

Genesis 20:1-18
Abraham Lies, Again

“¹⁴But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. ¹⁵Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death” (James 1:14-15). We know how sin works. It begins small and, if not eliminated, it grows. And once it has taken root, it becomes even more difficult to get rid of. We all have some particular sin with which we struggle. We know it is wrong, we grieve over our failure to avoid it, but we continue to stumble nonetheless. For some, a particular sin has become a habit.

The great saints of the Bible were no different from us in this regard. We know of David’s lust. We know of Peter’s rashness. And Abraham was no exception. In our passage this morning we again see that his wanderings led to an episode in which he subjected his wife to danger and humiliation, only to be protected by God’s intercession to preserve the divine plan for Abraham.

Abraham’s Lie

At some point after viewing the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, “Abraham journeyed from there toward the land of the Negev, and settled between Kadesh and Shur; then he sojourned in Gerar” (v. 1). Scripture gives no reason for his journeys. When Abraham had left Canaan before and traveled to Egypt, there had been famine in the land. That may have been the case now, perhaps even brought about by the environmental devastation that resulted from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, but the Bible is silent on the matter.

Whatever the reason, Abraham traveled from the oaks of Mamre at Hebron to the south (Negev) and stayed for some time in the wilderness of Shur. Abraham was used to traveling, his herds needed fresh grazing and water supplies. And perhaps it was the lack of the latter in that remote desert region than compelled Abraham to relocate again, this time northward to Gerar. The exact location of Gerar is disputed, but most scholars place it at the southern regions of Canaan (Genesis 10:19). Also, no timetable is given for these travels.

But at some point after he arrived in Gerar, “Abraham said of Sarah his wife, ‘she is my sister.’ So Abimelech king of Gerar sent and took Sarah” (v. 2). Abimelech is described here as the king of Gerar, but since there is another Abimelech given as king of these people (Genesis 26:1), it may be a title, or perhaps a family name - think wither the Caesars of classical Rome or the many Louis of French history. Abimelech was a pagan and practiced polygamy, as many rulers of the ancient world did.

We might be astonished to see that Abraham again represented his wife as his sister. One might think that such an error in judgment would not be repeated, but as we will see that was not the case. Scripture gives no reason for this, although later Abraham did mention that he thought “there is no fear of God in this place” (v. 11). Neither does Scripture give a reason for Abimelech taking Sarah into his harem. Perhaps she was still beautiful, even though she was ninety-nine and well beyond the natural age of childbirth (Genesis 18:11-13). Perhaps it was to form an alliance with the wealthy traveler in his kingdom.

The account given in this passage is much briefer than that given in the description of Abraham's sojourn in Egypt. No record is given here of his flattering his wife on this occasion. It may be that this episode was more spontaneous than the first, or it may be that having already perpetrated the ruse, both Abraham and Sarah knew what was expected of them and little rehearsal was needed.

Still one must wonder why Abraham had not learned from his previous mistake. In fact, now Abraham was much more familiar with his God than he had been. He had seen God's faithfulness when he saved Lot from the invading armies. He had testified to God before the priest Melchizedek. He had entered into a covenant with God and had been twenty-five years a man of faith. He had recently entertained God and His angels in his own dwelling. Surely Abraham was above committing the sins he did when he was younger and less spiritually mature.

Yet he did commit that same sin. Abraham lied. Perhaps that was because God had protected him in Egypt and, in fact, Abraham had prospered as a result of his actions. Whatever damage had been done to his relationship with Sarah, the couple had survived it, and they had flourished economically. The sin of lying had not been eradicated, and so it grew, and now lying had become a habit.

God's Protection

Yet, despite Abraham's sin, Abimelech was still accountable for his own actions. "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'" (v. 3). No time frame is given for the period between Abraham giving his wife to Abimelech and God's vision, but we can assume it happened quickly, perhaps even on the very first night. Sarah had been promised a son within the year (Genesis 18:14), and so the amount of time traveling to the south, and then returning to Gerar could not have been long, since Sarah is not yet pregnant (Genesis 21:2).

Implicit in this account is the understanding that God may choose to reveal Himself to whomever He wishes. The people of God have no such monopoly. Not only Abimelech, but also Laban (Genesis 31:24), the Egyptian cupbearer and baker (Genesis 40:5), and Pharaoh himself (Genesis 41:1) received visions from God. Indeed one king of Israel died because he did not heed the word of God in the mouth of a pagan.

²⁰After all this, when Josiah had set the temple in order, Neco king of Egypt came up to make war at Carchemish on the Euphrates, and Josiah went out to engage him. ²¹But Neco sent messengers to him, saying, 'what have we to do with each other, O King of Judah? I am not coming against you today but against the house with which I am at war, and God has ordered me to hurry. Stop for your own sake from interfering with God who is with me, so that He will not destroy you.' ²²However, Josiah would not turn away from him, but disguised himself in order to make war with him; nor did he listen to the words of Neco from the mouth of God, but came to make war on the plain of Megiddo. ²³The archers shot King Josiah, and the king said to his servants, 'take me away, for I am badly wounded.' ²⁴So his servants took him out of the chariot and carried him in the second chariot which he had, and brought him to Jerusalem where he died and was buried in the tombs of his fathers. All Judah and Jerusalem mourned for Josiah" (2 Chronicles 35:20-24).

Despite the apparent fear Abraham had with regards to other men taking his wife, adultery in the ancient world was usually a capital offense. Not only the Mosaic law (Leviticus 20:10, Deuteronomy 22:22), but also Hittite, Babylonian, and other cultures punished adultery with death. That Abimelech did not challenge the judgment of God is further evidence that he agreed with the consequences of those caught in adultery. So a second implication we can draw is that there are general principles of morality that transcend culture. God does have a moral law, and all humanity is obligated to it.

Instead of disputing the punishment, Abimelech argued that he was innocent of the crime. “⁴Now Abimelech had not come near her; and he said, ‘Lord, will You slay a nation, even though blameless? ⁵Did 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” (v. 4-5).

It seems from the text, that Abimelech’s speech is part of the dream. His argument that surely the Lord would not kill a blameless man is reminiscent of Abraham’s plea for Sodom (Genesis 18:25). The logic here is that there are two conditions by which a person might break God’s law and still be innocent. The first is ignorance, that is, a person broke the law without knowing that what he was doing was unlawful. The second is negligence, that is where a person breaks the law accidentally. Abimelech is making his case citing the first exception.

Perhaps, Abimelech does not overstate his case in saying that God would kill off his entire nation if he were punished. It would not be surprising for the news of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah to have reached Gerar, and Abimelech might have feared an equally apocalyptic judgment for having taken Abraham’s wife. Or, more prosaically, as king, if Abimelech died without an heir (likely considering that the consequences of his having taken Sarah was that the wombs of his household were closed, v. 18), civil war among competing rivals for the throne would occur with much devastation and loss of life.

Though a pagan, Abimelech had faith in God’s justice. Not that he understood that this ‘god’ was Yahweh. We must not read too much into Abimelech’s fear and obedience. Abimelech was, like all pagans of the time, polytheistic. His use of the term ‘lord’ was a generic term for a deity. To Abimelech, this god of Abraham was another powerful being to whom he would do well to submit.

“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” (v. 6). See the grace of God. God gives nations other than the Israelites the opportunity to repent (Jonah 3:10). That Abimelech did not violate Sarah set him apart from the wicked men of Sodom, who refused to repent.

God saved Abimelech from himself. It was not his own self-control that kept Abimelech from taking Sarah to bed. God alone was responsible for restraining his sexual appetite. Abimelech was a sinful person, just as any other. And the implication is that without God’s intervention, he surely would have taken advantage of Sarah. But God acted to protect the seed of Abraham. As with Mary, God saw to it that the fatherhood of the promised child was beyond dispute. The child that Sarah would bear would be Abraham’s. There would be no challenge to his paternity.

But God also had a command for Abimelech. God told Abimelech, “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” (v. 7). Forgiveness was linked to restoring Sarah to her husband. There is no indication that Abimelech had taken Sarah by force, and he had not had sex with her. Thus far, no boundaries had been broken that were beyond repair. But Abimelech must make things right.

We can tell from later in the passage that God had already enforced His judgment on Abimelech’s house (v. 17-18). The women were not able to conceive. Such a punishment was proactive. It, too, was not irreparable. Once Sarah was returned to Abraham, all would be right in Abimelech’s house. And we can see that the punishment of barrenness for Abimelech’s household was particularly fitting in that Sarah’s barrenness had been the subject of much of the Abrahamic narrative.

Also, we must note that Abraham is described here as a prophet. This is the first time the term is used in the Old Testament. And his role as prophet was to pray for others. This event was commemorated by the psalmist.

“¹²When they were only a few men in number,
Very few, and strangers in it.
¹³And they wandered about from nation to nation,
From one kingdom to another people.
¹⁴He permitted no man to oppress them,
And He reprov’d kings for their sakes:
¹⁵Do not touch My anointed ones,
And do My prophets no harm” (Psalm 105:12-15).

Abraham’s Rationalization

The vision from God was not taken lightly by Abimelech. In fact, he “arose early in the morning and called all his servants and told all these things in their hearing” (v. 8). Like any wise ruler, he gathered his advisors to discuss the matter. He needed counsel. He wanted advice. We ought to note that Abimelech could have just quietly returned Sarah to Abraham and not let his advisors know that he had been rebuked by a god. His transparency is contrasted nicely with Abraham’s duplicity in the narrative.

Abimelech gave his attendants an account of the night. So disturbing was the news that ‘the men were greatly frightened’ (v. 8). No doubt the memory of the destruction of the cities of the valley was very vividly remembered. There was only one thing to be done. Abraham must be summoned at once, and his wife returned to him.

“⁹Then 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.’ ¹⁰And Abimelech said to Abraham, ‘what have you encountered, that you have done this thing?’” (v. 9-10). The first question was obviously rhetorical. Everyone knew what Abraham had done. It reminds the reader of God’s questions to Adam and Eve in the garden. And Abimelech realized that the ruse performed by Abraham had ramifications not only for himself personally, but for his

people as well. This act had been done “to us” and impacted “my kingdom” Abimelech claimed. Abimelech demanded an explanation. What had he done to wrong Abraham that justified Abraham's wronging him?

Abimelech's frustration was no doubt increased by the fact that he realized he was dealing with a man whom God protected. Again, we have no reason to believe Abimelech believed in Yahweh as we do, but it is clear that Abimelech understood that a powerful deity was on the side of his adversary. Abimelech might be angry, but he also needed to be careful.

Abraham prevaricated. He said, “¹¹because I thought, surely there is no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife. ¹²Besides, she actually is my sister, the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother, and she became my wife; ¹³and 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”’” (v. 11-13).

First, Abraham excused himself through a false assumption. He had not believed the people of Gerar would treat him well. We do not know how Abraham came to that conclusion, perhaps the people of Gerar *did* have a reputation for wickedness, much like the people of Sodom. In any case, Abraham assumed they would act outside the bounds of any decent moral code of behavior. Since they were pagans, he assumed they were entirely evil and would summarily murder him to take his wife.

Such an argument could not have been expected to flatter the king of such a people. It seems almost as if Abraham is laying the blame for his actions on Abimelech himself. Interestingly, if Abraham had truly have believed this, one might wonder why he chose to settle there in the first place. Surely Abraham was still wealthy. Surely he had options in terms of where to live. Even if the environment around Hebron had been made uninhabitable by the conflagration of Sodom and Gomorrah, there would have been no reason to be compelled to live among murderers and wife-stealers.

Second, Abraham used a very convoluted argument. He pursued a half-truth. He claimed that Sarah *was* his sister, in a sense. Offering a bit of family history, Abraham explained that Sarah and he shared the same father, though not the same mother. Essentially, Abraham was trying to get off on a technicality. To be sure, marriage within the family was not uncommon among the patriarchs, or most others in the ancient world for that matter. Nahor married his niece Milkah, Isaac married his second cousin Rebekah, and Jacob married two sisters, Rachel and Leah.

However, the biblical record does not support Abraham's argument. Genesis 11:27 lists three children of Terah, Abraham, Nahor and Haran. That Sarah is not mentioned could be explained by the fact that the list includes only those male descendants relevant to the biblical narrative, though it is curious that Sarah is not connected with the family when she is introduced in verse 29. In fact, it may be that this is another lie told by Abraham. And, we cannot assume that even if it were the truth, that Abraham believed this would have justified his actions. But perhaps he did think Abimelech might consider it a mitigating circumstance.

Finally, Abraham appealed to precedent. He had done this thing before, apparently without difficulties. ‘Everywhere’ he had gone this same explanation had been given. He even implicated God in the act, since it was God who ‘caused’ him to wander. Perhaps it is possible that after the ‘success’ of the ploy in Egypt, Abraham employed it again at other places on his travels. But again, we cannot assume that Abraham was telling the truth here either. We must remember that Abraham had been summoned early in the morning to appear before a powerful ruler. And he had been caught in an act of deception against the king, an act that might have cost that king his kingdom. Abraham had no way of knowing that God had told Abimelech to treat Abraham well. Abraham feared for his life, and likely said whatever he believed might get him out of that uncomfortable situation. The habit of lying was difficult to overcome.

Abimelech’s Wisdom

No comment is made on whether or not Abimelech accepted the excuses Abraham made. Nevertheless, “¹⁴Abimelech then took sheep and oxen and male and female servants, and gave them to Abraham, and restored his wife Sarah to him. ¹⁵Abimelech said, ‘behold, my land is before you; settle wherever you please.’ ¹⁶To 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’” (v. 14-16).

Whether he did so because he had been persuaded by Abraham, or more likely because he feared Abraham’s God, Abimelech compensated Abraham in three ways. First, he returned Sarah and gave Abraham livestock and servants. The return of Sarah was what was demanded by God in the vision, but the addition of livestock and servants had not been required. This was an act of generosity that is reminiscent of the actions of Pharaoh under similar circumstances (Genesis 12:16). The difference, of course, is that in the former case Pharaoh gave Abraham compensation as part of a bride price. In this case Abimelech knew he was getting nothing in return. Yet it is likely that both Pharaoh and Abimelech were motivated by the fact that clearly God was on the side of Abraham, and so it seemed wise to maintain good relations with this prophet.

Abimelech’s actions were motivated by God, but are also understandable considering the ethics of the day. A law from Assyria (admittedly two or three centuries later) required that a man who took another man’s wife on a trip, even though he was unaware of the fact that she was already married, was required to pay the offended man two talents of lead, presumably for making tools or weapons. He swore an oath stating that he did not know the woman was married, and gave the husband the compensation. That ended the matter.

As a second part of the payment, Abimelech then offered Abraham land in his kingdom. This was the very opposite of what Pharaoh had done. In Egypt, Abraham and Sarah had been ordered to leave, and even been provided with an escort for the purposes of making certain they did so (Genesis 12:20). Abimelech seemed inclined to maintain Abraham within his borders. Perhaps this was an act of alliance; perhaps Abimelech wanted to keep an eye on him and make certain this ‘prophet’ really prayed for his family to be healed.

Finally, Abimelech gave Sarah money. Referring to Abraham as “your brother” (we cannot know if Abimelech was mocking Abraham’s argument or accepting it) the one thousand pieces of silver was an

exceptional amount. It was probably one thousand shekels, the common form of currency. For comparison, Abraham later bought the cave of Machpelah as a burial site of Sarah for four hundred shekels (Genesis 23:15-16). Jacob bought a piece of land in Shechem for one hundred pieces of silver (Genesis 33:19). And Joseph was sold into slavery for a mere twenty shekels, apparently the price of a slave (Genesis 37:28).

Furthermore, Abimelech made a public announcement that Sarah had remained pure. This vindication was essential to not only those present, but also in the context of the Abrahamic storyline.

In response, ¹⁷“Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech and his wife and his maids, so that they bore children. ¹⁸For the Lord had closed fast all the wombs of the household of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham’s wife” (v. 17-18). Abraham prayed and the women in the house of Abimelech were healed. The particular affliction is not detailed, they simply had been unable to conceive children. And Scripture is clear that though Abraham prayed, it was God Who healed. God had prevented the women of Abimelech’s house from having children, and now He permitted them to do so. The irony that Sarah had yet to become pregnant cannot have been lost on Abraham.

Takeaways

God protects His own. Even from themselves. Again we see that Abraham’s sin could have led to devastating consequences for his family and his family line. But God chose to be gracious and keep Sarah safe. Despite Abraham’s propensity to not tell the truth, God had chosen him and God was faithful to His promises for him. Let us praise God for Who He is, and strive to be worthy of His calling us to be His children.