

women IN SCRIPTure

EXPLORING ALL THE WOMEN IN THE BIBLE

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Sarah: The Mother of Jewish Nation

EXPLORING / by Stephanie Catmull

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Her womb was opened and her constant, unwavering faith in God led to her greatest blessing.

Sarah, the Founding Matriarch of Judaism, is legendary for her enduring

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faithfulness to God, and her unswerving commitment to her husband Abraham. Characteristics abound as she is described as faithful, beautiful, loving, steadfast, authoritative, caring, submissive, obedient, stubborn, hospitable, fearless, and loyal. Volumes have been written about her, as her heroic life has been told throughout the ages, and her personhood is revered in both Judaism and Christianity. She is notably one of the most important female figures in the world's history, through whom the nations of the earth were to be borne and blessed. So who was this woman, and why exactly was she chosen to be the mother of God's chosen people?

Let's meet her first as Sarai, the wealthy and beautiful honored daughter of the Chaldeans from the land of Ur (Babylonia) in the 19th-20 century B.C.. (Note her name is Sarai until God changes it to Sarah upon His Covenant with Abraham.) Sarai's prestigious family comes from a long tradition of pagan polytheism, where the people worshiped over 2,100 gods and goddesses. Sarai, the daughter of Terah, was quite likely a pagan herself until she comes under the tutelage of her half-brother Abram and future husband, who is ten years her senior. And because she lived in a strongly matriarchal society, Sarai had the choice to decide who her future husband would be. Sarai chose Abram, a man who was the first rebel of the times, a man who believed in the One True God instead of the numerous, worthless deities of their culture. Sarai pointedly chose the wisdom and discernment of Truth that Abram represented despite the traditions of the age and pressure from her country, and instead aligned herself with Abram both in lands and in spiritual matters.

To delve into Sarai's character, you can easily see her intelligent reflection in the mirror of her husband Abram. Abram was a genius mathematician and astronomer, a celestial scientist who believed that the heavens and the earth were created by a Grand Architect, not the pagan gods of the ancient Near East, and who was quickly becoming wildly unpopular for this belief. Abram taught the Chaldeans of the existence of God, earning the honorary title of being the first preacher of a monotheistic religion. Abram, however, was essentially run out of his own country for these beliefs, nearly causing a civil war. This is the man that Sarai chose to follow as a nomad, leaving behind her wealthy family, and in so doing with great characteristic strength, becomes the first-ever woman evangelist. Sarai was evidently a brave and enterprising woman in her own right, courageous to follow God's Truth no matter the cost. Ironically, this first Hebrew woman and Mother of the Jewish Nation, was a converted gentile.

As Sarai approaches 65 years old, Abram takes her and his nephew Lot, "and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people whom they had acquired in Haran, and they departed to go to the land of Canaan," (Gen 12:5, emphasis mine). The Hebrew word for "persons" was nefashot, meaning souls, and "acquired" meant "made". The people, then, who journeyed with Abram and

Sarai and her husband Abram had converted into the blossoming Jewish religion, and wanted to escape the hostile land of the pagan Chaldeans in search of a land they could call their own. As immigrants, they settle in the land of Canaan, where their wealth, prosperity and beliefs multiply exponentially as they followed God's lead and blessing.

In time, the land of Canaan suffers a severe drought and famine. The couple travel to the land of Egypt (a scenario that would repeat itself in their great-grandchild Joseph's life) in search of sustenance for themselves and their massive entourage, and become the first missionaries to the Egyptian people. Sarai probably proselytized herself to the other women, while Abram's great intellectual abilities were admired by the Egyptians – who were themselves extremely intelligent. Abram, who was keenly aware of how exquisitely beautiful his wife was, tells her to lie to the Egyptians and especially the Pharaoh, saying that she is Abram's sister. While this is a compromising half-truth, Sarai agrees to the plot in order to save her husband's skin, since the only way Pharaoh could take her for his wife is if her husband were dead.

Sarai, above all else, was committed to her husband and was obedient to his command. She loved Abram unconditionally and supported him both in words and deeds. Too, Sarai, would understandably not want to become part of a harem, nor be subjected to marry into the land of idolatry. Her husband's solution, albeit not perfect, was the best answer at the time and she unquestionably followed it. While in Egypt, their conspiracy nearly backfires as she becomes Pharaoh's hostage, until God intervenes on her behalf, rescuing her from unwanted, forceful relations with him and protecting the sanctity of their marriage. Sarah, however, in the midst of her fear, shows great courage and steadfastness to her pledge to Abram. Pharaoh, finding out that Sarai was in fact married to Abram and not wanting to incur the wrath of their powerful God, gives Abram and Sarai a huge bride-price, including a handmaid by the name of Hagar, and instructs them to leave Egypt, thereby making them even wealthier than when they first arrived.

Sarai was very tenacious, and doggedly aligned her dreams with Abraham's and followed him with determination. Sarai knew her wifely duties – before these duties were ever spelled out by Moses or in the Torah. She was obviously very adept at running a large household – when Abram went to rescue his nephew Lot from the Assyrians, he left Sarai to run the estate, which consisted of 318 servants, not including the livestock, cattle and herds.

Back in Canaan when Abram is 86 years old, God promises that he will be the father of many nations, and Abram's descendants would be counted as numerous as the stars. By extension, Sarai would be the mother of these nations. There is one problem, however. Sarai is barren, and at 76 years old,

has not been able to produce an heir for her husband. In ancient times, this was a sign of divine disfavor, and Sarai undoubtedly feels that her infertility was solely her fault, probably because of some lack of virtue on her part, and is brokenhearted for her husband. With good intentions, Sarai swallows her pride and humbly chooses to remedy her barrenness by allowing her handmaid Hagar to become Abram's mistress, ensuring that Abram will conceive an heir through Hagar instead. Though this custom of surrogacy was socially acceptable and legally recognized throughout the ancient Near East, Sarai's choice went directly against God's instituted law of marriage (Gen 2:24), and thus this child would ultimately not become the rightful heir of God's covenant. Sarai had her husband to think of, though, and she did what she thought was best out of her love and compassion for him. Again.

Why doesn't God just take away Sarai's barrenness at this point? What was it that Sarai had to learn, or to prove, before she was able to conceive? Why doesn't God intervene, as He did with the Egyptian pharaoh, before this sexual sin is committed? Why does God wait 90 years before giving Sarai a son? Sarah had to prove her faithfulness to God, no matter her circumstances, no matter her barrenness. She had to believe in His promise no matter what. Hagar, erstwhile pregnant, becomes haughty, proud and abusive to her mistress, lording over her the fact that she was the mother of Abram's child, digging the knife further into Sarai's broken heart. Sarai, as the commanding head of her domestic household, is quite adept at authoritatively handling any kind of domestic dispute. Upon Abram's permission, she takes control of the situation and kicks the pregnant woman out of her house, until Hagar repents and remembers her place as a mere bondservant. Sarai does not cower; Sarai does not bend - though now she is reaping the repercussions of her mistake. Sarai puts her foot down at to what is expected, and allows Hagar back into the house only after establishing order and compassionately forgiving the handmaiden for her transgressions.

Ishmael is then born, and according to Josephus, Sarai loves Ishmael with all her heart. Though Ishmael is not of her blood, she treats him with great affection, dotes on him, and loves him unconditionally, showing her unlimited capacity for loving a child whom she did not birth. Sarai loves him as if he were her own and spoils him rotten, perhaps even turning a blind eye to his wild nature since he was Abram's "heir" and the future head of government. She is his mother for 13 years, and ostensibly proves her loving faithfulness as a mother and steward of God.

And now comes the turning point in her life, one that would change the nation and the world. At 90 years of age, God establishes His Everlasting Covenant between Himself and Abram, changing his name to Abraham, and Sarai's name to Sarah, meaning "Princess". She is going to be blessed by God because of her faithfulness, and be given a child! Sarah's great response of laughing says it all.

Not that she didn't believe God, because she did. Not that she didn't trust God, because she did. Why was she laughing? Was she bewildered, flustered, incredulous, relieved, joyful, and slightly hysterical? Probably all of the above. The desires of her heart, the thing she most wanted in this world, the thing she thought was beyond her reach, was being granted to her because of her great faithfulness and dedication to God and her husband. And now it was time for God's plan to begin in a miraculous fashion within a barren womb, in keeping with God's style of showing His glory by making the impossible possible through her.

Sarah later gains an eternal commendation in the Faith Hall of Fame : "Through faith also Sarah herself received strength to conceive seed and was delivered of a child when she was past age because she judged him faithful who had promised." (Hebrews 11:11) Her womb was opened and her constant, unwavering faith in God led to her greatest blessing. Even when she had reason to doubt His promise of a child, especially after being past child-bearing age, Sarah never gave up hope. She gave birth to a son, a promise from the Spirit (as opposed to Ishmael who was born of a bondwoman and of the Law), and signifies the covenant of free grace established under her own family line.

Sarah gives Abraham's rightful, legitimate heir the name of Isaac, and together they rejoice in God's promise to them of a son. Sarah, though, now has another issue to deal with, because the boy she had been raising, Ishmael, is not exactly fond of this young intruder who is vying for his mother's attention. His jealous, wild side becomes more and more apparent as his resentment for Isaac grows, and it has been suggested that he was physically abusive to his half-brother. Sarah is horrified at the mistreatment of Isaac, and again must take control of her household. Sarah is the protective mother bear who will not allow anything or anyone to hurt her child.

Sarah is perceptive, discernment and full of wisdom as she perceives the injustice and nefarious attitude that Ishmael and Hagar portray to the family. While Abraham wavers, Sarah is the firm parent, knowing the best course of action for their household. But Sarah does nothing until she has permission from Abraham, who gives in upon God's command to him to listen to his wife, for she knows what she's doing. God is pleased with her decision (according to Josephus), and

Abraham tells Hagar and Ishmael to leave – when Ishmael is 17 years of age. The seeds of discord that Sarah herself had planted are now gone and peace is restored.

The next time we hear about Sarah is upon her death at 127 years old, the only woman in the Bible whose age at their death is recorded. Sarah and Abraham enjoyed 37 blissful years together with their son Isaac. And when Sarah dies, Abraham lays her in the precious land bought for her burial place, bestowing

upon her a place of great respect and honor as befitting the Mother of Nations.

Sarah's life journey of heroic faith parallels her life as a desert nomadic wanderer to the rich prosperity enjoyed in the land of Canaan. Born into a pagan country, Sarah becomes the leader of the Women of Faith, the Mother of all Nations, and rightfully earns her place in history as the first Hebrewess and keeper of the faith. She is even credited with being the first woman evangelist and missionary. Sarah of the Old Testament, much like the Virgin Mary of the New Testament, was chosen by God to bear a son of the Spirit, due to her innocence, purity, faithfulness and steadfast love towards the Father. She will always be regarded as a justified saint, whom God used because of her faithfulness. To Sarah we owe the adage: It's not important where you start out in life, but where you finish.

"For in this manner, in former times, the holy women who trusted in God also adorned themselves, being submissive to their own husbands, as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord, whose daughters you are if you do good and are not afraid with any terror. Husbands, likewise, dwell with them with understanding, giving honor to the wife, as to the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life, that your prayers may not be hindered." (1 Peter 3:5-7)

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