

The first description that we hear about a character in the Old Testament, and the first words that we hear them speak, are crucial clues to their personality and their concerns. The first words we hear concerning Sarai, the wife of Abram tell us that she is barren; she bore no children. We hear this even before we have been introduced to Abram. Having children was what gave meaning to a woman's existence for much of history. Children were essential as heirs, for the only sense of a life beyond this life was in living in your children and their descendants; as workers in the family business, and as carers in the old age of their parents. A childless woman was a woman unfulfilled, shamed, pitiful. Abram receives a promise of God that his descendants will be as many as the stars in the heavens, but how will this be? This is the central question in Abram's story. Sarai is the stumbling block to God's plan being fulfilled.

The first words we hear Sarai speak are not pleasant. Despite her faith that is acclaimed in our second reading today, Sarai lost trust in God's promise and took the matter of children into her own hands. In the knowledge that she could not produce a child she suggested to her husband that he should use her Egyptian maidservant as a surrogate. Haggai would bear a child for them. We know from archaeological discoveries that this was accepted practice. Haggai duly becomes pregnant; and the maid mocks her mistress. Sarai demands that Abram throw her out. And he does. Only God's angelic intervention saves the girl and the child she carries.

Now renamed Sarah, she laughs when God announces to Abraham that she will be nursing her own baby within a year; and then denies laughing. It is an understandable reaction. She has for a long time kept her teeth in a glass at night, and her varicose veins are giving her a terrible time. But she again shows little trust in God's word.

When Isaac is weaned he is playing with Ishmael, Hagar's child. Sarah reacts with frenzied anger. She demands that servant and child again be thrown out. Abraham, to his credit, vacillates. God allows it; and again intervenes to save mother and child from a wretched death by thirst in the desert in one of the most emotion-filled passages of the Book of Genesis. Even the rabbis who staunchly defended the honour and character of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs found Sarah's actions indefensible.

When Abraham is told to sacrifice his son Isaac he does not tell Sarah. Indeed the two, who do not exchange many words in the telling of their story, never speak again. It appears that they live separate lives – he in Bethsheba; she in Hebron. However, upon her death Abraham spends a small fortune to acquire a cave which will be the family mausoleum. It is the only piece of 'The Land' that he possesses in his life time.

God's promise will be fulfilled but it takes a long time. Nevertheless, Sarah is the instrument of God's promises being partially achieved. Abraham has a son, by his wife, and the line of promise will continue through Isaac; and he possesses a cave at Macpelah, a piece of real estate in the Land which will belong to his descendants.

But Sarah, remembered like Abraham as one of great faith, acclaimed as such by the author of the Letter to the Hebrews, was less trusting in the word of God than we might imagine listening to today's second reading, and she was at times really nasty; jealous and alarmed by Hagar and her child. Can we be surprised, the medieval rabbis wondered, that Hagar children are inimical to the children of Sarah? Hagar's children being the people of Islam.

The Hebrew Scriptures do not give us portraits of saints, people of such merit that they can do no wrong. No, they describe people like those we know, like those we are, capable of heroism and virtue, and able to be spineless and horrible. We are all Sarah's children.