Moral Discernment in the Abraham and Sarah Narrative: Observations for Contemporary Pilgrims

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Abstract
For many Christians, Abraham and Sarah are exemplary characters, whose lives provide spiritual and moral guidance for us on our own journeys of faith. Adopting a literary approach, this paper explores the narrative, draws insights from reception history, and asks what it can teach us with regard to moral discernment in the contemporary church. It suggests that while Abraham and Sarah live lives of faith and hope, they are flawed characters, hampered by personal weakness and cultural influences. Reception history of the story challenges us to be discerning readers — aware of our own flaws and constraints, unafraid to examine our traditional understandings, and open to learning from voices from traditions other than our own.

Keywords
Abraham; Sarah; moral discernment; reception history; narrative

Introduction

In Christian tradition, the Bible is a source of moral guidance as well as of doctrine and spiritual comfort. For many 'ordinary' readers of the text, the Bible is the place in which to look for guidance for everyday life.[1] The text is to be taken at face value and its instructions obeyed without discussion. This approach to Scripture is rooted in a hermeneutical standpoint which has been called 'foundationalism', the belief that human beings can reach a knowledge and understanding of 'objective truth'.[2] It dominated much of biblical scholarship in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and led to an understanding of the text as the source of facts and data, and as far as ethics is concerned, principles and rules.

[1] By 'ordinary' I mean Christians who have little or no theological education. See Jeff Astley *Ordinary Theology: Looking, Learning and Listening in Theology* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 56.
[2] Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), p. 23.

In recent years, however, this approach has come under fire. Not only has it been recognised that our understanding of the text is constrained by cultural context and human weakness, there has also been a growing realisation that our moral lives are impoverished if we live only by rules. Under the influence of character ethics, ethicists and theologians have come to appreciate the value and importance of narrative in the moral lives of communities and individuals.[3]

Within biblical studies, this, along with a growing interest in literary criticism, has led to a greater appreciation of the narratives in Scripture as a source of moral guidance.[4] In his book *Understanding Old Testament Ethics*, John Barton notes that the Hebrew Scriptures are rich in examples of narrative texts which can be used as vehicles for the exploration of moral issues. We can look to the behaviour, attitudes, and values of the characters within these narratives to provide us with rich material for discussion. They are, as he says, 'stories with a serious purpose', each intended as 'a vehicle for presenting insights into the moral life of human subjects in such a way that the reader would be challenged and stimulated to thought and action'.[5]

With this in mind, in this article, I intend to focus on one of these narratives, the story of Abraham and Sarah. The patriarch and his wife have, in both Christian and Jewish tradition, often been revered as examples for us to follow. Abraham is considered to be the father of faith, the biological ancestor of the people of Israel, and the obedient, faithful recipient of the covenantal promises. As such, he is venerated as the patriarch of Israel, 'a model for emulation, the progenitor of the Jewish people, and a friend of God'.[6] Sarah, too, has been commended

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[3] Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

[4] See, for example, Gordon J. Wenham, *Story as Torah: Reading the Old Testament Ethically* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000); *Character and Scripture: Moral Formation, Community, and Biblical Interpretation,* ed. by William P. Brown (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002); Stephen E. Fowl and L. Gregory Jones, *Reading in Communion: Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life* (London: SPCK, 1991).

[5] John Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics: Approaches and Explorations* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), p. 10.

[6] Sean A. Adams and Zanne Domoney-Lyttle, 'Introduction: Abraham in Jewish and Christian Authors', in *Abraham in Jewish and Early Christian Literature*, ed. by Sean A. Adams and Zanne Domoney-Lyttle (London: T&T Clarke 2019), pp. 1–8 (p. 2).

for her obedience to her husband, and understood as a model for motherhood. But how far, if at all, should they be revered and emulated? Are they really to be trusted as good moral guides? The aim here is to explore the narrative, looking at how Abraham and Sarah are depicted and how they conduct themselves in relation to God and to other people.[7] Along the way, we will dip into the narrative's reception history, both Christian and Jewish, listening to and learning from the insights of readers over the centuries.[8] In what ways can these voices help us be discerning readers of the text today?

Abraham: Piety, Religiosity, and Obedience

The narrator tells the story simply, seldom offering comment. Abraham, after the death of his father Terah, is commanded by God to leave Harran, and go to an as-yet unnamed land. Having heard from God that he will become a 'great nation' (Gen 12:2–3), the patriarch sets off on his journey, taking Sarah and his nephew Lot with him, along with his household and possessions, not knowing where he is going. As readers follow the story of Abraham and Sarah's journey, they are left to make up their own minds as to the morality of the protagonists' behaviour on the basis of incidents and dialogue. Nevertheless, it is made clear from the first few verses of the narrative that Abraham is to be seen as a man of obedient faith (Gen 12:4), and this emphasis is maintained throughout. Prior to Abraham's arrival on the scene, the Genesis story of human activity has featured rebellion, death, and finally, scattering, when the attempt to build a tower at Babel is thwarted (Gen 11:1–9). Abraham's dutiful response to God's call to leave his home in Harran

[7] Note that I am not looking for 'implied law' in the story as, for example, James K. Bruckner does in *Implied Law in the Abraham Narrative: A Literary and Theological Analysis* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).

[8] I use the words 'dip into' advisedly, for the primary and secondary sources are vast. See, for example, John D. Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham: The Legacy of the Patriarch in Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012); Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Abraham: The Story of a Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015); Kris Sonek, 'The Abraham Narratives in Genesis 12–25', *Currents in Biblical Research*, 17 (2019), 158–183.

(Gen 12:4–5) brings us back to a new beginning of faith and obedience.[9] From the outset, the reader knows that this is a man to watch.

In the course of his journey, Abraham builds several altars (4:7, 8; 12:6; 13:4, 18; 22:9) and religious ritual is an important aspect of his ability to discern what God is saying. However, this is not mere religiosity — Abraham is a man of prayer, who 'calls upon the name of the Lord' (13:4), and he regularly hears from God in dreams and visions (e.g. 12:7; 13:14; 15:1–16; 17:1–22). He leaves Ur of the Chaldees without demur, and obeys the command to have himself and all the males in his household, including slaves, circumcised (17:23–27). Famously, too, he does not object when God tells him to sacrifice his son, Isaac (Genesis 22). He is obedient and loyal even in the face of overwhelming evidence that the promises of land and progeny he has received are unlikely to be fulfilled. He believes, trusts, and is faithful to his understanding of what God is saying to him.

On this evidence, then, his reputation as a man of faith seems unassailable. This was certainly the opinion of the earliest Christian theologians. Paul notes in his letters to the Roman and Galatian churches that Abraham is to be considered righteous because he believed God's promise, despite the odds, that he would be the 'father of many nations' (Romans 4; Galatians 3). For the writer of the letter to the Hebrews, Abraham's faith is exemplary because of his trust in God's goodness and the fact that he holds on to what he has been promised and leaves his home without knowing where he is going (Heb 6:15; 11:8, 17).[10] In the Epistle of James, Abraham is commended for his obedience when he offered his son for sacrifice (James 2:21–23). The Early Fathers saw Abraham as a moral paragon. For Saint Anthony, Abraham's journey is an allegory of the spiritual life — the patriarch was searching for the 'discernment of the good' and his journey provides us with a pattern to follow. According to Ambrose, Adam had allowed himself to

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[9] Thomas L. Brodie, *Genesis as Dialogue: A Literary, Historical and Theological Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 233.

[10] On the use of the Abraham story in the New Testament, see further Chris Tilling, 'Abraham in New Testament Letters', in *Abraham in Jewish and Early Christian Literature*, ed. by Adams and Domoney-Lyttle, pp. 127–148.

be distracted by pleasures, but Abraham turns toward virtue.[11] His obedience is unquestioning, as the fourth-century Egyptian theologian Didymus the Blind notes with favour; he does exactly as God tells him.[12]

However, not all commentators have shared this view. Some suggest, for example, that Abraham's trip to Egypt during the famine betrays a lack of trust in Yahweh's ability or willingness to provide for his household's needs. His offering of Sarah as his sister (Gen 12:10–20; 20:1–18) has been seen as a failure to trust God to protect him from danger.[13] Calvin considered that in Egypt, Abraham should have turned to God in a dangerous situation and that the repeat incident in Gerar shows that he did not learn from his mistake. Nevertheless, Calvin is keen to emphasise that these are only minor stumbles in the life of a man who did not waver in his faithfulness to God's greater purpose.[14] Similarly, for Claus Westermann, the fact that Abraham yields to Pharoah's might in this situation is a sign of weak faith — he should have trusted God for a way out.[15] His laughter when angels tell him that Sarai will soon have a child (17:17) and his impregnation of Hagar have been interpreted as expressions of doubt with regard to the promise (17:18). In the overall story, however, these incidents are mere aberrations — all too human slips in an otherwise exemplary life. The comment of the narrator captures the theme of his life: when God promises that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars, Abram believes and it is 'credited to him as righteousness' (15:6).

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11 Anthony the Great, 'Letter 1', in *Epistolae sanctissimorum*, Patrologiae Cursus Completus Series Graeca, vol 40, ed. by J.-P Migne (Paris: Migne 1857–1886), cols 977–1000; Ambrose of Milan, 'On Abraham', in *Sancti Ambrosii Opera,* ed. by Karl Schenkl, Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum, vol 32 (Vienna: F. Tempsky, 1896), 2:1–2. See the *IVP Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture Old Testament II: Genesis 12–50*, ed. by Mark Sheridan and Thomas C. Oden (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2002), pp. 1–2.

12 Didymus the Blind, *Commentary on Genesis: Fathers of the Church Patristic Series*, trans. by Robert C. Hill (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2018), p. 185.

13 Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 95.

14 See John Calvin, *Sermons on Genesis Chapters 11–20*, trans. by Rob Roy McGregor (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2012), Sermon 56 (p. 111) and Sermon 96 (p. 854).

15 Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12–16*, trans. by John J. Scullion SJ, A Continental Commentary (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), p. 167.

Abraham: Social, Business, and Political Interests

Abraham's faithful obedience and religious observance have been, to a large extent, admired. However, religiosity and obedience tell us little or nothing about the true nature of a person. It is possible to be (or even want to be) religiously and theologically correct, but be a very flawed character indeed. It is possible for a person to believe that he or she is obeying God, but at the same time to have ulterior motives and selfish aims. The best way to determine a person's moral character is by looking at his or her dealings with other people. We will therefore consider Abraham's social, business, and political activities as they are recorded in the narrative. Two things stand out here. First, he is largely peaceable. He is able, on the whole, to maintain peace with his neighbours and as he journeys through others' land. Abraham has no designs on the territory of others. When trouble erupts in Egypt, he leaves quietly, and in Gerar he enters into a treaty of mutual respect with Abimelech. He is generous in allowing his nephew to take the fertile Jordan lands for himself, and when this leads to trouble, Abraham sends his militia to rescue him (14:13–16). Kinship is important.

He is also depicted as a man of integrity, with a sense of justice in an age before the law was given.[16] He also seems to have a sense of God as God of justice.[17] He argues with God, insisting on justice when it seems that entire cities are going to be destroyed because of the behaviour of some of their citizens. According to Nahum Sarna, Abraham's dialogue with God here

> involves a concern for the welfare of others, total strangers. Abraham displays an awareness of suffering and an ability to respond beyond his immediate personal interests. He shows himself to be a moral man, a compassionate person. His behaviour at this moment makes him the paradigm of 'the just and the right', qualities that are to characterize his descendants.[18]

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[16] See Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics*, pp. 32–44. Cf. Cyril S. Rodd, *Glimpses of a Strange Land: Studies in Old Testament Ethics* (London: T&T Clark, 2001).

[17] Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis,* Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1982), p. 171.

[18] Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2001), p. 132.

At a post-battle meeting with the king of Sodom, Abram refuses to take any goods from the king (except the food the men have eaten), declaring that he has made an oath to God that he would give him no cause to say 'I have made Abram rich' (14:23). He makes sure, however, that his men have their share.

Wealth does not seem to lead him into moral difficulty.[19] When Lot chooses the fertile Jordan area, Abraham is not greedy or self-seeking and he does not impose his seniority on family members.[20] Grasping Lot loses everything while Abraham's wealth increases. Melchizedek, the King of Salem, who is described as a priest of God Most High, recognises Abraham as a man of God, and blesses him. Abraham pays tithes to Melchizedek — an act which Ambrose interprets as humility. When God appears to Abraham near the trees of Mamre in the form of three men, he offers lavish hospitality (18:3–8).

Abraham: Domestic Matters

In general, then, Abraham's activities suggest a man who is virtuous in matters of business, hospitality, and diplomacy. He is not perfect, but there is integrity in his dealings with others. The relative orderliness of Abraham's life is sharply contrasted with the chaos and greed of Lot and the citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah. He is loyal and gracious in his dealings with Lot. However, his treatment of his wife and female slave, and even of his children, raise many questions. The two occasions on which he says that Sarah is his sister, rather than his wife, have troubled scholars. Is Abraham a coward to let Pharaoh take Sarah into his harem, failing to protect her honour? Should we be concerned about his deceitfulness? Many, including Augustine, absolve Abraham of deceit on the basis that Sarah actually is his half-sister. Cowardice and dishonour are discounted by Hermann Gunkel on the grounds that the practice of using one's sister in this way was not unethical in that culture.

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[19] For Brodie, there are two primary tests for Abraham involving wealth and beauty. The patriarch passes the first — but fails the second. Thomas L. Brodie *Genesis as Dialogue: A Literary, Historical and Theological Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[20] Sarna (*Genesis*, p. 98) speaks of Abraham displaying 'great nobility of character' and as being 'peace loving and magnanimous'.

'The story', he says, 'glorifies the intelligence of the patriarch, the beauty and the self-sacrifice of the mother, and especially the faithful help of Yahweh.'[21]

Others are less sympathetic. Walter Brueggemann discounts arguments that Abraham was not at fault because Sarah was really Abraham's sister by noting that the story 'clearly depends on the admission that Abraham was lying'.[22] Mark Biddle, while exonerating Abraham of dishonesty, considers his actions 'inept and clumsy' and suggests that the tales underscore the divine plan for Abraham to be a blessing to the nations *despite* his behaviour.[23] He notes Abraham's lack of trust but argues that the issue in these stories is 'not one of fairness or justice, but rather an expression of God's grace which surpasses human error and mistrust'.[24]

Jewish writers have long been perturbed by Abraham's behaviour in these stories. Some have tried to see it in a positive light. The book of Jubilees, for example, absolves Abraham (and Sarah) by saying that Pharaoh took Sarah by force for himself (Jubilees 13:12–13; 17:17–18).[25] The *Genesis Apocryphon* 20:14–22 similarly emphasises that Sarah was taken from Abraham by force. For the medieval Sephardic commentator Ramban, Abraham inadvertently committed a great sin in risking Sarah's virtue — he should have trusted God to save him. Radak, the eleventh-century commentator, considers that Abraham had to make a choice between two evils. Both are at risk of being killed and his

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[21] Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis*, trans. by Mark E. Biddle (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997), p. 172. The issue of whether these narratives provide two accounts of one incident or of two separate events, does not concern us here. For a discussion of the arguments, see Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50,* Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1994), pp. 68–69.

[22] Brueggemann, *Genesis*, p. 127.

[23] Mark E. Biddle, 'The "Endangered Ancestress" and Blessing for the Nations', *Journal of Biblical Literature,* 109, no. 4 (1990), 599–611. According to Biddle, a potential curse is averted by God in the Pharaoh episode and the potential depriving of the blessing is recognised by Abimelech.

[24] Hemchand Gossai, *Power and Marginality in the Abraham Narrative* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1995), p. 124.

[25] See J. L. Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible: A Guide to the Bible as It Was at the Start of the Common Era* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 254–255.

wife at risk of abuse. It is better for Sarah to be violated so that both may survive.[26]

Contemporary feminist scholarship offers a quite different approach to the story. From this perspective, in Genesis 12, Abraham traffics his beautiful wife in order to save his own skin.[27] Sarah, who has no choice in the matter, stays in Pharaoh's harem while Abraham makes a profit, showing no concern for her wellbeing whatsoever. Thanks to the work of feminist writers, we are also now far more able to appreciate the nature of Hagar's powerlessness and lack of voice, and the compassion that God shows her when Abraham and Sarah have shown none. Whereas Ambrose took the opportunity to urge women to put aside jealousy on the grounds that Sarah 'desired only that her husband forgive her sterility', and Augustine claimed that Abraham did not lust after Hagar, it is today pointed out that Hagar, as a female slave, had no rights at all, and so her impregnation by Abraham could be seen as rape. Abraham's distress for his son when he and his mother are sent away is encouraging to twenty-first century readers, but he does not, apparently, have any concern for Hagar. Weak in the face of pressure from Sarah, he sends his slave and son into the desert — most likely to die.[28] With Bruce Chilton we might say that after the birth of Isaac, Abraham's character has 'all the staying power of a weathervane'.[29]

Above all, it is the story of the Akedah in Genesis 22 which has been the stimulus for discussion of Abraham's integrity. According to the narrator, Abraham is tested by God (Gen 22:1). When he is told to take Isaac to Mount Moriah and sacrifice him, he obeys without

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[26] Sarna *Genesis,* p. 95. Moses ben Nachman (Ramban 1194–1270 CE) was a Catalonian Jewish philosopher and biblical scholar. David Kimchi (Radak, 1160–1235 CE) was a Provencal rabbi, biblical commentator, grammarian, and philosopher. Sarna thinks Radak's interpretation is faulty, but recognises that Abraham had to face a 'conflict between human life and human dignity within a hierarchy of values'.

[27] Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes, 'Sarah's Exile: A Gender-Motivated Reading of Genesis 12.10–13.2', in *A Feminist Companion to Genesis*, ed. by Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), pp. 221–234.

[28] See Donna Nolan Fewell, 'Changing the Subject: Retelling the Story of Hagar the Egyptian', in *A Feminist Companion to Genesis*, ed. by Brenner, pp. 182–194; John L. Thompson *Writing the Wrongs: Women of the Old Testament Among Biblical Commentators from Philo through the Reformation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 17–99.

[29] Bruce Chilton, *Abraham's Curse: Child Sacrifice in the Legacies of the West* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), p. 202.

question. At the last minute, God provides a ram, and Isaac's life is saved. Early Christian and Jewish voices applaud Abraham.[30] In his *Treatise on Abraham* (167–207 CE) Philo approves of Abraham's 'free and loving tribute to God'.[31] The Epistle of James sees the offer of Isaac as an example of faith active in works (James 2:21–24). For the writer to the Hebrews, Abraham's faith is exemplary because the patriarch knew that God could raise people from the dead; on this basis he was prepared to sacrifice his son (11:17–19). Augustine thought Abraham praiseworthy for the same reason, and Irenaeus saw the patriarch's action as a foreshadowing of Jesus's death.[32]

The question of the ethics of the story begins to come to the fore in the modern age.[33] The approval of Abraham's actions amongst Christian readers is most famously expressed by Søren Kierkegaard, who admires Abraham (describing him as 'the knight of faith') for laying aside his sense of right and wrong in order to obey God. God's command is higher than any ethical principle.[34] Abraham is commended for his trust in God's goodness, for being prepared to relinquish that which is most precious to him, and for foreshadowing the kind of faithfulness exemplified by Christ himself.[35] The French Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas responds to Kierkegaard's approval of Abraham's willingness to abandon ethics in obedience to God with a commendation of the patriarch's ability to listen to the voice of the angel

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30 For Jewish and Christian views that Abraham was found to be faithful when tested, see J. L. Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible*, pp. 295–326. Cf. John D. Levenson *Inheriting Abraham*, pp. 66–112, who cites both positive and negative views.

31 Blenkinsopp, *Abraham*, p. 141.

32 Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. by Henry Bettenson, Penguin Classics, rev. edn (London: Penguin, 2003), 16:32; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies,* in vol 1 of *Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr, Ireneaus*, ed. by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 4:5.4.

33 See Aaron Koller, *Unbinding Isaac: The Significance of the Akedah for Modern Jewish Thought* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2020); *Interpreting Abraham: Journeys to Moriah*, ed. by Bradely Beach and Matthew T. Powell (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014).

34 Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and the Sickness unto Death*, trans. by Walter Lowrie (New York: Doubleday, 1954).

35 For positive Christian views of Abraham, see for example, R. W. L. Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith: A Study of Abraham and Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 225–242; Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in the Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 258–307.

and refrain from killing Isaac. Both writers, for quite different reasons, see Abraham's actions as morally worthy.[36]

But not all are agreed. For Immanuel Kant it is objectionable, and questionable, that God should be understood as making such a demand at all. God would not ask Abraham to do something contrary to the moral law. Kant says,

> Abraham should have replied to this supposedly divine voice: 'That I ought not to kill my good son is quite certain. But that you, this apparition, are God — of that I am not certain, and never can be, not even if this voice rings down to me from (visible) heaven.'[37]

Kant is an early, lone voice, however. Most Christians have been reluctant to challenge Scripture in this way, until recently. Increasingly, God's command and Abraham's unquestioning response have been considered cruel and unfeeling. What sort of a God would ask a father to do this? And what sort of a father would be prepared to do it? In her book *Abraham on Trial*, Carole Delaney recounts the story of Cristos Valenti who, in 1990, killed his daughter in a Californian park believing that God had commanded him to do so. Delaney challenges the notion that the willingness to sacrifice one's child, rather than the protection of the child, should be seen as the 'quintessential model of faith'.[38] Other questions have arisen. Why, for example, does Abraham argue with God about the fate of Sodom (and Lot) and not about the fate of his son? For his failure to argue with God in this instance, Abraham is either branded as a 'brute' or pronounced mentally deranged.[39]

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[36] See Laurence Bove, 'Unbinding the Other: Levinas, the Akedah and Going Beyond the Subject', in *Interpreting Abraham: Journeys to Moriah*, ed. by Beach and Powell, pp. 169–86.

[37] Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, trans. by Mary J. Gregor (New York: Abaris, 1979), p. 115. The German original was first published in 1798.

[38] Carole Delaney, *Abraham on Trial: The Social Legacy of Biblical Myth* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 5. See further, Chilton in *Abraham's Curse* who examines the story's influence on religious violence and martyrdom thinking in the three major faiths.

[39] Chilton, *Abraham's Curse*, p. 203. On religious delusion and the Akedah see George Graham, *The Abraham Dilemma: A Divine Delusion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

Sarah

But what of Sarah in all this? We are not told much about her. Like all the women in the patriarchal narratives, she is a secondary figure, despite her crucial role in the proceedings.[40] In comparison with Abraham's, her story is incomplete and she is very often absent at crucial moments in the narrative.[41] In everyday life, she seems to be given little or no choice in the matters that concern her. She plays no part in Abraham's religious practices, and is apparently complicit in the ill-judged dealings with Pharaoh and Abimelech. Did she enter Pharaoh's harem out of 'noble generosity to save her husband's life and to serve his great calling', as Leon Kass suggests?[42] We do not know.

We are informed, at the outset, that she is unable to have children (Gen 11:30). Her suffering, therefore, is great. Culturally, this is a matter of great shame, and implicitly, Abraham is seen as virtuous for having kept her as his wife.[43] Throughout the story she is a compliant if sometimes tetchy wife, going along with his wishes, obedient to his requests, often at considerable personal cost. The text gives little sense of her own relationship with God. Her laughter at the promise that she would conceive has been interpreted, like Abraham's, as a lack of faith (Gen 18:12–15). She does hear from God, however, when he contradicts her denial that she laughed. She is appropriately grateful when she does have a son (21:6). Importantly, she has her own sphere of influence in the domestic circle. She gives her slave Hagar to Abraham so that he may have a child with her (Gen 16:1–4). However, when Ishmael is born, she resents the fact that he has no respect for her family, and insists that Hagar is sent away (21:14).

In Hebrews 11:11, Sarah is included in the list of those whose faith is remarkable, along with that of Abraham. For Augustine, she denotes grace and divine mercy. For Origen her obedience to her

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[40] Sarah's key role in the narrative is highlighted by Tammi J. Schneider in *Sarah: Mother of Nations* (London: Continuum, 2004).

[41] Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narratives* (London: T&T Clark, 2016), pp. 69–114.

[42] Leon R. Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 275.

[43] See Candida R. Moss and Joel S. Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility: Biblical Perspectives on Procreation and Childlessness* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), pp. 21–69.

husband is exemplary.[44] Jewish commentators (Philo, for instance) see Sarah as representing virtue, and are keen, for example, to preserve her chastity in Pharoah's harem.[45] In the *Genesis Apocryphon*, Sarah is depicted as wise, but ultimately it is her usefulness as a sexual, reproductive being which is emphasised.[46] If the biblical narrative keeps Sarah in her place by giving her very little voice, midrashic tradition gives her opportunities to speak. In *Midrash Tanhuma, Lekh Lekha* 5, for example, she is allowed to protest at being left in Pharaoh's house at risk of abuse and tells God to act in keeping with his great name and the faith she placed in him. Some Jewish writers have been disturbed by her treatment of Hagar. Radak considers her treatment of Hagar to be lacking in morality, piety, and compassion, and Ramban is also critical.[47]

The reformers had differing views. Luther considered Sarah to be a wise and saintly women, while Calvin was strongly disapproving of her treatment of Hagar.[48] In the nineteenth century, some female writers followed the view taken in 1 Peter 3:6 that Sarah's every action should be seen in a good light, and that she should be commended as a paragon of wifely obedience and motherhood, as well as of faith.[49] This idealised picture is still a feature of some strands of Christian thinking today.[50] However opinions as to Sarah's character have begun to change. While

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[44] Augustine, *The City of God* 15.2; Origen 'Homilies on Genesis', *in Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, trans. by Ronald E. Heine (Washington, D.C: The Catholic University of America Press, 1982), 7:5–6. See Elaine James, 'Sarah, Hagar, and Their Interpreters', in *Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. by Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline E. Lapsley, 3rd edn (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), pp. 51–55.

[45] Philo, *Legum Allegoria,* trans. by F. H. Colson and G. H. Whitaker, Loeb Classical Library, 226 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1929), 2.82.

[46] See Joseph McDonald, *Searching for Sarah in the Second Temple Era*: *Images in the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint, the Genesis Apocryphon, and the Antiquities* (London: T&T Clark, 2020).

[47] See Adele Rheinhartz and Mirian Sinna-Walfish, 'Conflict and Coexistence in Jewish Interpretation', in *Hagar, Sarah and their Children: Jewish Christian and Muslim Perspectives*, ed. by Phyllis Trible and Letty M. Russell (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), pp. 101–126 (p. 113).

[48] Phyllis Trible and Letty M. Russell, 'Unto the Thousandth Generation', in *Hagar, Sarah and their Children*, ed. by Trible and Russell, pp. 1–33 (pp. 15–21).

[49] See for example, the writings of Frances Elizabeth King and Grace Aguilar in *Let Her Speak for Herself: Nineteenth Century Women Writing on Women in Genesis*, ed. by Marion Ann Taylor and Heather E. Weir (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006), pp. 107–184.

[50] See for example, Matthew B. Schwartz and Kalman J. Kaplan, *The Fruit of Her Hands: A Psychology of Biblical Woman* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), pp. 133–135.

it is recognised that as a woman who cannot have children she is an object of pity and even an outcast in society, her treatment of Hagar has been strongly criticised.[51] She is seen as petulant, jealous, and even cruel.[52] Athalya Brenner notes that she fails to treat Hagar's son as her own, despite having undertaken to do so (16:2).[53] Womanist writers point out that Sarah's treatment of Hagar is reminiscent of the abuse of black slaves by white women in antebellum America.[54]

As we have seen, Sarah is given no voice at all in the Akedah story. That her son is to be sacrificed is apparently no concern of hers. Josephus is concerned by this, and says that Abraham did not tell her what God had said to him.[55] Later Jewish Midrash, however, gives her a voice which the Masoretic text does not. *Leviticus Rabbah* tells of Sarah crying out and dying when Isaac tells her what has happened. 'Had it not been for the angel you would have been slain?' she asks her son. When Isaac confirms this, 'She uttered six cries corresponding to the six blasts of the shofar. It is said, she had barely finished speaking when she died.'[56] Contemporary feminist scholars also consider her part in the incident. In Phyllis Trible's view, it is Sarah rather than Isaac who is sacrificed on Moriah. After this, the matriarch and Abraham seem to separate. Trible suggests that the Akedah incident was the death knell for Abraham and Sarah's relationship — he goes to Beersheba and she dies in Hebron. The conflict with Hagar is unresolved and her character is unredeemed. It should have been Sarah who was healed of her attachment to Isaac, not Abraham.[57]

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51 On Sarah's cruel and callous treatment of Hagar see Gossai, *Power and Marginality*, pp. 1–34.

52 Alice Ogden Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots and Heroes: Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible*, 2nd edn (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), pp. 60–62.

53 Athalya Brenner, 'Female Social Behaviour: Two Descriptive Patterns within the "Birth of the Hero" Paradigm', in *A Feminist Companion to Genesis*, ed. by Brenner, pp. 204–221 (p. 208).

54 See, for example, Renita Weems, *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible* (San Diego: Lura Media, 1988), pp. 1–19; John W. Waters 'Who was Hagar?' in *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*, ed. by Cain Hope Felder (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1991), pp. 199–200.

55 Josephus, *Antiquities,* Books 1–3, trans. by H. St J. Thackeray, Loeb Classical Library, 242 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1998), 1.225.

56 Leviticus Rabbah 20:2; see Chilton, *Abraham's Curse*, p. 204.

57 Phyllis Trible, 'Genesis 22: The Sacrifice of Sarah', in *'Not in Heaven': Coherence and Complexity in Biblical Narrative*, ed. by J. P. Rosenblatt and J. C. Sitterson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), pp. 170–191.

Moral Discernment and the Story of Abraham and Sarah

What can we learn from this story of father Abraham and mother Sarah and their journey of faith? First, the traditional view of the patriarchs as moral exemplars and the Protestant emphasis on Abraham's faith and righteousness have tended to encourage a far less nuanced view of the patriarch and his wife than the story itself provides. These assumptions can tempt the reader to lose sight of the struggles of the journey and may even diminish our appreciation of God's grace in working through Abraham and Sarah despite their many failings. Far from being the paragons of virtue that the early Fathers wanted them to be, we see that they are as capable of good and evil as any other human beings. Despite this, and indeed because of it, we can learn from them. For instance, Abraham may be seen as an example for us to follow regarding belief and obedience. Brueggemann suggests that Abraham's willingness to leave all that he knows should pose a moral challenge to the modern western church in its settled, comfortable state, and to individual Christians in complacency and career building.[58] We can also admire Abraham's generosity and peaceableness in his dealings with outsiders and his loyalty to his kin. As for Sarah, whose voice is so muffled, we can say that she suffered much but remained faithful and loyal in her own way. We can detect both virtue and vice in these characters. There are signs of virtue — generosity, a sense of justice, diligence, patience (if tested at times), but there is also cruelty and exploitation. We might hope that they grow in wisdom as they go on their pilgrimage, but I am not convinced that we can see moral or spiritual development in the account.[59] What we have is a story of struggle and conflict.

Second, the story teaches us to be cognisant of how our cultural assumptions can inform and inhibit our moral discernment. The narrator and characters operate within the constraints of their culture, and Abraham and Sarah can treat others in ways that are shocking to twenty-first century readers. In the narrative, this is especially evident with respect to the treatment of women, children, and slaves. We do

[58] Brueggemann, *Genesis*, p. 112.

[59] Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics*, p. 68: 'What the Bible thinks about is not moral progress but conversion.' This does not, of course, preclude us from seeking moral progress in our own lives.

well to remember, however, that we are no different. Cultural assumptions can also blind us to the personhood of others and the moral dimensions of our own actions. Moreover, we must always be alert to the fact that what is legal (for example, using one's slave as a surrogate mother), may not be moral.[60] Of course, Abraham and Sarah's times are different to our own, but rather than ignore or excuse this, or discard the story altogether, we must recognise that we, no less than any preceding generation, need to examine ourselves to see where our moral discernment is influenced by and perhaps clouded by adherence to cultural norms.[61]

Third, we see too that if the story of Abraham and Sarah is to help us in our own moral discernment, we must be discerning readers. Christian interpreters have been uneasy with questioning the viewpoint of the narrator. We have been prone to idealising Abraham and Sarah. We have tended to adopt a foundationalist approach which looks to the text to provide us with certainty as to what to believe and how to behave.[62] We would do well, I think, to become more comfortable with an approach to Scripture which relishes the nuances of the narratives and the opportunities for rich moral discussion and discernment which they offer.

This is highlighted in the story of the Akedah and its reception history. Approval of Abraham's unquestioning obedience is far less popular than it was, and I am glad that this is so. Nevertheless, the Christian instinct to look to the text to tell us how we should live our lives runs deep, and can have problematic results. Clemens Thoma speaks of an Akedah-inspired spirituality in late antiquity. He writes,

> Many people, finding themselves in difficult situations, were able to sustain themselves on the strength of this account about Abraham who, confidently obeying the God who was 'testing' him (Gen 22:1), was prepared to slaughter his only and beloved son, and about Isaac who was willing to be offered as a

[60] The practice is attested in the *Code of Hammurabi*, 146. A copy of the Code of Hammurabi can be found at the Avalon Project, part of Yale University Law Library <https://avalon.law.yale.edu/ancient/hamframe.asp> [accessed 3November 2023].

[61] See further Paul Borgman, 'Abraham and Sarah: Literary Text and the Rhetorics of Reflection', in *The Function of Scripture in Early Jewish and Christian Tradition,* ed. by Craig A. Evans and James A. Sanders (London; Bloomsbury, 1998), pp. 45–77.

[62] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism,* p. 23.

> sacrifice. This expression of obedience by Abraham and submission by Isaac constitute an example worthy of imitation. The story motivated people to accept obediently and submissively in their lives what seemed incomprehensible, unendurable and contradictory and to reflect on it.[63]

Such an understanding may provide reassurance and emotional comfort in the face of difficulty, but it can also lead to passive acceptance of injustice. A foundationalist perspective prompts a desire to find proposition and instruction, asking only 'what is the story telling me to do?'. As we have seen, such an approach, when taken to extremes, can have tragic consequences. Here, we can learn much from the Rabbinic tradition of midrash with its willingness to dig deep and ask awkward questions of the text.[64] According to *Genesis Rabbah*, a wicked angel asks why Abraham should think sacrificing his son is an acceptable thing to do: 'Hast thou lost thy wits?' he asks.[65] We may not wish to be visited by a wicked angel, but, as the Apostle Paul well knew, all spiritual discernment needs to be tested, and it should be done in community (1 Cor 14:26–33, cf. 1 John 4:1). Had Abraham consulted Sarah, for example, had she been given a voice, he might have re-thought, re-discerned what he thought God was telling him to do, and averted much suffering in the process. Did God really say that?

Conclusion

The main aim of this article has been to explore how the story of Abraham and Sarah can be a guide for moral discernment amongst contemporary Christian readers. Noting the limitations of a foundationalist hermeneutic which looks to the text for rules and instructions and suggesting that it is a narrow if not impoverished way to go about moral discernment, the choice was made for a narrative approach which looks to the story for challenging moral insight.

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[63] Clemens Thoma, 'Observations on the Concept and the Early Forms of Akedah-Spirituality', in *Standing Before God: Studies on Prayer in Scriptures and in Tradition with Essays in Honor of John M. Oesterreicher*, ed. by Asher Finkel and Lawrence Frizzell (New York: Ktav, 1981), pp. 213–222 (p. 213).

[64] On midrash see Karin Hedner Zetterholm, *Jewish Interpretation of the Bible: Ancient and Contemporary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Fortress, 2012), pp. 69–110.

[65] *Genesis Rabbah* 56.4.

This narrative based approach revealed a far more nuanced story than the commonly held view of Abraham and Sarah as moral exemplars might suggest. These are complex, flawed characters who are constrained by the culture in which they live, and do good as well as make serious mistakes. Each episode in the narrative provides the reader with rich material for reflection on their actions, and the cultural constraints which influenced them. Modern readers can gain much from reflecting on how the story might speak into the way we conduct our business and domestic matters today. What can we learn from the mistakes of these characters, as well as their 'right' actions? What cultural influences help us, blind us, or constrain us? What difference does being followers of Christ make to the way we conduct ourselves?

In addition, we have seen that reception history can help us to avoid simplistic readings of the story. Jewish midrash and feminist hermeneutics, amongst others, have opened up ways of looking at the story of Abraham and Sarah's journey which encourage us to look beneath the surface of the text and ask difficult questions. The richness of biblical narrative demands that we dig deep and reflect in order to learn and grow. There is thus a responsibility on the part of theological educators and church leaders to encourage and facilitate a move away from simplistic foundationalist thinking and to enable readers to ask honest and probing questions of the text, and indeed, of each other. We need to be challenged if we are to avoid interpretative hubris with all its attendant dangers. As Stanley Hauerwas says,

> To claim the Bible as authority is the testimony of the church that this book provides the resources necessary for the church to be a community sufficiently truthful so that our conversation with one another and God can continue across generations.[66]

If the church is the truthful community of which Hauerwas speaks, we must not be afraid of examining our traditional understandings and engaging in new conversations. We have looked for moral discernment in Abraham and Sarah, now let us cultivate it in ourselves, for there is still much to learn.

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[66] Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, p. 64.