

Exegetical Notes – Genesis 20:1-18

“Abraham and Abimelech”

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(See Exegetical Notes for Genesis. The Book of Genesis answers three critical questions. The first question it answers is, “Whose world is it anyway.” The first few chapters of Genesis, Chapters 1- 11, answer this question. They tell us that it is God’s world by right of creation. He made it. Therefore, it is His. The second question it answers is, “How do we get along in God’s world God’s way.” We are deeply into the answer to that question in the portion of the text we are now examining. We get along in God’s world God’s way but trusting Him and obeying Him. As we move through the text we see people trying it both ways. Some seek to follow God and obey Him. Others do not. Clearly, the call of the text is to trust God and to obey His word. In the next few chapters, the text will change its focus slightly as it begins to answer the third question, “How do we get along in God’s world God’s way especially with the members of my own family.” We must now listen to the answer to that question.)

Verses 1-2

¹ Now Abraham moved on from there into the region of the Negev and lived between Kadesh and Shur. For a while he stayed in Gerar, ² and there Abraham said of his wife Sarah, “She is my sister.” Then Abimelech king of Gerar sent for Sarah and took her.

- Abraham is the person God has chosen to bring God’s blessing to all the people of the earth (see Genesis 12:1-3). The story focuses on the family of Abraham to answer the third question, “How do we get along in God’s world God’s way especially with the members of my own family.” It is through the interactions of the members of Abraham’s family that we will discover the answer to this question.
- Abraham is moving from place to place to discover the place which God has promised to him (see Genesis 13:1-5).

- In this text he has moved into the Negev, a desert wasteland. The word literally means, “the south.” He settled in a place called Gerar for a time. The king of Gerar was named Abimelech. Abraham lied to Abimelech about who Sarah, Abraham’s wife, was.
- Abraham said that Sarah was his sister, not his wife. Abraham is afraid that Abimelech will want Sarah as his wife and will kill him to take her. (This is not the first time that Abraham has done this [see Genesis 12:10-20]. The first time, this plan failed and had disastrous effects. None the less, Abraham seems to have a fear that other powerful men will want his wife and will kill him to get Sarah. He is unable to trust this matter to God and takes matters into his own hands in this regard to protect himself.)
- But, is Sarah actually Abraham’s sister? There is no Biblical genealogy which includes her name. There is no reliable information outside of the Bible to establish that Sarah is Abraham’s sister or even his half-sister. The Law of Moses forbids marriage between brothers and sisters, even half-brothers and half-sisters. While it is true that the Law Moses will not be given for 500 more years, most cultures regarded marriage between siblings as wrong. Almost all rabbinical scholars conclude that Abraham is simply lying about who Sarah is to both Pharaoh and Abimelech. They are agreed that he does so to protect himself rather than trusting God to protect him. Some Christian scholars argue that Sarah is the daughter of Terah, Abraham’s father, by some woman other than Abraham’s mother, but there is no evidence to support this. Some scholars argue that Abraham uses the word “sister” in a larger sense meaning that he and Sarah are of the same blood or the same family line. But, Abraham is a sinner like all other men. Most likely he lies about Sarah simply to protect himself. He is unable to trust God in this matter, so he lies.
- However, Abraham’s plan does not work. Abimelech takes Sarah into his harem. The lie protects Abraham from death, but leads to other problems.

Verse 3

³ But God came to Abimelech in a dream one night and said to him, “You are as good as dead because of the woman you have taken; she is a married woman.”

- God spoke to Abimelech in a dream warning him that he would bring judgment upon himself if he had sexual relations with Sarah because she was married.

Verses 4-7

⁴ Now Abimelech had not gone near her, so he said, “Lord, will you destroy an innocent nation? ⁵ Did he not say to me, ‘She is my sister,’ and didn’t she also say, ‘He is my brother’? I have done this with a clear conscience and clean hands.”

⁶ Then God said to him in the dream, “Yes, I know you did this with a clear conscience, and so I have kept you from sinning against me. That is why I did not let you touch her. ⁷ Now 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, you may be sure that you and all who belong to you will die.”

- God’s warning came to Abimelech before he had been with Sarah sexually. In the dream, Abimelech confronted God with what he had been told by both Abraham and Sarah about who she was.
- God told Abimelech that he knew that no sin had been committed yet, but that Abimelech must return Sarah to Abraham.
- This is the first time that the word “prophet” (in Hebrew “nabi”) is used in the Bible. The word means “to declare or proclaim, to speak as an intermediary for one more powerful.” Abraham is the first person to be given this title.

Verses 8-10

⁸ Early the next morning Abimelech summoned all his officials, and when he told them all that had happened, they were very much afraid. ⁹ Then Abimelech called Abraham in and said, “What have you done to us? How have I wronged you that you have brought such great guilt upon me and my kingdom? You have done things to me that should never be done.” ¹⁰ And Abimelech asked Abraham, “What was your reason for doing this?”

- The morning after the dream, Abimelech called his advisors together and told them about the dream. He then called Abraham into the meeting and confronted him with his deception. He asked Abraham why he would do such a thing.

Verses 11-13

¹¹ Abraham replied, “I said to myself, ‘There is surely no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife.’ ¹² Besides, she really is my sister, the daughter of my father though not of my mother; and she became my wife. ¹³ And when God had me wander from my father’s household, I said to her,

'This is how you can show your love to me: Everywhere we go, say of me, "He is my brother.'"

- Abraham admits that he misled Abimelech.
- He gave three excuses for doing what he did: (1) The people of Gerar did not fear God. Given the above, they obviously do fear God. This is an insult to his host. (2) Sarah really is his sister. Here, he is clearing using the word in the larger sense, meaning that they are from the same bloodline. There is no evidence that Sarah is really his sister. (3) The two of them, Abraham and Sarah, had agreed to do this to protect him. He admits that he did this to protect himself.

Verses 14-16

¹⁴ Then Abimelech brought sheep and cattle and male and female slaves and gave them to Abraham, and he returned Sarah his wife to him. ¹⁵ And Abimelech said, "My land is before you; live wherever you like."

¹⁶ To Sarah he said, "I am giving your brother a thousand shekels of silver. This is to cover the offense against you before all who are with you; you are completely vindicated."

- God shows Abraham that He will protect Abraham. Despite the lie to protect himself, God causes Abimelech to bestow great favor on both Abraham and Sarah. Abraham can trust God to protect him.

Verses 17-18

¹⁷ Then Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech, his wife and his female slaves so they could have children again, ¹⁸ for the Lord had kept all the women in Abimelech's household from conceiving because of Abraham's wife Sarah.

- Apparently, God had made Abimelech's wife and his slaves barren as a result of Abraham's sin. Remember that Sarah, too, was barren.
- Abraham prayed for them and the curse was lifted. Abraham acts out of the office of prophet which God has bestowed upon him.

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