

February 5, 2017 - Gen. 20:1-18 - Abraham and Abimelech

Torah Readings: Gen. 20:1-18 - Abraham and Abimelech

Psalm 15

Haftorah - Isaiah 61:9-11 + 62:5-12

Judges 9:21-28 + 56-57

Genesis 20:1-2 - “And Abraham journeyed from there toward the south country, and dwelled between Kadesh and Shur, and sojourned in Gerar. And Abraham said of Sarah his wife, She is my sister: and Abimelech king of Gerar sent, and took Sarah.”

Some of the Jewish writers say Abraham left the area because he was grieved at Lot’s incest with his daughters and the reproach which the Canaanites cast upon him. Or that he was terrified by the destruction of Sodom. Others say that it was so ordered in Providence that he should move from place to place, that it might confirm that he was but a sojourner in the land. Canaan was not yet intended for a permanent habitation.

Onkelos and Jonathan paraphrase the words “between Kadesh and Shur” as between Rekam and Chagra, or Hagra, the same place where the angel of the Lord met with Hagar at the well.

Another ill-advised plan for protection

“She is my sister”

Sarah, though now 89 years of age, was as youthful in look as a person of forty would now be. Some think that with the promise of a son, Sarah’s youth had been renewed.

Why did Abraham attempt this charade a second time (Genesis 12), after 20 years?

This is another example of Abraham’s righteousness not being based on his behavior or works. It was because he “saw Christ’s day and was glad.” The life of this “father of faith” reflects the working out of that revelation, as he faces his own frailty and failures.

“Scripture neither represents its heroes as perfect, nor does it raise them disproportionately above the level of their own times. The fact that God rescued him and Sarah from all danger in Egypt may have seemed to him a warrant that in future difficulties he would have the same Divine protection. In fact, it was Abraham’s plan to avoid peril that twice entangled him in actual danger.” — Ellicott's Commentary

(Incredibly, Isaac and Rebekah do exactly the same thing later - See Genesis 26).

Abimelech

Abimelech (father-king) - was a title of the Philistine kings like Pharaoh is in Egypt. Or possibly, it means “my father is Melech (king)” or “Molech,” the pagan deity. A similar

name Abi-milki is attested as the name of the King of Tyre in the 14th century B.C.

Possibly Abimelech thought by placing Sarah in his harem he could solidify an alliance with Abraham, the rich and powerful nomad prince who had entered his dominions — Delitzsch

The Rabbis taught that God appears to non-Jews only in dreams, as God appeared to Abimelech "in a dream of the night" in Genesis 20:3, God appeared to Laban the "in a dream of the night" in Genesis 31:24, and God appeared to Balaam "at night" in Numbers 22:20. See also Pharaoh - Genesis 41:1; and Nebuchadnezzar - Daniel 4:5

Abimelech addresses God as 'ădonāy, "Lord." Knowledge of the true God, the High God, had not yet disappeared from the Gentile world.

Abimelech's challenge to God recalls Abraham's plea concerning Sodom.

Genesis 20:4-5 - "... Lord, wilt thou slay also a righteous nation? ... in the integrity of my heart and innocency of my hands have I done this."

He says "nation" here because (the Rabbis say) a cry went up across the land as every household was stricken with a condition that closed the wombs and sexual organs of humans and animals alike.

Abimelech was referred to as a righteous Gentile (Midrash Ps. 34). His attempted seizure of Sarah is explained by the fact that he was childless, and that he hoped to be blessed with offspring by marrying such a pious woman (PdRE 26). Among his punishments for his sin were that ruffians entered his house, that boils erupted on his body (Gen. R. 64:9), and that his household became barren (BK 92a).

The Prayer of Abraham

Genesis 20:7 - "Now therefore restore the man his wife; for he is a prophet, and he shall pray for you, and you shall live: and if you restore her not, know you that you shall surely die, you, and all that are yours."

Abraham is here given the title of "prophet," or "nâbî" (the first occurrence of the term in Scripture). The prophet—the one who utters or pours forth. He is one who is in intimate relations with God, moved by His Spirit, protected by His Power. Also called seers, prophets were also teachers, mediators and intercessors.

"He shall pray for thee." - The rabbis note this is the first instance recorded of someone offering prayer for another person.

The Midrash compares this to Moses' prayer as **Numbers 21:7** reports, "And Moses prayed," to demonstrate the meekness of Moses, who did not hesitate to seek mercy for them, and also to show the power of repentance, for as soon as they said, "We have sinned," Moses was immediately reconciled to them, for one who is in a position to

forgive should not be cruel by refusing to forgive. Similarly, **Job 42:10** reports, "And the Lord changed the fortune of Job, when he prayed for his friends" (after they had slandered him).

A comment on this incident is supplied by **Psalms 105:14-15** - "He permitted no man to oppress them, And He reproveth kings for their sakes: 'Do not touch My anointed ones, And do My prophets no harm.'"

Reconciliation

Genesis 20:15 - "And Abimelech said, Behold, my land is before you: dwell where it pleases you."

Whereas Pharaoh had kicked Abram out of Egypt after his deception, Abimelech offers Abraham pasture in his country.

Genesis 20:16 - "And to Sarah he said, Behold, I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver: behold, he is to you a covering of the eyes, to all that are with you, and with all other: thus she was reproveth."

Better with the LXX and the NET translation:

"To Sarah he said, "Look, I have given a thousand pieces of silver to your 'brother.' This is compensation for you so that you will stand vindicated before all who are with you."

In other words, it is a metaphor for a gift of appeasement given that Abraham may "shut his eyes" or cover over or pardon with regard to Abimelech's offense.

Genesis 20:17-18 - "So Abraham prayed to God: and God healed Abimelech, and his wife, and his maidservants; and they bore children. For the LORD had fast closed up all the wombs of the house of Abimelech, because of Sarah Abraham's wife."

Something had caused them to not be able to either have sex, conceive or bring forth children. Impotence? Or a disease afflicted them? It's not clear.

The Rabbis report the angels cried out to God that it was unfair for Abimelech's wife to conceive and give birth while God's promise to Abraham and Sarah was still not fulfilled. So Isaac was born seven months later.