''*Toldot*: Who are the real children of Abraham?''

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Our sidrah opens with the enigmatic verse (Gen. 25:19):

יט וְאֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדֹת יִצְחָק בֶּן־אַבְרָהָם אַבְרָהָם הוֹלִיד אֶת־יִצְחָק׃

19. And these are the generations of Isaac son of Abraham; Abraham gave birth to Isaac.

It will be noted that this is the opening of a totally new section dealing with Isaac's offspring and the domestic struggles between Isaac and Rebecca, for which reason Jewish tradition allocates to it a separate Sidrah. However, if we look at the verse numeration, it is represented as a mere continuation— v.19— of the *previous* episode. This calls for an explanation.

As we know, the Hebrew text of our Bible was zealously preserved down the ages, and handed down—as we would have expected—by Jewish authorities and scribes, giving rise to a scribal textual tradition popularly referred to as our 'Masorah' (lit. 'that which was handed down'). In the 7th century there arose a school of 'Masoretes' who standardised the rules of writing the Sefer Torah and the spelling of certain words, and who provided the *neginot,* the accentuation and punctuation signs, as well as the system of vowels as guides to the pronunciation which we use to this day. They also drew up statistical lists of the vocabulary and varieties of spelling, and established that certain words, that had suffered from scribal error, were to be pronounced (*kerei*) slightly differently from the way their spelling had been preserved *(ketiv*). As the Sefer Torah has never been endowed with vowels, and as, over the centuries, scribal errors inevitably would have crept in and been widely copied, the

schools of Masoretes were in a real sense among the guardians of our heritage; and our present-day 'soferim', who write and correct our Torah, tefillin and mezuzah scrolls, follow in that centuries-old tradition.

So much for our rabbinic activity. But, while we were busy preserving our Torah, others were bent on undermining it. And this leads us back to the point we made at the outset about the numbering of the verses.

It was the medieval Church authorities who introduced the chapter divisions into the Bible to suit their own missionary purposes. From the 13th century periodic public disputations were initiated by the Church, summoning the Jews to send a representative to debate the relative theological beliefs and merits of the two religions. These were held in the presence of the royalty, and state and church leaders of the countries which organised them, and attended by vast audiences. The most (in)famous were the Disputation of Paris (1240), Barcelona (1263) and Tortosa (1413).

With the benefit of their recently introduced chapter divisions—which were originally ignored by Jews who followed our own sidrot and other Masoretic section divisions— the Church debaters would have been able to hurl their own biblical references at their opponents. This would have confused the latter and given the assembled throng the erroneous impression that the Jews were ignorant of their own Bible. All they needed to do was to offer a challenge such as, 'But how about Isaiah chapter 7?!' In order to prevent themselves falling into that trap, the Jewish authorities had no alternative but to incorporate the Christian division of chapters (and later, verses) into their own copies of *TaNaCh*. The name of a Rabbi Solomon ben Ishmael (14th century) is credited with having sanctioned that concession.

The Church divisions were not arbitrary, and they lost no opportunity to use those divisions in order to score theological points. The most glaring example is Isaiah ch. 11. If we look up the haftarah for the eighth day of Pesach (Hertz p. 1023), we see that Jewish tradition designates the beginning of that section of prophecy at Isaiah chapter 10 verse 32. Now, early Christianity used chapter 11:1-3 and v.10— with their references to Yishai (Jesse, father of King David)— as an Old Testament foreshadowing of the identity of Jesus (whom they identify with Yishai) as the Messiah.

In order to further that Christological association, and to sever the contextual connection with the previous verses, which refer quite clearly to a *past* historical event, namely Sennacherib's assault on Jerusalem in 701 BCE, and *not* to any future event— and could not therefore be used to prove the future coming of Jesus— the Christian authorities created a new and separate chapter number, commencing with, and giving pride of place to, what they interpreted as the Jesus references.

Now to return to our initial query, namely why the Christians rejected the traditional Jewish—and far more logical— arrangement of commencing a new chapter with the story of the life of Isaac— corresponding to v. 1 of our sidrah Toldot— rather than tacking it on as verse 19 of the previous chapter!

The explanation is clear, given that the New Testament looks to Genesis 12:3— "In you, shall *all the nations* be blessed"—as proof that the covenant with Abraham was directed at all people of faith, *not just to Jews*. Hence such statement as, "Not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham just because they are descendants" (Romans 9:6). Galatians is even more bold, removing from Abraham his direct biological and spiritual offspring, Israel, and allowing only 'those of (Christian) faith' to trace

their relationship to father Abraham: "So you see that it is those of faith who are sons of Abraham" (Galatians 3:7).

Now, our Hebrew Bible allocates a new Sidrah (Toldot) to the ‘generations of Isaac, son of Abraham’, which is appropriate to the story of the founding family of the Hebrew nation. The Christian numeration, however, by starting our sidrah 18 verses earlier, reduces the ‘generations of Abraham and Isaac’ to an inferior position, following on after ‘the generations of Ishmael son of Abraham’ (25:12), the offspring of Abraham’s other wife, Keturah (v.1), his concubines (v.6), and host of other nations (vv. 2-4). The line of Isaac now becomes the last, and least, of the Abrahamic line. ***QED*** !!

Shabbat shalom,

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