



Genesis - Chapter Twenty

II. Genesis 11:27-50:26 - Patriarchal History (continues)

II.a Genesis 11:27-25:18 - Abraham (continues)

Summary of Chapter Twenty

This story makes strange reading for many people, yet it reveals the grace and mercy of God in many ways. Abraham had travelled south into the Negeb and was staying in the town of Gerar. As he had done when he had first visited Egypt he instructed Sarah to say that she was his sister. This of course was true, she was his half-sister, but there was also clear deception in not revealing her as his wife. The reasoning Abraham gave was that the region was not one that followed God and he feared for his life, knowing that the local king Abimelech would desire her for himself.

Believing Sarah to be unmarried then Abimelech did indeed desire Sarah and took her into his care but did not sleep with her. God visited Abimelech in a vision and told him that he had sinned in taking a married woman and that the consequences for his actions would be dire. Abimelech was told by God that he had prevented Abimelech from sinning against God and that, if he restored Sarah to Abraham and asked Abraham to pray for him then God would show mercy. Abimelech did this and, despite making his feelings about being tricked known, he rewarded Abraham with livestock, money and returned Sarah to him. He also offered to let Abraham remain anywhere in the land. Abraham prayed for Abimelech and his people. God healed and restored them as a consequence.

II.a.xii Genesis 20:1-18 - Abraham and Sarah at Gerar

Abimelech's actions place in jeopardy the fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham that Sarah will bear him a son. Closely resembling the earlier taking of Sarah by

Pharaoh, an account recorded in Genesis 12:10-20, and this story presupposes the reader's knowledge of that event.

¹ From there Abraham journeyed towards the region of the Negeb, and settled between Kadesh and Shur. While residing in Gerar as an alien,
² Abraham said of his wife Sarah, 'She is my sister.' And King Abimelech of Gerar sent and took Sarah.

Genesis 20:1-2

Abraham journeyed towards the region of the Negeb. No specific reason is given for Abraham's relocation to Gerar, in the northern Negeb. This was after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and perhaps he did not want to live in the hills overlooking the destroyed region any longer, and be reminded of those people and the judgement visited upon them. Abraham and Sarah are unknown to the inhabitants of the region and they are to live there as aliens.

She is my sister. This comment presupposes that the reader is familiar with 12:11-13, which explains the rationale behind Abraham's words. It may have been that Sarah looked much younger than her 90 years and was still attractive to men like the king. However, she was connected to one of the richest and most influential men of the region. In that day, a harem was sometimes more of a political statement than a romantic statement.

King Abimelech of Gerar. Abimelech, which means 'my father is king,' appears to have been a common royal name or even a title. The same name is mentioned in Chapter 26 and is given to later biblical figures: <<*Now there was a famine in the land, besides the former famine that had occurred in the days of Abraham. And Isaac went to Gerar, to King Abimelech of the Philistines*>> (Genesis 26:1), and: <<*His concubine who was in Shechem also bore him a son, and he named him Abimelech*>> (Judges 8:31).

³ But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night, and said to him, 'You are about to die because of the woman whom you have taken; for she is a married woman.'
⁴ Now Abimelech had not approached her; so he said, 'Lord, will you destroy an innocent people?'
⁵ Did he not himself say to me, "She is my sister"? And she herself said, "He is my brother." I did this in the integrity of my heart and the innocence of my hands.'
⁶ Then God said to him in the dream, 'Yes, I know that you did this in the integrity of your heart; furthermore it was I who kept you from sinning against me. Therefore I did not let you touch her.'

Genesis 20:3-6

But God came to Abimelech. God intervenes to ensure that Abimelech does not touch Sarah. In contrast to 12:10-20, this episode emphasises in a variety of ways the important point that Sarah has not had intercourse with the king; otherwise, Abimelech could be the father of the son born to Sarah in 21:1-3.

In a dream by night. Throughout Genesis dreams are often used as a medium of divine revelation; refer to 28:12, 31:10-11, 37:5-9, 40:5-8, and 41:1.

You are about to die because of the woman whom you have taken. This was a terrifying thing to hear from God, even in a dream. But the point had to be made to Abimelech, even though he could truly say he acted in the integrity of my heart and the innocence of my hands, just as all people are called to do before God: <<*The LORD judges the peoples; judge me, O LORD, according to my righteousness and according to the integrity that is in me*>> (Psalm 7:8), <<*Therefore I do my best always to have a clear conscience towards God and all people*>> (Acts 24:16), <<*I am grateful to God—whom I worship with a clear conscience, as my ancestors did — when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day*>> (2 Timothy 1:3), <<*Pray for us; we are sure that we have a clear conscience, desiring to act honourably in all things*>> (Hebrews 13:18), and: <<*Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame*>> (1 Peter 3:16b). God's threat of punishment may seem drastic on this occasion, but the stakes were high for there would have been two candidates for the father of the seed of promise.

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

Genesis 20:7

Abraham is the first person in the Bible to be designated a prophet; many others would follow, including: <<*Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face*>> (Deuteronomy 34:10), <<*But Jehoshaphat said, 'Is there no prophet of the LORD here, through whom we may inquire of the LORD?' Then one of the servants of the king of Israel answered, 'Elisha son of Shaphat, who used to pour water on the hands of Elijah, is here'*>> (2 Kings 3:11), <<*But shall we say, "Of human origin"?'—they were afraid of the crowd, for all regarded John as truly a prophet*>> (Mark 11:32), and: <<*When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, 'This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world'*>> (John 6:14), as well as those whose writings appear in the books of the prophets. In this context, attention is drawn to his ability to intercede on behalf of others, one of the

characteristics of a great prophet, as indicated by: <<*Then the LORD said to me: Though Moses and Samuel stood before me, yet my heart would not turn towards this people. Send them out of my sight, and let them go!*>> (Jeremiah 15:1); and is confirmed by Abraham's actions in Genesis 18:22-33.

⁸ So Abimelech rose early in the morning, and called all his servants and told them all these things; and the men were very much afraid.

Genesis 20:8

Abimelech rose early in the morning. The king took action immediately he awoke showing that he did indeed fear God and knew that he had the power to do what he said he would if Abimelech did not comply.

⁹ Then Abimelech called Abraham, and said to him, 'What have you done to us? How have I sinned against you, that you have brought such great guilt on me and my kingdom? You have done things to me that ought not to be done.'

Genesis 20:9

What have you done to us? Abimelech rightly challenges Abraham for deceiving him about the status of Sarah his wife. The term great guilt or sin sometimes denotes adultery.

¹⁰ And Abimelech said to Abraham, 'What were you thinking of, that you did this thing?' ¹¹ Abraham said, 'I did it because I thought, There is no fear of God at all in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife.'

Genesis 20:10-11

There is no fear of God at all in this place. Abraham's response betrays both his lack of faith in God and his misjudgement of the people of Gerar. The whole episode reveals that the king and his servants were God-fearing. This account provides a principal that Jesus brought to the fore: <<*Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgement you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get*>> (Matthew 7:1-2).

Reverential fear of God is called for as the following two verses indicate so well: <<*Transgression speaks to the wicked deep in their hearts; there is no fear of God before their eyes*>> (Psalm 36:1), and: <<*By loyalty and faithfulness iniquity is atoned for, and by the fear of the LORD one avoids evil*>> (Proverbs 16:6).

¹² Besides, she is indeed my sister, the daughter of my father but not the daughter of my mother; and she became my wife. ¹³ And when God caused me to wander from my father's house, I said to her, "This is the kindness you must do me: at every place to which we come, say of me, He is my brother."

Genesis 20:12-13

Besides, she is indeed my sister. Abraham's explanation, which is true as far as it goes, does not excuse his behaviour. His intention was to deceive.

When God caused me to wander from my father's house. Not only was Abraham failing to accept responsibility for his own actions with weak justification, he now implicitly puts some of the blame on God. He was not the first person to do this: <<*The man said, 'The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate'*>> (Genesis 3:12), and would certainly not be the last! Abraham had not just wandered from his home but on this occasion his heart seems to have wandered away from his God: <<*Why, O LORD, do you make us stray from your ways and harden our heart, so that we do not fear you? Turn back for the sake of your servants, for the sake of the tribes that are your heritage*>> (Isaiah 63:17).

At every place to which we come. It appears that Abraham regularly resorted to this wife-sister ruse for his own self-protection. Genesis Chapters Twelve and Twenty reveal that it did not always work out in the way Abraham had hoped it would. Only God's intervention protects Abraham's relationship with Sarah, a point that should not be lost on the first audience, as confirmed in the comments made on 12:10-20.

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

¹⁵ Abimelech said, 'My land is before you; settle where it pleases you.'

¹⁶ To Sarah he said, 'Look, I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver; it is your exoneration before all who are with you; you are completely vindicated.'

Genesis 20:14-16

Then Abimelech took sheep and oxen, and male and female slaves, and gave them to Abraham. Abimelech's generosity, on top of his innocence, contrasts sharply with Abraham's self-serving deception regarding the truth about Sarah. The king's actions are a very public affirmation that he has not acted inappropriately toward Sarah, and thus he is not the father of any children she may have.

Look, I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver. The reader is perhaps invited to imagine the irony in Abimelech's voice as he refers to Abraham as Sarah's brother and not as her husband.

You are completely vindicated. The ancient Hebrew word for vindicated or reproved is *yakach*. It has the idea of being set right, so it is debatable if Sarah was set right by Abimelech's rebuke, or if she was found to be right because of her humble submission on this occasion. In a sense, both are true.

¹⁷ Then Abraham prayed to God; and God healed Abimelech, and also healed his wife and female slaves so that they bore children. ¹⁸ For the LORD had closed fast all the wombs of the house of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife.

Genesis 20:17-18

God healed Abimelech. The healing of Abimelech and the restoration of his wife and female slaves so that they may once again have children underlines God's power over fertility. By noting that these things are restored, the narrator prepares the way for the birth of Isaac (21:1-3). By observing that Abraham prays, the narrative picks up on the theme of God's blessing being mediated through Abraham (12:3), even though Abraham had not acted faithfully on this occasion.