

The Importance of Abraham & Sarah in the Hebrew Bible

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The March of Abraham, painting by József Molnár;

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Today's most popular world religions are dominated by the Abrahamic religions of Christianity and Islam, with Judaism accounting for a very small percentage.¹ Whilst the predominance of these religions as a percentage in relation to population seem to correlate with fertility rates amongst these groups, the question of why the growth rate is such shouldn't be ignored. After all, did God not say that he would ensure Abraham's descendants would be 'vast like the stars in the sky'? These religions were built upon God's covenant with Abram (Abraham), who along with Sarai (Sarah), birthed the Abrahamic observance of God's will. To uncover what took place that led Abraham and Sarah in becoming the patriarch and matriarch of the religions we know today, we will examine their journey and experiences as recorded in religious texts.

Although there is no outside historical record of Abraham and Sarah, their story endures from the texts of the Bible (Christianity), Quran (Islam) and the Tanakh (Judaism). They are considered important to all religions associated with these books but differ somewhat in their consideration. The Bible views Abraham as the person God chose, along with Sarah, to become the progenitors of great nations under God's rule.² The Quran on the other hand, sees Abraham as a prophet and also as lineage to Muhammad.³ For the Judaic faith, and within the Tanakh, Abraham and Sarah are seen from a more personal perspective, as the true patriarch and matriarch of the Jewish people, from whom all Jews are descended. The Jewish faith honours them and pays particular attention to living within their values.⁴

Early life

Abram's early years were spent in a community and household where polytheism was practiced; his father even being a trader in idols. This belief in multiple gods did not seem comfortable to Abraham, possibly because of the teaching through Shem who was of Abraham's lineage. God then speaks to Abraham and promises that he will be made great, and that all who bless him will in return be blessed by God. He instructs Abram to leave his home and travel to Canaan;⁵ and so begins Abram's journey and the beginnings of the Abrahamic religions. We see in Abram an example of following one's own truth, having strength and conviction and a willingness to step outside of convention. As described by Joseph Dov

¹ Population Education, *World Population by Religion: A Global Tapestry of Faith*, (2025), <<https://populationeducation.org/world-population-by-religion-a-global-tapestry-of-faith>> [accessed 25 June 2025].

² Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, (Hendrickson Publishers: 2004).

³ Thomas Robinson, *Understanding Our Religious World: Islam*, Kindle Edition, (self-publisher: robinest, 2021).

⁴ Daniel H. Frank, Oliver Leaman, Charles Harry Manekin, eds., *The Jewish Philosophy Reader*, (London: Routledge, 2000).

⁵ Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, (Hendrickson Publishers: 2004).

Soloveitchik, 'In addition to being a historical prototype, Abraham serves as a spiritual and ethical model'.⁶

Not much is known of Sarai's early life, but it may be assumed that she led a similar life to Abram, as Abram acknowledges her as his half-sister in Genesis 20:12, 'Besides, she is indeed my sister, the daughter of my father but not the daughter of my mother, and she became my wife'. This statement by Abram occurred as a result of one of the two times that Abram and Sarai pretended not to be married. Laws on marrying as we know them today were not present in that time and were therefore not viewed as we view them today.⁷

The journey

Abram followed God's instruction to leave his home, and along with his father Terah, his nephew Lot, and his wife Sarai began their journey. Along their journey, they settled in Haran for a time until God instructed Abram to continue on the Caanan. Whilst in Haran, his father Terah died. Before reaching Caanan, they travelled to Gerar where he encountered King Abimelech and pretended for the first time that Sarai was not his wife out of fear for his life. He knew Sarai's beauty would be coveted, becoming cause for him to be put to death.⁸ Here we see an example of sacrifice from both Abram and Sarai on a personal level as God had not yet told them that they would bear nations in his name. However, God intervened, and Sarai was returned to Abram for their journey to continue. Finally reaching Caanan, they settled in Shechem to worship in Bethel. During their time in Caanan, a famine struck, and Abram and Sarai fled to Egypt where a repeat of the events in Gerar took place. Pharaoh took Sarai and bestowed wealth upon Abram, but again, God intervened, and Sarai was returned to Abram.⁹ Another example of sacrifice, borne from the necessity of escaping famine, but not only for themselves as they had fled there with their households. Some scholars argue that Abram should have stayed in Caanan, trusting that God would provide for them.¹⁰ It seems that Sarai's sacrifice here was greater than Abram's which seems to be a theme for Sarai, leaving her homeland for her husband's beliefs and twice being subjected to sacrificing herself for her husband. In today's western society, this act of denial and imposed sacrifice for Sarai does not sit well. As described by Diane Bergant 'Not only is there total disregard for the inherent dignity of the women here, but the cowardice of the men is laid bare'.¹¹ Although not mentioned in the Bible, the Rabbi's midrash of the Talmudic period suggests Sarai prayed to God to protect her from the Pharaoh, and that she had informed Pharaoh that she was married.¹²

⁶ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Abraham's Journey: Reflections on the Life of the Founding Patriarch*, David Shatz, Joel B. Wolowelsky, Reuven Zeigler eds. (New Jersey: KTAV Publishing House Inc., 2008).

⁷ Galon West, *Marriages Designed in Heaven*, (Florida: Self-published via Lulu.com, 2014).

⁸ Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, (Hendrickson Publishers: 2004).

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ Jonathan Sacks, How Perfect Were the Matriarchs and Patriarchs? *The Rabbi Sacks Legacy*, (2025) <<https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation>> [accessed 20 June 2025].

¹¹ Diane Bergant, *Genesis: In the Beginning*, (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2013), p.82.

¹² David J. Zucker & Moshe Reiss, *The Matriarchs of Genesis: Seven Women, Five Views*, (Oregon: WIPF & Stock, 2015).

Emphasis on the male in historical writings is prevalent, with the female story being often ignored;¹³ making it feasible that the investigation by the Rabii's hold truths.

The covenant

Arguably to most well-known story of Abram and Sarai is God's covenant with Abram, which includes changing their names to Abraham and Sarah, informing Abraham that Sarah will conceive a child, instructing the practice of circumcision, and the promise of becoming a great and vast nation that would be blessed by God.

Now back in Caanan, the story of Abraham and Sarah focuses upon there being no heir to Abraham as Sarah was unable to bear children. Sarai appeared to be so troubled by the fact that she could not give Abram an heir, that she instructed her Egyptian slave Hagar to lay down with him, resulting in the birth of a son called Ishmael.¹⁴ When Ishmael was thirteen years old, God made his covenant with Abram. Sarah overheard the message that she was to bear a child, and she laughed at the prospect. When questioned by God why she laughed, she lied and said that she hadn't.¹⁵ Here we see that Sarah's devotion to God did not match Abraham's. Twenty five years after the covenant, Sarah conceived and gave birth to a son named Isaac. There is much discussion surrounding why God waited twenty five years to fulfil his promise, with teaching patience being the most obvious, and the sacrifice of time being another.

The sacrifice

The greatest sacrifice God required of Abraham and Sarah was the offering of their son Isaac. There is no definitive timeline for this, and recordings vary between late teenage years up to his late thirties. Jewish traditions tell of Sarah's death being attributed to the grief associated with thinking her son had been sacrificed, or the shock upon his return.¹⁶ If we take the latter estimate of Isaac's age at the time, it correlates with the age Sarah was when she died. When considering God's instructions to Abraham, and the fact that God had referred to Isaac as Abraham's only son, we are left wondering how he would keep his promise of generations to come. Perhaps if we consider the phrase, it was to be an *offering* (which can be rejected) it can be viewed less harshly. We can also wonder whether Abraham did indeed think the sacrifice would be made, in which case did he believe that God would allow another child between him and Sarah in order for him to keep his promise of nations to come.¹⁷ As we know, the sacrifice did not take place as God intervened. Isaac himself became a patriarchal figure, and his lineage was indeed vast.

¹³ Diane Bergant, *Genesis: In the Beginning*, (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2013).

¹⁴ Phyllis Tribble, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*, (Nprwich: SCM Press, 2003).

¹⁵ Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, (Hendrickson Publishers: 2004).

¹⁶ Phyllis Cheslar, *The Sacrifice Of Sarah*, *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, (2010), <<https://www.jta.org/2010/10/26/ny/the-sacrifice-of-sarah>> [accessed 26 June 2025].

¹⁷ Trevor Dennis, *Sarah Laughed*, (Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1994).

Abraham and Sarah's story provides us not only with a historical account of devotion, fidelity, patience and unwavering belief, but also with parallels of modern times. Abraham's bravery to go against the beliefs of his family and community in order to follow the one true God shows us that we can endure when making the right choices. Sarah's sacrifices to ensure the continuation of her union with her husband and furthermore their lineage, helps us to understand the importance of keeping vows, and committing fully. Their continued faith in God can be a template for modern day values and demonstrates patience, love and obedience to God.

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