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# The Matriarchs of Genesis

*Seven Women, Five Views*

**DAVID J. ZUCKER**  
**MOSHE REISS**

Sarah. Hagar. Rebekah. Leah. Rachel. Bilhah. Zilpah. These are the Matriarchs of Genesis. A people's self-understanding is fashioned on their heroes and heroines. Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, and Rachel—the traditional four Matriarchs—are important and powerful people in the book of Genesis. Each woman plays her part in her generation. She interacts with and advises her husband, seeking to achieve both present and future successes for her family. These women act decisively at crucial points; through their actions and words, their family dynamics change irrevocably. Unlike their husbands, we know little of their unspoken thoughts or actions. What the text in Genesis does share shows that these women are perceptive and judicious, often seeing the grand scheme with clarity. While their stories are told in Genesis, in the post-biblical world of the Pseudepigrapha, their stories are retold in new ways. The rabbis also speak of these women, and contemporary scholars and feminists continue to explore the Matriarchs in Genesis and later literature. Using extensive quotations, we present these women through five lenses: the Bible, Early Extra-Biblical Literature, Rabbinic Literature, Contemporary Scholarship, and Feminist Thought. In addition, we consider Hagar, Abraham's second wife and the mother of Ishmael, as well as Bilhah and Zilpah, Jacob's third and fourth wives.

**David J. Zucker**, PhD, is a retired rabbi and chaplain living in Aurora, CO. He is the author of five previous works, including *The Bible's Prophets: An Introduction for Christians and Jews* (2013) and *The Bible's Writings: An Introduction for Christians and Jews* (2013). Many of his writings are available at [www.DavidJZucker.org](http://www.DavidJZucker.org).

**Moshe Reiss** is a retired businessman, rabbi, and teacher of Judaism. He has been widely published, including in the *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament*, *Women in Judaism*, *Reform Jewish Quarterly*, *Asbury Seminary Journal*, *Louvain Studies*, *Biblical Interpretation*, *Interreligious Dialogue*, and on [moshereiss.org](http://moshereiss.org).

Even in a time when gender-related scholarship is growing exponentially, *The Matriarchs of Genesis* is an invaluable contribution. Zucker and Reiss explore the narratives of seven biblical women: Sarah, Hagar, Rebekah, Leah, Rachel, Bilhah, and Zilpah. These narratives are examined from five unique perspectives, which offer thought-provoking analysis and introspection. I highly recommend this volume as a learning tool for students and laypersons.

—DINA RIPSAN EYLON, Publisher and Editor-in-Chief, *Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary Journal*

"A fine effort providing many insightful comments, and showing a variety of views about Genesis' Matriarchs."

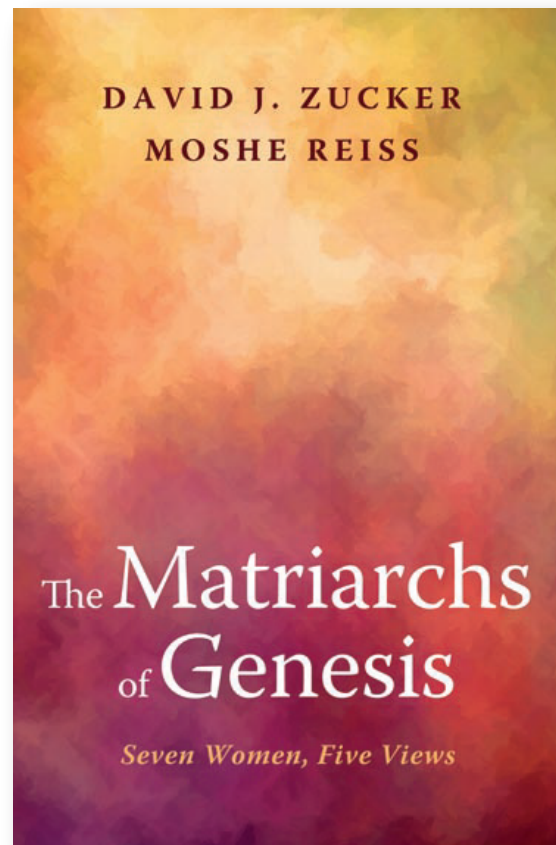
—TAMARA COHN ESKENAZI, Rabbi, Professor of Bible, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion

"*The Matriarchs of Genesis* is an excellent primer, offering a vast array of exegetical material (from ancient to modern) on each of the seven biblical matriarchs. Well researched and designed, this book is the perfect shortcut for researchers and students alike – just don't tell my students!"

—RABBI DEBORAH KAHN-HARRIS, Principal, Leo Baeck College, The Sternberg Centre

"Zucker and Reiss open a window into the lives of the Matriarchs. They give these esteemed women a voice and present them as dynamic, emotional, and articulate individuals whose family relationships were complex and unpredictable. Through their careful research in biblical and extra-biblical literature, [they] bring the Matriarchs to life, expose their relentless emotional struggles and give them the acclaim they most certainly deserve. A fascinating read for anyone interested in biblical women!"

—HÉLÈNE DALLAIRE, Professor of Old Testament, Denver Seminary



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Seven Women, Five Views

BY

David J. Zucker

AND

Moshe Reiss

WIPF & STOCK • Eugene, Oregon

THE MATRIARCHS OF GENESIS  
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## Authors' Note

WE CAN IMAGINE YOU, the reader, picking up this volume and saying, “*The Matriarchs of Genesis* . . . but why *seven* Matriarchs? Surely there are only four!” We can also imagine you asking, “Why five views, and how can there be five views? Doesn’t Genesis just present one view of these women?”

The answer to the first question as to why *seven* Matriarchs is that these women are all married to those men traditionally termed the Patriarchs of Genesis: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. These seven women, then, are their respective wives: Abraham’s Sarah, but also Hagar; Isaac’s Rebekah; and Jacob’s Leah and Rachel, but also Bilhah and Zilpah. Yes, Jacob had four concurrent wives, and together they produced thirteen children—twelve sons and one daughter. Six of these women (Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, Rachel, Bilhah, and Zilpah) are Matriarchs of Judaism, and therefore Christianity. Hagar is the Matriarch of Islam.

The book of Genesis, like the Bible as a whole, focuses on the lives of males, not females. The lives of men—who they were, what they did, what they said, and what was said to them—dominates the narratives we read in the Bible. At the same time, undoubtedly, about half of the people who lived in biblical times were women. Yet, less than 10 percent of the names mentioned in the Bible belong to women, and not all of them voice their views. Indeed, when looking at the seven Matriarchs of this volume, not all of them had a speaking part in Genesis. That said, when certain women like Sarah and Hagar, Rebekah, Leah, and Rachel do speak, their voices are clear and strong.

As to the second initial question concerning why we include five views if Genesis presents these seven Matriarchs as they were, the view from Genesis is the first level of our inquiry. We locate each woman where she appears in Genesis and, episode by episode, chapter by chapter, offer context for her appearance (who she was, what she did, what she said, or what was said to—or about—her). It is possible that even at this point, there may be details that are new to you, or that you may not have considered before.

The second level or view takes the same Matriarchs (accordingly, readers will find chapters devoted to Sarah, Hagar, Rebekah, Leah, Rachel, and Bilhah and Zilpah) as she appears in the literature of the early extra-biblical period. These are works written in the late Second Temple period and a bit thereafter, ca. 200 BCE–200 CE. For example, we cite material written about these women by the historian Josephus and from those books known as the Pseudepigrapha. The Pseudepigrapha is comprised of Jewish writings that never attained canonical status and were not included in the official books of the Bible. Specifically, we offer examples of the Matriarchs' treatment in such works as the book of *Jubilees* and the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*; then we provide readers with context and scholarly commentary on these examples. Both *Jubilees*, and then the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* are examples of what is termed Rewritten Scriptures. The book of Genesis is the source for those works, but their portrayals of the Matriarchs are very different from the women we know from the Bible. These Re-written Scriptures both excise and add to the words of the biblical account found in Genesis. The Matriarchs in these works often have very different, much more active roles and voices than in the first book of the Bible. They are strong and powerful figures. For example, in *Jubilees* there is no mention of Rebekah's courtship or her childlessness, but she is featured taking a prominent role in advising with Jacob about his future marriage partner. Likewise, *Jubilees'* Rebekah has many powerful speeches and seems to have an unusually prominent standing in the community; she is a woman standing alongside the men.

Next, we turn to a third source that presents yet a different view of these Matriarchs: the writings of the classical rabbis. The rabbis share their ideas through the medium of midrash (pl. midrashim), short explanations rooted in the biblical text. The rabbis wanted to teach certain values, such as what was or was not proper behavior, or address how to be in right relationship with God. To do this, the rabbis reached into the Bible, and for our purposes, into the lives of the Matriarchs, lifting the biblical story out of its original context and applying it to another context. The rabbis both quoted the biblical text and invented new dialogue for the Matriarchs. In presenting their view of the Matriarchs, the rabbis both taught their values and kept the Bible alive. We offer dozens of examples from the writings of the rabbis, providing a wide variety of views and clearly citing the sources for each of these quotations.

The fourth view of each Matriarch is taken from contemporary (late twentieth- and early twenty-first century) biblical scholarship. These scholars—Jewish, Christian, other religions, and secular alike—present and analyze the materials found in Genesis. They offer commentary from various

perspectives, such as a cultural, political, linguistic, or sociological vantage point. The fifth view is that of feminist thought. Feminist authors clearly are not categorized by gender identity, because there are both male and female feminists. Feminist writers seek to understand the Matriarchs and their significance as they experienced life *as women* in the biblical world. We admit that whether an author is quoted in the “contemporary scholarship” section or the “feminist thought” section is sometimes a subjective, arbitrary decision on our part.

We have written a book that avoids technical language. We understand that many readers may lack intimate familiarity with the biblical narratives, much less be fluent in Hebrew. We have kept that in mind in providing our explanations. This book is largely a collection of materials taken from both ancient and modern sources, readily accessible materials that focus on the Matriarchs of Genesis. Our approach is unique in that we know of no other work that brings together in one volume such diverse views that are nevertheless linked in a common purpose. The bibliography and notes refer to works for the reader who wants to explore further into the fascinating lives of the Matriarchs of Genesis.

David J. Zucker, Moshe Reiss



## Sarah

### Biblical Sarah

#### Introducing Sarah

SARAH IS THE BIBLE'S first Matriarch. More broadly, Sarah is the mother of the Jewish people.<sup>1</sup> Commentaries on Genesis deal with Sarah's place within the biblical narrative, her life within the context of ancient Near Eastern customs, laws, and mores, and other matters as well. As the first Matriarch in Jewish (and Christian) tradition, Sarah and the world in which she lived hold special interest to women. She is the focus of female commentators and feminist commentators in particular.<sup>2</sup> Sarah plays a pivotal role in the unfolding drama of Genesis. She is Abraham's wife and Isaac's mother. Hagar the Egyptian is Sarah's slave. Sarah's actual words in Genesis are few in number. She is portrayed as a supportive, largely silent wife, although she states quite clearly her views on matters of importance to her.

1. As Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are regarded as the Patriarchs within Jewish tradition, so Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, and Rachel (and possibly Bilhah and Zilpah) are deemed the Matriarchs of Judaism. This tradition has its roots in Isaiah's words, "Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you" (Isa 51:2). "Sarah our mother" (*Sarah imeinu*) is used both in rabbinic writings and in common speech (*Pesikta de Rab Kahana*, *Piska* 20.1).

2. To cite but a few examples: Athalya Brenner, Leila Leah Bronner, Amy-Jill Levine, Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss, Elaine James, Susan Niditch, Mayer I. Gruber, Ilona N. Rashkow, Savina J. Teubal, Phyllis Tribble, Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, Danna Nolan Fewell, and David Gunn.

Teubal takes an idiosyncratic view that is not widely shared. She suggests that Sarah is a priestess. Although Teubal does not claim that Sarah was a devotee of the goddess Astarte, she nevertheless points out that plaques of the goddess Astarte were found at Kiriyyat-Sepher, which is in close proximity to Kiriyyat Arba, Hebron, and Mamre (cf. Gen 13:18). "For Sarah . . . there are major elements in the episodes which are characteristics of a priestess" (Teubal, *Sarah*, 99).

## Genesis 11: Sarah Begins as Sarai, an Infertile Wife

Although there are some other references to Sarah in the Bible, she appears in chapters 11 through 23 of Genesis.<sup>3</sup> When first introduced, she is named Sarai, meaning “my princess.” She holds this name for more than half of her life. She is listed as the daughter-in-law of Terah as the wife of Abram (who will become Abraham, just as Sarai becomes Sarah in chapter 17). The Bible explains that Terah was planning to take his family from Ur of the Chaldeans to Canaan, but that when they came to Haran they settled there, and after some time Terah died (Gen 11:31–32). The text also notes, “Now Sarai was barren; she had no child” (Gen 11:30). The “Hebrew *‘akarah* simply means ‘childless,’ but not necessarily infertile.”<sup>4</sup>

## Genesis 12: The Call, Travels, and a Sojourn in Egypt

This is the tenth generation since the time of Noah. God’s voice has been silent. Suddenly, without warning or preamble, God calls to Abram and commands him to leave Haran, where he and his immediate family have settled. At this point, Abram is seventy-five years old, Sarai sixty-five.<sup>5</sup> They are to go to a new and unspecified land: “Go from your country and your kindred . . . to the land that I will show you” (Gen 12:1). God promises that Abram will be the progenitor of a great nation and that his name will become great. Furthermore, “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” Technically, the biblical text reads that “The LORD said *to Abram*, ‘Go from your country . . .’” Yet this is a command to both Abram and Sarai.

3. Sarah’s life is depicted in Gen 11–23. The other references to her in the Hebrew Bible are Gen 24:36, 67; 25:10, 12; 49:31; and Isa 51:2. Sarah is mentioned by name in the New Testament in the Epistles in several places: Rom 4:19, 9:9; Heb 11:11; 1 Pet 3:6; and she is referred to, but not named, in Gal 4:21–31. These references do not fall within the purview of this book.

4. Sarna, *Genesis*, 87 n. 30. NRSV uses the term “barren.” Unless we are quoting a text which uses that word, we substitute the less offensive word, “infertile.” Friedman uses “infertile” in place of “barren.” See Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah*.

5. Abraham is listed as seventy-five, and therefore Sarah is sixty-five (cf. Gen 17, where Abraham is nearly 100 and Sarah nearly ninety). Old age was seen as a sign of divine favor, but these figures seem unrealistic. Although not a hard-and-fast rule, in many cases when the ages of people found in the post-diluvian era in Genesis are halved, the narrative makes greater sense. This would translate into Sarah being merely forty-five when she became pregnant (not ninety) and Abraham being only fifty (not 100) years old. This explanation does not resolve the issue of Sarah’s claim to be post-menopausal and then becoming pregnant. See Zucker, “Ages of the Matriarchs and the Patriarchs.”

This will be clarified later in Genesis when God makes it manifest that it is not through Abraham alone but rather through his and Sarah's child that the covenant will continue (Gen 17:19).

The family travels leisurely. Lot, their nephew, as well as their large household of many servants and retainers, accompanies them. In the absence of any direct heirs, Abram probably thinks that the covenant would continue through Lot. (Later, in Gen 15:2–3, Abram, still childless, will complain to God that it will be his servant Eliezer who will be the chief inheritor.) In time, they settle in the land of Canaan. Not long thereafter, due to a major famine, the family and its entourage relocate to Egypt for a time.

When they are approaching Egypt, Sarai's husband explains that he fears for his life. "When [Abram] was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife [Sarai], 'I know well that you are a woman beautiful in appearance; and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, "This is his wife;" then they will kill me and let you live. Say you are my sister, so that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life will be spared on your account'" (Gen 12:11–13).<sup>6</sup> This is the first of three similar situations related in Gen 12 and 20 concerning Abraham and Sarah and in Gen 26 regarding Isaac and Rebekah.<sup>7</sup> There is some difference of opinion among scholars as how to understand this episode, as well as its later parallels. This shall be discussed in the "Contemporary Scholarship" and the "Feminist Thought" sections below.

At its most direct level, this means that Sarai is marginalized as a person. Abraham and the Egyptians regard her merely as her "brother's" property. He seems to get her to agree and to submit to Pharaoh. She apparently acquiesces to this changed status. Sarai does not claim that she is Abraham's lawful wife. Shortly after their arrival, Sarai is taken into Pharaoh's palace. There is no indication in the biblical text that she objects to or challenges

6. Technically, Sarai is Abram's sister. According to Gen 20:12, they share a common father, but not the same mother. As a note in *NOAB* explains, "Marriage with a half-sister was permitted in ancient times (2 Sam 13:13) but later was forbidden (Lev 18:9, 11; 20:17)" (comment on Gen 20:12). This note notwithstanding, it is unclear in the Samuel passage whether Tamar voices these words in an attempt to avoid rape.

According to Josephus and rabbinic tradition, Sarah is also the same person known as Iscah—or Yiscah, perhaps meaning "regal," or something to do with "sight" (see the discussion below in the section on "Josephus" in "The Rabbis' Sarah"). Iscah is the daughter of Haran, Abraham's dead brother, whose other daughter is Milcah. Abraham's other brother Nahor married Milcah. If they were the same persons, then Rebekah, Leah, and Rachel would be related by blood to both Abraham and Sarah. Lot then would be a brother to Milcah and Sarah/Iscah.

7. This episode (and parallel episodes in Gen 20 and 26) have been termed the "wife-sister" motif. While Speiser suggests connections with Nuzi documents (Speiser, *Genesis*, 91–94), that view has been challenged. See Greengus, "Sisterhood Adoption," 5–31.

this wife-sister deception. As shall be discussed in a section below, “The Rabbis’ Sarah,” there is rabbinic material that features her prayers to God seeking release and rescue from the Pharaoh’s advances towards her. In Egypt, Sarai’s husband prospers, and he acquires “male and female slaves” for their household (Gen 12:16). Yet God takes notice of what is happening and brings plagues unto Pharaoh and his house, “because of Sarai, Abram’s wife” (v. 17). Finally, Pharaoh releases her, expelling them both from Egypt along with Abram’s newly acquired wealth.

### Genesis 16: Sarah, Hagar, and Abraham

Sarai is not mentioned in chapters 13, 14, or 15. Ten years have passed since Sarai and Abram first settled in Canaan. They still lack direct heirs. In desperation, following ancient Near Eastern custom,<sup>8</sup> Sarai takes one of her household servants, Hagar the Egyptian, and convinces Abram to take Hagar as a wife/concubine. Hagar’s role is to function as a surrogate mother in place of Sarai.

Hagar conceives almost immediately, and she then apparently acts contemptuously towards Sarai. Tensions mount. Sarai confronts her husband who, in effect, relinquishes any authority he has in this matter. He says to Sarai, “Your slave-girl is in your power; do with her as you please” (Gen 16:6). Sarai mistreats Hagar, who then leaves the encampment and flees to the desert. There, Hagar has an angelic encounter. She is told to return to Sarai. She is also informed that she will bear a son whom she is to name Ishmael. This name is then directly connected to the angel’s explanation that God has heard her affliction (Ishmael translates as “God hears,” *yishm’a ʾel*). Hagar does return and apparently tells Abram about her experience in the desert wilderness, for he names his son Ishmael.

### Genesis 17: Sarai Becomes Sarah; The Promise of a Son

Sarah does not appear as an active character in this chapter. She is spoken about, but she is not physically present. In this chapter, Abram receives a new name from God, Abraham. God renames Sarai, giving her the name Sarah. Furthermore, God says that she will be doubly blessed: Sarah will give birth to a son, and she shall give rise to nations. Noting that he is one hundred years old, while Sarah is ninety, Abraham is incredulous and laughs when he

8. See the section below on “Contemporary Scholarship” for an explanation of this custom of surrogate motherhood.

hears this news. Patiently, God repeats the information to him. God further explains that the covenant will be through their mutual son Isaac, but that Ishmael will also become the father of many princes. God then reiterates that in about a year's time Abraham's wife will give birth: "Sarah shall bear to you" (Gen 17:21).

### Genesis 18: Visitors Appear, Sarah Is Told She Will Give Birth; Sarah's Reaction

Chapter 18 begins with some unexpected visitors presenting themselves when the family is encamped by the oaks at Mamre. Abraham rushes to meet them, then goes to Sarah's tent and asks her to help him prepare food. The meal is served to the three visitors outside of the tent near a tree. Sarah is standing inside the entrance near the tent opening. She overhears their conversation (Gen 18:9–10). The visitors explain that in a year's time Sarah will give birth. Now it is Sarah who is skeptical, perhaps bitter. She is bemused thinking that this is too little, too late, for as the text explains, she is post-menopausal (v. 11). "So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, 'After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?'" (Gen 18:12).<sup>9</sup> Despite this remark, or perhaps due to the bitterness of her response, or because she has doubts about Abraham's abilities or God's, God chides Sarah: "The LORD said to Abraham, 'Why did Sarah laugh? . . . Is anything too wondrous for the LORD?'" Sarah overhears this question. She is embarrassed and afraid. She denies the fact that she laughed, saying, "'I did not laugh.' . . . He said, 'Oh yes, you did laugh'" (Gen 18:13–15). God's response to Sarah's remark may be a gentle rebuke. On the other hand, is God exasperated with her lack of faith, tingeing the word "laughter" with divine bitterness? It is notable that when Abraham is equally incredulous (Gen 17:17), God is considerably more patient with the Patriarch. This is a remarkable passage. The plain reading of the text suggests that God is one of the visitors to the encampment, and quite clearly that God is in dialogue with Sarah.<sup>10</sup> As shall

9. Please note these alternate readings: "Now that I am withered" (NJPS) and "Now that I've lost the ability" (CJPS). As shall be explained in the section on rabbinic literature below, the rabbis have an answer for this remarkable phenomenon.

10. Teubal suggests that God may have been more than in dialogue with Sarah: "Isaac was conceived through divine agency. '[God] took note [pqd] of Sarah as [God] had promised, and [God] did for Sarah as he had spoken. Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the set time which God had spoken' [Gen 21:1–2] . . . the verb *paqad* is used for a husband visiting his wife for coitus in Judges 15:1. Use of this word in conjunction with the visit of [God] to Mamre seems to bring vestiges of a tale of supernatural conception in which a male deity impregnates a human woman . . .

be noted below, the rabbis suggest (Hagar in Gen 16:13 and Rebekah in Gen 25:23, notwithstanding) that this is the only instance in the Hebrew Scriptures where God speaks to a woman.

Genesis 20: Sarah, Abraham, King Abimelech  
of Gerar; Sarah as Sister

Sarah does not appear in chapter 19 of Genesis. As chapter 20 begins, Sarah and her husband continue to wander in the land of Canaan. They leave Mamre and move for a while to the Negev area—to the Philistine stronghold of Gerar, located between Kadesh and Shur. In a situation reminiscent of the deception in Egypt, Abraham once again presents Sarah as his sister, not his wife (Gen 20:2). She is then taken into the ruler's harem. God suddenly intervenes and warns Abimelech that he is in mortal danger: "God came to Abimelech in a dream by night, and said to him, 'You are about to die because of the woman whom you have taken; for she is a married woman'" (Gen 20:3). The next verse states clearly that Abimelech had not yet approached Sarah. The king is anguished. He explains to God that both the woman and the man had claimed that they were siblings. God confirms that Abimelech is innocent of intentional wrongdoing but warns him to return Sarah upon pain of death.

The next morning, Abimelech warns his community about these events. He confronts Abraham, who claims that it was his fear of being killed that caused him to misrepresent his true relationship with Sarah. Abraham then continues to explain that on some level they are siblings, for "she is indeed my sister, the daughter of my father but not the daughter of my mother, and she became my wife" (Gen 20:12). Abraham claims responsibility for his deceitful words. As in Egypt, Abraham prospers because of the deception, for Abimelech gives him sheep and oxen as well as male and female slaves, then returns Sarah to him. Abimelech next turns to Sarah and says, "Look, I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver; it is your exoneration [alternatively, "your unblemished virtue," or "vindication"] before all who are with you; you are completely vindicated" (Gen 20:16).<sup>11</sup>

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*hieros gamos*" (Teubal, *Sarah*, 126).

11. See "Sarah's Exoneration, Vindication" in the "Contemporary Scholarship" section.

### Genesis 21: Sarah Gives Birth; Expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael

As Gen 21 begins, Sarah conceives and gives birth. Abraham names their son Isaac, a name that literally means, “one will laugh.” Reaching back to the announcements of Isaac’s future birth in chapters 17 and 18, in this chapter, as later in chapter 26, laughter and Isaac are connected, but often it is bitter laughter.<sup>12</sup>

There are two major episodes in Gen 21 that concern Sarah. The first seven verses describe Sarah’s joy at becoming a mother. This is followed by five verses that reflect Sarah’s protective stance regarding Isaac’s personal welfare. Genesis 21:8–12, which probably takes place around the time of Isaac’s weaning, suggests that Sarah desires to banish Hagar and Ishmael, for they threaten Isaac’s present and future well-being. At this point Isaac is approximately three years old,<sup>13</sup> and Ishmael is about sixteen or seventeen. Sarah approaches Abraham and demands that he expel Hagar and her son from the family encampment. Sarah explains that the “son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac” (Gen 21:10). In the previous verse, the biblical text says, “Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian whom she had borne to Abraham, playing” (v. 9). The Septuagint, and therefore most Christian Bible translations, add a few words so that the sentence reads, “playing *with her son Isaac*.”<sup>14</sup> It is not at all clear what the word “playing” means in this context.<sup>15</sup> Were Ishmael’s actions, with or without Isaac, connected to Sarah’s decision to expel Hagar and Ishmael? Did Sarah see Ishmael acting this way at Isaac’s weaning ceremony, or before, or after? Could it have been months or years later? Considering that Ishmael was his father’s firstborn son, surely he was entitled to some inheritance. Two generations later, Jacob’s sons by the secondary wives, Bilhah and Zilpah, become full tribal leaders (Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher, respectively). The Bible is silent on most of these matters. Although upset by this turn of events, Abraham capitulates when God tells him to defer to Sarah’s wishes. God is explicit: “Whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you” (v. 12). God also

12. See Speiser, *Genesis*, 125 n. 17; Alter, *Genesis*, 97; Zucker, “Isaac,” 105–10.

13. “Extant documents suggest that . . . in the ancient Near East, mothers usually weaned their children at around the age of three” (Berlin, “Central Commentary, *Sh’mot*,” 312). See Gruber, “Breast-Feeding Practices,” 69–107.

14. Emphasis added.

15. This particular issue shall be discussed at some length in the next sections, “The Rabbis’ Sarah,” “Contemporary Scholarship,” and “Feminist Thought.”

explains that because Ishmael is Abraham's offspring, he will know God's support; Ishmael will be the progenitor of a nation (Gen 21:13, 18, 20).

### Genesis 23: Sarah Dies and Is Buried

Sarah does not appear in Gen 22, the Binding of Isaac. Given Sarah's protective stance toward Isaac, her absence from the biblical narrative is nearly incomprehensible. A midrash offers an explanation as to why she is absent.<sup>16</sup> The last time Sarah appeared was in Gen 21, at about the age of ninety-three. Thirty-four years pass without comment.<sup>17</sup> Then, at the end of a long life, at the age of 127, Sarah dies at Kiriyyat Arba/Hebron; she is buried there (Gen 23:1–2).

## Early Extra-Biblical Literature's Sarah

### Jubilees

Sarah appears as Abraham's wife in the book of *Jubilees*. While *Jubilees* broadly reflects the information found in Genesis, it includes additional materials, and much is deleted or retold. The family conflict that is so visible in Genesis is largely downplayed by the author(s) of *Jubilees*. A more important theme for *Jubilees* is family or tribal endogamous marriages, which seem required for the often partner-like relationships described.

While Sarah's childlessness is mentioned early in the Genesis tradition (Gen 11), *Jubilees* mentions her infertility at a later point. Sarah is taken into Pharaoh's house, but details about this differ from the Genesis account. At a later point in *Jubilees*, Abraham informs Sarah of the covenantal promise of heirs and land. Furthermore, Sarah is present when the visitors mention her future pregnancy, unlike in the Genesis version, in which she is eavesdropping in a tent. In *Jubilees*, Sarah and Abraham together, following the *Aqedah*, or Binding of Isaac (Gen 22), move to Kiriyyat Arba/Hebron, which appears to contradict the account in Genesis where Abraham lives in Beersheba. Finally, Sarah's death is listed as Abraham's tenth trial; these trials, almost mythic in themselves, are a post-biblical tradition.<sup>18</sup> Sarah is

16. See "Protecting' Sarah from the Truth" in "The Rabbis' Sarah" section later in this chapter. See also the examples that address Gen 22 in the "Feminist Thought" section.

17. A discussion of the missing years is found in the "Addition/Excursus" section at the end of this chapter.

18. Abraham's ten trials or ten tests are part of rabbinic lore (see *Mishnah Avot* 5.3;



featured in *Jub.* 12–17 and 19. The *Jubilees* chapters center on Abraham; however, the material listed below focuses on Sarah.

### *Jubilees 12*

This chapter paraphrases parts of Gen 11 and 12. As in Genesis, the names of the main characters are Abram and Sarai.<sup>19</sup> At the end of Gen 11, Sarah (Sarai) is first mentioned as Abram's wife, along with the information that she is childless. Chapter 12 includes the call to the new locale, meandering through the land, and the temporary sojourn in Egypt. It also includes Abraham's request that Sarah pretend to be his sister and the consequences of her being taken into Pharaoh's house.

In terms of Sarah-related material, *Jub.* 12:9 explains that "Abram took a wife, and her name was Sarai, daughter of his father, and she became a wife for him." This sibling connection will only come to light in Gen 20:12, when Abraham explains this matter to King Abimelech of Gerar. As in Gen 12, the *Jubilees* text includes a similar call to move to a new land, with the promise that the families of the earth would be blessed through Abraham. What is pointedly different is that Abraham is told that God will be God not only to Abraham, but also to his son, grandson, and all his descendants: "And I shall be God for you and your son and for the son of your son and for all of your seed. Do not fear henceforth and for all the generations of the earth. I am your God" (*Jub.* 12:24). Since Abraham is married to Sarah, the inference at this point is that they shall have children together.

### *Jubilees 13*

As a result of a famine, Abraham and Sarah move to Egypt. The *Jubilees* text adds that they are there for half a decade (v. 11), while no such number is found in Gen 12. The "wife-sister" motif that appears in Gen 12, 20, and 26, when the spouse is presented as a sibling, does not appear in *Jubilees*. In Genesis, Abraham claims that he fears for his life because of his wife's beauty and effectively "sells" her to the Pharaoh of Egypt. The *Jubilees* author

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*Avot de Rabbi Natan*, 33; *Numbers Rabbah* 15.12). These trials include the command to leave his homeland, and the command to sacrifice Isaac. There are variant traditions as to the specific nature of these trials, but all agree that Abraham triumphed in all of them. *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* chs. 26–31 enumerate one version of the trials, and *Midrash Psalms*, Ps 18.25 offers a different version.

19. Please note that in the following sections, a brief overview of the biblical account precedes a description of the material in *Jubilees*.

eliminates the beauty issue. *Jubilees* has the Pharaoh take Sarah by force after the couple has resided in Egypt for five years. The text explains, “his wife was taken from him . . . when Pharaoh took Sarai” (*Jub.* 13:11, 13). As in Genesis, God retaliates by bringing plagues to harass Pharaoh and Egypt. Pharaoh then returns Sarah to Abraham and sends them away.<sup>20</sup>

#### *Jubilees 14*

Chapter 14 of *Jubilees* contains information that is conveyed first in Gen 15 and 16. In Gen 15, God speaks to Abraham, and Abraham brings an elaborate sacrifice. God explains that in the fullness of time, Abraham’s descendants will inherit the land. In broad outline, similar information is conveyed in *Jub.* 14. The *Jubilees* account, however, unlike Genesis, adds that Abraham conveys this message of heirs and land to Sarah. (In the Bible, Sarah will not learn of her future pregnancy until she overhears the “visitors”—not Abraham—announce this fact in Gen 18:9–10.) In *Jubilees*, Sarah and Abraham enjoy a much more mutually supportive relationship than is found in the Genesis account. That she cannot bear children is a problem that they share; it is not simply Sarah’s problem. It is at this point that the *Jubilees* text finally informs the reader that Sarah is childless: “And on that day we made a covenant with Abram . . . And Abram renewed the feast and ordinance for himself forever. And Abram rejoiced and he told all of these things to Sarai, his wife. And he believed that he would have seed, but she did not give birth” (*Jub.* 14:20–21).

Genesis 16 features the early Sarah-Abraham-Hagar narratives. This chapter includes Sarah’s suggestion to enlist Hagar to produce a child, Hagar’s pregnancy, her difficulties with Sarah, and eventually the birth and naming of Ishmael. Similar material is found in *Jub.* 14, including Sarah’s suggestion that she might procure an heir through Hagar, Abraham taking Hagar for a wife, Hagar’s pregnancy, as well as the eventual birth and naming of Ishmael:

And Sarai advised Abram, her husband, and she said to him:  
“Go into Hagar, my Egyptian maid. It may be that I will build  
seed for you from her.” And Abram heard his wife Sarai’s word,  
and he said, “Do (it)!” And Sarai took Hagar, her Egyptian maid,

20. By contrast, Abraham asking Sarah to pretend to be his sister rather than his wife, Sarah’s great beauty, and Abraham’s prayers after Sarah is forced into the Pharaoh’s house are all part of the *Genesis Apocryphon* (columns 19 and 20), a “fragmentary work from the Second Temple period, discovered at Qumran” (Morgenstern and Segal, “Genesis Apocryphon,” 237).

and she gave her to Abram, her husband, so that she might be a wife. And he went into her. And she conceived and bore a son and he called him Ishmael. (*Jub.* 14:22–24)

Hagar becomes pregnant and gives birth, all in one verse (*Jub.* 14:24). None of the Sarah-Hagar conflict is mentioned, nor is Sarah's criticism of Abraham, which we find in Genesis: "May the wrong done to me be on you!" (Gen 16:5). In the *Jubilees* account, Sarah is portrayed as much more invested in the surrogate pregnancy for their mutual benefit, telling Abraham: "Go into Hagar, my Egyptian maid. It may be that I [Sarah] will build seed for you [Abraham] from her" versus the Genesis account: "I shall obtain children by her" (Gen 16:2).

### *Jubilees 15*

This chapter in *Jubilees* features information taken from Gen 17, including name changes and the promise of an heir through Sarah herself. In Gen 17, God speaks again to Abraham about the covenantal relationship. Abram's name becomes Abraham, and Sarai becomes Sarah. In addition to mentioning the requirement of circumcision, God promises that Sarah will bear a child to Abraham. In *Jubilees*, God likewise changes their names, speaks of circumcision, and promises a child through Sarah. God "said, 'Yes, but Sarah will bear a son for you and you will call him Isaac. And I shall raise up my covenant (as) an eternal covenant with him and with his seed after him'" (*Jub.* 15:19).

### *Jubilees 16*

This chapter initially addresses the angels' visit to the Abrahamic encampment and the announcement that in a year's time, Sarah would give birth. In Gen 18, visitors suddenly appear, and Abraham goes out to greet them. He then asks Sarah to prepare a meal. After they have eaten, they announce that Sarah will give birth in a year's time. She laughs with incredulity. When called out for her reaction, Sarah denies her laughter, but she is reminded that she did indeed laugh. *Jubilees* 16 repeats the visitors' announcement. Whereas in Genesis Sarah is positioned inside her tent as she listens by the

opening, in the *Jubilees* text she seems to be present when the statement is made: We<sup>21</sup> “appeared to Abraham at the oak of Mamre and we talked with him and we also caused him to know that a son would be given to him by Sarah his wife. And Sarah laughed because she heard that we discussed this matter with Abraham” (*Jub.* 16:1–2).

In Genesis, God asks Abraham why Sarah laughed. In *Jubilees*, God seems to address Sarah, and then “admonishes” her for her response. Unlike the Genesis account, here the angels inform Sarah that her son’s name will be Isaac: “And we reproached her. And she was afraid and denied that she laughed about the matter. And we told her the name of her son Isaac—just as his name was ordained and written in the heavenly tablets” (*Jub.* 16:2–3).<sup>22</sup> The next section in *Jubilees* that mentions Sarah is based on the early verses of Gen 21 detailing that God fulfilled the earlier promise and that Sarah therefore conceived and bore a child. God

visited Sarah and did for her as [God] had said. And she conceived and she bore a son . . . in the time when [God] told Abraham. Isaac was born on the feast of the firstfruits of the harvest [*Shavuot*]. And Abraham circumcised his son on the eighth day. He was the first one circumcised according to the covenant which was ordained forever. (*Jub.* 16:12–14)

As Kugel points out, “what more appropriate time for Isaac, the ‘first fruit’ of Sarah’s womb, to be born!”<sup>23</sup> The author(s) of *Jubilees* may have had a slightly different version than the current Masoretic Text. *Jubilees* suggests that an additional angelic visit to both Abraham and to Sarah takes place following Isaac’s birth. During this second encounter, first Abraham and then she is informed of what the angels had told Abraham, namely that the descendants of Isaac would be God’s special “possession from all people,

21. As explained in the introductory chapter, the book of *Jubilees* takes the form of an angelic revelation to Moses while he is on Mount Sinai (see chapter one, footnote 34). Consequently, in this section the “we” of “we appeared to Abraham at the oak of Mamre . . .” means an angel is relating this information to Moses.

22. This reference to “heavenly tablets” is not part of the Genesis tradition. In the *Jubilees* text, reference to these “heavenly tablets” suggests that the Torah is already written and resides in heaven. It allows for the Matriarchs and Patriarchs to know about later legislation, such as is found in Exodus, even though it has not yet been revealed. As noted earlier in the introductory chapter of this volume, hundreds of years after the time of *Jubilees*, the rabbis will offer the explanation that in the biblical era there is no such thing as linear/chronological time. *ʿAyn muqdam umʾuḥar baTorah*, “There is neither later nor previous time in the Torah” (Babylonian Talmud *Pesahim* 6b). Kugel explains that these references to the heavenly tablets are the later work of an anonymous writer, whom he terms the “Interpolator” (Kugel, “Jubilees,” 278).

23. *Ibid.*, 345.

and so that he might become a kingdom of priests and a holy people" (*Jub.* 16:18; cf. *Exod* 19:6).

### *Jubilees* 17

This chapter reflects information that appears in *Gen* 21, including the birth of Isaac and his subsequent weaning, as well as the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael at Sarah's demand:

Abraham celebrated a great feast . . . on the day that his son, Isaac, was weaned. And Ishmael, the son of Hagar, the Egyptian woman, was in the presence of Abraham, his father, in his place. And Abraham rejoiced and he blessed [God] because he had seen his sons and had not died without sons . . . And he rejoiced because [God] had given him seed . . . so that they might inherit the land . . . And Sarah saw Ishmael playing and dancing and Abraham rejoicing very greatly. And she was jealous of Ishmael and she said to Abraham, "Drive out this girl and her son because the son of this girl will not inherit with my son, Isaac."  
(*Jub.* 17:1–4)

The *Jubilees* version adds certain information not found in Genesis. In the view of one contemporary scholar, Ishmael is definitively present at the weaning ceremony, which is only inferred in Genesis.<sup>24</sup> In *Jubilees*, Abraham rejoices because he sees his *sons*. It might be that Abraham assumes that both of his sons will inherit the land and produce progeny for him. At this point, Sarah sees Ishmael playing *and dancing*; she also sees Abraham rejoicing. *Jubilees* mentions that Sarah becomes "jealous of Ishmael" and demands that Abraham send away the girl and her son.<sup>25</sup> The reason for Sarah's jealousy is not stated. Was it because Ishmael was playing, because he was dancing, or both? Or are his playing and dancing coincidental? Was she jealous of Ishmael because Abraham rejoiced and blessed God at the sight of both his sons? The *Jubilees* text also fails to explain why Sarah's emotions turn to jealousy. Why not some other emotion? Further, *Jubilees*—like Genesis—does not address why, as part of the "non-inheritance," Hagar and

24. "In the text in Genesis there is no explicit connection made between the feast of Isaac's weaning and Ishmael and Isaac playing together, although it is implied. In *Jubilees*, however, this connection is explicit" (Van Ruiten, "Hagar," 127).

25. "The emotions of Abraham and Sarah seem to be placed in greater contrast than in Genesis. On the one hand, the author of *Jubilees* stresses Abrahams' extreme happiness (*Jub.* 17:2b, 3b, 4b), and on the other, Sarah's jealousy is also made explicit (*Jub.* 17:4c)" (*ibid.*, 134).

Ishmael had to be expelled from the Abrahamic encampment. Were there no other alternatives?

### *Jubilees 19*

Sarah does not appear in *Jub.* 18. Chapter 19 of *Jubilees*, like Gen 23, reports that Sarah died at Kiriyyat Arba and that Abraham buried her there:

Abraham returned [from the *Aqedah*, or Binding of Isaac, in Gen 22] and dwelt two weeks of years opposite Hebron, i.e., Kiriyyat Arba. And . . . the days of Sarah's life were completed and she died in Hebron. And Abraham went to weep for her and bury her . . . he spoke with the sons of Heth so that they might give him a place in which to bury his dead. (*Jub.* 19:1–4)

In Gen 22, Abraham returns to Beersheba, not Kiriyyat Arba/Hebron. Indeed, according to Gen 23, Abraham is at Beersheba and needs to go to Hebron to mourn Sarah and purchase a burial site for her. Finally, in *Jubilees*, Sarah's death is listed as the tenth trial of Abraham as opposed to the rabbinic version, in which the *Aqedah*, or Binding of Isaac, is Abraham's tenth trial: "And all the days of the life of Sarah were one hundred and twenty-seven . . . These (are) the days of the life of Sarah. This (is) the tenth trial with which Abraham was tried. And he was found faithful, controlled of spirit" (*Jub.* 19:7–8).

### Josephus

#### *Sarah Is Iscah*

Josephus claims that Sarah is the same person as Iscah, the sister of Milcah and Lot, Abraham's niece (*Ant.* 1.6.5).<sup>26</sup> Whereas Gen 11:29 states that Haran had two daughters, Milcah and Iscah, Josephus states that the daughters were Milcah and Sarah.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, Josephus writes that Abraham marries his niece Sarah, whereas in Gen 20:12 Abraham claims that they are siblings who share a father but not a mother in common.

26. Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jews* will be cited parenthetically hereafter as *Ant.*

27. See also *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* on Gen 11:29; Babylonian Talmud *Megillah* 14a, *Sanhedrin* 69b; *Genesis Rabbah* 38.14.

*Sarah Is in Danger*

Genesis 12, unlike *Jubilees*, mentions Sarah's great beauty. Josephus describes Sarah's good looks as legendary and comparable to Eve. He assumes that Sarah is in real danger because of "the Egyptians' frenzy for women" (*Ant.* 1.8.1).

*Disease and Political Disturbance*

While the rabbis claim that an angel of God intervened in preventing Pharaoh from abusing Sarah, Josephus suggests that it was "disease and political disturbance" brought by God that convinced the Egyptian monarch of the error of his ways (*Ant.* 1.8.1).

*Sarah Loved Ishmael*

Josephus explains that while "Sarah at the first . . . cherished [Ishmael] . . . with an affection not less than if he had been her own son . . . when she herself gave birth to Isaac, she held it wrong that her boy should be brought up with Ishmael, who was the elder child and might do him an injury after their father was dead" (*Ant.* 1.12.3). This insight about Sarah's fondness for Ishmael is unique to Josephus.

## Joseph and Aseneth

In the opening chapter of the pseudepigraphical work *Joseph and Aseneth*,<sup>28</sup> Aseneth is compared to the Matriarchs of old. In contrast to other Egyptian women, Aseneth "was in no way like the Egyptian *parthenoi* [young, unmarried women]<sup>29</sup> but was in every way like the daughters of the Hebrews; she was tall like Sara, attractive like Rebekka, and beautiful like Rachel" (*Jos. Asen.*, 1:5).

28. Ahearne-Kroll, "Joseph and Aseneth." Dating of this work is unclear; most scholarly estimates range from ca. 100 BCE to 115 CE in Egypt.

29. For a fuller explanation of the term *parthenoi*, see *ibid.*, 2530 comment on 1:4.

### Testament of Abraham

The *Testament of Abraham*<sup>30</sup> is thought to come from the first or second century CE and was most likely written in Egypt. It has survived as two recensions, an A and B version. At one point in the A version, Sarah recognizes that a visitor to their home is an angel; Abraham did not realize this (*T. Ab. A* 6.1–6). Just prior to this, God had sent a message to Isaac in a dream saying that before long, his father would die. Isaac then goes into Abraham's room and tells him so. Both men start to cry. Sarah, who is in her own tent, overhears this. She joins them and also bewails Abraham's impending death. In the A version, unlike in Genesis, Abraham's death precedes that of Sarah (*T. Ab. A* 5.6–14; 20.6–7).

In the second version, Abraham goes off on a long journey with the angel Michael. They are gone a long time. Sarah, in the meantime, "since she had not seen what had become of Abraham, was consumed with grief and gave up her soul. And after Abraham returned to his house, he found her dead, and he buried her" (*T. Ab. B* 12.15–16).

### The Rabbis' Sarah

The rabbis of the Talmudic period sought to teach values that would enhance Jewish life and bring people closer to their religious traditions as well as to the presence of God. One way to do this was through legislation by means of carefully worded interpretations of biblical laws. To supplement this legal material, the rabbis created a more flexible set of writings known as midrash. Through midrash, the rabbis teach their values. The tradition of midrash often takes biblical narratives and uses them as a springboard to develop additional materials about the lives of familiar ancient figures. Some of the early extra-biblical Second Temple literature noted above became sources for rabbinic commentary. It is through midrash that the rabbis created a whole other side of Sarah's persona. This is the Sarah portrayed in classical Jewish texts, the Talmud, and many collections of midrashim.

As explained in the introductory chapter, the rabbis reflect a worldview under which males are privileged over females. In their minds, the ideal human society is decidedly oriented toward men, whom the rabbis believe to possess superior intellectual, spiritual, and moral capacities. The rabbinic attitude toward women is often sexist and sometimes misogynistic. Women are often compared to children and slaves. Every morning, men would thank

30. The *Testament of Abraham* Recensions A and B will hereafter be cited as *T. Ab. A* and *B*, respectively.



God for not making them a woman, a slave, or a heathen. On the other hand, we find extraordinary statements about the importance of women: “As the reward for the righteous women who lived in [the generation of the Exodus] the Israelites were delivered from Egypt” (Babylonian Talmud *Sotah* 11b). This range of attitudes is present in the rabbis’ writings about Sarah. Sometimes they are quite obvious, such as when the rabbis articulate their surprise that God spoke directly to a woman. They explain that this incident with Sarah is the one exception in which such express communication with a woman is recorded.<sup>31</sup> At another point, they suggest women are incapable of deep thought. Abraham, in his explanation to Sarah for taking Isaac away (to sacrifice him on the mountain), falsifies his true intent, for he considers women to be light-headed.<sup>32</sup> At other occasions, the rabbis’ ambivalence about women lies beneath the plain meaning of their comments.

### Genesis 11

Sarah is introduced to the reader of the Bible in Gen 11. At this point, she is called Sarai. Her seeming inability to bear progeny is stated clearly: she is childless.

#### *Sarah’s Relationship to Abraham*

Genesis 11:29 describes Sarah as Abraham’s wife. In Gen 20:12, Abraham claims that she is his half-sister, the daughter of his father but not of his mother. A variant tradition describes Sarah as the same person as Iscah, Abraham’s niece and the sister of Milcah (Babylonian Talmud *Megillah* 14a; *Sanhedrin* 69b; *Genesis Rabbah* 38.14).

#### *Sarah’s Childlessness*

Sarah is the first in a series of childless women. Not only the Matriarchs of Genesis, but also others follow in this line. In addition to Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah, there is Manoah’s wife, who is Samson’s mother, as well as Hannah, who is Elkanah’s wife and Samuel’s mother. Hence, the words from Ps 113:9, God “gives the *infertile* woman a home,” apply to Sarah, just as they will also apply to these other female figures: “Now Sarai was infertile;

31. Referencing Gen 18:15, see “A Singular Experience: God Spoke Directly to Sarah” below.

32. See the section below on “Protecting’ Sarah from the Truth.”

she had no child” (Gen 11:30). The words “making her the joyous mother of children” also apply to Sarah: “Sarah would nurse children . . . I have borne him a child” (Gen 21:7; *Pesikta de Rab Kahana*, *Piska* 20.1).

*Sarah’s Period of Childlessness: A Paradigm for Zion*<sup>33</sup>

The sages build on the verse, “Now Sarai was infertile; she had no child” (Gen 11:30; cf. 16:1). The rabbis equate Sarah’s delayed childbearing to Zion. Zion, which is understood as a metaphor for the people Israel, is described as a woman. Zion (or the people of Israel), while momentarily childless, will know fruitfulness. Zion shall give birth; the people of Israel will be reborn in their own land: “Zion is the seventh in the number of notable mothers in Israel who were barren a long time before God blessed them with children. Like the others, Zion’s time will come: no longer barren, no longer uprooted from the Land, she will find peace.”<sup>34</sup>

Genesis 12

The call from God to go to a new land begins this chapter. After some time in Canaan, due to a serious regional famine, Abraham and Sarah travel to Egypt.

*Sarah and Abraham Were Proselytes and  
Actively Proselytized Others*

Sarah and Abraham were the first proselytes to the new faith (*Numbers Rabbah* 8.9). They brought others to know the one God. Sarah converted the women, while Abraham converted the men: “Abram took his wife Sarai . . . and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran” (Gen 12:5; *Genesis Rabbah* 39.14; 84.4; *Song of Songs Rabbah* 1.3.3; Babylonian Talmud *Avodah Zarah* 9a). This understanding is based on reading the word “acquired”—the literal Hebrew is “they made”—as a synonym for “converted,” not merely adding members to the household. In a different midrash collection, the rabbis point out that the actual words “they made” cannot be taken literally.

33. The connection to Mother Zion is based on two verses in Isaiah: “Sing, O barren one” (Isa 54:1) and “Then you will say . . . ‘Who has borne me these?’” (Isa 49:21). Some of the material in this section appears in a different form in Zucker, “Sarah: The View,” 221–52.

34. See Braude and Kapstein, *Pesikta de Rab Kahana*, 330.

Humans are incapable of creating even an insect. Rather, what is meant here is that God credited Abraham and Sarah as if they had “made” new *souls* when they brought these converts into the faith of the one God.<sup>35</sup>

### *Sarah's Great Beauty*

Eve was a beautiful woman. She transmitted her beauty to the reigning beauties of each generation. Yet Sarah was even more beautiful than Eve, explains one midrash (*Genesis Rabbah* 40.5). According to the rabbis, even in her mid-sixties Sarah was extraordinarily good-looking. Her husband affirms this when he says to her, “I know well that you are a woman beautiful in appearance” (Gen 12:11). Elsewhere, despite her advanced age, we are told that Sarah was as beautiful as a bride on her wedding day (*Genesis Rabbah* 45.4). Another midrash features four stunningly attractive women, naming Sarah as the first example. The other three women were Rahab, a prostitute (Josh 2:1); Abigail, one of David’s wives (1 Sam 25:3); and Queen Esther (Esth 2:15) (Babylonian Talmud *Megillah* 15a).

Traveling is arduous work that affects travelers physically. Nonetheless, despite their many journeys, Sarah remained beautiful (*Genesis Rabbah* 40.4; *Zohar*, *Lech Lecha*, 1.81b).<sup>36</sup> The Egyptians praise Sarah’s beauty. When “the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful . . . they praised her to Pharaoh” (Gen 12:14–15). The rabbis explain that the light of Sarah’s beauty filled all of Egypt (*Genesis Rabbah* 40.5).

### *Sarah Seeks Divine Support*

When Sarah and Abraham were approaching Egypt, Sarah’s husband focuses on his—not her—wellbeing. He says, “Say you are my sister, so that it may go well with me because of you.” How did Sarah respond to this strange request? Did she argue with her husband? Was she distraught? Neither Genesis nor the rabbis offer clues to Sarah’s feelings, nor is there any suggestion of what her reply may have been. When, however, Sarah “was taken into Pharaoh’s house” (Gen 12:15), the rabbis explain that she turned to God for help. She says words to the effect that this is not something she is doing of her own volition. Sarah claims she is innocent of wrongdoing. She is there because Abraham trusted in God. Implicit in her comments is the request

35. *Avot de Rabbi Natan*, ch. 12.

36. As noted earlier, the *Zohar* is a mystical commentary on parts of the Bible. It dates from about the thirteenth century CE. (Please note that in the edition of the *Zohar* from which we quote, direct biblical quotations appear in capital letters.)

that God save her. The Genesis text reads: *‘al d’var Sarai*, which NRSV translates as “because of Sarai.” The word *d’var* can mean “matter,” “thing,” or “word.” The rabbis take *d’var* to mean “word”; they suggest Sarah spoke up at this point, either praying to God or instructing an angel in what to do to prevent Pharaoh from molesting her. Sarah said:

Sovereign of the World, Abraham came with you under a promise, since you had said to him (in Gen 12:3): I will bless those who bless you. Now I did not know anything except that, when he told me that you had said to him (in Gen 12:1): go, I believed your words. But now, <when> I have been isolated from my father, my mother, and my husband, this wicked man [Pharaoh] has come to mistreat me. He (Abraham) had acted because of your great name and because of our trust in your words. The Holy One said to her: By your life, nothing evil shall harm you, as stated (in Prov 12:21): No harm shall befall the righteous, but the wicked are full of evil. So in regard to Pharaoh and his house, I will make an example of them. Thus it is written (in Gen 12:17): then [God] afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues at the word of Sarai. (*Midrash Tanhuma, Genesis. Lekh-Lekha*, 3.8 Gen 14:1ff., Part 3)<sup>37</sup>

### *Sarah in Pharaoh’s Palace*

When Sarah “was taken into Pharaoh’s house . . . the LORD afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram’s wife” (Gen 12:15, 17). The Bible does not provide details as to what transpired. Was she forced into an adulterous relationship? Was she raped? The rabbis are quick to defend Sarah’s virtue. Although he desired to do so, the Pharaoh was unable to touch her:

Because [Pharaoh] dared to approach the shoe of that lady . . . the whole of that night Sarah lay prostrate on her face, crying, “Sovereign of the Universe! Abraham went forth [from his land] on your assurance, and I went forth with faith; Abraham is without this prison, and I am within!” The Holy One said to her, “Whatever I do, I will do for your sake, and all will say, ‘It is because of Sarai, Abram’s wife.’” (*Genesis Rabbah* 41.2)<sup>38</sup>

37. *Midrash Tanhuma, Genesis*. Please note that in the Ktav edition translated by John T. Townsend, direct biblical quotations appear in capital letters.

38. Note that in the Soncino edition of *Midrash Rabbah* edited by Freedman, Simon, and Slotki, direct biblical quotations appear in capital letters.