

Genesis 20: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Genesis chapter 20. From there Abraham journeyed towards the territory of the Negev, and lived between Kadesh and Shur, and he sojourned in Gerar. And Abraham said of Sarah his wife, She is my sister. And Abimelech king of Gerar sent and took Sarah. But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night, and said to him, Behold, you are a dead man because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is a man's wife. Now Abimelech had not approached her. So he said, Lord, will you kill an innocent people? 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. And God said to him in the dream, Yes, I know that you have done this in the integrity of your heart. And it was I who kept you from sinning against me. Therefore I did not let you touch her. Now then, return the man's wife, for he is a prophet, so that he will pray for you, and you shall live. But if you do not return her, know that you shall surely die, you and all who are yours. 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. 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 in my kingdom a great sin? You have done to me things that ought not to be done. And Abimelech said to Abraham, What did you see that you did this thing? 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. Besides, she is indeed my sister, the daughter of my father, though not the daughter of my mother, and she became my wife. 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. Then Abimelech took sheep and oxen, and male servants and female servants, and gave them to Abraham, and returned Sarah his wife to him. And Abimelech said, Behold, my land is before you. Dwell where it pleases you.

To Sarah he said, Behold, I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver. It is a sign of your innocence in the eyes of all who are with you, and before everyone you are vindicated.

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

[2 : 44] Chapter 20 of Genesis is one of those chapters where we might be forgiven for thinking that we're reading another chapter in Genesis entirely. There are three stories within the book of Genesis that have a very similar form, where one of the patriarchs goes to a foreign land to sojourn there for a while, and his wife is taken, or there's a threat that the wife might be taken, and then the true identity of the wife is revealed, and then they're sent away with many gifts. This is a story that we've already read in chapter 12. There's a similar story in chapter 26. Such stories are what Robert Alter has described as type scenes. A type scene could be described as a fundamental template of a story that can be modified in different ways.

So within the Old Testament we can think of accounts of women meeting men at wells, and we also have an example of that in the New Testament of course. We might also think of the annunciation of the birth of a saviour. There are a number of examples of that in the Old Testament, but also in the New. These are fundamental patterns of stories that can be told many different times with variations.

Now when we see a type scene it's important not just to pay attention to the similarities and the fundamental sameness of these stories. That would be a mistake. The stories are never exactly the same.

The variations are no less significant than the similarities. What a type scene does is place stories alongside each other so that as we reflect upon their similarities and differences we might come to

a deeper understanding of their meaning. So when we arrive at Genesis chapter 20 we've already heard this story in one sort of form before. These events are told as historical events. The point is not that these things are just made-up tales, but rather they're told with significant repetition and with correspondences that cause us to reflect upon their meanings over against each other. This story has differences from the previous story that we saw in chapter 12, but also similarities. On this occasion Abraham does not go down to Egypt. He goes to the land of the Philistines. The Philistines, if we've looked at chapter 10 and paid attention to it, they're one of the people groups that descend from Israel and that people group from Ham. This is a people group that's associated with the Egyptians and it's important because as we go through the text here we'll see that they are playing a role that's similar to the Egyptians in certain respects. As we go through the story of the book of Samuel we'll again see the character of the Philistines connected to the Egyptians. So judgments upon the Philistines and sojourning with the Philistines, these are events that are interactions with an Egypt-related people. Another thing to bear in mind here is that the Philistines were not one of the people groups whose land was to be given to Abraham. They were a people group that oppressed the land at various points, but they were adjacent to the land. They were not actually going to lose their land to Abraham and his seed. Where does Abraham go outside of the land at this point? Probably because of the destruction upon Sodom and Gomorrah which may have rendered the land fairly barren at this point. If we look at the story of Genesis 12 or the story here in chapter 20 or the chapter 26 story concerning Isaac, each one of the stories follows something of the pattern of an Exodus narrative. There is a threat to the land, they move into a foreign land with all of their possessions, there is a threat to the bride and the seed, there is a judgment upon the wicked, there is an accusation against the righteous, there is the humiliation of foreign gods, and then there is deliverance by God, going with great gifts and being established in a new land. Now this is the basic Exodus motif and we can see it more elaborated in certain contexts, but more constrained and limited in others. We have already seen an Exodus motif played out in the previous chapter concerning Sodom and certain details within that story highlight a connection between the story and the story of the Exodus. Things like two people coming to test the place, outrage coming up to the Lord, threat at the doorway, meal of unleavened bread, fleeing the city, etc etc. And in this chapter we have a different sort of Exodus paradigm playing out, a story with resemblances with other stories that we see in Genesis. This event also occurs at a very significant juncture in time. If we think about what we've read in the previous chapters, God has promised to Abraham and Sarah that they will have a son within a year. The taking of Sarah at this particular point is a threat to the promise, it's a threat to the possibility of Isaac's birth in the first place. So it seems to be a very clear assault by the serpent upon the seed of the woman. There's a threat to the bride as there was in chapter 12, but also crucially here to the seed. In the chapter 12 account we see that God intervened with plagues and other things upon Pharaoh. But here there is a more specific threat and there's not just generic plagues. God appears in a dream to Abimelech warning him that he will die because of what he has done. These are themes of Genesis chapter 3, the judgment of the fall.

[8 : 03] He has taken something that is not his and he will die as a result. He claims innocence that he does not know that Sarah was the wife of Abraham. For all he knew, Sarah was Abraham's sister. Now Abraham has used this ruse before. He has already claimed that Sarah was his sister when he went down to Egypt.

Hasn't he learned his lesson? And there are ways in which this is clearly not a positive event, the way that this plays out. It's not good for Sarah to be taken. And there's an expression here of the limitation of Abraham's power. God has to intervene on this occasion, just as he did in chapter 12, to deliver Abraham from his plight and his predicament. But yet, is Abraham sinning? As we saw in the previous case, this is a consistent ploy that he is using. This is something that he does in every single place that he goes to. When Abimelech inquires concerning what has happened to Abraham, Abraham says that he did not believe that the fear of God was in that place and so he did not want to be killed on account of his wife. Now, we can often see this as Abraham just wanting to save his own skin.

But it's important to bear in mind that Abraham is the head of a sheepdom. He has at least two or three thousand people along with him. If he's killed, they're in great danger. And so, there is a problem for him. If he pretends to be the brother of Sarah, then he can be courted. He's someone that has leverage. He's someone that the king of the place will want to make peace with and want to

treat well so that there can be some alliance made so that the men of Abraham can be his men and be allied to him.

However, if Sarah is Abraham's wife, Abraham is an obstacle and Abraham should be removed from the situation. So, that ploy is one that has a certain reasoning to it and it's not merely out of selfish interest. Abraham saving his life is something that will save the lives of the people around him as well. It's something that he does consistently for this reason. God intervenes, but who is at fault here? Primarily Abimelech. Abimelech is acting in a tyrannical manner. He does not know that he is taking another man's wife, but he is taking Sarah without any negotiation with Abraham, without consulting with him. And so, Abraham is powerless to act. Abraham can't intervene to play for time or do whatever he needs to protect Sarah. He's put in a very vulnerable position. So, God acts to intervene and establish Sarah back with Abraham at this point. What he's doing at this point is protecting the seed and the bride. Behind all of these points, we need to see the work of serpent-like figures, the brood of the great dragon. And in these repeated events, what we're seeing is an assault upon the woman and her seed, as we see in Revelation chapter 12. In these different chapters then, we're seeing this played out.

In chapter 3 verse 15, we're told that the woman and her seed will crush the serpent's head, and the enmity is placed between the woman and the serpent for this reason. And so, these stories are playing out a great archetype, an archetypal story behind the lesser stories, a motif playing out, and the subtle variations help us to understand these stories at the juncture at which they occur. The judgment that occurs upon Abimelech in his house is also important. The judgment of wombs being closed up. Now, this may have to do with Abimelech's impotence, because it's a fairly brief period of time. How would they know that the wombs were closed and that they were not fertile? It could be that the women are miscarrying.

[11 : 47] Maybe they're just not able to come to delivery properly. Something is happening anyway that is alerting them to the fact that they are under judgment. And within that size of people group, it might take maybe a month or two to realize that something serious is amiss. And as a result, that there is some sort of divine judgment. And this judgment concerning the seed is a sign that there is something going on with the birth of Isaac here. Isaac is being prevented from being born. And so, as long as Isaac is prevented from being born, the wombs of the people of Abimelech are closed up.

There's a poetic justice here within that situation. Why does Abimelech take Sarah? Is it because Sarah is particularly beautiful? Well, this is some decades after the original events of chapter 12, when Sarah was taken by Pharaoh. Maybe her appearance is not the reason here. Maybe it's more the fact that she is associated with someone who has great power. And if she is taken, she will be someone who creates a strategic alliance. Having the sister of the ruler of this great sheikdom as your consort would put you in a position of significant power, in a position maybe to take over that whole sheikdom. When God appears to Abimelech, he tells him to restore Sarah to Abraham, but also to get Abraham to pray for him.

Abraham is a prophet. This is the first time we see this word used in the Bible. Abraham has already been described as a seer, but here he is a prophet. A prophet is someone, in many cases, who participates in the divine council, as we saw in chapter 18. Someone who, when God is deliberating concerning his purposes, is present and a participant. Abraham is part of this discussion, and he has influence upon the way that God's purposes play out in the world. And so Abimelech is called to ask Abraham to intercede for him. Also presents Abraham as a figure who is engaged in blessing the nations. There is a blessing upon the nation here.

As Abraham prays, the wombs of this nation will be opened up. There is association here also between the blessing of Sarah and the blessings of the Gentiles. These two things go together with the movement of Abraham into a greater degree of prophethood. At the beginning of Abraham's story, we saw him engaging in more priestly activity, building altars, leading people in the land in worship, calling upon the name of the Lord in the various places that he establishes altars. Then we see him engaging in kingly activities, warring against the kings within the land. Now we have him going a step further. He's more like a prophet. He's not just dealing with people in the land here.

[14 : 29] He's involved with the life of the surrounding nations, not just creating an initial foothold of sanctuaries and altars, but now speaking to people who are kings in the nations round about, acting as a prophet within those contexts. The movement then in the story of Abraham, a maturation.

This is, among other things, an anticipation of what will happen later on in the story of Israel. What other things can we see as we compare and contrast this with chapter 12? Recognize significant similarities and significant differences. One of the differences here is that Abimelech asks for Abraham to stay. See, my land is before you. Dwell wherever it pleases you. While Pharaoh wanted Abraham to leave his land as quickly as possible, Abimelech wants to be blessed by Abraham within his land. There's an extension here again of what we see in the promise to Abraham. Abraham will be fruitful, multiply, and all these sorts of things, and nations will be blessed through him. Abimelech is noticing that as Abraham is present with him, he will be healed and blessed. Abraham is a man of God, a man that God is with, and a man that God is blessing. And so people who bless Abraham will be blessed with believing Abraham. So there's an important progression here. One question to reflect upon.

Chapter 20 involves themes of deliverance. The deliverance of Sarah, also the deliverance of opened wombs, and the deliverance of the child. The story of the Exodus has very similar themes connected with birth, the birth of the firstborn. Can you see some of the ways in which the story of the birth of Isaac might shed light upon the story of the Exodus? How is the birth of Isaac an Exodus event?

And how is the Exodus a birth event?