



***Sarah's Laughter as Her Lasting Legacy:
An Interpretation of Genesis 18:9-15***

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Genesis 18:9-15 is a highly important text within the Hebrew Bible, especially within the narrative of Abraham and his wife, Sarah. However there have been many disagreements regarding the passage's translation and interpretation. Through independent analysis and the use of secondary sources concerning translation from the original Hebrew into English, this paper aims to provide one possible way to consider and interpret this short passage in Genesis about Sarah's laughter and God's response to it as a glimpse into the characters of both Sarah and God.

The scene of Sarah's laughter in Genesis 18 has echoed through the ages because of the ambiguities within the text, which spark curiosity in the reader. In this scene, Abraham is hosting three mysterious visitors whom the reader knows are messengers of God (18:1), but neither Sarah nor Abraham are said to be aware of this fact. One of the strangers announces that Sarah will have a son "in due season" (18:10).¹ Sarah then laughs at this announcement and asks, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?" (18:12). The visitor rebukes her by asking, "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" (18:14). Sarah denies her laughter then, but the visitor rejects her lie, saying, "Oh yes, you did laugh" (18:15). With this statement, the scene abruptly ends. This short passage has generated debate among scholars over the interpretation of several facets of the scene. Was Sarah's laughter inspired by delight or bitterness? What is the meaning of her commentary following her laughter; is she in awe or incredulous? Was Sarah aware of the promise made to Abraham by God? How does her knowledge of this promise change how we should read the passage? What is the significance of the visitor's rebuke to Sarah and their brief dialogue? By answering these questions, it is possible to get some insight into Sarah's character that can be used to reinterpret her previous and subsequent actions within the Abraham narrative.

In order to analyze the meaning of Sarah's laughter and her comments in Genesis 18:12, we must first look at the narrative remark that comes before her laughter. After the visitor's announcement that he will "return... in due

season, and... Sarah will have a son" (18:10), the narrator remarks that "Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women" (18:11). This statement is important because it illuminates the fact that it would be highly unlikely for Sarah and Abraham to be able to produce a child, with Abraham so old and Sarah being menopausal. Especially considering the fact of Sarah's lifelong barrenness, as previously established throughout the Abraham narrative in Genesis, the likelihood of Abraham and Sarah having a child at this point in their lives seems utterly impossible, as seen in 16:2-3 and 16:15.

It is with this impossible physical situation in mind that Sarah "laughed to herself" at the stranger's announcement that she was to have a son in Genesis 18:12. Elaine Phillips noted a very simple though not immediately obvious reason for her laughter: at this point in the narrative. Though we know that the visitors are from God (18:1), Sarah has no idea that this is the case. She believes that the man is a human stranger, and "thus, her own knowledge of her own physical condition in conjunction with her lack of expectation that these strangers speak with authority on such an issue would naturally prompt incredulity."² Given the circumstance – a 90-year-old overhearing a total stranger announcing her imminent pregnancy – it is completely reasonable that she would be doubtful of the news. Because of this it seems more likely that her laughter is tinged with bitterness than joy. The stranger's words most likely seem a cruel taunt rather than a delightful promise.

Another possible reason for the perceived bitterness in Sarah's laughter is that not only does she believe that she is unable to bear a child, given her lifelong barrenness and old age, but she also doubts Abraham's ability regarding conception. When, in Genesis 18:12, she cites Abraham's age and her "pleasure," Sarah could very well be insinuating that Abraham is too old to perform sexually and perhaps has been for a long time. In the article "Feminist Criticism: Sarah Laughs Last," Susan Brayford states that ancient Ugaritic texts on sexuality and reproduction suggest that the people of Ugarit believed that pregnancy could occur only if the female experienced orgasm. Because of the proximity of Ugarit to the lands of Abraham's wanderings, Brayford notes that some scholars read 18:12 "as evidence that the ancient Hebrews also believed that sexual pleasure was necessary for conception."³ If this is indeed the case, then Sarah's reference to Abraham's "old age" and her question of finally having pleasure suggest that she believes it to be far-fetched that she would be able to conceive due to Abraham's sexual impotence brought on by agedness.

Interpretations of Sarah's laughter as bitter or delightful depend on the reading of the words of the passage. It might be easy to hear Sarah's laughter as being full of delight if the words are read in a particular way. If Genesis 18:12 is read so that Sarah's question of pleasure is an excited question, then it can be interpreted, as Tammi Schneider does, that "[Sarah] is joyful when she learns the news"⁴ because she is excited to finally have a gratifying sexual encounter with her husband. Schneider also says that "pleasure" in 18:12 can also be translated as "joy," *'ednah* in Hebrew, and has a "sense of 'delight' and

carries a sexual connotation.”⁵ This is consistent with Brayford’s assertion that the ancient Hebrews connected sexual pleasure with conception.

However this allusion to sexual pleasure does not necessarily mean that Sarah was delighted at the stranger’s announcement. This is doubtful because the text states that she laughed “to herself.” This phrase can be translated a number of different ways, but every translation includes the implied inward nature of her laughter. Gina Hens-Piazza translates the phrase as laughed “inside herself” because of the implication given by the Hebrew description *biqirbah*.⁶ The phrase has also been translated as “Sarah laughed inwardly, saying...”⁷ which implies that her comment was spoken inwardly as well. All of these translations suggest that Sarah’s laughter was inward and private. If her laughter was produced out of delight, her laughter would have been loud and public, because when someone laughs delightfully their laughter is loud and meant for everyone to hear. On the other hand, when someone laughs bitterly, it is often quiet, under their breath, for herself alone. Because Sarah’s laughter was private and to herself, this suggests that her laughter was bitter, disbelieving, and doubtful. Additionally, if Sarah’s laughter was delightful, that seems like an important enough description to have appeared in the narrative itself. If her laughter had been full of joy, the narrative might say that she “laughed joyfully” rather than “to herself.” Because of the narrative economy used throughout the Hebrew Bible, the fact that the author of this passage included that her laughter was to herself is an important detail that deserves a large interpretive role for the whole of the passage.

Moreover, Sarah is not the only character in this story to specifically be said to have spoken to herself. In Genesis 17, when Abraham hears the same news as Sarah will in Genesis 18, he falls on his face, laughs and then speaks to himself (Genesis 17:17). His inward dialogue is almost always translated as being “in his heart”⁸ or “to himself.”⁹ Niehoff states that in both the case of Abraham and of Sarah, the inward speech slows down the narrative and allows the reader to gain insight into the character’s “state of mind at this crucial moment.”¹⁰ He notes that both laugh at the prospect of Sarah becoming pregnant and cite old age as a reason for the impossibility; husband and wife are completely in sync in believing that having a child is now impossible. Additionally, Niehoff says that Sarah’s laughter and internal dialogue offer a glimpse into her agitation at the announcement and her attempt to quell the rekindling of her long-suppressed hope for a child.¹¹ She responds to the announcement bitterly to avoid renewing a maternal desire that had long-since been denied.

Sarah’s comment following her laughter, while it can be read as being in awe of the news she has just heard, makes the most sense to be read in a bitter or mocking way. She has just laughed to herself, and then she asks: “After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?” (Genesis 18:12). Though some may interpret this pleasure as being the pleasure of the knowledge of impending sexual pleasure,¹² or the pleasure of finally having a child,¹³ it seems more realistic that, given the bitterness of

Sarah's laughter, her commentary should be read as a sarcastic comment. In other translations, the sarcastic and bitter tone of her comment is far more apparent. In *Irony in the Old Testament*, Edwin M. Good translates verse 12 as "After I am decrepit, do I get some pleasure? And with an elderly husband?"¹⁴ In his commentary on Genesis, Nahum Sarna translates 12 as "Now that I am withered, am I to have enjoyment – with my husband so old?"¹⁵ Gina Hens-Piazza translates the question as "Now that I am used up, shall I have sexual pleasure? And my husband is old."¹⁶ These translations from the Hebrew lend credence to the interpretation that Sarah felt physically incapable of bearing a child, describing herself as "decrepit," "withered," and "used up." Knowing this, upon rereading all of verse 12, one can almost imagine her laughing to herself, rolling her eyes and asking sarcastically if she will finally have pleasure when she is so old and her husband old and quite possibly impotent. Between her private, disbelieving laughter and sarcastic, self-deprecating comment, Sarah's response to the visitor's news should be read as nothing short of bitter.

With this in mind, it is important to explore whether or not Sarah knew of God's promise to Abraham from earlier in the story. Because it is never revealed in the narrative itself, we as readers are unsure if Abraham ever shared with Sarah God's promise of a son. Her knowledge or ignorance of this promise colors the interpretation of her laughter. On one hand, if she was not aware of the promise made to Abraham, it is reasonable for Sarah to find the stranger's announcement completely preposterous. In Genesis 17, when God himself appears to Abraham and tells him that Sarah will bear a son, Abraham falls on his face laughing and exclaims, "Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" (Genesis 17:17). That is his reaction even though he had heard this promise many times before (Genesis 12:2, 13:14-16, 15:5-6). Gina Hens-Piazza notes the similarity between Abraham and Sarah's exclamations; they both point to their own age and their spouses' old age as making the idea of having a child seem ludicrous.¹⁷ Abraham expressed the same laughter-inducing doubt as his wife, who may or may not have been aware of the promise. Her incredulity in this circumstance is full of doubt and colored by bitterness because her awareness of her physical inability to bear a child.

If Sarah had additionally been aware of the promise, it makes even more sense to interpret her laughter as incredulous and bitter. Abraham and Sarah left their homeland when Abraham was 75 years old, and in Genesis 17 it is mentioned that Abraham is 99 years old; so for 24 years, Abraham and Sarah have been waiting for God's promise to Abraham of "a great nation" (Gen 12:2) to be fulfilled, a promise that explicitly states in Genesis 15:3-6 that Abraham will have a child. By the time Sarah laughs in Genesis 18, the promise has been repeated four times, and still there is no child born to Abraham by Sarah. If Abraham had shared all of these previous repetitions of the promise with his wife, then this fifth announcement would just seem like another empty promise. It is very understandable if, by this point in the story, Abraham and Sarah doubt the power of God to grant them fertility.¹⁸

As presented in the Bible, in Abraham's time Yahweh was still a newcomer in relation to other gods. Hundreds of years passed between the events of the Flood and the Tower of Babel, and when God called on Abraham. Meanwhile, the polytheistic traditions of the ancient Near East came to prominence. Other ancient Near Eastern cultures worshipped supreme gods, with other personal gods chosen for devoted worship while still believing in the existence of other cultures' gods.¹⁹ Yahweh seemed to be quite unknown to Abraham when he called upon him, and he did not yet have a track record of successful promise fulfillment. This did nothing to bolster Sarah's confidence in the promise of a son coming to fruition; if anything, given the circumstance, it would make more sense for Sarah to doubt God's ability to provide a child for her and Abraham than to believe the promise. And given that at this point Sarah is unaware of the divine nature of the visitors in her camp, bitter and doubtful laughter is only fitting as an expression of her doubt in God's promise as well as in her and Abraham's own abilities to producing a child.

After Sarah laughs, God turns to Abraham, asking, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" (Genesis 18:13-14). Sarah has been caught in the act of her private laughter and mocking commentary, a response which catches God off-guard. There are two ways that God's questioning of Sarah can be interpreted. The first interpretation is that God is angry at Sarah for laughing because her laughter symbolizes mistrust and a lack of faith.²⁰ His questioning is an accusation regarding her lack of faith in him. On the other hand, God's rebuke can be seen as an expression of his genuine inability to understand Sarah's incredulity. It seems as if this moment of Sarah's doubt and God's indignation at her disbelief demonstrate that God baselessly expects that Abraham and Sarah should believe his promises even though he has no proof of his abilities to do the wondrous works he says he can and will perform. Without action to assure them that his words are true, Sarah is disbelieving.²¹ Though God is aware of his power, Sarah has not yet seen what he is capable of, which makes her doubt justifiable.

God's indignation and surprise at Sarah's bitter response to his announcement can also be colored by whether or not Sarah was aware of the promise previously made to Abraham. If she was unaware of the promise, then perhaps God was expecting an openly delighted response, but instead she laughed to herself, quietly, privately and with bitter incredulity. From God's perspective, he is giving her a promise dependent on time; he has told her when she can expect to have a child. This should be received joyfully. This repetition of the promise is different from all the previous promises he made to Abraham because this is a promise for both of them to hear and has concrete specifications; they will have a son "in due season" (Genesis 18:10, 14), or rather at this time next year.²² A specific promise of a son should delight Sarah, but instead he receives a bitter and disbelieving response to his announcement.

Even if Sarah was aware of the promise made to Abraham, God would be expecting not only excitement from her but also relief and joy. If she knew about the promise of a son and had also been waiting 24 years for a child, just as Abraham had been, God thinks this time-dependent promise should be a warmly received announcement. But Sarah disappoints. Instead of being excited, she doesn't believe the promise delivered under the guise of a visitor. She laughs to herself, she comments on her old age and the old age and impotency of her husband. She asks, "Will I now have my pleasure?" – a question most likely tinged with sarcasm and disbelief. She is questioning the ability of God to produce a child for her. Despite the fact that God has done nothing to inspire Sarah's belief, he is taken aback by her doubt.²³ Shouldn't his divine promises be enough to merit her faith?

Yet promises were not enough. Even with the specification of time, and the revelation that the visitor is no mere man but God himself in Genesis 18:13-14, Sarah again denies the omniscience of God when she denies his claim that she laughed at his words. She boldly lies in the face of God,²⁴ stating, "I did not laugh," (18:15), though everyone – Sarah, God, and the reader – knows that she did. With or without knowledge of God's promise to Abraham, Sarah takes a very bold stance against God, laughing outright at his words and then lying to him. She knows of her own physical inability to bear a child and her husband's physical inability to produce a child. Whether or not she was aware of the promise made to Abraham, her awareness of the physical impossibility of such a promise coming to fruition makes her doubt God, who is standing right outside her tent saying that she will have a child "in due season." Her wait is almost up, but Sarah has most likely lost any remaining hope of having a child.

After 90 years of barrenness and the onset of menopause, Sarah would have given up the hope of ever having a child of her own. Fourteen years before, she had already given up by giving Hagar to Abraham as a wife so that Abraham could at least have a child, even if not by her.²⁵ Thus by Genesis 18, Sarah had understandably abandoned any hope of ever conceiving. It is quite likely that she had resigned herself to a child-less existence for the remaining years of her life. However then a stranger comes to her camp and makes an announcement of an impending pregnancy, a forthcoming son, trying to rekindle her hopes. Even when she discovers that this is a promise made by God, she doesn't want to begin hoping again when she has no reason to believe that God could actually provide a son for her. He hadn't done so in the last twenty-four years, so why would he do so now when she is so old and beyond hope?

In Genesis, Sarah is the second woman to have a direct confrontation with God, which begs for comparison with the first: Eve. In Genesis 3 Eve has to defend her actions to God face-to-face, much like Sarah in Genesis 18. After being tricked by the serpent, both she and Adam ate the fruit from the tree of knowledge. When God discovers this, he asks her, "What is this that you have done?" and she answers, "The serpent tricked me and I ate" (3:13). She shows

no fear of God and boldly admits her mistake before him. Yet for their transgression, both she and Adam are cast out of the Garden to toil on the earth until they die (3:17-19). Though Sarah's confrontation is the result of a much less serious transgression, it is still an action that ends in a rebuke from God. She is caught laughing and making comments to herself that express disbelief in God, is rebuked for it, and then denies her response entirely. Rather than admitting to her actions, she tries to hide them, despite the fact that the visitor – having revealed himself as God just before her denial – has just demonstrated that he indeed knows what she has done (18:13-15). She lies directly to God, and yet her son is made a father of a blessed nation, whereas Eve's descendants were forced to toil on the earth and then were almost entirely destroyed by the Flood in Genesis 7.

I believe that this reveals two important things about God at this point in the narrative. First, God no longer feels that humankind is a threat to him. In Genesis 3, God says that because man had tasted of the tree of knowledge and became like him (3:22), they could then reach out and take from the tree of life. It was because of this that he banished them from the Garden, which subtly implied that if man ate from the tree of knowledge and the tree of life, they would be too much like God for him to reign over them. However Sarah's doubt and blatant lie are no threat to him; perhaps her lack of faith has no significant effect because he knows that he will eventually fulfill his promise whether she believes it or not. Though he is taken aback by Sarah's incredulity and rebukes her attempted deceit, he does not punish Sarah because she is not a threat to him.

Second, this passage is just another indication that Sarah is not as important as Abraham in the whole of the narrative. Abraham is the one who has received the promise by God on multiple occasions. He is the one with whom God initially speaks to address Sarah's disbelief (Genesis 18:13). Sarah's doubt, her bitterness, her laughter, her lie: none of these things have any effect on God maintaining the decision to make Abraham the father of the nation. Though Sarah is the chosen matriarch, given that Abraham was told by God that Ishmael is not the designated heir (17:18-19), her actions are not important as long as she conceives and bears Abraham's son at the time when God has planned. Her disbelief does not in any way affect Abraham, so there is no danger of God losing Abraham's faith, which is far more important than Sarah's, because Abraham is the one who instructs Isaac, with whom God makes his covenant, in faith and worship.²⁶ Additionally, the fact that Sarah disappears from the narrative after Isaac's weaning in Genesis 21, when she makes Abraham send Hagar and Ishmael away to protect Isaac's birthright (until she dies in Genesis 23, well over thirty years later)²³ strongly illustrates that Sarah was only important because she was chosen to be the matriarch. Once she had served her purpose, she had little role left to play in the broad scope of the story and could then be freely forgotten by God and the reader, whose attention then turns to Abraham and Isaac in God's test of Abraham in Genesis 22.

So why include Sarah's bitter laughter and doubtful commentary at all? Though we have seen Sarah act previously in the Abraham narrative, we have had little opportunity to see her inner workings and her motivations. Then finally in Genesis 18:12, through her laughter and commentary, we see a woman who responds with bitterness to avoid the heartbreak of a failed promise, a woman who has wanted children her whole life but has accepted the impossibility of bearing a child. When she is rebuked by God and defiantly lies to his face, we see a bold woman whose feelings cannot be predicted even by God himself. This scene allows us to interpret her previous actions toward Hagar in Genesis 16 as being the actions of a woman who is jealous and bitter, not one who is simply cruel to her slave. It also allows us to view her future actions toward Hagar and Ishmael in Genesis 21 (when she again sends them away) as being not spiteful and cruel, but instead the behavior of a mother doing whatever she deemed necessary to protect her miraculously-obtained son. Sarah's brief time in the spotlight offers us a peek into the inner workings of an early matriarch in Israel's history and allows us to understand the emotions and motives behind her actions.

The story of Sarah's laughter is one that is very much open to interpretation. The way that I read the story is not the way that everyone has or will read it. However that is part of the reason that this story has persisted in the minds of many readers. Because, as with many biblical stories featuring women, "the carefully crafted ambiguity of biblical stories provided them with elasticity... [and] the elasticity ensured an ongoing evolution."²⁸ The ambiguities within Sarah's story in Genesis 18 prompts readers to ask questions about the meaning of Sarah's inner dialogue and her discourse with God, and to form their own opinions about what the passage is really saying. Because there is no definitive answer to the questions prompted by the story's ambiguities, Sarah's laughter will continue to prompt debate among its readers, resulting in a lasting legacy that goes beyond her matriarchal role in the narrative and delves into her intricacies as a character.

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Notes

- 1) All biblical citations from *Harper Collins NRSV Study Bible* (United States: HarperOne, 1989).
- 2) Elaine A. Phillips, "Incredulity, Faith and Textual Purpose: Post-biblical Responses to the Laughter of Abraham and Sarah," in *The Function of Scripture in Early Jewish and Christian Tradition* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 22-33, 26.
- 3) Susan Brayford, "Feminist Criticism: Sarah Laughs Last," in *Method Matters: Essays on the Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Honor of David L. Petersen*, ed. Joel LeMon and Kent Harold Richards (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 311-332, 328.
- 4) Tammi J. Schneider, *Mothers of Promise: Women in the Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), p. 38.
- 5) Schneider, *Mothers of Promise*, 31.
- 6) Gina Henz-Piazza, "Why Did Sarah Laugh?" in *Distant Voices Drawing Near: Essays in Honor of Antoinette Clark Wire*, ed. Holly E. Hearon (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004), 57-68, 62.
- 7) M. Niehoff, "Do Biblical Characters Talk to Themselves? Narrative Modes of Representing Inner Speech in Early Biblical Fiction," *Journal of Biblical Literature* vol. 111, no. 4 (Winter, 1992), 577-595, 584.
- 8) Niehoff, "Do Biblical Characters Talk to Themselves?", 583.
- 9) Nahum Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (United States: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 126.
- 10) Niehoff, "Do Biblical Characters Talk to Themselves?", 583.
- 11) Niehoff, "Do Biblical Characters Talk to Themselves?", 585.
- 12) Schneider, *Mothers of Promise*, 31.
- 13) Vanessa Ochs, *Sarah Laughed: Modern Lessons from the Wisdom and Stories of Biblical Women* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005), 113-114.
- 14) Edwin M. Good, *Irony in the Old Testament* (Sheffield: The Almond Press, 1981), 93.
- 15) Sarna, 130.
- 16) Hens-Piazza, "Why Did Sarah Laugh?", 66.
- 17) Hens-Piazza, "Why Did Sarah Laugh?", 58.
- 18) Jack Miles, *God: A Biography* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 54-55.
- 19) Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), p. 65.

- 20) Ochs, *Sarah Laughed*, p. 114.
- 21) Miles, *God: A Biography*, p. 56-58.
- 22) Sarna, 130.
- 23) Though God rescued Sarah from Egypt in Genesis 12:17-20, the narration makes it seem unlikely that Sarah knew her release was God's doing.
- 24) Jonathan Kirsch, *The Woman Who Laughed* (New York: Penguin Compass, 2001) 8.
- 25) Genesis 16:16 states that Abraham was 86 when Ishmael was born to himself and Hagar, and Genesis 17:1 states that Abraham was 99 around the time of God's repetition of the promise to Abraham and the subsequent events in Genesis 18. Taking into account the length of time of Hagar's pregnancy after she was given to Abraham by Sarah as a wife in Genesis 16:2-3, 14 years seems a more accurate amount of time than the purely mathematically estimate of 13 years.
- 26) For example, it seems that Isaac believes in God and knows how to make proper animal sacrifices, because in Genesis 22:7 Isaac questions his father's ill preparations for his imminent sacrifice of a lamb in the land of Moriah.
- 27) Sarah was 90 when the announcement was made and so she was probably ninety-one when Isaac was born, though it is not stated in the narrative. She dies at 127 years old (Gen 23:1).
- 28) Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of their Stories* (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), p. 339.