

MISCELLANEOUS
BIBLICAL STUDIES

CHAPTER ELEVEN

UNDERSTANDING SARAH'S
LAUGHTER AND LYING:
NOTES ON GENESIS 19:9–18

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XI
UNDERSTANDING SARAH'S
LAUGHTER AND LYING:
NOTES ON GENESIS 18:9–15

As demonstrated in my study “The Meaning of Abram/ Abraham: Gen 17:5,”¹ Arabic cognates can provide clues for the proper interpretation of many Hebrew texts and the recovery of long lost Hebrew lexemes. The *raham* in the name *Abraham* is the word אֲרָחָם, meaning “prolific,” the cognate of the Arabic رَهَام (*ruhâm*) “*numerus copiosus*” (Castell 1669: 3537) and أَرَهَم (*irham*) “fruitful, abundant” (Lane 1867: 1172). Similarly, the change from *Sarai* to *Sarah* is best understood in light of the Arabic تَرَّى / تَرَّى (tarrâ / tarî) “he became great in number or quantity, many, numerous” (Lane 1863: 335), which is confirmed by Gen. 17:16b, וְהָיְתָה לְגוֹיִם, “and she will become nations.”²

Difficult readings in Gen 17:17–18 and 18:9–15, dealing with God’s promise to Abraham and Sarah that within the year they will become the parents of a son named “Isaac,” can also be clarified when the lexical options available to the interpreter include several lost lexemes which can be recovered in light of Arabic cognates.

As traditionally interpreted there appears to be a definite gender bias favoring Abraham when it comes to his laughing at these words of God:

As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her; I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.

Hearing this Abraham laughed (וַיִּצְחָק) so hard he fell on his face, asking himself, “Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear

a child?” The answers were in the affirmative and in recognition of his joyous laughter—so he would never forget—this son was to be named Isaac (יִצְחָק). Although the verb לָצַח could be used for all kinds of laughter, including “to jest, to sport, to ridicule, to deride, to be frightened,” the context permits the meaning attested from the Arabic cognate ضحك (*ḍahaka*) “to expand the face and show the teeth by reason of joy, happiness, gladness and a sense of wonder” (Lane 1874: 1771). Abraham’s laughter was hilarious joy.

By contrast, according to Gen 18:10–15, when Sarah discreetly laughed to herself (וַתִּצְחַק בְּקִרְבָּהּ) upon overhearing Yahweh tell Abraham, “I will surely return to you according to the time of life (כְּעֵת חַיֶּיהָ), and Sarah your wife shall have a son,” her laughter was perceived as ridicule and derision. Yahweh became perturbed and—unable on his own to figure out Sarah’s behavior and disbelief—sought from Abraham the reason for his wife’s laughter. After

- reassuring Abraham that, “at the time promised (לְמוֹעֵד)³ I will return unto thee, according to the time of life (כְּעֵת חַיֶּיהָ), and Sarah shall have a son,” and after
- Sarah denied that she laughed upon hearing about her upcoming pregnancy

Yahweh spoke directly to Sarah and assured her that he knew that she had laughed/jested/ridiculed/derided the idea of her becoming pregnant. Thus, whereas Abraham’s laughter was a positive, Sarah’s laughter was a negative—assuming that the לָצַח in Gen 17:17 and 18:12–15 is the same word.

The initial difference to note is that *Isaac* appears 108 times in Biblical Hebrew as יִצְחָק, from the stem לָצַח “he laughed.” But four times (Psa 105:9, Jer 33:26, Amos 7:9, 15)

it appears as שָׂחַק , as though it was derived from the synonym שָׂחַק “he laughed” (BDB 850, 965). In the *Qurʾan* the name *Isaac* appears as إسحاق (*ʿishāq*) which, aside from the shift of the initial ʾ to an ʳ, equals שָׂחַק .⁴ This Arabic spelling is surprising because the Arabic root سحق (*saḥaqa*) has nothing to do with *laughter* but means “(God) removed/estranged him from his mercy,” with the imprecation سحقا له (*suḥqan lahu*) meaning “may God curse him!” This سحق (*saḥaqa*) is a synonym of بعد (*baʿada*) “he perished, he died,” with its similar imprecation بعد له (*buʿdan lahu*) “may God curse him” (Lane 1863: 264; 1872: 1319). With the שָׂחַק / שָׂחַק “he laughed/he cursed” variants in focus, it is easy to see how *Isaac* (שָׂחַק = “Cheers”) was at the same time *Isaac* (שָׂחַק = “Accursed”), the one who was to be slain as a sacrifice by his father in obedience to God’s command (Gen 22: 1–14). This double spelling and meaning of *Isaac* mitigates against the Islamic expositors who argue that Ishmael was the son whom God commanded Abraham to sacrifice.⁵ Thanks to *Isaac*, the lexeme سحق (*saḥaqa*), stem II, “he laughed” (= שָׂחַק) should be noted in Arabic lexicons; and שָׂחַק , stem II, “he was alienated, cursed” (= سحق [*saḥaqa*], stem I) should be noted in our Hebrew lexicons.

The next item of note is the Arabic cognate حوى (*ḥawiya*) which clarifies the meaning of כַּעַת חַיָּה in Gen 18:10, 14 and II Kings 4:16, 17. Montgomery (1951: 371) rightly called this כַּעַת חַיָּה a *crux interpretum*. The phrase in Gen 18:10 and

18:14 has been translated as

- ἀτὰ τὸν καιρὸν τοῦτον εἰς ὥρας (LXX),
- “according to this period seasonably” (Brenton),
- “*ad te tempore isto vita comite*” (Vulgate),
- “at this time, life accompanying” (DRA),
- “according to the time of life” (KJV, NKJ),
- “when the season cometh round” (ASV, JPS),
- “about this time next year” (NIV, NIB),
- “at this time next year” (NAS, NAU, Lamsa),
- “next year” (NJB)
- “in the spring” (RSV),
- Targum Neophyte: בְּשַׁעֲתָא הֲרֵין בְּעִידְנָה הֲרֵין “ at this time, at this set time”
- Targum Pseudo Johnathon: בְּעִידְנָה הֲרֵין וְאַתּוֹן קִיִּימִין “at this set time and you are reviving.”

Montgomery concurred with Skinner (1951: 301) that the phrase has to do with the period of pregnancy (base upon New Hebrew חַיִּיהָ “a woman in child-birth”). Skinner translated כְּעֵת חַיִּיהָ as “according to the time of a pregnant woman,” or “9 months hence.” Jastrow (1903: 452) noted the חַיִּיהָ meaning “a lying-in woman” and “a midwife.” The point missed by Skinner, Montgomery, and others is that כְּעֵת חַיִּיהָ has to do with the *termination* of a pregnancy, not its *duration*. It has to do with *birthing*, not with *conception*.

All of these translations interpret the חַיִּיהָ in this phrase as if it were the cognate of Arabic حَيٌّ (*ḥayy*) “he was alive” (Lane 1865: 679–681). However, the חַיִּיהָ in Gen 18:10, 14 and II Kings 4:16, 17 is the cognate of Arabic حَوِيٌّ (*ḥawiyya*)

—with a ֿ (*h*), not a ֿ (*h*)—meaning “she became empty in her belly on the occasion of childbirth” (Lane 1865: 827). This is the correct derivation of the חַיִּיהָ meaning “a woman in child-birth,” over against the חַיִּיהָ meaning “an animal.” Far from being a “Late” Hebrew word, חַיִּיהָ “a woman in labor, in child-birth” is well attested here in Gen 18:10, 14 and in II Kings 4:16, 17. The חַיִּיהָ homographs/homophones have distinctly different etymologies.

Another phrase of interest is the $\text{בְּלֹתִי הִיתָהּ לִי עֵרְנָה}$. in Gen 18:12, which became $\sigma\upsilon\pi\omega \mu\acute{\epsilon}\nu \mu\omicron\iota \gamma\acute{\epsilon}\gamma\omicron\sigma\upsilon\epsilon\upsilon \acute{\epsilon}\omega\varsigma \tau\omicron\upsilon \nu\omicron\upsilon$ in the Septuagint, which Brenton (1851) translated as “the thing has not as yet happened to me, even until now.” The בְּלֹתִי was read as the negative particle rather than as the suffixed infinitive of בלה “to become old.” The עֵרְנָה was read as the equivalent of עַד עַתָּה “until now.” Most English translations follow the Vulgate’s *voluptati operam dabo*. The DRA has “shall I give myself to pleasure?” In agreement with a parenthetical note in BDB (726) the NAB is a bit more explicit, having here the question, “am I still to have sexual pleasure?” By way of contrast, Targum Pseudo-Jonathan has $\text{הוּי לִי עֵרְוִיין}$ “(shall) pregnancies happen to me?” Targum Neophyte has “is it possible for me to return to the days of my youth, and for my having pregnancies [and] periods (וּלְמַהוּיין לִי עֵרְוִיין .)” The parallel passage in the *Qurʿan Sura* 11:72) reads, “She said, ‘Ah, woe is me! shall I bear a son when I am old, and when this my husband is an old man?’”⁶ This focus on *pregnancy* rather than *pleasure* supports the interpretations found in the Targums rather than the Vulgate.

The phrase **וַתִּצְחַק שָׂרָה בְּקִרְבָּהּ** in Gen 18:12 is also of interest. It became in the Septuagint *ἐγέλασεν δὲ Σαρρα ἐν ἑαυτῇ* “Sarah laughed to herself,” and in the Vulgate it appears as *quae risit occulte*, “she laughed secretly.” But Targum Neophyte and Pseud-Jonathan have here the verb **וַתִּמְוָה** “to wonder, to be astonished,” although the verbs **וַתִּצְחַק** “to laugh” and **וַתִּשְׂחַק** “to laugh” appear in 18:12 and 18:15 in both Targums.

The real eye-catcher is the footnote in J. M. Rodwell’s translation (dated 1861) of *Sura* 11:71–73 in the *Qur’an*.³ Here are the initial words of 11:71, with an asterisk marking Rodwell’s footnote and my parentheses citing the Arabic with its Hebrew equivalent:

*His wife was standing by and laughed**

(**וַתִּצְחַק** = ضحكت) *

and we announced Isaac

(**וַאֲנִשְׂאֵהוּ** = إسحق) *to her.*

* Or, *menstrua passa est*, in token of the possibility of her bearing a child.

Rodwell recognized that **וַתִּצְחַק** and **וַתִּשְׂחַק** were equivalent, with just the interchange of a K and a Q (analogous to our use of *Koran* and *Quran*). He also recognized a ضحك (*ṣaḥaka* = **וַתִּצְחַק**), stem I, “to laugh, to jest” and a ضحك (*ṣaḥaka* = **וַתִּשְׂחַק**), stem II, “to menstruate.” Lane (1872: 1771–72) has an extended note on the verb ضحكت (*ṣaḥikakat*) “she menstruated,” highlighting the different interpretations of *Sura* 11:74 among early Islamic expositors like El-Farrā (786 C.E.) and Ez-Zejjāj (890 C.E.) — some of whom inserted the unam-

biguous *اضت* (*hâdat*) “she menstruated” after the *ضحكت* (*ṣahikakat*) in *Sura* 11:74 as an explanatory gloss.⁷

In Gen 18:11 the statement was made, *חָרַל לְהַיּוֹת לְשָׂרָה*, which is well translated as “Sarah had stopped having her womanly periods” (NAB). The ninety year old Sarah had been in menopause for decades. But according to Gen 18:12, Sarah made the *declarative* statement—not a question—*הֲיִתָּה לִי עֲדָנָה* “a menses has happened to me.” She was at that moment having her period.⁸

The *וַתִּצְחַק* in 18:12 is from *צַחַק*, stem I, “to laugh, to wonder,” but in 18:13 and 18:15 the *צַחֲקָה* and *צַחֲקֹתַי* are best read as *צַחֶק*, stem II, “to menstruate.” Thus, Gen 18:13 reads

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־אַבְרָהָם לְמָה זֶה
צַחֲקָה שָׂרָה לֵאמֹר הֲאֵף אֲמַנָּם אֵלֶּךָ וַאֲנִי זָקְנָתִי:

Yahweh said to Abraham, “Verily, this is the situation:

Sarah has menstruated, saying,

‘Oh! Wow! Truly I will give birth though I am old!’

And similarly Gen 18:15 reads

וַתִּכְחַשׁ שָׂרָה לֵאמֹר לֹא צַחֲקֹתַי כִּי יִרְאֶה
וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא כִּי צַחֲקָתִי:

But Sarah denied [it] saying: “I did not menstruate!”

—for she was afraid—

and he said, “Not so! You did indeed menstruate!”

Contributing to the traditional mistranslation of these two verses are two more homographs (but not homophones). The

emphatic adverb לַמָּוֶה (= לְמָוֶה) “verily, indeed” was always read as the interrogative לְמָוֶה “why.” But as Frank Cross noted (1973: 235) with reference to the לַמָּוֶה in Judges 5:17, the emphatic לַ/לוֹ—well known from Ugaritic—was often extended with the syllable מָוֶה-. This emphatic לַמָּוֶה/לְמָוֶה “surely, verily, boldly, indeed” appears in

- Judges 5:17, “*Boldly* (לַמָּוֶה) Dan attacked the ships!”⁹
- II Chron 25:16, “Stop! You will *surely* (לַמָּוֶה) be struck down!”
- Ps 2:1, “*Indeed* (לַמָּוֶה), the nations rage!”
- Ps 22:2 “My God, my God, you have *surely* (לַמָּוֶה) made me suffer!”¹⁰

By shifting the initial vowel of לַמָּוֶה from an accented \bar{a} to an unaccented u , and by changing this interrogative adverb into a declarative, the very nature of God depicted in Gen 18:13 is transformed *from* a perturbed deity who seeks information from the mortal Abraham *to* a God who knows all the facts and informs Abraham about the present situation as follows:

- Sarah is menstruating!
- Her reproductive organs are working just fine!
- She will soon become pregnant!
- She will be the mother of your son Isaac!

Sarah’s words הֲאֵפֶה אֲמַנָּם אֵלֶי וְאֲנִי זָקְנָתִי in Gen 18:13 have similarly been misread as the question, “Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?” But the initial הֲאֵפֶה is a compound interjection composed of הֵא “Oh! Behold!”

and **אָי** “Yea!” (implying something surprising and unexpected).¹¹ But the haplography of an **אָ** changed Sarah’s emphatic affirmation, “Oh! Wow! (**אָי אָה**) I will truly bear a child!” into a question of doubt, “Indeed shall I (**אָי אָה**) bear a child?”

Sarah’s instantly believing what she overheard from behind the door, and her being aware at that moment of having some vaginal bleeding, gave way to some scary second thoughts. Was the bleeding a *menses* or a *malady* (such as that of the woman mentioned in Matt 9:20, who was cured of her twelve year long “issue of blood” by touching the hem of Jesus garment)? Her fear was enough to induce a denial of her new reality. Therefore, according to Gen 18:15, she denied that she was having her period, saying simply **לֹא צִחַקְתִּי** “I have not menstruated.” Sensing her fear, Yahweh himself¹² addressed Sarah directly to allay her fear and bring her back to the marvelous reality with just these three words:

- the negative particle **לֹא** “Not so!” by which Yahweh refuted her statement **לֹא צִחַקְתִּי** “I did not menstruate,”
- the emphatic particle **כִּי** “surely, verily,” and
- the verb **צִחַקְתִּי** “you did menstruate!”

According to the traditional translations of Gen 18:12–15 Yahweh reproached Sarah for her inappropriate laughter. But the Hebrew text itself permits—if not requires—this alternative interpretation wherein Yahweh addressed Sarah’s fear with affirming words about (1) her period, (2) her pregnancy, and (3) her progeny, so as to assure her that his words to Abraham (in Gen 17:16) would indeed become her reality:

וּבִרְכָתִי אֶתָּה וְגַם נָתַתִּי מִמֶּנָּה לְךָ בֵּן
 וּבִרְכָתֶיהָ וְהָיְתָה לְגוֹיִם מְלֻכֵי עַמִּים מִמֶּנָּה יֵהְיוּ

I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her;
 I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations;
 kings of peoples shall come from her.

Yahweh’s promise, “I will return to you, at the time of the birthing” (Gen 18:14) was fulfilled (Gen 21:1–7), at which time there was much laughter *by* Sarah, *for* Sarah, and *with* Sarah—thanks to *Isaac* (יִצְחָק):

*“And Sarah said,
 ‘God has made laughter (צִחָק) for me;
 everyone who hears will laugh (יִצְחָק) with me.’”*

However, when Sarah saw Ishmael laughing that was a different matter. Gen 21:9 reads וַתִּרְאֵהוּ שָׂרָה אֶת־בֶּן־הַגֵּר וַתִּצְחַק, “Now Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, laughing.” This מִצְחָק became

- “mocking” in the KJV, NAS, YLT,
- “scoffing” in the NKJ,
- “playing” in the TNK, NJB, RSV,
- “making fun of” in the NLT.

But the Septuagint ends the verse with the additional phrase μετὰ Ἰσαακ τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτῆς, “with Isaac her son”; and this addition has been adopted by the the NJB, RSV, and NLT.

The Targums, on the other hand, are much more expansive in seeking to legitimate Sarah’s call for the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael. The Cairo Geniza Targum has the accusation:

ם[ג]חיד עם ברה בעי למקטול יתה

“[Ishmael’s] jesting with her son, seeking to kill him.”

Targum Pseudo-Jonathan expanded the מִצְחָק to mean:

מגחך לפולחנא נוכראה וגחין ליי

“mocking with a strange worship, and bowing to the Lord.”

The Targum Neophyte interpreted the מִצְחָק to mean

עבר עובדין די לא כשרין

“[Ishmael’s] “doing deeds which were not *kosher*.”

CONCLUSION

Biblical translators and exegetes have interpreted Abraham’s raucous laughter (upon his hearing that Sarah would bear him a son) to have been very pleasing to God, so much so the baby boy would be named “Laughter/Cheers.” But Sarah’s silent laughter (upon overhearing about her upcoming change-of-life, was said to be disturbing to God. The translators and exegetes can be faulted, in words taken from James Barr (1968: 268), “for a strong tendency towards leveling the vocabulary and the interpretation of that which is rare as if it was that which was more normal.” Such is the case with the following seven words for which the rare meaning was missed by many (with the rare meanings cited here in *italics*):

- שָׂרָה = “*prolific*,” not “princess,”
- חַיָּה = “*giving birth*,” not “life” or “animal,”
- שָׂחָק = “*accursed to death*” as well as “laughter,”
- עֲדָנָה = “*menses*,” not “pleasure,”
- צָחַק = “*to menstruate*” as well as “to laugh,”

- למה = “*verily/indeed*” as well as “*why?*”
- הֲאֵיךָ = “*Oh! Wow!*” as well as “*is it really?*”

Thanks to Arabic cognates the first five of these seven rare Hebrew words have been recovered and can be included in the new lexicons of Biblical Hebrew. If Ishmael were alive he could well get in the last laugh, knowing that his descendants compiled the Arabic lexicons used by students of Biblical Hebrew who study the texts which tell about the birth of stepbrother Isaac. The language of Ishmael clarifies many of the ambiguous homographs found in the stories Isaac. So, with enough smiles to go around to make everyone happy, Gen 18:12–15, which tells about Sarah’s laughing and lying is best translated as follows:

So Sarah laughed to herself saying, “After I have grown old, a menses has happened to me—but my husband is old.” Yahweh said to Abraham, “Verily, this is the situation: Sarah has menstruated, saying, ‘Oh! Wow! truly I will give birth though I am old!’ Is any thing too hard for the Yahweh? At the time promised I will return to you, at the time of the birthing, and Sarah shall have a son.” But Sarah denied [it] saying: “I did not menstruate!”—for she was afraid—and he said, “Not so! You did indeed menstruate!”

NOTES

1. This study is now available on line at http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/CBBP_Chapter_4.pdf.
2. Because the Arabic ث (*t*) is routinely equated with the Hebrew שׁ, the new name שרה should have been pointed as

שרה rather than שרה, for the name change was from *Sarai* to *Sharah*. Because the unpointed ש is ambiguous there was no way for well over a thousand years to distinguish between שרה (*Sarah*) and שרה (*Sharah*). The popular name שרה “Princess” prevailed, and the rare שרַי (*Sarai*) and שרַה (*Sharah*) dropped out of use.

3. Note that the Arabic cognate of מוֹעֵד “appointed time” carries the idea of a “promise.” See Lane 1893: 2953.

4. Note J. M. Rodwell’s translation of the *Qur’an* (London: 1861, second ed 1876) *Sura* 11:71–73 (with the parenthetical Hebrew/Arabic notations being added by this writer):

His wife was standing by and she laughed (ضحكت = צַחֲכָהּ);* and we announced Isaac (إِسْحَاق = אִשְׁחָק) to her; and after Isaac (إِسْحَاق = אִשְׁחָק), Jacob (يعقوب = יַעֲקֹב). She said, “Ah, woe is me! shall I bear a son when I am old, and when this my husband is an old man? This truly would be a marvellous thing.” They said, “Marvellest thou at the command of God? God’s mercy and blessing be upon you, O people of this house; praise and glory are His due!”

* Or, *menstrua passa est*, in token of the possibility of her bearing a child.

5. See the *Qur’an Sura* 37:98–109. An online study presenting the evidence for recognizing Isaac as the son to be sacrificed can be found by clicking [HERE](#); and a study presenting the evidence for recognizing Ishmael as the son to be sacrifice can be found by clicking [HERE](#).

6. For the plural עֲרִיִּין and עֲרִיִּים “pregnancies” see Jastrow 1903: 1067; and for the singular עֲרִנָּה “period, menses” see Jastrow 1903: 1045. Note the עֲרִיִּים עֲרִי in Ezk 16:7.

7. For the unambiguous حاضت (*ḥâḍat*) “she menstruated” see Lane 1865: 686–687.

8. The Septuagint reads, ἐγέλασεν δὲ Σαρρα ἐν ἑαυτῇ λέγουσα οὐπω μὲν μοι γέγονεν ἕως τοῦ νῦν ὁ δὲ κύριός μου πρεσβύτερος, “And Sarah laughed in herself, saying, ‘The thing has not as yet happened to me, even until now, and my lord is old.’” All other translations read the declarative הִיתָהּ, as if it were an interrogative הִיתָהּ הִיתָהּ which suffered a haplography of the initial ה.

9. For this translation see my book *The Song of Deborah: Poetry in Dialect*, pp. 181–182, available online by clicking [HERE](#).

10. For this translation see my book *Clarifying New Testament Aramaic Words and Names and the Shem Tob Hebrew Gospel of Matthew*, pp. 31–42, available online by clicking [HERE](#).

11. Jastrow 1903: 328 and BDB 64–65.

12. Yahweh is mentioned by name in 18:1 and 18:13, in preference to the unnamed three men who appear as his messengers.

DVD AND ONLINE SOURCES

The Biblical texts and the Targums have been copied from *BibleWorks 7*, P.O. Box 6158, Norfolk, VA 23508.

The Etheridge translation of the Targum is available at http://targum.info/?page_id=8.

The Arabic text of the *Qurʾan* is available online at <http://www.2muslims.com/images/downloads/arabic-quran.pdf>.

The English text of the Qurʾan is available at <http://www.muslimaccess.com/quraan/arabic/001.asp>.

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