

## Genesis 20 Denying Sarah to Abimelech

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### Overview

Lot's experience shows us how the righteous can be hindered by their interactions with an unrighteous society. Ch. 20 presents a complementary picture, of how society is sometimes more righteous, practically speaking, than God's people, and how we are rebuked when this happens.

Need to discuss similarity with ch. 12, and the reason for the repetition. Maybe this is the place to describe the overall structure:

A. A testing journey (choose God over ancestors/descendants)	12:1-9	22:1-19
B. Threats to promises of land and seed	12:10-13:18	20-21
Sarah compromised in strange land	12:10-20	20
Strife over land	13:1-9	21:22-34
Separation from rival heir	13:10-13 (Lot)	21:9-21 (Ishmael)
Divine promise of land	13:14-18	<<lacking>>
Divine promise of seed vindicated (Isaac born)	<<lacking>>	21:1-8
C. Blessing to nations: cities of the plain; covenant with gentile	14	18:16-19:28
Birth of rival heirs (Ammon and Moab)	<<lacking>>	19:29-38
D. Covenant: land and seed	15-16	17:1-18:15
Announcement of birth	16a	18:15
Birth of rival heir (Ishmael)	16b	<<lacking!!>>

Although both B sections have similar paragraphs, they are not in the same order. The order in 20-21 is chiasmic in Abimelech:

Abimelech shows godly character	20:1-18, Sarah compromised in Philistia	21:22-23, Covenant with Abimelech over land: no separation
Distinction between true and rival heir	21:1-8, Birth of Isaac	21:9-21, Ishmael driven out

This appears to be an unfolding of the material in 12-13.

- The outer members of the chiasm in 20-21 appear together in 12:10-13:9
- The separation from Lot in 13:10-13 corresponds to the dismissal of Ishmael, motivated by the birth of Isaac (21:1-21)
- 13:14-18 sets up the promise that is developed and emphasized in all of 20-21.

Contrast with 12:10-13:18. Two details emphasize the promise of the land from 13c.

- In ch. 12, Abraham is driven out of Egypt. Here, he remains in Philistia (20:15), in spite of the same offense.
- There, strife over land forces separation between Abraham and Lot. Here, similar strife is resolved without forcing Abraham out of the land (21:34).

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Differences from the first account (Leupold):

	Gen 12	Gen 20
Location	Egypt	Philistia
Motive for Abraham's movement	To escape a famine	Nomadic migration (but, contrary to Leupold, food shortage might motivate such migration)
Riches given to Abraham...	...as dowry for Sarah	...as apology for the error
After the discovery:	Abraham sent out of the land	Abraham invited to stay in the land
Discovery of the error	(means not stated)	God appears in a dream to Abimelech
Abraham's response	Silence	Detailed explanation

The chapter itself is chiasmatic:

Narrative with Abraham speaking	1-2 (to Abimelech)	17-18 (to God)
Dialog	3-7 (God and Abimelech)	9-16 (Abraham and Abimelech)
Narrative	8	

### 1-2, Narrative Setting

Cf. 12:9,10. There is no mention here of famine. This appears to be normal nomadic migration, perhaps strengthened by a desire to move away from the scene of the recent judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah.

He does not go all the way to Egypt, but stays in the land. Show map.

- “Shur” (“wall”) is the northern Sinai desert adjacent to Egypt.
- “kadesh” is probably kadesh Barnea, Ain el Qudeirat, 096006
- Gerar is Tel Abu Hureireh (Tel Haror), 112087

What is important here is that he remains within the land of promise per 15:18, not crossing over “the river of Egypt” (probably one of the branches of the Nile, perhaps the one now dried up that marked the eastern border with Sinai).

Abraham continues to claim Sarah as his sister, as in 12:11-13. But note the wording in v.2, “Sarah his wife,” emphasizing the error of this claim. Why would he make the same error twice, particularly when it jeopardizes the promise of the seed that has now been made so strongly?  
Components of Abraham's error:

- Forgetfulness of God's past protection. Thus the Scriptures exhort us frequently to “bless the Lord, and forget not all his benefits.”
- Not discerning distinctions among unbelievers. Pharaoh's antagonism is very different from the inclination toward God of Abimelech.
- The letdown after the mountaintop. Ch. 18 was certainly a high point of his experience: meeting personally with the Lord, interceding for Sodom, receiving the promise of a son. In such times, it is easy to grow self-confident, and let down our dependence on the Lord. 1 Cor 10:12, “let him that thinketh he standeth, take heed lest he fall.”

### 3-7, God's Dialog with Abimelech

This dialog and the sequel show a major contrast between the pagan rules in the two episodes.

- Pharaoh shows no inclination toward God or communication with him, and is hostile toward Abraham.
- Abimelech clearly understands the fear of God.

### 3, God's Accusation

"Thou art but a dead man," lit., "Thou art dying." Cf. v.17. God had smitten him and his people with an illness, and here announces that it will be fatal if not stopped.

This emphasizes the seriousness of adultery: it is a capital offense in the OT. (Recall our discussion of capital punishment in the Bible.) This was codified in the Mosaic law in Deut 22:22, "If a man be found lying with a woman married to an husband, then they shall both of them die, *both* the man that lay with the woman, and the woman: so shalt thou put away evil from Israel." Cf. Lev. 20:10. Infidelity is not excused by "consenting adults," and is not a matter for sitcom jokes.

Why does God take this sin so seriously?

- It strikes a blow at the most fundamental structure of our society. The family is the core from which everything else is constructed. Anything that weakens it, compromises the rest as well.
- Recall our study of 1:26,27. The "likeness" of God is seen in the one-flesh relation between male and female in the family. Adultery mars that likeness, like an anarchist throwing red paint on Lincoln's statue in the Lincoln Memorial. God does not overlook such treason.

### 4-5, Abimelech's defense

Chiastic, ABBA. He characterizes himself in the outer members, while reporting the mitigating circumstances in the center.

His *excuse* (5a) is that both Abraham and Sarah had described their relation as brother and sister, not man and wife. So he claims ignorance of their true state. Note that in spite of this ignorance, the sentence of death still hangs over him. Ignorance of the law is no excuse. Sin exists at two levels.

- Our intention to rebel against God can make even superficially good works sinful.
- But even if we do not intend to rebel, doing what God has forbidden is sin.

He *characterizes himself* in three ways:

1. "A righteous nation." Lit. "The people, and a righteous one at that." Two things are interesting about this one: the term "righteous," and the inclusion of others ("nation," better "people" *goy*).

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- a. “Righteous” *tsadiq* indicates conformity to a standard. He recognizes the existence of a standard and believes that he and his nation conform to it. Thus he sees himself as “under authority.”
  - b. “The people” indicates that he realizes that his personal conduct has implications for his citizens. Empirically, he can observe that they share in his sickness (v.17). Spiritually, this situation is an example of the principle that sin has consequences for those around us; cf. Achan in Josh 7.
  - c. “Also” may be in contrast with Sodom and Gomorrah. The news of this overthrow may have reached him. They were renowned for corruption (19:4, “men of Sodom that they were”), so their judgment was not a surprise. Abimelech clearly considers himself and his people in a different category.
2. “Integrity of heart.” He has not violated his conscience. His intent has been pure.
  3. “Innocency of hands.” He has done nothing wrong. This is a weaker claim than “righteous.”

These three point out the threefold work of God in our salvation:

- Forgiveness makes us innocent; it removes the guilt of sin.
- Justification makes us righteous; it gives us God’s righteousness as a free gift.
- The HS in our heart gives us a desire to live pleasing to the Lord.

Abimelech is a good example of a moral heathen. He recognizes a moral standard and wants to think that he meets it, but without God’s help. The Lord’s response qualifies his optimism.

### **6-7, God’s Response**

Twofold: statement and command.

**Statement.**—God’s response qualifies Abimelech’s claim of righteousness.

- God acknowledges only one of the three items that Abimelech claims for himself: “integrity of heart.” He grants that Abimelech did not think he was doing wrong, but this is not the same as being either righteous or innocent. Even if we know nothing against ourselves, that does not prove that everything else is OK. Prov 21:2; 1 Cor 4:3-4.
- He points out that in the end it was God’s sovereign intervention, not any merit of Abimelech’s, that guarded him from falling into sin.

**Command.**—Having learned the true state of things, Abimelech must act in accordance with the morality he professes. God’s command points out two circumstances that a modern reader might not expect.

1. It is unexpected that in spite of his integrity, Abimelech is still at risk.

- If he does not return Sarah to Abraham, he and all his people will die. The illness that has fallen on them will grow to consume them.

Compare this warning with v.3, which is unconditional. “The inculcation of repentance is included in all threats” (Calvin), which is taught explicitly in Jer 18:1-10.

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- Simply returning Sarah is not enough to stop the disaster. Even though he has not touched Sarah, merely taking her into his harem is already an offense. He requires the intercession of a prophet to stay God's hand of judgment, and this is a role for which Abraham is qualified (cf. his intercession for Sodom in ch. 18).

This part of the discussion reveals two aspects of sin that run counter to unsaved intuition.

- Sin is objective, not subjective. It consists in the *fact* of offending against God's law, whether or not we know we have done it. Abimelech was ignorant that he was doing anything wrong, but it was still sin, and he was still under sentence of death.
- Sin is persistent: even after we have stopped doing it, our previous offense still burdens us down. The world sometimes thinks that simply stopping sinning is enough, but this does not take care of the offense that has already been committed, which must be paid for.

Thus the first unexpected circumstance is that in spite of Abimelech's clear conscience, God considers him a sinner.

2. The second unexpected circumstance is that in spite of his reprehensible conduct, God considers Abraham a prophet.

20:7 is the first occurrence of "prophet" *nabi* in the Bible, and the only occurrence in Genesis. The second occurrence, and the only one in Exodus, is Exod 7:1, describing Aaron. That reference shows the usual intent of "prophet": one who speaks to people on behalf of God. But this reference seems inverted! Note:

- It is part of the role of prophet to intercede for those to whom one gives revelation. Thus Moses (at the episode of the golden calf, Exod 32:11-13, or the return of the spies, Num 14:13-19); Samuel (at the approach of the Philistines, 1 Sam 7:8-10, or in view of their asking a king, 1 Sam 12:16-25), Jeremiah (concerning the flight to Egypt, 42:1-6), Amos (7:2,5). If God speaks to people through a man, it is reasonable for the people to expect the man to carry their concerns back to God.
- This *should* have been the pattern with Abraham, on the basis of 12:1-3. Recall our analysis of those verses as two commands, each followed by three promises. The second command is "Be thou a blessing," and is followed by the promise that God will bring blessing through him. God often appeared to him, and he should have been communicating to Abimelech (and others like him) the knowledge of God. Instead, because of Abraham's sin, here Abimelech is in the position of prophet, the one who hears from God and carries the news to Abraham.
- Still, Abraham is the chosen one. By identifying him as the prophet to Abimelech, God remedies Abraham's weakness: "He is a prophet; he should have spoken to you, but did not. So I am doing it, but he is still my chosen one." If Abraham was too fearful to do the first part of the role of a prophet (speaking for God to men), God will gently urge him to perform at least the second part (speaking for men to God). Thus we see God's incredible patience and grace with his chosen ones. We are his workmanship, created unto good works. He will bring us to that end, though it require infinite patience and chastisement, sometimes gentle, sometimes severe.

These two unexpected circumstances emphasize that while man may look on the outward appearance, God looks on the heart (1 Sam 16:7).

Ps 105:13-15 refers to this and other similar episodes in the patriarchal narratives.

## 8, Abimelech's Cabinet Meeting

This verse shows the state of Abimelech's heart: he feared God. Contrast the behavior of Lot's sons in law when they learned of impending judgment (19:14): they treated it as impending judgment. That distinction is why they were destroyed and he was not.

Both cases show the biblical approach to evangelism. People must first be confronted with their sin and called to repentance. Those in whom God is working will respond with fear; for them the news of our Lord's sacrifice is truly "good news." Those who mock are bereft of the Spirit's work, and have no claim on God's grace. We have no warrant to tell them, "God loves you."

## 9-16, Abraham and Abimelech

Chiastic: Abimelech-Abraham-Abimelech.

### 9-10, Abimelech to Abraham

The two statements stand in the relation of detail and summary.

"What sawest thou" = "What have I offended thee?" Abimelech takes a vulnerable position. Am I to blame for your deception? Please tell me.

"Thou has done this thing" = "Thou hast brought on me and on my kingdom a great sin. ... Thou hast done deeds unto me that ought not to be done."

- "Great sin" was a common designation in the ANE for adultery. Abimelech does not deny that his actions are culpable.
- Note also how he continues to recognize the broad effect of his sin: "me and my kingdom."

Abimelech chastises Abraham, while acknowledging his own offense. His rebuke is a model of how we should confront those who have wronged us.

### 11-13, Abraham to Abimelech

Abraham responds in three steps to Abimelech's rebuke. Each shows a defect in his attitude.

**11, Doubt.**—He assumed the worst of Abimelech and his people, and feared for his own safety. There are two components to his error here.

1. He jumped to an unjustified verdict when he concluded, "the fear of God is not in this place." In fact, the previous portion of the chapter shows that Abimelech and his counselors did indeed fear God. All unbelievers are unsaved, but they differ in their degree of civilization, just as all animals are non-human, but some are domesticated and others are not. Abimelech is a domesticated heathen. He recognizes the difference between right and wrong, and tries in his own strength to do what is right. Abraham should have been more discerning.
2. He did not trust God to deliver him, even if Abimelech were as bad as Abraham thought he was. He even had the evidence of God's care in Egypt (ch. 12) to reassure him, yet he persisted in his doubt.

**12-13, Prevarication.**—Abraham is dishonest at several levels.

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1. At best, Abraham is guilty of a half-truth. Even if it is true that Sarah is his wife, in the context of a king's proposal it is far more relevant whether she is his wife. He has concealed the most important piece of information.
2. But it may also be the case that the whole story about her being his sibling is made up. Certainly there is no hint of this relationship in 11:29,31, where Sarai is described, not as Terah's daughter, but as his daughter-in-law. Claiming her here as his half-sister may be a device to avoid the opprobrium of marrying a full sister.
3. In v.13, he excuses this deception to Abimelech by insisting that it has been their constant policy since leaving Haran. "I wasn't singling you out for deception; this is our standard traveling practice." If this excuse is true, it means that Abraham has been constantly deceptive in every place. But in fact, 12:11-13 dates the agreement precisely, to the point when they left Palestine for Egypt, and specifically cites the Egyptians as the threat. It is likely that he *has* singled out Abimelech.

**13, Syncretism.**—Our translation of v.13 misses an important point. Literally, Abraham says, "when the gods caused me to wander..." Since the word for "God" is grammatically plural, this is very close to what our translation suggests. The text reads, *hit(u) oti )elohim*, while our version would be a correct translation for *hit(a)*; the whole difference turns on *hit(u)* "they caused to wander" vs. *hit(a)* "he caused to wander." Our translators, like most commentators, want to go easy on Abraham, and make excuses about grammatical attraction. But it is far more likely that Abraham is so ashamed of his conduct that he cannot with good conscience present to Abimelech the great revelation of one true God of which he is the custodian. What does he have to offer Abimelech, who so outshines him morally, in the spiritual realm? He feels it would dishonor God to associate his distinctive revelation with Abraham's sin, and so he condescends to Abimelech's polytheistic view of God. He is called to be a prophet, but his sin has completely vitiated his effectiveness.

So what should Abraham have done? He would be far better off simply confessing his sin. His excuses simply mire him more and more deeply. This episode, more than any other, shows the degree to which Abraham's position is due to God's grace rather than any merit of his own.

### **14-16, Abimelech to Abraham**

Abraham made three meager excuses; Abimelech makes three gracious and generous gestures.

**14, Gifts.**—Much like the list in 12:16, but without asses or camels. Here, however, the gift is in apology for the wrong that Abimelech has done, not to entice Abraham to give up his wife.

**15, Land.**—In contrast to Pharaoh, who kicked Abraham out after his deception (12:20), Abimelech invites him to stay. We may see the hand of God in this, since here, unlike ch. 12, Abraham is in the land of promise, and God inclines the hearts of those who were there first (Mamre, Abimelech, Ephron) to make way for him.

**16, Honor.**—Several things to note:

With the thousand pieces of silver, compare the price of a slave, Exod 21:32 (30 pieces of silver), and the maximum bride price of 50 pieces of silver (Deut 22:29).

“He/it is to thee a covering of the eyes.” The pronoun probably refers to the gift, not Abraham. Cf. 32:20, where “appease” is literally “cover his face,” and Job 9:24, referring to the effect of a gift on a judge. We can reconstruct the argument:

- Sarah is in danger of being dishonored in the eyes of her household, if she is seen as responsible for being taken into Abimelech’s harem.
- By making a large gift when he returns her, Abimelech is taking the position of one who has done wrong and must make amends. Thus he is taking responsibility for the compromised position in which she found herself. The larger the gift, the more serious the offense for which he is apologizing.
- When the household (“all that are with thee”) learns of his gift, they will assign responsibility for the episode to him, not to Sarah. Thus their eyes will be covered.
- This overwhelmingly gracious act on the part of Abimelech was a reproof to Sarah for her part in the ruse (the last clause in v.16).

## 17-18, Epilog

Finally Abraham acts the part of a prophet, and intercedes successfully for Abimelech. He interceded successfully before, in ch. 18 on behalf of Sodom, but there he was alone with the Lord. This chapter shows that he was reluctant to act the prophet with unbelievers, but God is teaching him that his mission to bring blessing to all nations requires that he speak for God among all men. The Lord has graciously led him to this action by telling Abimelech that this is what must happen, and now finally we see Abraham behaving as he ought.

## Notes for ch. 21

21:14, “Abraham rose up early in the AM,” cf. 19:27 (to check on status of Lot) and 22:3 (to sacrifice Isaac).

The Ishmael episode resembles

- Sacrifice of Isaac (parent taking child away to apparent doom)
- Deception of Abimelech (God intervening with a pagan)

13, “The gods caused me to wander.”—Similar constructions in

- 31:52 (Laban to Jacob; we know that he had household gods that he valued, so this is likely polytheistic)
- 35:7, of Jacob at Bethel: “there the gods appeared to him.” The parallel in 28:12 shows that he did see a multitude of angels on the ladder, and this would appear to be the reference; for *el* for or other distinguished individuals, see Psa 82:6.
- Deut 5:23, *elohim xayyim* (but verb *midabber* is singular)
- 2 Sam 7:23, David’s prayer: “Israel, whom the gods went to redeem to himself...”
- Josh 24:19 uses plural adjective (but singular subject)