AMBIGUITY AND INCONGRUITY IN GENESIS 18:9-15 AN INTERPRETIVE STUDY OF SARAH'S LAUGHTER

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Contents

Abstract

This paper provides an interpretive study of the Genesis 18:9-15 passage, with a focus on the influence of ambiguity and incongruity as literary devices in relation to Sarah's laughter in the story. Theories of laughter are presented in order to provide contextual understanding of the way in which humour is communicated specifically through literature. The research examines the function of literary devices, together with the interplay between author, reader and text, to elucidate how meaning and significance is communicated for interpretation today. This study postulates that the presence of incongruity and ambiguity within this narrative involving Sarah is an invitation for others to laugh with God, and with each other.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

22nd February 2021

Date..

Acknowledgments

Introduction

Every person's life tells a story. Some stories are experienced as being filled with mystery and adventure, while other stories may be considered by their owner to be less than ordinary. But what if we each embraced the ambiguities and incongruities in our stories such that we saw them as more than ordinary - in fact, extraordinary? What if ambiguity and incongruity were to draw us in to embrace our participation in the fuller revelation of God's story and experience a richer narrative in our life? Through my pastoral role in the local church and school chaplaincy, I have had the opportunity to sit with and listen to people share their story. Some have told a rich and powerful story of God at work through their celebrations and sorrows, and I have been invited to laugh, as well as cry with them. But sadly, others have conveyed a different story. These individuals struggled with ambiguity and incongruity in life, finding it difficult to make sense of their story. There was no sense of curiosity to imagine how their story was being written into the fullness of God's story - and certainly no invitation for laughter.

The aim of this research is to investigate the author's use of literary devices, specifically ambiguity and incongruity, in the Genesis 18:9-15 account of Sarah's laughter. The literary power of ambiguity and incongruity on narrative meaning is explored, illustrating the relevance of their presence and purpose in our own personal lives. To begin with we investigate the use of ambiguity and incongruity in general literature. Literary devices pertinent to this study - including satire, paradox, hyperbole and irony - are noted to illustrate their use and influence on meaning. The research then recognises the complexities which arise from interpreting the meaning in relation to the author, reader, and text. The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) is used throughout this research to maintain consistency in the biblical text. While original languages are not the focus here, it is worth noting that the NRSV is located more towards the word-for-word end of the spectrum of Bible translations, rather than the thought-for-thought end. The NRSV seeks to reproduce the meaning of the author as closely as possible to the original language. If this paper were to make reference to a wider source of translations, it would further illustrate the complexities of understanding and meaning through varied syntax and semantics, and editorial interpretations. By considering one single translation, this research effectively illustrates how a reader's interpretation, with little-to-no knowledge of original languages, can be influenced by the literary devices in the biblical text as they receive it.

The research then presents an overview of three main philosophies of laughter: superiority, relief, and incongruity. The study moves to a specific focus on incongruity theory and the influence this theoretical perspective on laughter has on literary meaning, and more specifically biblical narrative.

The dissertation then considers in depth the Genesis 18:9-15 passage in order to illustrate the literary devices present, and the power they hold to carry the reader in certain directions. The discussion on ambiguity and incongruity in the biblical text seeks to demonstrate the way the reader is drawn into the story through satire, irony and humour. The biblical literature tells the story in a way which stirs the imagination of the reader in order that they find themselves in the story - even laughing with the characters. As we shall see in a later section of this study, there is a richness in the artistry of literature which enables it to speak back to us. The research then moves to explore ambiguity and incongruity as powerful characteristics in the contemporary narrative for life. With personal anecdotes from my own life, the paper looks at the richness unveiled through finding the meaning in our story in God's story. The research considers the way ambiguity creates space for imagination, and the correlation between incongruity and laughter which forms an invitation to deepen our participation in God's story.

Interpreting and finding meaning in biblical literature

The art of communication through literature

Communication may be defined as the imparting or interchange of thoughts, opinions, or information by speech, writing, or signs. Literary writings use words that often possess a range of possible meanings in a dictionary, and authors usually have in mind one of the conventional meanings listed in the dictionary. However, the ability, and invitation, for an author to be creative with word usage recognises that literature is an art form. It is characterised by beauty, craftsmanship, and technique. Therefore, it is necessary not only to focus on what is said but also on how it is said.

The communicative function of language constitutes a powerful force, but this textual power can be abused. Specifically, Susan Gallagher and Roger Lundin warn that one such abuse occurs when "we become desensitised to the power that language, metaphors, and narratives can wield."[1] When the language becomes exhausted often due to a shift in culture, and no longer communicates effectively, new styles emerge to seize the reader's attention and communicate in a fresh and compelling way.[2] This paper does not elaborate on postmodern or modernist literature, as biblical literature is neither of these. However, there are similar stylistic techniques used in both postmodern or modernist literature which are worth mentioning in the context of this study. Nasrulla Mambrol recognises the combination of different incongruous elements presented often leads to playful parody or satire, while the use of irony and dark humour is often woven into their writings through serious themes and subjects.[3] This research will consider these features and literary devices in more detail below through the examination of laughter theories. Mambrol adds, "Modernist and postmodernist works are also fragmented and do not easily, directly convey a solid meaning. That is, these works are consciously ambiguous and give way to multiple interpretations."[4] With this in mind, it is necessary to gain some understanding of the influence that literary genres and devices have on meaning.

Influence of literature genres and devices on meaning

While the reader may desire knowledge of the author's intended meaning, understanding the text requires that it be read in its context. Different forms of literature are governed by different rules. Therefore, having an awareness of the figurative language being used alerts the reader to how the

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[1] Susan V. Gallagher and Roger Lundin, *Literature Through the Eyes of Faith*, (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1989), 137.
[2] Sheeba, Sheeba, "Postmodern literature: Practices and Theory," in *Excellence International Journal of Education and Research. Vol: 4, Issue: 3.* (Majmaah University, March 2017).
[3] Nasrulla Mambrol, *Postmodernism*, (2016) https://literariness.org/2016/03/31/postmodernism/.
[4] Mambrol, *Postmodernism*, (2016).

text may be interpreted. Literary works are formed by the way the author employs particular conventions, such as presenting words in poetic lines or placing characters in certain situations. Michael Gorman illustrates this in the way we read a newspaper: we recognise the front-page news, comics, advice columns, advertisements, and editorials as different types of literature to be interpreted as such.[5] With this understanding, Ryken explains, "Every piece of writing must be approached in terms of what it is, and the conventions that it presupposes."[6]

In literature, conventions are considered to be certain storylines, settings, character types and writing styles which, according to Brian Moon, readers expect to find in certain kinds of text.[7] Moon adds that these conventions "work to stabilise the range of meanings which may be applied to a text."[8] A common way to discuss the structure of a literary work is to examine its *genre*. These genres, which can include poetry, drama, fiction, and non-fiction, each have certain features and conventions that distinguish them apart. These conventions carry with them sets of expectations that should guide the reader's encounter with the text, and the interpretation of it. This interplay between textual features and reading practices help shape and limit the meanings readers can make with a text.[9] The identification of genre is not only important to the expectations of the reader, but it also directs authors as they compose the text. Tremper Longman III notes that genre "shapes or coerces writers so that their compositions can be grasped and communicated to the reader."[10] Our attention is drawn to genres of prose and drama as the focus of this research paper is on a passage recognised to be biblical narrative.

Narrative is understood as the events selected from a story, and the order in which they are communicated. It becomes a representation of the story, rather than the story itself. Therefore, a different narrative may consist of a new event order, but it is simply the retelling of the same story.[11] Narrative literature, and biblical narrative in particular, is presented in such a way as to recreate an experience for the reader in which they can relate to an incident, incongruity, or the character depicted. The reader participates imaginatively in the unfolding action, and rather than simply "telling the reader about the action, the reader enters the action."[12] This action of narrative is built around common plots, characters, and images, whose traits remind us of similar representations elsewhere

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[5] Michael J. Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis: A Basic Guide for Students and Ministers*, (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 84-85.

[6] Leland Ryken, *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible, 13th ed.* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 21.

[7] Brian Moon, *Literary Terms*, (Cottesloe WA: Chalkface Press, 2017), 38.

[8] Moon, *Literary Terms*, 40.

[9] Moon, *Literary Terms*, 92.

[10] Tremper Longman III, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation Vol 3*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Academic Books, 1987), 77.

[11] https://www.beemgee.com/blog/story-vs-narrative/.

[12] Gene Edward Veith Jr., *Reading Between the Lines: A Christian Guide to Literature*, (Wheaton IL: Crossway, 1990), 62.

in literature and life. Literary critics call these recurrent images and symbols archetypes.[13] These master images are the building blocks of the literary imagination and recur throughout literature because of their pervasiveness in life. Archetypes show us how much we have in common with other people, and so give us the means by which we can see ourselves in the works of literature. While it is interesting to find these common patterns, it is important to know what to do with them, and whether they add meaning to the text, introduce ambiguity, or actually enhance the reading experience.

Throughout literature, there are four well known literary types: tragedy, comedy, realism, and fantasy. Each type is not limited to one particular genre, but through their features they reveal not only what literature is, but also what it can do. Tragedy and comedy can be distinguished according to the effect the work has on its readers, as both types invoke human emotions of suffering and joy. These literary types can also introduce ambiguity and gaps, as well as incongruity and folly through conflict.[14] Occasionally the text itself is inherently ambiguous, and sometimes for mystery, intrigue and even greater impact, the author intended it to be that way. When gaps in a piece of literature become apparent to the reader, the information omitted invites more than simply one interpretation of the story. Ambiguity and incongruity will be explored in more detail later in this research, but it is important to note that through different literary types, an invitation to greater engagement exists.[15]

Further to the identification of literary genres and types, writers may often deviate from the dictionary meanings of words to create fresher ideas and images.[16] Such deviations from the literal meanings are referred to as figurative language, or literary devices. This figurative language, Moon writes, "provides the reader with comparisons, substitutions, and patterns that shape meaning."[17] Through word play, writers may use devices such as ambiguity or satire, with figures of speech such as paradox, hyperbole and irony. While there are many literary devices that serve to communicate meaning and understanding in a variety of rich ways, the following devices are a selection which are pertinent to the Genesis 18:9-15 passage in this study. The descriptions are provided to highlight the influence these devices can have on meaning.

Ambiguity refers to something having multiple possible meanings. For example, in this famous quote attributed to G.K. Chesterton "the word 'good' has many meanings. If a man were to shoot his grandmother at a range of five hundred yards, I should call him a good shot, but not necessarily a good

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[13] Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 26.
[14] Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 62.
[15] Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis*, 132.
[16] https://literarydevices.net.
[17] Moon, *Literary Terms*, 79.

man." Without any context, a reader could not know which sense of "good" is being referred to. There are different types of ambiguity, but semantic (polysemy), syntactic and narrative ambiguity are the most important. Firstly, where a word has multiple meanings, which is called "polysemy", interpretation can usually be resolved using context. Secondly, syntactic ambiguity comes out of the structure of the sentence rather than the words. Narrative ambiguity occurs when a plotline could have several meanings, but the storyteller does not let you know explicitly. Ambiguity as a literary device can be very useful, especially in storytelling.[18]

Satire uses ridicule or rebuke to exposure human vice or folly. It becomes literary when this attack is combined with a literary method such as story, description, or metaphor. Ryken notes, "It is a convention of satire that satirists feel free to exaggerate, overstate, and oversimplify to make their satiric point."[19] The aim of satire is not merely to entertain, but to change people's thinking and alter their behaviour.[20] A key strategy in satire is the use of irony, which is described below. For the strategy to work, a reader must recognise that the stated meaning disguises as an implied meaning. If readers fail to see through the irony, then the satire might be misinterpreted, considered offensive, or dismissed altogether.

Figure of speech is a word or phrase using language that has a different meaning than its normal definition. In other words, figures of speech rely on implied or suggested meaning, rather than a dictionary definition. These words or phrases are not only used to embellish the language, but also cause a moment of excitement when reading. They provide emphasis, clarity or freshness to expression. Clarity, however, can sometimes suffer as a figure of speech may introduce ambiguity through denotation, the literal or factual meaning, or connotation, the suggested or implied meaning.

Paradox is a statement that is inherently contradictory, but upon reflection makes sense. In literature, paradoxes can usually be classified either as situational or rhetorical. For example, if characters find themselves in difficult to reconcile circumstances, this would be a situational paradox, whereas if a character makes a seemingly anomalous statement, this would be rhetorical paradox. Paradoxes can add mystery and layers to a story in order to make it more compelling.[21]

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[18] https://literaryterms.net/ambiguity/.
[19] Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 329.
[20] Moon, *Literary Terms*, 200.
[21] https://literarydevices.net/paradox/.

Hyperbole, or exaggeration, is a literary device which enables the writer to convey not just factual information, but feelings and emotions as well.[22] By using hyperbole, a writer makes common human feelings remarkable and intense, to such an extent that they do not remain ordinary. In literature, usage of hyperbole develops contrasts and is employed to catch the reader's attention.[23] It is often used for emphasis, or for humorous, or satiric purposes.[24] For example, the statement "My grandmother is as old as the hills," is an exaggeration of her age in order for the reader to interpret the grandchild's perception of her age.

Irony is a literary device in which incongruous statements or situations reveal a reality that is different from what appears to be true. The effectiveness of irony as a literary device depends on the reader's expectations and understanding of the disparity between what "should" happen and what "actually" happens in a literary work.[25] Unexpected events or character behaviours can create suspense for readers and heighten the humour in a literary work. For example, in the Grimm fairy tale classic of Hansel and Gretel, the witch intends to eat Hansel and Gretel, but ironically is trapped by the children in her own oven. Using literary devices such as these have the purpose of making reading more enjoyable, and intentionally invite the reader to extract the hidden meanings out of the writing, rather than offering the literary piece in an uncomplicated manner.

Approaching a text requires paying attention to the language and form of the text, and even exploring the social and cultural features presented within the work.[26] In narrative literature, the physical and cultural setting often contributes to the atmosphere of the story. Therefore, knowing something about the cultural setting of a story is often necessary to prevent misreading, and to ensure aspects of the action are not missed. When reading ancient literature, modern readers require the help of archaeologists and historians to recover an understanding of location and cultural practices to establish meaning.[27] The functions of settings in stories vary, but it is necessary to pay careful attention to the detail of setting in the narrative and observe how it contributes to the story.

A text obviously exists as a whole, as a relatively self-contained unit of meaning, but it also consists of numerous parts. The words, sentence segments, sentences, text segments, the text itself, are

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[22] Robert H. Stein, *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible: Playing by the Rules*, (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, 1994), 123.
[23] https://literarydevices.net.
[24] Moon, *Literary Terms*, 77.
[25] https://literarydevices.net/irony/.
[26] Jie Y. Park, "All the Ways of Reading Literature: Preservice English Teachers' Perspectives on Disciplinary Literacy," English Education 45, No. 4 (2013), Accessed November 2020, http://www.jstor.org/stable/24570980.
[27] Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 60-61.

examined to uncover the intended meaning.[28] Syntax and diction help writers develop tone, mood, and atmosphere in a text, to evoke the readers' interest and to convey meaning.[29] Diction refers to the choice of words in a particular situation, while syntax determines how those words are used to form a sentence. Semantics considers the interpretation and meaning of the words, sentence structure, and symbols, to clarify whether the meanings of words are literal or figurative. The purpose of semantics is to remove confusion and ambiguity, which might lead the readers to believe a word has many possible meanings.

Importance and complexities of interpretation

Literature is the result of an act of communication, and meaning is conveyed through engagement with it. Finding clarity in the meaning of a piece of literature can be a challenging exercise, because 'meaning' is a highly ambiguous term. To handle the text with the respect it demands requires identifying those literary features mentioned previously, together with many others not identified for the sake of this paper. Yet, Gorman points out that different interpreters still arrive at differing interpretations, or syntheses, of the same text,[30] because there is often a distinction between what a text meant and what a text means. George Caird suggests the need to discriminate between the public meaning, which is characteristic of language, and the user's meaning, which is characteristic of speech.[31] Stein argues that while a text can convey meaning, it cannot produce meaning, because only the authors and readers of texts can think.[32]

Longman proposes the author has encoded a message for the readers, and the goal of interpretation is to recover the author's meaning and purpose for writing.[33] The author's intended meaning is singular in essence, but what the text 'means' to the reader has potentially multiple meanings depending on its significance for the reader at a given time.[34] Stein cautions, "The hypothetical and probable nature of interpretation enters the picture because we cannot read minds and thus cannot be absolutely certain that we have recovered the correct meaning of a text."[35] The pattern of meaning an author willed to convey to readers may be available through the text, but the inner emotional and mental experiences are not. When pursuing the meaning of a text, the reader is not seeking to

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[28] Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis*, 104.
[29] https://literarydevices.net.
[30] Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis*, 129.
[31] George B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible*, (Pennsylvania: Westminster Press, 1980), 37-39.
[32] Stein, *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible*, 19-20.
[33] Longman, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation Vol 3*, 64-65.
[34] Grant R. Osborne, "Literary Theory and Biblical Interpretation," in *Words in the Word: Explorations in Biblical Interpretation and Literary Theory*, edited by David G. Firth and Jamie A. Grant, (England: Intervarsity Press, 2008), 23.
[35] Longman, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation Vol 3*, 65.

reexperience the mental acts of the author. Rather, the reader is interested in what the author wished to convey by the text presented.[36]

Stein suggests, for the sake of clarity, it may be wiser to refer to the 'meaning' of the text, as that which belongs to the author, and the 'significance' of the text, as that which belongs to the reader.[37] This implies that the significance of a text is always open for change or multiple meanings, even though that text has been locked in past history. As Grant Osborne notes, literary theory over the last century has moved away from the possibility of discovering intended meaning in a discourse.[38] Through the act of interpretation, the reader may like what is heard in the work, may be confused by it, or may find it offensive, but nevertheless makes a judgement.[39]

Synthesising a text integrates the interpreter's well-conceived, well-developed, and well-defended conclusion about the meaning and function of a text.[40] This is not a summary, but the drawing of a conclusion about the text's essential meaning, purpose or function, as it is understood. In regard to biblical literature, there are particular nuances of Greek or Hebrew grammar and syntax in translation which can be impossible to grasp, and can therefore depend on knowledge of the original languages.[41] In spite of the complexities, Maier and Tollers acknowledge that considerable work has been done in this literary history of the ancient world.[42] Ryken notes that the literary approach operates on the premise that, whereas history tells us what happened, literature tells us what happens. It assumes that characters in a narrative or story are representatives of the human condition.[43]

This paper does not explore additional interpretation complexities associated with readers who may exhibit certain forms of disability or cognitive impairment. However, it is worth noting that literary interpretation and meaning is more than an individual activity – it is a communal and social endeavour. James K.A. Smith notes that an author's intention can only be seen in "a communal discernment, insofar as the community 'saturates' a context."[44] Elsewhere he adds, "communities 'fix' contexts, and

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[36] Stein, *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible*, 52-53.
[37] Stein, *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible*, 44.
[38] Osborne, "Literary Theory and Biblical Interpretation", 23.
[39] Gallagher and Lundin, *Literature Through the Eyes of Faith*, 9, 74.
[40] Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis*, 136.
[41] Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis*, 112.
[42] Vincent L. Tollers, and John R. Maier (editors), *The Bible in its Literary Milieu*, (Grand Rapids MI: W.B Eerdmans Publ., 1979), 269.
[43] Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 365.
[44] James K.A. Smith. *The Fall of Interpretation: Philosophical Foundations for a Creational Hermeneutic*, (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, 2012).

contexts determine 'meanings'."[45] The importance and significance of together interpreting and finding meaning in literature, and specifically biblical literature, is part of the reconciling work of God's story in the world. Building on the earlier comment, of a reader's desire to know the author's intended meaning, interpretation becomes more complex as direct access to the mind of the author is not possible. James K.A. Smith refers to this assumption of direct access as "the immediacy fallacy" distinguishing between fallible traditions and interpretations and "the clear teaching of Scripture" in order to bring about Christian unity.[46]

Interpretation of biblical literature

The Bible is a library of sixty-six separate books which includes history, law, theology, social criticism, and personal reflection. It incorporates literary types such as historical nonfiction, philosophical nonfiction, fiction through parables, and poetry.[47] Given the variety of literary types in biblical literature, Ryken observes the same passage can be approached from different perspectives and with different interpretive methods.[48] The theological approach considers the moral and theological ideas contained in a passage. The historical approach is preoccupied with the actual characters and events about which biblical authors write. The literary approach focuses on the features of the text and is sensitive to the imaginative nature of biblical literature.

The biblical narrative draws us into an encounter with characters and events and are affective by their very nature. Stories communicate their meaning partly by getting us to respond favourably and unfavourably to what happens in the story. A literary approach is concerned with building bridges between a biblical text and the life of the reader. It identifies the recognisable human experiences found in the stories and poems of the Bible. When reading narratives in the Bible, archetypes and identifiable characters are encountered both within and beyond the Bible. Graham Buxton comments on noticing details, as they "speak to us about the human condition, our struggles and weaknesses, our experiences of both pleasure and pain, our hopes and fears: they represent to us the reality of our own lives, and so speak to us vicariously."[49] Accordingly, we find connection points between the biblical narrative and our story. However, whilst recognising the limits of narrative theory and

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[45] James K.A. Smith. *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism? (The Church and Postmodern Culture): Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church*. (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 53.
[46] Smith, *The Fall of Interpretation*, 40.
[47] Veith, *Reading Between the Lines*, 47.
[48] Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 14.
[49] Graham Buxton, *Dancing in the Dark*, (United Kingdom: Paternoster Press, 2001), 225.

storytelling, and the difficulty of narrating either the beginning or the end of our life, this paper does not address such limits.

Exegesis is the elucidation or interpretation of a text and can occur in contemporary life through things such as interpreting news reports, novels, and even tweets. Biblical exegesis involves careful historical, literary, and theological analysis of a text. It is grounded in the conviction that a text can be read responsibly if the unique setting (historical context) in which it was produced, and in which it is situated (literary context), is understood. Gorman acknowledges that while the discovery of the biblical writer's purpose in writing is a laudable goal, it is often difficult to achieve.[50] His reasoning is due in part to learning to ask the right questions, even if they are not immediately resolved. As a consequence, he adds, "exegesis may lead to greater ambiguity in our understanding of the text itself, of its meaning for us, or both."[51] Therefore, exegetical safeguards, which are not covered in the scope of this paper, are necessary to ensure that exegesis of the Bible does not become eisegesis, and a reading *into* the text. Whilst contemporary narratologists offer a range of poststructuralist critiques of literary narrative, providing the reader with new trajectories in the expanding craft of narratology, this research is grounded in a structuralist approach to biblical interpretation which seeks to understand the intention of the author better, and is based on the attempt to discover patterns within the text.[52]

The aim of biblical exegesis is to discover the theological intention of a passage of Scripture. The passage can be identified in a number of ways including a change of scene, or the changeover of new central characters and places. A stereotypical introduction, significant change in vocabulary, or identifiable tensions in a passage are also signs of a new passage.[53] Theological insights are uncovered as a result of investigating the interplay between the literary features of a text, and its historical aspects. Each culture or time period has its own conventions of literary communication. The more one recovers these conventions and learns of their intended effect, the more power the narrative has on the reader.[54] Making the process more complicated is the fact that the meaning of some words from ancient languages remains obscure, and the odd combination of words into idiomatic phrases can turn individually clear lexical items into completely obscure phrases.[55] The meaning of these words and

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[50] Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis*, 10.
[51] Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis*, 11.
[52] John Rogerson. *Recent Literary Structuralist Approaches to Biblical Interpretation*, (public lecture St. Mary's College, St. Andrews, November 1975), 166.
[53] S.D. Snyman, "A Structural-Historical Approach to the Exegesis of the Old Testament," in *Words in the Word: Explorations in Biblical Interpretation and Literary Theory*, edited by David G. Firth and Jamie A. Grant, (England: Intervarsity Press, 2008), 65.
[54] Longman, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation Vol 3*, 66.
[55] Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis*, 41.

phrases can only be guessed, using the context as a guide. Literary features involving connotations, figurative language, and imagery are important for exegesis, and through hermeneutics help uncover the meaning and significance of the text in contemporary terms.[56]

An author can help the reader to understand and interpret meaning by identifying key dialogues with particular characters. The reader knows, because of who is speaking, whether what is being said represents the mind of the narrator.[57] For instance, when God or Jesus speaks, the reader knows that the author wants him or her to accept what is being said as true. Similarly, when faithful servants of God, such as a patriarch, prophets, or apostles, speak, they can be relied upon as being true and authoritative, unless the narrator reveals otherwise.

The setting is an essential ingredient in most biblical stories. If it is ignored, it can diminish our enjoyment and understanding of biblical narrative. The setting can be physical, temporal, or cultural, and serves to stimulate the imagination. In addition, it reinforces character and action, builds atmosphere, strengthens the structural unity of a story, and conveys symbolic meanings.[58] When indeterminant settings are included it implies a sense of mystery.

Ambiguity in biblical literature

Ambiguity is defined by William Empson as "any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language."[59] Unquestionably, there are contexts where the presence of ambiguity is highly undesirable. For example, legal documents such as contracts or wills need to be written in such a way that there is only one reasonable interpretation.[60] Instructions in certain processes also need clarity to avoid possible misinterpretations that could lead to defective or dangerous outcomes. But that does not mean ambiguity itself is fundamentally wrong. After all, Gorman points out that human communication is actually polyvalent and possesses multiple senses.[61] Ambiguity is therefore something to be anticipated rather than feared. It is also something to engage with, rather than avoid. Ambiguity in literature is to be appreciated, as it serves the purpose of lending a deeper meaning to a literary work.

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[56] Snyman, A Structural-Historical Approach, 69.
[57] Stein, *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible*, 164.
[58] Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 61-62.
[59] William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity, 3rd ed.,* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960), 1.
[60] David G. Firth, "Ambiguity", in *Words in the Word: Explorations in Biblical Interpretation and Literary Theory*, edited by David G. Firth & Jamie A. Grant, (England: Intervarsity Press, 2008), 152.
[61] Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis*, 135.

The Bible is both great literature as well as great theology. As a consequence of this, Buxton describes the human response to Scriptural truth to be "not only through God-given faculties of reason, will, and emotions, and not only as the Holy Spirit reveals the once-hidden things of God to us, but also through our imagination."[62] By introducing ambiguity into a piece of literature, writers give liberty to readers to actively participate using their imagination to explore meanings.[63] As Moon acknowledges, "A degree of ambiguity can enrich a text by suggesting 'layers' of meaning."[64] Therefore, deliberate ambiguity is evocative, causing readers to ponder the text more carefully. However, it is difficult to determine if an ambiguity is meaningful, unless there are some elements in the genre being employed that require ambiguity for the text to be meaningful.

William Empson developed a taxonomy for different ways in which ambiguity works.[65] Five of these classifications are identified here and emphasise how playfulness in texts is not simply the prerogative of the reader but is also something in which authors engage.[66] Empson explains that authors typically strive for clarity in their communication, although on occasions they use multiple possibilities for a particular expression or to make for a more interesting read. Secondly, ambiguity may deliberately leave open a range of possibilities before ultimately leading to a single conclusion. Thirdly, authors draw on and use multiple meanings inherent in words but without actually resolving them one way or the other. Fourthly, ambiguity can occur when the author deliberately leaves multiple alternative meanings open for an extended time, but then combines them further on to clarify their intention. Lastly, ambiguity can take place when an author deliberately includes contradictory statements or concepts, to invite readers to notice the way in which they mutually interpret one another to create a single meaning.[67]

Gaps, silences and blanks add ambiguity to a text, and readers must make connections between ideas, or supply information that is not fully or explicitly provided.[68] Longman cites Meir Sternberg's work on the importance and prevalence of gapping in Hebrew storytelling. Sternberg notes, "the storyteller's withholding of information opens gaps, gaps produce discontinuity, and discontinuity breeds ambiguity."[69] Sternberg identifies the way in which gaps and blanks involve the reader by raising narrative interest through curiosity, suspense, and surprise.[70] He makes the distinction of gaps

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[62] Buxton, *Dancing in the Dark*, 223.
[63] https://literarydevices.net.
[64] Moon, *Literary Terms*, 77.
[65] William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity.*
[66] Firth, "Ambiguity", 158.
[67] Firth, "Ambiguity", 169-170.
[68] Moon, *Literary Terms*, 84.
[69] Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*, 236.
[70] Longman, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation Vol 3*, 97.

as a deliberate ambiguity in a narrative by omitting details "for the sake of interest", whereas blanks are an accidental transmission of confusing narrative signals often omitting details "for lack of interest."[71] According to Sternberg, the questions and wonderings the reader may have concerning a passage could be limitless, but the whole truth remains contextually relevant truth. This includes the filled gaps - but this may not be so with the innumerable blanks. Sternberg adds that the distinction between gaps, silences and blanks can be difficult to discern, as the gap and the blank can show identical characteristics, and "one reader's gap may prove another's blank."[72] As this paper will show, the Genesis 18:9-15 passage illustrates how the use of gaps, silences or blanks draws the reader in to ask questions of the text, in the process of interpreting its meaning.

Biblical narratives communicate stories reliably, but simultaneously leave so much unsaid. Ryken points out that for the most part they describe, but do not explain what happens.[73] The consequence is that the basic action in a biblical story can be understood, but the interpretation of meaning in regard to human dynamics can be challenging, if not confusing. Gorman explains that even upon careful investigation of every detail of the text, a good exegete may conclude that aspects of the text, or even the text as a whole, is ambiguous as to its meaning. He suggests reasons may include insufficient knowledge of the historical and cultural situation in which the text was produced; the vocabulary or grammar used in the text; or unclear arrangements of words, phrases, or sentences.[74] These ambiguous words or statements can lead to vagueness and confusion, and shape the basis for instances of intentional, and unintentional humour.[75]

This section has provided important background in regard to the influence on meaning of literary genres and devices, with particular attention paid to ambiguity. This study will now consider the function and nature of laughter in literature through an examination of Superiority Theory, Relief Theory, and specifically Incongruity Theory.

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[71] Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative.*
[72] Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 236-237.
[73] Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 43.
[74] Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis*, 131-132.
[75] https://literarydevices.net.

Laughter Theories and their influence on literature

Philosophical overview of Laughter Theories

There has been much written about comedy, humour, and theories of laughter. Philosophers, psychologists and sociologists have attempted to provide precise definitions of the nature and function of the comic. However, it is apparent from all that has been offered that there is no complete and concise theory to explain everything comical. Superiority Theory, Relief Theory and Incongruity Theory are three classical theories identified through philosophical writings on humour and laughter which are used to distinguish between comedic intention, expression and reaction.[76] For the purpose of this paper, a brief overview of these classical theories of humour and laughter will be presented, with a specific focus on Incongruity Theory.

Superiority Theory understands that an event, or individual, being laughed at is perceived to be inferior to one's self, and that laughter is the observer's expression of the realisation of hostility towards, or superiority over, that event or inferior individual. The inferior person and associated misfortune are laughed at, with the assumed superior person happy not to be in that situation, perhaps even thinking it would not happen to them. [77] Plato refers to a malicious kind of pleasure experienced by a person who sees the failures and ignorance of others, and he thought people were ridiculous when they demonstrated this ignorance of themselves.[78] In this regard, Superiority Theory considers humour to be a 'mixed pleasure' of the soul, because an inner basic envy or malice resides within and celebrates the misfortunes of other people.[79]

Relief Theory focusses on our inhibitions rather than our feelings of superiority or hostility. This theory emphasizes the liberating effect of humour and considers laughter to be a discharge of surplus energy which alleviates psychic tension. According to Sigmund Freud, people laugh because "a sum of psychical energy which has hitherto been used for cathexis is allowed free discharge." Freud argues that humour is the capacity for transferring energy from unpleasurable circumstances and feelings to pleasurable ones.[80] We laugh about situations which create incongruity between what is thought,

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[76] Karl-Josef Kuschel, translated by John Bowden, *Laughter: A Theological Reflection*, (London: SCM Press, 1994), xvi.
[77] Anton Nijholt, "Incongruity Humour in Language and Beyond: From Bergson to Digitally Enhanced Worlds," in *Proceedings Fourteenth International Symposium on Social Communication*, (Santiago de Cuba, Cuba: Centro de Lingüística Aplicada, 2015).
[78] In H.N. Fowler, *Plato with an English translation*, III, The Statesman; Philebos, William Heinemann, (London: W. Heinemann, 1952), 48–49.
[79] Thomson, *God and the Infinitely Comic*, 3.
[80] Conrad Hyers, *The Comic Vision and the Christian Faith: A Celebration of Life and Laughter*, (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1981), 163-164.

spoken, or enacted, and our common-sense, emotional and cognitive reasoning.[81] Relief Theory suggests that people unburden themselves - if only momentarily - from their struggle and tension, to become receptive to new avenues of pleasure.[82]

Incongruity Theory considers the way an object of amusement is comprised of some kind of incongruity, and that laughter, more than just for relief, is a pleasurable expression of the incongruous. The Macquarie Dictionary defines incongruous as "out of keeping or place; inappropriate; unbecoming; absurd; not harmonious in character; inconsonant; lacking harmony of parts; and inconsistent."[83] Psychologist Thomas R. Schultz defines incongruity as a conflict between what is expected and what actually occurs.[84] The theory focuses on situations that lead to confusion and misunderstandings, and how humour often emerges from the contradiction or "double meanings" evoked by two differing definitions of the same reality.[85] Philosopher Blaise Pascal writes, "Nothing produces laughter more than a surprising disproportion between that which one expects and that which one 'sees.'"[86] The following scenario describes incongruity in general. If a person expects something A, but surprisingly encounters something B, quite different from A, they feel a 'conflict'. If the unpredicted encounter does not fit their expectation, there is incongruity between the former and latter. When new information on a situation produces conflict, a reinterpretation is required for understanding and meaning.[87]

The incongruities between expectation and encounter often figure in humour. Psychologists Pien and Rothbart write, "It has been frequently proposed that the perception of incongruity is a necessary condition for the experience of humour."[88] With certain situations there can appear a close association between incongruity and ambiguity as Henry W. Cetola notes: "things that we find funny have to be somewhat unexpected, ambiguous, illogical, or inappropriate."[89] If the ambiguous expression is reinterpreted, but the meaning cannot be considered to fit, therefore being incongruous, then this incongruity often figures in humour.[90]

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[81] Nijholt, "Incongruity Humour in Language and Beyond".
[82] Kuschel, *Laughter: A Theological Reflection*, 103.
[83] Macquarie Concise Dictionary, 5th ed., (Sydney: Macquarie Dictionary Publishers, 2009), 253.
[84] Thomas R. Schultz, "A Cognitive-Developmental Analysis of Humour," in *Humour and Laughter: Theory, Research and Applications*, edited by Chapman and Foot, (London: John Wiley and Sons, 1976), 12.
[85] Gerald A. Arbuckle, *Laughing with God: Humor, Culture, And Transformation,* (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2008), xiii-xiv.
[86] Arbuckle, *Laughing with God*, xiv.
[87] Nijholt, "Incongruity Humour in Language and Beyond".
[88] Diana Pien, and Mary K. Rothbart, "Incongruity Humour, Play, and Self-Regulation of Arousal in Young Children," in *Children's Humour*, edited by McGhee and Chapman, (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 1980), 1-2.
[89] Henry W. Cetola, *Toward a Cognitive-Appraisal Model of Humour Appreciation, Humour, (*Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1988)*, Volume 1-3, 245-46.*
[90] Robert L. Latta, https://archives.bukkyo-u.ac.jp/rp-contents/JB/0024/JB00240L051.pdf, 56.

Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard understood humour to come from the incongruous mix we find ourselves in through creation. He notes that we belong to both the finite and the infinite, to time and eternity, to freedom and necessity.[91] Kierkegaard wanted to draw a distinction between the approach of Greek philosophy and that of Christian theology to acknowledge what makes us ridiculous. As mentioned above, Plato considered people ridiculous through their ignorance. Kierkegaard, however, argued for a doctrine of original sin to understand humour.[92] With reference to the Scriptural writings of the Apostle Paul, we as humans can know what is good and still not do it (Rom 7:15). We find ourselves incapable of doing the right thing because of the pervasiveness of our sinful condition. The refusal to do the good is what Kierkegaard regards as making us 'infinitely comic'.[93]

Conrad Hyers identifies three observations of laughter through the frame of paradise.[94] Firstly, the 'laughter of paradise' is the simplest and most innocent level of humour. It considers laughter as a form of playing for the sake of playing. Through puns and storytelling, it may include words, concepts, objects, situations, or individuals. Secondly, the 'laughter of paradise lost' considers not all humour to be innocent. Laughter in this case may stand more self-consciously in the midst of conflict and anxiety, success and failure, faith and doubt. Here laughter is encountered as a means of expressing frustration, fear, and antagonism. Finally, the 'laughter of paradise regained' is "the laughter of maturity, the laughter in the freedom of a higher innocence and unity."[95]

This study will now examine the specific influence Incongruity Theory has on literary meaning before addressing incongruity within a biblical narrative.

Influence of Incongruity Theory on literary meaning

Authors have the ability to play with words by drawing attention to language's syntactic, semantic and pragmatic aspects. Language can communicate layered meaning as words are playfully arranged in unusual ways, introducing ambiguities, confusion, inappropriate language use, and incongruities. Henri Bergson identifies this characteristic through the way a playwright hides a storyline from the

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[91] Søren Kierkegaard, "The Sickness Unto Death," in *Fear and Trembling; The Sickness Unto Death*, translated with introduction and notes by Walter Lowrie, (New York: Doubleday, 1941), 146.
[92] Thomson, *God and the Infinitely Comic*.
[93] Kierkegaard, "The Sickness Unto Death", 224.
[94] Hyers, *The Comic Vision and the Christian Faith*, 37.
[95] Hyers, *The Comic Vision and the Christian Faith,* 37.

audience, only to allow it to emerge when all other storylines are resolved.[96] Word play, verbal jokes, or humorous remarks triggered by conversational interaction can become the catalyst and invitation for laughter.[97] Gerald Arbuckle suggests that incongruity, or paradox, is the quality at the heart of humour, whether it is visible, audible, or neither. After all, some comedies may not arouse laughter in audiences, while in contrast, some tragedies can induce hysterical laughter. Arbuckle classifies two kinds of laughter as 'formal laughter', which is visible or audible, and a 'laughter of the heart', which may or may not manifest itself in visible or audible form.[98] Furthermore, the quality of incongruity is shared by both comedy and tragedy. 'Positive humour' addresses incongruous flaws in human nature, but without the intention to hurt or harm individuals. Even though this comedy may address the incongruity of human life, positive humour is about 'laughing with' others and not against them. On the other hand, tragedy focuses on the tension between the grandeur of life which people strive for, and the reality of falling short, resulting in sadness and pain.[99]

Theoreticians of humour have widely considered that amusement and laughter are pleasurable.[100] Glen Cavaliero, in his study of comedy in English literature, broadens this view.[101] Pleasure, specifically through humour, helps us cope with frustrations and disappointments that negatively impact upon our happiness.[102] However, the definitions of incongruity previously described do not convey pleasurable connotations, but rather seem to contradict pleasure and lean more towards black comedy and dark humour, in which something serious is made light of. Dark humour is a way of processing the sadness and despair that may occur in the face of things such as death, war, slavery, addiction, disease - even barrenness. In these situations, "incongruity," defined above with words such as inappropriate, unbecoming, and absurd, are usually associated with something disagreeable, displeasing or disturbing, rather than with something agreeable or pleasing.

John Morreall says of incongruity, "We live in an orderly world where we have come to expect certain patterns among things, properties, events, etc. When we experience something that doesn't fit these patterns, that violates our expectations, we laugh."[103] However, if an acceptable solution to an incongruity cannot be found, then the situation is often not considered amusing, and no one laughs. This may be due to misinterpreting what has gone wrong or what the significance of the underlying

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[96] Nijholt, "Incongruity Humour in Language and Beyond".
[97] Nijholt, "Incongruity Humour in Language and Beyond".
[98] Arbuckle, *Laughing with God*, 6.
[99] Arbuckle, *Laughing with God*, 5.
[100] Tomáš Kulka, *The Incongruity of Incongruity Theories of Humour*, (Organon F: Medzinárodný Časopis Pre Analitickú Filozofiu, 2007), 14 (3), 320-333.
[101] Glen Cavaliero, *The Alchemy of Laughter: Comedy in English Fiction*, (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2000), 238-245.
[102] Arbuckle, *Laughing with God*, 155.
[103] John Morreall, *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humour*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 130.

meaning is. Thomas Schultz and Judith Robillard agree, "The concept of incongruity refers to the notion that something unexpected happens in a joke which serves to arouse, surprise, or mystify the listener." [104] But they add, "The concept of resolution refers to the notion that the incongruity can be explained or rendered sensible."[105] Jokes which arouse laughter are those which are communicated in a way in which the source of the incongruity is known. There is the likelihood of the incongruity being resolved because the misapplication of the conception, and reason for the mistake, is perceived. The pleasure and laughter that follows from the perception of incongruity is understandable when we see the unexpected meaning or 'get the point'.[106] However, Morreall claims that "Getting a joke... is never the complete elimination of incongruity."[107]

Literary meaning requires paying necessary attention to the devices of disclosure the storyteller employs to influence the reader with regard to approval or disapproval of the characters, events, and settings of a story.[108] However, Arbuckle believes that humour goes beyond language, and that for understanding and meaning to be accessible, people need to be "familiar with the culture, of which formal language is only one part."[109] Culture is more than just what people do in certain contexts. It is an evolving pattern of values encased in symbols, myths, and rituals. Ritual becomes the visible expression of the society's symbols and myths, and a way of resolving the ambiguities, paradoxes, and incongruities of life. As Reinhold Niebuhr argues, "Faith is the only possible response to the ultimate incongruities of existence which threaten the very meaning of our life… man's very position in the universe is incongruous."[110] It is with this perspective in mind that we focus on the presence of incongruity in the biblical narrative.

Incongruity in the biblical narrative

To understand the biblical narrative, it is necessary to enter into the world of the story as much as possible. Ryken observes that through participating in what happens to the characters, the reader can find the point of a story more accessible. He explains, "the truthfulness of literature is partly a truthfulness to human experience."[111] The biblical narrative is not a collection of ideas, but of characters performing actions in relatable circumstances. Therefore, whatever a story communicates,

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[104] Thomas R. Schultz, and Judith Robillard "The Development of Linguistic Humour in Children: Incongruity through Rule Violation," in *Children's Humour*, edited by McGhee and Chapman, (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 1980), 60.
[105] Schultz and Robillard, *The Development of Linguistic Humour in Children,* 60.
[106] Arbuckle, *Laughing with God,* 4.
[107] Morreall, *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humour*, 199.
[108] Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 86.
[109] Arbuckle, *Laughing with God*, 3.
[110] Hyers, *The Comic Vision and the Christian Faith*, 31.
[111] Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 81.

it communicates through setting, character, dialogue and action. However, he adds that "clarity and mystery mingle as we move through these stories."[112] The storytellers of the Bible speak truth, but not the whole truth. They describe basic action, but generally do not exhaustively explain what and why things happened. Therefore, it can be difficult to interpret all of its meaning and all of its human dynamics. The biblical narrative requires both a naive and sophisticated literary response. It necessitates the ability to deal with the incongruous and ambiguous through a diverse range of responses that characterise human thoughts, attitudes and behaviour.

This difficulty of interpretation is also noticeable through observing the actions of God which dramatically diverge from our human expectations of how God should relate to us. We judge the actions of God according to our expectations only to discover that our conclusions are dramatically wrong.[113] We endure hardship and become disheartened, yet God allows us to suffer. We contemplate the meaning of this suffering for our lives. In contrast, God allows us to also experience joy and laughter through the incongruities of life, and through this we too seek meaning for our lives also.[114] We are pursued by the grace, mercy and love of God in ways that from our human perspective are often illogical and ridiculous. As Arbuckle acknowledges, "the contraries of God as a creator and judge relating to sinful humankind and their resolution through God's infinite mercy and love are startlingly incongruous."[115]

God demonstrates the incongruity of divine love through the incarnation of Jesus. A socially insignificant mother gives birth to a baby in unsanitary conditions. He is accepted by a small number of followers, is unjustly sentenced to death by crucifixion, then redeems the world through his subsequent resurrection. Through Jesus, God becomes one with us. The Apostle John endeavours to put into words the fundamental incongruity of this divine action. "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 4:10). We would expect God and all sinful creatures to remain distanced from each other, but incongruously, God draws near. Similarly, God incongruously reconciles humanity into a redeemed relationship with the Trinity. Through this awareness of spiritual incongruity, and the invitation to laugh, it is significant to consider theologian Karl Barth's view that, "Laughter is the closest thing to the grace of God."[116] The interplay of law and grace, or law and gospel, or human sinfulness and divine mercy, permeates

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[112] Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 43.
[113] Arbuckle, *Laughing with God*, xi.
[114] Veith, *Reading Between the Lines*, 101.
[115] Arbuckle, *Laughing with God*, 5.
[116] Susan Sparks, *Laugh Your Way to Grace: Reclaiming the Spiritual Power of Humour*, (Woodstock, Vermont: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2011), xvi.

through much of the biblical narrative. Ryken notes, "The pattern of promise and fulfilment is a major motif in the Bible, especially as a framework for interpreting the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament."[117] Jesus Christ observed people and their cultures, capturing their imagination through humorous stories and comical expressions. His intention was to soften their hearts and transforms their lives.[118] In our culture, most humour is based on joke telling, verbal ambiguities, and physical comedy. However, Jewish humour often employed witty hyperbole and exaggeration to generate laughter. We see Jesus use this technique in the Gospels, although for us literary meaning can become difficult, as we usually do not 'get the joke' or appreciate the significance of the humour.[119]

Peter Berger accepts Freud's and Bergson's view that the comic is a fundamental incongruity. He considers the human spirit to be held captive by the created world of order. However, through humour, the human spirit is able to find freedom from this imprisonment to make contact with God's joy.[120] Søren Kierkegaard proposed a similar view, in that humour cannot be confined to the premises and humanistic assumptions of this world. Instead, it points implicitly but constantly toward the "incarnational premise that humanity is being enabled by grace to share in the divine nature and has the image of God stamped precisely upon its very creaturely existence."[121] Barth expresses the need for humour in Christian living. The positive sense of humour invites the contemplation and acceptance of the incongruities through life, and expresses this reflection in laughter, smiling, or simply an inner joy or peace beyond all possible human understanding. Laughter becomes the anticipation, and the participation in the laughter of God.

This section has raised awareness of the influence on meaning of laughter theories, and specifically Incongruity Theory. This study will now focus in detail on the ambiguities and incongruities found in Genesis 18:9-15 concerning Sarah's laughter.

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[117] Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 30-31.
[118] Arbuckle, *Laughing With God*, xii.
[119] Randy Alcorn, *Happiness*, (Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, 2015), 167.
[120] Peter Berger, *A Rumour of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969), 90.
[121] Thomas C. Oden, (editor), *The Humour of Kierkegaard: An Anthology*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 25.

Ambiguity and incongruity in Genesis 18:9-15

Narrative composition of the passage

The Genesis 18:9-15 passage sits within the larger narrative of Genesis 18:1-16a, and is a self-contained unit consisting of two identifiable parts. The first section records the visit of three men to Abraham (vv.1-8), while the second describes the interaction between the visitors, Abraham and Sarah, concerning the promise of a son (vv.9-16a). J. William Whedbee considers the narrative a "master stroke of Genesis, pulsating with energy and humour in its narration of a divine visit to an aged couple."[122] Although an artistic appreciation of the whole narrative has value, Whedbee highlights how the comedy of the scene is captured with the focus on the promised baby (vv.9-15).[123] While the source and compositional origin of this passage is not the focus of this paper, it is worth noting at this point that many interpretations assign separate sources for the announcement of the promised child in Genesis 17:15-21 compared to the announcement in Genesis 18:1-15. Claus Westermann refers to the additional peculiarity of the introduction, which seems so circumstantial that it could be considered an independent narrative.[124]

With specific consideration of the passage, Gina Hens-Piazza describes the way the composition draws attention to unaddressed questions, and to "cracks lurking in the margins."[125] These gaps contribute to the ambiguity and disrupt the integrity of unified readings. The scene of Sarah's laughter has sparked curiosity in the reader and echoed through the ages because of the ambiguities within the text.[126] In acknowledging the presence of ambiguity and uncertainty in the narrative, this paper highlights the artistry of this literary piece as an invitation for the reader to discover meaning for their own life through the interpretation of incongruities in the life of biblical characters.

Finding Sarah within the scene

In order to provide some necessary context for the passage and to make reference to ambiguities or incongruities within the text, it will be helpful to set the scene in which the characters appear. The chapter begins with an announcement that the Lord appeared to Abraham: however this appearance unfolds with ambiguity. There is no immediate conversation between God and Abraham, but instead

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[122] J. William Whedbee, *The Bible and the Comic Vision*, (Minneapolis: First Fortress Press, 2002), 77.
[123] Whedbee, *The Bible and the Comic Vision*, 77.
[124] Claus Westermann, *Genesis: A Practical Commentary*, (Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans Publ., 1987), 134.
[125] Gina Hens-Piazza, "Why did Sarah Laugh?" in *Distant Voices Drawing Near: Essays in Honour of Antoinette Clark White*, edited by Holly E. Hearon, (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2004), 60.
[126] Kristine Gift, *"Sarah's Laughter as Her Lasting Legacy: An Interpretation of Genesis 18:9-15,"* (Coe College, 2012), 99.

there is mention of three visitors who arrive. Kathleen M. O'Connor notes the uncertainty as to whether they are three human visitors or they "represent the Lord as announced by the first verse and confirmed by the events that follow."[127] When Abraham sees them, he offers these strangers the hospitality expected in the Ancient Near East.[128] There is ambiguity around whether Abraham senses who the visitors are, or whether he is simply an exemplary host.[129] While the character of Abraham is not the focus of this study, the function of his actions in relation to Sarah's role are of interest to what is taking place in this passage. Likewise, the narrative's references to the "tent" prods the reader's curiosity in order to alert them to the location of Sarah in the story.[130]

Genesis 11:30 introduces Sarah[131] by her barrenness, and this is paradoxically recapitulated in this particular passage, following the Lord's promise of bearing a son. In Sarah's culture, a woman's status was directly associated with motherhood[132], and infertile women were despised, rejected, helpless, and considered cursed.[133] The incongruity of desiring to mother children with the impossibility of bearing children due to infertility was felt with anguish. Iain M. Duguid suggests that not having children in a society where a woman's value was measured by her fertility would have been a bitter blow.[134] Similarly, Walter Brueggemann refers to barrenness in those times as "an effective metaphor for hopelessness."[135] Sarah's cunning plan to build her status, her reputation, her worth, by using Hagar to overcome the stigma of infertility, was evidence of her desperation to fill this void.[136] In regard to this passage, Whedbee describes the promise of a new baby in this scene as preposterous.[137] He suggests that all elements written within the passage add up to something equivalent to the farce befitting a domestic comedy." To add further ambiguity, the dialogue closes without any clear resolution. It is not until the writer discloses the birth of Isaac, the promised child, in Genesis 21, that the story is complete, and the promise delivered. The study now seeks to address ambiguities and incongruities which reside within each verse*.*

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[127] Kathleen M. O'Connor, *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary: Genesis 1-25A*, (Georgia: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2018), 259.
[128] Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16-50, Word Biblical Commentary 2*, (Texas: Word, 1994), 46.
[129] O'Connor, *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary*, 261.
[130] Hens-Piazza, "Why did Sarah Laugh?", 64.
[131] Sarah's name was changed by God from Sarai. However, for the purpose and focus of this paper she will be referred to as Sarah, unless required to identify the change.
[132] Marlo M. Schalesky, *Waiting for Wonder: Learning to Live on God's Timeline*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016), 83.
[133] John H. Walton, *Genesis, Vol 1 of the NIV Application Commentary,* (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2001), 389.
[134] Iain M. Duguid, *Living in the Gap Between Promise and Reality*, (New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 1999), 10.
[135] Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis, Vol 1 of Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 116.
[136] Schalesky, *Waiting for Wonder*, 83.
[137] Whedbee, *The Bible and the Comic Vision*, 77.

Commentary on Genesis 18:9-15; 21:1-7

Genesis 18:9 They said to him, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he said, "There, in the tent."

The mystery surrounding the identity of the three visitors is heightened as they ask about Abraham's wife by name. Mario M. Schalesky points out that "not only did they ask after Abraham's wife, but they used her name. And not her old name of Sarai, but ironically her new, God-given name."[138] It is unclear how they knew her name, and why they acted so boldly to ask Abraham about his wife in "a culture where women generally belong in the private sphere."[139] Women were not solely restricted to the home in ancient Israel, but it was in that role where their dignity and security related to success in childbearing.[140]

The narrative is unclear as to whether the author included this question to humorously highlight the way in which Abraham is racing around and hosting this whole event himself. Perhaps their question to Abraham is in the text to draw attention to the archetype of roles, and therefore introduced a sarcastic element in regard to this incongruity. Given the patriarchal context, and that Abraham has been doing all the preparing and serving, it would have been fitting that they asked where his wife is.[141] However, it is ambiguous whether they are mocking Abraham, or whether it is simply a question included in the narrative to shift the focus onto Sarah. Enquiring about Sarah's location leads to a repeat of the promise concerning her having Abraham's son, since there is no clear mention of her being informed about the previous oracle.[142] Whatever the reason behind their question, the narrative gives no indication that Abraham is shocked by it. He replies, "There in the tent."

Genesis 18:10 Then one said, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him.

One of the visitors then provides Abraham with an indication of their identity as the Lord, since only God can faithfully promise life out of barrenness.[143] The statement seems directed at Abraham and is one which alludes to the promise which was made in Genesis 15:4, as well as the covenant established in Genesis 17:16-21. The Lord identifies the time when this will come to fruition, restating it again in verse 14. However, there is some ambiguity as to whether the statement the Lord made was spoken

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[138] Schalesky, *Waiting for Wonder*, 128-129.
[139] O'Connor, *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary,* 260.
[140] O'Connor, *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary,* 263.
[141] Hens-Piazza, "Why did Sarah Laugh?", 61.
[142] Jean Calvin, *Genesis: The Crossway Classic Commentaries*, edited by Alistair McGrath & J.I. Packer, (Illinois: Crossway Books, 2001), 174.
[143] Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary*, (Michigan: Zondervan, 2001), 267.

in order for Sarah to hear. The shift in language may suggest that this birth announcement was for Sarah more than Abraham. Hens-Piazza provides some insight into the literary syntax and semantics concerning the announcement of the promised child. When God spoke to Abraham in chapter 17, Abraham was promised "I will give *you* a son by her (Sarah)" (17:16). And further on in verse 19, "No, but your wife Sarah shall bear *you* a son and *you* shall name him Isaac" (17:19). Hens-Piazza suggests that in those statements the emphasis on "give *you*" and "bear *you*" designates that Abraham is the intended recipient of the announcement.[144] However, in this story the language used by the messenger seems to change.

After establishing Sarah is in the tent through Abraham's disclosure, the Lord speaks to Abraham as if it is her announcement. "Your wife Sarah shall have a son," implies the ridiculous notion that one, she will be able to bear a child even though old and barren, and two, that Abraham would be the natural father of the child, in spite of his age. While the semantics of the phrase seems to involve only a slight adjustment, the hearing and recognition of the personal implications for Sarah would be significant, if not laughable. At this point, only the reader is allowed permission to observe the irony taking place in the wings for Sarah as this drama plays out. Eavesdropping, and behind the visitor's backs, Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent. The comic subtext of this scene grows as Sarah watches and listens in on her husband and some strangers, discussing matters of conception, especially in regard to her. From verse 12, as discussed below, it becomes apparent that she heard the specific promise concerning the child, as well as the reference to her own impending pregnancy. Suddenly, Sarah experiences the irony of believing her thoughts were private, and instead faces the reality that they are fully exposed to an omniscient God.

Genesis 18:11 Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women.

The author's use of hyperbole in this verse draws attention to the ridiculous likelihood of Sarah falling pregnant. This apparent sidenote is offered as an invitation for the reader to empathise with what would have seemed impossible for Sarah. Although Abraham had fathered Ishmael with Hagar, at the age of eighty-five, it was now fourteen years later, and one would consider even less possible for Abraham to father more children naturally. Furthermore, how could he become a father again with his ninety-year-old wife Sarah? It would need a miracle, especially considering the paradox of Sarah's barrenness, referred to at the beginning of their marriage some twenty-four years earlier (Gen.11:30).

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[144] Hens-Piazza, "Why did Sarah Laugh?", 65.

Bruce K. Waltke comments that her body was "procreatively dead" suggesting that Sarah would never have children without the miraculous intervention of God.[145]

Genesis 18:12 *So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?"*

The writer satirically notes that Sarah laughed "to herself." This phrase can be translated a number of different ways, but Gift points out that because of the Hebrew description *bə·qir·bāh*, every translation indicates an inward orientation of her laughter and comment.[146] Lauren F. Winner cites Rashi, the eleventh-century biblical interpreter, suggesting Sarah's laughter was "inward" (*bekirbah*) in two ways. She was laughing *to* herself, but she was also laughing *at* herself and her dried-up inner parts.[147] If Sarah's laughter was one of delight, it would be reasonable for the writer to record it as loud and public, because when someone laughs with enjoyment their laughter is usually loud and often infectious. In contrast, when someone laughs bitterly, it can be quiet, under the breath, and kept secret. In the narrative the writer uses language which indicates her laughter was private and to herself, although not completely secret, suggesting her laughter was bitter, disbelieving, and doubtful.[148] She laughed, incredulous at the promise of a son at her age. Karl-Josef Kuschel identifies how these incongruities through life can evoke a response of laughter which is not always joyful. Sarah's doubt in a future possibility causes her to consider a laughable discrepancy between human and divine potential. Schalesky notes that God waited "until the chances were not even slim to none – they were just none."[149]

Although the reader has now been made aware that the visitors are from God (18:1,10), it is possible that Sarah remains ignorant. Therefore, she believes the one who foretold the pregnancy is merely a human stranger. Sarah hears this promise of a child but compares it with her reality and notes the discrepancy and incongruity which is comical. For Sarah, the reason for her laughter is the experience of the contrast between reality and possibility, so that the cause of her laughter is not one of perplexity or despair, but possibly one of doubt.[150] Elaine A. Philips also points out that "her own knowledge of her own physical condition in conjunction with her lack of expectation that these strangers speak with

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[145] Waltke, *Genesis*, 268.
[146] Gift, *Sarah's Laughter as Her Lasting Legacy*, 101.
[147] Lauren F. Winner, *Wearing God: Clothing, Laughter, Fire, and Other Overlooked Ways of Meeting God*, (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2015), 183.
[148] Gift, *Sarah's Laughter as Her Lasting Legacy*, 101.
[149] Schalesky, *Waiting for Wonder*, 129.
[150] Kuschel, *Laughter: A Theological Reflection*, 49-50.

authority on such an issue would naturally prompt incredulity."[151] Hence, according to Gift, the words she overhears are received as a "cruel taunt rather than a delightful promise."[152] The text discloses that Sarah laughs to herself, but then the author seemingly invites the reader to imagine Sarah turning to one side to let the reader in on the joke, "After I have grown old (ḇᵊ·lō·ṯî), and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure (ʿeḏ·nāh)?" The verb ḇᵊ·lō·ṯî, "to be worn out" (used of old clothes in Joshua 9:13 and of bones dried up in Psalm 32:3), along with ʿeḏ·nāh, referring to sexual pleasure, communicates Sarah's curiosity and uncertainty.[153]

The pleasure Sarah mentions could still be considered the knowledge of impending sexual pleasure, or the pleasure of finally having a child. However, this is unlikely, as the context suggests that a more meaningful interpretation of the inclusion of this word is sarcasm because of Sarah's bitterness.[154] That is, rather than the story suggesting Sarah laughs in awe of the news she has just heard, her response makes the most sense if read in a bitter or mocking way. The author's semantics in her response satirically refers to her, and then her husband's, old age being the barrier to her pregnancy, not her own barrenness. It is comical that their age has become more the issue for Sarah, rather than their long-term inability to bear children. As Sarah makes this comment, there is ambiguity as to whether her focus becomes drawn to the sexual act between herself and her husband, as there has been no previous pregnancy to find "pleasure" in. Gift suggests that Sarah could be insinuating that Abraham is too old to perform sexually, and perhaps has not for a long time.[155] Susan Brayford refers to ancient Ugaritic texts on sexuality and reproduction, suggesting that the female had to experience orgasm in order to fall pregnant. As Brayford notes, some scholars read 18:12 "as evidence that the ancient Hebrews also believed that sexual pleasure was necessary for conception."[156] If this is so, then the sarcasm Sarah expresses may relate to her inability to experience "pleasure" with Abraham due to Abraham's "sexual impotence brought on by agedness."[157]

The ambiguity in the narrative allows for another possibility to exist. It is quite conceivable that Abraham shared with Sarah the blessing God spoke over him in Haran (Gen.12:2-3). As a consequence,

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[151] Elaine A. Phillips, "Incredulity, Faith and Textual Purpose: Post-biblical Responses to the Laughter of Abraham and Sarah," in *The Function of Scripture in Early Jewish and Christian Tradition*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 22-33, 26.
[152] Gift, *Sarah's Laughter as Her Lasting Legacy,* 100.
[153] Andrew A. McIntosh proposes the meaning "sexual pleasure or conception" in "*A Third Root in Biblical Hebrew? 1)*" Vetus Testamentum 24, 4 (1974): 454-473.
[154] Gift, *Sarah's Laughter as Her Lasting Legacy*, 101.
[155] Gift, *Sarah's Laughter as Her Lasting Legacy,* 100.
[156] Susan Brayford, "Feminist Criticism: Sarah Laughs Last," in *Method Matters: Essays on the Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible* in Honour of David L. Peterson edited by Joel LeMon and Kent Harold Richards, (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 311-332, 328.
[157] Gift, *Sarah's Laughter as Her Lasting Legacy*, 100.

that promise may have continued to play on her mind over the twenty-four years they were married. Gradually, Sarah may have become resentful, tired and frustrated with waiting. This attitude can certainly be explained as she offers her maidservant Hagar to her husband (Gen.16:1-2). To exaggerate her resentment further, Sarah may have again heard the news of the promised child from Abraham's encounter with God a year earlier (Gen.17:1).[158] And now, if Abraham knew the identity of these visitors, he may have intentionally kept Sarah in the tent in light of her previous state of mind concerning the promise. In doing so he could have been trying to avoid any drama, yet it is both drama and comedy the author uses to capture the story. If Sarah knew of the promise, it could explain why she now finds the stranger's promise laughable. What is more, if Sarah knew the identity of the strangers too, then it provides good reason why she curiously listens in and scoffs at the repeated promise heard so many times without fulfilment.

Genesis 18:13 *The Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?'*

Sarah's inner-laughter now launches her into the centre of the story and the Divine presence in the episode is unveiled as the conversation narrows in on one of the three visitors. The author identifies the Lord as the one asking the question concerning Sarah's laughter. Her private laughter and mocking commentary have been exposed by the Lord. Gift suggests this response from Sarah is one which "catches God off-guard": however this seems unlikely given that the Lord had the knowledge and awareness to correctly detect her inner-laughter. It is more likely that it was Sarah who was caught off-guard. But the author reveals that the question is directed towards Abraham, not Sarah. It seems ironic to the reader that Abraham is asked, given that Sarah was out of sight, and, as noted in verse 12, merely laughed "to herself." Therefore, as Hens-Piazza points out, "How is Abraham supposed to know that (Sarah) laughed, much less why she laughed?[159]

A possible explanation is that when this visitor enquires about Abraham's wife, it reminds the reader again that this is a patriarchal society where husbands have authority and interpretive power in the household.[160] But the ambiguity may also be due to the Lord intending to draw attention to the doubt that pervades the situation, and especially within the household.[161] Perhaps, the Lord is confronting Abraham, if in fact it was he who had directed Sarah to remain within the tent because of her disposition. It is unclear whether God was addressing Abraham's own concerns and the need to

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[158] Gift, *Sarah's Laughter as Her Lasting Legacy,* 102.
[159] Hens-Piazza, "Why did Sarah Laugh?", 62.
[160] O'Connor, *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary*, 264.
[161] O'Connor, *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary*, 264.

protect his wife from being exposed for her lack of faith. Vanessa Ochs and others suggest that God is angry at Sarah for displaying a lack of faith.[162] God's indignation and surprise at Sarah's bitter response may also depend on whether Sarah was previously aware of the promise. If she had no knowledge, then perhaps God was expecting this news to be received joyfully,[163] especially as this promise indicated a specific timeframe.

The Lord then makes reference to a question Sarah asked, but was not identified in verse 12.
It is ambiguous whether she made the comment, "Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?" at the same time as inwardly asking, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?" Was this spoken in the tent, or was this a question posed to Abraham over several months - even years? Was it a question Sarah often asked God in private? Could the author's inclusion of this question here be for the purpose of exaggerating Sarah's struggle.

Genesis 18:14 *Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son."*

The speaker is not identified to the reader, but the narrative proceeds with the first spoken reference to God among the characters. The rhetorical, and arguably sarcastic question, "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" seems to be included as a sharp rebuke for both Sarah and Abraham. Hens-Piazza describes the follow-up question as "the theological linchpin" of the announcement regarding the promised child.[164] Jon D. Levenson notes the question "serves as proof of Divine ability to work miracles and therefore of the miraculous nature of the nation to descend from the promised son."[165] There is no indication that Abraham offered a response to this follow-up question. The Lord may have allowed the weight of that question to sit with Abraham for a period. If this was so, one could imagine a pregnant pause, allowing Abraham, as well as Sarah at the tent, to consider what God was able to accomplish. Whatever the delivery of question and statement, the reader is invited to consider that God had not given up on Sarah and Abraham, nor the promise he had made to them twenty-four years earlier.

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[162] Vanessa L. Ochs, *Sarah Laughed: Modern Lessons from the Wisdom and Stories of Biblical Women,* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005), 114.
[163] Gift, *Sarah's Laughter as Her Lasting Legacy*, 103.
[164] Hens-Piazza, "Why did Sarah Laugh?", 66.
[165] Jon D. Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham: The Legacy of the Patriarch in Judaism, Christianity & Islam*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 60.

Genesis 18:15 *But Sarah denied, saying, "I did not laugh"; for she was afraid. He said, "Oh yes, you did laugh."*

The text confirms in verse 12 that Sarah laughed, but it does not reveal who she fears, or who reinforces the proof of her laughter. There is ambiguity regarding the reason for Sarah's fear. If she had suspected the identity of the visitors, then perhaps she was fearful of God's judgment. However, she had little reason to be afraid of the Lord as she had experienced God repeatedly coming to her aid and saving her from Pharaoh's house (12:17). It is possible that Sarah actually has reason to fear Abraham. Abraham hands her over to Pharaoh in Egypt, allows her maidservant Hagar to treat her with disrespect, and, as mentioned, may not have informed her of the Lord's promise of a child. With or without knowledge of God's promise to Abraham, Sarah rejects the insinuation of laughing. The narrative does not indicate to whom she directed her denial, so it may have been to the Lord, to Abraham, or even directed inward again to herself. She rejects the word of God on account of physical limitations and believes in natural means above God's supernatural authority.

Most translations assume that the Deity is the speaker, though the text does not state this explicitly.[166] This interpretation may be due in part to the last male speaker in the narrative being the messenger of the Deity. However, the identity cannot be confirmed from this and therefore the ambiguity remains. There is also some ambiguity as to the difference between the Deity and the messenger of the Deity. Therefore, the one who rebukes Sarah may also have been one of the other men with the Lord. Henz-Piazza assumes the speaker to be God, since it is considered Abraham had no knowledge of her laughter.[167] However, the rebuke need not be read as if the character had knowledge of Sarah's laughter in the present moment. "Oh yes, you did laugh," may have been said as an accusation from a husband who either knows her heart and state of mind, or simply chooses to side with God. Schneider also argues the grammar supports the interpretation that Abraham speaks to Sarah.[168] If this is the case, it is possible that Abraham, knowing the identity of his visitors, speaks up taking God's side over his wife's. Schneider further suggests that another reason for doubting that the Lord speaks here is that the Lord has only spoken directly to Abraham, and has "never spoken with Sarah before or after this verse."[169]

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[166] Tammi J. Schneider, *Mothers of Promise: Women in the Book of Genesis*, (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 32.
[167] Hens-Piazza, "Why did Sarah Laugh?", 62.
[168] Schneider, *Mothers of Promise*, 32.
[169] Schneider, *Mothers of Promise*, 32.

A detailed commentary on the birth of Isaac as recorded in chapter 21 is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is worth briefly making reference to the fulfilment of the child promised to Abraham and Sarah, in regard to gaps or blanks. Sternberg explains, "All gaps result from discontinuities between the order of narration and the order of occurrence, with its straight chronology. But it makes a considerable difference whether what happened at a certain point in the action emerges in the narration later or not at all."[170] The reader is not made aware of the arrival and fulfillment of this promise until it is disclosed in Chapter 21. Furthermore, there is no further mention of the promise until the announcement of Isaac's birth. The following comments on Genesis 21:1-7 are included to highlight the way in which laughter seems to permeate this story through incongruity.

Genesis 21:1-7 *The Lord dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised. ² Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. ³ Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him. ⁴ And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. ⁵ Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. ⁶ Now Sarah said, "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me." ⁷ And she said, "Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age."*

Conybeare describes the whole narrative leading up to the birth of Isaac as one which "rings with laughter."[171] The birth of Isaac evokes a laughter from Sarah far different from what we have heard before. Sarah's laughter at Mamre was choked back in denial, but with the birth of Isaac, we hear the infectious nature of her new laughter. It is an invitation for others to join with her experience of God's blessing. It is ironic that they name their son "Isaac," which means "he laughed." Whedbee notes that she "extends it beyond the charmed circle of Yahweh, Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac"[172] announcing, "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me." Conybeare continues, "The biblical narrator stands back and allows Sarah herself to announce her dissolution into laughter."[173] Sarah's laugher, which as we have seen is ambiguous in a number of ways, has now turned into a laughter of faith-filled joy. Schalesky, who interprets Sarah's laughter in Genesis 18 as one of doubt, acknowledges that this did not disqualify her from receiving what God had promised.[174]

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[170] Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 237.
[171] Catherine Conybeare, *Laughter of Sarah*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 13.
[172] Whedbee, *The Bible and the Comic Vision*, 80-81.
[173] Conybeare, *Laughter of Sarah*, 13.
[174] Schalesky, *Waiting for Wonder*, 130.

Ambiguity and incongruity as a contemporary narrative for life

Finding meaning in our story in God's story

Embedded within this Genesis passage is an illustration of the ambiguity and incongruity that is part of human life. This biblical narrative draws us in, and as Alter explains, "leads us to ponder again and again complexities of motive and ambiguities of character because these are essential aspects of its vision of man, created by God, enjoying or suffering all the consequences of human freedom."[175] Christian and Jewish readers must remain people of the Word and thus of language. But according to Gene Veith and Matthew Ristuccia, "Language is precisely what stimulates and feeds the imagination."[176] When we pay close attention to the words, our imaginations awaken in a fuller sense through the literary devices used, and we enter into the story more. The author's use of powerful literary devices affects the reader as they see beyond simply what is said, and imagine how it is said. Veith and Ristuccia add, we become "more intimately and personally involved in Scripture, and the Word of God has a greater impact on us."[177] This is precisely how narrative imagination works and how literary devices function. There is a richness to language and biblical literature in particular, by which we can experience the text speaking back to us. Eugene Peterson refers specifically to the generative power of the Word of God commenting, "things happen to us as we let the text call forth, stimulate, rebuke, prune us. We do not end up the same."[178] We are invited to experience, or empathise, with the story of every person in the Bible, so that we may discover the correspondence and relationship of God's story with the story of every person today.

One could expect God to distance himself from us, but incongruously, God does not. Instead, God steps into humanity in the Person of Jesus Christ. Christians observe the incongruities of God coming to them as a vulnerable baby born to an unmarried young woman, accepted by a few but rejected by many, and then redeeming the world by coming back to life after being crucified and buried in a guarded tomb. Brian Edgar writes, "Humour is part of this relationship with God, an aspect of divine character, closely related to the central theological themes of incarnation, cross, and resurrection, and that it is an element of the Apostle Peter's declaration that "you may participate in the divine nature" (2 Pet 1:4)."[179] Recalling Kierkegaard, this implies Christians and Jews are an incongruous mix

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[175] Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 24.
[176] Gene Edward Veith Jr. and Matthew P. Ristuccia, *Imagination Redeemed: Glorifying God with a Neglected Part of Your Mind*, (Wheaton IL: Crossway, 2015), 112.
[177] Veith and Ristuccia, *Imagination Redeemed*, 41.
[178] Eugene H. Peterson, *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2006), 66.
[179] Brian Edgar, *Laughter and the Grace of God: Restoring Laughter to its Central Role in Christian Spirituality and Theology*, (Oregon: Cascade Books, 2019), 3.

of dust and God.[180] They are both physical and spiritual which can cause dramatic tension between each dimension.[181] But God invites them to participate in a life that matters in the kingdom of God. This kingdom life may not appear pleasurable when everything is falling apart, or when a medical diagnosis is grim. Often it can be difficult to find meaning in our story when it seems God's story is unclear or perceived to be in conflict with ours. But discovering the ambiguity and incongruity in Sarah's story invites us to interpret our story as part of the fuller revelation of God's story.

My wife and I had three young children and were not planning for more. Naively, we considered our family story to be within our control. However, my wife discovered she was pregnant and felt increasingly tired and nauseous. Her first three pregnancies were normal in comparison to this experience. Concerned, she went for an early ultrasound to ensure the baby was healthy. To our surprise, her discomfort was justified because she was carrying twins. I recall exhaling a gasp, similar to laughing under my breath. The curiosity and confusion I experienced was not a laugh which expressed a lack of faith. Rather, the unexpected twist in our story caused me to marvel at God's grace, provision and blessing. At the same time however, I was trying to make sense of the incongruity. When others heard we were expecting twins they laughed with us. The announcement of two additional sons to my story reminded me that God's story is bigger than my story. I sensed the reality of God's presence. God caught me laughing. I could not deny it - even without all the answers.

Ambiguity and the space for imagination in our story

When we read the Bible with our imaginations fully engaged, the biblical truths become personal. A sanctified imagination will help us direct our choices and guide our lives as followers of Jesus. Through the reading of biblical literature, this sanctified imagination applies the moral truths of God's Word and acknowledges that life has meaning. Veith and Ristuccia recognise however that the imagination does not in itself press us to draw out the meaning. They explain that it is our reason, not the imagination, which demands the explanation, as "the imagination itself can be content with the not knowing."[182] Our imaginations allow us space to consider, as Peterson describes, "the immense world of God's revelation in contrast to the small, cramped world of human "figuring out.""[183] Through imagination we embrace uncertainty with curiosity to cause us to think more profoundly. In contrast,

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[180] Søren Kierkegaard, "The Sickness Unto Death", 146.
[181] Thomson, *God and the Infinitely Comic*, 5.
[182] Veith and Ristuccia, *Imagination Redeemed*, 49.
[183] Peterson, *Eat This Book*, 67.

Buxton suggests that "certainty can lead us to discard thinking altogether."[184] What we discover is that the elements of our stories vary and include a range of interpretations, but the tapestry of our story finds meaning through our participation in God's redeeming story of creation. Indeed, our stories may embrace uncertainty through times of celebration or suffering, but as Buxton encourages, we must engage our imaginations and pay attention to "what is", in order to move beyond observation and into participation.[185]

The hope we experience through participation in the divine nature enables us to perceive a way through whatever situation we face. Edgar explains that "A comic approach to a difficult and serious situation can often be more creative, imaginative, insightful, and ultimately wiser than despair."[186] In regard to making sense of a chaotic and threatening world, Arbuckle notes that the visible expression of a group's symbols and myths, especially through ritual, is a way of resolving the ambiguities, paradoxes, incongruities, and apparently unfathomable tensions of daily life. As Buxton suggests, "We need to embrace new ways of thinking that acknowledged the paradox, ambiguity, and mystery implicit not just in Christian ministry, but in life itself."[187] Ritual thus becomes a means of introducing people to the imaginative possibilities of another way of looking at their own life.[188] Again, Buxton offers great insight, suggesting it is in "acknowledging the place of mystery, mediated through the imagination, that we may discover a new way of doing ministry, grounded in a more generous and humble appreciation of what we do not know, as much as what we do know."[189] Veith and Ristuccia comment that the not-knowing aspect of our imagination brings value to our faith. This 'negative capability' is engaged when we are willing "to not understand, not do something, not explain, not act, not challenge or doubt or complain."[190] But with this freedom we must hold the reality our story and God's story with reverence and respect.

Incongruity and the role of laughter in our story

In ancient Celtic spirituality, to participate and experience the reality of God, you had to know where to look.[191] "Thin places" are where the border that separates us from that reality become porous and permeable. It is where the veil that blinds us to the reality of the sacred momentarily lifts and we have

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184 Graham Buxton, *An Uncertain Certainty: Snapshots in a Journey from "Either-or" to "Both-And" in Christian Ministry*, (Oregon: Cascade Books, 2014), 8.
185 Buxton, *An Uncertain Certainty*, 13.
186 Edgar, *Laughter and the Grace of God,* 97.
187 Buxton, *An Uncertain Certainty*, 5.
188 Arbuckle, *Laughing With God*, 54-55.
189 Buxton, *An Uncertain Certainty,* 16.
190 Veith and Ristuccia, *Imagination Redeemed*, 49.
191 Sparks, *Laugh Your Way To Grace,* 124.

a sense of the reality of God. Thin places can be geographical locations, but they can also be anywhere our hearts can be opened to the reality of the sacred.[192] Sparks suggests, "Another thin place we don't often think of is laughter. It clears our hearts of insecurity, neediness, and stale expectations. It opens our hearts anew for the words or songs or silence we were meant to receive. With laughter, our hearts are laid bare before God."[193] The irony is that when God seems silent, and we laughingly admit we do not have all the answers, it is in giving up our need for specific answers that we reconnect with God again. Edgar writes, "To be able to laugh, or even offer a wry smile, in a difficult situation is an expression of faith and hope that all will, eventually, be well."[194] Foster agrees, "True laughter only comes from looking into the very worst of our situation and realising there is hope."[195] This understanding can deepen and widen our participation in the redeeming story and ministry of God.

Laughter is an appropriate response for the one who is deepening their awareness of the nature and the work of God.[196] Kushchel suggests, "Christians who laugh are taking part in God's laughter at his creation and his creatures, and this laughter is a laughter of mercy and friendliness."[197] This laughter comes from the recognition that the stories of the world's sufferings do not have the last word, nor the last laugh. It is the hope in God which allows the person a fuller, more complete assessment of the incongruous situation. According to Edgar, they are able to "laugh at themselves or at others for their foolishness, vanity, ignorance, weakness, or whatever frailty is demonstrated, rather than simply falling into despair."[198] Sparks writes, "(Laughter) reframes how we see others, and it changes the very way we engage with God.[199] She refers to theologian Karl Barth who said, "Laughter is the closest thing to the grace of God."[200] In Genesis 21 we observe how Sarah called on others to laugh with her at the realisation of what God had done through her story. In much the same way we find ourselves doing the same. In our contemporary context there is richness in our lives as we laugh with others who together embrace God at work through ambiguity and incongruity. We are drawn towards each other's stories and observe how we are woven with beauty and grace into God's story.

'Greenlights', the newly published book by actor Matthew McConaughey, illustrates this inner pull. The language crafted in the blurb appropriately grabbed my attention and made me curious about

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[192] https://marcusjborg.org/open-hearts-and-thin-places/.
[193] Sparks, *Laugh Your Way To Grace*, 124.
[194] Edgar, *Laughter and the Grace of God*, 97.
[195] Jonathan Foster, *Death, Hope and the Laughter of God*, (Bloomington, In: Westbow Press, 2017), Chapter 11, 88% kindle book.
[196] Edgar, *Laughter and the Grace of God,* 102.
[197] Kuschel, *Laughter: A Theological Reflection*, 133.
[198] Edgar, *Laughter and the Grace of God*, 97.
[199] Sparks, *Laugh Your Way To Grace*, xiii.
[200] Sparks, *Laugh Your Way To Grace*, xvi.

McConaughey's story. Within, McConaughey described his writing as based on the adventures of his life "that have been significant, enlightening, and funny, sometimes because they were meant to be but mostly because they didn't try to be."[201] Reading this of McConaughey's story encouraged me to understand him on a deeper level and relate my experiences to his. He continued by saying his notes were "about successes and failures, joys and sorrows, things that made me marvel, and things that made me laugh out loud."[202] In McConaughey's story his Christian faith enabled him to see ambiguity and incongruity in his life as graces, truths and beauties of brutality.[203] The language of his story communicated meaning for his life, but also for mine, as I was drawn into it. But his narrative highlighted how a story is not powerful simply because we are drawn in to be informed by it. More significantly, a story is powerful as we are drawn in to laugh with and be spiritually formed through it. Peterson comments, "The very nature of language is to form rather than inform. When language is personal, which it is at its best, it reveals; and revelation is always formative – we don't know more, we become more."[204] Through the language used by the writer of Genesis 21, is it possible we may interpret that this spiritual formation was at the heart of Sarah's invitation to others.

Through surprise, exaggeration, and incongruity we are challenged in the way we perceive ourselves and our circumstances. Edgar notes that our laughter is a "recognition of the true nature of the self, humanity, and the world."[205] He adds, "It provides an accurate view of a flawed, inconsistent, often ambiguous and sinful world."[206] It is in laughter, asserts Hyers, that "we transcend disappointment and suffering. We transcend the jumbled contradictions of our lives. We transcend even the self-imposed requirement that life always make sense, conform to a plan, work out, give us our due, or be equitable and just."[207] It is often when we can laugh at the incongruities of life that we are able to perceive the "meaning that doesn't fit."[208] John Berntsen describes the expression of God's tangled "no" and "yes" in our own stories as one of humour's great services,[209] while McConaughey sees incongruity being about "how to catch more yeses in a world of nos and how to recognise when a no might actually be a yes."[210]

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[201] Matthew McConaughey, *Greenlights*, (London: Headline Publishing Group, 2020), 3.
[202] McConaughey, *Greenlights*, 5.
[203] McConaughey, *Greenlights*, 6.
[204] Peterson, *Eat This Book,* 24.
[205] Edgar, *Laughter and the Grace of God*, 97.
[206] Edgar, *Laughter and the Grace of God*, 102.
[207] Hyers, *The Comic Vision and the Christian Faith,* 59.
[208] Richard M. Gula, *The Way of Goodness and Holiness: A Spirituality for Pastoral Ministers*, (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2011), 85.
[209] John A. Berntsen, *Cross-Shaped Leadership: On the Rough and Tumble of Parish Practice*, (Virginia: The Alban Institute, 2008), 110.
[210] McConaughey, *Greenlights*, 15.

Gula suggests, "If we can laugh first at ourselves, we can liberate ourselves from an alienating narcissism and become better companions."[211] Then laughing together, he adds, "allows us to accept the limitations of our shared humanity, to reconcile with being human, and to live with the absurdities by keeping them in proper perspective."[212] Laughter expresses an openness to others and otherness, and more generally, "to the world, to its uncertainty and instability."[213] John Stott explains: "It is often through laughter that we gain clear glimpses both of the heights from which we have fallen and of the depths to which we have sunk, leading to a wistful desire to be "ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven."[214] This good news of resurrection faith in Jesus allows us to laugh at the incongruities we face from day to day. This true laughter makes life easier to bear, at least briefly, because these momentary sufferings in our story do not define our final destiny.[215]

The nature of this laughter was experienced several years ago with the death of my wife's Great Nana. She was a wonderful woman with a quiet faith in God. She passed away at the age of ninety-four and the family was at the funeral home for a private viewing. My wife, her mother, and three sisters, went into the room apprehensively. There was a great deal of grief and nervous tension in the viewing room. I waited in the hallway, but within a minute I heard some giggling, and then laughter, and then even a couple of snorts. I discovered later their laughter was due to the way the funeral home had done Great Nana's makeup. Her hair was parted the wrong way and her lipstick was not her colour. In their moment of grief and suffering, they allowed each other permission to laugh together. Obviously, there was incongruity in her physical appearance, but they could tell she was not there. In their laughter they were made aware this body was just a shell which had carried her spirit on earth. They were filled with hope and laughter trusting she was with God. They laughed to the point of tears. Then, catching the meaning of their tears, it caused them to laugh again. Sparks quotes theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, who considers that laughter can often be "the beginning of prayer."[216] This was their prayer.

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[211] Gula, *The Way of Goodness and Holiness*, 86.
[212] Gula, *The Way of Goodness and Holiness*, 86.
[213] Conybeare, *Laughter of Sarah*, 102-103.
[214] John R. Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1982), 291-292.
[215] Gula, *The Way of Goodness and Holiness*, 84.
[216] Sparks, *Laugh Your Way To Grace*, 80.

Conclusion

In this dissertation we have seen that the story of Sarah's laughter is one that is open to interpretation. Tikva Frymer-Kensky acknowledges how ambiguity is "part of the reason that this story has persisted in the minds of many readers."[217] There are no definitive answers to the questions prompted by the story's ambiguities, so Sarah's laughter will continue to prompt debate among its readers. Gift comments, "The ambiguities within Sarah's story in Genesis 18 prompts readers to ask questions about the meaning of Sarah's inner dialogue and her discourse with God, and to form their own opinions about what the passage is really saying."[218] The narrative is more than just a theologically loaded passage. Historically it happened as an event in the story of God and his people. But through Scripture, the literary narrative has power to speak into our lives at a deeply personal level. This study has shown how this passage illustrates the way in which various figures of speech, specifically ambiguity and incongruity, impact our own narratives for life. But this is true of all of Scripture. Our story is part of God's story. And God's story is part of our story. These are beautifully woven together. This dissertation opened with the statement, "Every person's life tells a story." What this study has shown is that each person can find meaning in their story when they are open to their participation in the revelation of God's story. This connection to the greater narrative often takes place through adventure and mystery, in the presence of ambiguity, with an expectation for incongruity, and a willingness to laugh throughout.

Literature, and biblical literature especially, offers a window into the world in which we live. As we read literature, and as we have noted in our investigation, the way events unfold to create ambiguity and incongruity, can mirror the sort of experiences of life that we have. In addition, literature helps us to experience things we would not otherwise experience, or perhaps engage in through the world today. Narratives touch on aspects of our own life, naming or alluding to characteristics and scenarios of circumstances we have been through or are about to face. We are able to detect connections and associations with the story on a page and our own lives. We have seen how through the power of literary devices we find ourselves drawn into the narrative which amplifies our awareness of similarities and parallels in our own stories. With well-crafted literature, we find ourselves drawn in, in particular with ambiguity and incongruity. Then as we enter the text we find it "speaks back to us" about what is occurring in our lives today. If we are experiencing various things which resonate with the text, then it powerfully sharpens that for us, and can help us come to terms with it because we

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[217] Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of their Stories* (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), 339.
[218] Gift, *Sarah's Laughter as Her Lasting Legacy*, 106.

see we are not alone, but we are part of the whole story of God and God's people. Schalesky writes, "(God) uncovers the deepest places of our shame and pain and promises to bless the whole world right from those very places."[219]

Through being immersed in this passage over several months and exploring it within the context of literary devices and theories of laughter, I have come to realise how rich the text is. The commentaries presented on the passage demonstrate there is much speculation, and I have been caught up in the story of possibilities. It is a passage loaded with relevance of what it means to live out our lives as human beings in God's economy and God's grace. Therefore, ambiguity is not something readers of Scripture should be afraid of or attempt to remove. Rather, it is through uncertainty and ambiguity that a sanctified imagination is given space to encounter more of God's grace and mercy. People today who engage with biblical literature through faith in Jesus are enabled by the Holy Spirit to experience the Word of God as living and active. With space for sanctified imagination, they discover through stories and language how the Word penetrates and divides both soul and spirit (Heb 4:12). Whether life brings experiences such as the loss of a loved one or the longing for a child, our story is embedded in God's story and involves mystery and adventure. As with Sarah, God sees our brokenness and barrenness but meets it with promise. And the realisation that God comes to us where we are, not where we think we ought to be, should cause us to laugh with God, and with others.

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[219] Schalesky, *Waiting For Wonder*, 14.

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