In Cool of Evening or Heat of Day

By Joseph Richard

"And God said to Abraham, "As for Sar′ai your wife, you shall not call her name Sar′ai, 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." Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to 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?" And Abraham said to God, "O that Ish′mael might live in thy sight!"

Genesis 17:15-17

"And the Lord appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day. He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, three men stood in front of him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them, and bowed himself to the earth. . ."

Genesis 18:1-3

Abraham does not flee the face of God. Unlike Adam, Eve, even the Israelites in Exodus, Abraham does not hide. He sees God coming over a hill and runs out to meet Him. Abraham sees the creator of the universe popping up over the horizon and greets him like a child after they've waited for their father to come home, with joy and sweet obeisance and love. There is nothing forced in their encounter, nothing unnatural, nothing strange--quite the opposite, Abraham's encounter with God by the oaks of Mamre is presented to us first and foremost as something eminently natural. The character of this dialogue is one of mutual interplay, of authentic relation that begins in obeisance but shifts to struggle, that begins and ends in love, but a love that involves a certain give and take (for the Hospitality is not *just* the Hospitality, but also the debate over Sodom). The question, seems to me, hovering over the whole Hospitality is the character of the encounter; can man and God speak on a level ground, can any struggle with the creator and fashioner of the dirt in your bones end well? What does it even mean for encounter with the maker of all things to be 'natural'?

There is, of course, the text's presentation of the Hospitality. Genesis tells us that there was nothing peculiar in the opening scene of the encounter. Abraham sees three men, one of them the creator of Heaven and Earth, approaching by the oaks of Mamre, and immediately goes out to meet them. He does not find it peculiar that the Lord of all should come out to meet him. What fascinates me is that this presentation continues up to Sarah's reaction to God's prophecy, for it is here that a certain machismo brutishness seems to come out in God's character. Something natural is lost when God speaks and Sarah answers as she does from her heart.

Abraham, of course, ever the faithful servant, ever the servant who leaves his home and his riches and his family and his heritage without knowing where he's going, does not question the God of the universe when he tells him that He'll give him a son. We can imagine Abraham repeating Eli's words in Samuel, 'What is good in His eyes, let Him do'. It is Sarah that 'laughs in her heart', and it is Sarah that asks before she is taken out to the land she knows not. It is interesting that God's first response to her lack of faith is not directed at her, but His servant Abraham,

> Then the Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Will I really have a child, now that I am old?' *Is anything too hard for the Lord?* I will return to you at the appointed time next year, and Sarah will have a son.
> Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, "I did not laugh." But he said, "Yes, you did laugh."

Force, coercion, fear and trembling, these begin only with Sarah's doubt. It strikes me that this might well help us on the question to discern what it actually means for man to speak to God in a natural mode, in a proper way, and what it means, further, that Abraham seems to do this without any trouble.

The question God asks His servant, 'is anything too hard for the Lord?', is rhetorical, but everything hinges on it. That God appears as man does to man is no horror, no scandal precisely

because Abraham is the servant who knows the answer to the question 'is anything too hard for the Lord?'--the absolute power of God over His world, even over His mode of appearance to His creation, is a given for Abraham. Abraham takes it as an axiom. For Sarah, however, the appearance of God is something well and good by itself, but the *intervention* of God into the world He made seems something gratuitous, even ludicrous. Sarah is not the servant who thinks that for God all things are possible, and this lack of faith is counted against her in the same way Abraham's response to God earlier in Genesis is 'counted to his credit'.

Though Sarah seems Abraham's antithesis, one would be hard pressed to explain how this characterization fits the grander narrative--Sarah is to be the 'mother of faith', and the one who bears the first fruits of Abraham's people (who themselves are to be more numerous than the stars in the sky). Why would God work through Sarah if she were so hard of heart? Why would God work through Sarah, that is to say, if she really was made of such tough stuff? We can only paint a fuller picture of divine-human relation in Genesis if we consider Sarah together with her husband.

Just a chapter before God's appearance to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, God gives the very same prophecy; in the first, it's Abraham who laughs. Abraham, the man of faith, finds himself in the same position his wife later would. An elderly man, a man sunk deep in the brokenness of the world, he can't envision a disruption of the natural order that would allow a man of his age to conceive a son.

> "Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to 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?"

Abraham's reaction isn't rooted in doubt *of God*--he is, after-all, not rebuked for his insolence. Abraham laughs precisely because he's sunk deep in the suffering of the world and unable to envision any disruption of the natural order, not out of a lack of faith but--seemingly--out of a despair similar to the 'depths' of the Psalmist. If we run with this interpretation, we find ourselves given a vision of character development in Genesis that sheds light on Sarah's behavior in the following episode and on the broader meaning of that enigmatic 'faith' (if we take Abraham as its father).

Faith, for Abraham as well as Sarah, involves struggle. That Abraham does not come to us ready-made and willing to accept a subversion of the self-evident in the name of divine providence alerts us to something pivotal about the character of faith. Abraham, Israel's forebear, born after the Fall, must pass through a struggle against the apparent to reach Isaac. Sarah, a decade his junior, must face a similar course. The narrative, then, gives us two depictions of this sort of growth in faith, each one parallel to the other.

It strikes me, further, that Sarah's reaction to God's prophecy, and God's rebuke after she denies it, evokes the closing chapters of the Eden account in a remarkable way. Like Adam and Eve, Sarah is unable to conceive of God in a way that goes beyond the limitations He chose to subject Himself to that He might speak with His creation. As we see with Adam and Eve, Sarah hides herself 'from the face of God' imagining that she *can* hide, imagining that the being who fashioned her heart is somehow incapable of looking inside. She laughs at God in the same way Abraham does, with the same spirit, with the same knowledge of good and evil preventing her from assimilating the content of the prophecy.

This all adds up to the debate over Sodom at the end of the Hospitality. Abraham is his wife's mirror image. Where Sarah sees the Lord of all and imagines Him a man, and considers Him a man in her heart, Abraham sees the Lord of all for whom nothing is too difficult. Abraham has passed through the tumult that Sarah has just endured; when Abraham begs God spare Sodom for the sake of fifty righteous, forty, thirty, ten, he does so well aware of His own position before this incomparable might. He speaks to God as a child to his irate father, with a full awareness of his own limitedness, but with hope. Abraham speaks to God as man speaks to man, but not just as man speaks to man, instead as a child to his father.

To the question, then, 'what does it mean for a man to speak to God as a man speaks to man?', we might well respond, 'it means that man speak to him as a man speaks, when he is a child, to his father.' It is the absolute power of God over the world He has made that enables Him to speak with Abraham, and it is the absolute power of God over the world He has made that enables him to speak with such surety and to reassure Abraham that he will, in fact, have a son. The key is that Abraham does not begin with this sort of surety. He leaves his home, he goes out from Ur to a place he knows not, but he laughs in God's face when he's given the promise of

an apparent impossibility. The ‘parental’ mode of divine-human relation shifts beyond the human when it borders the self-evident--Abraham can imagine that God will give him something momentous, something worthy, but a subversion of the natural order for the sake of an old nobleman and his wife seems ridiculous *because it is*. Here’s the truth the text hides behind so-many-prophecies: only when we’ve done away with the serious that we can make room for the absurd.

Abraham and Sarah, the parents of faith, are the parents of faith precisely because there is something paradigmatic about their relationship with God. They begin as anyone would, with ‘faith’ (trust), but a faith still sunk deep in human fragility. They go further, Abraham first and Sarah later, when they begin to internalize the fact that for God all things are possible. If the relationship between Abraham, Sarah, and God is ultimately (though perhaps not initially) parental, then it is the sort of relationship a child might have with its parent before that child recognizes that there are definite limits on what the parent is capable of accomplishing. A recovery of the innocence of the Garden, an innocence the other side of good and evil and beyond decay, characterizes God’s relationship to the founders of His chosen nation.