



SARAH AND THE FORMATION OF ISRAEL'S IDENTITY: A FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF GENESIS 11-23

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Abstract

Israel's identity in the Old Testament emerges from historical processes marked by spiritual, theological, and genealogical dimensions. Within patriarchal interpretations of these narratives, women have often been reduced to companions or reproductive instruments. This study reexamines Sarah's place within the Abraham cycle and argues that her body, faith, and agency constitute Israel's covenantal identity. Employing qualitative library research, it analyzes Genesis 11-23 through Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's hermeneutics of suspicion and Simone de Beauvoir's concept of the Other, in dialogue with biblical, theological, and feminist scholarship. The findings show that Sarah's womb is not merely a biological site but a theological locus through which the divine promise enters history. However, Sarah remains an ambivalent figure: she is subordinated within patriarchal structures while also exercising agency and reproducing domination in her treatment of Hagar. Sarah therefore functions as a bridge between divine promise and Israel's historical emergence, while the Sarah-Hagar conflict exposes the gendered and hierarchical dynamics embedded in covenantal identity. This reading expands the hermeneutical space for women's embodied experience. It demonstrates that Israel's identity was formed not through Abraham alone, but also through women's faith, bodies, choices, and contested agency.

Keywords: Sarah; Israel's Identity; Feminist Criticism; Feminist Hermeneutics; Book of Genesis; Patriarchy

INTRODUCTION

The book of Genesis provides the narrative foundation for Israel's identity, and Sarah plays a pivotal role in the promise of descendants and the nation's formation. Traditional interpretations, however, have frequently consigned women to subordinate positions as reproductive objects and auxiliaries to men. Feminist criticism challenges and

reconstructs such readings by foregrounding the experiences and voices of women long marginalized within biblical texts.

Israel's identity in Old Testament narrative emerges from a sequence of historical events shaped by spiritual, theological, and genealogical dimensions. Within this larger framework, women have often been treated as companions or

ancillary figures in patriarchal narratives. However, a closer reading of Israel's ancestral traditions reveals that women play a more foundational role than has generally been acknowledged. Sarah, Abraham's wife and Isaac's mother, occupies a crucial place in the narrative formation of God's people. From her womb comes Isaac, the child of promise and the first link in the lineage of the divinely chosen Israel. His birth is therefore not merely a biological or domestic event; it is a theological moment that inaugurates the historical fulfillment of God's promise (Natar 2020, 174).

The Sarah cycle in Genesis 11-23 traces her long journey from barrenness and near despair over the prospect of descendants to motherhood of the long-awaited child of promise. Within the theology of covenant, Sarah participates in a larger economy of faith: the promises of descendants and land are not bestowed on Abraham as the principal figure alone. However, they are embodied in Sarah's faith and lived experience. Nevertheless, many theological readings reduce Sarah to the woman who bears Abraham's offspring, while casting Abraham alone as the recipient of revelation and covenant. Israel, understood as God's chosen people, is thus presented as issuing from the covenant between God and Abraham, with Abraham serving as the embryonic point of Israel's emergence (Tubagus 2022, 77-88). Early biblical traditions, dated here

to the eighteenth century BCE, likewise trace Israel's ancestry to Abram/Abraham, the father of monotheism (Adiwidjajanto 2016). Sarah, by contrast, often appears as a passive supporting figure and an obedient wife (Gen. 12:10-20). This imbalance reflects theological interpretation dominated by a masculine perspective.

Few studies have explicitly treated Sarah as a point of origin for Israel's theological identity—an identity grounded not only in the promise to Abraham but also in a woman's faith, body, and womb. This lacuna creates space for a study that repositions Sarah not merely as Isaac's mother, but as a foundational figure linking the divine promise to Israel's historical formation and symbolizing the emergence of the chosen people's collective identity. In Sarah, woman is present not simply as a biological medium but as a theological subject through whom God's promise enters human history. By realizing the promise through a woman's womb, God implicitly affirms women's dignity (Lambut et al. 2014, 39-40). The narrative therefore indicates that Israel's identity is bound not only to the promise given to Abraham but also to Sarah's body, faith, and narrative location as a woman within the covenantal structure.

This study addresses three principal questions: How may Sarah be understood as a point of origin for Israel's theological identity in Old Testament narrative? How does

Genesis construct the relationship among God's promise, the female body, and the formation of the chosen people? Moreover, how might this understanding challenge the dominant patriarchal narratives of biblical scholarship?

This study analyzes Sarah's position in Genesis 11-23 through a feminist hermeneutical lens, with particular attention to how her embodied experience, faith, and agency contribute to the formation of Israel's theological identity.

No single pericope serves as the study's controlling text, because the analysis encompasses the life of Abraham and Sarah across Genesis. Multiple passages are therefore read together, and the title identifies the book rather than privileging one discrete passage.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative method based on library research. Its primary source is Genesis 11-23, which encompasses the full Sarah cycle. The analysis focuses on passages that directly portray Sarah's experience, actions, and narrative position, especially Genesis 11:29-30; 12:10-20; 16:1-16; 17:1-21; 18:9-15; 21:1-21; and 23:1-20. Secondary sources include theological monographs, journal articles, and works by feminist theologians. The textual analysis proceeds through *rereading* within a feminist hermeneutical framework. In particular, the study draws on Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's

hermeneutics of suspicion (Schüssler Fiorenza 2005, 175-76), which illuminates power relations that marginalize women's voices in religious narratives. It also employs Simone de Beauvoir's concept of *the Other* to examine how patriarchal cultures construct women as subordinate.

By applying feminist critical theory and method, the study moves beyond a strictly literal reading to interrogate the gendered domination embedded in the text. It thereby opens interpretive space for readings that are more inclusive and empowering for women.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Sarah in the Genesis Narrative

Sarah is a central female figure in Genesis and plays a decisive role in God's purposes for humanity, particularly in Israel's history of salvation. She is introduced as Abraham's exceptionally beautiful wife, whose beauty places her at risk when Abraham presents her as his sister to secure their survival in Egypt and Gerar (Gen. 12:11-20; 20:1-18).

Within these episodes, patriarchal logic positions Sarah as her husband's possession and requires her to participate in political and social strategies designed to protect Abraham. She is subordinated and made an instrument of his security. The narrative gives her no space to voice consent, refusal, or inner conflict. Her body is politicized and deployed as a

bargaining instrument for Abraham's safety.

Read through a *hermeneutics of suspicion*, these episodes disclose the narrative's androcentric perspective. The text leaves unarticulated the trauma, fear, and conflict Sarah may have experienced when she was taken into foreign royal households as part of Abraham's strategy.

Sarah is also portrayed as faithful and steadfast in accompanying Abraham through a precarious life: leaving their homeland, migrating repeatedly, and eventually settling in Canaan (Gen. 11:30-31; 12:4). Her infertility is a central narrative motif, for God promises descendants through her despite her barrenness (Gen. 11:30; 15:4-5).

Sarah's role becomes still more decisive when, in old age, she gives birth to Isaac in fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham and Sarah (Gen. 21:1-3; 17:17-19). Isaac's birth establishes Sarah as the mother of the lineage through which Israel's identity takes shape. In this respect, Sarah is not merely an object of possession but a narrative agent in salvation history through whom the divine promise is fulfilled (Pakpahan 2023, 104-14).

The narrative portrays not only Sarah's personal development but also a significant transformation in her faith. Initially, she doubts God's promise that she will bear a child in old age, as Genesis 18:9-15 makes clear. Her doubt registers a

recognizably human uncertainty and inner struggle. Over time, however, Sarah is remembered as a steadfast figure of faith who clings to the divine promise, and Isaac's birth becomes the tangible sign of its fulfillment (Gen. 21:6).

Sarah's story, however, concerns more than faith and divine promise. Her conflict with Hagar, her enslaved servant, exposes the moral and social complexity of women's lives within a patriarchal household. In Genesis 16 and 21:9-10, the tension between Sarah and Hagar is not merely personal; it concerns rights, status, and Sarah's position within a family structure organized around lineage and inheritance. Sarah struggles to defend her dignity and rights as Abraham's legitimate wife while negotiating a dense web of social power. Taken as a whole, Genesis represents Sarah ambivalently: she is both an object of possession and subordination within patriarchy and a central figure in the formation of Israel's identity and salvation history. God's particular protection and blessing of Sarah affirm the significance of women within the divine purpose, even where social structures constrain their autonomy.

Sarah's Identity and Gendered Role

Sarah is regarded as the mother of Israel, yet the biblical narrative also reveals the force of patrilineal and patriarchal structures in shaping Israel's ancestral family. She

functions not only as a maternal figure but also as a symbol of social structures that consolidated male dominance within Israel's later monarchical order (Endojowatiningsih 2013, 125–42).

The biblical accounts of Sarah show how patriarchal power can position a woman simultaneously as property and as a political instrument. Sarah is repeatedly represented in a subordinate position, with her identity and social existence defined largely through roles assigned by male figures such as Abraham and other patriarchs who wield authority and power.

This subordination does more than reflect women's social status in the ancient world; it also reveals how patriarchal structures systematically deprive women of full autonomy. Sarah is not consistently represented as an independent subject with rights and a voice, but is often drawn into social and political strategies that preserve male dominance. Even decisions surrounding Sarah—including recourse to Hagar for an heir—are constrained by dynastic interests and norms that limit women's freedom. Such patterns exemplify the social construction by which patriarchal systems have long legitimated women's subordination. Gerda Lerner writes:

“Traditionalists consider women's subordination to be universal, divinely ordained or natural, and therefore immutable” (Djawa 2012).

Asnath challenges this claim

by arguing that biological conditions and social roles must be examined anew. Women and men differ biologically and may also differ psychologically, but such differences do not require different social roles; people of different sexes may perform the same social role (Djawa 2012). Biological difference, therefore, cannot legitimately be invoked to justify inequality or women's subordination. Instead, a shared commitment to equality across social life is required.

Women's subordination is produced through culture rather than nature, as Simone de Beauvoir argues in *The Second Sex*:

“One is not born, but rather becomes, woman. No biological, psychic, or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female takes on in society; it is civilization as a whole that elaborates this intermediary product between the male and the eunuch that is called feminine. Only the mediation of another can constitute an individual as an Other” (Beauvoir et al. 2011, 330).

In other words, womanhood is not a fixed biological, psychological, or economic destiny. It is socially produced through the mediations by which civilization constructs femininity and constitutes woman as the Other.

Beauvoir's dictum—“One is not born, but rather becomes, woman”—means that women are not naturally subordinate; subordination is produced through socialization beginning in childhood. Culture and social norms render woman *the Other*, positioned in relation to and

behind man. Applied to Sarah, this framework discloses a patriarchal culture in which women are rendered vulnerable and marginal, becoming instruments for the preservation of male power and status.

Sarah's position as *the Other* is visible in male control over her body. In Genesis 12:13, Abraham instructs her, "Say you are my sister." The command makes Sarah's body a means of protecting Abraham. Her bodily autonomy is displaced by patriarchal decision-making. The preceding dialogue (vv. 11-13) likewise records no response from Sarah: she is present in the story but is denied authority to determine her own identity.

Sarah's construction as *the Other* is also evident in Genesis 16:1-4. Because she has no child, the narrative's central concern is not Sarah's personal experience of infertility but the continuation of Abraham's lineage. Her position is evaluated through reproductive function. Sarah then gives Hagar to Abraham in order to secure descendants, demonstrating how closely her value within the patriarchal system is tied to her capacity to produce an heir.

Sarah's story is therefore more than a historical or religious record. It mirrors systemic gender injustice and shows how women in patriarchal societies are frequently deprived of voice and control over their own lives.

Feminist criticism also recognizes that Sarah's narrative

does not erase women's agency altogether. Although she is frequently subordinated, Sarah remains a central figure whose contribution to Israel's salvation history is indispensable. Her representation is thus ambivalent: constrained by patriarchy, she nevertheless remains a participant capable of influencing history and religious tradition. Sarah's narrative invites a more critical rereading of women's position in historical and religious texts—one that challenges patriarchal dominance while exposing the complex forms of female agency often obscured by social and political constructions.

A Feminist Critique of Sarah's Narrative

A feminist reading of Sarah's story in Genesis interrogates the patriarchal structures that shape women's representation in the Old Testament. It examines not only women's frequent reduction to auxiliaries of male figures but also the control exercised over their voices, bodies, and decisions within an androcentric social order. Feminist hermeneutics approaches women not as mere narrative objects, but as subjects whose experience, response, and theological significance are integral to salvation history.

Genesis 12:10-20 offers a clear example. Abraham asks Sarah to identify herself as his sister in Egypt in order to protect his life. He speaks entirely in his own interest, while

Sarah is given no direct dialogue. Her body becomes a medium of political negotiation among men: Abraham seeks survival, Pharaoh takes Sarah into his household, and the transaction proceeds without her consent or voice. Sarah is exchanged within patriarchal power relations. Feminist criticism identifies this narrative structure as an erasure of female agency in the biblical text.

Theological feminism challenges such traditional readings by affirming that women, Sarah included, possess intellectual, spiritual, and moral authority equal to that of men. It rejects patriarchal dominance that casts women as subordinate and passive, and advocates a rereading of scripture that recognizes women as active agents in history and theology. Sarah must therefore be read not merely as property or a political instrument, but as a subject with voice, will, and strategic significance in the narrative of salvation ("Feminism" 2018). Feminist criticism creates space for more inclusive and just interpretations that both recognize women's presence in sacred texts and value their contribution as shapers of identity and agents of change within religious traditions. It also calls for a shift from androcentric biblical interpretation toward gender justice and equality, thereby enriching contemporary theological discourse with a critical and transformative perspective (Gunawan 2017, 288).

Through Beauvoir's theory of

the Other, Sarah's story can be deconstructed, and her identity recovered. She is no longer viewed solely as Abraham's possession, but as a subject with will, voice, experience, and a role of comparable importance. Sarah ceases to be *the Other* defined from a male perspective and emerges as a full subject in the salvation narrative through Isaac's birth and the continuation of God's promise. Positioning Sarah as a subject also acknowledges that Israel's history of faith is constituted not only by God's promise to Abraham, but also by a woman's body, faith, and experience.

Sarah's ambivalence is especially evident in Genesis 16. Cultural pressure surrounding infertility makes her a victim of patriarchy by measuring her worth against her capacity to bear descendants. However, Sarah also becomes an agent of domination when she gives Hagar to Abraham and later abuses her after Hagar conceives. Women within patriarchal systems, the narrative shows, are not always passive victims; they may also reproduce oppression against women with less social power (Reinhardt-Simpson 2020, 253–56). A feminist reading must therefore resist idealizing Sarah as only an oppressed figure and instead acknowledge her moral and social complexity.

Genesis 18, by contrast, creates space for Sarah's personal response to God's promise. On hearing that she will bear a child in old age, Sarah

laughs inwardly. This response matters because it discloses an interiority and subjectivity often neglected by patriarchal interpretation. Her laughter is not merely unbelief; it registers a human struggle with a divine promise that appears impossible. Sarah thus emerges not simply as the object of male action but as a person who directly negotiates the experience of faith.

Genesis 21 further underscores Sarah's influence through Isaac's birth and her demand that Hagar and Ishmael be expelled. Although the demand raises serious ethical questions, the narrative demonstrates that Sarah's voice decisively affects the continuation of the covenantal line. God even instructs Abraham to heed her words. Sarah is therefore not wholly silenced within Genesis; she helps determine the course of the chosen people's history, even while remaining embedded in a patriarchal social structure.

Feminist criticism of Sarah's narrative thus does more than expose women's oppression; it also reveals the tensions and complexities in biblical representations of women. Sarah is simultaneously subordinated and silenced, yet endowed with agency, a responsive faith, and considerable theological influence. A feminist reading makes clear that Genesis constructs Israel's identity not through male figures alone, but also through women's bodies, experiences, and struggles.

Israel's Identity

Genesis positions Sarah as a key figure in Israel's identity and as indispensable to realizing God's promise to Abraham. Her original name, Sarai, is presented as meaning "my daughter," (Pardosi 2019, 1–13) and is changed to Sarah, understood as "princess" or "mother of nations" (Gen. 17:15-16). The change marks a transition from an ordinary woman to a central figure within God's saving purpose.

For many years, Sarah is unable to bear children, a condition regarded in the ancient cultural setting as a source of disgrace and a grave obstacle to dynastic continuity (Gen. 11:30). God nevertheless promises that through Sarah Abraham will have numerous descendants and become a great nation (Gen. 17:16-19). Isaac's birth, when Sarah is ninety years old, fulfills that promise and signifies divine power that exceeds human limitation (Gen. 21:1-3).

As Israel's mother, Sarah is not a passive figure but an agent in realizing the promise of salvation. Her presence underscores Israel's identity as a chosen people born of divine promise and grace rather than human achievement alone. Jewish and Christian traditions also remember Sarah as a figure of faith, as reflected in Romans 4:19 and Hebrews 11:11, where trust in the promise is integral to God's covenant with the people.

Sarah's story in Genesis is not merely personal; it contains complex

social and political dynamics within Abraham's household. The conflict with Hagar and Ishmael reflects tension between the recognized covenantal line and alternative lines of descent (Gen. 16; 21). As Abraham's legitimate wife, Sarah actively defends her rights and status, particularly in relation to the birth of the promised heir on whom Israel's identity rests.

The conflict begins when the infertile Sarah gives Hagar, her enslaved servant, to Abraham in order to obtain descendants through her. After Hagar conceives, tension intensifies: Hagar looks upon Sarah with contempt, and Sarah responds by using her authority as the legitimate wife to abuse Hagar, who subsequently flees (Gen. 16).

The narrative depicts Sarah's struggle to preserve her social position and rights as Abraham's legitimate wife and as the mother of Isaac, the divinely promised and lawful heir. After Isaac's birth, Sarah asserts that status by demanding the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael, whom she perceives as a threat to Isaac's inheritance (Gen. 21). Her action establishes the priority of the recognized covenantal line in the formation of Israel's identity. The social and political tension within Abraham's household thereby becomes emblematic of contested identity and inheritance in the Abrahamic traditions (Pardosi 2019).

The conflict also shows how pain, hatred, and disgust can become roots of humiliation and violence in

the relationship between Sarah and Hagar (Prasetyo et al. 2022, 61–65). It exposes the harsh social reality and unequal status of a legitimate wife and an enslaved woman in the ancient world. Sarah exercises her authority severely, an action that also reflects her struggle to secure an identity and inheritance bound to the divine covenant (Gen. 16:5-6; 21:10).

Sarah's narrative is not simply a family story; it reflects the social, political, and ethnic conflicts through which Israel's history and identity take shape. Sarah is central to securing the covenantal lineage as she defends her rights and status within Abraham's household (Pardosi 2019). However, feminist interpretation must also critique her actions. Sarah uses her power as an enslaver to oppress Hagar. Her position within patriarchy is therefore ambivalent: her body and voice are controlled by men, but as Abraham's legitimate wife she deploys authority against another woman of lower social status.

When Sarah demands Hagar's expulsion, Abraham is distressed and later provides Hagar with provisions for the journey (Gen. 21). His response reveals a limited concern for Hagar even as he remains embedded in, and benefits from, patriarchal power. The juxtaposition suggests that women and men may occupy ambivalent positions: Sarah is both a victim and an agent of patriarchal domination, while Abraham is a patriarchal figure who

nevertheless displays a measure of empathy. The narrative thus shows how patriarchal systems can generate chains of oppression among women.

A rereading of Sarah's story therefore calls for a paradigmatic shift in theology and religious tradition: from treating women as accessories to men toward placing women's experience and agency at the center of the chosen people's collective identity. Such a deconstruction of patriarchal narrative is academically necessary and directly relevant to women's empowerment in contemporary religious contexts. Under a transformative interpretation, Sarah appears not as a passive figure but as a sacred bridge between divine promise and historical reality. This study consequently invites interpreters, religious leaders, and communities to create inclusive space for women's experience, voice, and leadership in pursuit of traditions that are equitable, just, and liberating—possibilities already latent in Sarah's place at the beginning of Israel's history.

A feminist reading of Sarah demonstrates that Israel's identity is formed not only through Abraham as the recipient of the promise, but also through a woman's body, experience, faith, and agency. At the same time, the Sarah-Hagar story warns that women who are oppressed may reproduce oppression when they occupy positions of power within unequal structures. The argument reaches its sharpest point

here: Sarah is not merely a symbol of women's empowerment, but an ambivalent figure who compels theology to rethink promise, embodiment, power, and Israel's identity with greater critical rigor.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Sarah may be understood as a point of origin for Israel's theological identity because God's promise of descendants first takes concrete historical form through her. She is not merely Abraham's companion, but the central figure who connects the divine promise to Isaac's birth as the child of covenant and to the emergence of the chosen people. Israel's identity is thus constituted not solely through patriarchal lineage, but also through Sarah's faith and her place as the mother of the covenant.

Genesis constructs the relationship among God's promise, the female body, and the formation of the chosen people through Sarah's transformation from an infertile woman into Isaac's mother by divine initiative. Her womb becomes a theological sign of the promise's fulfillment. The female body is therefore not merely biological, but a locus of saving action and of the formation of God's people.

This account challenges the patriarchal narratives that dominate biblical scholarship by showing that women are neither passive figures nor mere adjuncts to men. Feminist criticism discloses Sarah's agency,

lived faith, and symbolic authority within salvation history. Biblical interpretation can thus become more inclusive by according women's experience an equal place in the formation of Israel's faith tradition.

This study may enrich biblical scholarship by advancing a contextual and hermeneutically rigorous feminist critique. Its analysis of Sarah demonstrates that Israel's theological and historical identity cannot be separated from women's roles and experiences.

Because this study concentrates on Sarah, its scope does not permit sustained analysis of other biblical women. Further research should examine figures such as Hagar, Rebekah, Leah, Rachel, Miriam, Deborah, Ruth, and Esther in order to broaden understanding of women's experience in salvation history and faith traditions. Comparative study of women's narratives would likewise deepen analysis of women's roles in salvation history and in the formation of Israel's identity.

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