Hermeneutic of Cultural Differentiation and Accommodation: A Biblical Paradigm of Inculturation for the Indian Church

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Abstract
The relationship between Christian faith and culture continues to generate discussion. This issue is perennielly relevant to the Indian church as it exists in a multicultural context. How should the Indian church practice its faith in a given culture? To what extent can its faith be enculturated? This article proposes a biblical hermeneutic of cultural accommodation and differentiation as a model for the Indian church. It examines the culture/customs of the patriarchs in the book of Genesis as a test case and argues that the narrator’s hermeneutic promotes the integration of culture with faith so long as both converge under the primacy of the latter.

Keywords
biblical hermeneutic, inculturation, cultural differentiation, cultural accommodation, patriarchal customs, Genesis

Introduction
During the past few years, native voices outside the Christian faith have been calling the Indian church to reinterpret Scripture (the Bible) and inculturate the Christian community in line with the history and heritage of Indian civilization. Irrespective of whether these native voices harbor hidden agendas, the church has generally remained defiant to this call because it assumes that culture will run roughshod over faith. Although
this concern may be legitimate to some extent, the church in India cannot
shy away from finding ways to practice its faith in a way that is compatible
with Indian cultures or subcultures.

One way of dealing with the relationship between faith and culture is
to explore biblical-hermeneutical models that bridge both, something that
Paul G. Hiebert had advocated about three decades ago.\textsuperscript{1} Contributing to
the hermeneutical bridge, this article examines the interface between the
faith and the culture/custom of the patriarchs in the book of Genesis and
proposes a hermeneutic of cultural differentiation and accommodation\textsuperscript{2}
as a biblical paradigm for inculturation of the Indian church. The
proposed hermeneutic of inculturation argues that the narrator of the
book of Genesis presents similar cultural practices but rejects one and
allows the other based on the primacy of the patriarchs’ faith. This
argument is made in two stages: the first stage establishes the narrator’s
hermeneutical framework\textsuperscript{3} (cultural differentiation and accommodation)
in the inculturation of Abraham and Joseph; the second stage shows how
the narrator applies the hermeneutic to the rest of the similar patriarchal
customs, such as marriage and progeny and the adornment of jewelry. The
socio-literary method is used for the argumentation of the proposal, since
it examines the Genesis narrative of patriarchs and the socio-history of

\textsuperscript{1} Paul G. Hiebert, “Critical Contextualization,” \textit{International Bulletin of Missionary Research} 11, no. 3 (1987): 109-110. The four steps in critical contextualization that Hiebert suggests are: exegesis of culture, exegesis of Scripture and the hermeneutical bridge, critical response of the faith community, and new contextual practices. As it appears, the third and fourth steps depend upon the first and second. Thus the task of biblicists is to help the church with the second step: hermeneutical models or the “bridge.”

\textsuperscript{2} Although these terminologies are overly used as scholarly shorthand, rarely have they been explored through a biblical-hermeneutical prism.

\textsuperscript{3} Biblical writers or, for that matter, their Ancient West Asian (AWA) counterparts did not simply record events or thoughts; rather, they used layers of hermeneutical frameworks for communicating their writings to their audience. For instance, the royal writers of the Middle Egyptian Kingdom used the hermeneutical tool of “justice and stability” for interpreting the past instability and chronicling the present so as to advance the legitimacy of the Middle Kingdom rulers; see Zeyad El Nabolsy, “Using the Concept of Hermeneutical Injustice and Ideology to Explain the Stability of Ancient Egypt during the Middle Kingdom,” \textit{Journal of Historical Sociology} 33, no.3 (2020): 345-370.
patriarchal culture and customs. We conclude by drawing its implications for the Indian church.

**DIFFERENTIATION AND ACCOMMODATION IN THE STORY OF ABRAHAM AND JOSEPH IN EGYPT**

The narrator's cultural hermeneutic operates at both ends of the patriarchal stories, namely, Abraham's sojourn in Egypt (Gn 12:10-20) and Joseph's settlement in Egypt (Gn 41-50). While the narrator is critical of Abraham's inculturation (hermeneutic of cultural differentiation), he is sympathetic toward that of Joseph (hermeneutic of cultural accommodation). The differing stances of the narrator, as we shall show, are based on how each man adhered to his faith in a given cultural set up.

The template of patriarchal faith is enunciated in Abraham's call (Gn 12: 1-9) and is reiterated at different stages of Abraham's life. They are: the divine promise of the land; the divine promise of the offspring/nationhood; the fidelity of patriarchs to Yahweh's divinity and sovereignty. Importantly, each of these divine promises calls for recognition and reciprocation on the part of the patriarchs: the promise of the land entails wandering and sojourning before its possession; the promise of the offspring/nationhood mandates it to be a blessing to the nations or the world; the fidelity to Yahweh is evidenced through cult (worship) and belief. In other words, the narrator's hermeneutic of differentiation or accommodation in a given case of patriarchal inculturation is contingent upon how the patriarchs upheld the primacy of faith.

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5 In his subsequent work on Genesis, Sarna notes that patriarchs do not engage in an "existing cult," but the altars signify their gratitude to the deity. Since the building of an altar is accompanied by prayer in Abraham's case, the faith aspect becomes obvious regardless of Sarna's point. In fact, Sarna calls it "loyalty to Yahweh" when referring to Jacob's building of an altar in Gn 35:1. See Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The JPS Torah Commentary* (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 92, 242.
Cultural Differentiation in Abraham’s Inculturation in Egypt (Gn 12:10-20)

The narrator’s hermeneutic of cultural differentiation in Abraham’s case rebuffs Abraham’s wife-sister cultural adaptation in Egypt (Gn 12:10-20). According to the story, Abraham migrates to Egypt due to a severe famine in Canaan. As Abraham approaches Egypt, he is overcome by the fear of being killed by the Egyptians because of his beautiful wife. Hence, Abraham comes up with the wife-sister strategy for his own safe sojourning in Egypt.

Abraham seems to have used the wife-sister relation in order to adapt to the local culture. Scholarly positions on Abraham’s cultural adaptation in this case remain divided, with a majority of scholars rejecting the theory that the patriarchs (including Abraham here) used a “wife-sister adoption” custom parallel to that in use in the Hurrian society at Nuzi. Some, in recent times, however, re-advocate this comparative custom whereby Abraham projects Sarah as the legal guardian (sister) and secures his protection in a foreign land (Egypt). In my opinion, both groups gloss over the point because the issue of Abraham’s inculturation must be seen primarily through the lens of Egyptian culture. Abraham possibly knows how the marital relationship functions among the ruling class and the commoners in Egypt, and thus he makes such a move. As Russell Middleton explains, the ruling class or the Pharaohs mostly married their sisters or half-sisters and even their daughters, as the majority of cases show in the eighteenth and nineteenth dynasties. Middleton also cites that while the Pharaohs of the eighteenth and nineteenth dynasties practiced both forms of marriage, the earlier dynasties perhaps confined the conjugal relationship to the sister or half-sister pattern. For instance, Pharaohs such


8 Russell Middleton, “Brother-Sister and Father-Daughter Marriage in Ancient Egypt,” *American Sociological Review* 27, no. 5 (1962): 603-604. Of course, there are disagreements in certain cases. Earlier it was believed that Pharaoh Snefru, who belonged to the fourth dynasty (2614-2591 BC), married his first daughter, Nefertkauw, and produced a son, Nefermaat. Later, this was contested. See Middleton, “Brother-
Tao II, Ahmose, Amenhotep I, Thutmose I, Thutmose II, Thutmose III, Amenhotep II, Thutmose IV of the eighteenth dynasty (1570–1397 BC), and Rameses II and Merenepthah of the nineteenth dynasty married their sisters or half-sisters; and from among them Rameses II, Amenhotep III, Amenhotep IV or Akhenaton married their daughters. Although the evidence is slender concerning the commoners, brother-sister marriages did take place among them, as identities of fathers or mothers were attached to the names of the offspring. Even otherwise, mirroring the royal household, it is believed, the husbands among the commoners began addressing their wives as sisters. In such a context, as Nahum M. Sarna observes, Abraham’s use of the word “sister” perhaps conveyed more than how Egyptians employed the same term to emphasize the romantic or filial relationship. Importantly, Abraham understands that the cultural equation of a brother and sister between the Egyptian husbands and wives (siblings married to one another) coheres with his overall ploy that he expresses in a similar episode later (“Besides, she is really my sister, the daughter of my father though not my mother, and she became my wife. And when God had me wander from my father’s household, I said to her, ‘this is how you can show your love to me: Everywhere we go, say of me, He is my brother’” Gn 20: 12-13). This means, as said earlier, that Abraham culturally identifies himself with the Egyptian elites and commoners so that he can be treated as one among them. And he opts for cultural integration at

Sister”: 605.
12 Sarna, Genesis: The JPS, 95.
13 Looking at diplomatic marriages in AWA, Hoffmeier proposes a principle of quid pro quo in Abraham’s wife-sister relationship and argues that both Abraham, “the pastoralist,” and the Egyptian pharaoh, “the urban agriculturalist,” benefit mutually through such a marital alliance. Abraham, according to Hoffmeier, resorts to treachery (wife-sister relationship) only because he has no daughter; Hoffmeier, ”The Wives”: 87-94. Hoffmeier’s proposal is problematic because the book of Genesis records treaties between deemed equal partners. For instance, treaties between Abraham, Isaac, and Abimelech are made for mutual security and prosperity (Gn
the border because this, he hopes, would keep them united in the foreign land.

Abraham’s move to inculturate (the wife-sister relationship) for his security emerges from Gn 12:10-13 which can be organized in a parallel structure:

A—Abraham’s migration to Egypt (v. 10);
B—Abraham’s timely awareness of Egypt (v. 11a);
A’—Abraham’s security issue in Egypt (vv. 11b-12);
B’—Abraham’s solution for security in Egypt (v. 13).

20:14-16; 26:26-31). However, there is no such basis for a treaty between Pharaoh/Egyptians and Abraham because, as Claus Westermann opines, the latter is weak and begs for shelter in Egypt. See Claus Westermann, Genesis 12-36, trans. John J. Scullion, SJ (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985), 164, 167.

14 In Westermann’s opinion, the “border” is a critical place because this is where Abraham, envisaging an ideal situation for himself in Egypt, settles the issue with Sarah through a dialogue; Westermann, Genesis 12-36, 163. Westermann’s observation is important and it must be strengthened. Apparently, the text is not explicit about whether Egypt issued border permits to sojourners. However, such practices were in vogue for shepherds crossing over to Egyptian pasture lands. Sarna provides the exact quotation of a case wherein an Egyptian boarder-in-charge allows shepherds from Edom to enter Egypt and informs “the Scribe of the Treasury” thus: “We have finished letting the Bedouin tribes of Edom pass the fortress, to keep them alive and keep their cattle alive”; Sarna, Understanding, 102. Thus, for Abraham, who enters Egypt to save a sizeable number of people and cattle (Westermann, Genesis 12-36, 167), the Egyptian protocol for a border permit may not have been different, although the case cited here seems to have happened after the Abraham story. If so, Janet E. Tollington’s remark concerning the term “border” or “frontier” (Gn 12:11) being “anachronistic” does not necessarily militate against the narrator’s intention. See Janet E. Tollington, “Abraham and His Wives: Culture and Status,” in The Old Testament in Its World, ed. R. P. Gordon and J. C. de Moor (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 184.

15 Our analysis differs from Westermann’s observation, which blames Abraham for his foreknowledge about the consequence of the “ruse”; that is to say, he consciously “surrendered” Sarah to a third party in Egypt as a tradeoff for saving himself and his entire household from death and famine; see Westermann, Genesis 12-36, 164, 165, 167. Sarna seems to suggest that Abraham had no idea of the consequence, since it “went awry” (of course, we differ from his Nuzi parallel and have already suggested an Egyptian one); Sarna, Genesis: The JPS, 95.

16 T. L. Thompson rightly criticizes E. A. Spicer for failing to reconstruct the patriarchal custom from the text. See T. L. Thompson, The Historicity of Patriarchal Narratives (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1974), 235.
The first panel (A&B), especially verse 10, not only highlights the severity of the famine in Canaan but also underscores the prospective status of Abraham in the land of Egypt:

X—Now there was a famine in the land;
Y—So Abram went down to Egypt to reside there as an alien;
X’—for the famine was severe in the land.

Against the commonality of X & X,’ Abraham’s prospective status of a resident alien (lagur) in Y anticipates a recalibration in the land of Egypt, since resident aliens, in Gordon J. Wenham’s observation, desire a “long-term settlement.”\(^{17}\) The follow-up clause in the first part of verse 11, “When he was about to enter Egypt,” then, amplifies Abraham’s readiness for an Egypt-specific adjustment. A juxtaposition of parallel words explaining Abraham’s journey to Egypt in verses 10 and 11 underlies this further:

Abram went to Egypt, v. 10=[Abram] came to Egypt, v. 11; to sojourn there, v. 10=when he came near. Apparently, the juxtaposition of words in verses 10 and 11 drives home Abraham’s heightened consciousness of a sojourner’s status at the frontier, necessitating his inculturation in Egyptian society for better acceptance and security.

The second panel (A’B,’ Gn 12:11b-3) highlights Abraham’s insecurity and completes the narrator’s point of Abraham’s inculturation made in the first one (AB, Gn 12:10-11a). The verb “I know” suggests Abraham’s own fear of impending harm in Egypt, while the wordplay between mar’eh (Sarah’s appearance) and yiru (the Egyptian seeing Sarah) of the same root (ra’ah) reinforces his perceived fear. And a triple use of the verb ’amar (to say) in verses 11b-13 in consonance underlines Abraham’s critical understanding of playing the role of Sarah’s brother in Egypt. Notably, Abraham speaks of his insecurity (wayyomer) in relation to Sarah’s appearance; the Egyptians presumably speak the same (we’amru) and supposedly confirm Abraham’s insecurity; and Sarah is advised to speak (’imru) to the Egyptians about her brotherly relation with Abraham and resolve the insecurity.

Abraham’s integration into the Egyptian culture is doubly confirmed by the way the narrator presents the minority in general and Abraham’s

\(^{17}\) Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 287.
ethnicity in particular. Having arrived in Canaan, Abraham operates temporarily in a “dimorphic society”\(^{18}\) in which he does not count himself among the resident population: note the literary parallel in Gn 12:6 (*Abram travelled through the land*…*and the Canaanites were living in the land*). However, Abraham’s reference to Egypt in Gn 12:11 suggests that he intends to be part of it because he is aware of how he should live with and among the people of the land. Similarly, in Gn 14:13, Abraham is portrayed as ethnically distinct from the inhabitants, and yet he is allied with them through a contractual binding (“to Abram the Hebrew, and he was living by the great tree of Mamre the Amorite, a brother of Eshcol and Aner, all of whom were allied with Abram”)—note the narrator’s use of a homophone to underline the ethno-cultural difference between Abram the Hebrew (*ha‘ibri*), the inhabitants, the Amorites (*ha‘emori*), and their mutual alliance (*berit ‘abram*). However, in Gn 12:11, the narrator underplays Abraham’s ethnicity because, being a minority, he is overcome by fear, desiring a cultural subsumption in Egypt. Abraham perceives that his vulnerability as part of a minority might be further exacerbated in a majority culture, as evidenced in Dinah’s rape (Gn 34:1-2). Here the equation between the majority and minority is: *Shechem, ben hamor hakhiwwi* (*the son of Hamor the Hivite, the leader of the land*) leaves *bibnot ha‘aretz* (*the daughters of the land*), but he rapes *dinah bat le‘ah* (*Dinah, the daughter of Leah*). Note the asymmetry in the wordplay between *ben* (*son*), *benot* (*daughters*), and *bat* (*daughter*) on the one hand and between *Shechem* (*Shechem*) and *wayishkab* (*to lie with a woman* or *rape*) on the other hand. Therefore, understandably, Jacob reprimands his sons for their retaliation against local perpetrators and cautions them against antagonizing the native majority (Gn 34:30). But Hamor, Shechem’s father, suggests a solution to this insecurity of the minority, which is that Jacob and his family socioculturally integrate with the inhabitants because it will result in mutual security and prosperity in the land: be in-laws with us; give your daughters to us and take our daughters to you…live among us…live in…, Gn 34:9-10). Note that Hamor’s offer repeats the verb *yashab* (*to live*) twice to the migrant minority (v. 10) and thrice to the inhabitants (vv. 21, 22, 23) in order to promote a naturalized residency of Jacob and his children; also, note the wordplay and shift between *yashab* (*to live*) and *wayishkab* (*to lie with a woman*) offering citizenship to Jacob’s

family in exchange for Shechem raping Dinah. In short, Abraham seems to have well understood his security implications in a powerful empire like Egypt if he were to sojourn there with a beautiful woman. Thus he ponders the benefit of cultural integration before crossing the border.

Having presented Abraham’s inclination toward sociocultural integration, the narrator goes on to condemn it in the story because Abraham’s need for security or prosperity in Egypt endangers his faith, the divine promise of the offspring or nationhood. To begin with, the narrator suggests that Abraham’s perception of his insecurity necessitating a cultural adaptation is ill-founded. The repetition, addition of words, and wordplay in the narrator’s language beautifully capture this point as juxtaposed below:

- when he came to the borders of Egypt, v. 11a = when Abraham came to Egypt, v. 14a; that you are a beautiful woman, and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, she is his wife; and they will kill me and let you live, vv. 11b-12) = and the Egyptians saw the woman that she was very beautiful, v. 14b.

The first juxtaposition keeps the suspense of Abraham’s perceived insecurity alive—note the wordplay between labo (to come) and kebo’ (when he came) and the second one heightens it by adding the word me’od (very). So the suspense about Abraham’s anxiety is built up to a point at which the Egyptians not only just see a beautiful woman, but they encounter a very beautiful woman. However, both end in an anti-climax. The Egyptians remain unbothered even after having observed Sarah’s entry into their country, let alone investigating her relation with Abraham as to whether she is his wife (‘ishto) or sister (‘akhoti). Hence, from the narrator’s viewpoint, Abraham’s security concern and his subsequent attempt at inculturation was unnecessary.

The narrator then goes on to condemn Abraham’s aspiring prosperity, which also puts the divine promise of the offspring in jeopardy. At this point, the narrator’s irony becomes stronger. That is, Abraham’s attempt at inculturation does not convince the elite because he is just another non-Egyptian for them, both ethnically and culturally. Thus, unlike the commoners, the ruling class (the princess) sees Sarah and reacts to the

19 Also, Wenham, Genesis 1-15, 289.
woman’s beauty by praising her to Pharaoh. The wordplay between saray (Sarai) and sarey (the princess of Egypt), and Sarah being taken into Pharaoh’s house (not harem) suggest that the well-being of Abraham, a resident alien, is now ensured by his relation to Pharaoh’s family. The narrator makes this point in his cumulative shift from umibeyt ‘abikha (and from the house of your father, Gn 12:1), wayiqakh ‘abram et saray ‘ishto (and Abram took his woman / wife Sarai, v. 5) to watuqakh ha’isha beyt par’oh (and the woman was taken to Pharaoh’s house, v. 15). Since Abraham transports Sarah from the father’s house to that of Pharaoh, he is treated well for Sarah’s sake, supposedly fulfilling the benefit of cultural integration, which, again, is buttressed by the parallel of anticipation (he will treat me well for your sake, v. 13) and fulfillment (and Abram was treated well for her sake, v. 16). Notably, Abraham’s use of the singular (he will treat) over against his hitherto used plural (the Egyptians and their potential actions) anticipates the ruler’s favor. But it has come at the cost of his faith—Abraham’s offspring or Sarah becoming the wife of another man. Therefore, the narrator overturns Abraham’s idea by crafting a literary reversal. While Pharaoh treats Abraham well, God afflicts Pharaoh and his house with a plague. Apparently, the wordplay between wayenaga’ (he plagued) and nega’im (plagues) in v. 17 underlines the severity of the plague; the shift between ba’aburekh (on your account) and ‘al debar (because of), the two opposite usages related to beyto (Pharaoh’s house, vv. 16 and 17), show that there can never be a mixture between the houses of Abraham and Pharaoh. Having presented the literary reversal, the narrator uses Pharaoh’s voice and shows the counterproductivity of Abraham’s cultural adaptation. Pharaoh calls and reprimands Abraham for his attempt to identify culturally with the Egyptians (vv. 18-19). Here, a group of wordplays between mah (what) and lammah (why),20 asita (you did) and ‘ishteka (your woman/wife), between naga’ (Yahweh afflicting Pharaoh) and nagad (Abraham failing to declare his true relationship with Sarah to Pharaoh) indicates that Abraham’s inculturation is not only gratuitous but also grievous. Similarly, the wordplay between laqakh (Abraham taking back Sarah) and halakh (Abraham walking from Egypt) on the one hand and a quasi-assonance between ‘akhoti (my sister), wayishlakhu (he/Pharaoh evicted [Abraham]) and lakakh (Abraham taking back Sarah) on the other further expose the

20 Wenham only observes a “triplet of accusations.” See Wenham, Genesis 1-15, 290.
fault line in Abraham’s cultural identification and confirm the failing of his wife-sister tactic.

Finally, Pharaoh’s deploring voice against Abraham’s inculturation echoes the narrator’s viewpoint on the promised offspring/nationhood (Gn 12). In their own ways, both the narrator and Pharaoh suggest that the divine promise to Abraham becoming a great nation can never be fulfilled through cultural integration; or, Abraham’s inculturation cannot happen at the cost of his faith. In Gn 12, the narrator speaks of God uprooting Abraham from his native land/culture and implanting him and his group in a foreign land/culture, which happen with immediate effect (vv.1, 2-5): lekh lekha ma’artsekha… (walk from your land, v. 1); wayelekh ‘abram… wayelekh ’ito lot (Abram walked…Lot walked with him, v. 4); wayiqakh ‘abram et saray ‘ishto (and Abram took Sarah his wife, v. 5). Here, the narrator sandwiches the divine promise of making Abraham a great nation between the command and the compliance. In this structure, the wordplay between halakh (to walk/go) and laqakh (to take) suggests that Sarah should continuously be Abraham’s wife (not a sister) in his journey and sojourning in order to fulfill the divine promise. Any dissonance between them will jeopardize his faith. Abraham’s attempt to disturb this harmony through cultural integration (wife-sister relationship) is simply unacceptable to the narrator. Thus, it is overturned as Pharaoh asks Abraham to take (laqakh) his wife (not sister) and leave (halakh) Egypt. Also, by adopting the wife-sister relationship, Abraham compromises another aspect of his faith: he forgoes the privilege of becoming a blessing to the nations—in this case, the Egyptians and Pharaoh. Located between humanity’s rebellion at Babel (Gn 11) and an autocratic empire in Egypt (Gn 12), the divine call makes it incumbent upon Abraham to be a moral paradigm to the world. But in Gn 12:18-20, Pharaoh (not Abraham) occupies the moral high ground.

In summary, the narrator employs a hermeneutic of cultural differentiation in the case of Abraham’s inculturation in Egypt because it jeopardizes his faith: the divine promise of the offspring or the nationhood. A corollary can be drawn from Abraham’s case: any attempt at inculturation out of a minority mentality or its accompanying apprehension of the majority’s reprisal may lead to a compromise of faith.

21 Also, see Wenham, Genesis 1-15, 269.
Cultural Accommodation in Joseph’s Inculturation in Egypt

The narrator returns to “Egyptian inculturation” at the other end of the patriarchal story. Here, he employs the hermeneutic of cultural accommodation that revolves around Joseph, the counterpart of Abraham. Notably, Joseph’s inculturation in Egypt appears to be more intense than that of Abraham. Unlike Abraham, whose predisposition to cultural integration in Egypt is based on his muted ethnic identity, Joseph’s cultural assimilation happens with his explicit Hebrew pedigree (Gn 39:17; 41:12). The narrator accommodates Joseph’s Egyptian ethnocultural integration in an Egyptian way: Joseph receives an Egyptian name, and he is married to an Egyptian woman. The arrangement of the words and the wordplay between them are instructive of Joseph’s complete ethno-religio-cultural integration, at least from Pharaoh’s viewpoint: wayiqra phar’oh shem yoseph tsaphnat pa’neakh wayitenlo et ‘asnat bat poti phera’ kohen ‘on (Pharaoh called Joseph by the name tsaphnat pa’neakh and he gave him ‘asnat the daughter of poti phera’, the priest of On, Gn 41:45):

note the wordplay between tsaphnat and ‘asnat, pa’neakh and poti phera’, wayiten and kohen. If the meaning of ‘asnat (“she belongs to the goddess Neit”) is factored into the first wordplay, then it would mean that Joseph is tied to the deity that his Egyptian wife worships. This is far more serious than the events narrated in Gn 12 and 34, where Abraham attempts cultural identification by unwittingly handing Sarah over to Pharaoh or Hamor offering cultural integration to Jacob and his sons through interethnic marriage. This foundational religio-cultural aspect legitimizes or, in Victor P. Hamilton’s term, “formalizes” Joseph’s political appointment over Egypt, encompassing different aspects of his identity as explained below. Otherwise, Joseph’s authority will be construed as lacking authentic birthright. That is to say, it is the Egyptian tsaphnat pa’neakh, not Joseph the Hebrew, who rules over Egypt as the vice-regent (“Thus Joseph gained authority over the land of Egypt,” Gn 41:45c).

22 Claus Westermann notes that the renaming of Joseph is a social affair by which foreigners such as Joseph are absorbed into Egyptian society; Claus Westermann, Genesis 37-50, trans. John J. Scullion S. J. (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), 96.
The narrator first presents Joseph as an Egyptian national to his brothers. The double entendre of nakhar (to recognize) in Gn 42:7 (wayakirem wayitnaker, Joseph recognizing his brothers and yet not recognizing them), the harsh tone of conversation, and his hard interrogation mean that at this point the Egyptian Joseph is dealing with outsiders.

Second, the narrator speaks of Joseph’s Egyptian identity in linguistic terms, as he is said to be using an interpreter for communication (Gn 42:23).

Third, Joseph’s Egyptian royal-priestly status becomes evident in the Egyptian inter-dining custom at the feast hosted by Joseph at which the people are seated by their ethnic and hierarchical superiority (Gn 43:32).

Fourth, Joseph is said to be well aware of the Egyptian hydromantic form of divination—whether or not Joseph is a practitioner of divination is immaterial to our argument, although the text suggests it in the negative. Joseph orchestrates this to reveal his identity to his brothers (“Is it not from this that my lord drinks? Does he not indeed use it for divination?... Do you not know that one such as I can practice divination?” Gn 44:5, 15). Here both sentences begin with an identical tone, but the usage of the cup becomes redundant because Joseph claims to have known the act of theft himself by divination without it, indicating the absence of hyromancy.

Finally, the inculturated Joseph perilously comes close to the Egyptian religious belief in relation to life after death. He embalms his dead father (“Joseph commanded the physicians in his service to embalm his father;” Gn 50:2) with seventy days of mourning (“And the Egyptians wept for him seventy days,” Gn 50:3). This is a customary royal funerary practice generally accompanied by an elaborate ritual that paves the way for the life of the departed to enter the heavenly realm, even immortalizing the deceased in both realms, as was done to the pharaohs. Such was the impact of Joseph’s Egyptian national/cultural identity that the communal division (“us versus them”) between Egyptians and Israelites is exposed only after


Joseph’s death and the end of the pharaoh’s dynasty that initiated Joseph into the Egyptian politico-cultural environment (Ex 1:8-10). Interestingly, the new Egyptian king distrusts the national/cultural integration of the Israelites, saying that they will turn anti-nationals when Egypt’s national security comes under attack.

The intense inculturation of Joseph notwithstanding, nowhere in the story does the narrator condemn Joseph; rather, the narrator ends the other side of the book of Genesis with a hermeneutic of cultural accommodation. Why? This is because Joseph keeps the perpetuity of patriarchal faith in perspective. While the narrator is eager to protect Abraham’s faith through the hermeneutic of differentiation, he seeks to promote the same in Joseph’s case by employing the hermeneutic of accommodation. According to the narrator, Joseph, with all his cultural integration, adheres to his faith in Egypt. We may point out at least three aspects.

First, Joseph makes his fidelity to Yahweh nonnegotiable in the family, although he lives and works within the Egyptian power structure. For instance, having spoken of Joseph’s cultural integration by the name-changing and inter-ethnic/-religious marriage, the narrator goes on to underline Joseph’s faith through the same. A chiastic relationship between Gn 41:45 and verses 50-52 reveals this:

A—Pharaoh renames Joseph (“Pharaoh gave Joseph the name Zaphenath-paneah,” Gn 41:45a);
B—Asenath is given to Joseph in marriage (“and he gave him Asenath daughter of Potiphera, priest of On, as his wife,” Gn 41:45b);
B’—Asenath gives birth to the sons of Joseph (“Joseph had two sons, whom Asenath daughter of Potiphera, priest of On, bore to him,” Gn 41:50);
A’—Joseph names his sons (“Joseph named the firstborn Manasseh…And the name of the second called he Ephraim,” Gn 41:51-52).

While Pharaoh wants Joseph to be known as an inculturated Egyptian in public, the narrator shows him to be an authentic Israelite patriarch at home. A plausibility of the same root between ‘ephrayim (Ephraim) and porat (Jacob’s reference to Joseph as a “fruitful bough”) further strengthens the bequeathal of patriarchal faith to the next generation because Ephraim
is the personification of Joseph’s faith—here one should not gloss over the fact that the narrator has already highlighted Joseph’s faith in public, since his reference to God concerning the interpretation of Pharaoh’s dream is made in relation to his ethnic identity, in contradistinction to the magicians and the wise men of Egypt.

Second, in Egypt, Joseph keeps the patriarchal sojourning and wandering in perspective:

Wayishlakhani 'elohim liphneykhem… (“God sent me before you…So it was not you who sent me here, but God,” Gn 45:7-8). This is similar to what Abraham says (“And when God caused me to wander from my father’s house,” Gn 20:13). The verb shalakh (to send) in Joseph’s statement negatively echoes the concurrence of the same in Gn 12: shalakh in Gn 12 means Abraham’s eviction from Egypt (Pharaoh sends out Abraham), but it means Joseph’s entry to and engagement with Egypt. Furthermore, there is a correspondence between the narrator’s earlier information about Abraham’s descendants ending up in a foreign land and Joseph’s migration to Egypt being a divinely orchestrated event (Gn 15:13-16). This statement of faith of Joseph differs from his earlier one referring to his being in Egypt as a forcible dislocation or human trafficking (Gn 40:15), which is true from the human viewpoint.

Third, Joseph’s faith sets in motion the divine promise concerning the land to the patriarchs (Gn 12:7). Interestingly, despite holding an enviable position and enjoying a royal life in Egypt, Joseph never admires that land. If anything, he refers to Egypt as the land of his suffering (be’erets ‘anyi, the land of my pain, Gn 41:52); neither does he wish his posterity to settle permanently in Egypt because he considers Canaan to be his homeland. The chiastic structure in Gn 50:22-26 reinforces this point.

A—Joseph dwells in Egypt (wayasheb yoseph bemitsrayim hu’ubeit ‘abiw, “And Joseph lived in Egypt, he and his father’s household,” v. 22a);
B—Joseph lives 110 years and sees the third generation (wayekhi yoseph me’ah wa’ser shanim….., “And Joseph lived one hundred and ten years,” 22b-23);
X—Joseph speaks of his death and God’s promise of resettling the people in Canaan, with his desire to have his bones transferred (weha’elah ‘etkhem…

28 Also, see Westermann, Genesis 37-50, 97.
weha’aletem et ‘atsmtpay mijeh, “God will...bring you up out...,” “you shall carry up my bones from here,” vv. 24-25);

B’—Joseph dies at the age of 110 (wayamet yoseph..., Joseph dies, being one hundred and ten years old, v. 26a);

A’—Joseph is mummified in Egypt29 (wayakhantu wayishem, “he was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt,” v. 26b.).

As the above structure suggests, Joseph does not simply live and die like an ordinary Egyptian, but he lives and dies like an Egyptian royal—note the opposition between wayekhi (he lived) and wayamet (he died) and the wordplay between wayasheb (he lived/he dwelt) and wayishem (he was placed). In fact, the wordplay indicates Joseph’s non-burial or mummification; yet Joseph maintains and follows his faith. The double and corresponding hiphil use of the verb ‘alah (to go up), God bringing the people from Egypt (weha’elah) and the people bringing Joseph’s bones from Egypt (weha’aletem), underscore Joseph’s confidence in Yahweh’s promise to Abraham and the future settlement of his people in Canaan. Importantly, even after becoming an adapted Egyptian, Joseph remains to be a symbol of morality (Gn 39) and material blessing (Gn 41:56-57) to the Egyptians and the nations, the kernel of Abrahamic blessings. A corollary may be drawn here: any inculturation that fulfills the mission of God may also maintain the primacy of faith, as explained in Joseph’s case.

DIFFERENTIATION AND ACCOMMODATION APPLIED TO OTHER PATRIARCHAL CUSTOMS

The narrator applies the hermeneutic of cultural differentiation and accommodation to the rest of the patriarchal stories and customs located within the two frames explained above. Since space forbids us to examine all of them, we shall briefly analyze at least two, namely, marriage and progeny, and costume, especially jewelry. The narrator presents the same custom with differing attitudes.

Differentiation in the Patriarchal Custom of Marriage and Progeny

(Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar in Gn 16-17)

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29 Also, Westermann, Genesis 37-50, 199.
In Gn 16, the narrator’s hermeneutic of differentiation on marriage and progeny operates primarily on the patriarchal faith (the divine promise of the offspring or nationhood through Sarah), although one might discern a subtext of monogamy. That is to say, from Adam to Noah, all have produced offspring through one wife/woman except for Lamech, whose two wives, in any case, are mentioned without their progeny. However, with the introduction of Abraham in Gn 12, the issue of marriage and progeny becomes intertwined with his faith—Yahweh promises to bless Abraham with posterity for inheriting the land. Since this is further delayed by Sarah’s barrenness, she falls back on a culturally acceptable alternative (Gn 16) that the narrator denounces.

The cultural solution that Sarah seeks is called the slave-wife surrogacy, a general practice in Ancient West Asia (AWA) whereby the first wife, in case of sterility, can substitute a female servant/slave for herself in order to provide offspring for the family.30

Sarah’s attempt to harmonize culture and faith concerning progeny31 emerges from a chiastic structure in Gn 16:1-4:

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30 For further discussions, see Wenham, Genesis 16-50, 7; Hamilton, The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17, 444-445; M. Stol, “Women in Mesopotamia,” JESHO 38, no. 2 (1995): 129; M. Stol, Women in the Ancient Near East, trans. Helen and Mervyn Richardson (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 168. Also, here it is important to provide an example of weakness in Thompson’s disagreement that is germane to our discussion. Delineating seven discrepancies concerning the Genesis stories of surrogacy in general and between Gn 16 and the Nuzi parallels in particular, Thompson argues that, unlike Gn 16, which is primarily driven by Sarah’s attempt to mitigate the ignominy of barrenness, the Nuzi custom of surrogacy is meant for the husband’s right to posterity. See Thompson, The Historicity, 256, 256-258. However, this is somewhat misleading if the text is taken into account. Abraham’s consent must be seen in the light of his desire for an heir, something the narrator astutely mentions in Gn 15:2-3. And, as we shall see later, Yahweh reprimands Abraham, not Sarah; Sarah only proposes the idea of bridging the culture and faith, which Abraham accepts.

31 Sarna thinks that the text is unclear about Sarah’s cultural option, as the whole act seems to be driven by desperation. However, Sarah’s choice of her own maidservant instead of another wife or concubine makes Sarah’s intention clear because she naturally owns Hagar’s child (Gn 16:2b). By contrast, a child born of another woman (wife or concubine) would have belonged to the biological mother alone. This deliberate act of Sarah (although out of desperation) is in line with the surrogacy custom of ancient Mesopotamia, as Tollington observes. See Tollington, “Abraham and His Wives”: 187-188.
A—Sarah’s barrenness and Hagar’s surrogacy (wesharay ‘eshet ’bram…welah shhiphkha…ushemah hagar, “Now Sarai, Abram’s wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian slave-girl whose name was Hagar,” v. 1)—note a quasi-assonance between sharay (Sarah), shiphkhah (maid) and shemah (her name), which underscores the alternative;

B—Sarah’s faith concerning barrenness and her proposal (“and Sarai said to Abram, ‘You see that the LORD has prevented me (‘atsarani) from bearing children; go in to my slave-girl,’” v. 2);

B’—Cultural compatibility of her proposal (watiqakh saray…shhipkhatah miqets ‘esher shanim leshebet ’abram be’erets kena’an watiten ‘otah, “Sarai… took Hagar the Egyptian, her slave-girl, and gave her…,” v. 3);

A’—Hagar’s conception (wayabo ’elhagar watahar, “He went in to Hagar, and she conceived,” v. 4).

Sarah understands the problem of her barrenness through her belief (that Yahweh has closed her womb), but she explores a solution culturally and thus tries to bridge both. Within the given structure, the narrator provides further literary evidence for it. The wordplay between the roots ‘atsar (to restrain) and ’erets (land) suggests Sarah’s dependence upon the law or custom of the land so as to free her from the divine restraint. And the phrase miqets ‘esher shanim leshebet ’abram be’erets kena’an (from the end of ten tears that Abraham had to live in the land of Canaan), sandwiched between watiqakh (Sarah took) and watiten (Sarah gave), further undergirds Sarah’s cultural option. This phrase suggests that Abraham and Sarah were willing to integrate themselves to the local culture due to their having lived a reasonable amount of time (ten years) in the land.32 Here, the word qets (end) echoes the verb qarab (near or at the border) that occurs in Gn 12:11: qets connotes a completion of the cultural process in Canaan just as qarab suggests a heightened cultural consciousness of Abraham when he goes to Egypt. Furthermore, the verb leshebet (to live) in this context drives home the comfort level of a cultural adoption because of a longer stay. Although the narrator has used both verbs yashab (to live) and shakhan (to live) for mentioning Abraham’s settlement in Canaan (Gn 13:12; 14:13),

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32 Although the practice of surrogacy was non-Canaanite in its origin, it became widespread across space and cultures; see Westermann, Genesis 12-36, 240. Thus Abraham’s consent to surrogacy means an uncritical acceptance of culture, especially after his departure from Mesopotamia (Gn 12).
they are always explained in tandem with the divine promise (Gn 13:16-18) or Abraham’s ethnic distinction (the Hebrew, Gn 14:13). However, an isolated usage of the verb *yashab* in Gn 16:3 portrays Abraham to be like a resident or culturally native Canaanite who permits Sarah to exchange her role with Hagar (*lo le’ishah*, to him for a woman/wife).

Having presented the cultural adaptation by Sarah and Abraham, the narrator goes on to show his hermeneutic of differentiation through a contrast. According to the narrator, Sarah’s cultural option of surrogacy concomitantly jeopardizes the patriarchal faith and Hagar’s pregnancy and security. Therefore, the narrator shows that while the principle of inculturation solves Hagar’s insecurity and protects her offspring, the same does not solve Sarah’s desire to realize the divine promise, the offspring/nationhood (“it may be that I shall obtain children by her,” Gn 16:2).

That inculturation works in favor of Hagar is discernible through a chiastic structure in Gn 16:7-10:

A—The angel of the Lord finds Hagar at a spring in the desert (*’al ‘eyn hamayim bamidbar ‘al ha’ayin bederekh shur*, “...by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur,” v. 7)—note the repetition of spring (*’eyn and ‘ayin*), perhaps suggesting hope and life;

B—The angel of the Lord comes to know about Hagar’s desertion (*watomer miphney gebirti ‘anokhi borakhat*, “She said, ‘I am running away from my mistress Sarai,’” v. 8);

B’—The angel of the Lord commands Hagar to be loyal to her mistress (*shubi elgebirtekha wehit ‘ani takhat yadeyh*, “return to your mistress, and submit to her,” v. 9);

A’—The angel of the Lord promises numerous descendants to Hagar (*harbah ’arbah etjar’kh welo yisapher merob*, “I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude,” v. 10)—note, again, the repetition of *rab/raah* (great/many), confirming the future.

As the structure shows, in order to address Hagar’s plight of abandonment, the angel of the Lord himself seems to legitimize or theologize the family structure (the culture of AWA) that requires the
submission of inferiors and servants to superiors and masters/mistress. This is evident in how the narrator uses certain key words in the story: the wordplay between *shur* and *shub* (to return), with the latter being in *qal* imperative, relocates Hagar from a homeless wandering to home; the *antanaclasis* of *‘anah* (to humiliate/humble) in verses 9 and 6 calls for Hagar’s unconditional submission to Sarah just as Sarah mistreats her; and the usages of *yad* (hand) in verses 9 and 6 suggest Sarah’s total authority. In a similar vein, the narrator also makes Hagar’s posterity contingent upon the compatibility between faith and culture.

However, the narrator says that the same principle of inculturation that Sarah and Abraham have tried works against their faith and the realization of the promised offspring. Thus the narrator begins Gn 17:1-2 with an unusual statement after Abraham fathers Ishmael. The narrator’s point can be captured through the following parallelism:

A—Yahweh introduces himself to Abraham (“…The Lord…I am the Almighty God,” v. 1b);
B—Divine command to Abraham (*hithhalekh lephanay weheyah ṭamim*, “walk before me, and be blameless,” v. 1c);
A’—Yahweh personally confirms the covenant (“And I will make my covenant between me and you,” v. 2a);
B’—Numerous descendants of Abraham (*we’arbeh ‘otkha bime’od me’od*, “and will make you exceedingly numerous,” v. 2b)—note that the verb *rabah* (to multiply) occurred earlier in Yahweh’s blessing to Ishmael, but now it occurs with an addition of *me’od* (exceedingly).

The above structure is diametrically opposed to how Yahweh deals with Hagar. As opposed to the deity finding Hagar and initiating a conversation with her (Gn 16), he introduces himself to Abraham in the first person and becomes personally involved (A&A’); and, while the promise of numerous descendants to Hagar is contingent upon a cultural solution (the deity stops Hagar from running away and asks her to submit to Sarah, the mistress), the same for Abraham is connected to his faith (B&B’).

In fact, the phrase *hithhalekh lephanay weheyah ṭamim* (B) is loaded with a suggestion for Abraham to separate his faith from the culture. The

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34 Also, Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 10.
usage of *halakh* (to go or walk) in the case of Hagar means her hopeless and uncertain movement (*telekhi*, Gn 16:8), but the same verb means a demonstration of faith by Abraham, as it did earlier (Gn 12:1, 4; 13:17). Also, a combination of *lephanay* (instead of *et* used earlier to describe someone’s walk with God, Gn 5:24, 26; 6:9) and *tamim* underlines the authenticity and purity of Abraham’s faith that is unsullied by the culture. Here the word *lephanay* (before) negatively echoes *mipeneya/mipaneyh*35 (from before), which appear in Gn 16:8, 6, indicating a noncultural solution to Abraham’s need for progeny; the wordplay and opposition between *tahar* (Hagar’s conception) and *tamim* (Abraham’s perfection) enjoins Abraham to hold a distinct identity in Canaan similar to that of Noah, which distinguishes him from the rest of the world (“Noah was a righteous man, blameless [tamim] in his generation,” Gn 6:9).36

The narrator further crystallizes the separation between faith and culture in terms of Abraham and his descendants keeping the covenant, which is that all the descendants of Abraham ought to be circumcised. This is meant to be an everlasting covenant in the flesh (“thus shall my covenant be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant,” Gn 17:13). The usage of *basar* (flesh)—earlier used to explain the corruption of humanity (Gn 6:12)—here means that the faith of Abraham and his descendants is not to be corrupted by the standards of culture. Importantly, the narrator sandwiches the requirement of circumcision (the covenant keeping) between the two confirmations of Yahweh’s covenant with Abraham: in the first incident, Yahweh confirms the covenant of making Abraham a father of many nations; in the second, Yahweh reconfirms the covenant by dispelling Abraham’s idea of accepting Ishmael, since the covenanted offspring will arrive only through Sarah. Hence, in Gn 17, the symbolism of circumcision is an antithesis to Gn 16, which describes the patriarchal attempt to harmonize faith and culture (socially acceptable way of having intercourse with Hagar to produce offspring, Ishmael).37 Notably, by inculturating himself, Abraham does not become a blessing or a moral

36 Hamilton makes numerous references to all the words that are discussed in the whole section; Hamilton, *Genesis 1-17*, 461.
37 As Hamilton observes, circumcision may not distinguish Israelites from non-Israelites who practice the same rite (for example, Ishmael). Hamilton, *Genesis 1-17*, 470.
exemplar to either Pharaoh, the Egyptian ruler, or Hagar, the Egyptian maids. In sum, the narrator applies the hermeneutic of differentiation to the issue of marriage and progeny in the case of Hagar’s surrogacy because here the culture endangers the patriarchal faith.

Accommodation in the Patriarchal Custom of Marriage and Progeny (Jacob, Leah, and Rachel in Gn 30–32)

The narrator reports similar customs of marriage and progeny in Jacob’s case, and yet he remains sympathetic toward him. Jacob’s case seems to be far more serious than that of Abraham because of the intertwining of two cultural customs, namely, bigamy and surrogacy. Against the parental advice to marry one of Laban’s daughters, Jacob marries two sisters from the same family because of the custom of the land (“Laban said, ‘This is not done [lo ya’aseh] in our country…,'” Gn 29:26). Furthermore, with the consent of his wives, Jacob produces children with two maidservants. Of particular interest here is the similarity between the case of Abraham-Sarah and that of Jacob-Rachel. The latter case can be put in a chiastic structure:

A—Rachel’s sterility and desperation (Gn 30:1);
B—Jacob’s faith response (v. 2, “Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?”);
B’—Rachel’s cultural option of using her maidservant (“Then she said, ‘Here is my maid Bilhah; go in to her, that she may bear upon my knees and that I too may have children through her…,'” vv. 3-5);
A’—Rachel’s motherhood through surrogacy (v. 6).

A few observations must be made to drive home the gravity of the offense. One, Rachel proposes the cultural option of surrogacy because her sister has children; two, Rachel’s words are far more explicit than those of Sarah; three, Jacob becomes a party to this proposal despite knowing the divine role in Rachel’s sterility. He, then, goes on to participate in more cases of surrogate pregnancies with Zilpah, Leah’s maidservant (Gn 30:9-13). In other words, the birth of Jacob’s offspring is hijacked by cultural customs

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40 According to Wenham, Rachel’s proposal of surrogacy is similar to that of Sarah. Wenham, *Genesis 17-50*, 244.
in some way, creating strife between the wives and other members. More important, does the narrator accommodate the cultural customs of bigamy and surrogacy (the latter is already condemned in the Abraham-Hagar episode) in Jacob’s case, since they contribute to the Abrahamic offspring/the nationhood (the patriarchal faith)?

To begin with, the narrator seems to absolve Jacob, as he accommodates the customs that he follows. Although Jacob’s love for Rachel creates a rivalry between the two sisters, the narrator does not hold Jacob culpable. The narrator involves Jacob in reporting his love for Rachel (“and he loved Rachel more than Leah,” Gn 29:30), but he quickly extricates Jacob from making him a party to Leah’s unloved status (“Now the Lord saw that Leah was unloved,” Gn 29:31). Thus the deity’s sympathy toward Leah’s status in no way condemns Jacob. If the issue is not about Jacob but about the rivalry between the sisters, then Yahweh seems to have tolerated this because he initiates steps toward its resolution: he listens to Rachel and opens her womb (“and God heeded her and opened her womb,” Gn 30:22) just as he does to Leah (“And God heeded Leah,” Gn 30:17). Literally speaking, the first pregnancies of both sisters (Gn 29:31; 30:22) seem to have thawed the relationship among all parties concerned, as the ensuing episodes suggest. For instance, Jacob consults both wives before he flees Laban’s home (Gn 31:4); both sisters take a consonant view of their father disinheriting them and mistreating Jacob, and both are agree to leave their father’s home (Gn 31:14-16). Finally, even the episode of Jacob wrestling with God at Jabbok has no pejorative undertone in relation to all that he did in Padan-Aram. Although space forbids a detailed analysis, it suffices here to say that the narrator is conveying a positive message of God’s dealing with Jacob. The

41 Hamilton makes isolated comments on Rachel’s jealousy and Jacob’s consent. Hamilton, Genesis 18-50, 270, 271.
42 Helen R. Jacobus compares the levitical law (Lv 18:17-18) with Jacob’s marriage and argues for Jacob’s guilt in having intercourse with slave girls, although it absolves him from marrying two sisters. Helen R. Jacobus, “Slave Wives and Transgressive Unions in Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Laws,” in Leviticus and Numbers, ed. A. Brenner and A. Lee (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 61-63. We differ from this position because both polygamy and surrogacy are intertwined in the Jacob narrative.
43 Wenham thinks that Jacob had to get his wives on his side because the sons of Laban were coming up against him. Wenham, Genesis 16-50, 270-271.
44 Also, Hamilton, Genesis 18-50, 289. However, we differ from Hamilton’s view concerning the motive of agreement.
Jabbok episode (Gn 32:22-32), as an antithesis, is sandwiched between the stories of Jacob’s anxious meeting with Esau (Gn 32:1-21; 33:1-17). For instance, Jacob’s anxiety propels a prayer to Yahweh to save him from Esau’s hand (“Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau…,” Gn 32:12=Eng v. 11)), but the narrator suggests it to be misplaced because if God saves Jacob from himself (“…saying, ‘For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved,’” Gn 32:30=Eng v. 31), then no greater danger than this can beset Jacob.

The narrator is critical of Abraham but is sympathetic to Jacob adapting a cultural custom regarding marriage and progeny because Jacob’s cultural integration does not impinge upon the patriarchal faith. In Gn 28, Jacob gets to know the patriarchal faith at first hand, which the narrator repeats twice: Isaac passes on the faith and blessing to Jacob before he sets out to Padan-Aram (vv. 1-5), and on the journey, the deity also speaks to him in a dream (vv. 11-15). A small but significant difference between them provides the key to understand the narrator’s hermeneutic of accommodation. Isaac’s blessing to Jacob can be put in a chiastic form:

A—Isaac sends Jacob to Padan-Aram to find a wife in his uncle’s house (qum lekh…weqakhlekha misham ‘ishāh…, “Arise, go to Paddan-aram, to the house of Bethuel your mother’s father; and from there take to yourself a wife…,” vv. 1-2);

B—Isaac blesses Jacob with the Abrahamic blessing of numerous offspring (weyarbekha wehayita... “May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and numerous…,” v. 3);

B’—Isaac continues with the Abrahamic blessing of possessing land (lerishtekha ’eterets…natān..., “May he give to you the blessing of Abraham…the land…,” v. 4);

A’—Jacob goes to Padan-Aram (v. 5).

The above structure suggests that Isaac assumes the fulfillment of Abrahamic blessing in the Abrahamic pattern in which faith supersedes culture. Note that Isaac’s use of lekh (to go), weqakh (and take), ‘ishāh (one woman/wife), rab (to multiply), natān (to give), and ’erets (land) recall the Abrahamic pattern of faith (cf. Gn 12:1-2). However, Yahweh’s subsequent
revelation to Jacob (Gn 28:11-15) reiterates everything that Isaac utters except the details or description about the means and method—whether the fulfillment of the offspring/nationhood happens through one wife or many wives and concubines. The deity’s omission of the one wife formula is significant. This is diametrically opposite to the earlier scenarios wherein Yahweh promises offspring to Abraham only through Sarah or listens to Isaac on behalf of his barren wife (Gn 25:21). Importantly, Yahweh seems to give a blanket approval to Jacob, saying that he will bring Jacob back to the land and fulfill the Abrahamic promise at any cost (ki lo ’e’ezabkha ‘ad ’asher ’im ’asiti… “for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you,” Gn 28:15). Jacob’s vow to the deity is also focused on his safe return to the land because, for Jacob, the patriarchal faith is equally about experiencing the fulfillment of divine promise made to his fathers. However, it happens through divine orchestration that works through the cultural labyrinth and is not based on any precedent. The narrator’s pun on ‘asah (to do) in the deity’s doing (‘asiti, Gn 28:15) and Laban’s doing (lo ya’aseh, Gn 29:26) suggests the deity’s foreknowledge about the impending cultural predicament of Jacob and his decision to overlook it. Therefore, the deity continues to communicate to him positively in Padan-Aram despite Jacob’s falling into a cultural trap. Moreover, the cultural trap has not prevented Jacob from becoming a blessing to other nations, especially to his father-in-law’s clan. At the beginning Laban speaks of Jacob’s presence ushering in material blessings to his family (Gn 30:27); and toward the end he acknowledges the sovereignty of Jacob’s God.\footnote{For more, see Manoja Kumar Korada, The Rationale for Aniconism in the Old Testament: A Study of Select Studies, CBET 86 (Leuven: Peeters, 2017), 208.} In sum, unlike Abraham, the narrator makes allowance for Jacob’s inculturation regarding such customs as marriage and progeny because they do not affect the patriarchal faith.

Accommodation in the Adornment of Jewelry (Abraham Servant Adorning Rebekah, Gn 24)

To say the least, an argument of the narrator accommodating costumes or jewelry in Gn 24 sounds simplistic or illogical, plainly because these items are culturally neutral (Jer 2:22; Ez 16); and women in Mesopotamia (or even in AWA) use common clothing and adorn themselves with
jewelry irrespective of their faith and ethnicity. However, for the narrator, everything concerning the patriarchal life, including the issue of jewelry, has to do with faith. The narrator speaks of jewelry four times in Gn 24, where he narrates the story of Abraham asking his chief servant to go on a mission to find a wife for his son. The narrator devotes some space to jewelry not merely because he wishes to highlight the custom of the bridal gift, but because he wants to underscore a harmony between the cultural custom and faith. As the literary pattern in Gn 24 suggests, jewelry is mentioned in the context of the patriarchal faith: building of the nation through Abraham’s offspring (Isaac’s marriage to Rebekah), the land, the deity’s sovereignty, and a reciprocal belief through cult/worship. All of these are reflected or reiterated in the mission of Abraham’s servant.

The first faith episode can be described in a chiastic structure as follows:

A—The servant prays to confirm the right girl and he puts forth signs (vv. 12-14);
B—Rebekah arrives (vv. 15-16);
B’—Rebekah gives drinks to the servant and the camels (vv. 17-20);
A’—The servant ponders over the confirmation (v. 21).

The narrator follows it up with the servant taking the jewelry. Importantly, the narrator says that the servant does it soon after the camels drink water, as if to bypass the moment of pondering (“…the man took a gold nose-ring weighing a half shekel, and two bracelets for her arms weighing ten gold shekels,” Gn 24:22). Later, the servant clarifies that his adorning of Rebekah with jewelry happens only after confirming her family connection and his bowing down to Abraham’s God in worship (“…and I put the earring upon her face, and the bracelets upon her hands,” Gn 24:47).

The second faith episode has the same pattern, which, again, may be put in a parallel structure:

A—Laban and Bethuel agree with the servant about divine guidance (v. 50);
B—Laban and Bethuel consent to give Rebekah, as she is the divine choice (v. 51);

47 As Hamilton observes, Rebekah perhaps was unaware of the “bridal gift.” Hamilton, Genesis 18-50, 148.
A’—Abraham’s servant bows down in worship (v. 52);
B’—He presents jewelry to the divinely chosen bride (Rebekah) and her mother (“And the servant brought out jewelry of silver and of gold, and garments, and gave them to Rebekah…,” Gn 24:53).

More importantly, all the verbs used for the servant adorning Rebekah with jewelry echo the faith statements of Abraham in the earlier part of the story: while the servant takes (wayiqakh) jewelry, Abraham tells the servant not to take (lo tiqakh) a wife from the Canaanites because the angel will guide the servant’s path in taking a wife (welaqakhta) for the master’s son; while the servant puts (wa’asim) gold on Rebekah, Abraham puts (simna’) the servant’s hand under his thigh; while the servant gives (yiten) articles of gold, Abraham speaks of Yahweh giving (’eten) the land to his descendants. This means that the usage of jewelry in Gn 24 would have lost its cultural significance and acceptance, had the servant violated any of Abraham’s faith statements, such as taking a Canaanite woman for Isaac’s wife.

In sum, although gold and other forms of jewelry are regarded as valuable cultural accouterments in AW A, the narrator does not view them as mere items of adornment; rather, he incorporates them into the patriarchal story because their cultural value serves the patriarchal faith. This is the narrator’s hermeneutic of accommodation.

The Hermeneutic of Differentiation in the Adornment of Jewelry
(The Renunciation of Jacob’s Family, Gn 35)

In Gn 35, the narrator shows a different attitude toward jewelry in the context of God asking Jacob to move to Bethel after the tragic and traumatic incident in Gn 34, the rape of Dinah. The narrator seems to have conveyed his standpoint through a parallel structure:

A—God asks Jacob to go to Bethel to live and build an altar (qum ‘aleh beitel weshebsham wa’sechsham mizbeakh, “Arise, go up to Bethel, and settle there. Make an altar there…,” v. 1);
B—Jacob asks the family members to put away foreign gods and purify themselves (wayomer ya’aqob elbeito we el kal’asher ‘imo hasiru ’et elohey hanekhar, “So Jacob said… ‘Put away the foreign gods that are among you’…,” v. 2);
A’—Jacob asks the family to join him in going up to Bethel (wenaque
wenalehetbeitetweeexshammitzbeakh, “then come, let us go up to Bethel,
that I may make an altar there to the God...,” v. 3);
B’—The family gives foreign gods to Jacob and the jewelry, which he
buries (wayitenu’etkal’eloheyhanekhar’asherbeyadwe’t’hanezamim
’asherbe’azneyhemwayitmon..., “So they gave to Jacob all the foreign gods
that they had, and the rings that were in their ears; and Jacob hid them...,”
v. 4);
C—The terror of God falls on the surrounding people (v. 5).

The above structure against the background of Gn 34 means that Jacob need
not live at Shechem with a fear of having to integrate culturally with the
local people, because God offers him an alternative. That is, Jacob’s house
(family) can now live in God’s house (Bethel)—note the wordplay between
beit’el and ’elbeito and the common location of residence and worship,
weshebsham/wa’asahsham (settle there/make an altar there). Obviously, this
is possible only if members of Jacob’s household rid themselves of foreign
gods, which they promptly do. However, here the narrator goes on to
mention an extra item, jewelry (we’et’hanezamim’asherbe’azneyhem, and the
rings that were in their ears). Although Jacob did not require it earlier, the
narrator raises the issue because at this point he expresses his condemnaton
regarding jewelry (the hermeneutic differentiation). Here, jewelry (the
(cultural adornment) must be discarded because, as Victor A. Hurowitz’s
opines, the word hanezamim (earring) refers to the “regalia of an idol,”
not of any human.48 Hurowitz’s opinion seems to be correct in view of
other literary features: there are alliterations between nekhar (foreign gods)
and nezem (the earring) on the one hand, and tahar (members of Jacob’s family purifying themselves)
on the other hand. Thus, as Hurowitz suggests, Gn 35 prevents the earring
from being reused,49 as opposed to Gn 24, which allows for a continuous
use of jewelry. In sum, in Gn 35 the narrator uses the hermeneutic of
differentiation in relation to jewelry because it may engender idolatry,50
thereby compromising the patriarchal faith.

49 Hurowitz, “Who Lost an Earring?”: 31; Also, for somewhat differing viewpoints, see
Wenham, Genesis 16-50, 324; Hamilton, Genesis 18-50, 374.
50 That the patriarchal faith is aniconic is recognized by a good number of scholars. For
example, see Augustine Pagolu, The Religion of the Patriarchs, JSOT Supp. Series 277

CONCLUSION

By examining the dynamics between the patriarchal faith and culture in the book of Genesis, this article has proposed “the hermeneutic of cultural differentiation and accommodation” as a model for the Indian church to inculturate its faith. The article has shown that the narrator’s hermeneutic examines similar cultural practices, but it approves or rejects them based on the patriarchal faith. The hermeneutical framework operates at both ends of the book: while at the one end the narrator condemns Abraham’s inculturation (wife-sister strategy) in Egypt for compromising his faith (jeopardizing the divine promise of offspring/nationhood), at the other end he allows Joseph’s assimilation to the culture of the same country because his inculturation goes hand in hand with the patriarchal faith. Joseph’s faith maintains loyalty to Yahweh in the family context: Joseph is absorbed into the Egyptian society through a ritual of naming, but he subverts it by the act of counter-naming his own children. Joseph’s faith keeps the land, Yahweh’s sovereignty, and the patriarchal wandering in proper perspective. Within this hermeneutical framework, the narrator examines other customs such as marriage and progeny and the adornment of jewelry and shows differing views. While the narrator condemns Abraham for adapting surrogacy, which sabotages the divine promise of the offspring, he condones Jacob for practices of both bigamy and surrogacy because they do not impede the patriarchal faith (fulfillment of the nationhood); while he allows the customary wearing of jewelry for Isaac’s bride, Rebekah, he condemns jewelry in Jacob’s family because it violates the patriarchs’ loyalty to Yahweh (a potential recurrence of idolatry because of metal images). The narrator’s differing attitude toward all these similar cultural practices is anchored in faith. That is to say, for the narrator, the integration between the patriarchal faith and patriarchal culture is possible only if the patriarchs uphold the primacy of faith.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE INDIAN CHURCH

What does the proposed hermeneutic of cultural differentiation and accommodation mean for the Indian church? Fundamentally, it means that the Indian church should not attempt to inculturate itself out of a minority
syndrome and the fear associated with it. Rather, it should move away from the tendency of viewing culture as a religious/faith category, such as the Hindu culture, the Islamic culture, the Sikh culture, or the Christian culture. This is a vestige of an former era, dare I say the colonial era, which continues to linger on in our collective consciousness. Instead, the Indian church should understand culture primarily in terms of ethnicity, language, geography, and so forth. Moreover, the Indian church should accept different cultures and subcultures as God-ordained vehicles for his salvific work. Such a construct will make the convergence, not compromise, between culture and faith more authentic and dynamic, making cultural markers and customs amenable to, and absorbable into, faith. How would such a convergence look if the church were to shelve a religious construction of culture? We may suggest a few instances that have been discussed within the exegetical section of this paper with a caveat: although the following implications seem to be monolithic in nature, various subcultures in India can still look at them heuristically.

First, the narrator’s condoning of Jacob’s bigamy does not provide a license to Indian Christians to sanctify or indulge in such a practice, simply because Indian Christians stand at the other end of the biblical revelation with a reasonable clarity on this issue.

Second, the Indian church has to reexamine onomastic and cultural identity. It goes without saying that naming something reflects a particular culture. So, for example, we have typical British, Scottish, and French names. This means that the Indian church should discourage or even deprecate the idea of giving their children foreign names. For instance, Christians should not be identified as Rosy or Blessen, which advocates a religious impersonation; instead, they should be named Pushpa (the name conveying an idea of a flower) or Anugraha or Ashish (the word blessing for Blessen); or instead of naming a person with theophoric names such as Shankarshan, the name Sudarshan can be used. Even if one wishes to retain biblical naming with a theological thrust, it needs to be transposed culturally. Otherwise, the religious overtone in Christian onomasticons becomes an initial relational impediment causing cultural separation between the church and society (us versus them).

Third, the church must rediscover acceptable cultural patterns of attire and accouterments. Christians in India, say, Christian women, should
appear, clothe, and bedeck themselves like other womenfolk of a given culture. Modesty does not mean discarding the culture, but it means desisting from ostentation. If, in a certain local or regional culture, men and women value decorative paraphernalia (such as bracelets, bangles, or necklaces), these should not be a taboo for the church to practice with some modifications. Unfortunately, this is not the case in general; the public appearance of Christians itself creates a cultural chasm between them and others.

Fourth, the Indian church needs to redeem cultural practices. For instance, a Christian wedding can incorporate several cultural elements, such as the exchange of garlands between brides and grooms; the brides and grooms can be serenaded into the wedding venue in a cultural pattern; the wedding garment can look very cultural; the newly wedded couple can be welcomed home culturally without such practices as the bride toppling a rice-filled vessel before entering. Although inculturation is not a panacea for the church to be acceptable in society, the point here is that the church should not give the impression of being a foreign entity locally and culturally. Otherwise, the church will always be a suspect and its faith engagements with the people outside its fold will be misconstrued as cultural invasion and foreign domination. All said, interpreting biblical faith in a given cultural environment is a continuous endeavor.

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