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Ephrem and the Patriarchal Wives

Ephrem the Syrian, who died in AD 373 in Edessa, wrote one of earliest extant commentaries on Genesis and Exodus. In this commentary he weaves a new biblical story by selecting from both the narrative background and foreground—not in an arbitrary way, but as a very deliberate process. One of the new themes that Ephrem weaves into his retelling is the unwavering righteousness and spiritual receptiveness of the patriarchal wives.

When Ephrem tells the story of Rebekah, he adds that she went with Abraham's servant because she knew that "it was the will of the Lord that she should go" [21.4.2].¹ Later, Rebekah overheard what had passed between Isaac and Esau and she "went and counseled Jacob lest the birthright of Esau be contrary to the word of God which said 'the elder shall serve the younger'" [25.1]. At the end of this episode, Isaac is unable to alter the blessing he gave to Jacob because "he knew that the will of the Lord had been accomplished just as it had been told to Rebekah." Rachel likewise takes her father's idols, not out of desire for them—rather "she despised them as being useless"—but because she loved the God of Jacob [29.4.2].

When we turn to Ephrem's Sarah we see an even more vocal and strong character than her biblical counterpart; one who is willing to resist Pharaoh ("she did not exchange her husband for a king" [9.3]) and stand up against the king Abimelech ("She said in a loud voice before everyone, 'It is not right that you transgress the legal custom concerning your wife by [committing] adultery, not even by the taking of another wife'" [17.3]). Ephrem's Sarah was a woman who recognizes God's hand in her life ("Sarah saw that God was her help" [17.3]) and acted on the basis of His promises.

Ephrem's firm belief in the righteousness of Sarah is further seen in his retelling of the story of the binding of Isaac (Genesis 22). Ephrem tells us that when God called Abraham to take his son and offer him as a burnt offering, "He did not inform Sarah because he had not been commanded to inform her" [20.1.2]. Neither did Abraham tell anyone else in his household, lest they try and stop him, or snatch Isaac away, or persuade him to put off the sacrifice. Thus Ephrem implies that it was not a question of Sarah's faithfulness, but rather

Abraham's. This point is explicitly made when Ephrem poses the hypothetical question, What if Abraham had told Sarah? He tells us later what the rest of the camp would have done, but the answer for Sarah is completely different: "She would have persuaded him to let her go and participate in his sacrifice just as she had participated in the promise of his son." Ephrem is introducing a very interesting scene into the tradition by asking this one question of the text. He highlights Sarah's response by making it clear that everyone else in the camp would have been unable to bear the news of what Abraham had been commanded to do. Only Sarah could bear his burden with him, but she is not called to it.²

Not only does Ephrem see women playing a more significant role in the Old Testament narratives, he is also responsible for introducing women choirs into the worship services of the Syriac Christians. As a later Syriac poet records, "Ephrem saw that women were silent from praise [in the church] and in his wisdom he decided it was right that they should sing out."³ It is thought that he composed songs particularly for women's choirs.⁴ It may well be the case that Ephrem was personally responsible for early Syriac writers seeing a greater role for biblical women in the biblical narrative. Certainly a contributing factor would have been the very positive role of women in the New Testament, in particular Mary the mother of Jesus. ☒

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Notes

1. Citations in brackets refer to St. Ephrem the Syrian: *Selected Prose Works*, trans. Edward G. Mathews and Joseph P. Amar (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1994).

2. Note that Gregory of Nyssa and Josephus take the opposite view that Sarah would have been so distraught by the command that Abraham would not have been able to obey God. Edward Noort and Eibert J. C. Tigghelaar, *The Sacrifice of Isaac: The Aqedah (Genesis 22) and Its Interpretations* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 104.

3. Paul Bedjan, comp., *Acta martyrum et sanctorum Syriace* (Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1968), 3:672.

4. Cf. Sebastian P. Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem*, rev. ed. (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 1992), 168–72.