



Women in the Bible

Hebrew Bible: Sarah

Genesis 16-17, 21

We can use Sarah's story to begin exploring relationships in the Bible through the lens of power. How does power function in the story as a whole? Who has power in each relationship, and how can we tell?

Abraham's Wife

Sarah is the second woman mentioned in the Bible, after Eve. She is Abraham's wife, and today she is often referenced as a pair with him (i.e. "Abraham and Sarah"). But Sarah is not always subject to Abraham's whims. In fact, this part of her story shows a true reversal of power: she tells *Abraham* what to do! The father is traditionally the head of the household in these stories. He owns the property, including the enslaved people, and brokers marriages on behalf of the family. In this part of Sarah's story, though, she takes on the role of controlling procreation. It is a masculine role, in a sense, because it shows power, and power was associated with maleness.

When she tells him to consort with her maid, the text presumes that the reader knows how this type of procreation works. That is, Abraham will make Hagar pregnant, and the resulting offspring will be counted as the descendant of Abraham and Hagar's "master" Sarah. Hagar's body belongs to Sarah so deeply that even her reproductive ability is not her own.

Sarah's story helps us delve into the roles women play in patrilineal descent, which is so important in the ancient world. In this case, it is far more important that Abraham have a male descendant than that he remain sexually faithful to his wife. In fact, the story does not depict his actions with Hagar as sexual infidelity at all. The conflict, therefore, arises not from his sexual encounter with Hagar, but from Hagar's resentment of Sarah, who caused this whole situation in the first place.

From a modern perspective, it can be difficult to read Sarah's actions in Genesis 16 with sympathy. First, she instructs Abraham to "go in" to her slave Hagar so that they might conceive a son, without regard for Hagar's bodily autonomy. Then she is upset with Abraham that Hagar looks at her with contempt. Finally, she jealously punishes Hagar to the point that Hagar runs away into the desert to escape her harshness. The relationship between these women is fraught because the power imbalance is so profound; Sarah has nearly all the agency, and Hagar has absolutely none.

“The Lord Has Prevented Me from Bearing”

A recurring theme in the Hebrew Bible is the problem of infertility. (It also appears as a theme, though to a lesser extent, in the New Testament.) Throughout Sarah’s story, she attributes both her infertility and her fertility to God’s will. When she instructs Abraham to procreate with Hagar, she explains, “You see that the Lord has prevented me from bearing children” (Gen 16:2). Her choice to “give” Hagar to Abraham for procreation, then, is a practical one. God does not seem to want Sarah to conceive, as proven by her infertility. But they need a male heir, and her enslaved maid can give them one.

In her cultural context, Sarah’s infertility could be seen as a threat to her agency; as long as she cannot give Abraham a male descendant, she has not fulfilled her responsibilities as his wife. This may be why she feels so threatened by Hagar after Hagar becomes pregnant. Sarah seems to get what she wants: a male heir through Hagar. But, at the same time, Hagar’s pregnancy highlights Sarah’s infertility and therefore her inability to provide a son for her husband.

Despite Sarah’s experiences of fertility, God appears to Abraham with a promise: “You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations” (Gen 17:4). This is a comical and surely absurd proposition. Not only has Sarah’s life experience proven her to be barren, but Abraham is 99 years old, and Sarah is 89. It is clear to both of them that their conceiving days, if they had ever existed, are behind them. Nevertheless, God insists that this promise will come to pass. It is in the context of this promise that God renames Abram as Abraham and Sarai as Sarah. Their new names may reflect the depth of their new relationship with God after God’s promise. They have been forever changed.

Sarah, indeed, is changed in at least one major way. God says to Abraham, “I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her... and she shall give rise to nations” (Gen 17:16). If God had prevented her from becoming pregnant before, as she had said, it is now God’s will that she bear a son and name him Isaac. Her transformation into mother of a great nation is marked by God renaming her.

The story of God’s promise to Sarah and Abraham, that their offspring will become nations, appears twice in Genesis: first in chapter 16 and then in chapter 21. The first account, which is attributed to the J author, highlights Sarah’s jealousy of Hagar and her pregnancy. In contrast, the account in chapter 21, attributed to the E author, places Sarah and Hagar’s conflict later, after Sarah’s son Isaac is already born. In the second version of the story, Sarah’s anger is even less justified because she has much less reason to be jealous of Hagar. God’s promise of offspring, despite Sarah and Abraham’s old age and against all odds, has come to fruition in Isaac.

Hagar the Egyptian

As an enslaved member of Sarah’s household, Hagar is Abraham and Sarah’s property. This fact is emphasized in the way the story is told: Hagar’s story only exists within the bounds of Sarah’s. The parts of Hagar’s life when she is not relevant to Sarah’s story – her childhood, for example, or her experience raising Ishmael – are invisible to us as readers.

Hagar’s enslaved body is not her own, and neither is her story. Even when she escapes from Sarah in their first conflict in Genesis 16, an angel of the Lord instructs her to return to her master. “Return to your mistress and submit to her” (Gen 16:9). What does it mean that God instructs an enslaved woman

to return to her abusive “owner?” To modern readers, with the history of chattel slavery and its continuing reverberations, the angel’s instructions sound harsh, even immoral.

This moment has not gone unnoticed by Black interpreters of the Bible, especially African American women. Black feminists and womanists have reclaimed Hagar, not only because she is an enslaved woman but also because her story is familiar in some important ways. Treated as property, Hagar is a different ethnicity than her owners, Egyptian rather than Hebrew. Abraham has sex with her, regardless of her consent – or lack thereof. In the end, their son Ishmael is cut off from God’s covenant, which is instead bequeathed to his half-brother Isaac, considered more “legitimate” because he was born of Abraham’s wife. Of course, the Genesis story is unaware of modern race relations in the United States and the history of chattel slavery that informs them. Still, as readers we cannot divorce ourselves from our contexts, and this story is all too familiar for the descendants of enslaved Africans in the United States.

Hagar ultimately finds herself back in the desert, not because she flees there this time, but because Sarah sends her there. When Sarah sees Ishmael playing with his baby half-brother Isaac, she fears for her son’s inheritance. “Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac,” she instructs her husband Abraham (Gen 21:10). God promises Abraham that Ishmael, like Isaac, will become a great nation “because he is your offspring” (Gen 21:13). Like her early life, Hagar’s later life is invisible to the reader; her story disappears behind Ishmael’s, and then both are subsumed into Abraham’s larger narrative.

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