

General Comments on Genesis 20

This chapter typically gets passed over as intervening history, but it is significant because it explains the lack of trust between Abimelech and Abraham in 21:22-24, and therefore serves to explain why the Lord chastens Abraham in ch. 22.

In 18:17-19, the Lord tells Abraham what His expectations are:

¹⁷ And the LORD said, Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I do; ¹⁸ Seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? ¹⁹ For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the LORD, to do justice and judgment; that the LORD may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him.

The Lord expects Abraham to "keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgement". The problem is in this chapter Abraham commits the same deception he did previously in ch. 12, once again forcing the Lord to take action on his behalf in order to protect the covenant.

The result is Abimelech doesn't trust Abraham, and it makes the Lord look as though he is a god of caprice and favoritism, not the God of Justice and Righteousness to all nations. Abraham sets a bad example here, and it in turn makes the Lord look bad, like He is no different from any of the other local pagan gods.

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¹ And Abraham journeyed from thence toward the south country, and dwelled between Kadesh and Shur, and sojourned in Gerar. ² And Abraham said of Sarah his wife, She is my sister: and Abimelech king of Gerar sent, and took Sarah. ³ But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night, and said to him, Behold, thou art but a dead man, for the woman which thou hast taken; for she is a man's wife. ⁴ But Abimelech had not come near her: and he said, LORD, wilt thou slay also a righteous nation? ⁵ Said he not unto me, She is my sister? and she, even she herself said, He is my brother: in the integrity of my heart and innocency of my hands have I done this. ⁶ And God said unto him in a dream, Yea, I know that thou didst this in the integrity of thy heart; for I also withheld thee from sinning against me: therefore suffered I thee not to touch her. ⁷ Now therefore restore the man his wife; for

he is a prophet, and he shall pray for thee, and thou shalt live: and if thou restore her not, know thou that thou shalt surely die, thou, and all that are thine.

v1-7 Repeating the same dissembling of ch. 12, Abraham and Sarah again engage in the "we are brother and sister" story, so any potentially hostile locals will not kill him over her.

The Lord confronts Abimelech, who justly pleads his own innocence, due to their deception, and the Lord warns him to do the right thing or He will kill them all. We also are told in v. 17 that the Lord "closed up all the wombs of all the house of Abimelech", so the lethal threat was preceded by this warning of the end of Abimelech's kingly line.

⁸ Therefore Abimelech rose early in the morning, and called all his servants, and told all these things in their ears: and the men were sore afraid. ⁹ Then Abimelech called Abraham, and said unto him, what hast thou done unto us? and what have I offended thee, that thou hast brought on me and on my kingdom a great sin? thou hast done deeds unto me that ought not to be done. ¹⁰ And Abimelech said unto Abraham, what sawest thou, that thou hast done this thing?

¹¹ And Abraham said, Because I thought, Surely the fear of God is not in this place; and they will slay me for my wife's sake. ¹² And yet indeed she is my sister; she is the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother; and she became my wife. ¹³ And it came to pass, when God caused me to wander from my father's house, that I said unto her, This is thy kindness which thou shalt shew unto me; at every place whither we shall come, say of me, He is my brother.

¹⁴ And Abimelech took sheep, and oxen, and menservants, and womenservants, and gave them unto Abraham, and restored him Sarah his wife. ¹⁵ And Abimelech said, Behold, my land is before thee: dwell where it pleaseth thee. ¹⁶ And unto Sarah he said, Behold, I have given thy brother a thousand pieces of silver: behold, he is to thee a covering of the eyes, unto all that are with thee, and with all other: thus she was reprov'd.

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

v8-17 Early the very next morning Abimelech warns all of his people (v. 8) and then confronts Abraham over his unwarranted deception (v. 9-10). Abraham makes excuses, explaining it was a half-truth (v. 11-13). Abimelech gives them exceptional gifts in order to secure their favor, after the Lord's lethal threat,

and also for their protection (v. 14-16). Abraham then prays to the Lord on their behalf for them to be released from the curse (v. 17).

v14 "menservants, and womenservants", we might assume Abimelech passed these people over to Abraham and Sarah as an insurance policy against future threats from locals. As Abraham and Sarah were foreigners, other locals might not believe their story, so the native servants would be able to vouch for them and speak for Abimelech to protect them per the promise of covering in v. 16. The servants are probably also intended to prevent anything like what just happened from happening again.

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