



Introduction

The Holy Bible has quite a number of female figures who have contributed to the making of human history, and played a role in the plan of God's salvation for

mankind. However, none of them was up to the title of "matriarch". Like her husband, the patriarch of patriarchs, Sara, though no explicit mention of her name, was the first woman in the genealogy of our Lord Jesus Christ (Mathew 1:1). Sara, a woman of good looks and character manifest in her faith, faithfulness, determinedness, problem solving, reliance on God and many other attributes, is the subject of this article.

Sarai in History

The Old Testament story of the beautiful woman Sarai begins with her marriage to Abram; when he and his brother Nahor both "took wives". Sarai was married to Abram in the region of Ur of the Chaldees, commonly recognized as Southern Iraq today. According to the Holy Bible, the story of Sarah took place during the staunch patriarchal times, when women were generally oppressed and their needs often disregarded. In the days prior to the Mosaic Law, marriage was mainly for convenience

and reproduction; often taking place between family close relatives; a thing permitted by law and tradition, during the patriarchal times.

Sarai and Barrenness

The immediate and striking news following Sara's having been "*taken as a wife*" (Genesis 11:29); is the Old Testament account of one of the most intimate and private husband-wife experiences. "*Sarai was barren; she had no children*" (Genesis 11:30). Sara's fertility; a meaningful measure of a fruitful, successful marriage, questioned, had become a predominant focus on her family life and subsequently a sore point.

Sarai and Tradition

Offspring, especially male, were regarded essential for the sake of lineage continuity; as well as an outward manifestation of, and reward for living an obedient godly life. Generally speaking, throughout the Hebrew history, women who could not bear children "for their husbands" were considered within their community as either forgotten or frowned upon by God for some untoward deed in their life.

Traditionally, along with marrying close relatives, having another woman conceive for a barren one, was perhaps one of the traditions the Israelites acclimated to from the surrounding nomadic

cultures and idolaters, while on their way to Canaan. After all, surrounding environment did influence culture as proved in the Sodom and Gomorrah catastrophe resulting in Lot's wife becoming a pillar of salt. Further back in retrospect, prior to Abram and Sarai, Noah had one wife and three sons (each had one wife only) aboard the Ark.

Sarai and Hope

Sarai was not to bear children the first ninety years of her life. Much speculation must have gone quietly through their community as to why she could not provide Abram with a child. Yet, Sarai was not depressed or incapacitated. She did not clothe herself in black, whine to Abram in tears each day, nor revert to idol worship forsaking God. Her strength of character is unspoken; and the reader of the Holy Bible story is very much aware that Sarai is not the typical wife. We can assume that, like any woman with maternal instinct, she desired to bear children. We can also assume that was Abram's desire as well. In fact, God had already repeatedly promised to make Abram and Sarai "*into a great nation*" (Genesis 12:2).

Sarai and Problem Solving

By the time Sarai had reached her mid-seventies; she surmised that she would never bear a child. She then

made a decision that was to affect her rights and privileges in her married life. Having been instructed by his wife to "use" her servant Hagar (an Egyptian not a Jew), to bear him a child, Abraham went ahead and did as was told.

Scholars believe this to be an accepted practice in ancient Israel history noting the absolute necessity for continuing the family lineage. In forethought, certainly an Egyptian would most probably not be a threat to Sarai's standing as Abram's wife, her position in the family, and her Jewish descent. Although Sarai's decision denotes weakness in her faith; yet, it reveals her genuine concern over the existing problem and hence her daring, courageous spirit in taking desperate measures, most probably against her innermost desire, just for the sake of providing a way out. Out of love for her husband, she wanted to ensure Abram of descendents. She did not lie down and give up to depression or to her age; nor did she murmur or despair. Sarai took a step and action.

Sari and Determinedness

In spite of some scholars' dispute over Sarai's "hasty" action as having subsequently incurred discontent with her choices; yet waiting for sixty or seventy years to bear a child is certainly patient enough; thus making endurance a strong attribute in her

character. Certainly, in God's sight, what Sara lacked at that point was not so much forbearing with her circumstances as much as trust in Him.

Sarai's suggestion and Abraham's subsequent concession certainly leave the ground open for constructing the blueprint of Sarai's character. Having her own maid and property as a surrogate mother to bear a child by her husband would challenge both fortitude as well as dogged determination. Yet she went ahead and saw to it that her husband carried it out.

Sarai and the Ego

As soon as Hagar got pregnant by Abram; "*her mistress became despised in her eyes*" (Genesis 16:4). It infuriated Sarai to see her slave exhibit such a demeaning behavior. "*The Lord judge between you and me*" (Genesis 16:5) were her words to Abraham. Why was Hagar's behavior so upsetting to Sarai whom we know to be patient, strong and proactive? Perhaps, the here-and-then confirmation of Abraham's fertility and hence the ultimate conclusion of her being otherwise, had now been pronounced clearly and publicly. Perhaps, Hagar's loyalty to Sarai had long been questioned; given the signs of her disdain. Hagar was Sarai's personal handmaiden and therefore most probably had

known what bearing a child from her own womb would mean to Sarai.

Abraham's response to Sarai's outburst was in her favor. It is apparent that he had no great sympathy, nor did he try to understand the feelings of the one who was to bear his first born son. Could Abram have simply seen Hagar as a handmaiden service provider? Abram reminded Sarai that she had the right to discipline Hagar as she saw fit according to the custom of the day. Sarai dealt harshly with Hagar, so harshly that Hagar ran away and only the Angel of the Lord could return her to Abraham's camp where she bore Ishmael. This certainly reveals the suppressed feelings Sarai must have concealed within herself regarding her inability to bear children.

Sarah and Calamities

Two important, focal events occurred during Sarai's traveling with her husband Abram to Canaan; highlighting God's graciousness and mercy upon her as well as her integrity, faith and longsuffering. Both incidents revolve around Abraham's concealing her true relationship to him as his wife, revealing only her blood kinship to him. Such half truths had put her safety on the line right away; making her life vulnerable to suffering dire consequences. However, God intervened on her behalf at the right time. The

first intervention by God on Sarai's behalf occurred in Egypt when Pharaoh desired to take Sara. God inflicted Pharaoh's household with plague and disease; inevitably revealing the true nature of Abram and Sarai's marital relationship. Thus was Sarah rescued from Pharaoh's lustful desire for her. Pharaoh ended up sending them away freely.

The second incident of God's gracious intervention occurred when Abraham again denied his marital bond to Sarah before King Abimelech for fear of death and of Sarah's abduction because of her beauty. God intervened, revealing to the king Abram's true status as God's prophet. Promising that Abraham would pray for him, his wife and his female servants to bear children; God ordered the king to release Abram and Sarah. Evidently, "the Lord had closed up all the wombs of the house of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife." After relenting, the king released the two. Thus Sarah escaped adultery through God's continuing care for her.

Sarah and Faith

After witnessing God's past overt protection over her, and His timely intervention to deliver and save her from adultery and harm; one would wonder why Sarah laughed in disbelief after she had been told the good news of conceiving within a year from that time. Had she forgotten God's intervention on

her behalf? Nevertheless, her laughter can be interpreted in her favor. It could be that her laughter sprang from her practicality and down-to-earth view of things. The Holy Bible tells us, "*Now Abraham and Sarah were old, well advanced in age; and Sarah had passed the age of childbearing. Therefore Sarah laughed within herself saying, 'After I have grown old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?'*" (Genesis 18:11-12).

If the Holy Bible itself states that Sarah had passed the age of childbearing; she too might have conformed to this fact as well; with her laughter being a reflexive response rather than one of sarcasm. Indeed, when confronted, she denied having laughed thus proving her eagerness to see the three men's prophecy come true. An argument in her favor is that Sarah had never seen the three men before; naturally she found it difficult to take strangers at their word. Also, evidently, Sarai did not intend for the male visitors to hear her laughter, nor realize she was eavesdropping upon their conversation. After all, eavesdropping, springing from her naturally curious human nature was not the best thing to do. After they had acknowledged her laughter; she might have feared having been heard. We are not told that Abram heard her laughter.

At the threshold of her nineties, Sarai was told that within one year she would have a child. Ishmael was a teenager when Sarah gave birth to Isaac; and so a whole nation was thus begotten. He grew up and befriended his older brother Ishmael, Hagar's son. When Isaac was three, Sarah discovered Ishmael teasing his half brother, Isaac. This ignited Sarah's rage bringing about unjustifiable consequences disproportionate to the deed done. Also, Hagar's disdain might have brought forth the suppressed feelings Sarah must have harbored for some time. In anger, Sarah urged Abraham to send Hagar and her son to the desert, though legally Ishmael was Sarah's child, yet, she did not develop maternal instincts toward him. In fact the opposite must have occurred.

Sarah and Dominance

Abraham was not certain that driving Hagar away with his son was the right thing to do; because he cared for Ishmael, his first son; and because he, by law, was required to divide his inheritance among all his acknowledged children. However, Sarah was determined to secure Abraham's inheritance to the son she had born; convinced that she was only instrumental in the conception of Ishmael. God intervened again on behalf of Sarah instructing Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away. Abraham, though displeased with the request, listened to what

Sarah had to say; keeping to himself the need to obey the Word of God first and foremost. The Holy Bible did not record any dispute over supremacy, threats, bad language, neither mild nor detrimental between the husband and wife. It was understood and taken for granted that the final action was Abraham's. Thus Ishmael was sent away.

Sara and Wifehood

- *Love*

Abraham, with all the riches that had made answerable all his heart's desires; loved his wife Sarai so wholly that he did not recognize any women for any function other than that they had been owned or hired for. We can surmise the fortitude of the love bond between Abraham and Sarah through which Abraham listened to his wife. With all his wealth and possessions, Abraham loved only one woman, Sarah, while she was alive. He considered her wants and desires and usually succumbed to them if they did not challenge his sense of right and wrong with no explicit nor implicit male chauvinism.

Unusual for the age Sarah had lived in; she felt free to express her feelings to her husband without fear of repercussions, even through some unprecedented actions. Her strength of

character was evident at times while at others it was not. Sometimes she insisted upon her way without much contemplating the consequences of her actions and how they would affect those subservient to her. Her humanness and certainly her weaknesses were on display most of her adult life. However, she would not allow them to cripple her; nor would she use them as excuses. Rather she carried on with her life, frank with her feelings, trying to compensate for her weakness, by putting her husband and her son before all earthly concerns.

- *Submission*

Sarah worshipped God without interfering with her husband's relationship with the Almighty. She willingly took command from her husband concerning food preparation for the visiting three men and with immediate compliance. She called her husband "lord" with a personally affable sense known only to both. Her fortitude, personality and character play a more distinct and prominent role in her life than did her beauty which remained with her even through her old age. Abraham must have considered the strength found with Sarah appealing; or else, according to the law and custom of the day, he

could have simply set her aside because of her barrenness.

- *Obedience*

While outwardly, strong Sarah was inwardly soft-hearted and obedient to her husband. St. Peter addresses Sarah's obedience to her husband which may have fortified and consolidated their marriage, "*Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord, whose daughters you are if you do good and are not afraid with any terror*" (I Peter 3:6). The magnitude of Sarah's natural intrinsic strength of character extended to cover her both inwardly and outwardly. She was equally strong in her obedience to her husband as she was in her order to him to send Hagar away. She followed Abram from Ur to the land that God was to show him without fear or misgiving. When Abram identified her as his sister, she did not contradict nor correct him. There is no documentation that she ever publicly confronted her husband with disapproval of a deed he had done. These are the concrete evidences of Sarah's obedience to and respect for Abraham. Anyone who wonders what and where is the secret behind this successful married life, should come to realize that it lies within this miraculous, yet essential capacity of

"understanding" each other. This "understanding" of one another is essential for a marriage to succeed and flourish.

- *Selflessness*

Abraham's life and relation with God was not deterred by his wife's actions. He understood Sarah and her needs, although sometimes unjustifiable. Sarah understood his needs as they related to serving God. God intervened in this harmonious marriage; turning around tests into testimonies in the course of their married life. Although Sarah is recorded as a woman of good looks; unlike women of all ages, she never boasted about it nor used it as a tool to hurt others' feelings. On the contrary, her willingness to allow her maid to bear a child by her husband and have another woman's features printed on that child was definitely a sign of great selflessness and forthcoming. As a result of this selflessness, God protected Sarah's beauty from defile or malice, especially when it appealed to the Egyptians and their king.

Sarah's submission to her husband is clearly seen at the encounter with Pharaoh. Although she was in a position to defend herself overtly by duly contradicting her husband then and there thus revealing her true identity as Abraham's

wife; yet the Holy Bible has not recorded any response from her. In faith, she kept silent allowing God to run the course of actions. Such is the behavior of a woman who does not seek her own wisdom or understanding but that of God.

Trial and Reward

Always trusting God's mercy and deliverance from evil and pain, as well as the inherent quality of mutual understanding that belonged to both spouses right from the inception of their marriage, served to increase Abraham's faith and devotion to the Lord and prepared him for the test God would later call upon him to take, that of offering his son Isaac a sacrifice. Certainly such mutual respect and understanding within a marriage will always stand the test of time. Abraham remained faithful to Sarah till she died; at a time in history when such performance was the exception, not the standard. He desired only one woman and that was his beloved wife, at a time when marriage could easily be mingled with concubines and sons of concubines. We do not read in the Holy Bible that Abraham came up, nor even insinuated taking another woman for the sake of bearing him children. Although Sarai's barrenness was a reason, strong and acceptable enough for Abraham to set her aside; he did not even

threaten to do so; nor did he ever treat her with disdain or disrespect although this was not totally untoward for barren wives during that era. It gradually becomes apparent that Abram had been content in his marriage and loved his wife dearly.

Conclusion

While many marriages cannot overcome the smallest of hurdles, Abraham and Sarah's marriage survived the most difficult of challenges, both traditionally and culturally. They not only survived; but thrived and grew in respect and love one for the other. Their marriage is not only an example of mutual love and respect, but one out of which unsurpassed blessings sprang because of their union and oneness of heart.

It can thus be concluded that Sarah's strength of character sprang from her readiness to face circumstances honestly and proactively with a serving but not subservient readiness, firmly but not stubbornly. That is perhaps why God was on her favor and showered her with his blessings. Sarah lived happily to the age of one hundred and twenty-seven years. After death, she was buried in the Machpelah cave near Hebron which Abraham had purchased especially as her resting place. In the genealogy of Abraham came forth the great prophet and King David, and the paramount of blessings, the Lord Jesus Christ.

May we all learn from the character of the woman and matriarch whom God so abundantly blessed; that through her strength she became the mother of nations, brought forth of her aged womb kings and patriarchs; and whose namesake is still carried by so many saints at all generations.

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