

Genesis Chapter 20

Genesis 20:1 "And Abraham journeyed from thence toward the south country, and dwelled between Kadesh and Shur, and sojourned in Gerar."

“Gerar” was an ancient trading post located halfway between Beer-Sheba and Gaza on the Mediterranean coast. A Philistine city on the border between Palestine and Egypt, about 10 miles south of Gaza.

Its exact location has been debated. W.J. Phythian-Adams (1922). and W.F. Flinders Petrie (1927). suggested Tell Jemmeh as the original site, but the excavations of D. Alon at Tell Abu Hureirah, revealed the latter site as more likely to be ancient Gerar.

A flourishing Middle Bronze Age community was discovered there which parallels the time of the patriarchs. Here Mycenaean (proto-Philistine), traders like Abimelech made contact with wealthy desert sheiks like Abraham.

Genesis 20:2 "And Abraham said of Sarah his wife, She [is] my sister: and Abimelech king of Gerar sent, and took Sarah."

“She is my sister”: The same thing had happened in Egypt with Pharaoh (chapter 12). Now it occurred again in Gerar with Abimelech. God appeared to Abimelech in a dream, revealing Abraham’s deception, and expressed His sovereignty in withholding “thee from sinning against me”.

“Abimelech”: This king who took Sarah into his harem was most likely the father or grandfather of the Abimelech encountered by Isaac (see note on 26:1).

He preached to Abraham in the morning and asked him why he had done such a thing. Abraham had forgotten that God was his shield (15:1).

As terrible as this story is, this was the second time Abraham had told a ruler that Sarah was his sister. Abraham left out the very important statement that Sarah was his wife. The last time the deception was to Pharaoh of Egypt. This time it happened to Abimelech, King of Gerar, in the land we know as the Holy Land.

Genesis 20:3 "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."

“God came ...in a dream”: Again, Abraham’s Lord intervened to protect Sarah, who had joined in the lie of her husband (verse 5), deceiving a king who earnestly protested his innocence and integrity before God (verses 4-6), and who, together with his aides, demonstrated proper submission to the warning of God (verse 8).

God warned Abimelech, before he committed a sin that was worthy of death. Adultery was a terrible sin, and in God's sight, it still is. Abimelech had been deceived, he had not been aware that she was married. God kept him from sinning, until He could warn him.

Genesis 20:4 "But Abimelech had not come near her: and he said, Lord, wilt thou slay also a righteous nation?"

"But Abimelech had not come near her": Sarah had been put into an apartment in his palace, and she had not yet been admitted into his company, and not at least to his bed. He had not lain with her, which is the purpose of the expression. The Septuagint version is, "had not touched her", as (in Genesis 20:6); which is another phrase expressive of the same thing.

Abimelech said, Lord, wilt thou slay also a righteous nation? Meaning either his family, the greater part of which were not accessory to this affair; or rather his kingdom (Gen. 20:9); which though not a nation of righteous men, in a strict sense (see Gen. 20:11).

Yet with regard to this business of Sarah was in no way criminal: Either God had threatened to destroy his people, as well as Abimelech, if he did not return Sarah to her husband, or committed iniquity with her. Or he knew that this had been usual for people to suffer for the crimes of their governors.

And like a true father of his country shows an affectionate concern for their welfare in the first place; for this may be the sense of the word "also", on which an emphasis is put; wilt thou not only slay me, but also a whole nation for my sake, a nation free from all fault and blame in this matter?

God is just. He would not destroy a people who were innocent. It is amazing to me, at her age, that she was still desirable to men. When God restored her reproductive ability, He restored her youth, as well.

Genesis 20:5 "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."

"Said he not unto me, she is my sister?" By this it appears that Abimelech had a personal conversation with Abraham, and inquired of him about Sarah, who she was, and what relation she was to him. Who told him that she was his sister; and for the truth of this he appeals to the omniscient God, who knew that Abraham had told him this.

"And she, even she herself said, he is my brother": When Sarah was asked what relation she was to Abraham, and what he was to her, she declared he was her brother; so that Abimelech had reason to conclude, from what both of them had said, that this was the truth of the matter.

And especially from what Sarah said, who he thought might be depended on, and would speak out the whole truth on such an occasion.

“In the integrity of my heart, and innocency of my hands, have I done this”: Hereby declaring, that his design was not to defile the woman, and to gratify his lust, but to take her to be his wife.

This he thought to be no evil, though he had a wife (Genesis 20:17); polygamy not being reckoned a sin in those times. And that he had used no violence in taking her, they both seemingly agreeing to it.

Abimelech had been deceived by Abraham and Sarah. He was saying I am innocent, and that was a true statement.

Genesis 20:6 "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."

"And God said unto him in a dream" God communicates with Abimelech in a dream saying:

"I know that thou didst this in the integrity of thy heart": not only thou knowest, but I, who know all things, know and acknowledge that this was so done by thee. Abimelech's plea is admitted, and a very great testimony borne to his integrity in this matter. Throughout the whole account, he appears to be a man of great honor and uprightness, especially in this affair, if not a good man.

"for I also withheld thee from sinning against me": for had he committed adultery with her, it had been not only a sin against her, and against her husband, but against God being contrary to his will revealed in the minds of men by the law and light of nature. Before the law of Moses was given and indeed all sin against the neighbor is ultimately against God (see Psalm 51:4).

And now from the commission of this sin God restrained Abimelech, either by some impulse upon his mind not to take her to be his wife as yet, or by throwing some thing or other in the way of it, in his providence. Or by inflicting some disease upon him, which rendered him incapable of it (Gen. 20:17).

"Therefore suffered I thee not to touch her": That is, to have carnal knowledge of her (see 1 Cor. 7:1). As there is nothing done but what is done by divine permission, so many more evils would be committed than there are, were it not that men are restrained from them by the power and providence of God, not suffering them to do them.

And in particular, this sin was prevented, that it might not in any respect be a doubtful point whether Isaac, whom Sarah had now conceived, was a legitimate son of Abraham. And these expressions of Abimelech not coming near her (Gen. 20:4); and not touching her as here, are used for that purpose.

“Withheld thee from sinning”: Notwithstanding God’s restraint of Abimelech, he was still required to restore Sarah to forestall judgment.

God kept Abimelech from sinning. God realized that it was not Abimelech's fault. He did not know she was married.

Genesis 20:7 "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."

"He is a prophet": Abraham, in spite of his lie, still served as God's intermediary and intercessor for Abimelech (verses 17 and 18). This is the first time the Hebrew term for "prophet" is used in Scripture.

Here it identified Abraham as 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 one who speaks to someone on behalf of God.

God was giving Abimelech a chance to make this right, because of his innocence. The same way He gives us a chance to repent, and we must, before His anger is kindled and punishment begins.

You see here, that it is not wrong for some ministers to pray for you. He told him to let the prophet pray for him, also. Notice, that if Abimelech continued in the sin and did not heed the warning, he would die.

Genesis 20:8 "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 rose early in the morning": etc. God came to Abimelech in a dream by night, and we find as the day broke he arose, assembled his servants, (what we would call his courtiers), and communicated to them what he had received from God. They were all struck with astonishment, and discerned the hand of God in this business.

Abimelech shared with his servants the terrible thing that almost happened, and the warnings, and they rightly feared God.

Genesis 20:9 "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."

Then Abimelech called Abraham, and said ... What hast thou done onto us"? In what a humiliating plight does the patriarch now appear, he, a servant of the true God, rebuked by a heathen prince. Who would not rather be in the place of Abimelech than of the honored but sadly offending patriarch!

In a most respectful and pious manner the king expresses strong disapproval with him for bringing him and his people under the Divine displeasure, by withholding from him the information that Sarah was his wife; when, by taking her, he sought only an honorable alliance with his family.

“Deeds unto me that ought not to be done”: The confrontation between prophet and king attested the grievous nature of Abraham’s actions. How humiliating for the prophet of God to be so rebuked by a heathen king.

Genesis 20:10 "And Abimelech said unto Abraham, What sawest thou, that thou hast done this thing?"

What a dignified attitude is that of the king, calmly and justly reproving the sin of the patriarch, but respecting his person and heaping coals of fire on his head by the liberal presentation made to him.

It is about time that someone placed the blame where it belonged, at Abraham's feet. Abraham could have caused this King and his people great problems. He demanded Abraham to tell him why he did this.

Verses 11-13: Abraham offered 3 reasons for his lie:

- (1) His perception from the horrible vices in Sodom that all other cities had no fear of God, including Gerar;
- (2) His fear of death as a mitigating factor for what he had done; and
- (3) His wife actually being his half-sister as justification for lying and hiding their marital status.

Abraham didn’t need fraud to protect himself. God was able to provide safety for him.

Genesis 20:11 "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."

"And Abraham said": Abraham now replies with great simplicity and honesty. He had said within himself, that there was no true religion or godliness in Gerar: that the inhabitants of it were without any fear of God before their eyes, or in their hearts; and he knew, where this is the case, there is nothing to restrain from the commission of the grossest sins.

"The fear of God is not in this place." This is another indication that polytheism (worship of many gods), was setting in. He concluded that his life would be in danger on account of his wife, and resorted to this hope for safety.

He had learned to trust in the Lord in all things; but he did not think this inconsistent with using all lawful means for personal security, and he was not yet fully alive to the unlawfulness of his usual pretense. He pleads an attempt using a less serious offense, that she is in reality his sister (see Gen. 12:19-20).

"And they will slay me for my wife's sake": that they might marry her (see Genesis 12:12).

This was just a very limp excuse. Abraham, first of all, had no right to judge them. Judgment belongs to God.

Genesis 20:12 "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."

"She is my sister": I have not told a lie; I have suppressed only a part of the truth. In this place, it may be proper to ask, what is a lie? It is any action done or word spoken, whether true or false in itself, which the doer or speaker wishes the observer or hearer to take in a contrary sense to that which he knows to be true.

It is, in a word, any action done or speech delivered with the intention to deceive, though both may be absolutely true and right in themselves (see note on Genesis 12:13).

"The daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother": Ebn Batrick in his annals, among other ancient traditions has preserved the following: "Terah first married Yona, by whom he had Abraham; afterwards he married Tehevita, by whom he had Sarah." Thus, she was the sister of Abraham, being the daughter of the same father by a different mother.

He was trying to say he did not lie. Well, maybe he didn't technically, but he did bring a deception to Abimelech. She actually was his half-sister and his wife.

Genesis 20:13 "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."

"And it came to pass, when God caused me to wander from my father's house": In Ur of the Chaldees, from whence God called him to go forth; which laid him under an obligation to depart from there, and move from place to place, and go he knew not where (as in Hebrews 11:8).

Or "the Gods", as it is in the plural number, and so the verb in construction with it; not the idol gods, but the Gods of the Gentiles.

As the Targum of Jonathan, who interprets the words thus, "and it was when the worshippers of idols sought to cause men to err, and I went from my father's house." But the true God, as Jarchi, Aben Ezra, and Ben Melech acknowledge, and is by many Christian interpreters understood of the three Persons in the Godhead.

"That I said unto her": this is thy kindness which thou shalt show unto me; this I shall take as a favor done me, as an instance of tender affection unto me: at every place, whither we shall come, say of me; or for the sake of me. In order to save me from the hands of wicked men, whom he feared would slay him for her sake.

"He is my brother": And so he hoped, instead of being ill-used, he should meet with favor and friendship on her account, being thus nearly related to her. This he observes to Abimelech, to

show that this was an old agreement, near thirty years ago, when they first set out on their travels.

And was no new device and scheme which they pursued on account of him and his people in particular; but what they had formerly agreed upon should be said in all places wherever they came. Therefore, there was no intention to affront Abimelech; only it supposed they might come into places where wicked men dwelt.

Abraham's wife, Sarah, was very beautiful, and he was afraid that someone would want her badly enough to kill him. Abraham made up this little scheme to save his life, and Sarah obeyed her husband.

Genesis 20:14 "And Abimelech took sheep, and oxen, and menservants, and women servants, and gave [them] unto Abraham, and restored him Sarah his wife."

"And Abimelech took sheep, and oxen, and menservants, and women servants, and gave them unto Abraham": In a good measure satisfied with what Abraham had said to excuse himself; and these gifts he gave unto him, that he might, as Jarchi observes, pray and intercede for him, that he and his family might be healed.

Having understood by the divine oracle that he was a prophet, and if he prayed for him he would be restored to health: and these were not given to bribe him to give his consent that Sarah might be continued with him.

"Restored him Sarah his wife": Untouched by him, as he was directed by God to do.

Abimelech was doing everything within his power to make this thing right. He did not want the wrath of God to be upon him.

Genesis 20:15 "And Abimelech said, Behold, my land [is] before thee: dwell where it pleaseth thee."

"And Abimelech said, behold, my whole land is before thee": Instead of bidding him be gone, and sending him away in haste out of his country, as the king of Egypt did in a like case, he solicits his stay in it. And to encourage him to it, makes an offer of his whole kingdom to him, to choose which part of it he would to dwell in.

"Dwell where it pleaseth thee": if there was anyone part of it better than another, or more convenient for him, his family and his flocks, he was welcome to it.

He not only gave Abraham gifts, but offered him land to dwell on. I am sure that he thought God would bless Abraham; and in the overflow, he would be blessed, also.

Genesis 20:16 "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."

“Behold, he is to thee a covering of the eyes”: Literally, “It is a covering for the eyes,” apparently a method for diverting or forestalling suspicion. The phrase “thus she was reproved” conveys the idea that she was vindicated. Several passages convey the idea of a similar legal or disciplinary connotation (21:25; 31:42).

“Reproved”: This is better translated “justified.”

Abimelech’s large gift of a “thousand pieces of silver” (since no coins existed at this time, pieces is not accurate; everything was weighed) was proof of his high esteem for Abraham and Sarah, and would serve to stop any scoffing on the part of her household. God referred to Abraham as a “prophet” (in verse 7).

"Silver" means redemption. I am sure that had to do with this gift of silver given. This was the custom of countries in the east to cover their wives’ heads with veils. This sin was her husbands, more than hers.

Genesis 20:17 "So Abraham prayed unto God: and God healed Abimelech, and his wife, and his maidservants; and they bare [children]."

Abraham said he would pray for Abimelech (an absolutely amazing statement under the circumstances), and when he did so, “God healed Abimelech”:

Abraham’s intercession (18:23-33), saved Abimelech’s life and removed the barrenness of his household. “For the Lord had fast closed up all the wombs of the house of Abimelech” (12:17).

Genesis 20:18 "For the LORD had fast closed up all the wombs of the house of Abimelech, because of Sarah Abraham's wife."

With large tumors probably, so that they could not cohabit with their husbands and conceive. Nor could those that had conceived bring forth: and this disorder they were smitten with.

"Because of Sarah Abraham's wife": Who was taken into the house of Abimelech, in order to be his; to rebuke and punish for which, and to convince of the evil of it, and cause to abstain from it, this disorder was inflicted on them.

God left nothing to chance. He had stricken all the women barren who were in Abimelech's house. When Abraham (the man of God), prayed for Abimelech, God healed everyone. The women were able to conceive again. In this area of the country, it was a curse when you could not have children.

Genesis Chapter 20 Questions

1. Where did Abraham sojourn?

2. What was the name of the king who took Sarah?
3. What had Abraham told that made it seem alright for the king to have Sarah?
4. Who was the ruler Abraham told this to the first time?
5. What present day country did this king live in?
6. How did God contact Abimelech?
7. What message did God bring?
8. What was the sin God was warning about?
9. What was Abimelech's statement to God?
10. When God made it possible for Sarah to bear children in her old age, what else did He restore to her?
11. What would happen to Abimelech, if he did not heed the warning?
12. Who did Abimelech confess to?
13. Who was really to blame in all of this?
14. What excuse did Abraham give Abimelech?
15. Who is Judge of all?
16. What relation, besides wife, was Sarah to Abraham?
17. What had Abraham asked Sarah to say wherever they went?
18. Why did Abraham do this?
19. What four gifts did Abimelech give Abraham, when he restored Sarah?
20. What was Abraham to Sarah?
21. What happened, when Abraham prayed for Abimelech?