

## Who was Sarah in the Bible?

Sarai began her life in the pagan world of Ur, in the land of the Chaldees, which was located in the area now known as Iraq. She was the half-sister, as well as the wife, of Abram, who would be called Abraham. Sarai and Abram had the same father but different mothers, according to Genesis 20:12. In those days, genetics were purer than they are today, and intermarriage was not detrimental to the offspring of unions between relatives. Also, since people tended to spend their lives clustered together in family units, it was the natural course to choose mates from within their own tribes and families.

When Abram encountered the living God for the first time, he believed Him (Genesis 12:1-4; 15:6) and followed after Him, obeying His command to leave his home to go to a place he had never heard about, much less seen. Sarai went with him.

Their journey brought them to the area called Harran (Genesis 11:31). Abram's father, Terah, passed away in this city, and Abram, Sarai, and their nephew Lot and their retinue continued their journey, allowing God to lead and guide them. With no housing and no modern conveniences, the journey must have been very difficult for all, especially for the women. During their journey, there was a famine in the land, prompting Abram and Sarai to go to Egypt (Genesis 12:10). When they did, Abram feared that the Egyptians would kill him because Sarai was beautiful and they would want her as a wife. So he asked Sarai to tell everyone that she was Abram's sister—which was technically true but also meant to deceive. Sarai was taken into Pharaoh's house, and Abram was treated well because of her. But God afflicted Pharaoh's house, and the couple's lie was revealed. Pharaoh returned Sarai to Abram and sent them on their way (Genesis 12). Sarai and Abram came back to the land now known as Israel. They had

acquired many possessions and a great deal of wealth in their travels, so Lot and Abram agreed to split up in order that the massive herds of cattle would have adequate ground for grazing (Genesis 13:9).

Sarai was barren, an issue of personal distress as well as cultural shame. Abram was worried that he would have no heir. But God gave Abram a vision in which He promised him a son and that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky (Genesis 15). God also promised Abraham's offspring the land of Canaan. The problem was that Sarai remained childless. Ten years after God had made His promise to Abram, Sarai, following cultural norms, suggested that Abram have a child with her servant, Hagar. The child born of that union would be counted as Sarai's. Abram agreed, and Hagar conceived a son—Ishmael. But Hagar began to look at Sarai with contempt, and Sarai began to treat Hagar harshly, so much so that Hagar ran away. God met Hagar in the desert and encouraged her to return to Abram and Sarai, which she did (Genesis 16).

Thirteen years after Ishmael was born, God reaffirmed His covenant with Abram, this time giving him the sign of circumcision as well as changing his name. Abram, meaning "high father," became Abraham, meaning "father of a multitude." God also changed Sarai's name, meaning "my princess," to Sarah, meaning "mother of nations." God told Abraham that He would give him a son through Sarah. This son—Isaac—would be the one with whom God would establish His covenant. God would bless Ishmael as well, but Isaac was the son of promise through whom the nations would be blessed (Genesis 17). Isaac means "he laughs." Abraham laughed that, at 100 years old, he could have a son with Sarah, who was 90 years old and had been barren her entire life. Sarah, too, laughed at the prospect (Genesis 18:9-15).

Shortly after God promised Abraham and Sarah a son, He destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, but He rescued Abraham's nephew Lot (Genesis 19). Abraham and Sarah journeyed toward the Negeb and sojourned in Gerar (Genesis 20:1). Abraham again asked Sarah to lie about her identity, and the king of Gerar took Sarah to be his wife. But God protected Sarah, through whom Isaac would be born. King Abimelech had no relations with her. God warned Abimelech in a dream, and the king not only sacrificed to God in repentance, but he gave gifts to Abraham and Sarah and allowed them to dwell in the land (Genesis 20).

God remained faithful to His promise to give Abraham and Sarah a son. They named him Isaac, and "Sarah said, 'God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me.' And she added, 'Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age'" (Genesis 21:6-7). Though she may have previously laughed in disbelief and secrecy, now Sarah laughed with joy and wanted her situation to be known. God had been faithful to His promise and blessed her.

Unfortunately, the tension between Sarah and Hagar remained. When Isaac was weaned, Abraham held a feast. But Ishmael, Hagar's son, was mocking Isaac. Sarah told Abraham to get rid of Hagar and Ishmael and that Ishmael should never share the inheritance with Isaac. Abraham was distressed at this, but God told him to do what Sarah said and that his descendants would be numbered through Isaac. Abraham sent Hagar and Ishmael away, and God provided for their needs (Genesis 21:8-21). It was after this that God tested Abraham by asking him to sacrifice Isaac. Abraham was willing to give up his son, trusting that God would somehow still remain true to His promise (Genesis 22; Hebrews 11:17-19).

Sarah was a simple, beautiful (Genesis 12:11), and very human woman; she made mistakes,

just like we all do. She stepped ahead of God and tried to handle His business on her own by foolishly sending her handmaid, Hagar, to Abraham to bring forth the child God had promised. In so doing, she ignited a feud that has lasted for 4,000 years (Genesis 16:3). She laughed in unbelief when, at 90 years old, she heard an angel tell Abraham that she would become pregnant (Genesis 18:12), but she gave birth to the promised child and lived another 30 years, dying at the age of 127 (Genesis 23:1).

Hebrews 11:11 uses Sarah as an example of faith: "And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise."

First Peter 3:5-6 uses Sarah as an example of a holy woman who hoped in God and who adorned herself by submitting to her husband. Sarah willingly left her home and stepped out into the unknown to follow Abraham, as he followed the directions of a God with whom she was unfamiliar at the time. She endured much to try to provide an heir for her husband and to keep her husband safe in dangerous lands. In the end, she had faith enough to believe that she and her husband, at the ages of 90 and 100, would produce the promised heir, Isaac. Although she lived in a world of danger and confusion, Sarah stood firm in her commitment to her husband and to God, and her commitment was rewarded with blessing.