

The Virgin Mary and Sarah, Matriarch of Israel

Protevangelium of James [2nd century A.D.] 11:1-2

And Mary took the pitcher and went forth to fill it with water: and lo a voice saying: *"Hail, thou that art highly favoured; the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women."* And she looked about her upon the right hand and upon the left, to see whence this voice should be. And being filled with trembling she went to her house and set down the pitcher, and took the purple and sat down upon her seat and drew out the thread.

And behold an angel of the Lord stood before her saying: *"Fear not, Mary, for thou hast found grace before the Lord of all things and thou shalt conceive of his word."* And she, when she heard it, questioned in herself, saying, *"Shall I verily conceive of the living God, and bring forth after the manner of all women?"* And the angel of the Lord said, *"Not so, Mary, for a power of the Lord shall overshadow thee. Wherefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of the Highest. [...]"* And Mary said: *"Behold the handmaid of the Lord is before him, be it unto me according to thy word."*

J. Levenson, Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son, 141-2

Through the aqedah, Abraham surrenders his beloved son to the God who made his miraculous conception possible. The natural father hands over the son born outside the course of nature to the divine father whose due he is. The divine father exercises his prerogative to decline the offering he demanded, Isaac is allowed to live, and a sheep takes his place over the fire. But the Isaac who survives the aqedah is no longer the "boy" (Gen 22:5) who accompanied his father on that fateful journey to Moriah. He is, instead, a man ready for marriage, a point brought out nicely by the genealogy that follows the aqedah, with the words "Bethuel being the father of Rebekah" (22:23). The point is underscored by a subtle item of diction as well. The angel's second address to Abraham promises him that "your descendants shall seize the gates of their foes," and when two chapters later, Rebekah's family blesses the maiden as she is about to leave for Canaan and marriage to Isaac, they say, "May your offspring seize the gates of their foes." The unusual blessing occurring only in these two texts we can reasonably surmise that the narrator wishes to underscore yet again the providential character of the match of Isaac with Rebekah. The Isaac who emerges from the aqedah is less his father's son than a patriarch in his own right, about to marry and, after years of childlessness reminiscent of his father's experience (25:20-21), to beget the children who will themselves be further fulfillment of the irrevocable promise.

Ibid., p. 100

For Ishmael God intervenes, but for Isaac he overcomes nature itself. Ishmael is the natural son, born of ambiguous human machinations to circumvent a natural curse. Isaac is the promised son, born of an undeniable supernatural plan to overcome the curse of nature in order to realize the blessing God has promised to visit upon Abraham and his descendants through his beloved son.

The plan, so long thwarted, comes at last to fruition in Gen 21, when "the Lord took note of Sarah as He had promised, and the Lord did for Sarah as He had spoken," enabling her to conceive and bear Isaac (vv 1-2). On the words, "as He had promised," the commentator Ovadiah Seforno, an Italian rabbi of the late fifteenth century, remarks that the promise at issue had come in 17:16 with the words "I will bless her." Now, Seforno observes, God has "removed from her the curse of Eve with regard to conception, birth, and rearing of a child": "I will make most severe / Your pangs in childbearing" (3:16). That a childbirth should be a blessing is indeed a reversal of the postlapsarian order of things and suggests that Fishbane's observation about the promise to Abraham in Genesis 12 need to be expanded so as to include Sarah as well. It is not simply Abraham's "generativity" that is blessed; were that the case, the matter could have come to rest with the birth of Ishmael, a state of affairs that Abraham, according to Rashi's understind of 17:18, was quite satisfied to accept. But now, in 21:1-2, we see the miraculous fulfillment of the promises of 17:15-21 and 18:9-15, as an aged Sarah, barren all her life and past menopause to boot, conceives and gives birth to the son promised by the very God who had cursed Eve with the pains of labor.