semitic FBD pattern, he can only discuss them in the most general terms. He does not see through to the marvellous subtlety of the message: while endogamous marriage of the FBD type is near enough to incest, it is still a step away from it. By reducing FBD marriage to father—daughter incest, this variant demonstrates just how close endogamous marriage is to incest while serving yet to distinguish the two.

I think now that enough variants have been adduced to confirm the existence of a transformation group comprising a mytheme on FBD marriage and to explore something of its nature. I do not doubt that other mythemes relating to the field of marriage could also be discovered in this material. There are, for example, a series of events which center on the failure of leviratical marriage between the brothers Er, Onan and Shela and the woman Tamar, on Tamar's sexual liaison and impregnation by her father-in-law Judah, and on Onan's reduction of marriage and reproduction to masturbation (Gen. 38). (After all, Onan's crime is not so much sexual as social; a failure to sire a son to continue his older brother's name.) Perhaps these events may properly belong to the FBD group, perhaps to one or more relatively independent transformation sets. Leviratical marriage forms do exist independently of FBD marriage in other parts of the world. In this case, however, my intuition is that they do belong to the FBD group.

There may also be a distinct Egyptian thread in this material, though I am not sure how to understand it either together with or apart from the FBD theme. Still, there is the repetition in the cases of Abraham, Ishmael, and Joseph of not just any foreign wife but specifically an Egyptian one. Having barely scratched the surface of the field of marriage, still, I would like to turn to the position of women in this material and to the powerful attempts to control them that seem to be so striking throughout Semitic ethnographic materials.

### *The Control of Women*

... the first [she camel] as the price of her womb, in which she carried her sons; the second as the price of her breasts; and the third as the price of her hip, on which she lay while suckling them. . . . Besides these she takes a fourth camel as the price of her husband, whom she served until his death. . . . The fourth camel is inherited by her kin while the first three fall to the kin of her late husband, [i.e., following her own death].<sup>42</sup>

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41 M. P. Carroll, *Leach, Genesis and Structural Analysis: A Critical Evaluation*. This is a good demonstration of the notion that myths do not reflect but transform and employ symbolically the materials of society. On the one hand, incest here does not quite mean incest in any transparent sense but stands for a form of marriage that is perilously close to it. Consequently, from its treatment here, little or nothing can be said of ancient Hebrews' beliefs about incest *qua* incest.

42 A. Musil, *The Manners and Customs of the Rwala Bedouins*, 664. The author is commenting on the inheritance rights of a Rwala Bedouin woman who has been predeceased by her sons as well as by her husband.

If Murphy and Kasdan are correct, the problem for an ostensibly unilineal society with a preference for lineage endogamy is not the control of women most generally but of particular women, the members of the kin group whose identity threatens to obfuscate the clear lines of genealogy when they marry back into their own lineages. The issue is cast in terms of kinship roles: it is the transformation *sister/cousin* → *wife* that creates the problem. Meeker, although approaching the issue from a different perspective, casts it in comparable terms. From his position control of women is the prior element while the transformation *father/brother* → *husband/cousin* is its solution. I suggest that Meeker's solution may exacerbate Murphy and Kasdan's problem leading to a vicious circle not entirely manageable within the realms of descent and marriage and thus requiring appeal to other institutions: law, behavioral codes (veiling, seclusion), myth, etc. The Musil citation provides a case of this.

The Bedouin inheritance law Musil records would seem to have symbolic consequences at least as significant as those it holds for the distribution of brood-camels. It explicitly identifies an inheritance right with the parts of woman's anatomy instrumental for birthing and rearing sons and distinguishes this right from that due for services as a wife. Thus, it draws a rather clear distinction between *mother* and *wife* and loads the balance of the equation three to one in favor of the first. Moreover, in following through the logic of the brood-camel distribution beyond a woman's own death, it serves clearly to distinguish *wife takers* ("the kin of her late husband") from *wife givers* ("her kin") who, in fact, are likely to overlap if not be identical under the conditions of FBD marriage. At the same time, it assigns *descent* (the three camels for child-bearing/rearing) to the first group and *marriage* (the camel for wifely services) to the second. Thus, the inheritance law struggles to distinguish precisely what the marriage practices have confounded, but it struggles in a distinct way. A contradiction created within or better between the realms of marriage and descent is pushed off onto the (social) identity of women who are made to bear so much of the burden of this system.

In the Biblical materials I find evidence of both this overburdened wife/mother dichotomy as well as of a more general attempt to obfuscate the identity of particular women and to disparage their effectiveness in fulfilling wife/mother roles. Mothers and wives are obviously important people and effective in their roles or else society ceases to exist. It is, after all, Rebekah who schemes to win the birthright for her younger son, not Jacob himself, and it is Rebekah who arranges to send her son to her brother's house for protection in the aftermath of this scheme for all that Isaac imagines it to be his own bright idea. As the mother of a favorite son, Rebekah is most effective in his interests. Again, it is for the sake of Rachel that Jacob labors not seven but fourteen years in his uncle's fields and it is because Rachel is his beloved wife that Jacob favors Joseph above his older brothers. As a wife, Rachel is a most effective and powerful person.

Yet, throughout the texts there is a constant tension between the undeniable importance and effectiveness of these women and the doubts cast upon their procreativity as mothers and their uniqueness as wives (when one is substituted for another). Both Andriolo<sup>43</sup> and Donaldson<sup>44</sup> have touched upon this material, yet in the end both have argued that *despite*

43 K. R. Andriolo, *Myth and History: A General Model and Its Application to the Bible*.

44 M. Donaldson, *Kinship Theory in the Patriarchal Narratives: The Case of the Barren Wife*.

*the ambiguous treatment of women, nevertheless they are important. I assert the contrary: because these women are important, therefore they must be treated ambiguously.*

### *The Negation of Motherhood—The Barrenness of Sarah*

This mytheme (negation of motherhood) implicates all three of the matriarchs Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel. Sarah's infertility is the most extreme, clearly the most prolonged; she is fully ninety years old when God promises Abraham that she will bear a child within a year's time (Gen. 17:17-21). There is no doubt about Abraham's fertility, he has already sired Ishmael at the age of eighty-six (17:24-26), and will sire half a dozen more sons by his third wife nearly forty years later (25:2). Moreover, it is only through divine intercession that Sarah's sterility will be lifted; nothing in her will or power can affect the situation.

Indeed, it seems that not only the removal of barrenness is beyond Sarah's control, but even the barrenness is not truly her own. On the sole occasion when Sarah does assert her personal agency even if only in the negative by refusing to believe she might yet bear a child at her advanced age (Gen. 18:12), she is rebuked by God in a manner as to discount her agency entirely. Thus God demands of Abraham:

Why did Sarah laugh, saying, "Shall I in truth give birth, I being aged?" Is anything impossible for God? (Gen. 18:13-14)

"For God" and not *for Sarah*. And, if this were not a clear enough statement of who is agent here, in the following verse Sarah not only recants but denies having even made this sole assertion of agency. ("Who laughed? Did somebody laugh? I didn't laugh.")

Sarah's unique position in the history of Israel can hardly be denied, surely not by an Israelite audience of these narratives. Of Abraham's three wives, only she can bear a proper son, one who will lead to Israel and the fulfillment of God's promise. Of the three, only Sarah is a proper wife, a member of the ethnic group and the kin group, a FBD in fact. As the latter, however, her identity threatens the principle of patrilineality and the genealogical system erected upon that principle. Her existence thus manifests the contradiction between the systems of marriage and descent and cries out to be "resolved." But the real contradiction is not resolvable and can only be mystified. Sarah is transformed from a human agent into an instrument nonetheless and, hence, considerably less of a person.

### *The Barrenness of Rebekah*

As I have noted, the instance of Rebekah's barrenness seems to be a relatively weak variant as compared to that of Sarah's. Neither the problem nor its resolution are presented dramatically or at any great length. Its duration is comparatively short—a mere twenty years—and Rebekah's age when she finally does conceive is not entirely improbable. Isaac is forty at the time of their marriage (Gen. 25:20) and sixty when his sons are born (25:26). Rebekah is hardly likely to have been older and may be

considerably younger than her husband. (As per Figure 4, she is born a generation below him.)

Still, for all that Rebekah's barrenness is a relatively unmarked variant, it is striking enough. While Abraham has already fathered a child making it easy enough to accept his fertility and doubt Sarah's, Isaac's fertility has never been demonstrated; yet the narrative does not even pause before assigning the problem to his wife. As in the previous instance, it is the husband rather than the wife who begs divine intervention, and again it is only through God's agency that the problem is resolved. While no one could possibly question Rebekah's importance—she is the mother of Israel and the instrument of his triumph over his older brother—yet control over her own reproductive capacity is beyond her and the strategem that wins Jacob the birthright is actually his mother's loss as Jacob must flee her household in consequence.

### *The Barrenness of Rachel*

This variant seems to be the most marked and singular member of the mytheme group as Rachel herself is so singular. Despite the fact that her husband has another proper wife (i.e., a FBD), that she is a younger sister and a second wife, that she never bears nearly as many sons as her older sister, yet she is Jacob's beloved. It is she and not Leah who bears the continuor of the line of the patriarchs and she who comes to occupy the position of matriarch alongside Sarah and Rebekah.

Rachel, moreover, is not merely once but twice barren in that the lapse between the births of Joseph and Benjamin seems as long if not longer than the gap between Joseph and his elder brothers. In consequence, Rachel bears not one remarkable son but two, for Benjamin too plays a special role in these texts. The innocent one, only Benjamin can mediate Joseph's reunion with his kindred and thus reconnect the broken line of Israel: Jacob's other sons are all tainted by their complicity in selling Joseph into slavery.<sup>45</sup> Lastly and perhaps most importantly, Rachel's barrenness is all the more striking as, in the end, her overcoming of it brings only death.

It is interesting to note that of the three cases, only Rachel's infertility is given even the pretense of sufficient motivation. Because Jacob loves Rachel rather than Leah, God "opened [Leah's] womb while Rachel was barren" (Gen. 29:31). While God denies the possibility or impossibility of fertility to Sarah, in the case of Rachel he is the direct agent of barrenness as much as of its cure. Again, this motivation does not even much reflect on Rachel as a distinct subject. It is for Jacob's willfulness that Rachel is made barren, not for any act of her own.

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45 As E. L. Greenstein, "An Equivocal Reading of the Sale of Joseph" in K. R. R. Gros Louis & J. S. Ackerman, eds., *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives, Volume II* (Nashville, 1982), 114–25, 306–10, has observed, the relationship between Joseph and his brothers is more complicated than that of the other sibling sets. There are really *three* kinds of brothers involved here, the older brothers who threaten, the younger who ultimately triumphs (Joseph), and the split couple Reuben/Benjamin who mediate the conflict. Reuben at least tempers his brothers' murderous scheme towards Joseph and claims to mean to scotch it entirely (Gen. 37:21–22; 29–30), though in the end he cooperates with the others in hiding the true situation from their father (37:31–35). He thus stands apart from the others to some degree while Benjamin reproduces

The instance of Rachel's barrenness is also marked by some curious features of her relationships with her husband and co-wives. While Abraham and Isaac beseech God to overcome their wives' infertility, it is Rachel who makes the appeal in her own interest and not to God but to her husband. Consequently, where Sarah is rebuked by God for her lack of belief in his power, Rachel is chastised by her own husband for asking too much of him (Gen. 30:1-2). Indeed, Jacob has a consistently curious way of treating his beloved as, even as she names her youngest son with her dying breath, he rejects her authority and renames the infant himself (35:18).

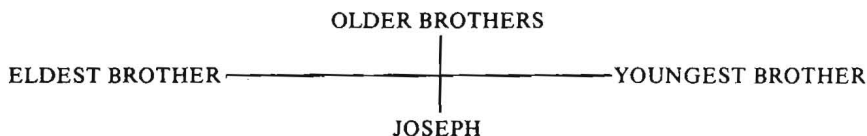
Rachel's relationships with her co-wives are equally striking. In lieu of being able to satisfy her own intense desire to conceive, she offers up Bilhah in her stead, and by choosing the names for Bilhah's sons, claims to be their mother (Gen. 30:3-8). Later she trades her connubial rights to Leah in exchange for some of Reuben's mandrake though this also avails her naught and even leads to the recommencement of Leah's child-bearing (30:14-17).<sup>46</sup> That is, Rachel repeatedly trades away her prerogatives as wife in unsuccessful attempts to become a mother, in some sense, denying herself as both. The negation of motherhood seems to lead to the negation of wifehood as well.

### *The Negation of Wifehood—The Substitution of Hagar for Sarah*

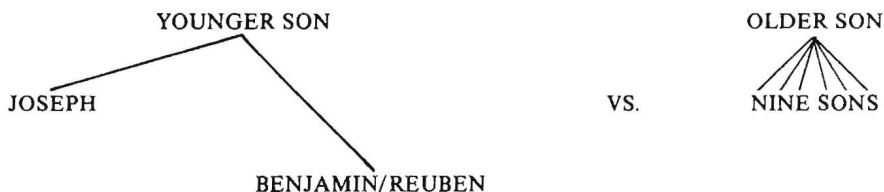
In the Genesis texts the substitution of one woman for another as wife—which derides the uniqueness of any particular woman as wife—is always consequent upon the failure of

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and transforms his position at the conclusion of the scenario. As Reuben the eldest has tried and failed to prevent a disjunction between Joseph and his kindred at the outset, Benjamin is employed by Joseph to mediate a reunion at its close. The relationship between the brothers might best be represented as:



Indeed, taking into consideration the splittings between the sons of Rachel and between Rachel's youngest and Leah's eldest, this relationship might better be represented as:



<sup>46</sup> I believe that an interesting analysis could be made of Rachel's exchange of connubial rights for the mandrake and Esau's trade of inheritance rights for the lentils, and between this pair of exchanges and the "trickings" of Jacob: his tricking of his father by substituting himself for his elder brother and his tricking by Laban when an elder daughter is substituted for a younger as his wife. Cf. for now J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis* (Assen/Amsterdam, 1975), esp. 140.

the first woman as mother. However, it also results in the failure of the substitute wife as mother in that her son is never an acceptable successor to the patriarch. In the end, this only serves to validate the importance/uniqueness of the first woman as proper wife/mother. In what does her properness reside if not in the fact that she is a FBD? But it is this fact that has created the contradiction in the first place leading to the need to mystify her identity/effectiveness. The contradiction between endogamous (FBD) marriage and the principle of patrilineality leads to a mystification of the roles of women but this very process of mystification inevitably leads back to the re-validation of FBD marriage and to the validation of its consequences.<sup>47</sup>

Barren, Sarah is a failed mother. In her stead and at her initiative, Abraham takes Hagar to wife (Gen. 16). While Hagar does bear Abraham a son, ultimately she too fails as mother, for her son is no acceptable successor to the patriarch. Though Sarah twice triumphs over Hagar in the end—by exercising her power to discipline Hagar and by actually bearing Abraham's successor—her position as wife had been undermined by polygyny<sup>48</sup> as her position as mother was disparaged by prolonged infertility. Though the doubts will be resolved in her favor in both instances, they remain engraved in the texts nonetheless.

### *The "Substitution" of Rebekah for Rebekah*

This matter of multiple wives never explicitly emerges in the case of Isaac and Rebekah, for, as I have noted above, Rebekah is the condensation of the kin wife and the non-kin wife. Consequently, she herself bears the two kinds of sons (acceptable and unacceptable as successor to the patriarch), who are, appropriately enough, twins. Rebekah's siding with Jacob against the interests of his older brother Esau, however, creates a situation as if the latter were the son of another mother. As soon as this "as if" is posited, the events of the narrative develop as in the cases of Sarah and Rachel, where the son of the mother who is also kinswoman triumphs over the son of non-kin wife, and the younger son over an elder.

### *The Substitution of Leah, Bilhah and Zilpah for Rachel*

If the polygyny element is missing in the Isaac and Rebekah variant on account of the condensation, it is hyperemphasized in the house of Jacob on account of the splitting of Leah/Rachel and also, hence, the reduplication of the substitution of a bondswoman for her mistress. In the first instance Rachel's own father substitutes her elder sister in her place in spite of his unambiguous contract with Jacob. This substitution both presages and causes Rachel's barrenness rather than merely resulting from it. Rachel's position as wife is undermined even before her marriage is effected and doubly so. Leah is not a bondswoman but a legitimate wife and a FBD herself. She is both older than Rachel and, through a trick that averts a social impropriety, Jacob's first wife. It is on account of

47 This underlines the impossibility of the mythic struggle of ever overcoming real contradictions.

48 Polygyny is the specific term for taking of multiple wives.

Jacob's refusal to accept the legitimacy of this substitution that Rachel is held barren. Where in Sarah's case barrenness leads to the acceptance of substitution (*ineffectiveness as mother* → *replacement as wife*), for Rachel the terms and consequences are transformed (*replacement as wife* → *ineffectiveness as mother*) but to similar ends.

If the polygyny mytheme marks this narrative from the outset, it also recurs powerfully at its center. In her barrenness, Rachel twice offers a substitute wife in her own stead. Like Sarah, she offers up her servant (Bilhah, who bears not one but two sons), while like her husband's brother Esau, Rachel also trades away a right (here connubial) to her sibling. (And even Leah offers her bondswoman to Jacob when she concludes, wrongly as it happens, she has left off child-bearing.) In the end, of all the four wives and twelve sons of Jacob, only Rachel can bear the one to succeed his father. Why this should be so—Leah is, after all, a proper wife: Israelite and FBD—is not immediately apparent simply from the logic of the narrative. It begins to make sense only if viewed as a variant of the mythemes of multiple wives and conflicts between elder and younger sons/brothers.

For all it is emphasized, the substitution of one wife for another never succeeds in producing the legitimate heir and successor to the patriarch. It is obviously impossible to pretend for very long that any woman can simply be substituted for any other. Though they are belittled for their barrenness and lack of agency in procreation, Rachel, Rebekah, and Sarah do finally bear the legitimate successor, something none of the substitute wives are capable of. Each of these women is a distinct individual and has her own personal destiny. For all that patrilineal ideology proclaims: "The King is dead. Long live the King!" men have not yet been known to reproduce parthenogenically. For all that the contradictions created by an intersection of patrilineality and parallel cousin marriage encourage men to strive to ignore, forget, veil, exclude, or belittle the women who bear kings, real women insistently assert their identities and their importance.

### *Structuralism and Psychoanalysis*

The structuralist approach to myth begins to reveal considerable similarity to the Freudian analysis of primary process most generally and to that of dreams in particular. Like dreams, myths seem to be overdetermined in both senses of the term: a multiplicity of historical streams feed into any given text thus heightening its saliency and, given that the texts (or dreams) are discursive as much as discursive, any text may speak to a number of issues simultaneously and thus be interpretable on more than one level.<sup>49</sup> Again, myths, like dreams, seem to circle about contradictions—social on the one hand, intra-psychic on the other—returning again and again to elaborate upon the same unresolvable conflicts with something like the force of the repetition compulsion.<sup>50</sup> Most striking are the employments of condensation and splitting in the two kinds of materials.

Freud used the term condensation to apply particularly to the combination of multiple

49 S. Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (New York, 1965), 562.

50 S. Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (New York, 1961).

referents into a single dream image.<sup>51</sup> As best I can determine, he uses the same term for the inversion of this process, the distribution of a single referent over a number of dream images, but I would prefer to call the second splitting<sup>52</sup> Rebekah, I have been arguing, is a condensed representation. Consequently, she bears two sons who are twins, i.e., a unity that has not completely differentiated. In other variants of the mytheme group, the two kinds of sons are borne by separate mothers, one who is a close kinswoman to the patriarch and the other a stranger, but as Rebekah is a condensation, in some sense so are her sons. I think only this way of approaching the matter can account for why one of Rebekah's sons must end up as being read out of the tribe entirely, Esau, "He is Edom" (Gen. 36:1), while the other goes on to become eponymous of the Hebrew people when he changes his name from Jacob to Israel. Rachel, on the other hand, represents the case of splitting. In this instance the single referent, the FBD type wife, is distributed over two images, Rachel and Leah. Rachel too bears a pair of sons, but while in their births they are clearly distinguished from each other, in their roles it is as if they have split a single function. Thus, while Joseph will assume the mantle of the patriarch, nonetheless Benjamin is essential to that outcome as the mediator of the sundered connection between Joseph and his father. Benjamin, as I have indicated above (and cf. n. 45), is also a member of a split pair in another sense. As Rachel's youngest, he forms part of a couple with Reuben, Leah's eldest, a couple which has the function of mediating between Joseph and his older brothers. On the basis of this material as well as cases gleaned from my work on Hindu mythology, I am coming to suspect that the employment of condensation and splitting in myth may be symmetrical. That is to say, a condensation in one part of a myth structure (as here in the case of Rebekah), may call for splitting a subsequent variant (as in that of Rachel).<sup>53</sup>

This raises the issue also of the relationships between paradigm and syntagm. The first term is usually understood to refer to the set of variant mythemes, the barrenness of A, of B, of C, while the second refers to the syntactic relation between members of mytheme groups, the barrenness of A and her replacement by X as opposed to the barrenness of B and her replacement by Y. Transformations between members of a paradigmatic set have obvious consequences for the syntagmatic chains to which they belong. Thus, the fact that the mother mytheme is condensed in the instance of Rebekah means that her offspring are also condensed while the situation is reversed on both dimensions in the case of Rachel. There are further reverberations of this across syntagmatic chains as when Jacob, who is half of a twin pair, marries a pair of sisters, or, as I have already remarked, when Jacob who is the beneficiary of his own substitution for an older brother becomes the victim of his uncle's substitution of an elder sister for a younger. As this last instance illustrates, the relation between two syntagmatic chains need not be one of identity but could be one of inversion. I have also pointed out another such example in note 46 as when Esau's

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51 S. Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams; Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (New York, 1966); *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (New York, 1933).

52 In the psychoanalytic literature, splitting is used as a technical term in a somewhat different but not incompatible sense. This usage is owed to Melanie Klein, I believe, though I cannot cite a specific source, and refers to the infant's splitting of its experience of mothering into constructs of a "good" and a "bad" mother which are then internalized.

53 It would be interesting to see if anything like this symmetry holds for dreams, either within a single dream or within the corpus of a night's dreaming.

inheritance claim against his father and Rachel's marital claim against her husband are traded to a sibling for a vegetable product, involving nourishment on the one hand, reproduction on the other.<sup>54</sup>

### *Structuralism and History*

Academic essays traditionally end with the author asserting the security of his conclusions, but I choose to end this one by expressing my doubts about it. This project began firmly rooted in the structuralist tradition, but in the course of my own intellectual development it has increasingly been forced to come to terms with a very different and possibly antithetical intellectual tradition, that of Marxist historiography particularly as exemplified by the British historian E. P. Thompson.<sup>55</sup> Thompson believes his own approach to be entirely uncongenial to structuralism of any stripe and, in his argument with Althusser, seems to be criticizing all structuralisms quite even-handedly.<sup>56</sup> I would like to believe that the two traditions *can* be made to speak to each other, that both are necessary to what are essentially questions of epistemology: What do men know about the social and political world they live in? How do they know it? How are their "knowing" and their "living" interrelated? Thus, I hope it is clear that, for example, the sense in which I use "contradiction" here is more nearly marxist than structuralist *per se*.

I set out in this project to see how an analysis of a contradiction arising from social practices and the ideological attempts to resolve that contradiction in modern Semitic societies could be useful for interpreting the mythological texts of an ancestral society. I have satisfied myself that *if* the structural analysis of the modern societies is correct, it is also productive of interesting interpretations of the ancient texts. Is it correct? Can history be mapped onto structure? Is this a good mapping?

One test would be if this analysis could be extended to enlighten other aspects of the Genesis texts. I have indicated at points that I believe this is so particularly with respect to the "problem of the younger son." From a (purely) structural perspective I have even begun to develop that analysis, noting how the relationships between brothers is syntactically contingent on the kinship relations between their mothers and fathers as well as on the syntagmatic relations between the roles of matriarch as wife and as mother. I feel quite certain, however, that these observations are not sufficient to interpret this mytheme. Conflict between brothers all but approaching fratricide is an aspect not only of the Biblical texts but of the Middle Eastern ethnographies as well. Inheritance, a perennial source for conflict among siblings the world over seems especially problematic in these societies, and I suspect that the unusual pattern of ultimogeniture (inheritance by the

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54 Obviously, this comparison of the structuralist approach to myth and the psychoanalytic analysis of dreams is worthy of a fuller treatment and I am currently working on developing such.

55 Cf. especially E. P. Thompson *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (New York, 1978) and *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York, 1963). Anyone even passingly familiar with this work will see where my interest in agency comes from.

56 E. P. Thompson, "The Poverty of Theory or An Orrery of Errors" in Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, 1-210.

lastborn) presented in Genesis may be speaking to this issue.<sup>57</sup> In any event, such an analysis properly demands an essay-length treatment of its own.

And where does this kind of myth analysis stand with regard to the Lévi-Straussian enterprise? In the "Overture" to *The Raw and the Cooked* he asserted that "I therefore claim to show, not how men think in myths, but how myths operate in men's minds without their being aware of the fact."<sup>58</sup>

But because Lévi-Strauss has done as much as he has, it is now possible and more than timely to begin to consider how men *do* think in myths. No one who has read the foregoing essay could imagine that I am suggesting an abandonment of the structuralist enterprise, or worse, a regression of our attention from *langue* to *parole*, but I am suggesting the study of how *parole* or, better, how *parleurs* who come to their consciousness under specific social and historical conditions employ *langue* and to what ends. No more than Lévi-Strauss do I imagine that men are ordinarily aware of the structures of their myths than that they are of that of their grammars. I do imagine, however, that when one "speaks" another "listens," at least sometimes and, occasionally, even "gets the message."

Structuralism is a child of our ideological times and as such, in part, another instrument for purveying that ideology. Yet, it seems to me in another part a productive and useful methodology that could be harnessed in tandem with historical modes of analysis instead of being set in a tug of war against them. To do so it is necessary to "think" structuralism rather than, in the hyperbolic language to which structuralisms often seem to turn and which Thompson aptly mocks, to "be thought" by it.

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57 For example, the inheritance pattern of the Rwala Bedouin is nominally egalitarian with curious tugs in both the direction of the eldest and the youngest sons. All sons inherit equally of the father's livestock except that the eldest takes one extra brood-camel before the others begin dividing and also receives the father's brood-mare. (The second son receives the mare's first foal, a third son the second foal, a fourth son the first foal's first foal, etc.) At the same time, the youngest son is favored with regard to material possessions, having special claim to the father's tent and sword. Cf. A. Musil, *The Manners and Customs of the Rwala Bedouin*, 663-64. Among the nomads of Persia, a potentially even more complicating situation prevails. There, sons claim their share of the patrimony at the time of their marriage. Sons remaining with the father at the time of his death, however, have the possibility of inheriting the father's share as well as their own. As might be expected, considerable strategic consideration goes into the decision to marry for each marriage produces a new division of the flocks and the labor force, the outcome of which is not entirely predictable. Cf. Barth, *Nomads of South Persia*.

58 C. Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked. Introduction to a Science of Mythology*, Volume I (New York, 1969), 12.