

CHAPTER 20

INTRODUCTION TO GENESIS 20

This chapter relates the removal of Abraham to Gerar, (~~0201~~Genesis 20:1); the king of Gerar's taking to him Sarah, whom Abraham had called his sister, (~~0202~~Genesis 20:2); who is rebuked of God for it in a dream, (~~0203~~Genesis 20:3); for which he makes an apology that is admitted, only he is ordered to restore to Abraham his wife, (~~0204~~Genesis 20:4-7); and accordingly early in the morning he called his servants, and acquainted them with what had happened, (~~0205~~Genesis 20:8); and then sent for Abraham, and expressed his resentment at his usage of him, (~~0206~~Genesis 20:9); which Abraham defended as well as he could, (~~0207~~Genesis 20:10-13); the issue of all which was, great kindness was shown to Abraham, and his wife restored to him, though with a reproof to her from the king, (~~0208~~Genesis 20:14-16); upon which Abraham prayed for the healing of Abimelech and his family, in which he was heard and answered, (~~0209~~Genesis 20:17,18).

Ver. 1. *And Abraham journeyed from thence towards the south country,* etc.] He returned from the plains or oaks of Mamre, where he had lived fifteen or twenty years, into the more southern parts of the land of Canaan: the reason of this remove is not certain; some think, because he could not bear the stench of the sulphurous lake, the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were become; and others, because of the scandal of Lot's incest with his daughters, which prejudiced the idolatrous people in those parts more against the true religion; neither of which are likely, by reason of the distance; but the better reason seems to be, that it was so ordered in Providence that he should remove from place to place, that it might appear that he was but a sojourner in the land:

and dwelt between Kadesh and Shur; two wildernesses, as Jerom says ^{f1196}, one of which joined to Egypt, to which the people of Israel went when they passed over the Red sea, and the other, Kadesh, reached to the desert of the Saracens. Onkelos and Jonathan paraphrase the words between Rekam and Chagra, or Hagra, the same place where the angel of the Lord met

with Hagar at the well, (see Gill on “⁻⁰¹⁶⁷Genesis 16:7”) and (see Gill on “⁻⁰¹⁶⁴Genesis 16:14”):

and sojourned in Gerar; or Gerara, as Jerom ^{f1197} calls it,

“from whence he says the Geraritic country in his time beyond Daroma, or the south, had its name, and was twenty five miles distance from Eleutheropolis to the south, and was formerly the southern border of the Canaanites, and the metropolis of Palestine.”

According to the Samaritan version, Gerar is the same with Ashkelon, which was afterwards, when aristocracy took place in this country, one of the five lordships of the Philistines; and so says Africanus ^{f1198}; and that Gerar was in the country of the Philistines, and Abimelech was king of them, is clear from (⁻⁰²¹³Genesis 21:32 26:1). This place was about six miles from Mamre ^{f1199}, from whence Abraham removed.

Ver. 2. *And Abraham said of Sarah his wife, she [is] my sister*, etc.] This he gave out in all conversation he came into, and said it to every one that asked who she was, which was little better than a lie; it at least was an equivocation and deception, and not at all justifiable, and tended to expose his wife’s chastity, and discovered a distrust of divine Providence; the same infirmity he had given way to, and the same evil he had fallen into in Egypt, (⁻⁰¹²¹Genesis 12:11-20), and therefore was the more inexcusable now; good men not only fall into sin, but have their relapses:

and Abimelech king of Gerar sent and took Sarah; having heard or seen what a beautiful woman. Sarah was, though ninety years of age, having never bore children; and understanding she was a single person, sent his servants to take her, and bring her to his house, in order to be his wife, which seems to be done with some kind of force; and it can hardly be thought that Abraham and Sarah would freely agree to it, at least it must be done with reluctance on their parts. Whether Abimelech was the first king of Palestine of this name, is not certain; if he was, which is not improbable, it became usual afterwards for the kings thereof to be so called, as Pharaoh was a common name to the kings of Egypt; it signifies “father” and “king”, as kings should be the fathers of their people.

Ver. 3. *But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night*, etc.] Put a dream into his mind, by which he cautioned him against taking Sarah to be his wife; so careful was the Lord that no wrong should be done to such a godly and virtuous person, to which she was exposed through the

weakness of her husband. Aben Ezra wrongly interprets this of an angel, when it was God himself:

and said unto him, behold, thou [art but] a dead man, for the woman which thou hast taken; that is, God would punish him with death, unless he restored the woman, whom he had taken, to her husband; not for any uncleanness he had committed with her, but for taking her without her free and full consent, and without inquiring more strictly into her relation to Abraham, and connection with him, and for his impure and unlawful desires after her, if persisted in:

for she [is] a man's wife, or “married to an husband”^{f1200}; and therefore it was unlawful in him to take her to be his wife.

Ver. 4. *But Abimelech had not come near her*, etc.] Sarah had been put into an apartment in his palace, and not yet admitted into his company, not at least to his bed; he had not lain with her, which is the design of the expression: the Septuagint version is, “had not touched her”, as in (^{Q116}Genesis 20:6); which is another phrase expressive of the same thing:

and he said, Lord, wilt thou slay also a righteous nation? meaning either his family, the greater part of which were not accessory to this affair; or rather his kingdom, as Aben Ezra, (see ^{Q119}Genesis 20:9); which though not a nation of righteous men, in a strict sense, (see ^{Q121}Genesis 20:11); yet with regard to this business of Sarah were no ways criminal: either God had threatened to destroy his people, as well as himself, if he did not return Sarah to her husband, or committed iniquity with her; or he knew that this had been usual for people to suffer for the crimes of their governors, and like a true father of his country shows an affectionate concern for their welfare in the first place; for this may be the sense of the word “also”, on which an emphasis is put; wilt thou not only slay me, but also a whole nation for my sake, a nation free from all fault and blame in this matter? though some think he has reference to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, a recent action, and fresh in his mind; as if he should say, thou hast justly destroyed a wicked people for their sins, and wilt thou also destroy a nation that at least, in comparison of them, is a just and righteous one?

Ver. 5. *Said he not unto me, she [is] my sister?* etc.] By this it appears, that Abimelech had a personal conversation with Abraham, and inquired of him about Sarah, who she was, and what relation she was to him, who told

him that she was his sister; and for the truth of this he appeals to the omniscient God, who knew that Abraham had told him this:

and she, even she herself said, he [is] my brother; when Sarah was asked what relation she stood in to Abraham, and he to her, she declared he was her brother; so that Abimelech had reason to conclude, from what both of them had said, that this was the truth of the matter, and especially from what Sarah said, who he thought might be depended on, and would speak out the whole truth on such an occasion:

in the integrity of my heart, and innocency of my hands, have I done this; hereby declaring, that his design was not to defile the woman, and to gratify his lust, but to take her to be his wife; and this he thought to be no evil, though he had a wife, (^{<4017>}Genesis 20:17); polygamy not being reckoned a sin in those times; and that he had used no violence in taking her, they both seemingly agreeing to it.

Ver. 6. *And God said unto him in a dream*, etc.] The same dream continued:

yea, or “also”

I know that thou didst this in the integrity of thy heart; not only thou knowest, but I, who know all things, know and acknowledge that this was so done by thee. Abimelech’s plea is admitted, and a very great testimony borne to his integrity in this matter; and throughout the whole account he appears to be a man of great honour and uprightness, especially in this affair, if not a good man:

for I also withheld thee from sinning against me; for had he committed adultery with her, it had been not only a sin against her, and against her husband, but against God being contrary to his will revealed in the minds of men by the law and light of nature, before the law of Moses was given: and indeed all sin against the neighbour is ultimately against God, (see ^{<4504>}Psalm 51:4); and now from the commission of this sin God restrained Abimelech, either by some impulse upon his mind not to take her to be his wife as yet, or by throwing some thing or other in the way of it, in his providence, or by inflicting some disease upon him, which rendered him incapable of it, (^{<4017>}Genesis 20:17);

therefore suffered I thee not to touch her; that is, to have carnal knowledge of her, (see ^{<4100>}1 Corinthians 7:1); as there is nothing done but what is

done by divine permission, so many more evils would be committed than there are, were it not that men are restrained from them by the power and providence of God, not suffering them to do them; and in particular this sin was prevented, that it might not in any respect be a doubtful point whether Isaac, whom Sarah had now conceived, was a legitimate son of Abraham; and these expressions of Abimelech not coming near her, (^{<0104>}Genesis 20:4); and not touching her as here, are used for that purpose.

Ver. 7. *Now therefore restore the man [his] wife*, etc.] Which will be a full proof and evidence to all of the integrity of thy heart, and the innocence of thine hands, which thou pleadest, and which I own:

for he [is] a prophet; familiar with God, dear unto him, a friend of his, to whom he communicates his secrets; is able to foretell things to come, as well as to interpret the mind of God, and instruct in the knowledge of divine things, all which agrees with Abraham's character; and he is the first man that is dignified in Scripture with the title of a prophet; so he is called in the Apocrypha:

“Beware of all whoredom, my son, and chiefly take a wife of the seed of thy fathers, and take not a strange woman to wife, which is not of thy father's tribe: for we are the children of the prophets, Noe, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob: remember, my son, that our fathers from the beginning, even that they all married wives of their own kindred, and were blessed in their children, and their seed shall inherit the land.” (Tobit 4:12)

Jarchi thinks this is observed to encourage Abimelech to return his wife to him, because being a prophet he knew he had not touched her, and therefore would receive her more readily, and entertain no ill opinion of her; but rather it is mentioned for the reason following:

and he shall pray for thee, and thou shalt live; it being one part of the business of a prophet to pray for others, and make intercession for them, especially in any distress or trouble, (see ^{<2718>}Jeremiah 27:18). Prophets were praying persons, had usually a great gift in prayer, and great power with God, and prevailed with him for the good of others; and such an one was Abraham; and it is here intimated, that upon the restoration of his wife to him, as he was familiar with God, and had an interest with him, he would make use of it, and pray for Abimelech, that whatsoever offence he had been guilty of to God or men, it might be forgiven, and that he might

be healed of the disease with which he was smitten, and so recover of it, and live in health and happiness:

and if thou restore [her] not, know thou, that thou shalt surely die, thou, and all that [are] thine: if he proceeded to take her to be his wife, and defile her, he is strongly assured that he should die, death being the punishment for adultery before the law of Moses, (see ~~1331~~ Genesis 38:24); and not only he, but all his family, especially such who had been, or would be accessory to this affair, and even all who might he justly punished of God for other sins they had committed; and Abimelech being punished, both in his own person, and in his servants and subjects, the greater his punishment was, the greater abhorrence and detestation was shown to the sin he would be guilty of, to deter him from which this threatening is given out.

Ver. 8. *Therefore Abimelech rose early in the morning,* etc.] Awaking upon the dream, could sleep no more, his thoughts running upon what had been said to him by the Lord in it: wherefore as soon as it was light he rose from his bed,

and called all his servants; his household servants, and particularly his courtiers and counsellors, who had advised him to take Sarah for his wife, and had been assisting in it:

and told all those things in their ears: how that God appeared to him in a dream, and told him that Sarah, whom he had taken into his house, was another man's wife, and that if he did not immediately return her to her husband, he would die, and all that belonged to him:

and the men were sore afraid; lest they should be struck with death; and perhaps they might call to mind the burning of Sodom and Gomorrah for their sins, they had lately heard of, and might fear that some such calamity would befall them.

Ver. 9. *Then Abimelech called Abraham,* etc.] Who might be in the king's palace, being taken into it caressed by the king for the sake of Sarah:

and said unto him; not in a passion, as might have been expected, but in a mild and gentle manner, yet with great strength of reasoning, and making very just expostulations with him:

what hast thou done unto us? what evil to him, his family, and his subjects? this was very probably said in the presence of his servants he had called, and therefore the plural number is used:

and what have I offended thee, that thou hast brought on me, and on my kingdom, a great sin? the sin of adultery, he had been in danger of committing, which by the light of nature was known and acknowledged to be a great sin, and therefore was avoided by Heathens, and prohibited and punished by them; or else a “great punishment”^{f1201}, as death to him, and all his subjects: and now Abimelech expostulates with him, and desires to know what he had done to incur his displeasure, that he should take such a method as this to avenge himself of him; he plainly intimates that he was not conscious to himself that he had done any thing to offend him; he had suffered him to come into his kingdom, and sojourn in it, and used him well, and in no instance, as he knew of, had done anything to affront him:

thou hast done deeds unto me that ought not to be done; in saying Sarah was his sister, and persuading her to say the same, and so virtually disowning his marriage with her, equivocating in this affair, and dissembling truth, and thereby exposing the chastity of his wife, and the king to the commission of sin with her; things that ought not to be done by any man, and much less by a man professing religion and godliness.

Ver. 10. *And Abimelech said unto Abraham,* etc.] Continuing his discourse with him:

what sawest thou, that thou hast done this thing? he desires to know what he had observed, either in him or his people, that gave him any reason to conclude that they were a lustful people, and would stick at nothing to gratify their lusts, which put him upon taking such a method to secure his life, lest they should kill him for his wife’s sake.

Ver. 11. *And Abraham said,* etc.] In defence of himself, as well as he could:

because I thought; within himself, concluding from the general depravity of the Canaanites, that this was the case of the inhabitants of Gerar:

surely the fear of God [is] not in this place; this is a certain truth, which he thought might be depended upon, and taken for granted, since so it was everywhere: or “only”^{f1202}, as the word used signifies; this was the only thing he had to plead, that he verily thought with himself that there was no

true religion and godliness in Gerar: that the inhabitants of it were without any fear of God before their eyes, or in their hearts; and he knew, where this is the case, there is nothing to restrain from the commission of the grossest sins:

and they will slay me for my wife's sake; that they might marry her, (see ^{<1122>}Genesis 12:12).

Ver. 12. *And yet indeed [she is] my sister*, etc.] In the same sense as Lot was his brother; for she was sister to Lot, and both were the children of Haran, the brother of Abraham:

she [is] the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother; she was the daughter of his father, being his granddaughter, grandchildren are sometimes called children, but not the daughter or granddaughter of Abraham's mother; Terah having had two wives, by the one he had Haran, the father of Sarah, and by the other Abraham. According to the Arabic writers ^{f1203}, Abraham and Sarah were the immediate children of Terah, but by two mothers:

“the mother of Abraham (they say) died, whose name was Juna, and Terah married another wife, whose name was Lahazib, some say Tahuitha, who bore him Sarah, afterwards married to Abraham; hence Abraham said, she is my sister on my father's side, but not on my mother's side:”

and she became my wife; as in those times it was judged lawful, and so it has been accounted lawful in many nations to marry sisters on the father's side, when those on the mother's were prohibited ^{f1204}.

Ver. 13. *And it came to pass, when God caused me to wander from my father's house*, etc.] In Ur of the Chaldees, from whence God called him to go forth; which laid him under an obligation to depart from thence, and move from place to place, and so he knew not where, as in (^{<8108>}Hebrews 11:8); or “the Gods”, as it is in the plural number, and so the verb in construction with it; not the idol gods, the gods of the Gentiles, as the Targum of Jonathan, who interprets the words thus,

“and it was when the worshippers of idols sought to cause men to err, and I went from my father's house;”

but the true God, as Jarchi, Aben Ezra, and Ben Melech acknowledge, and is by many Christian interpreters understood of the three Persons in the Godhead:

that I said unto her, this [is] thy kindness which thou shalt show unto me; this I shall take as a favour done me, as an instance of tender affection unto me:

at every place whither we shall come, say of me; or for the sake of me, as Aben Ezra and Kimchi, in order to save me from the hands of wicked men, whom he feared would slay him for her sake:

he [is] my brother; and so he hoped, instead of being ill used, he should meet with favour and friendship on her account, being thus nearly related to her: this he observes to Abimelech, to show that this was an old agreement, near thirty years ago, when they first set out on their travels, and was no new device and scheme which they pursued on account of him and his people in particular; but what they had formerly agreed upon should be said in all places wherever they came, and therefore there was no intention to affront Abimelech; only it supposed they might come into places where wicked men dwelt.

Ver. 14. *And Abimelech took sheep, and oxen, and menservants, and womenservants, and gave [them] unto Abraham,* etc.] In a good measure satisfied with what Abraham had said to excuse himself; and these gifts he gave unto him, that he might, as Jarchi observes, pray and intercede for him, that he and his family might be healed, having understood by the divine oracle that he was a prophet, and if he prayed for him he would be restored to health: and these were not given to bribe him to give his consent that Sarah might be continued with him, since it follows,

and restored him Sarah his wife; untouched by him, as he was directed by God to do.

Ver. 15. *And Abimelech said, behold, my whole land [is] before thee,* etc.] Instead of bidding him be gone, and sending him away in haste out of his country, as the king of Egypt did in a like case, he solicits his stay in it; and to encourage him to it, makes an offer of his whole kingdom to him, to choose which part of it he would to dwell in:

dwelt where it pleaseth thee; if there was anyone part of it better than another, or more convenient for him, his family and his flocks, he was welcome to it.

Ver. 16. *And unto Sarah he said, behold, I have given thy brother a thousand [pieces] of silver*, etc.] Or shekels of silver, as the Targums of Jonathan and Jerusalem, which, if two shillings and sixpence of our money, amount to one hundred and twenty five pounds; though perhaps little pieces of silver, current in this country, may be meant, that were not worth so much. Some think that the sheep, oxen, etc. Abimelech had given to Abraham, were worth so many pieces of silver: but it rather seems that he gave these over and above them, and chiefly for Sarah's use, as will be observed hereafter; since the words are directed to her, and in which there is a sharp cutting expression, calling Abraham her brother, and not her husband, thereby putting her in mind and upbraiding her with her equivocation and dissimulation:

behold, he [is] to thee a covering of the eyes, unto all that [are] with thee; a protection of her person and chastity: so an husband, in our language, is said to be a cover to his wife, and she under a cover: thus Abraham being now known to be the husband of Sarah, would for the future be a covering to her, that no one should look upon her, and desire her, and take her to be his wife; and he would also be a protection to her maidens that were with her, the wives of his servants, that these also might not be taken from him: but it seems best to refer this to the gift of the thousand pieces of silver, and read the words, "behold, this is to thee ^{f1205} a covering of the eyes"; so the Targums of Jonathan and Jerusalem; for the words are a continued biting sarcasm on Sarah; as Abimelech twits her with calling Abraham her brother in the preceding clause, so in this he tells her that he had given him so much money to buy her a veil with, and to supply her with veils from time to time to cover her eyes, that nobody might be tempted to lust after her, and that it might be known she was a married woman; for in these countries married women wore veils for distinction, (⁽¹²⁴⁵⁾Genesis 24:65); and so not to be had by another, nor would any be deceived by her; and not only was this money given to buy veils for her, but for her female servants also that were married, that they might be known to be another's property; though this latter phrase "unto", or "with all that [are] with thee" ^{f1206}, may be understood, not of persons, but of things, even of all the girls which Abimelech had given her while in his house; these he did not, take back

again, but continued them with her, either for the above use, or whatever she pleased; and the following phrase,

and with all [other], as we render it, making a considerable stop, should, according to the accents, be read with what follows thus, “and with all this was she reprov’d”^{f1207}; so Aben Ezra; and so they are the words of Moses, observing, that by and with all this that Abimelech had said and done,

thus she was reprov’d; Sarah was reprov’d for saying that Abraham was her brother: or the words may be rendered thus, “and so before all she was reprov’d”^{f1208}; before her husband, and before Abimelech’s courtiers, and perhaps before her own servants; though Ainsworth, and others, take them to be the words of Abimelech, and render them, “and all that”, or “all this is that thou mayest be rebuked”^{f1209}, or instructed; all that I have said and done is for this end, that thou mayest be warned and be careful for the future to speak out truth, without any equivocation, and not call Abraham thy brother, when he is thy husband.

Ver. 17. *So Abraham prayed unto God*, etc.] As the Lord had told Abimelech he would, (^{QMT}Genesis 20:7); he might pray for the forgiveness of him and his wife, and might give thanks that Sarah had been restored to him; but chiefly it was on account of Abimelech and his family:

and God healed Abimelech, and his wife, and his maidservants: who by reason of some disease were rendered unfit for and incapable of cohabitation with their husbands, and they with them; but upon Abraham’s prayer for them, who was heard, they were healed, and the disorder removed; the Targum of Jonathan is,

“his wife and concubines;”

and they bare [children]; cohabited and conceived, and bare and brought forth children, all which are comprehended in this expression.

Ver. 18. *For the Lord had fast closed up all the wombs of the house of Abimelech*, etc.] With large tumours probably, so that they could not cohabit with their husbands and conceive; nor could those that had conceived bring forth: and this disorder they were smitten with, because of Sarah Abraham’s wife; who was taken into the house of Abimelech, in order to be his; to rebuke and punish for which, and to convince of the evil of it, and cause to abstain from it, this disorder was inflicted on them.