

“But Sarah Denied for She was Afraid”: Considerations on Gen 18

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Abstract. This paper provides an interpretation of Sarah’s laugh in Gen 18:12. Sarah’s behaviour has been outlined over the years as distrustful in front of God, but her fear of the divine strangers allows a different reading. The comparison with the attitude of Lot’s sons-in-law in Gen 18:14 will help rescue the character of Sarah from a negative evaluation, so consciousness and unconsciousness will be pointed out to be the conditions for finding God’s piety in the narrative.

Keywords: Hebrew Bible; Sarah; laugh; fear of God; Lot’s sons-in-law; consciousness; unconsciousness; characterisation.

[es] “Pero Sarah lo negó porque tenía miedo”: consideraciones sobre Gen 18

Resumen. Este artículo ofrece una interpretación de la risa de Sara en Gen 18:12. Por años se ha delineado el comportamiento de Sara como desconfiado hacia Dios, pero su temor de los extranjeros divinos permite una lectura diferente. La comparación con la actitud de los yernos de Lot en 18,14 será útil para rescatar al carácter de Sara de una evaluación negativa. La conciencia y la inconsciencia se indicarán cómo las condiciones para encontrar o no la piedad de Dios en la narración.

Palabras clave: Biblia Hebrea; Sara; reír; temor de Dios; géneros de Lot; conciencia; inconsciencia; caracterización.

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1. Introduction

The episode of Gen 18 tells about the visit of three foreigners to Abraham’s tent in Mamre. One of them is commonly identified with God, and the other two with angels. Abraham is unaware of these men’s divine nature and treats them according to the hospitality rules typical of the Hebrew Bible². Although the story touches on numerous themes, two main topics are developed in the first part of the story (Gen 18:1-16): Abraham’s hospitality and the annunciation of Isaac’s birth. Annunciation is also the reason of this unexpected divine visit to the human world³. But how does Sarah, now elderly, react to this notice of pregnancy? Incredulously, she laughs.

This paper aims to enlighten a positive nuance given by the narrator to the character of Sarah. This nuance is provided through a scene which embraces, on the one hand, mockery and disrespect; on the other hand, repentance and trust. It will be outlined how the act of laughing appears in other pericopes strictly related to the one taken into the examination. Furthermore, it will be argued how Sarah’s fear of God constitutes a possible narrative device for being characterised as a positive figure. Specifically, Sarah’s laugh will be compared to the irreverent behaviour of Lot’s sons-in-law, who in Gen 19:14 do not heed God’s warnings. The comparison will provide the leading argument to point out awareness and unawareness as prominent issues in God’s judgment in this episode. Hence, a reading of Sara’s behaviour as a positive model will be argued, which opens new perspectives in the traditional interpretations provided by biblical studies. This paper is not intended to prove

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² The hospitality rules have been addressed to represent a schematic model recurring over the Bible. For a further discussion, see Wright 1989, 53-154.

³ Isaac’s annunciation receives a focus through the narrative expedient of the play word «to laugh» and Isaac’s name, since based upon the same root. See note 4. For a further discussion about the birth announcement as the reason for the angels’ visit, see Ska 2009, 298.

conclusively that Sarah's laugh is to be regarded according to positive nuances but rather to show that new interpretative roads can still be in interpreting the characters' construction.

2. A Mocking Laugh? Discussing Gen 18:12

As soon as one of the three men proclaims the birth of Isaac to Abraham, the narrator shifts the reader's attention to Sarah. While the other characters are outside the tent, she hides inside and eavesdrops on the men's words. Based on Gen 11:30, the reader knows that Sarah is barren. Then, they understand why the woman silently wonders how such a prediction could become real. Furthermore, "The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah"⁴ and Abraham is advanced in years. All of these contradictions cause Sarah to laugh because it is biologically impossible that the couple could ever have a child (Gen 18:12).⁵

Besides the apparent reference to the very name of the child to be born⁶, commentators have wondered how this laughter could be understood from a behaviour and theological perspective. Hence, they questioned whether it was a laugh of joy or mockery. In this last case, should it be considered offensive regarding God?

Rashi⁷ and Ibn Ezra⁸ remark on Sarah's physical condition to explain her spontaneous laugh. The two commentators explain Sarah's behaviour in apologetic tones that justify her seemingly disrespectful behaviour before God. According to them, she does not know that the men are divine beings and, from her perspective, they could not be aware of her sterility. Therefore, her act of laughing is interpreted as a reaction coloured with sarcastic nuances.

Rabbinic literature is divided. Just to mention some examples, the *Perek ha-Shalom* and the Tractate *Kallah Rabbati* 10:1 take the path of Rashi and Ibn Ezra in interpreting the text. Both justify Sarah's disbelief before the birth announcement based on her and Abraham's oldness⁹. It is not the case of the *Megillah* 9a:14, which explicitly addresses Sarah's laughter as offensive.

Modern commentaries agree in creating a parallelism between Sarah's and Abraham's laugh at Gen 17:17, which is the first actual narration concerning the annunciation of Isaac's birth. According to Brueggemann¹⁰, both Gen 17 and Gen 18 aim to create tension between God's promise and Abraham's and Sarah's resistance to this promise. The resistance is expressed through a mock laugh. Therefore, Abraham and Sarah would be offered as human models of disbelief in front of God's power. Waltke also supports this idea¹¹. Unlikely, Westermann¹² and Wenham¹³ focused on Sarah's unawareness about whom her husband is talking with. Following the scholars, Sarah only has a natural and human reaction. Her behaviour cannot be taken as a form of distrust in front of God if one admits that she has not recognised God himself at the moment of laughing. The JPS Torah Commentary¹⁴ only poses the question. It connects the two characters' laughter without discussing the possible interpretations.

On the contrary, besides agreeing with predecessors, Alter¹⁵ and Giuntoli¹⁶ add different nuances. The former puts Sarah's laughter of distrust in Gen 18:12 and the laughter following the birth of Isaac in Gen 21:6 in contrast. According to him, the second laugh is supposed to be read as a manifestation of joy, exultation, and absurdity at odds with the initial willingness to mock¹⁷. The latter points out the intention of the Targumim Neophyti and Pseudo-Jonathan to rescue Sarah from the negative judgement of the reader. Indeed, both texts correct the verb «to laugh» and replace it with «to marvel»¹⁸ to avoid Sarah's disrespectful behaviour in front of God.

Finally, Fischer¹⁹ suggests a radical new reading. She claims that interpreting Sarah as an embarrassing character means missing the point of the whole narrative. According to the scholar, Sarah «is not improperly eavesdropping on the men's conversations, but instead, the interest of the men is focused on her, which is im-

⁴ Gen 18:11.

⁵ The topic of infertility is central to the Hebrew Bible. It is a literary *topos* that underlies a certain number of female characters' stories (Cf. for instance Gen 29:31, Judg 13:2, 1Sam 1:5). The *topos* of infertility is also imbued with social and theological meanings. For a more in-depth discussion, see Baden 2011, 13-27.

⁶ The verb «to laugh» is expressed in Hebrew through the root צחק, which recalls the name of Isaac (יצחק). The use of this root would characterize Isaac as a God reflecting merriment. For the discussion about the possible etymologies of the name, see Stamm 1950, 33-38; Westermann 1985, 269; Sarna 1989, 127.

⁷ Rashi, Gen 18:12.

⁸ Ibn Ezra, Gen 18:12.

⁹ *Derek Eretz Zuta*, *Perek ha-Shalom* 6.

¹⁰ Brueggemann 1982, 157-158.

¹¹ Waltke 2001, 268.

¹² Westermann 1985, 281-282.

¹³ Wenham 2015, 48.

¹⁴ Sarna *op. cit.*, 2001, 126, 130.

¹⁵ Alter 1996, 79, 97.

¹⁶ Fischer 2011, 272-273.

¹⁷ Based on Alter, even Conybeare 2006, 12-13.

¹⁸ "ותצחק שרה" for the Hebrew "ותצחק שרה".

¹⁹ Giuntoli 2013, 62-63.

proper in a patriarchal society. She laughs because of the realistic estimation of her age and not because sexuality in old age was taboo or because she was laughing at God. The moment she realises who the announcer is (“Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?” 18:14), her laughter gives way to faith, and she denies her laughter, which ultimately gives Isaac his name (יצחק-צחק). The fact that the deity insists on Sarah’s laughter thus does not represent a severe reprimand, but in fact, the preparation of an aetiology of the name Isaac determined by folk etymology».

As discussed, scholars have taken different positions over the years about interpreting this pericope. Sarah’s intentions in front of God represent the crucial point which leads them to understand the character’s behaviour differently. This issue will be argued in the following paragraphs. What can unquestionably be considered explicit is that Sarah’s laugh is, at least at the beginning, an impulsive laugh of mock.

3. Fearing God: a Positive Attitude

As discussed in section 1, since Late Antiquity, commentators realised that Sarah’s behaviour could be perceived as ambivalent. Most converge in two opposite positions that divide those who negatively judge Sarah’s behaviour and those who do not. Proposals were brought forward to conciliate her disbelieving attitude with the positive role she plays in the story, that of Abraham’s wife. A careful reading of the text can allow a further argument for the two strands of interpretation to be reconciled without precluding the reasons brought to one or the other.

On the one hand, the characters’ attitude to act as a human being would naturally do and remain on a human level is coherent with the preceding events and chapters that lead into the narrative. The story of Terah’s lineage (Gen 11:27-25-18) unfolds a central topic: who will be Abraham’s successor if Sarah cannot have children due to her barrenness²⁰? Abraham tries to solve the problem by considering Lot as his heir. After Lot is ruled out, the patriarch proposes his servant, Eliezer and Ismael. These attempts are all human efforts to fulfil God’s promise of an outstanding offspring, remedying the problem of Sarah’s infertility²¹. Indeed, Abraham acts on a level of realistic possibilities and laughs at the announcement of a child. Therefore, finding a similar behaviour in the literary construction of his wife’s character would not be strange.

On the other hand, Sarah’s conduct should not necessarily be understood as a form of distrust before God, for she is unaware of His presence at the moment of laughing. In her eyes, laughing was just a natural human reaction in front of a stranger’s absurd prediction. But a further argument can be added to these considerations. As soon as Sarah understands being in front of divine beings, she changes her mind «for she was afraid²²». Then she lies, claiming to have not laughed.

At first, attention should be paid to the expression used to point out fear causing Sarah’s reaction. It is set at the centre of a concentric structure, a widely spread technique of biblical rhetoric aimed at emphasizing a concept and focus the reader’s attention²³. The structure is construed through the repetition of the roots אמר and צחק and the negative particle לא in the parallel sections A and A¹. The centre draws the reader’s attention to the reason for Sarah’s denial, even explaining why she lies.

It looks as follows:

ותכחש שרה לאמר לא צחקתי	A
כי יראה	B
ויאמר לא כי צחקת	A ¹

Because of Sarah’s ambiguous behaviour, one of the divine strangers immediately replies, remarking the truth²⁴. From our modern perspective, we could indeed judge Sarah’s attitude as a coward, for she deliberately lied out of fear. But taking a closer look at Biblical costumes may overturn this perspective.

According to the Dictionary of Classical Hebrew, the root used to express fear (ירא), when referring to God, points out both the acts of fearing and being reverent²⁵. Indeed, fearing God is a positive attitude in the Hebrew Bible. Two examples from the narration of Terah’s descendence, Gen 20 and Gen 22, will support this statement. From a synchronic perspective, Gen 20 is the second of three narratives construed using a similar pattern reproducing conventional scenes²⁶. Husband and wife arrive in a foreign land, and the man introduces his wife

²⁰ The topic is set in the wider genealogy structure of the Book of Genesis. See Ska 2006, 19-25.

²¹ This interpretation has been proposed by Helyer (1983, 77-88) and then repropoed by Naumann (2018, 29-62).

²² Gen 18:15.

²³ These structures are widespread over the Bible, belonging to three possible sets: concentric structure, chiasm, or parallelism. See Walsh 2001, 7-25; On the interpretation of the structure’s significance and meaning, see Assis 2002, 273-275.

²⁴ According to Schneider, it is not God reproaching Sarah at v.15, but Abraham. She argues that the narrative never portrays Sarah directly speaking to divine beings. See Schneider, 2015, 89-90. However, the narrator always introduces the speaker when the text records a change of actors performing a direct speech. If it actually is Abraham talking to Sarah, one may ask why the narrator has not notified the reader of this change of interlocutor.

²⁵ See Clines 1998, 276-281.

²⁶ According to Alter (2011, Chapter 3), the scene of the sister-wife is just an example of the numerous models upon which the Bible construct its stories.

as his sister to the king (or to the Pharaoh in the first story). The ruler is unaware of the woman's marriage condition, so he desires to lie with her, which is a sin before God. The situation of unknowingly acting wickedly in front of God is similar to the episode of Sarah, and the behaviour of the foreign ruler is noteworthy. Indeed, in all three episodes, he is shown to be intimidated in front of the Israelite God, which is explicitly pointed out as a positive attitude in Gen 20. According to Ska, «fear of God exists in foreign countries, although Abraham does not believe it does (20:11), and men do not necessarily follow their instincts²⁷». Therefore, according to Gen 20, even Abimelech – a foreign king – has regard for God.

In Gen 22, Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac is also a proof of trust. As it is well known, God asks Abraham for the sacrifice of his child, Isaac. Abraham is grieved but does not hesitate to set up everything as best he can to carry out the divine order. In doing so, he leaves Isaac unaware of his fate. When Isaac is about to be killed, God orders the patriarch to spare him from death. In fact, the confidence test is considered overcome as soon as Abraham proves being ready to fulfil the Lord's will, which is fearing Him²⁸.

Both the reported instances outline the feeling of fear as a form of respect and worship of the deity. Indeed, in agreement with the Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament, fear of God embraces terror and retreat but also attraction, trust, and love. Therefore, «this internal polarity and dynamic give rise to a semantic development in the fear of God: when the element of literal fear recedes, “fear of God” becomes tantamount to “religion” or “spirituality”; i.e., fear of God becomes synonymous with reverence, worship, and obedience to God's command²⁹». It may be inferred that if fearing God is a devout attitude, Sarah is meant to fall into this positive characterisation.

4. The Specular Mock of Gen 18 and Gen 19

Given the given considerations, it is worth drawing attention to Chapter 19 of the book of Genesis. The element of laughter appears in Gen 18:12 and Gen 19:14, and it is interesting for this paper's proposal to consider the specular construction of the stories.

The narration of Gen 18 has always been considered with the narration of Gen 19 as a coherent narrative unit. According to medieval³⁰ and modern³¹ commentators, God, the strangers, and Abraham are actors in both stories and function as linkers between them. In addition to the extreme similarity in the use of words, expressions and arguments, Gen 18 and 19 are specular from a structural point of view. Indeed, the plot action seems to be constructed through the narrative technique of inversion. Following Blum³² and Licht³³, Letellier³⁴ suggests that a binary model of positive and negative elements underlies the plot's dynamic. According to the scholar, opposites dominate the story: divine/human, man/woman, day/night, light/darkness, heights/depths, open/closed, good/evil, life/death, preservation/annihilation, friend/enemy, acceptance/rejection, hospitality/violation. Based on this setting, Gen 18 is considered the positive side of the diptych; Gen 19, pointed out by scholars³⁵ as a topsy-turvy moral world, is the negative counterpart. In this context, it is relevant to examine the behaviour of mocking characters, for it suggests identifying one more binary opposition in the text. Indeed, the act of mocking is expressed by the same root (צחק) in both narratives and is likely to be considered the triggering element in the opposition. It has been claimed in the previous paragraphs that Sarah's laughing at the divine announcement in Gen 18 only takes place because of her innocent unawareness. As soon as she realises the announcement comes from divine beings, she is afraid and tries to deny her action clumsily. In Gen 19, a very similar episode is told by the narrator.

Lot is informed by the angels that God has sent them to Sodom to destroy the whole city. Following their suggestion, he tries to rescue his relatives (Gen 19:12-13), suggesting escape. Therefore, he walks out of his house to warn his sons-in-law about the urgency to leave the city (Gen 19:14). But «he seemed to his sons-in-law to be jesting (היה מצחק)³⁶». The verbal root צחק, in a different conjugation, is the same used for Sarah's laughter. The sons-in-law show mockery, derision, and pride towards Lot's claim, which means, consequently, towards God's claim. But the sons-in-law do not reverse their behaviour as Sarah had done. While the woman fears God and tries to right her wrong, Lot's sons-in-law remain mocking. They are probably to be identified as

²⁷ Ska 2006, 58.

²⁸ The fear of God as proof of trust is explicitly mentioned within the text. Cf. Gen 22:12.

²⁹ Botterweck Ringgren 1974, 298.

³⁰ See, for ex., Rashi, Gen 19:1.

³¹ Just to quote the most known, see Gunkel 1964, 177; Von Rad 1972, 160; Brueggemann 1982, 162; Waltke Fredricks 2001, note 155.

³² Blum 1984, 269.

³³ Leach 1969, 11.

³⁴ Letellier (1995, 66-68) provides a reading of Gen 18 and 19 based on a specular analysis that allow a final interpretation about the narratives' symbolic meaning.

³⁵ Lasine (1984, 37-59) considers the episode of Sodom one of the episodes that reverse the world's order, such as Jdgs 19 and 2Kgs 6:25-30. See also Lasine 1989, 61-86 and Matthews 1992, 3-11.

³⁶ Gen 19:14.

inhabitants of Sodom, who are not proverbial for their righteousness³⁷. In fact, on the one hand, Sarah becomes the mother of the promised son, against every biological expectation. On the other hand, Lot's sons-in-law are burned out within the city of Sodom, as can be inferred from Gen 19:16.

Based on the data discussed above, Letellier's reading of Sarah's laugh can add one more opposition to those proposed and listed. According to the previous observations, Sarah's and the sons-in-law's attitudes convey the impression of disrespectful behaviour in front of God. But if the laugh of Gen 18 implies mocking, it also implies repentance. Sarah is unaware that she is mocking God, and she promptly shows herself ready to manifest her respect in front of Him through fear. The characters of Gen 19 were not as prepared. Their pride and arrogance in considering Lot's warning as a joke becomes the price for their own life. Lot had spoken to them in God's name, warning them of His intentions. But they have chosen to distrust Him. In fact, they die. Therefore, being aware of its own actions may lead to pointing out intentionality as an additional moral topic of Gen 18 and 19. In the context of the inverted construction of the narratives, awareness and unawareness, could be expected to be considered yet another model of opposites on which the plots are built.

5. Conclusion

The previous paragraphs have shown how even positive characters like Abraham and Sarah have mocking behaviours in biblical narratives. Then, there is no need to deny Sarah's mocking attitude, especially because it is immediately mitigated by her reaction in realizing to be in the presence of God. It is no coincidence that she is afraid.

The fear of God has been addressed as a positive feeling in the Hebrew Bible, for it involves reverence and worship. Then, Sarah's behaviour may be expected not to be considered distrustful regarding God. Instead, it may represent the positive model in the broader topic concerning awareness. As a human being, Sarah laughs to express disbelief, for she finds it hilarious to hear about her pregnancy from strangers unaware of her barrenness. But as soon as she is aware they know it, for they are not humans, she is afraid, which is reverence and does not show signs of distrust. Despite one of the three divine beings accusing Sarah of having laughed, and she denies it – i.e. she lies – considering her behaviour as a positive model may not be regarded suspiciously. Sarah's clumsy lie falls within the context of the human impulsive behaviour of the character. As she knows to be in front of divine beings, she also knows that a human lie cannot be influential³⁸. Therefore, it is likely to be seen as a human attempt to fix a mistake.

The episode has been set in parallelism with its supposed negative counterpart, Gen 19. Since chapters 18 and 19 of the book of Genesis are said to be based on pairs of opposite topics, the irreverent behaviour of Lot's sons-in-law becomes noteworthy in the context of consciousness. They are informed about God's intention to sweep away the city, but they react distrustfully in His regard. This mocking awareness leads them to death. The full evaluation of the collected data allows a conclusive observation.

The episodes concerning the characters' mocking attitudes in Gen 18 and 19 might regard awareness. Indeed, it is recognisable over the narratives as a play of being aware and unaware, which the narrator employs to add depth to the characters. Thus, on the one hand, Sarah may represent a positive character who can experience repentance and worship. On the other hand, Lot's sons-in-law may take on the nuances of negative figures, slain by their arrogance. Above all of them is the character of God, whose absolute awareness allows judgement. Indeed, as The Book of Proverbs reminds us, «Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy»³⁹. And Sarah obtained it.

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³⁷ It is the only pericope in which Lot's sons-in-law are named. According to the text, Lot moved to Sodom alone (Gen 13), separating from his nephew Abraham. Therefore, both wife and daughters – and with them their husbands – have to be citizens, or sojourners, of Sodom.

³⁸ The observation is particularly true if one considers that Sarah realised to be in the presence of divine beings because they heard her thoughts. Cf. Gen 18:12-13.

³⁹ Prov 28:13.

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