

Reading for Sarai (Genesis 12:1-9)

In Genesis, Sarai is a profoundly underwritten character.

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Sarai is a profoundly underwritten character in this text. She is tethered to Abram as his wife and thus goes with him when God commands it. We are told almost nothing about Abram's interior experience of going, but we are told even less about Sarai's.

In fact, the text does not even tell us she *goes*. Instead, it tells us she is *taken*, along with Abram's nephew Lot, all their possessions, and the unnamed people they had "acquired." Sarai heads the laundry list of human and material possessions taken by Abram as he follows God's call, but like everyone and everything on the list she is written as an entirely passive character in the text, briefly present but inactive and even unacknowledged save for the single phrase, "Abram took his wife Sarai."

And yet, as Phyllis Tribble writes in the edited volume *Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children*, Sarai—not Abram or Lot—"is the human pivot" in this story; "everything hinges on Sarai."

Tribble reads the story in light of God's command ("Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you") followed by God's promise ("I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.") For Tribble, this command and promise must be understood within the patriarchal logic of this ancient world: "God commands Abram to break with all that identifies a man in his ancient world." This includes the land, clan, and house allotted by patriarchal structures.

God then promises to remake those structures for Abram, who God promises will beget a great nation and a great family in a new land. This is a promise made to Abram, but it is a promise dependent on Sarai and specifically on her conceiving, growing, birthing, and raising a child. "Without a child there will be no great nation," writes Tribble, "without a child, no great name; without a child, the blessings will be barren."

Therein lies the problem, for the only thing we know about Sarai at this point in the story is that she is "barren" (11:30). Sarai's barrenness is the primary condition of her character in the biblical account. She is introduced by it, haunted by it, and eventually redeemed from it, we are told, with the miraculous and covenant-keeping birth of her son Isaac.

Walter Brueggemann has mined the metaphoric significance of this barrenness, reading it as the essential context for God's promise-making at the start of Genesis 12. "If it had been our task to begin a new history, we would have done so in a more hopeful context," he writes in his Genesis commentary. "But not this God. Inexplicably, this God speaks his powerful word directly into a situation of barrenness. That is the ground of the good news."

God's call and promise to Abram, as an echo of the creation story, comes from the nothingness of Sarai's empty womb.

But Sarai's barrenness is not simply metaphor, and it is not simply a problem. As Tribble notes, it is part of her power, part of what makes Sarai the "human pivot" on which "everything" in this story rests. As we read Sarai and the other unwritten people who fill the biblical record, we should resist the overly simple account. We need to wrestle with the dissonances of what we read and what we feel, what we are told and what we wonder, what is there and what is not there in the biblical text.