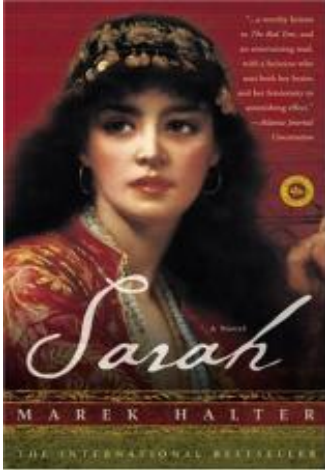


Sarah: Book One of the Canaan Trilogy

by Marek Halter



About the Book

Sarah is the passionate, spellbinding story of one of the most famous --- yet least-known --- women of the Bible. The daughter of a lord in the Sumerian city-state Ur, Sarah balks at her father's choice of a husband and flees to the tent-city below. She spends one night there, protected by the kind stranger Abraham, before returning to Ur, haunted by Abraham's memory. To avoid being forced to marry, she secretly drinks a potion that renders her barren --- which Sumerian culture sees as a sign of divine possession. Years later, Sarah sees Abraham again, but now she is the high priestess, the most revered woman in Sumeria, whose renowned beauty never ages. Exalted as she is, Sarah doesn't hesitate when Abraham asks her to join his nomadic life, following the one true God.

From the great ziggurat of Ishtar to the fertile valleys of Canaan, the bedchamber of the Pharaoh to the plateau where Abraham would sacrifice their son Isaac, **Sarah** immerses readers in an ancient world of spectacle, intrigue, and miracles. This guide is designed to help direct your reading group's discussion of this powerful novel.

Discussion Guide

1. Read the portions of Genesis in the Bible pertaining to Sarah's story. Discuss how the novel changes your perspective on an episode crucial to Jews, Muslims, and Christians. How familiar were you with the story beforehand? Does **Sarah**, the novel, raise issues you haven't thought about before in your own religion?
2. In Sarah's time, the role of women was often precarious. In her father's home, she was pampered, but bound to marry who he wished; as a high priestess, she wielded great power, but had no control over how her body would be used; even after marrying Abram for love, she was still given to Pharaoh as if she were a prostitute. Do you see parallels to the lives of women today? Why, or why not?
3. On pages 39 and 40, a soothsayer predicts Sarai will bear two children, and, when pressed, adds, "She can be a wife

without a husband. She is the kind of woman who provokes violent acts?The gods will decide her fate: queen or slave." In what ways did these predictions come true? How were they inaccurate?

4. Sarai tells Abram on page 117, "The gods of the lords of Ur aren't anyone else's gods! We are the only ones who can invoke them!" Do you see parallels to the current strife in the world? How have things changed in thousands of years?

5. On page 122, Sarai thinks of Abram: "This was the man she loved?A man who loved her without saying it in words, but who showed it through his jealousy and rage." Is this love? How important is love to Sarai and to the various societies she lived in?

6. On page 158, Sarai tells Abram, "I'm going with you because you are Abram and I am Sarai." How does Sarai feel about Abram's claims? She chose to go with him at the temple in Ur; does she choose to follow him now or is it no longer her decision to make?

7. Sarah's unchanging beauty is portrayed as both a miracle and a curse. How does this relate to today's world, where plastic surgery and "extreme makeovers" are becoming the norm? If Sarah were alive today, what do you think would be her fate?

8. Over the course of Sarah's life, she is immersed in several different cultures: the highly civilized city-state Ur, the nomadic *mar.Tu* people, the opulent and exotic palace of Pharaoh. What were the similarities? How were women treated in each society? Where was Sarah the most content? Where would you be most content?

9. Several of Sarah's plans --- drinking a potion to avoid forced marriage, giving Abraham a son through Hagar --- work perfectly, but are ultimately mistakes. Can you think of other examples? What are the repercussions? What happens when Abraham makes mistakes?

10. Throughout the novel, there are instances where Sarah behaves selfishly, often to the detriment of those around her. She shows almost no grief upon her brother's death. She encourages Lot's crush on her. She banishes Hagar when the woman is almost ready to give birth. Are there factors that mitigate or excuse these acts? Would you trust her? Does Sarah mature? Is she a good role model?

11. On page 205, Sarai says, "He's your god, Abram, not mine." What is the first sign that Sarai is beginning to believe in Yhwh? What fuels her conversion? Are her motives pure?

12. Abram tells Sarai on page 283 that Yhwh has changed their names to Abraham and Sarah. How is this a turning point in the story? Does it make them different people?

13. How does Sarah's legacy affect today's society? Your life?

14. Ancient Ur is located in what is now Iraq. Does this fact alter your feelings about what you have read in any way? Does it change your beliefs about that country?

15. The author, Marek Halter, said, "I have always been fascinated by the strong female figures in the Bible, and frustrated by the lack of documentation available on them. Re-examining the Old Testament through the feminine

perspective has rendered this ancient text more emotionally accessible and has given it a modern appeal." Do you think he achieved his goal? Would you call this a "feminist" version of the story? Does it ring true?

Author Bio

Marek Halter was born in Poland in 1936. During World War II, he and his parents narrowly escaped from the Warsaw ghetto. After a time in Russia and Uzbekistan, they emigrated to France in 1950. There Halter studied pantomime with Marcel Marceau and embarked on a career as a painter that led to several international exhibitions. In 1967, he founded the International Committee for a Negotiated Peace Agreement in the Near East and played a crucial role in the organization of the first official meetings between Palestinians and Israelis.

In the 1970s, Marek Halter turned to writing. He first published *THE MADMAN AND THE KINGS*, which was awarded the Prix Aujourd'hui in 1976. He is also the author of several internationally acclaimed, bestselling historical novels, including *THE MESSIAH*, *THE MYSTERIES OF JERUSALEM*, and *THE BOOK OF ABRAHAM, SARAH*, the first novel of the Canaan trilogy. *LILAH*, the last of the trilogy, will be published in 2006. Marek Halter lives in Paris.

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Publication Date: April 26, 2005

Genres: Fiction

Paperback: 336 pages

Publisher: Broadway

ISBN-10: 1400052785

ISBN-13: 9781400052783