

Genesis 20

This is the second time (cf. 12:10ff) that Abraham will nearly lose his wife to a foreign leader. Some think they are variations of the same event because “surely” no one would make the same mistake twice! Apparently, the critic does not know human nature very well. In fact, the text makes clear that this was Abraham’s standard practice when he was in a foreign land (20:13).

We are still within the twelve month time frame between the most recent promise of Sarah’s pregnancy (18:10) and its fulfillment (21:1). But Abraham is still concerned about potentially being killed for the sake of Sarah. Apparently, the matriarch was still attractive (12:14). This event is the first time “sin” is used by humans in reference to fellow humans. It is also the first occurrence of the word to “pray,” when Abraham made intercession on behalf of Abimelech, as he had done earlier for the Sodomites, where the action was found but not the word “pray.” It is also the first occurrence of the word “prophet,” although Enoch (Gen. 5:22-24) is referred to as a prophet by Jude (ver. 14).

TRANSLATION - 20:1-13:

1 Now Abraham traveled from there to the land of the Negev and stayed between Kadesh and Shur. And he stayed temporarily in Gerar. **2** Then Abraham said of Sarah, his wife, “My sister, she [is].” Then Abimelech, the king of Gerar, sent and took Sarah. **3** God came to Abimelech in a vision at night and said to him, “Behold, you [are] dead! Because of the woman whom you took. She [is] married to a husband.”

4 But Abimelech did not approach her and said, “My Lord, a nation also righteous will you kill? **5** Did he not say to me, ‘My sister, she [is]?’ And even she, herself, said, ‘My brother he [is]?’ In the completeness of my heart, even in the innocence of my hands, I did this thing!”

6 So God said to him in a vision, “Even I myself know that in completeness of your heart you did this thing and I withheld, even I myself, you from sinning against me. Therefore I did not give you to touch her. **7** But now bring back the wife of the man because a prophet he [is] and he must pray for you and you will live, but if there is not for you bringing back, know that to die you will die you yourself, and all which [is] yours.”

8 So Abimelech arose early in the morning and called to all his servants and spoke all these words in their ears and the men feared greatly. **9** Then Abimelech called to Abraham and said to him, “What did you do to us? And what did I sin against you that you brought over me and over my kingdom a great sin? Works which they do not do, you did to me.”

10 And Abimelech said to Abraham, “What did you see that you did this thing?”

11 Then Abraham said, “Because I said, ‘Only there is not fear of God in this place. And they will kill me on account of my wife. **12** And, in truth, my sister, the daughter of my father, she [is]. Only not the daughter of my mother and she became to me for a wife. **13** And it will be just as God caused me to wander, from the house of my father and I said to her, ‘This is the loving loyalty which you do to me, to every place where we come there... Say of me, ‘My brother, he [is].’”

WORDS:

“Stayed temporarily” (verse 1; 82 times) translates one word which suggests the idea of a temporary stay. It was used of Abraham back in 12:10 and of Lot in 19:9. It is the cognate verb for the word translated “alien or stranger” in 12:10. “Husband” (verse 3; 161 times) is the famous word “baal”. It was first used in Genesis 14:13 where we translated it “possessor of a covenant.” The word means an owner, a possessor, a lord, or husband. The verb is used sixteen times and means “to rule over, be lord, or be a husband.” Among the Canaanites, Baal is the name of the storm or fertility god (128 times), first met in Scripture in Numbers 22:41 although the names of certain places, like “Baal-hanan” carries the name of the local deity (Gen. 36:38).

“Completeness” (verse 5; 15 times) is related to the very similar word used of Noah in 6:9 and Abraham himself in 17:1. Again, it is the word used to describe a perfect specimen of an animal to be used in sacrifice. The entire word family is used nearly 200 times. “Innocence” is not found frequently (Hosea 8:5; Amos 4:6; Psa. 26:6; 73:13). It means cleanness, whiteness, or innocence. “Withheld” (verse 6; 28 times) means to “withhold, keep back, refrain, spare.”

“Prophet” (verse 7; 317 times) is certainly a biblical word, although many ANE nations had their own prophets. The classic biblical definition of a prophet is found in Exodus 7:1-2. “Greatly” (verse 8) is the adverb translated “very” or “extremely” in prior texts. “Fear” (verse 11; 44 times) is, of course, a cognate word for the verb. The whole word family is used 435 times, including as an epithet for Jehovah God (Gen. 31:42). “Cause to wander” (verse 13; 51 times) means to “lead astray or to err.” Because it is a *hiphil* (causative), here it carries the idea of *causing* to wander. “Loving loyalty” is *chesed* which we saw first in 19:19; see comments on “Words” in that section.

GRAMMAR:

“To die, you will die” is the Hebrew emphatic, an infinitive absolute with the same verb in an imperfect form.

ARCHEAOLGY:

We have already pointed out that “Negev” means the South. By the NT times, it came to be called “Idumea” (cf. Mark 3:8). This area was not good for farming, as they only received 8” (200mm) of rain per year. Kadesh is in northeastern Sinai. We saw Shur back in chapter 16:7, 14 (Kadesh) where Hagar met Jehovah God.

We do not know exactly where Gerar was (see Gen. 10:19). Gerar is not mentioned outside of the Bible. It might have been a territory or area rather than a city. “Abimelech” seems to have been a royal title rather than a personal name, similar to Pharaoh or Caesar. It was a fairly common West Semitic name. There is an Abimelech in chapter 26 and an Abimelech in the superscription of Psalm 34).

COMMENTS:

Abraham left Mamre and traveled south again, toward Egypt. Why did Abraham decide to pack up and move? Did the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah frighten him? Did he simply like to change locations frequently? Was he needing better or more pasture for his flocks? Was there conflict at home, which he was trying to avoid? We don’t know, but this incident, like chapter 12, almost causes problems for Abraham. It would have, if God had not intervened.

As Abraham had done in chapter 12, here he informs the leader, Abimelech, that Sarah was his sister. Then Abimelech “took” Sarah, denoting the idea of taking her for a wife. God appeared to Abimelech with a simple statement: “You are a dead man!” That is simple and to the point. The reason God gives is because this woman, Sarah, has a husband. The idea is that she “belongs” to someone, not as a piece of property but in a legal, emotional, and spiritual sense.

Then God appears to Abimelech. Outside the family of Abraham, Laban will receive a revelation from God (31:24), as will the Egyptian butler and baker (40:5) and Pharaoh himself (41:1); Balaam will also (Num. 22-24); as will Pharaoh Necho (2 Chron. 35:22). We find it hard to believe that an Israelite or Jew, unaided by divine revelation, would record such a behavior in the second or third century B. C.

Abimelech, respectfully calling God “Lord,” defends himself in several ways. First, Moses tells us that Abimelech had, in fact, not gone in to Sarah to sleep with her. Whether it was because he had been plagued in some way by God or not, we are not sure (cf. 20:17). Secondly, Abimelech, echoing Abraham’s thoughts of God (18:25), asked God if he would slay a righteous nation. The belief is that God is too righteous to kill a nation full of good people, in contrast with the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah. Thirdly, Abimelech reminds God that

both Abraham and Sarah had informed him that they were siblings. Fourth, Abimelech tells God that his motives were pure (“completeness of heart”) and his actions were pure (“innocence of hands”).

It is interesting that God acknowledged that Abimelech acted in innocence. At the same time, God tells Abimelech that he must have Abraham, “a prophet,” pray on behalf of Abimelech; otherwise, he would be killed. God is emphatic, observe, when He threatens Abimelech with death. This shows us that, even in the absence of a written law code, God expected Abimelech and mankind to respect certain moral values. Observe that adultery is viewed as a sin against *God*. We do not know *how* God kept Abimelech from Sarah, but it was through some providential means, no doubt. Not only would Abimelech pay with his life, if he disobeys God, but so would his family and, apparently, his own people. God gives Abimelech the freedom to obey or not to obey; but He does not give him the freedom to choose the consequences of that choice.

There are over fifty texts among the Mari documents that include messages from prophets of false gods. For Abraham, being a prophet meant he was to pray for those who were not among his family, to heal them (20:17; cf. 1 Kings 13:6). In the ANE, the role of prophet was generally held by priests of their respective gods. However, there was not as much overlap in Israelite religion, although there were notable priest-prophets such as Samuel and Ezekiel.

Abimelech wastes no time in responding to God’s threat. He arises early in the morning and tells his people what God had said and they all feared greatly, showing that Abraham had completely misjudged the people (20:11). Then, Abimelech, out of fear and perhaps anger, fires a round of questions at Abraham: What have you done? What sin did I commit against you that you brought this great sin against my kingdom? Observe here that Abimelech believed, as was generally acknowledged in the ANE, that adultery was a “great sin.” The phrase “great sin” is used four other times, all of which refer to idolatry (Exo. 32:21, 30-31; 2 Kings 17:21). This might be part of the link between idolatry and “spiritual” adultery. The questions from Abimelech continued: Why have you done things against me that ought not to be done? Abimelech is accusing Abraham of ignoring the most basic rules of hospitality. Verse 10 records a separate statement by Abimelech, as if he had to pause and take a deep breath. He wanted to know what Abraham was thinking, what was he expecting to find in Gerar that motivated him to lie?

Both Abimelech’s and his men’s fear, without the existence of a written law, shows that the final restraint on men’s moral choices is the consciousness that they are accountable to the God of heaven.

Abraham, forgetting God’s challenge in 15:1, did fear. Then that fear led him to jeopardize the promise. If Abimelech had had sexual relations with Sarah, it could not have been known that the baby was Abraham’s, by promise. Out of fear, Abraham had jumped to a false conclusion about Abimelech and his people. That was Abraham’s first response and his visceral reaction, although it was certainly a wrong assumption (cf. 20:8). Secondly, Abraham responded that he was only half-lying since they were half-siblings. They had the same father but not the same mother. That doesn’t seem to make Abimelech any happier (cf. 20:16, where Abimelech refers to Abraham, perhaps sarcastically, as Sarah’s “brother”). Finally, Abraham tried to justify his position by stating that deception about their relationship had been their standard operating procedure wherever they had gone, as if that were to make Abimelech feel better! Abraham tells Sarah it would be her “loving loyalty” to Abraham if she were to keep the full truth a secret.

APPLICATION:

Contemporaries in the text - Again, it is easy to criticize Abraham sharply, looking at his life through the lens of the NT or even through the Law of Moses. Let’s not forget that Abraham had lived among pagan gods for 75 years before God called him to separate himself. You could take the man out of the deceptive environment, but apparently, you could not take the deception entirely out of the man. Be that as it may, God stepped in, tolerated Abraham’s weak

faith, and kept Abimelech from taking Sarah as a wife or even having sexual relations with her so that there would be no doubt that her child was Abraham's child.

Contemporaries of Moses - God will forbid Israelite kings from having harems (Deut. 17:17). Adultery will be punishable by death in the Law of Moses (Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:22). Marrying one's half-sister will also, later, be condemned by the Law (Lev. 18:9, 11; 20:17). Again, it is hard to believe that Jews living later in OT times would have imagined "Father" Abraham doing something that would break the Law.

Later Hebrew writers - One point Israel should have drawn from this event is that God would take care of Israel, even in foreign lands, if they would simply walk with Him, as Abraham walked (cf. the events of 1 Sam. 4-6 when the ark was stolen by the Philistines).

NT writers - We have already noted in the introduction that chapter 20 is one of the few chapters in Genesis with no quotation or direct allusion in the NT. However, Jesus still forbids adultery under His covenant. "Adultery" is mentioned 23 times in the NT. Jesus also defines adultery as marrying a man or woman who had not divorced their first spouse on the basis of sexual immorality (Matt. 5:32; 19:9). It is still a "great sin" in the eyes of God (Heb. 13:4).

TRANSLATION - 20:14-18:

14 Then Abimelech took a flock and cattle and servants and female servants and gave to Abraham and brought back to him Sarah, his wife. **15** And Abimelech said, "Behold, my land [is] before you, in the good [land] in your eyes, dwell." **16** Then to Sarah he said, "Behold, I give a thousand pieces of silver even to your brother, behold, he [is] to you a covering for the eyes for all which [is] yours and all; and you are vindicated."

17 So Abraham prayed to God and God healed Abimelech and his wife and his female slaves and they gave birth. **18** Because to close, Jehovah closed every womb at the house of Abimelech on account of Sarah, the wife of Abraham.

WORDS:

"Covering" (verse 16) is not found very many times (eight) and has a broad range of meanings: covering, clothing, whether outer clothing or sackcloth. "Pray" (verse 17; 84 times) means to "pray or make intercession." There are about a dozen words in Hebrew which could be translated "prayer." This word is the most frequent along with its related noun. "Healed" (69 times) means to "make whole or healthy." In Exodus 15:26, God will tell Israel that He is the one who heals them. "Close" (verse 18; 46 times) was first seen in 16:2 where Sarah accused God of "closing" her womb. The word means to "hold back, restrain, hinder, or bring to a halt." Those were Sarah's words and feelings but here, clearly God is the one who closes the wombs of the women in Abimelech's house. "Womb" is found 26 times.

GRAMMAR:

"To close, he closed" is the infinitive absolute, followed by the perfect of the same verb, for emphasis.

COMMENTS:

Abimelech's generosity is impressive, especially considering how Abraham had treated him. He gives Abraham a flock of sheep, cattle, male and female servants, as well as Sarah, untouched sexually. In some way fulfilling God's promise of land to Abraham, Abimelech offers Abraham any place in his land where he could dwell, where he desired.

Then to Sarah, Abimelech spoke of a substantial gift given to her "brother." The 1,000 pieces of silver would have been a sizable sum, weighing around 25 pounds of silver. As far as we can tell, that would have been more than the typical worker would have earned in a lifetime. By way of comparison, Abraham will purchase their burial site for 400 shekels of silver. The land at Shechem will sell for 100 shekels (33:19) and a slave could be purchased for 20 shekels (37:28). Under the Law of Moses, a slave was sold for only thirty shekels of silver (Exo. 21:32).

The phrase “a covering for the eyes” (20:16), is a figurative expression, not literally referring to a veil but a figurative reference to a veil. It suggests overlooking a wrong, to preclude criticisms. It could suggest the undefiled honor of a woman.

Finally, Abraham will intercede on behalf of Abimelech, just as he did with Sodom (18:23-33). Then God will heal Abimelech. We do not know what Abimelech had suffered, but it seems to have had to do with childbearing. God had completely closed their wombs (the force of the verb phrase; see under “Grammar”) because Abimelech had taken Sarah.

As long as Abraham “has” no wife, Abimelech will “have” no children! It is ironic that Abraham’s prayer opened the wombs of Abimelech’s household but it had not for Sarah for over 24 years. Of course, we know why. God wants Abraham, Sarah, and all subsequent generations to know that the gift of Isaac would be by God’s miraculous power, not by any human effort (or merit)!

APPLICATION:

Contemporaries in the text - Just as in chapter 12, God turned a potentially disastrous situation into a form of blessing, just as He had promised (Gen. 12:1-3). Abraham left the pharaoh of Egypt a wealthier man (12:16) and he will leave Abimelech a wealthier man (20:14-16). God will work all things together for the good of those who love Him, despite their imperfections (Rom. 8:28).

Contemporaries of Moses - Israel needed to be reminded, regularly, that God would provide for their needs. They did not need to take their “salvation” into their own hands (by worshipping idols). God would bless faithful obedience.

NT writers - Abraham, here in chapter 20, is an example of the fact that human failure does not cause God’s promises to fail (2 Tim. 2:13). Despite the fact that Christians live in a strange world, as aliens and travelers, we must live differently. When we do live differently, the world will glorify God because of this behavior (1 Pet. 2:11-12).