

# Sarah

The Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature. James Strong and John McClintock; Haper and Brothers; NY; 1880.

Sa'rah, The name of two women in the Old Test., whose Hebrew names, however, are different.

**I.** The wife of Abraham and mother of Isaac.

**1. Her Name.** — The Hebrew form of *Sarah* is סָרָה, *Sarah*, which is the regular feminine of שָׂר, *sar*, a *prince*, often so used and rendered (Sept., Josephus, and New Test. Σάρρα, "Sara" in the A.V. of the N.T.). Her original name, however, was SARAI SEE [SARAI](#) (q.v.), which is usually regarded as of kindred etymology. The change of her name from "Sarai" to "Sarah" was made at the same time that Abram's name was changed to Abraham, on the establishment of the covenant of circumcision between him and God. That the name "Sarah" signifies "princess" is universally acknowledged. But the meaning of "Sarai" is still a subject of controversy. The older interpreters (as, for example, Jerome, in *Quoest. Hebr.*, and those who follow him) suppose it to mean "my princess;" and explain the change from Sarai to Sarah as signifying that she was no longer the queen of one family, but the royal ancestress of "all families of the earth." They also suppose that the addition of the letter ה, as taken from the sacred tetragrammaton Jehovah, to the names of Abram and Sarai, mystically signified their being received into covenant with the Lord. Among modern Hebraists there is great diversity of interpretation. One opinion, keeping to the same general

derivation as that referred to above, explains "Sarai" as "noble," "nobility," etc., an explanation which, even more than the other, labors under the objection of giving little force to the change. Another opinion supposes Sarai to be a contracted form of שָׂרַיָה (Seraydh), and to signify "Jehovah is ruler." *SEE SERAIAH*. But this gives no force whatever to the change, and, besides, introduces the element *Jah* into a proper name too early in the history. A third (following Ewald, *Heb. Gram.* § 324) derives it from שָׂרָה, a root which is found in *Ge 32:28*; *Ho 12:4*, in the sense of "to fight," and explains it as "contentious" (*streitsüchtig*). This last seems to be, etymologically, the most probable, and differs from the others in giving great force and dignity to the change of name (see Gesenius, *Thesaur.* p. 1338 b; Pfeiffer, in the *Stud. u. Krit.* 1871, 1, 145 sq.). *SEE PROPER NAME*.

⇒Bible concordance for SARAH.

**2. Her Parentage.** — She is first introduced in *Ge 11:29* as follows: "Abram and Nahor took them wives: the name of Abram's wife was Sarai; and the name of Nahor's wife was Milcah, the daughter of Haran, the father of Milcah, and the father of Iscah." In *Ge 20:12* Abraham speaks of her as his sister, the daughter of the same father, but not the daughter of the same mother. The common Jewish tradition, taken for granted by Josephus (*Ant.* 1, 6, 6) and by Jerome (*Quoest. Hebr. ad Genesin*, 3, 323 [ed. Ben. 1735]) is that Sarai is the same as Iscah, the daughter of Haran and the sister of Lot, who is called Abraham's "brother" in *Ge 14:14,16*. Judging from the fact that Rebekah, the granddaughter of Nahor, was the wife of Isaac, the son of Abraham, there is reason to conjecture that Abraham was the youngest brother, so that his wife might not improbably be younger than the wife of Nahor. It is certainly strange, if the tradition be true, that no direct mention of it is found in *Ge 11:29*. But it is not improbable in

itself; it supplies the account of the descent of the mother of the chosen race, the omission of which in such a passage is most unlikely; and there is no other to set against it, except the assertion of Abraham himself that Sarai was his half-sister, "the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother" ([Ge 20:12](#)); but this is held by many to mean no more than that Haran her father was his half-brother; for the colloquial usage of the Hebrews in this matter makes it easy to understand that he might call a niece a sister, and a granddaughter a daughter. In general discourse "daughter" comprised any and every female descendant, and "sister" any and every consanguineous relationship. (See Stempel, *De Abrahamo Matrimonium Dissimulante* [Vitemb. 1714].) In that case Abraham was really her uncle as well as husband. *SEE BROTHER.*

**3. Her History.** — This is substantially, of course, that of Abraham. She came with him from Ur to Haran, from Haran to Canaan, and accompanied him in all the wanderings of his life. Her only independent action is the demand that Hagar and Ishmael should be cast out, far from all rivalry with her and Isaac; a demand symbolically applied in [Ga 4:22-31](#) to the displacement of the Old Covenant by the New. The times in which she plays the most important part in the history are the times when Abraham was sojourning, first in Egypt, then in Gerar, in both which cases Sarah shared his deceit towards Pharaoh and towards Abimelech. On the first occasion, about the middle of her life, her personal beauty is dwelt upon as its cause ([Ge 12:11-15](#)); on the second, just before the birth of Isaac, at a time when she was old (thirty-seven years before her death), but when her vigor had been miraculously restored, the same cause is alluded to as supposed by Abraham, but not actually stated ([Ge 20:9-11](#)). In the former case the commendations which the princes of Pharaoh

bestowed upon the charms of the lovely stranger have been supposed by some to have been owing to the contrast which her fresh, Mesopotamian complexion offered to the dusky hue of their own beauties. But, so far as climate is concerned, the nearer Syria could offer complexions as fair as hers; and, moreover, a people trained by their habits to admire "dusky" beauties were not likely to be inordinately attracted by a fresh complexion. In both cases, especially the last, the truthfulness of the history is seen in the unfavorable contrast in which the conduct both of Abraham and Sarah stands to that of Pharaoh and Abimelech. She died at Hebron at the age of one hundred and twenty-seven years, twenty-eight years before her husband, and was buried by him in the cave of Machpelah, B.C. 2027. Her burial place, purchased of Ephron the Hittite, was the only possession of Abraham in the Land of Promise. It has remained, hallowed in the eyes of Jews, Christians, and Mohammedans alike, to the present day; and in it the "shrine of Sarah" is pointed out opposite to that of Abraham, with those of Isaac and Rebekah on the one side, and those of Jacob and Leah on the other (see Stanley's *Lect. on Jewish Church*, app. 2, p. 484-509). *SEE ABRAHAM.*

⇒ See also the [International Standard Bible Encyclopedia](#).

**4. Her Character.** — This is no ideal type of excellence, like that of Abraham, but one thoroughly natural and truly feminine, both in its excellences and its defects. Her natural motherly affection is seen in her touching desire for children, even from her bondmaid, and in her unforgiving jealousy of that bondmaid when she became a mother; in her rejoicing over her son Isaac, and in the spirit which resented the slightest insult to him and forbade Ishmael to share his sonship. It makes her cruel to others as well as tender to her own, and is remarkably contrasted with the sacrifice of natural feeling on the part of Abraham to God's command in

the last case ([Ge 21:12](#)). To the same character belong her ironical laughter at the promise of a child, long desired, but now beyond all hope; her trembling denial of that laughter, and her change of it to the laughter of thankful joy, which she commemorated in the name of Isaac. It is a character deeply and truly affectionate, but impulsive, jealous, and imperious in its affection.

Sarah, however, is so rarely introduced directly to our notice that it is difficult to estimate her character justly for want of adequate materials. She is seen only when her presence is indispensable; and then she appears with more of submission and of simplicity than of dignity, and manifests an unwise but not unusual promptitude in following her first thoughts, and in proceeding upon the impulse of her first emotions. Upon the whole, Sarah scarcely meets the idea the imagination would like to form of the life companion of so eminent a person as Abraham. Nevertheless, we cannot fail to observe that she was a most attached and devoted wife. Her husband was the central object of all her thoughts; and he was not forgotten even in her first transports of joy at becoming a mother ([Ge 21:7](#)). This is her highest eulogium.

It is asked whether Sarah was aware of the intended sacrifice of Isaac, the son of her long-deferred hopes. The chronology is uncertain and does not decide whether this transaction occurred before or after her death. She was probably alive; and if so, we may understand from the precautions employed by Abraham that she was not acquainted with the purpose of the journey to the land of Moriah, and, indeed, that it was the object of these precautions to keep from her knowledge a matter which must so deeply wound her heart. He could have the less difficulty in this if his faith was such as to enable him to believe that he should bring back in safety the son he was commanded to sacrifice ([Heb 11:19](#)). As, however, the account

of her death immediately follows that of this sacrifice, some of the Jewish writers imagine that the intelligence killed her, and that Abraham found her dead on his return (*Targ Jonath.*, and *Jarchi on Genesis 23:2*; *Pirke Eliezer*, c. 52). But there seems to be no authority for such an inference.

Isaiah is the only prophet who names Sarah (*Isa 51:2*) Paul alludes to her hope of becoming a mother (*Ro 4:19*); and afterwards cites the promise which she received (*Ro 9:9*); and Peter eulogizes her submission to her husband (*1Pe 3:6*).

**II.** (Heb. *Se'rach*, שֵׁרָח; Sept. Σάρα, "Sarah," *Nu 26:46*; being there "in pause" *Sarach*, שָׂרָה) the daughter of the patriarch Asher, elsewhere (*Ge 46:17*; *1Ch 7:30*) more properly Anglicized SERAE *SEE SERAE* (q.v.).