

# Genesis 20 - The Abimelech Incident; Abimelech Rebukes Abraham

II. Epilogue: Patriarchal history (Gen 11:10—50:26)

(1) Life of Abraham (Gen 11:10—25:11)

(B) Abrahamic Covenant (Gen 12:1—25:11)

(b) The maturation of Abraham and Sarah's faith in preparation for covenant blessings (Gen 18:1—22:19)

(iii) Test with Abimelech (20:1-18)

## Genesis 20

(iii) Test with Abimelech (20:1-18)

1 Now Abraham journeyed from there toward the land of the Negev, and settled between Kadesh and Shur; then he lived for a time in Gerar.

1 Now Abraham journeyed from there toward the land of the Negev, and settled between Kadesh and Shur; then he sojourned in Gerar.

1 Abraham traveled from there to the Negev and settled between Kadesh and Shur. While he was living in Gerar as an outsider,

1 And Abraham journeyed from thence toward the south country, and dwelled between Kadesh and Shur, and sojourned in Gerar.

- Abraham left his place at the Oaks of Mamre near Hebron, the Hill Country of Judah, and journeyed south to the Negev, the desert

— Gerar was near the coast about 12 miles south of Gaza and about 50 miles south of Hebron, in the land of the Philistines (21:34)

— Later Isaac will do the same thing with another Abimelech (26:1-11)

2 And Abraham said of his wife Sarah, "She is my sister." So **Abimelech** king of Gerar sent *men* and took Sarah.

2 Abraham said of Sarah his wife, "She is my sister." So Abimelech king of Gerar sent and took Sarah.

2 because Abraham kept saying about his wife Sarah, "She is my sister," King Abimelech of Gerar summoned them and took Sarah into his household.

2 And Abraham said of Sarah his wife, She is my sister: and Abimelech king of Gerar sent, and took Sarah.

- "...Abimelech" - a tribal title similar to "Pharaoh"; not a proper name

- 25 years after leaving Egypt in disgrace, and a rebuke from the Pharaoh (12:10-20), Abraham reverted to the same ploy of telling others that Sarah was his sister
- The result was the same: Abimelech took Sarah into his household
- This happened in the one year interim between the specific prophecy given by God about Isaac, and his birth. Sarah may not have been pregnant at this time, or if she was, it was early in her pregnancy.
- Abraham, once again, endangered the promise of the seed

3 But God came to Abimelech in a dream of the night, and said to him, "Behold, you are a dead man because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is married."

3 But God came to Abimelech in a dream of the night, and said to him, "Behold, you are a dead man because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is married."

3 But God came to Abimelech in a dream during the night and spoke to him, "Pay attention! You're about to die, because the woman you have taken is a man's wife!"

**3** But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night, and said to him, Behold, thou art but a dead man, for the woman which thou hast taken; for she is a man's wife.

- Again, God intervenes to protect Sarah and preserve His promise for the line of the Redeemer

- In Genesis and elsewhere, God more than once appeared to pagans in a dream:

— In Genesis, Abimelech is the first of five pagans to receive a divine revelation of things by a dream, and all were warnings. The other four were Laban (31:24), the butler and the baker (40:5), and Pharaoh (41:1).

- God threatened the life of Abimelech if he had relations with Sarah, a married woman

— This is another example of the cursing aspect of the Abrahamic Covenant

— God intervenes because the covenant is unconditional

4 Now Abimelech had not come near her; and he said, "Lord, will You kill a nation, even *though* blameless?"

4 Now Abimelech had not come near her; and he said, "LORD, will You slay a nation, even *though* blameless?"

4 Now Abimelech had not yet come near her, so he asked, "LORD, will you destroy an innocent nation?"

**4** But Abimelech had not come near her: and he said, LORD, wilt thou slay also a righteous nation?

- Abraham had prayed that the righteous would not be destroyed with the wicked (18:23-32). Now Abimelech's words echoed the same concern: Lord, will You destroy an innocent nation? The rebuke would have been quite forceful for Abraham.

- Abimelech's defense: "I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Mrs. Sarah" [Bill Clinton]
- Previously, the threat was only against Abimelech, but here it is also a threat to the whole city-state of Gerar

5 Did he himself not say to me, 'She is my sister'? And she herself said, 'He is my brother.' In the integrity of my heart and the innocence of my hands I have done this."

5 Did he not himself say to me, 'She is my sister'? And she herself said, 'He is my brother.' In the integrity of my heart and the innocence of my hands I have done this."

5 Didn't he say to me, 'She's my sister'? And she also said, 'He's my brother.' I did this with pure intentions and clean hands."

5 Said he not unto me, She is my sister? and she, even she herself said, He is my brother: in the integrity of my heart and innocency of my hands have I done this.

- Abimelech points out Abraham (and Sarah's) deception to God
- Abraham and Sarah both verified each other's story that they were brother and sister, so Abimelech's actions were the result of their lie
- Abimelech then defends his motives: he did this legally and with integrity, with no intention to sin against Abraham or against God

6 Then God said to him in the dream, "Yes, I know that in the integrity of your heart you have done this, and I also kept you from sinning against Me; therefore I did not let you touch her.

6 Then God said to him in the dream, "Yes, I know that in the integrity of your heart you have done this, and I also kept you from sinning against Me; therefore I did not let you touch her.

6 Then God replied to him in the dream, "I know that you did this with pure intentions, and it was I who kept you from sinning against me. Therefore, I didn't allow you to touch her.

**6** And God said unto him in a dream, Yea, I know that thou didst this in the integrity of thy heart; for I also withheld thee from sinning against me: therefore suffered I thee not to touch her.

- God initiates a second dream with Abimelech
- God's response shows His divine protection of Sarah (and Abimelech, and Abraham, and His unconditional promise)

7 Now then, return the man's wife, for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you and you will live. But if you do not return *her*, know that you will certainly die, you and all who are yours."

7 Now therefore, restore the man's wife, for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you and you will live. But if you do not restore *her*, know that you shall surely die, you and all who

are yours."

7 Now then, return the man's wife. As a matter of fact, he's a prophet and can intercede for you so you'll live. But if you don't return her, be aware that you and all who are yours will certainly die."

7 Now therefore restore the man his wife; for he is a prophet, and he shall pray for thee, and thou shalt live: and if thou restore her not, know thou that thou shalt surely die, thou, and all that are thine.

- First mention of "prophet" in the OT

- In spite of Abraham's own sin, his standing before God remains the same

- Contrary to its typical usage, in this verse "prophet" refers to Abraham being recognized by God to speak to Him on behalf of Abimelech. Usually, it is used to describe, not one who speaks to God on behalf of someone, but rather one who speaks to someone on behalf of God.

- Abimelech will return Sarah, and in turn, Abraham will pray for Abimelech and his life will be spared. If Abimelech chose to not return Sarah, God would punish him with death, along with his entire family.

- Stern warning: God regards adultery as a capital offense

8 So Abimelech got up early in the morning and called all his servants, and told all these things in their presence; and the people were greatly frightened.

8 So Abimelech arose early in the morning and called all his servants and told all these things in their hearing; and the men were greatly frightened.

8 So Abimelech got up early the next morning, summoned all his servants, and told them all these things. The men became terrified.

8 Therefore Abimelech rose early in the morning, and called all his servants, and told all these things in their ears: and the men were sore afraid.

- Abimelech woke early after his overnight dream

9 Then Abimelech called Abraham and said to him, "What have you done to us? And how have I sinned against you, that you have brought **on me and on my kingdom** a great sin? You have done to me things that ought not to be done."

9 Then Abimelech called Abraham and said to him, "What have you done to us? And how have I sinned against you, that you have brought on me and on my kingdom a great sin? You have done to me things that ought not to be done."

9 Then Abimelech called Abraham and asked him, "What have you done to us? How have I sinned against you, that you have brought such great sin against me and my kingdom? You've done things to me that ought not to have been done."

9 Then Abimelech called Abraham, and said unto him, What hast thou done unto us? and what have I offended thee, that thou hast brought on me and on my kingdom a great sin? thou hast done deeds unto me that ought not to be done.

- "...on me and on my kingdom" - both personal and national consequences were on the line

- The confrontation between prophet and king attested to the grievous nature of Abraham's actions

- How humiliating for a patriarch and prophet of God to be rebuked by a heathen king

10 And Abimelech said to Abraham, "What have you encountered, that you have done this thing?"

10 And Abimelech said to Abraham, "What have you encountered, that you have done this thing?"

10 Abimelech also asked Abraham, "What could you have been thinking when you did this?"

10 And Abimelech said unto Abraham, What sawest thou, that thou hast done this thing?

11 Abraham said, "Because I thought, surely there is no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife.

11 Abraham said, "Because I thought, surely there is no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife.

11 "I thought that there's no fear of God in this place," Abraham replied, "and that they would kill me because of my wife.

**11** And Abraham said, Because I thought, Surely the fear of God is not in this place; and they will slay me for my wife's sake.

- Abraham offers three excuses for his lie:

- (1) His perception from the horrible perversity in Sodom that the other cities had no fear of God, including Gerar (v11)

- (2) His fear of death as a mitigating factor (v11)

- (3) His wife actually being his half-sister (v12)

12 Besides, she actually is my sister, the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother; and she became my wife;

12 Besides, she actually is my sister, the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother, and she became my wife;

12 Besides, she really is my sister—she's my father's daughter, but not my mother's daughter—so she could become my wife.

12 And yet indeed she is my sister; she is the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother; and she became my wife.

- This type of relationship was later forbidden in the Mosaic Law (Lev 18:9,11; 20:17; Deut 27:22; Ezek 22:11), but this Law was not in force in Abraham's day

13 and it came about, when **God caused me to wander** from my father's house, that I said to her, 'This is the kindness which you will show to me: everywhere we go, say of me, "He is my brother."'"

13 and it came about, when God caused me to wander from my father's house, that I said to her, 'This is the kindness which you will show to me: everywhere we go, say of me, "He is my brother."'"

13 When God caused me to journey from my father's house, I asked her to do me this favor and say, 'He's my brother.'"

13 And it came to pass, when God caused me to wander from my father's house, that I said unto her, This is thy kindness which thou shalt shew unto me; at every place whither we shall come, say of me, He is my brother.

- Abraham explains that this "lie" was their family "policy" at least since the time they left Haran, if not since they left Ur of the Chaldees

— This had been their policy for the last 25 years

— This implies that this policy had been used more frequently than the two times recorded in Genesis; it seems to have worked everywhere they went except when it failed twice

- "...God caused me to wander" - in Hebrew this literally reads: "the Gods (plural), they (plural) caused me to wander"

— The word "God" (*Elohim*) is a plural noun; when used with pagan gods it is translated in the plural, but when used of the true God, it is translated as singular

— Several exceptions exist where both the noun and the verb are plural when speaking of the true God, and this again indicates a plurality in the Godhead. This verse is one example.

— The plural verb is used with *Elohim*, which is unusual (grammatically incorrect but factually true) when used of the true God. In addition, there are at least three other examples of this: 35:7, because there *Elohim* (they) appeared to him; 2 Sam 7:23, *Elohim* (they) went; Ps 58:11, verily *Elohim* (they) judge. Therefore, these uses imply a plurality in the Godhead.

14 Abimelech then took sheep and oxen and male and female servants, and gave them to Abraham, and returned his wife Sarah to him.

14 Abimelech then took sheep and oxen and male and female servants, and gave them to Abraham, and restored his wife Sarah to him.

14 So Abimelech took some sheep and oxen, and some male and female servants, gave them to Abraham, returned his wife Sarah to him,

**14** And Abimelech took sheep, and oxen, and menservants, and women servants, and gave them unto Abraham, and restored him Sarah his wife.

- As was the case with Pharaoh, God made Abraham richer still, showing again that the covenant was unconditional

— Abimelech showed respect for Abraham by enriching him, in spite of what Abraham did to him. This action was in keeping with Middle Assyrian Law of the time, which read: "If in the case of a seignior's [man's] wife, one not her father, nor her brother, nor her son, but another person, has caused her to take to the road, but he did not know that she was a seignior's wife, he shall (so) swear and he shall also pay two talents of lead to the woman's husband."

— By accepting these gifts, Abraham considered the matter settled and closed. However, Abimelech still needed Abraham's intercession on his behalf, for the reasons explained below

15 Abimelech said, "Behold, my land is before you; settle wherever you please."

15 Abimelech said, "Behold, my land is before you; settle wherever you please."

15 and said, "Look! My land is available to you, so settle wherever you please."

15 And Abimelech said, Behold, my land is before thee: dwell where it pleaseth thee.

- In contrast to Pharaoh, who expelled Abraham from the land, Abimelech offered Abraham to stay and settle wherever he wanted. He had permission to dwell anywhere in the land

— This is a good example of an unbeliever outdoing a believer

16 To Sarah he said, "Look, I have given **your brother** a thousand pieces of silver. **It is your vindication before all who are with you, and before everyone** you are **cleared.**"

16 To Sarah he said, "Behold, I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver; behold, it is your vindication before all who are with you, and before all men you are cleared."

16 Abimelech also told Sarah, "Look! I am giving your brother 1,000 pieces of silver to vindicate you in the eyes of all who are with you. As a result, you will be completely vindicated."

16 And unto Sarah he said, Behold, I have given thy brother a thousand pieces of silver: behold, he is to thee a covering of the eyes, unto all that are with thee, and with all other: thus she was reproved.

- Abraham also received a cash gift, in addition to the animals and servants

- "...your brother" - not "your husband," which emphasizes Abimelech's innocence in the affair

- "...It is your vindication before all who are with you, and before everyone" - this means to render one blind to what happened, and therefore preclude all criticism
- It is the Hebrew way of saying that Sarah was vindicated or approved in the situation
- "...cleared" - better translated "justified"

17 Then Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech and his wife and his female slaves, so that they gave birth *to children*.

17 Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech and his wife and his maids, so that they bore *children*.

17 Then Abraham interceded with God, and God healed Abimelech, his wife, and his female servants so they could bear children,

**17** So Abraham prayed unto God: and God healed Abimelech, and his wife, and his maidservants; and they bare children.

- Abraham is now keeping his end of the deal God made with Abimelech
- Abraham has the one who lied, but it takes his prayer to remove the curse because, again, the Abrahamic Covenant holds and works in spite of disobedience
- The fact that they couldn't, then could, bear children implies that enough time had passed for it to become noticeable that no births had taken place while Sarah was in Abimelech's household

18 For the LORD had completely closed all the wombs of the household of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife.

18 For the LORD had closed fast all the wombs of the household of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife.

18 since the LORD had made all the women barren in Abimelech's household on account of Abraham's wife Sarah.

18 For the LORD had fast closed up all the wombs of the house of Abimelech, because of Sarah Abraham's wife.

- The previously undisclosed curse on Abimelech is now revealed
- Here again is an example of the outworking of the Abrahamic Covenant and the curse-for-curse-in-kind principle
- Abimelech's actions would have resulted in Isaac not being born, and so the specific curse against Abraham was the danger of extinction of Abraham's line and the promised nation. If Isaac would not be born, the Jewish nation would then die out with the death of Abraham.
- If God had not reversed the curse on Abimelech, he would have been faced with the real danger of extinction because of the inability of the women in his household to give birth to



children. When Abimelech restored Sarah to Abraham, the future of Abimelech's nation is restored by God.