

GENESIS

A THEOLOGICAL COMMENTARY

THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, ISAAC AND JACOB

DR CHARLES VOGAN

WRONG NOTIONS FROM MODERN COMMENTATORS

Our modern culture has developed along with, and imbibed the values of, our Western Civilization over the last few hundred years. Without being aware of the changes that have been happening, we now make assumptions about life and values and truth that people in previous centuries would have thought totally foreign and unworkable. In particular, the values and principles of the Bible now sound foreign to *us*; so we've replaced most of that system with our modern ideals and philosophies.

This is why, when we read the stories of Genesis, we come up with totally different interpretations from what God wanted us to understand from them – and we think we're right! We can't conceive of a world so primitive, naïve, immoral and brutal. Surely the LORD wants us to re-cast the stories into our modern models. So, for instance, we use our modern morality system to judge the Patriarchs. This results in a strange way of “believing” the stories, however: instead of using the Patriarchs as models for our faith, we reinterpret their stories into examples of what *not* to do.

We looked at this methodology before – it's called “moralizing” the story. Their lifestyles were so different, so foreign, so shocking, that we are fixated on their actions and how different they are from ours. So our interpretation of the story, naturally, focuses on “why they were wrong, and we are right.” Genesis lends itself to this treatment.

This way of interpreting Genesis misses two points: *first*, their ways just may have been right, and ours wrong! I know that possibility is unthinkable for moderns, but it is a logical alternative and pursuing it honestly just may uncover faults in our modern culture. But it's next to impossible for a person to judge the culture he/she is part of, because of their heavy investment in its stability and success. Those from other cultures are actually better judges of our culture than we are – they can see the warts that we can't see.

Second, Genesis is not about morals. It's about the Covenant with Abraham. You will never understand its lessons, you will never understand how the rest of the Bible relies on it (including the New Testament), unless you can see this.

It seems that even the experts can't see it. Modern commentators almost all condemn the Patriarchs for their actions, and judge their morals, without a word concerning the driving force of the Covenant throughout the book. That's why I mentioned that this commentary that I'm offering is such a radical departure from the standard work on Genesis. But it grieves me to see such top-notch scholars miss the point. They all go after the morals, and they ignore the Covenant's whole-Bible influence (not to mention that they also miss the data of the contract between the LORD and Abraham), and they ignore the Biblical testimonies of the Patriarchs. Were they to write Genesis themselves, it would be a totally different book. Remember that the Apostles are our guide, not modern scholarship.

As an example, following is a sample of older but standard and well-known commentators on the story of Abraham and Sarah in Egypt.

*Keil and Delitzsch*¹
Gen. 12:10-20. Abram in Egypt

Vers. 10-20. ABRAM IN EGYPT – Abram had scarcely passed through the land promised to his seed, when a famine compelled him to leave it, and take refuge in Egypt, which abounded in corn; just as the Bedouins in the neighbourhood are accustomed to do now. Whilst the famine in Canaan was to teach Abram, that even in the promised land food and clothing come from the Lord and His blessing, he was to discover in Egypt that earthly craft is soon put to shame when dealing with the possessor of the power of this world, and that help and deliverance are to be found with the Lord alone, who can so smite the mightiest kings, that they cannot touch His chosen or do them harm (Ps. cv. 14, 15).

When trembling for his life in Egypt on account of the beauty of Sarai his wife, he arranged with her, as he approached that land, that she should give herself out as his sister, since she really was his half-sister (chap. xi. 29). He had already made an arrangement with her, that she should do this in certain possible contingencies, when they first removed to Canaan (chap. xx. 13). The conduct of the Sodomites (chap. xix.) was a proof that he had reason for his anxiety; and it was not without cause even so far as Egypt was concerned. But his precaution did not spring from faith. He might possibly hope, that by means of the plan concerted, he should escape the danger of being put to death on account of his wife, if any one should wish to take her; but how he expected to save the honour and retain possession of his wife, we cannot understand, though we must assume, that he thought he should be able to protect and keep her as his sister more easily, than if he acknowledged her as his wife. But the very thing he feared and hoped to avoid actually occurred.

Gen. 12:15 ff. The princes of Pharaoh finding her very beautiful, extolled her beauty to the king, and she was taken to Pharaoh's house. As Sarah was then 65 years old (cf. chap. xvii. 17 and xii, 4), her beauty at such an age has been made a difficulty by some. But as she lived to the age of 127 (chap. xxiii. 1), she was then middle-aged; and as her vigour and bloom had not been tried by bearing children, she might easily appear very beautiful in the eyes of the Egyptians, whose wives, according to both ancient and modern testimony, were generally ugly, and faded early. Pharaoh (the Egyptian *ouro*, king, with the article Pi) is the Hebrew name for all the Egyptian kings in the Old Testament ; their proper names being only occasionally mentioned, as, for example, Necho in 2 Kings xxiii. 29, or Hophra in Jer. xliv. 30. For Sarai's sake Pharaoh treated Abram well, presenting him with cattle and slaves, possessions which constitute the wealth of nomads. These presents Abram could not refuse, though by accepting them he increased his sin.

God then interfered (ver. 17), and smote Pharaoh and his house with great plagues. What the nature of these plagues was, cannot be determined; they were certainly of such

¹ C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch*, Vol. 1 of *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, reprinted August 1988), xx.

a kind, however, that whilst Sarah was preserved by the from dishonor, Pharaoh saw at once that they were sent as punishment by the Deity on account of his relation to Sarai; he may also have learned, on inquiry from Sarai herself, that she was Abram's wife. He gave her back to him, therefore, with a reproof for his untruthfulness, and told him to depart, appointing men to conduct him out of the land together with his wife and all his possessions. שלח, *to dismiss, to give an escort* (Gen. 18:16; 31:27), does not necessarily denote an involuntary dismissal here. For as Pharaoh had discovered in the plague the wrath of the God of Abraham, he did not venture to treat him harshly, but rather sought to mitigate the anger of his God, by the safe conduct which he granted him on his departure.

But Abram was not justified by this result, as was very apparent from the fact that he was mute under Pharaoh's reproofs, and did not venture to utter a single word in vindication of his conduct, as he did in the similar circumstances described in Gen. 10:11, 12. The saving mercy of God had so humbled him, that he silently acknowledged his guilt in concealing his relation to Sarah from the Egyptian king.

*Matthew Henry*²

III. A great fault which Abram was guilty of, in denying his wife, and pretending that she was his sister. The scripture is impartial in relating the misdeeds of the most celebrated saints, which are recorded, not for our imitation, but for our admonition, that he who thinks he stands may take heed lest he fall. **1.** His fault was dissembling his relation to Sarai, equivocating concerning it, and teaching his wife, and probably all his attendants, to do so too. What he said was, in a sense, true (ch. 20:12), but with a purpose to deceive; he so concealed a further truth as in effect to deny it, and to expose thereby both his wife and the Egyptians to sin. **2.** That which was at the bottom of it was a jealous timorous fancy he had that some of the Egyptians would be so charmed with the beauty of Sarai (Egypt producing few such beauties) that, if they should know he was her husband, they would find some way or other to take him off, that they might marry her. He presumes they would rather be guilty of murder than adultery, such a heinous crime was it then accounted and such a sacred regard was paid to the marriage bond; hence he infers, without any good reason, They will kill me. Note, The fear of man brings a snare, and many are driven to sin by the dread of death, Lu. 12:4, Lu. 12:5. The grace Abram was most eminent for was faith; and yet he thus fell through unbelief and distrust of the divine Providence, even after God had appeared to him twice. Alas! what will become of the willows, when the cedars are thus shaken?

Verses 14-20 Here is, **I.** The danger Sarai was in of having her chastity violated by the king of Egypt: and without doubt the peril of sin is the greatest peril we can be in. Pharaoh's princes (his pimps rather) saw her, and, observing what a comely woman she was, they commended her before Pharaoh, not for that which was really her praise—her virtue and modesty, her faith and piety (these were no excellencies in their eyes), but for

² Henry, Matthew *Commentary on the Whole Bible: Six Volumes*; Fleming H. Revell; p.88-89.

her beauty, which they thought too good for the embraces of a subject. They recommended her to the king, and she was presently taken into Pharaoh's house, as Esther into the seraglio of Ahasuerus (Esth. 2:8), in order to her being taken into his bed. Now we must not look upon Sarai as standing fair for preferment, but as entering into temptation; and the occasions of it were her own beauty (which is a snare to many) and Abram's equivocation, which is a sin that commonly is an inlet to much sin. While Sarai was in this danger, Abram fared the better for her sake. Pharaoh gave him sheep, oxen, etc. (v. 16), to gain his consent, that he might the more readily prevail with her whom he supposed to be his sister. We cannot think that Abram expected this when he came down into Egypt, much less that he had an eye to it when he denied his wife; but God brought good out of evil. And thus the wealth of the sinner proves, in some way or other, to be laid up for the just. **II.** The deliverance of Sarai from this danger. For if God did not deliver us, many a time, by prerogative, out of those straits and distresses which we bring ourselves into by our own sin and folly, and which therefore we could not expect any deliverance from by promise, we should soon be ruined, nay, we should have been ruined long before this. He deals not with us according to our deserts. **1.** God chastised Pharaoh, and so prevented the progress of his sin. Note, Those are happy chastisements that hinder us in a sinful way, and effectually bring us to our duty, and particularly to the duty of restoring that which we have wrongfully taken and detained. Observe, Not Pharaoh only, but his house, was plagued, probably those princes especially that had commended Sarai to Pharaoh. Note, Partners in sin are justly made partners in the punishment. Those that serve others' lusts must expect to share in their plagues. We are not told particularly what these plagues were; but doubtless there was something in the plagues themselves, or some explication added to them, sufficient to convince them that it was for Sarai's sake that they were thus plagued. **2.** Pharaoh reprov'd Abram, and then dismissed him with respect. **(1.)** The reproof was calm, but very just: What is this that thou hast done? What an improper thing! How unbecoming a wise and good man! Note, If those that profess religion do that which is unfair and disingenuous, especially if they say that which borders upon a lie, they must expect to hear of it, and have reason to thank those that will tell them of it. We find a prophet of the Lord justly reprov'd and upbraided by a heathen ship-master, Jon. 1:6. Pharaoh reasons with him: Why didst thou not tell me that she was thy wife? intimating that, if he had known this, he would not have taken her into his house. Note, It is a fault too common among good people to entertain suspicions of others beyond what there is cause for. We have often found more of virtue, honour, and conscience, in some people than we thought they possessed; and it ought to be a pleasure to us to be thus disappointed, as Abram was here, who found Pharaoh to be a better man than he expected. Charity teaches us to hope the best. **(2.)** The dismissal was kind and very generous. He restored him his wife without offering any injury to her honour: Behold thy wife, take her, v. 19. Note, Those that would prevent sin must remove the temptation, or get out of the way of it. He also sent him away in peace, and was so far from any design to kill him, as he apprehended, that he took particular care of him. Note, We often perplex and ensnare ourselves with fears which soon appear to have been altogether groundless. We often fear where no fear is. We fear the fury of the oppressor, as though he were ready to destroy, when really there is no danger, Isa. 51:13. It would have been more for Abram's credit and comfort to have told the truth at first; for, after all, honesty is the best policy. Nay, it is said (v. 20), Pharaoh commanded his men

concerning him, that is, [1.] He charged them not to injure him in any thing. Note, It is not enough for those in authority to do no hurt themselves, but they must restrain their servants, and those about them, from doing hurt. Or, [2.] He appointed them, when Abram was disposed to return home after the famine, to conduct him safely out of the country, as his convoy. Probably he was alarmed by the plagues (v. 17), and inferred from them that Abram was a particular favourite of Heaven, and therefore, through fear of their return, took special care he should receive no injury in his country. Note, God has often raised up friends for his people, by making men know that it is at their peril if they hurt them. It is a dangerous thing to offend Christ's little ones. Mt. 18:6. To this passage, among others, the Psalmist refers, Ps. 105:13-15, He reprov'd kings for their sakes, saying *Touch not my anointed*. Perhaps if Pharaoh had not sent him away, he would have been tempted to stay in Egypt and to forget the land of promise. Note, Sometimes God makes use of the enemies of his people to convince them, and remind them, that this world is not their rest, but that they must think of departing. Lastly, Observe a resemblance between this deliverance of Abram out of Egypt and the deliverance of his seed thence: 430 years after Abram went into Egypt on occasion of a famine they went thither on occasion of a famine also; he was fetched out with great plagues on Pharaoh, so were they; as Abram was dismissed by Pharaoh, and enriched with the spoil of the Egyptians, so were they. For God's care of his people is the same yesterday, today, and for ever.

*Arthur Pink*³

And now we come to the second failure of Abram, namely, his leaving Canaan and going down into Egypt. Concerning this incident we can here say only a few words. First it is to be noted that, "Abram journeyed, going on still toward the south" (v. 9). This geographical reference is deeply significant: southward was Egyptward! When the "famine" overtook Abram his face was already toward Egypt.

"And there was a famine in the land: and Abram went down into Egypt to sojourn there; for the famine was grievous in the land" (v. 10). This is the first mention in Scripture of Egypt, and like all its subsequent references, so here, it stands for that which is a constant menace to the people of God symbolizing, as it does, alliance with the world and reliance upon the arm of flesh – "Woe to them that go down to Egypt for help and stay on horses, and trust in chariots, because they are many; and in horsemen, because they are very strong; but they look not unto the Holy One of Israel, neither seek the LORD!" (Isa. 31:1).

The famine was sent as a trial of Abram's faith. A famine in the Land of Promise. What a test of faith! "God would see whether he had such confidence in His goodness that even famine could not shake it. Alas, Abram did as we are all prone to do, he sought relief from all his difficulties, rather than profit by the trial" (*Ridout*).

³ Pink, Arthur, *Gleanings in Genesis*, Moody Press: 1922, 1950; p.144-146.

Observe that when this famine came there was no seeking counsel from the LORD. Abram was prompted by the wisdom of the flesh which ever suggests relief in means and human help, in fact, anything rather than in the living God. O, the inconsistencies of God's children! Faith in God with regard to our eternal interest, but afraid to confide in Him for the supply of our temporal needs. Here was a man who had journeyed all the way from Chaldea to Canaan on the bare word of Jehovah and yet was now afraid to trust Him in the time of famine. Sad that it should be so, but how like us today!

One sin leads to another. Failure in our love to God always results in failure in our love to our neighbor. Down in Egypt Abram practices deception and denies that Sarai is his wife, thus endangering the honor of the one who was nearest and should have been dearest to him. Alas! What is man? But Jehovah would not allow His purposes to be frustrated – “If we believe not, yet He abideth faithful: He cannot deny Himself” (2 Tim. 2:13). So it was here. The LORD interposed – “And the LORD plagued Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife” (v. 17). The sequel is found in the next chapter. “And Abram went up out of Egypt, he and his wife, and all that he had. ... And he went on his journeys from the south even to Bethel, unto the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Ai; unto the place of the altar, which he had made there at the first, and there Abram called on the name of the LORD” (Gen. 13:1, 3, 4). He returned to the very place he had left. He repented and “did the first works.” Abram's sojourn in Egypt was so much lost time.

We cannot close this paper without first seeking to gather up in a few words the practical and deeply important lessons here recorded for our learning. **1.** The call which came to Abram comes to each one of his believing children – the call for absolute confidence in God; the call to take Him at His word and step out in simple and unquestioning faith; the call to separate ourselves from the world to a life of pilgrimage in dependency upon Jehovah. **2.** The trial of Abram's faith is also the lot of all his children. Profession must be tested and at times the meal in the barrel will run very low. The failure of Abram is a solemn warning against being occupied with circumstances instead of with God. Look not at the famine but unto God's faithfulness. **3.** Beware of going down to Egypt. The friendship of the world is enmity with God. Time spent in Egypt is wasted. Days lived out of communion with God produce nought but “wood, hay and stubble.” **4.** As you see in the failures of Abram the sad record of your own history, marvel anew at the long sufferance of God which deals in such infinite patience and grace with His erring and ungrateful children.

[Note *what Pink is accusing Abraham of:*

- Abram showed his lack of faith by going to Egypt
- Abram did not act in faith regarding Sarai
- Abram committed a grave sin: deceiving Pharaoh
- Pharaoh was innocent in God's eyes
- God rescued Sarai in spite of Abram's faithlessness and deceit
- Abram was *not* an example of faith for modern believers

And yet ...

- God blessed Abram richly
- God condemned Pharaoh, not Abram
- There is no judgment against Abram in the entire Bible
- God called Abram his Prophet and Friend
- Their “options of faith” totally ignore the situation
- Abram was *learning* about his God
- God will deal with Pharaoh; he wasn’t Abram’s problem]

AINSWORTH ON GENESIS XX⁴

As an example of interpreting this story in an entirely positive light as far as Abraham is concerned, Henry Ainsworth (an English Puritan) says *nothing at all* in criticism of the Patriarch. Instead he focuses on two things: *first*, that Abimelech was in danger of committing a terrible crime against God’s Prophet, and was spared only by God’s intervention – not for his sake but for Abraham’s and Sarah’s sake. He should have felt fortunate indeed of having escaped disaster for touching God’s anointed. *Second*, Abraham himself was a Prophet extraordinaire, of high character, fully in God’s confidence as to his works on earth. Abraham’s prayer on Abimelech’s behalf also showed his intimate status with God. In other words, Ainsworth didn’t put his own customs into the text; he simply went by what the passage *says*, and what parallel passages say about it. Following are the relevant sections from Ainsworth’s commentary on Genesis.

VER. 7. A PROPHET,] Therefore do him no harm, Psalm cv.15. A prophet in Hebrew *nabi*, in Greek *prophetes*, from which we have the word prophet, so named of *speaking, interpreting, or uttering* words and oracles that come from God, Deut. xviii. 15, 16, 18. as of seeing or receiving them by visions, such were named seers, 1 Sam. ix. 9. ... Such are called, ‘holy men of God, which spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost,’ 2 Pet. i.20. The Hebrew Doctors say, ‘It is one of the foundations of the law, to know that God maketh the sons of men to prophesy: and prophecy resideth not, but in a man that is great in wisdom, mighty in his virtuous qualities so that his affections overcome him not in any worldly thing; but by his knowledge he overcometh his affections continually; and he is a man expert in knowledge, and of a very large understanding, etc. On such a man, the Holy Spirit cometh down; and when the Spirit resteth upon him, his soul is associated unto the angels, and he is changed

⁴ Henry Ainsworth, *Annotations on the Pentateuch*, 1616

to another man; and perceiveth in his own knowledge, that he is not so as he was, but that he is advanced above the degrees of other wise men: even as it is said of Saul, in 1 Sam. x. 6. and though shall prophesy with them, and shall be turned into another man.’ *Maimony in Jesudei hatorah*, chap. vii. sec. 1.

SHALL PRAY,] This was a special work of the prophets, to pray for the people, Jer. xiv. 11. xv. 1 whereupon it is said; ‘If they be prophets, and if the word of the LORD be with them, let them intreat the LORD,’ etc. Jer. xxvii. 18. *Praying* or *interpellation*, hath the first signification of judging, and so meaneth the presenting of the person and cause of any unto God as the judge; and the judging of one’s self.

LIVE THOU,] That is, ‘thou shalt live:’ but it is a powerful manner of speech: whereupon God is said to *command* his mercy, and the salvation and blessing of his people, Psal. xlii. 9. xliv. 5. cxxxiii. 3. The like is often used, as Amos v. 4. ‘seek me and live:.’ that is, ‘ye shall live,’ and ‘dwell for ever,’ Psal. xxxvii. 27.

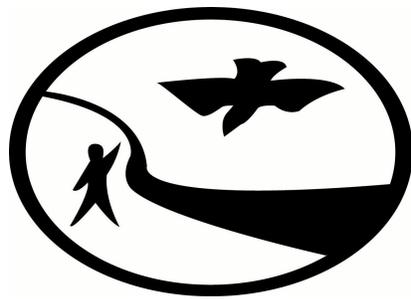
DYING] That is, ‘shalt surely die:’ see Gen. ii. 17.

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