

# **GENESIS: A THEOLOGICAL COMMENTARY**

*THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, ISAAC AND JACOB*

## ABRAM IN EGYPT (*GENESIS 12*)

So far a student with an impartial judgment may agree that the Covenant made with Abram was crucial for us Christians. But now our problems with the man start when Abram begins to interact with the people around him.

After living in Canaan for some time, a famine hit the land and threatened to make life difficult for nomadic aliens such as Abram and his family. Whatever scant resources were in Canaan would naturally be claimed by the Canaanites, and they would no doubt fight Abram for them.

Even though the LORD promised to give him and his descendants the entire land, now was not the time to claim his Inheritance. He moved his family south to Egypt until such time as the famine passed and he could come back. But what the LORD would do for him in Egypt (unknown to him) would be to enrich him to the point that, when he did come back, he would have more than enough resources to live without the help of the Canaanites and their land. He would come back a rich man, independently wealthy, and a force to be reckoned with.

Now was the time to test Abram's faith.

**Famine in Canaan** – In the land that would later be described “a land flowing with milk and honey,” there was so severe a famine that Abram had to move his family to Egypt. He certainly couldn't prosper in Canaan; even the native Canaanites who had possession of the land would find it difficult to survive.

What Abram needed was a “down payment” on the Covenant promises so that he could survive on his own resources. The way that the LORD decided to give it to him was to take him to Egypt and “plunder the Egyptians” – a tactic the LORD would use again more than 400 years in the future for Abram's descendants, and for the same reason: to provide supplies and wealth to keep them viable while living in a harsh environment.

**Abram's strategy** – Abram knew what could very well happen in

Egypt – his wife Sarai was a “beautiful woman,” and the local authorities could take an interest in her. So he told his wife Sarai to pretend to be his sister, hoping that the authorities would leave him alone in peace. And it was true in a certain respect: Sarai *was* his half-sister, through his father but not through his mother. (See Genesis 20:12) And *that's* the story that God wanted Pharaoh to hear: he would quickly bring Abram's sister to his household; not so quickly his wife.

For this act, Abram has been castigated in our generation as being a liar, a coward, without faith in his God, and guilty of not taking measures to protect his wife. But let's put this situation in perspective, starting at the top. Rulers in those days collected harems – an assortment of wives and concubines and mistresses that often grew to substantial sizes. It had to do with

the fertility of the leader who represented the fertility of the nation; it was often tied in with worshiping sex idols. And the ruler would take whomever he pleased (only the best!) from the populace over whom he ruled – it was his divine right, his political prerogative.<sup>1</sup> All this was entirely legal; nobody argued with this, or they would find themselves at the wrong end of a sword for challenging the king. We of course would accuse Pharaoh of being morally wrong here, but then we wouldn't have survived very long in his kingdom with our modern opinions.

The king was surrounded by court officials who were, for the most part, obsequious men and sycophants who were always on the lookout to gain favor with the king. And one of the best ways to get into his good graces was to find him a beautiful woman for his harem.

Abram knew all about this custom because it was so characteristic of all the cultures in the Middle East in his day – from Mesopotamia to Canaan to Egypt. No doubt he had neighbors in his past whose daughters were taken to grace the king's bedchamber. For the family, it wasn't such a bad deal – the king would usually reward them (sort of like a bride-price) for the use of their daughter. And the woman herself lived in royal luxury, which was a

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<sup>1</sup> Royalty have always exercised this “divine right” to multiple women, even down to our present generation. Augustus the Strong (1670-1733), first a Protestant who later converted to Catholicism, boasted of innumerable mistresses, by which he had (at one count) over 370 bastard children.

better life than she could have expected back with her family.

It turned out that Abram was exactly right. Sarai was turning heads when they entered Egypt; and since news of that nature travels fast, Pharaoh's officials came to see for themselves and they knew an opportunity when they saw one. They immediately went to Pharaoh with the report of another beauty to add to his collection of wives.

And look closely at verse 13: “Say you are my sister ...” The person who “lied” to Pharaoh was Sarai, not just Abram. If it was wrong for Abram to say that, it would have been wrong for Sarai too. A lie is a lie is a lie, no matter who says it. But if it was the LORD's strategy to bring Pharaoh down, it was an act of courage in the middle of a battle.

**Pharaoh takes Sarai** – The Hebrew verb here is “she was taken” – quite literally. Pharaoh's officials showed up with spears and guards to get her, and off she went with them. To resist them would have resulted in disaster, as Abram well knew (possibly by watching it happen to others in the past). They would have murdered him to get her. And it's no argument that Abram had several hundred servants he could have used to protect Sarah (see his action against the four kings to save Lot – Genesis 14:13-16). In this case he was up against Pharaoh and the entire nation of Egypt.

Besides, the way the LORD chose to work this situation out was a perfect strategy. By submitting to Pharaoh's demand, Abram was in no way guilty of any crime that Pharaoh could bring against him. When

things later fell apart in Pharaoh's household, Pharaoh had nobody else to blame for it but himself – and his entire household and officials saw that. All he could do was tell Abram to leave the country.

What Sarai did here shows her quality as a woman of God. The Apostle Peter later praises her for her faith.

Likewise, wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the Word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives, when they see your respectful and pure conduct. Do not let your adorning be external — the braiding of hair and the putting on of gold jewelry, or the clothing you wear — but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious. For this is how the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves, by submitting to their own husbands, as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord. And you are her children, if you do good and do not fear anything that is frightening. (1 Peter 3:1-6)

This was certainly a situation that was frightening. But she obeyed her husband, trusted that he knew what he was doing, and waited for the LORD's deliverance. And notice what Peter says about her deception to Pharaoh in obedience to her husband: "In God's sight is very

precious." There was no other incident in Genesis that Peter could have been talking about.

Beauty is skin deep, they say; Proverbs tells us that "Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised." (Proverbs 31:30) The LORD was about to use Sarai's beauty to cause trouble for Pharaoh's household (not exactly a thing for a believer to be proud of!); but her obedience to her husband in this sensitive and dangerous matter speaks worlds about her inner character, a more valuable asset than her physical beauty.

As it turned out, her obedience to her husband was the key that the LORD used to safeguard the Covenant. As Sarai followed the events that God unfolded, God used this difficult situation to accomplish his purposes. So, if it was right in God's eyes for Sarai to trust her husband, why would her husband's obedience and faith in God be wrong? Obviously his obedience, and her obedience, led to a successful conclusion in God's hands.

**Abram's sudden wealth** – As custom proscribed, Pharaoh gave the "brother" of Sarai a bride-price to cover the loss of her company and service in Abram's household.

This gift made Abram suddenly self-sufficient. He could now go back to Canaan, in spite of the famine and unfriendly natives sitting on their lands, and prosper among them. This is what the LORD was really after by taking Abram to Egypt. And it couldn't have been done so effectively by any other

means. Not swords nor diplomacy nor anything else that Abram could have dreamed up would have gotten the job done with such success and so quickly.

**Plague in Pharaoh's house** – Simply because Sarai was now in Pharaoh's house didn't mean that he took her to bed immediately. The protocol was usually that several months at least were required to "prepare" her for her first appointment in the royal bedchamber (see Esther 2:12).

During this interval (and it must not have been long, or it wouldn't have been so clear that Sarai's presence was the problem) the LORD had time to do two things: move Pharaoh to enrich Abram, and then (once the treasure was safe in Abram's camp) commence to striking at Pharaoh for his crime: "Touch not my anointed ones, do my Prophets no harm." (Psalm 105:15) What may be a surprise to everyone is the way the LORD sees this situation. In God's eyes, the crime wasn't on Abram's side (for "cowardice" or a half-lie, as many would accuse him of), but on Pharaoh's side for touching his anointed one. Notice that nowhere in the rest of the Bible is there any condemnation of Abram for his actions.

God doesn't owe the wicked anything. Many times he will teach them a lesson the hard way – inflicting pain without warning, presumably for something that they didn't think was their fault. Like touching a hot stove, they learn right at the very beginning not to try that again. Treatment like this is

necessary for people who have turned deaf ears to their Creator; they learn respect for God and for the people of God the hard way.

All of Israel's history, as it is recorded in the Old Testament, tells us of a special people, taken out and set apart from the rest of the world. The two were not to have anything to do with each other. God has no respect for pagans and idolaters; he has great plans to prosper his own people, however. Many times that prosperity is going to come at the expense of the pagans, as in this example with the Egyptians. And the LORD never apologized for what he did, either – he wanted to make it very plain whom he favors, who will succeed and why, and who will die in their sins.

It may seem like a very Middle Eastern thing for God to come so close to Pharaoh like this for the purpose of kicking him in the groin, robbing him and then leaving him sick and beaten while God's own people walk away with the rewards. We moderns believe in fairness all around. But on Judgment Day, we're going to witness the exact same thing worked out all over the world as God's people enter into the joy of their reward, and the wicked are stripped, and thrown outside into the outer darkness with nothing, confused about the whole situation. Then we will see how important it was to worship the right God; the unbelievers' punishment will be fully deserved.

'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?'

Then he will answer them, saying, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life. (Matthew 25:44-46)

By taking Sarai deep into Pharaoh’s house, where no man could have gone, the LORD got close enough to Pharaoh to almost destroy him. He brought “great plagues” upon both Pharaoh and his household. This was not your ordinary family virus: it must have been debilitating, widespread and deadly. It caused Pharaoh to 1) recognize that there was a serious problem here, and 2) think that there must be a reason for the problem, and he had to identify it immediately or it would turn into a disaster.

Knowing how the LORD worked at other times in this manner, it could have been like the plague of tumors that infected the Philistines (1 Samuel 5) who dared to take the Ark of the Covenant away from the Israelites. Tumors are no joke. It was immediately obvious even to the pagan Philistines that the Ark of the Israelites was doing it to them. And they knew they had to do something with the Ark right away – send it back to the Israelite camp. In the same way, Pharaoh and his household quickly identified their problem with this woman Sarai. We can probably assume (since later we read about another Pharaoh during Moses’ day consulting his magicians about the Plagues happening in the Kingdom – Exodus 8:19) that this Pharaoh could have also been counseled by his advisors, “This is

the finger of God” – precisely identifying the source of the problem.

**Pharaoh confronts Abram** – Pharaoh lost no time in calling Abram to himself and turning Sarai back over to her brother. His comment is telling: “What is this you have done to me?” His statement reveals panic, fear, and respect.

Understand that this common shepherd, a nobody from Mesopotamia, a “stranger and alien” in the land wandering between Canaan and Pharaoh’s realm, caught helpless between famine and ostracism, came face to face with the ruler of the greatest nation in the Middle East and had him, basically, trembling in fear at his feet. This kind of humiliation only happens to a ruler when he is overcome by armies on his own doorstep!

Pharaoh didn’t mention Abram’s God (in contrast with the incident with Abimelech – see Genesis 20), perhaps because even with this threat against him, Pharaoh was reluctant to give any credence to foreign gods; Moses found the same reluctance later in his dealings with his Pharaoh. But there was no denying that Abram had a Power which Pharaoh had no desire to contend with.

It’s doubtful that Abram knew how this situation would turn out. Remember that he was *learning* about his God, how God works; learning requires discipline, and it happens over time. Who would know the ways of the LORD before the LORD reveals them to him? “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than

your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” (Isaiah 55:9) As Paul tells us in Romans 4:1, Abram *learned* (the Greek word is εὕρισκω, “to discover”) faith by going through a sequence of steps, one of which was the all-important realization that what God promises to give us is impossible, therefore it is something that only God can do for us. So by stepping back and letting God take care of this matter, instead of trying something on his own, he himself proved to be obedient and thereby was accounted “righteous” in God’s eyes.

Abram didn’t do a thing to Pharaoh; Pharaoh stuck his own head in the noose. And nowhere in Scripture do we find a censure of Abram’s conduct – only in modern times on the basis of our contemporary ethical systems.

**Abram leaves Egypt** – Pharaoh was rather short in his discussion with Abram: Get out!

We need to understand that God was directing this entire affair. Pharaoh could have killed Abram, not only to get his wife but as punishment for inflicting this disaster on his household (as if Abram had done it!). Or, Pharaoh could have demanded the gifts of herds and wealth back from Abram, since the returning of Sarai meant the bride-price was nullified.

Instead Abram was told to get out of Egypt – and he walked away with his wife, the gifts of livestock, menservants and maidservants, much silver and gold – and the public record behind him that he was a potential threat (a single man!) to the State. And at no time was his wife

Sarai ever in danger. In fact, Pharaoh had Abram and his family escorted out of the country by his officials, which no doubt fueled the local gossip circles in a very embarrassing way.

**The Point** – So far Abram had been living in two different nations as he followed the LORD in his new faith: Canaan and Egypt. Both nations would figure largely in the lives of his descendants in the following centuries. But neither one would be a problem for God, as he proved so skillfully to Abram. First on the list to subjugate was Egypt: in a way that Abram could never have achieved himself, the LORD quickly and efficiently brought Pharaoh to his knees before the Patriarch of the Nation of Israel. This was the “first blood” of the battle that would extend into Moses’ time. Riches fell into Abram’s hands, just when he needed them to survive during the hard times in Canaan.

In fact, what happened with Abram and Sarai was a foretaste of things to come. God himself would use this very strategy 400 years later, when he deliberately put his own Bride (Jeremiah 31:32; Isaiah 54:5; 62:4-5; Revelation 21:2) deep in the heart of Egyptian territory, under Pharaoh’s control, and then brought her out wrecking vengeance on his enemies the whole way and enriching his own people in the process. In other words, he was teaching Abram and his descendants a recurring principle of saving his Beloved from the enemy.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> And of course you can see where we’re headed with this: Christ deliberately left his Bride, the Church, in the middle of enemy territory — “I do

Therefore, behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when it shall no longer be said, 'As the LORD lives who brought up the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt,' but As the LORD lives who brought up the people of Israel out of the north country and out of all the countries where he had driven them.' For I will bring them back to their own land that I gave to their fathers. (Jeremiah 16:14-15)

Abram was learning that this God has power over kings and nations; his Inheritance was not just of a local nature and suited only for a family setting. What God had in mind was to enrich his people on a global scale, with influence and power around the world and all through history. Many kings will rise and fall because of Israel and her God. (Psalm 2; Luke 1:46-55,68-79) Taking on the power of Egypt at the very beginning of Abram's walk with God was an impressive display but also a precursor of things to come. Abram's Inheritance was no small matter.

And he was learning that this God can do the impossible – an essential aspect of true faith. Forced into an impossible situation with no good solution, Abram learned that God already had an answer for him. *This* is the aspect of faith that we, who are children of Abram, are

called to emulate. (Romans 4:16-17, 23-24) If Abram were wrong in his approach, the Scriptures would hardly hold him up to us as an example!

God aims directly at kings and nations; his new Kingdom will tear these down – they are of no use to him, they get in the way of his Kingdom, they are to be destroyed to make room for his Kingdom and his people. Man's kingdoms have failed to bring about the kind of world that the Creator wants to see. His Covenant, in other words, addresses the failures of principalities and powers that have destroyed his first Creation and it sets up God's new system in their place. And here in Genesis we see how easily and quickly it can be done – and through whom it will be done: the Heir of God.

The nations just got their introduction to Israel's God: with a flick of his hand, he brought down Egypt before Abram and his Family, and he intended to do much more as time went on. The nations of the world were about to learn harsh lessons at the hands of the God of Abram.

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not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one." (John 17:15). Is he cowardly??? Or is he setting up the enemy to destroy him by bringing his Bride out in due time? This has definite eschatological overtones ...



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