

WHAT SARAH SAW: ENVISIONING GENESIS 21:9-10

DAVID J. ZUCKER

Sarah saw . . . [Ishmael] metzahek She said to Abraham, 'Get rid of that slave-woman and her child' (Gen. 21:9-10). Sarah sees her husband's son Ishmael "laughing" or "playing." (The Hebrew word metzahek, has multiple meanings.) Sarah goes to Abraham and demands that he 'get rid of that slave-woman and her child.' This is a major turning point in Sarah's life. She is about to create havoc in Abraham's household.

Taking the text at face value, just what did Sarah see? What provokes this reaction on her part? The Masoretic text simply says that Ishmael is laughing/playing; the Septuagint, and some Christian translations add the words "with her son Isaac." Sarah seems to assume that Ishmael is interacting with (or, perhaps, reacting to) her own son Isaac. Yet, in this context it is not at all clear that Isaac is present, or that the laughter/playing actually is directed at – or about – him.

This brief episode has much greater meaning to her than just a chance encounter. Apparently, she sees something threatening – to her? to Isaac? to her connections with Isaac? to the whole wider family relationship? – and consequently she is willing to risk a serious confrontation with her husband Abraham to assuage her concerns. Sarah is so infuriated that she cannot even bring herself to mention the names of Hagar and Ishmael. Instead, she labels them as objects: *that slave-woman and her child*. The reason she gives for her demand centers on the question of inheritance. She says specifically that *'the child of that slave-woman will not inherit along with my son Isaac'* (21:10).

THE BACKGROUND

The issue is more complicated than merely a question of inheritance. The very presence of those two people is abhorrent to Sarah. She does not seem to ask that the *child of the slave-woman* be totally disinherited. She is, however,

David J. Zucker, PhD is Rabbi/Chaplain at Shalom Park, Aurora, Colorado, a continuum of care/retirement center. He is the author of Israel's Prophets: An Introduction for Christians and Jews (Paulist, 1994), and American Rabbis: Facts and Fiction (Jason Aronson, 1998). His latest book is The Torah: An Introduction for Christians and Jews (Paulist, 2005).

adamant that the slave-woman's child is not going to live alongside her son Isaac. She is insistent that he and his mother be sent away, far from Abraham's encampment. A probable destination is Beer-lahai-roi, where years before Hagar had found refuge when she had run away (Ch. 16).

Earlier, God explained to Abraham that while the *everlasting covenant* will be through *Isaac and . . . for his offspring after him*, yet Ishmael will also know God's blessings. Ishmael will be fertile and exceedingly numerous, the father of 12 chieftains, '*but My Covenant I will establish with Isaac*' (17:19-21). Sarah does not challenge God's promise concerning Ishmael's future. She simply wants Hagar and Ishmael out of sight and out of mind.

SARAH IS A COMPLICATED CHARACTER

Tradition describes Sarah as the mother of the Israelite people, a priestess, a princess, and the heroine of the Book of Genesis. She is revered by the writers of midrashim, described as possessing a timeless beauty, a generous soul, and oftentimes as the personification of kindness. Twenty-two biblical women are worthy of the term "woman of valor," and among them Sarah is the greatest.¹

Yet, Sarah also is a complicated character who has to face some difficult choices that at times compromised her moral integrity, and forced her into a different identity. Twice in her life, as recorded in Genesis 12 and 20, she had – or chose – to agree to pretend that she is not the personage she truly is. In those instances, she acquiesced to being presented as Abraham's sister, and not as his lawful wife.²

In addition, Sarah had to come to terms with what appeared to be her inability to produce an heir for Abraham, probably the ultimate failure for a woman of the time. Niditch states:

Surrogate motherhood allowed a barren woman to regularize her status in a world in which children were a woman's status and in which childlessness was regarded as a virtual sign of divine disfavor (see [Genesis] 16:2; 30:1-2; . . . 38). Childless wives were humiliated and taunted by co-wives.³

One can imagine further that Sarah was mortified, for custom required that she offer Abraham her very own maidservant as a surrogate womb (Ch. 16).⁴

BARREN SARAH-MOTHER SARAH

Sarah is first mentioned in Genesis 11 by her earlier name of Sarai, the wife of Abram. Just as Abram will be renamed Abraham, so Sarai will be renamed Sarah (Ch. 17). When Sarai/Sarah first appears on the scene, in addition to the reader being told that she is Abram/Abraham's wife, the text further explains *now Sarai was barren, she had no child* (11:30). This information becomes vitally important, for early on in the next chapter, Abraham is told by God to go to a new land, a land where God *will make of [him] a great nation*. Further, God will promise that his offspring will inherit that land. Additionally, Abraham's descendants will be as the dust of the earth, too numerous to be counted. Since only Sarah is linked with Abraham, the clear inference of these statements is that Sarah should/would be the mother of this multitude.

Finally, late in life, Sarah's patience and perseverance is rewarded. Sarah does give birth, and in joy she exclaims *'God has brought me laughter; everyone who hears will laugh with me'* (21.7). Sarah's laughter at this point, and her suggestion that others will also laugh, as well as her earlier laughter-of-incredulity (18:12) are all linked word-plays on the name of her son. Isaac [Hebrew *Yitzhak*] is itself based on the word "laughter." One can suppose that Isaac's name is linked to Sarah's laughter, a symbol of her heartfelt joy.

About three years pass⁵ and it is time to wean Isaac. Abraham arranges a feast to celebrate the boy's reaching this important juncture in his life. Either at that event or at some later time, Sarah sees Ishmael, now 16 or 17 years old, "laughing" or "playing" [*metzahek*] and she takes instant umbrage. Immediately she says to Abraham: *'Get rid of that slave-woman and her child, for the child of that slave-woman must not inherit along with my son Isaac'* (21:10).

SARAH'S RESPONSE: MULTIPLE ANSWERS

What did Sarah see? What occasions her reaction? What has happened that Sarah's laughter turns to such bitterness?

A. Ishmael as Other

In the biblical world, all non-Israelite people are often understood to be the Other, and at times portrayed in a negative light. Sarah thinks of Ishmael as

Other, and more specifically as Egyptian, the son of Hagar the Egyptian. Indeed, throughout the Bible, Egypt and Egyptians are a source of danger and threat to the Israelite community.

Sarah has very bitter memories of Egypt where, to protect Abraham's life, she was taken into the Pharaoh's harem. Only through Divine intervention was she spared further physical and sexual humiliation, for God *afflicted Pharaoh and his household with mighty plagues on account* [of Sarah] (12:17). Sarna suggests that the verb "afflicted" also can mean sexual harassment, and midrashic literature is quite explicit about the dangers she had to face in Egypt.⁶

Were that not enough reason to despise Egyptians, to add insult to injury, Hagar herself is an ongoing and constant reminder of what Sarah had to suffer, for according to the rabbis, Hagar is none other than Pharaoh's own daughter!⁷

B. Sexual Encounters

Are there other explanations for Sarah having such a visceral reaction to Ishmael playing/laughing at or near the time of Isaac's weaning?

The most controversial explanation is pederasty or pedophilia, namely that Ishmael was sexually molesting his younger brother. The exact same word *metzahek* is found in Genesis 26:8 when Isaac and Rebekah are in the Philistine town of Gerar. This is the third of the so-called wife/sister episodes described in Genesis. The first two revolved around Abraham and Sarah (Ch. 12, 20); this occurrence involves the next generation. Isaac and Rebekah have pretended to be brother and sister. At one point Abimelech, the ruler of Gerar, looks through some latticework and sees Isaac *metzahek* with Rebekah, more than laughing and playing. It is a sexual encounter. Isaac is fondling Rebekah, so Abimelech concludes that they are husband and wife, not siblings.

Can this be what Sarah saw? She might have seen that the older half-brother by the hated Hagar, was sexually molesting her son Isaac.⁸ If so, then her visceral reaction is understandable.

It is possible that such an explanation – homosexual fondling – could be challenged by the notion that Ishmael will marry, and produce many children of his own (21:13; 25:12-17; 28:9). A more benign explanation is also possi-

ble. At the time of Isaac's weaning, Ishmael is a teenager. At this period in his life, it is normal to engage in some kind of sexual exploration. This could include same gender sexual encounters. Not having previously had children, and certainly not sons, Sarah might well have been totally unaware that this kind of behavior is well within the norms of adolescent growth and development.

C. Ishmael: Too Great an Influence

Perhaps a simpler more literal explanation is correct. It is likely that the two boys are only laughing or playing together. Ishmael is 14 or 15 years older than Isaac. According to the account in Genesis, Abraham was 86 when Ishmael was born and 100 when Isaac was born. Perhaps Ishmael, who later will earn renown as an archer, was showing Isaac how to shoot a bow and arrow, demonstrating his own expertise before his younger sibling. In its context the Isaac-Ishmael episode in Genesis 21:9 could well be understood as Ishmael amusing (baby-sitting?) his younger brother.⁹

If Sarah sees Isaac admires his older sibling, this is just what would frighten her so much. Not that Ishmael is a physical threat to Isaac; quite the contrary, he is too much of an influence upon her son both psychologically and emotionally. Sarah would worry lest Isaac fall under undue influence of his brother.¹⁰

Sarah and Abraham are older parents. How many years can they have before them? Hagar and Ishmael are much younger; they probably will outlive Abraham and Sarah. Sarah is concerned that Isaac will become "Egyptianized" and reject the cultural norms of his Mesopotamian-oriented parents, or that he will adopt the polytheistic religious ideas of Hagar-Ishmael in place of the monotheistic ideas of Abraham-Sarah.¹¹ Sarah's active intervention, which forces Ishmael-Hagar into exile, allows Isaac the opportunity to forge a relationship with Abraham's God.

Sarah's fears concerning the religio/cultural influence of the Other is well founded. The Torah, as well as later Israelite history, is replete with examples of how the community time and again was seduced by alien cultures. In the next generation, Esau upsets his parents when he marries foreign wives (26:34-35).¹²

SARAH TRIUMPHANT AND HER LEGACY

So what did Sarah see? What is – or are – the correct interpretation(s) of that crucial verb *metzahek* in Genesis 21:9, when *Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had born to Abraham, metzahek . . . ?*

No matter which answer given, from Ishmael-as-physical-threat-to-Isaac, or Ishmael-as-too-great-an-influence-on-Isaac, it appears that Sarah has legitimate concerns. In some fashion, Ishmael poses a threat to the future she envisions for her son Isaac. In addition, taking the text at its face value,¹³ Sarah sees Ishmael and his relationship to Isaac as a personal threat to her authority. To protect her interests, she opts for drastic action. She knows instinctively that the only way Isaac will come into his own will be if he is separated from Ishmael and Hagar. Sarah wants Isaac to grow up under her aegis, her influence, not that of her rival. In her anger and anxiety she wreaks havoc and Hagar and Ishmael are sent away. Though her demand troubles Abraham, he defers to her wishes. In this showdown, God backs Sarah and Sarah's actions/reactions (21:12). Consequently, Abraham ends up betraying his relationship with his son Ishmael.¹⁴

God's intervention leaves Isaac as sole son at home. At this point, his future seems assured. Sarah would be pleased; she would have reason to laugh.¹⁵

Some unexpected ironies result from Sarah's exile of Hagar and Ishmael. They follow the laws of unintended consequences. Isaac will now pattern his life on the one significant male figure he knows best: his father Abraham. Isaac will follow in the manner of his father, repeating many of the same episodes. In his time, Isaac will also listen carefully to the words of his wife, he will favor one son over the other, he too will send a son away though in this case for Jacob's own protection (Ch. 27).

As Isaac comes into his own, so does Ishmael. Away from his father's tether, Ishmael makes his own life and, as Scripture attests, he becomes the father of a great nation (21:13; 25:12-17; 28:9), even though he is not to be the major "designated heir."

There is one final irony. Apparently, despite all, the two brothers do keep in touch with one another, for they are both present to bury Abraham (25:9).

AFTERMATH

Was Ishmael amusing or abusing his younger brother? Was he laughing at Isaac's expense? Traditional rabbinic sources such as the Midrash and Tosefta are only too ready to point out that Sarah saw or intuited that Ishmael would become a thorough scoundrel. In later rabbinic views, he is accused of idolatry, rape, seduction, and attempted murder.¹⁶ This biblical and later rabbinic antipathy toward Ishmael reflects the *real-politik* tensions between Israel and its neighbors. Ishmael becomes synonymous with various Semitic and/or Arab tribes with whom Israel is in competition. One biblical historian summarizes:

The ancient Israelites were keenly aware of their geographic, linguistic and cultural kinship with Arab peoples The striking biblical consciousness of affinity between Israelites and Arabs is tempered, however, by its attempt to maintain a separation Peoples with Arabic names . . . continued to interact with the Israelites, although they are inevitably portrayed with little love lost Jewish relations with Arabs continued during the Hellenistic and Roman periods Arabs continue to be mentioned in the Talmud where they are sometimes referred to as Ishmaelites.¹⁷

Following the birth of Islam, Ishmael became a code word for Islam. The *Pirque De Rabbi Eliezer*, composed in the land of Israel circa 725 CE, during the closing days of the Omayyad dynasty, even contains Arab legends. For example, in Chapter 30, Abraham's son Ishmael is featured as having two wives whose names are respectively Ayesha and Fatima. Ayesha is one of the wives of Mohammed, who will live more than two millennia later. Fatima is Mohammed's daughter. These are not coincidental references.

Later territorial disputes between Israel and Arabs, or, in the case of Islam, territorial and religious disputes, are retrojected to the time of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs in Genesis so that it appears that Isaac and Ishmael had a long-standing history of conflict.¹⁸

Not surprisingly, Islamic tradition has a very different reading of the events pictured in Genesis 21:9.¹⁹

NOTES

1. See W. G. Plaut, Ed., *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981) p. 159. See also J. T. Townsend, *Midrash Tanhuma*, (S. Buber Recension) (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1989) Vol. 1, 5.3 (Hayye Sarah), Genesis 24:1 ff. Part III, where it is suggested that the valorous woman described in Proverbs 31 was the eulogy delivered by Abraham about Sarah.
2. These episodes (and a parallel episode in Genesis 26, involving Isaac and Rebekah) have been termed the "Wife-Sister" motif. While E. A. Speiser, *Genesis/Anchor Bible Series* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964) p. 91ff, suggests connections with Nuzi documents, that view has been challenged. See S. Greengus, "Sisterhood Adoption at Nuzi and the 'Wife-Sister' in Genesis," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 46 (1975). According to Genesis 20:12, Abraham and Sarah did share the same father, but not the same mother. This is not a relevant issue for this article.
3. S. Niditch, "Genesis," in C. A. Newsom and S. H. Ringe, Eds, *The Woman's Bible Commentary* (London: SPCK; Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1992) p. 17.
4. For the cultural context of this legalized surrogate motherhood, see N. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989) comment to verse 2, p. 119; Speiser, p. 120.
5. Sarna, p. 146.
6. Sarna, p. 97; *Midrash Genesis Rabbah* 41.2; *Midrash Tanhuma*, Vol. 1, 3.8.
7. *Midrash Genesis Rabbah* 45.1.
8. That such an explanation does not appear in the midrashic literature may be explained by the fact that while the rabbis might have suggested this wanton behavior, following the rise of Islam it was clearly politically too dangerous a judgment to make about Ishmael - the link to Islam. Any such existing midrashim were simply excised from the midrashic collections.
9. Ishmael's "'playing' with Isaac need mean no more than the older boy was trying to amuse his little brother. There is nothing in the text to suggest he was abusing him." Speiser, p. 155. In Genesis 19:14 the same verb "*metzahek*" has the sense of "jesting" or "kidding" someone. It is a very flexible verb.
10. Referring to Hafetz Hayyim, D. Lieber suggests that "Sarah fears that the danger of Ishmael corrupting his younger brother is greater than the prospect of Isaac being a good influence on Ishmael." D. L. Lieber, Ed., *Etz Hayim* (New York: The Rabbinical Assembly, the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, 2001, comment on Gen. 21:9) p. 114.
11. "What the text implies is that Hagar was bringing up her son Ishmael in a traditional Egyptian way, and this was not the influence Sarah wanted around Isaac." S. J. Teubal, *Sarah the Priestess: The First Matriarch of Genesis* (Athens: Swallow/Ohio University, 1984) p. 40.
12. Later in the biblical narrative, Numbers 25:1ff. recounts the troubles at Shittim, where Phinehas took precipitous action to curb foreign practices. Deuteronomy 12:2 ff. makes it clear that when the Israelites will enter the Promised Land that they are to eradicate idolatry, root and branch. The prophets, time and again, inveigh against syncretistic practices among the people.
13. Yet perhaps the text should not be taken at its face value. Sarah may have very different reasons for arranging Hagar and Ishmael to relocate. I explore this in a different article, "The Mysterious Disappearance of Sarah" (forthcoming.)
14. See D.J. Zucker, "Betrayal (and Growth) in Genesis 22" *CCAR Journal*, Spring, 46:2 (1999).

15. That laughter, however, shall soon appear hollow, since before too long God will appear to betray the Divine promise by initiating the Akedah. God will come to Abraham and say, *'Take your son . . . Isaac . . . and offer him as a sacrifice on a mountain which I will show you'* (Gen. 22:2).
16. *Pirke De Rabbi Eliezer*, G. Friedlander, Ed. (New York: Sepher-Hermon, 1981) Chapter 30; *Midrash Genesis Rabbah* 53.11. See also *Midrash Exodus Rabbah* 1.1; *Tosefta Sotah* 6.6, among other sources. The Christian Scriptures also carry forth the notion that Ishmael persecuted Isaac. See Galatians 4:21-5:1, and specifically, vs. 29.
17. R. Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990) pp. 3 f. For an example of Arabs-as-Ishmaelites portrayed in a negative light, see *Midrash Lamentations Rabbah* 2.2.4. Egyptians and Ishmaelites are both denigrated in *Midrash Esther Rabbah* 1.17.
18. Date of *Pirke De Rabbi Eliezer*, see D. Sperber, "Pirquei De-Rabbi Eli'ezer" in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*, eds. R. J. Z. Werblowsky and G. Wigoder (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) p. 534. For a discussion about the artificiality of this "conflict" between Isaac and Ishmael, see D. J. Zucker, "Conflicting Conclusions: The Hatred of Isaac and Ishmael," in *Judaism* 39.1 (Winter 1990).
19. Al-Tha'labi (d. 1036 CE) interprets the events of Genesis 21 on the authority of several sources, where Ishmael and Isaac compete in the presence of Abraham and Ishmael wins. Abraham then suggests that Ishmael should be the primary inheritor. Sarah is furious at this turn of events and when she sees the two boys fighting "with one another as young boys tend to do . . . Sarah got angry with Hagar and said, 'You will not live with me in the same place!' She commanded Abraham to dismiss Hagar. God then gave Abraham a revelation that he bring Hagar and her son to Mecca.' Firestone, p. 67.



INSTRUCTIONS FOR AUTHORS

**Detailed *Instructions for Authors* and journal style
can be found on our Internet website:**

<http://www.jewishbible.org>



**WE WELCOME ARTICLES ON THE FOLLOWING BOOKS
OF TANAKH: KINGS, ISAIAH, JEREMIAH, MICAH, AMOS,
JOEL, HAGGAI, HABAKKUK, PSALMS, PROVERBS,
CHRONICLES**

