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Sarah: A Woman Caught up in God's Promises

(*Genesis 11.29–23.20*)

Scholars generally refer to Genesis 12–50 as ‘the patriarchal narratives’, or ‘the patriarchal story’. It is easy to see why. The chapters are primarily concerned with the male ancestors, the founding fathers, the patriarchs of the people of Israel, that is with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph and his brothers. God plays the most significant part in their story, but they, at least Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph and his brothers, have the biggest supporting roles. They have more lines to speak than anyone else, more things and a greater variety of things to do; they are on stage for longer and more frequent periods than any other characters. Nevertheless, the titles ‘patriarchal story’ or ‘patriarchal narratives’ hide from our view the remarkable parts played by other ‘minor’ characters, and, in particular, encourage us to neglect the importance of the roles played in these chapters by women. Genesis 12–50 is concerned with a family, a particular household. As we noticed in Chapter 1, women played highly significant roles in the households of ancient Israel. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Genesis should tell us a good deal about the likes of Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and Leah.

We would do better to call Genesis 12–50 ‘the ancestral narratives’,¹ so as to do the main female characters greater justice. After all, Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and Leah all play parts as large as, if not larger, than the second of the patriarchs, Isaac. Nevertheless, as we examine the chapters in which Sarah features, we will notice a huge disparity between the amount of space devoted to her and that given to her husband Abraham. While we will inevitably spend most of our time on those stories which have her on stage,

we will also have to pay heed to those stories in which she is *not* present. Along the way we will encounter two passages which feature her together with her Egyptian maid Hagar. Hagar will be the subject of our third chapter, so we will be analysing those particular stories twice. However, we will try to avoid repeating ourselves unduly. In Hagar’s chapter we will be looking at things from Hagar’s point of view; in this, we will be looking at them from Sarah’s.

Neither Sarah nor Abraham carry around with them as many of our preconceptions as did the woman and the man of the Garden of Eden. Nevertheless, the image of Abraham as the exemplary man of faith has come to dominate our thinking about him, and Sarah sometimes basks briefly in his glory. Because of what passages such as Romans 4, Galatians 3 and Hebrews 11 have to say about Abraham, it is hard for us to approach the text of Genesis with an open mind. We know already what to think. But if that is the case, then either we are in for some surprises, or else, clinging to our prejudices, we will miss what the stories are trying to tell us. For in truth, Abraham is far from being a saint in Genesis, and the same goes for Sarah. Abraham was turned into a saint by the Jewish theologians of the period between the Old and New Testaments, and sometimes Sarah was given something of a halo herself. That thinking had a profound influence on the writers of the New Testament, and led to the two-dimensional pictures of Abraham and Sarah we find in the Epistles. In Genesis itself they are fully rounded characters, subtly drawn, with their strengths matched – one is tempted to say *more* than matched – by their weaknesses. They are, in a word, all too ‘human’ there, and the narrator rarely tells us explicitly what to make of them. Sometimes, by the way he writes his story, he points us in a certain direction, but still he leaves much of the work to us, and allows us to form our own judgements. The New Testament passages have their own value, of course, and their own importance. But we must put them aside as we approach Genesis, put out of our minds any notions of patriarchal or matriarchal sanctity, and allow Sarah and Abraham to doff their haloes.

A barren woman

(*Gen. 11.27–12.3*)

Sarah, or rather Sarai as she is for the present (and will remain until 17.15), first appears in a short passage (11.27–32) which tells

us of Abraham's, or Abram's, origins (he will not become Abraham until 17.5). We are informed that Abram had a father called Terah, who lived in Ur, and that he had two brothers, Haran and Nahor; that Haran had a son called Lot, and that Abram and Nahor's 'took wives'. The name of Abram's was Sarai, that of Nahor's, Milcah. We are given the names of the father and sister of Milcah. We are told nothing of Sarai's parentage or siblings. We are told only one thing about her, and yet it is of such significance that it will help to determine the course of the narrative for the next nine chapters: 'Now Sarai was barren; she had no child' (11.30). As is usual in the Old Testament, the lack of children is put down to the wife, not the husband. As is typical of Hebrew narrative, the bare outlines of such a momentous statement as this are not coloured in. Though her barrenness is underlined by the 'she had no child', and by the reminder in the next verse that Terah had a grandson in Lot, Sarai's own feelings are not touched upon. The narrator leaves them entirely to our imagination. Not until chapter 16 will they begin to come to the surface of the text. Then we will know something of her pain.

The full significance of Sarai's condition does not become clear until, with the start of chapter 12, Abram receives the famous command and promises of God:

'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great. And be a blessing!¹² I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.' (12.1-3)

The promise of becoming a great nation and gaining a great name depend in the first place on Abram having a child, and, since in ancient Israel the inheritance of a family was passed on through the male line, a male child. Without such a child, and children after him, the promise of a land will not mean much either, for after Abram's and Sarai's death it will have nobody in it, or else it will only have the wrong people. And in a culture where children were regarded as one of God's greatest blessings, it would also seem strange for a childless man to be a source of blessing for all the families of the earth. So it *all* depends on Abram having a son. And Sarai is barren. Either, then, she will not be the child's mother, and Abram will have to find another wife, or God will have to heal her barrenness. Not until the middle of chapter 17 will we

discover which of those options God has in mind. For the time being let us notice once more Sarai's plight. *Everything* depends on Abram having a son, and she, his wife, cannot give him one. God's promises to Abram represent, if we look back to Genesis 1-11, his new initiative for the redemption of the world, his most important creative act since the creation itself.³ In that great venture Sarai can, it seems, play no part for the present, except, through her barrenness, to obstruct its fulfilment. Is that why the promises are not given to both Sarai and Abram, but only to Abram? It will turn out to be more complicated than that, but for the moment we can notice that there is no mention of Sarai in those extraordinary verses at the start of chapter 12. God will repeat the promises many times to Abram and will expand upon them (in 12.7; 13.14-17; ch. 15; 17.1-22; 18.10-14; 21.12-13, and 22.1-18), but not once will he address them to Sarai. The particular promise that is most pertinent to her, she will have to overhear!

'Say you are my sister'

(Gen. 12.10-20)

'So Abram went, as the Lord had told him' (12.4). With those fine words the narrative continues. Yet if they put Abram on a high pedestal of obedience and faith, all too soon we find ourselves caught up in a story which knocks him on to the floor and puts a pharaoh's boot on his back for good measure.

With divine guidance he has 'taken' Sarai and Lot and the rest of his entourage straight into the Land of Promise. Before the end of 12.5 they are in Canaan. Only five verses later, however, they are out of it again, and on the borders of Egypt. Famine has driven them there, as it will Joseph's brothers at the other end of the ancestral narratives. That Egypt, the one in which Joseph and his brothers settle, the one to which Jacob comes to die, will for their descendants turn out to be the land of bondage, the very opposite of the land to which they have been called. Its pharaohs will prove themselves tyrants of the worst kind. This Egypt, Abram's and Sarai's Egypt, has a pharaoh whose righteousness will put the 'righteous' Abram to shame. This Egypt will bring Abram a harsh and well-earned rebuke, but send him away a rich man. This Egypt will be the place where Abram sacrifices Sarai on the altar of his own fear and self-interest. It will be the place where their marriage very nearly comes to an end, and Abram puts the bright promises

of God in great jeopardy. It will also be the place where God comes, wielding great plagues to rescue Sarai from the pharaoh's embrace, as in the early chapters of Exodus he will arrive again in similar fashion to rescue his people, and will then find the pharaoh in office considerably more difficult to deal with. Thus this little story at the start of the ancestral narratives will foreshadow the events that lie at the heart of the Old Testament's gospel. Sarai will 'play the part' of the trapped Israelites, but if there is a villain of this piece, then it is not the pharaoh, but Abram, her husband.

It begins on the Egyptian border. Abram is afraid:

... 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, but they will let you live. Say, please, you are my sister, so that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared on your account.' (12.11-13)

Claus Westermann tries to explain that Abram's fear is readily understandable.⁴ With famine at his back and the mighty Egypt in front of him, Abram feels immensely vulnerable. Sarai's presence only makes things worse for him, for he knows that the country is ruled by a pharaoh so powerful that he can have any woman he likes at the drop of an eyelid. And so he resorts to a trick: 'Say, please, you are my sister.' 'The ruse', says Westermann, 'is the only weapon left for the powerless given over to the mighty.' Quite so, but what a trick it is, and see how the narrator presents it to us! Though he does not tell us what Sarai feels about it – she has nothing to say and no initiative to take in the whole story – he goes out of his way to emphasize that Abram's motives are those of fear and self-interest alone, and are upheld at Sarai's expense: '... then they will kill me, but they will let you live ... so that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared on your account.' As we said when we were looking at Eve's story, the storytellers of Genesis do not generally tell us the motives of their characters. Here Abram's motives are quite clearly stated, *three times!*

If Abram is vulnerable, what of Sarai? If Abram is powerless, then how much power does Sarai have? Abram has no thought for her and for what might happen to her. He has no thought for his marriage. He shows, indeed, no concern for the promises of God that he carries down to Egypt with him. He still has no son, the son on whom everything depends, and how will he gain one when

his wife is taken away, as surely she will be, by Egyptians believing his story about her being his sister? What then? There will then be no point to any curing of her barrenness that God might have in mind. Abram will have to take another wife. Has he thought of that? Has *Sarai* thought of that? Still the story tells us nothing about her feelings. Abram does what he likes with her, and thus cruelly mimics what he fears the pharaoh might do.

Abram's trick works ... and the worst, or very nearly the worst, happens. The Egyptians do indeed notice Sarai's beauty, and they believe Abram's story. But instead of pursuing her themselves, they take reports of her to their pharaoh, and sing her praises in his throne room. As a result she is 'taken' into the pharaoh's household. This is the third time since she has been introduced to us in 11.29 that Sarai has been 'taken', and this 'taken' is particularly alarming, not just because it further underlines her powerlessness, but because we will soon learn that it means the pharaoh has 'taken' her for his wife.

It is alright for Abram! As the male of the family who has surrendered his 'sister', he gets a huge bride price from the pharaoh: 'And for her sake he dealt well with Abram, and he had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male and female slaves, female donkeys, and camels' (12.16). He hoped it would 'go well' with him if Sarai said she was his sister. Well, it most certainly has! There is something of a rags to riches story about this, and there is also a somewhat coarse and very male humour at work. Look what the 'simple nomad' has got from the pharaoh! All this from the greatest king in the world! And what a price he gets for his lovely 'sister'! We have been taught over the years not to expect humour in the Bible. In fact, there is plenty of it, at least in the Old Testament, and I feel sure it is intended here. Yet, if we persist in looking at this story from Sarai's angle, we will not find it funny at all, and if we do not, then we are in the best of company, because God himself does not see the joke. God takes things very seriously, with the deadly seriousness of 'great plagues', which he inflicts upon the pharaoh and his household. The pharaoh does not see the divine hand in these calamities, but he is inspired enough to realize at once the reason for them, to understand Sarai's true status, and to realize that all unwitting he has committed adultery. He summons Abram. 'What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? Why did you say, "She is my sister," so that I took her for my wife?' (12.18-19a).

Abram's initial fears were exaggerated. The Egyptians he has encountered have not been men driven by lust and violence. Their

pharaoh is a just and honourable man, who responds to divine prompting with supernatural insight. Yet now, surely, he has much to fear. He stands before the most powerful monarch in the world, accused of the most terrible deception, and responsible for the most appalling suffering having been inflicted upon the king and his household. Surely now he will die, Sarai will find herself a widow in a foreign land, and God will have to start all over again in his plan to redeem his world. But no. The story has one more surprise for us: 'Now then, here is your wife, take her, and be gone' (12.19b). With those curt commands, even more terse in the original Hebrew (literally translated it is, 'Here, your wife. Take, and go!'), Abram is sent packing, and he and Sarai and his entourage are expelled from Egypt, as the Israelites will later be ordered out of it at the Exodus (see Exod. 12.31-2, which has the same 'take . . . and go'), and as the man and woman were expelled from Eden. The storyteller does not allow Abram to respond to the pharaoh's questions. Like the man in the Garden, he might have said, 'I was afraid.' Like the snake in the Garden, he is certainly guilty of a most fearful deception. Like the woman in the Garden, he has been asked, 'What is this you have done?', and like her he has had no answer to give. The storyteller does not pass judgement upon him. Having written the story as he has, he does not need to. And we will find Abram doing it again, and, if he is to be believed, again and again! And still Sarai has not said a word. Still she has not done anything, only had things done to her. Still she is to be 'taken'. It would be good to think of her as the calm centre of this stormy narrative, the innocent and heroic victim of men's machinations. But the text does not allow us even to do her that service. Innocent she is, certainly, for when the pharaoh summons Abram he confronts him with what *he* has done, and does not accuse Sarai at all. And God comes riding into Egypt on his black horse with the specific purpose of rescuing her. We cannot, however, call her 'calm' or 'heroic', for we have no evidence to go on. Her fears, her reactions, her faith are completely neglected. She has no power here even to evoke our admiration.

Another ruse turns sour

(*Gen. 16.1-6, 15-16*)

It is not until chapter 16 that Sarai appears again in the narrative. Meanwhile Abram has been extremely busy. He has sorted out a

serious conflict between his herdsmen and Lot's; he has settled with his nephew what parts of the Promised Land each of them should live in; he has had the extent of the land that his descendants will occupy confirmed by God, and has walked the length and breadth of it to stake his claim upon it; he has himself settled in a place called Mamre; he has built his third altar; he has gone on a daring raid to rescue Lot from capture; he has been met on his triumphal return by the king of Sodom and has played the part of the magnanimous hero; he has been blessed by Melchizedek, priest-king of Jerusalem (called Salem in the text); he has had his second vision of God, and his first dialogue with him; he has taken part in an awesome ceremony in which God has made a covenant with him and has declared himself under solemn obligation to fulfil his promises; most important of all, as far as Sarai is concerned, he has been assured by God that he will have a son of his own, though he is not informed who the mother will be. In all this Sarai has played no visible part. She has not been on stage, nor been mentioned at any point.

When she emerges again at the start of chapter 16, we are reminded at once of the way she was introduced to us in chapter 11: 'Now Sarai, Abram's wife, bore him no children' (16.1). We are back to where we began, and still the narrator persists in seeing things from Abram's angle. Indeed his emphasis seems to have shifted further away from Sarai since the first mention of her barrenness. The 'she had no child' of 11.30 has now become '[she] bore him no children'. His wording reminds us of the importance of a child for Abram, but encourages us to forget how significant one would be for Sarai. Yet in the very next verse, for the very first time, she is allowed to act on her own initiative and to speak. 'She had an Egyptian slave-girl whose name was Hagar. Sarai said to Abram, "See, please, the Lord has stopped me from bearing children; go, please, to my slave-girl; it may be that I shall be built up through her"' (16.1b-2). Even when she was on stage in the story of Abram's trick in Egypt, she remained deep in the shadows of the men surrounding her. Then we could scarcely make out her outline; now she steps out into the open, and we begin to see her features.

'The ruse is the only weapon left for the powerless given over to the mighty.' That was Claus Westermann's comment on Abram's trick in Egypt.⁶ It might be ours now on Sarai's own ploy. 'The mighty' are no longer the pharaoh and the lustful, violent Egyptians of Abram's fantasy. The threat to Sarai is more subtle than that. For her now 'the mighty' are her husband, her God, and

the narrator. See with what caution and what great courtesy she speaks!

We must be careful not to exaggerate the brightness of the light these stories cast on the position of women in ancient Israel. We must not jump to the conclusion that their only role and function was to bear children, especially male children, to their husbands. Nevertheless, as 16.1 has reminded us, in *these narratives* that is what Sarai is there for. From God's first declaration of his promises to Abram at the beginning of chapter 12, through to the birth of Isaac in chapter 21, the stories are dominated, implicitly or explicitly, by the theme of an heir, a son – or rather by the theme of his absence. Though she does not learn of God's promises until chapter 18, Sarai is caught up in them from the beginning. Her role and function are limited to those the narrator has given her, and her position with regard to her husband, though not as subservient as we might expect, as we shall soon see, cannot fail to be affected by the dominant position that he occupies in the narrative as a whole.

In the face of all this might, Sarai at last attempts to gain some power for herself. Despairing of ever conceiving a child of her own, she offers her husband her slave-girl Hagar, in the hope that she might be 'built up' through her. Her despair is understandable. As we learn from 16.3, she and Abram have already been in Canaan ten years. How long they were married before that, the narrator does not tell us, but we do not need him to do so. Ten years and more is a long time to wait, an agonizingly long time, as many couples will still testify. Sarai, in her offer of Hagar, is not showing a lack of faith. She is simply being realistic. We might ask why she has not come up with the plan before this.

Interestingly enough, her plan is beginning to have a contemporary ring about it. The question of the surrogate mother is now on our agenda also. But while for us it is a relatively new one to consider, for the people of ancient Israel, and other nations in the Ancient Near East, it was not a question but an established practice.⁷ Genesis has further cases to offer. In chapter 30, for example, the barren Rachel gives her maid Bilhah to her husband Jacob, while his other wife, Leah, realizing she is too old to conceive any more, gives him her maid Zilpah.⁸ The children of such unions were counted as the offspring not only of the husbands who fathered them, but of the original wives whose slaves the natural mothers were. So now, in this story, any child born to Hagar will count as Sarai's child. That is why she hopes that she will 'be built up' through her. If Hagar has a child, Sarai will at last be able to shake

off the status of the barren wife.

That is what she *hopes* will happen. But, like the snake in the Garden, hope can deceive, and as it turns out, Sarai's plan quickly goes awry. Hagar does at once conceive, and she will give Abram a son. But Sarai gains only further humiliation, as we shall soon see, while the son does not turn out to be the one who will inherit the promises of God, the one on whom everything depends. It transpires that Sarai's ruse is something of a red herring as far as the larger narrative is concerned. For that reason some commentators have censured her for a lack of faith, for trying (after more than ten years of waiting!) to force the pace of God's purposes, instead of continuing to wait patiently for him to give her a son. John Calvin, in his sixteenth-century commentary, did so,⁹ and in 1956 the German scholar Gerhard von Rad was still able to comment on Sarai (and Abram) falling into 'severe temptation'.¹⁰

Let us get a few things straight. Let us return to reading these stories as if we were reading them for the first time, not knowing what the outcome will be. It is easy, then, for us to see Sarai not as obstructing the purposes of God, but as trying the only thing she can think of to remove the obstacle of her barrenness from the path of their fulfilment. Though she has not heard the promises of God, it is as if she understands them, and wishes to serve them. Interestingly enough, one Hebrew word of verse 2 would appear to back up that interpretation. It is the one we translated as 'I shall be built up'. Our versions tend not to translate it so literally, and the NRSV is typical, with its 'I shall obtain children'. Such a paraphrase does not allow the Hebrew to ring the bells it might. As Sharon Jeansonne has pointed out in her book *The Women of Genesis*, the term 'built up' is used elsewhere of establishing a people.¹¹ At first sight it seems from 16.2 that Sarai is thinking only of herself. That one word in the Hebrew text hints that she has larger (very much larger) purposes in view. One thing is certain: for all the conflict it produces, her ruse does not seriously threaten the purposes of God – unlike Abram's trick in Egypt.

However, it does pay Hagar's needs as little heed as Abram paid Sarai's in chapter 12; it results in the humiliation of its perpetrator, as happened in the earlier story; Sarai is rebuked by the narrator, as Abram was rebuked by the pharaoh; and the passage finds an ending in another expulsion.

At first, as happened at least for Abram in Egypt, with all his slaves, sheep, oxen, donkeys and camels, things go remarkably well. Sarai 'takes' Hagar (this is the first time Sarai has done the

taking; hitherto others have taken her) and gives her to Abram 'as a wife'. Then the story goes on: Abram 'went in to Hagar, and she conceived' (16.4). It is all so simple. Sarai has been waiting for a child for well over ten years. Now what seems to be the first act of sexual intercourse between her husband and her maid results in conception (and will end up producing a son!).

Elsewhere in the Old Testament such notice of conception is usually followed straightaway by the news of the birth. Not this one. We will have to wait until the end of the chapter for Hagar's child to be born, and meanwhile we are allowed to dwell on her pregnancy. At once things go wrong for Sarai: '... and when she [Hagar] saw that she had conceived, her mistress became contemptible in her eyes' (16.4b). When Sarai gave Hagar to Abram as his secondary wife, she gave her a status far higher than the one she enjoyed as her slave. But she assumed that her own status would be enhanced by any child born of their union. Now that Hagar is pregnant, the reality of things turns out to be very different. Hagar has turned the tables on her. The utterly powerless foreign slave has shown what female power there is to be found in fertility, and what degradation lies in barrenness. Sarai is now far beneath her. The Hebrew verb used to express Sarai's loss of status, her becoming 'contemptible', is the same one as the poet of the Book of Job uses to describe Job's sense of his smallness in the awesome presence of his God (see Job 40.4). No wonder, then, that all the bitterness of her years of unfulfilled longing, all her sense of failure, and all her disappointment at the dashing of her new hope come spilling out in dark words of accusation: 'Then Sarai said to Abram, "May the violence done to me be on you! I gave my slave-girl to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, I became contemptible in her eyes. May the Lord judge between you and me!"' (16.5). At last we hear her pain, and it is now greater than before. In the conception of her ruse (the only thing she could conceive) she glimpsed for a moment, for the first time, some hope, a way out. Now it has left her even more degraded. Her feelings are summed up in the word 'violence'. My Hebrew dictionary explains, somewhat quaintly, that it often refers to the 'rude wickedness of men, their noisy, wild ruthlessness'.¹² It is the term used in Genesis 6.11 to describe the lamentable state of the earth before the Flood. There it is precisely because of the world's 'violence' that God decides to go within a hair's breadth of ending it all. Hagar may be the one who is pregnant, but by the use of that word 'violence' the narrator suggests it is Sarai who is left feeling as if she has been raped.

And Abram only makes things worse. He does not appear to hear her accusations. If he does, he does not respond with anger, nor seek to defend himself. He does not seem to hear her pain. If he does, he gives her no comfort, no embrace, no love. He remains detached, aloof both from her and from his new wife. He reminds Sarai that Hagar is still her slave-girl. She can do with her what she likes. His detachment is most cruel, and results, not surprisingly, in more cruelty: 'Then Sarai dealt harshly with her [Hagar], and she ran away from her' (16.6b). As is often the case in the more sophisticated narratives of the Old Testament, tragedy is laced with irony. The Hebrew word for 'dealt harshly' is the one the narrator put in the mouth of God just a few verses before our story, at 15.13, when he was telling Abram of the oppression his descendants would suffer at the hands of the Egyptians. Hagar, we remember, is an Egyptian. Her people will get their own back. We have God's word on it.

For Sarai, and for the rest of us, this particular scene is at an end. When the curtain goes up again we find ourselves in the desert with Hagar, and in the extraordinary territory we will cover in our next chapter. Yet before we leave this part of the story, we must see how it ends. Hagar returns, and the narrator concludes with these words: 'Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram named his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael' (16.15-16). Sarai does not appear in these verses at all. The narrator has left her alone in her bitterness. She hoped at the beginning of the story that she might be built up by Hagar's child. But this Hagar has born Abram a child, not she. She hoped at the start that a child from Hagar might 'cure' her of her own barrenness. Now, at the story's end, the narrator thrice underlines her inability to have children by thrice telling us that Hagar has given birth to a son. Sarai will have her barrenness taken away. But she will have to wait another fourteen years.

Sarah's big moment

(*Gen. 17.15-16*)

Sarai has her next entrance in chapter 18, and she will then reappear as Sarah. Chapter 17 is almost entirely taken up with God speaking to Abram, or Abraham, as he is now renamed. As soon as he appears to him, he identifies himself as God Almighty, and Abram prostrates himself before him, as well he might. Then God

declares: 'No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you' (17.5-6).

Surrounding this speech is repeated talk of covenant, between God and Abraham and between God and Abraham's particular descendants, the Israelites; the promise to them of the land of Canaan is renewed; and the practice of male circumcision is solemnly introduced as the mark to be worn by Abraham and his male descendants, an indelible reminder to them and to God himself of the binding agreement between them.

Then the passage proceeds with yet more solemn promises:

'As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.' (17.15-16)

The commentaries tell us that, in fact, 'Sarai' is probably just an old form of 'Sarah', and that the two names mean the same thing. Yet for the narrator and his hearers the change must have been more significant. It is possible they thought the name Sarai meant Mockery.¹³ Certainly Sarah means Princess.

So now, for the first time, Abraham and we, the readers of the story, learn that Sarah will have a son. The 'mockery' of her barrenness will soon be over, and instead she will have – indeed already has – the status of a princess. Moreover, the child to be born to her will be the son that we have been waiting for ever since the story began. The twice repeated 'I will bless her' takes us back to God's first pronouncement of the promises to Abraham in chapter 12, and echoes their language. Since Genesis 1 the talk of 'blessing' has been laden with fertility, and so here. Sarah will be able to perform the role for which the narrator has created her. At last she will be able to play her part in the fulfilment of the promises of God. At last she belongs to the world of those promises. She is no longer an outsider. How tragic, then, that at this, her great moment, she is not on stage! Such fine words have been spoken, such momentous words have issued from the mouth of God, and she is not there to hear them!

The bias of the chapter reveals itself in other ways, too. Verses 15-16 balance verses 5-6, but they do not achieve equilibrium. Sarah will only have one child, and even that she will bear for her husband, not for herself. Abraham, by contrast, will be made

'exceedingly fruitful' (he already has Ishmael, of course, and after Sarah's death he will marry another wife, Keturah, and have six children by her; 25.1-2). God does not speak of making a covenant with Sarah, and there is no mention of any equivalent to circumcision for her and her female descendants. They will not bear God's mark upon their bodies, nor carry the sign of his everlasting commitment.

And if the narrator is biased, so is Abraham! To all the fine promises of the first part of the chapter he does not react. He does not think it at all ridiculous that he should be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. But as soon as Sarah's name is mentioned, he falls on his face with laughter. 'Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child? . . . O that Ishmael might live in your sight!' (17.17-18). Of course, the idea that they will have a child at their age is absurd! When the child is born, his birth will break all human rules and be quite astonishing, utterly miraculous. Yet Abraham laughs prostrate before his God, in the attitude of worship. His laughter, for all that it is understandable, comes uncomfortably close to blasphemy. It is also prophetic. For God responds by saying: 'No, but your wife Sarah shall bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac . . . my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this season next year' (17.19, 21). In Hebrew, Isaac means 'the laughs'. Sarah will bring laughter into the world, she will bring laughter to Abraham (for again, twice, it is said she will bear *him* a child). Whether she will laugh herself – and if so, for how long – remains to be seen. For the moment, we must rest content with the new information these two verses give us, about the name the child will have, and the time of his birth. Sodom and Gomorrah will be destroyed before that time comes, and Abraham will put God's whole plan in the greatest danger once again. But first Sarah needs to learn what God has in mind for her.

'No, but you did laugh'

(*Gen. 18.1-15*)

Once more God appears to Abraham, but this time in disguise. The Hebrew makes things clearer than our English versions. 'The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him' (18.1-2a). That is how the NRSV has

it. In the Hebrew original the word for 'appeared' in verse 1 is the same verb as the one for 'saw' in verse 2. Thus the Hebrew shows more plainly what is going on: what is actually there in front of Abraham is God himself; what he *sees* is three men. In chapter 17 he knew who he was talking to. Now he does not, and what is more he never penetrates the disguise.

Still finding it hard to break the idol of the righteous Abraham, we may find it hard to see that at points the narrator of Genesis turns him into something of a buffoon. In Egypt, in chapter 12, he wears the dress of a comic character, despite his cruel treatment of Sarah – of course, comic characters are not always nice. He plays the part there of a country bumpkin, who, not reckoning with the possibility of divine intervention, tries to pull a fast one on the sophisticated Egyptians and gets a severe ticking off from the pharaoh for his pains. In chapter 23 he will wear nearly the same costume, and be taken for a very long ride when he buys a burial plot for Sarah from the clever men of Hebron. Now here, in chapter 18, he sits at the entrance of his tent sucking straw and tinkling the bells on his toes.

At first the story proceeds as if it were simply a tale of fine oriental hospitality, and God says and does nothing to suggest that he is not what he seems to be. Abraham greets the 'three men' with the supreme courtesy. He runs to meet them, he bows low to the ground, he addresses one of them as 'My Lord' (there is a marvellous ambiguity and irony about that, of course: he has, by accident, given God the name by which he was most often called!¹⁴), he refers to himself, twice, as their servant, and he entreats them to stop and rest while he fetches them 'a little water' and 'a morsel of bread' – he cannot allow them to think they are causing him any trouble, or that he is blowing the trumpet of his own generosity. Then all is hustle and bustle. He rushes into the tent – one is sorely tempted to say 'the kitchen' – to find Sarah. 'Quick! Three measures of best flour! Knead it and make cakes!' (18.6). There is a delicious but highly disconcerting contrast which is even more obvious in the Hebrew, between the elaborate formality of his earlier courtesy and these curt, breathless orders that he gives to Sarah. This is no way to talk to a princess, even if you do happen to be married to her! Sarah is treated no better than the slave who has to prepare the rest of the meal, and roast the calf that Abraham chooses from his herd. Like the slave, she does not speak, she remains on the outskirts of the action, hidden from the view of the 'men', as etiquette dictates. When the meal begins, and Abraham waits on his guest(s), her vast pile of cakes (the quantity

of flour Abraham ordered her to use was quite enormous!) does not get a mention, only the calf, and the curds and milk that Abraham has himself supplied.

So far, if not entirely good, then fairly unremarkable, except for the size of the meal – a whole calf, as well as all those cakes and the curds and milk – and except, of course, for the fact that we know that the guests are God himself. But then the dialogue suddenly becomes mysterious. 'Where is your wife Sarah?' (18.9). How do 'they' know her name is Sarah? Well, *we* know the answer to that. It does not occur to Abraham to ask! 'There, in the tent,' he says, thinking he is being straightforward. Nor does he fall to wondering why his guest(s) should enquire after his wife. No one in these narratives has asked after her before. Suddenly *we* begin to think that Sarah might not be so much on the edge of this story as we imagined. Does God's question indicate why he has turned up for dinner? Has he really come about Sarah? Is she really at the centre of the story, even though we cannot see her, hidden away as she is in the tent? This God has paid Abraham so much attention. After his fine words of 17.15–16, is he now turning his attention to Sarah? It would seem so, for he responds to Abraham's 'in the tent' by saying: 'I will surely return to you at lifetime,¹⁵ and your wife Sarah shall have a son' (18.10). Who has been making promises of a son to Abraham, but God himself? Who was it who assured him in the previous chapter that Sarah would have a child the following year, if not the same God? Yet still Abraham plays the buffoon. Still the penny refuses to drop. Indeed, the story moves away from Abraham and his reaction; its spotlight swings round, and for the first time its beam catches Sarah.

And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, 'Worn out as I am, shall I have pleasure? And my husband is old!' (18.10b–12)

It is only her third speech since she was first introduced in chapter 11, and it is her most famous. There are a number of things about it for us to notice. First, it would seem that Abraham has not told her the glad tidings that God conveyed to him about her in chapter 17! We may laugh about a lack of communication between the aged husband and his wife, but when we return to seeing things from Sarah's angle, Abraham's silence seems intolerably cruel. She has been waiting for years and years to hear the news that Abraham

was given in chapter 17. Now she has to hear it, quite obviously for the first time, from the lips of 'a stranger'. Indeed, and this is our second point, she has to *overhear* it! That detail of the story, so central to its plot, is of such significance that we need to dwell on it a little.

The etiquette of Sarah's time demands she keep hidden in the tent when her husband entertains 'male' guests. On one level her having to overhear God's promise should not surprise us, however much it might offend our own sensibilities. Yet, as we set the tale in its larger context, we cannot fail to remember how often God appears to or speaks with Abraham, and to notice that he has never yet appeared to or spoken with Sarah. At the very end of this story she will have her one and only dialogue with him. She will say to him what amounts to two words in the Hebrew; he will say just three to her. Why should all this be the case? Why should the narrator have written the story like this? We cannot be sure, for we cannot get inside his mind, or ask him what his reasons were. We can only suppose that we are again witnessing the influence of the priests and the cult of ancient Israel upon the text.¹⁶ Though some women were prophetesses, though some took part in the cult as musicians or occasional composers of sacred music, though the two references we have to women serving at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting (see Exod. 38.8 and 1 Sam. 2.22) may indicate that a few played a far more significant role than they are generally given credit for, the priesthood in Israel was confined to men, and Israel's worship was run almost entirely by them. Within the cult, therefore, the task of mediating between God and his people was done exclusively, or almost exclusively, by men. This may be the reason why a male storyteller – for, as in the case of the Garden story, it is abundantly clear he was male – should describe his God as having so much to do with Abraham and so very little with Sarah. As we shall see in our next chapter, God does appear to and speak directly with Hagar, but on both the occasions when that happens there is no man on the scene. Whatever the reason for the huge imbalance in the story, it is one of its features we need now to find shocking. We need now to shake ourselves free of the influence of the male-dominance of the cult of ancient Israel, and to use these stories of Sarah and Abraham to expose and condemn the prejudices and practices within the contemporary Church and our society that still keep so many women in Sarah's place behind the tent-flaps, in a position of having to overhear.

Third, to return to our comment on Sarah's laughter, we notice that she, too, sees nothing odd about the stranger's knowing her

name, or being able to predict she will have a son. She has her own contribution to make to the comedy of the story. The penny does not drop for her either. But then she is not used to speaking with God and hearing him make such promises. All this is new for her.

Finally, her laughter is every bit as understandable as Abraham's if not more so, but does not approach blasphemy as his did. We now have the additional information, for Sarah herself gives it to us, that she is past the menopause (that is what the text's quaint reference to it having 'ceased to be with' her 'after the manner of women' means), and a broad hint that for her and Abraham sexual intercourse is a thing of the long gone past. That makes the promise of a son even more preposterous. (See how skilfully the narrator prepares the ground, step by step, for the miracle of Isaac's birth!) Of course Sarah laughs, but she, unlike her husband, does not know who she is listening to. She does not mean to mock the promises of God. She does not laugh in his face, or rather hide her laughter at his feet.

Yet, as so many commentators have noticed to Sarah's cost, her laughter meets with divine rebuke. 'No, but your wife Sarah shall bear you a son' was God's response to Abraham's incredulity and his proposing Ishmael as the child of the promises. Abraham's laughter remained unchallenged. With Sarah things are different. 'The Lord said to Abraham, "What's this? Sarah laughed and said 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, a lifetime, and Sarah shall have a son"' (18.13–14). In challenging one and not the other the text is not even-handed. We must not suppose, however, that somehow Sarah's laughter must after all be more reprehensible. Still the narrator does not tell us what to think. Still he leaves us to form our own judgement on the basis of the pointers he has chosen to include. God's response to Sarah here is only one of his pointers. The others we have already discussed, both with regard to this passage and the one in chapter 17, and the conclusions we drew from them need not be altered.

Sarah is, even at this stage, so near to the end of the story, still having to overhear. Her rebuke is not addressed directly to her but to Abraham. God continues to talk with him 'man to man' and has the courtesy (to Abraham, that is, not to Sarah) and the duplicity to alter Sarah's words. He omits any reference to Abraham's lack of sexual prowess and the absence of any sexual relations with his wife. Sarah's 'Worn out as I am, shall I have pleasure? And my husband is old!' is reported to Abraham in the

form, 'What's this? Sarah laughed and said, "Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?"'¹⁷

Yet the rebuke brings Sarah out into the open, and results in the only dialogue with God that she is given in all these many chapters. 'But Sarah lied, saying, "I did not laugh", for she was afraid. And he said, "No, but you did laugh"' (18.15). Sarah's fear is the only clue we are given in the story that she at least has penetrated God's disguise. We might think that the words of God's rebuke gave the game away right enough. But if we are expecting Abraham, to whom the speech was addressed, to fall to the ground in worship, or at the least to start quaking in his sandals, we are disappointed. We are not told of his reaction. The obtuseness he has displayed in the story this far encourages us to think of him as a buffoon to its end (though if he is, he will cease to be one as soon as the next scene begins). Sarah, however, like the man in the Garden, is suddenly afraid; like him, she finds herself in an entirely unfamiliar and most awkward position, yet turns, not to accusing God, as the man did, but to lying. She tries to withdraw her laughter. But God is not having that. The son that is to be born to her will be called Laughter. God cannot withdraw his promise just to save Sarah's blushes. Laughter must be born, will be born. Laughter cannot be denied so easily. 'No, but you did laugh' – and, we might add, 'you will again'.

Unless, of course, Abraham ruins everything. One and a half chapters later, he does his best!

'She is my sister', again!

(*Gen. 20.1-18*)

'While residing as an alien in Gerar [a town in the south of Canaan], Abraham said of his wife Sarah, "She is my sister." And King Abimelech of Gerar sent and took Sarah' (20.1b-2). We might have thought we had come a long way since chapter 12, and yet here we are back almost where we began. In truth things are much worse now, and Abraham's conduct beggars our belief. Though his treatment of Sarah in Egypt was intolerably cruel, though he showed no concern for the future of the promises of God, at least neither he nor we could be certain that Sarah was to be the mother of the child on whose birth so very much depended. It was not clear then quite how much was at stake. But now we know, and so does he. We know, and he knows, not only that Sarah is to have

the child, but that she is to give birth to him next spring. It is almost as if he is doubting his own ability to father the child, and is resurrecting the old ruse to get Sarah impregnated by one of the men of Gerar. If such speculation seems preposterous – and, it is true, it is given no explicit support by the text – then we can claim, in mitigation, to have been driven to it in a desperate attempt to explain Abraham's behaviour. Later in the story, when he is attempting to excuse himself before Abimelech, he will tell him, 'I did it because I thought, "There is no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife"' (20.11). The same old story. If we believe Abraham – and not all commentators do (the narrator typically leaves us free to decide for ourselves) – then once again he is intent only on saving his own skin, and cares nothing for anyone or anything else. Our own 'preposterous' suggestion is almost easier to take than Abraham's own excuse, for at least we allow him some thought for the fulfilment of the purposes of God, and even, in a curious way, for Sarah and the ending of her barrenness.

We were able to claim for the Abraham of the Egypt story that he could be seen as a comic character. Not so in Gerar. For comedy to work, the writer must evoke our sympathy for his or her comic characters. They may be seriously flawed, but they must not be beyond the pale. The narrator of chapter 20 does nothing to encourage us to be sympathetic towards Abraham. Quite bluntly, without any speech, any introduction, any explanation as yet, he says in 20.2, 'Abraham said of his wife Sarah, "She is my sister."' And, as David will one day send for and take Bathsheba, so Abimelech sends for and takes Sarah.

Everything seems to be ruined: Abraham's reputation, and the prospect of a son being born to him and Sarah; the fulfilment of the promises of God, and the development of Sarah in the narrative that has brought her out into the open as a character in her own right. That development, seen in chapters 16 and 18, did not amount to very much, but it was a start. Now she slips back into the shadows, and becomes less discernible than she was when she was cooking or hiding in the tent at Mamre. Again she is allowed no speech. At one point, when Abimelech is defending himself to God, he quotes her, and puts into her mouth what in the Hebrew is two words: 'Did he [Abraham] not himself say to me, "She is my sister"? And she herself said, "He is my brother"' (20.5). Near the end of the story Abimelech, unlike the pharaoh of chapter 12, addresses her: 'Look, I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver; it is your exoneration before all who are with you; you

are completely vindicated' (20.16). We must be grateful for small mercies, but small indeed they are. The first of them shows Sarah joining in Abraham's deceit. We may say she is only obeying orders, and indeed the story makes it quite plain that that is what she is doing. It makes it quite clear, as we see from verse 16, that no blame or guilt belongs to her. Yet that very reassurance is disconcerting. The narrator protests too much. His words remind us of the stereotype of the wicked temptress, the seductress who leads men astray. Subtly they hint that in the depths of our minds Sarah is guilty until she is found innocent. It seems churlish to say it, when the storyteller has gone out of his way to defend Sarah, but it would have been better if he had remained silent, and let the details of his tale speak for themselves. They would have preserved Sarah's innocence well enough, without allowing us to imagine she was in any need of defence.

We have already touched upon some of the similarities between this story and its counterpart in chapter 12, and upon some of the differences. Others are not hard to find. Again God has to intervene, this time much more quickly, in order to ensure that Abimelech does not have sexual intercourse with Sarah and so become by mistake the father of the child of the promises. No sooner has the king sent and taken Sarah, but God appears to him in an alarming dream, telling him she is a married woman. When he protests he took her in all innocence, God readily accepts his defence, but threatens him and the rest of his household with death if he does not return Sarah to her husband forthwith. The next morning he summons Abraham and rebukes him even more severely than the pharaoh did. Abraham seems to have learned nothing from the events in Egypt. He still has no defence to offer, but this time he makes it anyway. Part of it we have discussed already, his fear that the godless men of Gerar would kill him as soon as they saw his wife. (We need to forget for the purposes of this story that, according to its context, Sarah was very nearly ninety years old at the time!) That fear is as groundless as were his fears in Egypt. It insults the men of Gerar, and is nothing more than racial prejudice. Abimelech himself, like the good pharaoh before him, is an honourable and god-fearing man.¹⁸

The rest of Abraham's defence we need to linger on a while, for of all the details of this extraordinary story, it is perhaps the hardest to swallow:

'Besides, she is indeed my sister, the daughter of my father but not the daughter of my mother; and she became my wife.'

And when God caused me to go astray from my father's house, I said to her, 'This is the kindness you must do me: at every place to which we come, say of me, He is my brother.'" (20.12-13)

As we remarked at the start of Sarah's story, we were given no details of her parentage. This is the first we have heard about her being Abraham's half-sister. Is Abraham lying to get out of a tight corner, as Sarah herself did when she denied her laughter? We know from the story of Tamar in 2 Samuel 13, a story we will come to later in this book, that such a marriage as Abraham describes was not forbidden (see 2 Sam 13.13). But do we believe him? If we do, then we must, I think, believe the rest of his speech. We must believe that he is for the first time expressing his true feelings, his resentment about his being called to leave the city of Haran,¹⁹ when he accuses God of causing him to 'go astray' (for that is what the Hebrew means – the verb is the same as the one used, for example, in Isaiah's 'All we like sheep have gone astray'; Isa. 53.6). More importantly, we must believe that he has been playing his cruel game with Sarah over and over again, at 'every place' to which they have been! If we do believe that, then Sarah is surely one of the most abused women in the Bible.

Abimelech responds to these excuses by giving Abraham huge presents! He gives him sheep and oxen, and male and female slaves. Only the donkeys and camels are missing this time, but the king more than compensates Abraham for their absence with that fabulously large heap of silver, and his equally remarkable gift of land. 'My land is before you', he says; 'settle where it pleases you' (20.15). No expulsion this time. The gifts are not given as a bride price either, as they were by the pharaoh. They are given, with astonishing magnanimity as well as stunning generosity, to make amends. They are given to restore Abraham's and Sarah's honour, at least that is how others will understand their purpose.²⁰ They are really gifts for Sarah, at least one of the most valuable of them is: a gift to declare her innocence, a gift to compensate her for the grievous wrong that has been done to her by her husband, and by the unwitting Abimelech when he took her for himself. For the king continues with words we have quoted already, but must now quote again: 'To Sarah he said, "Look, I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver; it is your exoneration before all who are with you"' (20.16). As Claus Westermann comments, 'He hands the money . . . to Abraham because by the rules governing such a society the wife cannot acquire it.'²¹ It remains a present

for Sarah, a gift fit for an abused princess. By calling Abraham her 'brother', he shows, unless of course he is being sarcastic, that he believes the terms of her husband's defence. In that case he believes, presumably, that Sarah has already had to endure the rejection, the humiliation, the danger she has suffered in Gerar in town after town. A large pile of silver can never make up for that, but it is the best this Canaanite king can do. It would put Abraham to very great shame, but he cannot be put to any more than the story has heaped on him already.

If we read this story in the Hebrew, there is one word that sticks in our minds as we leave Gerar behind us. It occurs near the end of Abraham's defence of himself, at the point where he is reporting to Abimelech what he told Sarah to say whenever they came to a new place: 'I said to her, "This is the *kindness* you must do me: at every place to which we come, say of me, He is my brother"' (20.13). The Hebrew term for 'kindness' is *hesed*. It is often used in the Old Testament of relations between human beings, but it is also very commonly applied to God. It is hard to translate, and it is impossible to convey all its nuances in a word or a phrase. It speaks of mercy, kindness, love, fidelity, a love that will persist in the midst of great danger, and in the face of great provocation and rejection. It is often translated 'steadfast love', and when it is used of God it tells of his enduring commitment to his people more powerfully than any other word. With what bitter irony, then, does the narrator of chapter 20 put it on the lips of Abraham, even as he is justifying his rejection of his wife!

And in all this Sarah remains silent, and is allowed to take not a single initiative.

The birth and death of Sarah's joy

(Gen. 21.1-14)

Chapter 20 represents, for Sarah, one of the two lowest points in the narratives in which she appears. The beginning of chapter 21 marks her triumph, and in two verses captures the brief moments of her joy. The passage begins with bare, rather formal, almost cumbersome speech: 'The Lord visited Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised. Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him' (21.1-2). The word we and many of our versions have given as 'visited' also means 'pay attention to', and one is

tempted to translate, 'The Lord paid attention to Sarah'. It is only the second time he has done so, at least openly, above the surface of the text. Beneath it he has rescued her from the clutches (the word is not just being used metaphorically!) of two kings. But only on the occasion of her laughter have we seen him attending to her, instead of dealing with her husband. Her Egyptian slave, Hagar, will receive much more attention from him, as we shall see. Of course, Abraham cannot conceive and bear a child. Whatever we heard when Sarah laughed, that is too wonderful for the Lord! So, at long, long last, it is Sarah's turn. She conceives, and gives birth to a son.

Yet even now the story is being told from Abraham's point of view. Even now she bears *him* a child, and as the passage proceeds with its dry, flat speech, it is he who names the boy, although in early Israel it was more usually the mother who did the naming,²² and it is he who circumcises him on the eighth day, although it is not unknown in the documents for a woman to perform that rite,²³ as we shall see in our fourth chapter. And the narrator reminds us how old Abraham is when Isaac is born; he does not remind us of Sarah's equally remarkable age.²⁴

Yet the balance of the narrative is quickly restored, for it continues with this: 'Now Sarah said, "God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me." And she said, "Who would have ever announced to Abraham, 'Sarah is suckling a child!'? Yet I have borne him a child in his old age!"' (21.6-7). Now the language gets the colour back in its cheeks! These are words to remember Sarah by! They represent only her fifth utterance, and there will be but one more. Alas, that one will be laden with fear and will give vent to bitter ruthlessness. Here there is only joy and surprise and a newborn laughter. We are a world away from the derision of Abraham's laughter in chapter 17, and not much closer to the laughter of Sarah's own disbelief. Here, and here alone, Sarah is fulfilled.

She has brought Laughter into the world (of course, all the talk of laughter is a play on the meaning of Isaac's name). True, she has not escaped the man's world in which she lives. She still recognizes that her purpose is to bear Abraham a son, not to give a child life for the two of them together. She is not there to serve her own needs. She knows that. And yet she cannot contain her joy. Back in chapter 16 it was, 'The Lord has stopped me from bearing children'; now it is, 'God has made laughter for me.' Her new cry echoes the surprised delight of Eve when Cain was born. We have never heard Sarah speak like this before. She has a power

here we are not used to. And this remains true, despite the fact that the final author of the text has almost certainly robbed her of an important function.

We cannot be certain how this story reached its final form. But we can notice how strange it is that the one who 'explains' the name of the child, as Sarah does in verse 6, is different from the one who gives him his name. Invariably in the Old Testament those two functions are performed by the same person. We have already come across an example of it in Eve's naming Seth and then saying, 'God has appointed for me another child instead of Abel.' It looks very much as though in an earlier stage of the tradition it was Sarah who named her son after all²⁵ – as if the male bias of the text were not strong enough already!

Eve's joy, however, was very short-lived, destroyed by terrible conflict. Sarah's meets with a similar, and similarly swift, fate. The rejoicing continues, but only for one more verse.

Isaac grows and is weaned, and Abraham makes a great feast to celebrate the event. Archaeological discoveries at burial sites in Israel have demonstrated what we might have guessed, that infant mortality rates could be appallingly high.²⁶ Children were generally not weaned until they were in their third year, and so the feasting was chiefly to celebrate their surviving the most dangerous period of their lives.

But the relief, the sheer joy of Isaac's feast, quickly evaporates. 'But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, "Isaicing". So she said to Abraham, "Cast out this slave-woman and her son; for the son of this slave-woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac"' (21.9–10). What did Sarah see? We cannot be sure. The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, whose version of Genesis was probably composed in the third century BCE, adds to the end of the first sentence the words, 'with Isaac her son'. That has led most of our versions and commentators to say that what Sarah saw was Ishmael 'playing' with Isaac. If play it was, it may not have been innocent. When Isaac is grown up, Abimelech, the king of Gerar, will see him 'playing with his wife Rebekah' (26.8), and there the context will make it clear that their 'play' is of an overtly sexual nature. But should we follow the Septuagint here? The Hebrew word for 'play' comes from the same root as the name Isaac. When we read the Hebrew of verse 9 aloud, we cannot fail to be struck by the pun. Verse 8 ends in the Hebrew with Isaac's name, *yitzhak*; verse 9 ends with *metzakeq*. One commentator suggests we should translate *metzakeq* as 'Isaicing',²⁷ that is not playing with Isaac, but playing

Isaac. This is Isaac's feast, his big moment. But Ishmael cannot help but seek to attract the attention and the honour of the occasion to himself. He, after all, is the elder of the two boys, and as such can consider himself the rightful inheritor of the bulk of Abraham's land, and of the wealth and fine promises that go with it.²⁸ No one has told him that he is not the heir Abraham and Sarah and God have been waiting for. Only Abraham and God, and we, the readers of the narrative, know that.

We can now more readily understand Sarah's reaction, and why it will meet with divine approval.

Sarah begins with the old jealousies of chapter 16. That story's conflict between her and Hagar was left unresolved. Now the bitterness which has been simmering for these past fourteen years once more breaks out, and is so strong she cannot bring herself to give either Hagar or Ishmael their names. They are simply 'this slave-woman and her son'. Hagar is not even 'my slave-girl', as she was in the earlier story, but Abraham's. And yet, ironically, in her very rejection of Hagar, Sarah assumes her full authority as her mistress, and orders Abraham to get rid of her. In chapter 16 Sarah gave Abraham some plain speaking. But this is the first and only time we see her giving him a command.

Yet chapter 16 is not enough to explain the strength of Sarah's feelings at this point, or the particular reasons for her action. Then Sarah was barren. Now she has a son of her own to defend. She may not know of God's plans for Isaac. God has never communicated them to her, and Abraham, to judge by the evidence of chapter 18, has not been especially forthcoming either. For the same reasons, we can presume she does not understand what God has in mind for Ishmael. All she knows is that Isaac has an elder brother, that he is the son of the Egyptian woman who for so long rubbed salt into the wound of her sterility, and that, if things are left to themselves, he will inherit the bulk of Abraham's wealth and power. Already in Genesis we have seen an elder son kill his brother in the story of Cain and Abel. Later in the book we will witness the threat posed to Jacob by his elder brother Esau; and we will hear much about the attempts to get rid of Joseph by his older brothers. One has to be very careful of older brothers in this book. When Sarah has waited so long for Isaac to be born, when his conception and birth have so far exceeded her expectations and given her such surprising joy, can we ourselves be surprised when she is determined at all costs to defend him from the one who represents such a potent threat? God, as we know, has his own plans for Isaac that must not be put in jeopardy. He has

his own reasons for wanting Ishmael, and Hagar with him, out of the way. Sarah's bitter rejection of them serves him very well. 'Whatever Sarah says to you,' he tells Abraham, 'do as she tells you' (21.12).

Yet while we can explain Sarah's action well enough, we cannot escape its cruelty and its tragedy. 'Cast out this slave-woman . . .', is her last speech. With those words she leaves the narrative, and she only re-enters it to die, and for Abraham to mourn her and weep over her, and find a burial place for her body (ch. 23). Her harsh words remind us of the expulsion from Eden, where the same 'cast out' appeared in the text (3.24). The narrator allows her no chance to redeem herself, no opportunity to make amends.²⁹ There will be no healing of the conflict between her and Hagar as there will be of the one between Jacob and Esau. There will be no time for the kind of reconciliation that will take place so movingly between Joseph and his brothers. In more ways than one this story reminds us of the tale of Cain and Abel.

A deafening silence

(Gen. 22)

We have very nearly finished with Sarah. There is only one more story to be mentioned. It is the most powerful of all those concerning Abraham, and, indeed, one of the most remarkable in all Scripture. We all know how it begins:

After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, 'Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' He said, 'Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you.' (22.1-2)

All we wish to ask is this: where is Sarah?³⁰

God talks of Abraham loving Isaac, but it was Sarah who expressed so much joy at his birth. All along, it has been Sarah whose eyes have been focused on that birth. It was she who suggested the child might be born through Hagar. When God appeared to Abraham in disguise, but came really for Sarah and her sharp ears, all his talk, all Sarah's talk, was about this son. And she it was who perceived so clearly the threat from Ishmael, and was so quick and so determined to protect Isaac from him. God

has now commanded Abraham to take the child who is *her* son also and slit his throat.

And Abraham gets up early in the morning and prepares for the journey to the land of Moriah, and leaves with the fire and the knife and the wood for the burnt offering, and the sacrificial victim, her son. Has he told her where he is going? Has he said anything to her about what he is about to do? Has God made his own attempt to explain things? We do not know. The story does not tell us. Sarah is not even mentioned once from beginning to end. Neither God's previous record of communicating with Sarah, nor Abraham's, would lead us to think she knows anything at all. Though Isaac is saved from death at the last second, it seems from the text that he does not return home with his father.³¹ If Abraham has any explanation to offer Sarah for the boy's absence, we do not hear it. It would seem she never sees him again, for six verses after Abraham's return we learn of her death.

Chapter 22 represents for Abraham the passing of the most severe test that God could set him. On one level it is his moment of greatest triumph, the achievement which above all has contributed to his lasting reputation as a righteous man. For Sarah it is the second of the two lowest points in all the narratives in which she appears.

She does not share in her husband's glory. She has no chance here or anywhere else in her story to prove herself a woman of conspicuous faith and obedience. God has made no demands of *her*, just as he has never given her any promises. In all the chapters we have been looking at, the issue of *her* faith, *her* obedience, *her* righteousness has never once been raised. In these ancestral narratives she is an abused woman, and in the end, after an all too brief moment of joy, a wholly tragic character.