

# **GENESIS**

## **A THEOLOGICAL COMMENTARY**

***THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, ISAAC AND JACOB***

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## ABRAHAM AND ABIMELECH (*GENESIS 20*)

The second problem that modern students have with the Patriarch was his encounter with Abimelech, the king of Gerar. It was the first recorded dealing that he had with the Canaanites; and the outcome of that encounter forms an important aspect of the interaction between God's people and the rest of the unbelieving world.

We had been following Abraham's story since chapter 12, and then things digressed when Lot had to get out of Sodom. So the story of Lot and the destruction of Sodom comes *between* two important events in Abraham's life; in other words, the overriding point wherever we go in Genesis is always the story of Abraham and all those who are under his protection. Now we're coming back to Abraham, because there's still a matter to be settled in Abraham's life.

In Genesis 18, the angels visited Abraham and Sarah and promised them a son through Sarah *in a year's time* (18:14). So here in chapter 20, it's very likely that Sarah was pregnant by this time. The remark in 20:17-18 leads us to believe that Sarah was in Abimelech's house for a number of months – long enough for the king's harem to realize that something was suddenly wrong with their own child-bearing abilities. So the “year's time” for Sarah's son's birth was approaching its fulfillment.

But just as we saw the LORD protect Lot because he was Abraham's nephew, we also see that the LORD protected Sarah because she was Abraham's wife. In other words, the Abrahamic Covenant has real benefits for the entire Family.

**The local king** – I'm afraid we moderns don't appreciate the culture of ancient times, which has led us to criticize Abraham's actions in this story by using our current standards.

The king held the central power either over a nation or, in the case of Abimelech, over a city. Though there were various political systems by which the king exercised his rule over his subjects, one thing was almost universal – his “private” household was wealthy, ostentatious, and the pride of the people.<sup>1</sup> He represented the wealth and prosperity of the city. This means that whatever he wanted,

he took – and nobody argued with him. Of course even the pagans respected some moral principles, like the sanctity of marriage<sup>2</sup> (see Abimelech's remarks in Genesis 20:9,16); but when the king wanted a particular woman for his household, off she went – and neither she nor her family had any say in the matter. Anybody who stood against the king tended to disappear at night! They knew nothing of “personal rights” that we moderns take for granted.

So, just as had occurred in Egypt, the inevitable happened: Abimelech's officials (always on the lookout for their ruler's personal pleasures) took

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<sup>1</sup> Much like modern celebrities in our day: they live the life of luxury and unbridled lust that the common people would love to have themselves.

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<sup>2</sup> Though if the husband was conveniently found dead for some reason (!), the wife would suddenly become available.

Sarah because they knew she would please him. And in their culture, though it would have been a painful parting for the family, it would have meant the rich and comfortable life for her. We think it's a crime, but they considered it a windfall for their daughter/sister to suddenly be brought into the ruling family's household as the king's favorite.

**Abraham's strategy** – Abraham has received no end of condemnation from modern Christians who accuse him of succumbing to cowardice and failing to protect his wife.<sup>3</sup> But actually this was a wise move on his part, for several reasons.

*First*, Abraham was right – the king probably would have killed him to get Sarah. (See the story of David and Bathsheba!) This method of acquiring wives was a custom that nobody argued with. Abimelech sent officials and armed men to Abraham's camp, and that's a situation in which any man would need time to consider before he defied the king's orders. The king always sent armed soldiers with his messengers.

*Second*, Abraham had been learning some critical things about his God by then. The Covenant was proving to be a real asset, not an empty promise. The LORD had not only protected Sarah from Pharaoh in this same kind of situation before (Genesis 12), but twice the LORD also protected Lot in

his predicaments because of his relationship with Abraham. And Abraham always came out ahead in the end. By then he was learning what happens when one trusts in this God; certainly there was never reason to fear for the outcome.<sup>4</sup> This is a crucial element of faith for all of Abraham's descendents, and it's particularly useful for Christians in our day because of the problematic and antagonistic world we live in.

*Third*, the incident with Hagar (Genesis 16-17) convinced Abraham that the promise of a son would be fulfilled through Sarah – the LORD had every intention of giving Abraham's wife a son, so there was no reason to think that the miracle-working God couldn't safely guide Abraham and Sarah through this dilemma, *his* way. Abraham's "solution" with Hagar only botched things up badly, in his day and all through ensuing history (which was no doubt still a painful memory for him).

*Finally*, as in the case with Pharaoh, the LORD *wanted* Abimelech to believe that Sarah was Abraham's sister. By keeping him in the dark about the whole picture, the LORD was deliberately setting him up for ruin.

In light of the fact that Abraham had no options, and God always came through for him, and that taking actions on his own would only lead to more trouble, it was wisdom for him to stand back and let the LORD solve this problem for him: "The LORD will

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<sup>3</sup> It's not a valid hermeneutical principle to judge the actions of a Biblical character using our own standards when there's no solid basis for it in the passage. We are not allowed to read our own ethical system into the text, especially when the Biblical Masters interpret it differently.

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<sup>4</sup> If Abraham had done something wrong in Egypt, we would expect God to be telling him here to act differently. But he didn't.

fight for you, and you have only to be silent.” (Exodus 14:14) Remember that *we* are also learning about true faith by watching our forefather Abraham follow his God. (Romans 4) If he did almost everything wrong (as his critics claim), we certainly wouldn’t want to *follow* him in his misguided “faith”!

**God’s intervention** – Evidently some time elapsed between the taking of Sarah and when God began dealing with Abimelech. This too accords with the definition of faith: when God has told us that he is going to solve our problem, then the most important thing we must do is *wait*. “Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD.” (Psalm 27:14) There are a lot of details that have to line up before the final solution comes. Any action on our part that God doesn’t require is only going to ruin things. It’s not *our* actions that save us, but God’s actions. Such is the hope of true faith.

There were two things that God did with this pagan to thoroughly get his attention: he threatened him with death, and he closed the wombs of all the women of the king’s household. Kings don’t always listen to reason, or even to laws; they *are* the law. They do whatever they want. But since God is the King of kings, he has ways of terrifying even the powerful into submission. Even pagans learn the fear of the LORD when they actually see God in his power and glory.

Abimelech’s “excuse” of taking Sarah in clear conscience was true, but we shouldn’t attribute this to altruistic morality, as if he had been a

good man and the victim of Abraham’s “deceitful cowardice.” Abimelech’s “excuse” was a reaction of fear, not righteousness. Every pagan will back up to some “righteous” excuse for his/her behavior in order to save his skin.<sup>5</sup> Besides, he really didn’t know that Sarah was married, and therefore he thought he had a right to take her.

What he also didn’t know was that he was being “set up” by Abraham’s God. Just as the LORD “hardened” Pharaoh’s heart later in Moses’ day to create the perfect situation for Israel’s Exodus from Egypt (in which he fully intended to thoroughly punish Pharaoh!), in the same way he was effectively dealing with Abimelech and paving the way for generations of respect toward this man of God and his family. Notice what Abimelech learned about Abraham:

- Abraham was a prophet.
- If someone messes with Abraham they will get hurt.
- Abraham can pray for Abimelech’s safety.
- Abraham’s prayers healed the king’s family.

From that point on, Abimelech treated Abraham like royalty! None of this would have happened if the LORD had left Abraham to his own devices in the beginning.

**Curse on the household** – Notice that the LORD did not treat Abimelech tenderly. He shut the wombs of all the women in the king’s family, and threatened immediate death to the

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<sup>5</sup> It’s ironic that modern critics defend the godless pagan and condemn the Patriarch!

king if he didn't comply with the LORD's demands. He never had a chance to touch Sarah. There was something in the LORD's presence that night that struck terror into Abimelech's heart. "It is he who brings princes to nothing, and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness." (Isaiah 40:22-23)

This story should enlighten us about how God treats the wicked. Those outside of the Family certainly won't inherit any of the Covenant blessings. It's true that even they do things that aren't necessarily evil, and at times operate from a "clean" conscience. We all have the basics of morality imprinted into our hearts from Creation. But when the wicked threaten God's special people, for whatever reason or "good excuse," God moves against them in harsh punishment, not mercy. As long as they leave God's people alone, God *may* give them the good things of this world, and peace – if it suits his ends. In this case God decided to "set the rules" for Abraham living around pagans because of the potential for trouble. God wasn't interested in being "fair" to the pagans, but rather to put the fear of God in them.

**Blessings to Abraham** – Notice also that there is absolutely no condemnation from God toward Abraham and his actions. *None*. Neither the Prophets nor the Apostles condemn Abraham, but instead hold him up as a model for our faith. Our modern interpretations of Abraham's supposed "cowardice" are therefore totally foreign to the spirit of the story, and have no foundation in any of the details.

Instead, the LORD enhanced the standing of Abraham in the eyes of the pagans. He was called a "prophet," a spokesman for God. He had privilege of access to God's throne; thus when he prayed, Abimelech's offence was covered and forgotten. The doom over Abimelech's household disappeared only when Abraham prayed for his deliverance. And Abimelech's wives were returned to health, again only through Abraham's prayers.

Then Abimelech (because of his fear of Abraham's God and a new respect for this powerful prophet in his territory) gave Abraham "sheep and cattle, male and female slaves," and 1000 shekels of silver – to "cover Abimelech's offence" against Abraham and his family (just as had happened in Egypt). Notice *who* committed and acknowledged *his own* offence.

So instead of getting a bad grade for his actions, Abraham walked away richer, more powerful, and highly esteemed in the eyes of the locals, from the king on down.

So in a short time span, the LORD taught a harsh lesson to two powerful rulers: Pharaoh and Abimelech, Egypt and Canaan. Both learned not to touch God's people. And Abraham was suddenly a man to be feared and respected – by the ruling authorities. The stage was being set for the future Nation of Israel in the land where they would live: *they* would be the dominant power, because of the hand of the LORD upon them. "Nations will fear the Name of the LORD, and all the kings of the earth will fear your glory." (Psalms 102:15)

That completely changed the power structure in this territory. Abraham could pretty much do whatever he wanted without any interference. In addition, this respect of the locals for Abraham's family continued on into Isaac's life, as we see in Genesis 26, making things much easier for Isaac.

**The point** – It's obvious from this story that the LORD went ahead of Abraham and "brought down the mountains and lifted up the valleys" for his people. Since the people of this world will not have any respect for God's children – religious ideals and righteousness don't appeal to them – the Church's only hope is in their God's strong arm clearing the way before them. The LORD knows that his people don't have strength to fight the culture they live in. It requires God's hand.

For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ, being ready to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete. (2 Corinthians 10:3-6)

Sarah was never in any danger. As was noted already, she was probably in the beginning stages of her pregnancy and the promise of the son was not far off from fulfillment. Obviously the LORD had no misgivings about the outcome, since he was driving the circumstances all his way. And by now Abraham was

learning the *ways* of the LORD <sup>6</sup> (see Hebrews 3:10), and what true faith in God consists of. Note carefully that he was *richly rewarded* for letting the LORD handle the problem. Not seeing that is strangely missing the point!

But the overall point is that the Covenant that God gave Abraham and his heirs protected him, and protected anybody related to him. Nobody could touch this man. The world has been learning the hard way what it means to molest the children of God; and as the unbelievers are being dealt with harshly, the children will only become more prosperous as a result.

Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in Heaven, for so they persecuted the Prophets who were before you. (Matthew 5:11-12)

In the LORD's hands, the Covenant promises are never in jeopardy. Even the strangest circumstances and seemingly fatal situations only serve to strengthen God's program for his people.

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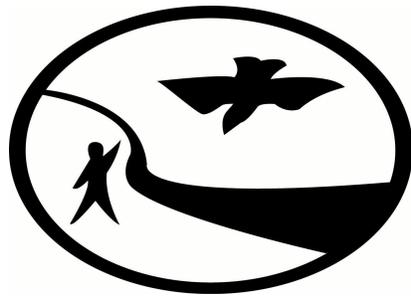
<sup>6</sup> One of which is to *wait* on the Lord – he takes time working out his will in this world.

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