

In *Son of Laughter*, Frederick Buechner pays close attention to detail as he attempts to re-create an authentic world. In doing so, Buechner supplements and interprets the Genesis narrative. In this review, I examine his characterization of the patriarchs and his portrayal of the customs and theology in ancient Near East.

### **Characterization**

The Genesis narrative does not provide many insights into the character of its protagonists. There are limited descriptions of their appearance, their interests, or their attitudes but generally the author of Genesis only provides the details necessary to understanding the story or its message. In a present day novel, however, characterization is considered essential to maintaining reader interest. As such, Buechner faced a difficult task in re-creating the central characters to his story in a way that was consistent with the biblical narrative but also relevant to a present day audience. To accomplish the task, Buechner picked up and developed the meagre the characterizations of the biblical narrative, paying attention to the importance of names, the brief physical descriptions, and the actions of the biblical characters.

In general terms, all of Buechner's characters, except perhaps Joseph and the Egyptians, are drawn as very crude individuals. They suffer from incontinence with respect to sex, urination, spittle, and flatulence. They are grubby and dirty, consistent with the squalid conditions in which they live. The physical descriptions usually draw attention to rough or dominant features. These characteristics contrast a western, protestant tendency to present biblical characters in their own image as middle-class, clean shaven, and hygienic people. Indeed, Buechner is correct in portraying the characters as he does. They were nomadic people, traveling in an arid and sandy region of the world, and visiting cities that had not yet developed sanitation systems. Bathing would have probably been perceived as a waste of precious water and a luxury. Even so, Buechner does draw too much attention to a portrayal of the patriarchs as constantly urinating.

For Jacob, Buechner actually does not add too much to the characterization of the Bible. In both cases, Jacob is portrayed as a conniving man who steals a birthright, a blessing, and wealth. He is a trickster. Also, Buechner quite appropriately interprets Jacob's vow to God at

Bethel as a bargain with God. More positively, Jacob is portrayed in both narratives as hard working. His love for Rachel is covered. His favouritism towards her and her sons, Joseph and Benjamin, is mentioned. His outrage towards Simeon and Levi's actions at Shechem is also highlighted. In the case of Jacob's characterization, Buechner does not depart significantly, if at all, from the insights of the biblical text. He only develops and amplifies what is there.

On the other hand, Buechner takes more licenses with his characterization of Isaac. Faithful to the meagre details concerning Isaac in the biblical text, Buechner describes Isaac as a "deferential man" (10). This character trait is a reasonable extrapolation of Isaac's obedience towards Abraham in the story of his near sacrifice as well as the story of the wells and the dispute with the king of Gerar. At the same time, though, Buechner portrays Isaac as somewhat of a neurotic who endlessly replays the moment of his near sacrifice by his father. Certainly, one wonders how the incident would have affected Isaac's psyche but his breakdown in Buechner's chapter, "The Ram in the Thicket," is perhaps excessive.<sup>1</sup> In other stories, Buechner is also not very generous in his characterization of Isaac. He is dull, lacking libido, frequently in his tent (eating or resting), and often the butt of Rebekah's somewhat disrespectful comments.

In my opinion, Buechner's characters are drawn in terms largely consistent with the biblical narrative or at least the ancient world in which they may have lived. Buechner valuably presents his characters in flawed and in this respect real ways. This approach of defamiliarization yields characters that are rich in character and meaningful in their actions. It brings new vitality to the biblical story.

### **Custom(s)**

In re-creating the era of the patriarchs, Buechner represents many customs that are attested in the ancient Near East. Many of these customs are not mentioned explicitly in the biblical text and so their inclusion, or at least elucidation, is a credit to Buechner's research into this era. Among the customs found in the book that are given more attention than in the Genesis

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<sup>1</sup> In one interesting albeit brief story element, Buechner draws upon the common midrash that Sarah died as a result of hearing the story of her son's near sacrifice by her husband (19).

narrative are city life in the ancient Near East, agriculture in Egypt, swearing of oaths, naming wells and the importance of water, and mummification.

One of the strengths of the novel is Buechner's attention to how people lived in the ancient Near East. Particularly in his description of city life in Gerar, Buechner draws attention to the lack of sanitation and generally squalid conditions that existed in these ancient cities. He also accurately describes the architecture of the houses. He describes houses made of brick or timber with thatched roofs (42). When the story moves to Egypt, Buechner again accurately portrays the living and social conditions. In one instance, he reveals the processes of agriculture in Egypt; how the Nile basin floods and then recedes, which required the timely sowing of seed (218-9). These sorts of accurate descriptions give the narrative an authentic feel.

Buechner also shows an awareness of more specific customs. In the swearing of oaths, Buechner correctly illustrates that the custom of the ancient Near East was to swear by a man's seed and consequently the person swearing an oath would clutch the other person's genitals. This practice is obscured by English translations of Genesis that use the word "thigh" or "loins" in place of genitalia. Buechner also devotes an entire chapter to Isaac's dispute with the citizens and king of Gerar with respect to wells, elucidating the importance of water and water systems to nomads and city dwellers alike. In addition, this chapter includes an account of the practice of naming wells as a sign of ownership. To these customs of the Palestinian region, Buechner adds an accurate representation of Egyptian customs. He points out the Egyptian affinity for elaborate make-up, hairpieces, and dress. At one point in his attention to Egyptian customs, Buechner digresses from his narrative to provide an elaborate (and somewhat unnecessary) description of the mummification process (272). Throughout the novel, Buechner is sensitive to customs and social practices. He accurately re-creates these customs of the ancient Near East thereby enlightening the reader to some of the considerable differences that exist between their culture and ours.

## Theology

It is generally acknowledged that the patriarchs lived in a polytheistic religious environment. The concept of monotheism, articulated by modern day Jews, Christians, and Muslims, was foreign to the societies of the ancient Near East. In keeping with this reality, Buechner presents the religion of the patriarchs as fluctuating between polytheism and henotheism. With respect to other gods in the ancient Near East, Buechner draws attention to Sin, a moon god, likely worshipped in Haran and seems to invent a fish god for the people of Gerar. The patriarchs, particularly Jacob, respect these gods and talk about them as if they are real. Buechner also makes frequent mention of the idols of Laban, stolen by Rachel. Even so, through covenants, promises, and vows, the patriarchs swear fealty to Yahweh as their personal or family god and Yahweh extends his protection to them. Yet, nowhere in the Genesis narrative does Yahweh explicitly demand exclusive worship. Buechner picks up and builds upon this fact to suggest that the patriarchs and their family continued to believe in and even worship other gods. While Gen 35:4 would seem to prove that Jacob's people worshipped foreign gods until they were buried near Shechem, it is significant to point out that the Genesis narrative does not depict the patriarchs as polytheists. So while their people may have continued to possess foreign gods, it is not clear that the patriarchs did. Moreover, I am inclined to believe that the patriarchs themselves were henotheists, rather than polytheists, and therefore worshipped Yahweh exclusively. In contrast, Buechner clearly suggests that Jacob worshipped at least two gods for much of his life: Yahweh and the idol with the long arm. This practice by Jacob in the novel does him a disservice as there is little basis for it in the Genesis narrative.

In Buechner's novel, consistent with the biblical text, God is presented as formless and mysterious. He is not represented by the patriarchs through idols. This gives God a sort of unpredictable character, which Buechner uses to explain why the term Fear was adopted as a title of God. Interestingly, Buechner largely keeps to the name "Fear" as a designation for God. He does not use the name of the Genesis narrative: El Shaddai. The patriarchs are indeed fearful of this God, who appears from time to time to speak to them, promise them things, demand

certain things, and provide for them. The characters never know when God will appear next and what he will promise or ask. This creates some uneasiness for all the patriarchs but especially Jacob. Jacob observes, "Who knows the full meaning of his words? Who know from how far he will bring me and to what place even farther still? Is his promise only a dream? Is it in our dreaming that we glimpse the fullness of his promise?" (274).

Buechner also re-creates other elements of patriarchal theology. He describes their beliefs about the after-life, consistent with the Old Testament concept of Sheol. Buechner stresses his characters uncertainty about the after-life and their belief that the dead slept and that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is a god of the living not of the dead. Buechner also shows the frequent use of stones to create ad hoc altars for worship and to signify important encounters with God. On the other hand, Buechner questionably imposes some later elements of Israelite faith on to the patriarchs: the Urim and Thummim ("The Two Stones" and elsewhere) and the tent of meeting (54). There is no evidence that either of these elements existed in the patriarchal religion.

For the most part, Buechner has re-created the ancient world of the patriarchs with remarkable sensitivity to the biblical text and the customs and theology of the ancient Near Eastern world in which they lived. One quickly appreciates his willingness to allow the patriarchs to exist as people of their own times and therefore possessing all the idiosyncrasies foreign to 20<sup>th</sup> century North America. Ironically, however, as different as the cultural context is between them and us, by allowing these idiosyncrasies to stand, Buechner revitalizes the biblical characters so that one can more easily identify with them. He presents them in all their failings, weaknesses, struggles, and pains as people just like us who search for God within the context of a culture that does not.

### **Bibliography**

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Walton, John H. and Victor H. Matthews. *[The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Genesis—Deuteronomy](#)*. Madison, WI: InterVarsity Press, 1997.