
GENESIS 20:1 Abraham travelled from there toward the land of the South, and lived between Kadesh and Shur. He lived as a foreigner in Gerar.

Abraham leaves Mamre, and, after having sojourned at Kadesh and Shur, settles in Gerar, Gen 20:1. Abimelech takes Sarah, Abraham having acknowledged her only as his sister, Gen 20:2. Abimelech is warned by God in a dream to restore Sarah, Gen 20:3. He asserts his innocence, Gen 20:4, Gen 20:5. He is farther warned, Gen 20:6, Gen 20:7. Expostulates with Abraham, Gen 20:8-10. Abraham vindicates his conduct, Gen 20:11-13. Abimelech restores Sarah, makes Abraham a present of sheep, oxen, and male and female slaves, Gen 20:14; offers him a residence in any part of the land, Gen 20:15; and reproves Sarah, Gen 20:16. At the intercession of Abraham, the curse of barrenness is removed from Abimelech and his household, Gen 20:17, Gen 20:18.

Verse 1

And Abraham journeyed - It is very likely that this holy man was so deeply affected with the melancholy prospect of the ruined cities, and not knowing what was become of his nephew Lot and his family, that he could no longer bear to dwell within sight of the place. Having, therefore, struck his tents, and sojourned for a short time at Kadesh and Shur, he fixed his habitation in Gerar, which was a city of Arabia Petraea, under a king of the Philistines called Abimelech, my father king, who appears to have been not only the father of his people, but also a righteous man.

GENESIS 20:2 Abraham said about Sarah his wife, "She is my sister." Abimelech king of Gerar sent, and took Sarah.

Verse 2

She is my sister - See the parallel account, Genesis 12 (note), and the notes there. Sarah was now about ninety years of age, and probably pregnant with Isaac. Her beauty, therefore, must have been considerably impaired since the time she was taken in a similar manner by Pharaoh, king of Egypt; but she was probably now chosen by Abimelech more on the account of forming an alliance with Abraham, who was very rich, than on account of any personal accomplishments. A petty king, such as Abimelech, would naturally be glad to form an alliance with such a powerful chief as Abraham was: we cannot but recollect his late defeat of the four confederate Canaanitish kings. See note on Gen 14:14, etc. This circumstance was sufficient to establish his credit, and cause his friendship to be courted; and what more effectual means could Abimelech use in reference to this than the taking of Sarah, who he understood was Abraham's sister, to be his concubine or second wife, which in those times had no kind of disgrace attached to it?

GENESIS 20:3 But God came to Abimelech in a dream of the night, and said to him, "Behold, you are a dead man, because of the woman whom you have taken. For she is a man's wife."

Verse 3

But God came to Abimelech - Thus we find that persons who were not of the family of Abraham had the knowledge of the true God. Indeed, all the Gerarites are termed גוי צדיק goi tsaddik, a righteous nation, Gen 20:4.

GENESIS 20:4 Now Abimelech had not come near her. He said, "Lord, will you kill even a righteous nation?"

GENESIS 20:5 Didn't he tell me, 'She is my sister?' She, even she herself, said, 'He is my brother.' In the integrity of my heart and the innocence of my hands have I done this."

Verse 5

In the integrity of my heart, etc. - Had Abimelech any other than honorable views in taking Sarah, he could not have justified himself thus to his Maker; and that these views were of the most honorable kind, God himself, to whom the appeal was made, asserts in the most direct manner, Yea, I know that thou didst this in the integrity of thy heart.

GENESIS 20:6 God said to him in the dream, "Yes, I know that in the integrity of your heart you have done this, and I also withheld you from sinning against me. Therefore I didn't allow you to touch her.

GENESIS 20:7 Now therefore, restore the man's wife. For he is a prophet, and he will pray for you, and you will live. If you don't restore her, know for sure that you will die, you, and all who are yours."

Verse 7

He is a prophet, and he shall pray for thee - The word prophet, which we have from the Greek προφητες, and which is compounded of προ, before, and φημι, I speak, means, in its general acceptation, one who speaks of things before they happen, i.e., one who foretells future events. But that this was not the original notion of the word, its use in this place sufficiently proves. Abraham certainly was not a prophet in the present general acceptation of the term, and for the Hebrew נביא nabi, we must seek some other meaning. I have, in a discourse entitled "The Christian Prophet and his Work," proved that the proper ideal meaning of the original word is to pray, entreat, make supplication, etc., and this meaning of it I have justified at large both from its application in this place, and from its pointed use in the case of Saul, mentioned 1 Samuel 10, and from the case of the priests of Baal, 1 Kings 18, where prophesying most undoubtedly means making prayer and supplication. As those who were in habits of intimacy with God by prayer and faith were found the most proper persons to communicate his mind to man, both with respect to the present and the future, hence, נביא nabi, the intercessor, became in process of time the public instructor or preacher, and also the predictor of future events, because to such faithful praying men God revealed the secret of his will. Hence St. Paul, 1Cor 14:3, seems to restrain the word wholly to the interpreting the mind of God to the people, and their instruction in Divine things, for, says he, he that prophesieth speaketh unto men to edification and exhortation and comfort. See the discourse on this text referred to above. The title was also given to men eminent for eloquence and for literary abilities; hence Aaron, because he was the spokesman of Moses to the Egyptian king, was termed

נביא nabi, prophet; Exo 4:16; Exo 7:1. And Epimenides, a heathen poet, is expressly styled προφήτης, a prophet, by St. Paul, Tit 1:12, just as poets in general were termed vates among the Romans, which properly signifies the persons who professed to interpret the will of the gods to their votaries, after prayers and sacrifices duly performed. In Arabic the word naba has nearly the same meaning as in Hebrew, but in the first conjugation it has a meaning which may cast light upon the subject in general. It signifies to itinerate, move from one place or country to another, compelled thereto either by persecution or the command of God; exivit de una regione in aliam - migrans de loco in locum - Golius. Hence Mohammed was called an nabi, because of his sudden removal from Mecca to Medina, when, pretending to a Divine commission, his townsmen sought to take away his life: e Mecca exiens Medinam, unde Muhammed suis Nabi Allah dictus fuit - Golius. If this meaning belonged originally to the Hebrew word, it will apply with great force to the case of Abraham, whose migratory, itinerant kind of life, generally under the immediate direction of God, might have given him the title nabi. However this may be, the term was a title of the highest respectability and honor, both among the Hebrews and Arabs, and continues so to this day. And from the Hebrews the word, in all the importance and dignity of its meaning, was introduced among the heathens in the προφήτης and vates of the Greeks and Romans. See note on the word seer, Gen 15:1 (note).

GENESIS 20:8 Abimelech rose early in the morning, and called all his servants, and told all these things in their ear. The men were very scared.

Verse 8

Abimelech rose early, etc. - God came to Abimelech in a dream by night, and we find as the day broke he arose, assembled his servants, (what we would call his courtiers), and communicated to them what he had received from God. They were all struck with astonishment, and discerned the hand of God in this business. Abraham is then called, and in a most respectful and pious manner the king expostulates with him for bringing him and his people under the Divine displeasure, by withholding from him the information that Sarah was his wife; when, by taking her, he sought only an honorable alliance with his family.

GENESIS 20:9 Then Abimelech called Abraham, and said to him, "What have you done to us? How have I sinned against you, that you have brought on me and on my kingdom a great sin? You have done deeds to me that ought not to be done!"

GENESIS 20:10 Abimelech said to Abraham, "What did you see, that you have done this thing?"

GENESIS 20:11 Abraham said, "Because I thought, 'Surely the fear of God is not in this place. They will kill me for my wife's sake.'

Verse 11

And Abraham said - The best excuse he could make for his conduct, which in this instance is far from defensible.

GENESIS 20:12 Besides, she is indeed my sister, the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother; and she became my wife.

Verse 12

She is my sister - I have not told a lie; I have suppressed only a part of the truth. In this place it may be proper to ask, What is a lie? It is any action done or word spoken, whether true or false in itself, which the doer or speaker wishes the observer or hearer to take in a contrary sense to that which he knows to be true. It is, in a word, any action done or speech delivered with the intention to deceive, though both may be absolutely true and right in themselves. See note on Gen 12:13.

The daughter of my father, but not - of my mother - Ebn Batrick, in his annals, among other ancient traditions has preserved the following: "Terah first married Yona, by whom he had Abraham; afterwards he married Tehevita, by whom he had Sarah." Thus she was the sister of Abraham, being the daughter of the same father by a different mother.

GENESIS 20:13 When God caused me to wander from my father's house, I said to her, 'This is your kindness which you shall show to me. Everywhere that we go, say of me, "He is my brother."'"

Verse 13

When God caused me to wander - Here the word אלהים Elohim is used with a plural verb, (התעו hithu, caused me to wander), which is not very usual in the Hebrew language, as this plural noun is generally joined with verbs in the singular number. Because there is a departure from the general mode in this instance, some have contended that the word Elohim signifies princes in this place, and suppose it to refer to those in Chaldea, who expelled Abraham because he would not worship the fire; but the best critics, and with them the Jews, allow that Elohim here signifies the true God. Abraham probably refers to his first call.

GENESIS 20:14 Abimelech took sheep and cattle, male servants and female servants, and gave them to Abraham, and restored Sarah, his wife, to him.

GENESIS 20:15 Abimelech said, "Behold, my land is before you. Dwell where it pleases you."

GENESIS 20:16 To Sarah he said, "Behold, I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver. Behold, it is for you a covering of the eyes to all that are with you. In front of all you are vindicated."

Verse 16

And unto Sarah he said - But what did he say? Here there is scarcely any agreement among interpreters; the Hebrew is exceedingly obscure, and every interpreter takes it in his own sense.

A thousand pieces of silver - Shekels are very probably meant here, and so the Targum understands it. The Septuagint has χιλια διδραχμα, a thousand didrachma, no doubt meaning shekels; for in Gen 23:15, Gen 23:16, this translation uses διδραχμα for the Hebrew שקל shekel. As shakal signifies

literally to weigh, and the shekel was a coin of such a weight, Mr. Ainsworth and others think this to be the origin of our word scale, the instrument to weigh with.

The shekel of the sanctuary weighed twenty gerahs, Exo 30:13. And according to the Jews, the gerah weighed sixteen grains of barley. R. Maimon observes, that after the captivity the shekel was increased to three hundred and eighty-four grains or barley-corns. On the subject of ancient weights and measures, very little that is satisfactory is known.

Behold, he is to thee a covering of the eyes - It - the one thousand shekels, (not he - Abraham), is to thee for a covering - to procure thee a veil to conceal thy beauty (unto all that are with thee, and with all other) from all thy own kindred and acquaintance, and from all strangers, that none, seeing thou art another mans wife; may covet thee on account of thy comeliness.

Thus she was reproved - The original is ונכחת venochachath, but the word is probably the second person preterite, used for the imperative mood, from the root נכח nachach, to make straight, direct, right; or to speak rightly, correctly; and may, in connection with the rest of the text, be thus paraphrased: Behold, I have given thy Brother (Abraham, gently alluding to the equivocation, Gen 20:2, Gen 20:5) a thousand shekels of silver; behold, It is (that is, the silver is, or may be, or let it be) to thee a covering of the eyes (to procure a veil; see above) with regard to all those who are with thee; and to all (or and in all) speak thou the truth. Correctly translated by the Septuagint, και παντα αληθευσσον, and in all things speak the truth - not only tell a part of the truth, but tell the whole; say not merely he is my brother, but say also, he is my husband too. Thus in All things speak the truth. I believe the above to be the sense of this difficult passage, and shall not puzzle my readers with criticisms. See Kennicott.

GENESIS 20:17 Abraham prayed to God. God healed Abimelech, and his wife, and his female servants, and they bore children.

Verse 17

So Abraham prayed - This was the prime office of the נביא nabi; see Gen 20:7.

GENESIS 20:18 For the LORD had closed up tight all the wombs of the house of Abimelech, because of Sarah, Abraham's wife.

Verse 18

For the Lord had fast closed up all the wombs - Probably by means of some disease with which he had smitten them, hence it is said they were healed at Abraham's intercession; and this seems necessarily to imply that they had been afflicted by some disease that rendered it impossible for them to have children till it was removed. And possibly this disease, as Dr. Dodd conjectures, had afflicted Abimelech, and by this he was withheld, Gen 20:6, from defiling Abraham's bed.

1. On the prevarication of Abraham and Sarah, see the notes and concluding observations on Genesis 12 (note); (See note Gen 12:20) and while we pity this weakness, let us take it as a warning.

2. The cause why the patriarch did not acknowledge Sarah as his wife, was a fear lest he should lose his life on her account, for he said, Surely the fear, i.e., the true worship, of the true God is not in this place. Such is the natural bigotry and narrowness of the human heart, that we can scarcely allow that any besides ourselves possess the true religion. To indulge a disposition of this kind is highly blamable. The true religion is neither confined to one spot nor to one people; it is spread in various forms over the whole earth. He who fills immensity has left a record of himself in every nation and among every people under heaven. Beware of the spirit of intolerance! for bigotry produces uncharitableness; and uncharitableness, harsh judging; and in such a spirit a man may think he does God service when he tortures, or makes a burnt-offering of the person whom his narrow mind and hard heart have dishonored with the name of heretic. Such a spirit is not confined to any one community, though it has predominated in some more than in others. But these things are highly displeasing in the sight of God. He, as the Father of the spirits of all flesh, loves every branch of his vastly extended family; and as far as we love one another, no matter of what sect of party, so far we resemble Him. Had Abraham possessed more charity for man and confidence in God at this time, he had not fallen into that snare from which he barely escaped. A hasty judgment is generally both erroneous and harsh; and those who are the most apt to form it are generally the most difficult to be convinced of the truth.