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## Did Sarah Know? Unveiling the Isaac's Sacrifice

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### Abstract

This study investigates the question of whether Sarah was aware of God's command to Abraham to sacrifice their son, Isaac. Although Genesis 22 does not explicitly mention Sarah's awareness, this paper argues that the emotional, spiritual, and practical unity between Abraham and Sarah—consistently depicted throughout the biblical narrative—strongly implies her knowledge and joint participation. The account of Abraham and Sarah's extensive spiritual journey, beginning in Mesopotamia, continuing through Haran, and culminating in Canaan, is reexamined through a close textual reading and contextual interpretation. Methodologically, the study employs a qualitative approach, utilizing hermeneutical analysis and Hebrew narrative criticism to interpret the biblical text and uncover the dynamics of the events described. The finding suggest that Abraham indeed informed Sarah, and that she knowingly shared in both the suffering and the faith required to endure this divine test alongside him.

**Keywords:** Abraham; akedah; faith; Genesis; promised son

## INTRODUCTION

The story of Isaac's sacrifice in Genesis 22 is one of the most dramatic and theological narratives in the Hebrew Bible. This event presents a profound tension between God's promise and the demand for sacrifice, a tension that appears paradoxical from a human perspective. For centuries, the text has been interpreted as a test of faith that places Abraham at the center as the father of believers. Traditional exegesis has emphasized Abraham's absolute obedience to the divine command as well as Isaac's willingness, as the child of promise, to be offered.<sup>1</sup> Yet, behind the dominant focus on Abraham and Isaac, the figure of Sarah—Isaac's mother and Abraham's covenantal partner—is often neglected or even entirely excluded from exegetical and theological discourse. In reality, Sarah's presence cannot be detached from the larger narrative of Abraham's family of faith. A fundamental question rarely addressed in academic studies is: “*Did Sarah know about God's command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac?*” This question is not only significant from a narrative perspective but also opens space for

deeper theological reflection concerning the role of women in salvation history.

The majority of biblical scholarship on Genesis 22 situates Abraham as the central figure of the theology of divine testing.<sup>2</sup> He is portrayed as a paradigmatic model of faith, exemplified by his readiness to sacrifice the very son that God had promised. Other figures in the narrative, particularly Sarah, are scarcely considered within theological or hermeneutical frameworks. For instance, David J.A. Clines offers a detailed exploration of Abraham's historical context and obedience but fails to address the family dynamics or relational dimensions of the event.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, Jewish tradition through the concept of *Aqidah* emphasizes the theological value of Isaac's sacrifice as a paradigm of Israel's faith, while Islamic discourse engages in debates surrounding Isaac and Ishmael, without attending to the roles of the women who bore them.<sup>4</sup> In Christian theology, the story has often been interpreted typologically: Isaac is understood as a prefiguration of Christ, portrayed as the innocent son carrying the wood of sacrifice

<sup>1</sup> Sharon Pace, “The Akedah: A Diverse Sampling From Antiquity And The Middle Ages,” *Scrinium* 7–8, no. 1 (April 7, 2011): 56–76, <https://doi.org/10.1163/18177565-90000058>.

<sup>2</sup> The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Abraham – Genesis Narrative in the Light of Recent Scholarship,” 2025, 158.

<sup>3</sup> David J. A. Clines, “Alleged Female Language about the Deity in the Hebrew Bible,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 140, no. 2 (June 1, 2021): 229–49, <https://doi.org/10.15699/JBL.1402.2021.1>.

<sup>4</sup> Abdelilah Ljamai, “Sacrifice and Islamic Identity,” in *Sacrifice in Modernity: Community, Ritual, Identity* (Brill, 2020).

just as Christ bore the cross.<sup>5</sup> While enriching theological imagination, such typological readings nonetheless sideline Sarah from the dramatic and theological flow of the event.

The gap in the literature becomes even more evident when approached from feminist hermeneutics. Since the 1980s, numerous efforts have been made to recover the voices of women in biblical texts. However, even as this approach has successfully highlighted female figures such as Hagar, Deborah, or Ruth, Sarah's role in Genesis 22 has remained overlooked.<sup>6</sup> Sarah has too often been reduced to a symbol of fertility or treated as a static figure whose significance ends with Isaac's birth. Yet, as Isaac's mother and Abraham's covenantal partner, Sarah's potential involvement in the near-sacrifice raises pressing questions about family relationships, emotional dynamics, and the faith-participation of women in the divine plan. In other words, previous studies have largely positioned Sarah at the margins of the text rather than within its living narrative flow.

Against this backdrop, this article seeks to make a fresh contribution by employing narrative and visual hermeneutics in re-reading Genesis 22. Narrative hermeneutics provides space for a critical exploration of textual gaps, narrative silences, and emotional dimensions that the narrator may have deliberately left unspoken.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, a visual hermeneutical approach helps uncover the symbolism embedded in the story, including the implicit presence of Sarah discernible through relational, imaginative, and representational cues.<sup>8</sup> Thus, this study does not merely interpret the text literally but also probes its psychological and theological depths.

The central hypothesis advanced here is that there are strong narrative, psychological, and theological grounds for suggesting that Sarah was aware of God's command to Abraham. Furthermore, she likely bore part of the burden of this divine test, even though the text does not explicitly acknowledge her role. This argument is supported by textual clues, the longstanding spiritual partnership between Abraham and

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<sup>5</sup> Pablo T. Gadenz, "The Akedah and the Crucifixion: Isaac Typology in Luke's Gospel?," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 31, no. 4 (December 15, 2021): 478–96, <https://doi.org/10.5325/BULLBIBLRESE.31.4.0478>.

<sup>6</sup> Barbara Thiede and Johanna Stiebert, "Feminism, Bible, Texts and Terror – A Feminist Reflection," *Feminist Encounters* 9, no. 1 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.20897/FEMENC/16018>.

<sup>7</sup> John Barton, "Reading into Images: Visual Hermeneutic Approaches to Biblical Texts," in *The Bible and Visual Culture*, ed. David Morgan and Sarah Roberts (Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> John Barton, "Visual Hermeneutics and the Old Testament: Recovering Overlooked Perspectives," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 139, no. 1 (2020): 37–55.

Sarah, and the narrative implausibility of Abraham concealing such a monumental command from his covenantal companion.

By offering a re-reading that places Sarah as an active and conscious figure, this study aims to enrich the discourse of feminist theology, narrative theology, and Old Testament hermeneutics. It also seeks to address the limitations of feminist scholarship that has tended to portray Sarah as a passive or symbolic figure, without considering her role in the crucial moments of the divine calling. Repositioning Sarah as an active and engaged partner of faith not only reshapes the way Genesis 22 is read but also opens new theological imagination about how women participate in salvation history. In this way, this article endeavors to affirm Sarah's presence as both a narrative actor and a covenantal partner, equal in significance during one of the most decisive moments in the lives of Abraham and Isaac.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative interpretive approach using a library-based method grounded in a Hebraic narrative hermeneutic framework with a visual orientation.<sup>9</sup> The primary aim is to explore the pos-

sibility of Sarah's emotional involvement and awareness in the event of Isaac's sacrifice as recorded in Genesis 22:1–19—a passage that has traditionally focused more on the figures of Abraham and Isaac. Rather than concentrating on historical reconstruction, this method is designed to uncover theological meaning through a Hebraic narrative lens by reading the text as a unified literary and theological composition.

This research is both textual and conceptual, with the biblical text of Genesis 22 serving as the primary source. The analysis is conducted on the original Hebrew text, read in parallel with modern English translations, and supported by secondary sources including biblical commentaries, scholarly journal articles, and theological works by scholars specializing in feminist, narrative, and symbolic approaches.

The interpretive framework is constructed through three integrated lenses: Hebraic narrative perspective, narrative hermeneutics, and visual-symbolic reading.<sup>10</sup> The Hebraic narrative approach emphasizes reading Scripture through the worldview of the ancient Hebrews and understanding how they would have interpreted the story.<sup>11</sup> When biblical authors—such as Moses in

<sup>9</sup> Robert D. Bergen, "A Study of the Literary Structure of Genesis 22:1-19," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 47, no. 2 (2009): 207–20.

<sup>10</sup> Barton, "Visual Hermeneutics and the Old Testament: Recovering Overlooked Perspectives."

<sup>11</sup> Arthur Keefer, "The Thought-Scene: A Literary Convention of Hebrew Narrative," *The Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 24 (January 22, 2025): 1–23, <https://doi.org/10.5508/JHS29665>.

this case—composed these narratives, they did so with the understanding that their original audience, also Hebrew, would grasp the intended meaning through both conceptual insight and visual imagination. Thus, the narrative was written to be comprehensible, evocative, and theologically rich for its original readers, who could engage with the story in a holistic manner without losing sight of its meaning or purpose as envisioned by the author.<sup>12</sup>

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Narrative Hermeneutics Analysis in Interpreting Genesis 22

The narrative hermeneutics approach focuses on the storyline, structure, and the dynamics of characters within the biblical text. In the context of Genesis 22, the Narrative begins with the phrase “After all these things” (v. 1), a literary signal that anchors the Akedah within the broader journey of faith shared by Abraham and Sarah.<sup>13</sup> This phrase functions not merely as a chronological marker, but as a theological hinge that

connects this episode to the covenantal developments in Genesis 12–21, particularly the miraculous promise and birth of Isaac.<sup>14</sup> It implies that the command to sacrifice Isaac is not an isolated test but the climax of a complex spiritual pilgrimage marked by divine promises, human doubt, and covenantal obedience.<sup>15</sup>

Narrative critics argue that such continuity demands a reading sensitive to earlier character patterns and relationships, including those that are not explicitly mentioned in the immediate text.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, the silence surrounding Sarah in Genesis 22 should not be equated with her absence.<sup>17</sup> Rather, narrative logic invites the interpreter to consider her implicit presence and emotional participation, especially given her foundational role in the fulfillment of God's promise. As such, the hermeneutical approach affirms that meaning in biblical narrative often emerges as much from silence and structure as from speech and action.<sup>18</sup>

This provides an important basis that the event of Isaac's sacrifice is not a stand-

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<sup>12</sup> The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Abraham – Genesis Narrative in the Light of Recent Scholarship.”

<sup>13</sup> Robert D. Bergen, “The Role of Genesis 22, 1-19 in the Abraham Cycle: A Computer-Assisted Textual Interpretation,” *Criswell Theological Review* 4, no. 2 (1990): 313–26.

<sup>14</sup> Jared M. August, “Abraham's Faith: An Analysis of Genesis 12–22,” *Journal of Ministry and Theology* 27, no. 2 (2023): 75–98.

<sup>15</sup> Jacques R. Doukhan, “The Center of the Akedah: A Study of the Literary Structure of Genesis 22: 1-

19,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies*, 1993, 17–28.

<sup>16</sup> Rhiannon Graybill, “Silent Characters and Narrative Agency in the Hebrew Bible: The Case of Sarah in Genesis 22,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 139, no. 3 (2020): 507–28.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Setio, “Reading the Akedah Narrative (Genesis 22:1–19) in the Context of Modern Hermeneutics” (University of Glasgow, 1993).

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Huckin, “On Textual Silences, Large and Small,” in *Traditions of Writing Research*, ed. Charles Bazerman (Routledge, 2010).

alone story, but rather a continuation of the spiritual life together that the two have gone through.<sup>19</sup> This narrative does not mention Sarah explicitly, but the absence of a name does not always indicate the absence of a role.<sup>20</sup> In narrative analysis, the absence of a character can actually give rise to significant implicit meanings.

Through narrative reading, it is found that Abraham and Sarah always walked together in fulfilling God's calling from Mesopotamia to Canaan. The consistency of Sarah's presence in every stage of Abraham's life is proof that she was not just a companion figure, but a true partner in obedience to God. When God promised offspring in old age, Sarah became an integral part of the covenant, which confirmed her spiritual position in God's plan. It would be narratively inconsistent to leave an event as dramatic as the sacrifice of Isaac out of Sarah's knowledge. Abraham and Sarah's long relationship, filled with dialogue with God, suggests that such a major decision could not have been made unilaterally by Abraham.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Stephen D. Campbell, "The Surety of God's Promises: A Theological Interpretation of Genesis 22," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 49, no. 3 (August 1, 2019): 123–31, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146107919852267>.

<sup>20</sup> Susan Ashbrook Harvey, "2000 NAPS Presidential Address Spoken Words, Voiced Silence: Biblical Women in Syriac Tradition," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 9, no. 1 (March 2001): 105–31, <https://doi.org/10.1353/EARL.2001.0007>.

A visual hermeneutic approach is used to read the symbols and dynamics of the actions that appear in the text. For example, Genesis 22:3 records that Abraham got up early, prepared the donkey, split the wood, and brought two young men and Isaac. These activities would have created extraordinary noise and activity in the tent. Given that Abraham and Sarah lived together in the same tent, it is impossible for this activity to have escaped Sarah's attention. Thus, from a visual and symbolic perspective, Abraham's actions actually suggest that Sarah was aware of the impending journey of extraordinary importance.<sup>22</sup>

The application of visual hermeneutics also allows the reader to imagine the possibility that the conversation about God's command took place the night before. The Bible does not mention a specific time that God spoke to Abraham, but the fact that he got up early suggests that the command probably came at night. Thus, it is possible to visually imagine that on that night, Abraham and Sarah talked, reflected, and wept together as parents about to lose their child. Wi-

<sup>21</sup> Katerina Koci, "Putting on Sarah's Skin: Victim Identity in the Abrahamic Stories and Beyond," *Open Theology* 10, no. 1 (January 1, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1515/OPHT-2024-0029>.

<sup>22</sup> Marion L. S. Carson, "Moral Discernment in the Abraham and Sarah Narrative: Observations for Contemporary Pilgrims," *Journal of European Baptist Studies* 23, no. 2 (December 11, 2023): 47–64, <https://doi.org/10.25782/JEBS.V23I2.1235>.

thin this narrative and visual logic, the silence of the text regarding Sarah actually creates space for her active presence—one that is not explicitly stated but strongly implied.

### **Indications of Sarah's Involvement in Narrative and Symbol**

One of the strongest indications of Sarah's involvement comes from the logic of the journey in Genesis 22:4, namely that Abraham and Isaac traveled for three days. For a journey of that length and duration, significant logistical planning and preparation would have been required. As a housewife who played a role in managing domestic needs, Sarah was almost certainly involved in preparing their travel provisions. The visualization of this activity strengthens the argument that Sarah knew where her husband and son were going, and what the spiritual purpose of the journey was. In the context of culture and text, women were not excluded from domestic affairs, especially in a covenant household like Abraham and Sarah's.

Furthermore, a major event such as the sacrifice of an only child that had been promised by God must have brought great psychological pressure. If Abraham faced a struggle of faith, then Sarah also faced an emotional struggle as a mother who had long awaited the birth of her child. This study suggests that the night before their departure, Abraham and Sarah talked about

the command, strengthened each other, and trusted in God. This is in line with Hebrews 11:19 which states that Abraham believed God was able to raise Isaac back to life. According to the narrative hermeneutics approach, this belief in faith was most likely also shared by Sarah.

Sarah's explicit absence in the text cannot be interpreted as ignorance. In biblical literature, many female characters are not directly mentioned in major events, but their roles are implicitly known through the narrative context. Another example is Moses' mother in Exodus 2, who is not named but clearly plays a major role in her son's salvation. Likewise, Sarah does not have to be present in the text verbally to be considered to know and be involved in her family's struggle for faith. Visual analysis of Abraham's activities and the overall structure of the story actually strengthen the hypothesis that Sarah was involved in the process.

Thus, the results of the analysis show that the combined approach of Narrative and visual hermeneutics opens up new space in interpreting the hidden presence of marginal figures. This article concludes that Sarah not only knew but also supported Abraham's decision to obey God's command. Sarah's knowledge and involvement in the event of Isaac's sacrifice was a manifestation of the shared faith that they had built

since the beginning of God's call. This conclusion confirms that the story of Genesis 22 is not only about the individual test of Abraham's faith, but about the collective faith of the covenant family. Sarah is not a passive figure, but an equal partner in the spirituality that is lived together.

By placing Sarah as a figure involved in the spiritual dynamics of Abraham's household, the Genesis 22 narrative cannot be read only as a relationship between God and Abraham, but also as a test of the faith of the covenant family. This finding aligns with previous studies that underscore the significance of female figures in the overarching biblical narrative. But this article provides a new reading by combining visual methods that have rarely been used in studies of Genesis 22. In contrast to the patriarchal interpretation tradition that tends to exclude the role of women from spiritual decision-making, this article emphasizes Sara's position as an equal partner. This article rejects the view that Abraham kept God's command a secret from Sarah, because it contradicts the narrative structure that emphasizes the spiritual intimacy of the couple throughout their lives.

Furthermore, the absence of Sarah's name in the text does not mean the absence

of consciousness. In narrative hermeneutics, silence or explicit absence can convey a deeper meaning. That is, the text actually invites the reader to fill in the narrative gap with reasoning based on previous patterns in the story of Abraham and Sarah. Therefore, the proper argument must be based on the belief that the story of Isaac's sacrifice is the climax of the journey of shared faith that had been forged over decades with Sarah as part of a covenant family with God.

By placing Sarah in the framework of faith and emotional involvement, this reading opens up space for a more inclusive and relevant interpretation in the context of relational spirituality. Sarah not only knew, but also took part in the suffering and the belief that God would raise Isaac back to life if he was indeed sacrificed. This strengthens the collective, not individualistic, dimension of faith in carrying out God's calling.

### Literature Citation and Discussion

In this discussion, it is important to consider the differences in interpretation that have emerged from classical and contemporary commentators. For example, early Christian exegetical traditions such as Augustine assume that Abraham kept this secret from Sarah in order to preserve the integrity of the divine command.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Philip Schaff, ed., *St. Augustine's City of God and Christian Doctrine*, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers,

Series I, Vol. II (Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1887).



This view is problematic because it gives the impression that God placed Sarah in a “voiceless” position in their family’s greatest test of faith. Therefore, a rereading through visual hermeneutics helps us see that the context of the action and symbols (tent, donkey, wood, morning) strongly indicate that Sarah is not ignored in reality, only in narrative. In comparison, Robert Alter says the biblical narrative suggests a broad and rich context filled with many potential interpretations, yet the key concern lies in the particular method by which this suggestion is realized.<sup>24</sup>

While biblical storytelling frequently remains quiet in places where later fictional styles might be more expressive, its silence is intentional and selective—whether regarding various characters, the same characters at different points in the story, or different facets of their thoughts, emotions, and actions.<sup>25</sup> Thus, Sara’s absence in the text is open to creative and logical interpretation, rather than precluding the possibility of her role. With this approach, this article not only refutes old assumptions, but also offers a more gender-just reading model that is sensitive to the integrity of family relations in the divine narrative.

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<sup>24</sup> Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2004).

<sup>25</sup> Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981).

According to Sebastian Brock, Abraham concealed the divine command from Sarah on the grounds that God had spoken exclusively to him. This intentional silence, Brock suggests, reflects a theological logic in which Abraham felt no obligation to involve Sarah in a revelation she was not directly given.<sup>26</sup> In response to such an argument, Tammi J. Schneider contends that Sarah’s role cannot be dismissed or rendered invisible within the covenantal narrative. It is highly plausible that Sarah was aware of the impending sacrifice. From the outset of the divine call in Ur of the Chaldeans, God’s invitation implicitly included Sarah as Abraham’s covenantal partner. As Abraham journeyed from Haran toward the Promised Land, Sarah accompanied him, not merely as a wife but as a fellow participant in their spiritual pilgrimage. To suggest that she remained entirely unaware at the climactic moment of their shared faith journey is theologically implausible. Having faithfully supported Abraham throughout their spiritual mission, excluding her from such a pivotal trial would suggest narrative betrayal—an interpretation inconsistent with the covenantal logic permeating Genesis.

<sup>26</sup> Sebastian Brock, “Sarah’s Ignorance of the Binding of Isaac in Early Homiletic Tradition,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 2020.

## Writing the Names of Books and References to Scriptures

In the entire discussion, the writing of the names of scriptures such as Genesis 22:1–4, Hebrews 11:19 is done completely to maintain the clarity and accuracy of text references. This writing follows the guideline that books and verses must be mentioned in full both in the main text and in footnotes. For example, the phrase “After these things God tested Abraham” (Gen. 22:1) shows the continuity of the previous narrative involving Abraham and Sarah's journey of faith. Likewise, the statement that “Abraham believed that God was able to raise the dead” (Heb. 11:19) is the basis for the belief that Sarah also had the same hope.

Writing complete references to scriptures also helps readers verify quotations and ensure that interpretations are not separated from their original context. This is important because every hermeneutic reading requires a solid foundation in the original text and biblical structure. This study also refers to Genesis 18:10 which states God's promise to Sarah, and Galatians 4:22 to emphasize Sarah's position as a free woman, not a passive figure. All these references form the basis of the argument that

Sarah's role in the story of Isaac's sacrifice cannot simply be removed from the narrative of Abraham's family faith.

In early Christian and rabbinic traditions, it has been suggested that Sarah died from shock upon learning of Isaac's near-sacrifice.<sup>27</sup> However, this narrative is neither original to the biblical text nor chronologically coherent. The account first appears centuries after the events described in Genesis and reflects interpretive expansions rather than historical memory. According to the biblical chronology, Sarah's death in Genesis 23 occurs years after the Akedah (Gen. 22), thus undermining the claim that she died immediately as a result of that incident. The *Seder Olam Rabbah* suggests that Sarah's death was not a direct or sudden consequence of hearing about the Akedah (binding of Isaac). Instead, her death occurred approximately one year after the event, indicating a chronological gap that undermines the idea of her dying from shock upon hearing the news of Isaac's near-sacrifice.

Based on the data presented above, combined with a close reading of the Hebrew narrative and a narrative-hermeneutical approach that traces the full arc of Abraham and Sarah's journey, it becomes clear—be-

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<sup>27</sup> H. Freedman and Maurice Simon, eds., *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis (Genesis Rabbah), Vol. 1* (The Soncino Press, 2002).

yond reasonable doubt—that Sarah was fully aware of the binding of Isaac. Moreover, the text implicitly indicates her support for the act, as evidenced by her involvement in the preparations for the journey to Mount Moriah, including the arrangement of provisions, the donkey, and the two servants who accompanied them.

## CONCLUSION

This study highlights Sarah's overlooked role in the narrative of Isaac's sacrifice through a narrative and visual hermeneutic approach. Although Genesis 22 does not explicitly mention her, textual gaps, domestic context, and relational logic strongly suggest her awareness of and struggle with the divine command. Sarah is therefore not a peripheral character but a covenant partner who shares in Abraham's test of faith. The findings demonstrate that narrative and visual hermeneutics can enrich biblical interpretation by revealing hidden dimensions of emotion, family dynamics, and symbolic meaning that traditional readings often ignore.

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