

The Book of Genesis

Chapter 20

20:1 Abraham journeyed by stages from there into the Negeb [NIV: "Negev"], and settled between Kadesh and Shur, living as an alien in Gerar. (REB)

Abraham's Residence

Abraham left the area of the land of the Amorites and moved into the area of the Philistines.

Gerar had sufficient water for crops and grazing, so Abraham used that city as his base camp. Yet, Kadesh and Shur, where he lived a large part of the time, were in a desert wilderness. The only possible reason to spend time in that area would be to meet the caravans coming out of Egypt. By intercepting them early, he had the advantage of purchasing the best goods, which he took back to Canaan and received top price.

20:2 and there Abraham said of his wife Sarah, "She is my sister." Then Abimelech king of Gerar sent for Sarah and took her. (NIV)

Sarah and Abimelech

Abraham had done the same thing 24 years earlier to the Pharaoh of Egypt. Sarah was still a very beautiful woman at age 90.

20:3 But God came to Abimelech in a dream one night [NKJ,TAN, NRS: "by night"] and said to him, "You are as good as dead because of the woman you have taken; she is a married woman." (NIV)

20:4 Abimelech, who had not gone near her, protested, 'Lord, will you destroy people who are innocent?' (REB)

This is the same argument Abraham made when discussing the destruction of Sodom. Abimelech's response shows he had some sense of morality.

20:5-6 Did he not say to me, 'She is my sister,' and didn't she also say, 'He is my brother'? I have done this with a clear conscience and clean hands." Then God said to him in the dream, "Yes, I know you did this with a clear conscience, and so I have kept you from sinning against Me. That is why I did not let you touch her. (NIV)

When God told Abimelech He kept him from sinning against Him, we are given the evidence of a moral code which was known to humanity prior to the giving of the law at Mt. Sinai. Although Abimelech had not touched Sarah, his intentions were not to keep away from her. God indicates that He supernaturally prevented any contact by afflicting Abimelech with some type of physical ailment, as vs 17 implies.

20:7 Now return the man's wife, for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you and you will live. But if you do not return her, you may be sure that you and all yours will die." (NIV)

This is the first and only mention of Abraham being a prophet. God overlooks Abraham's deceit, and by requiring Abraham to pray for Abimelech, shows that His prophet is without fault before Him.

20:8-11 Early the next morning Abimelech summoned all his officials, and when he told them all that had happened, they were very much afraid. Then Abimelech called Abraham in and said, "What have you done to us? How have I wronged you that you have brought such great guilt [NKJ, REB: "great sin"] upon me and my kingdom? You have done things to me that should not be done." And Abimelech asked Abraham, "What was your reason for doing this?" Abraham replied, "I said to myself, 'There is surely no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife.'" (NIV)

Canaanite gods

The Canaanites thought that the gods they worshipped were confined to certain localities. The term they used for each god was "Baal," but when they worshipped that god, it was called "Baal of such-and-such a place." When Abraham came to Gerar, he knew that the Philistines did not know "El Shaddai" and would not have had any fear of the God they did not know.

20:12 Besides, she really is my sister, the daughter of my father though not of my mother; and she became my wife. (NIV)

Abraham's Defense

Abraham states that he was truthful in what he actually said, even though his intent was obviously deceitful.

20:13 When God set me wandering from my father's house, I said to her, "There is a duty towards me which you must loyally fulfil: wherever we go, you must say that I am your brother."(REB)

Abraham and Sarah

This gives some insight into the relationship that existed between Abraham and Sarah. Peter tells us that Sarah showed respect toward her husband and yielded to his decisions: "Even as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord"(1PE 3:5-6).

20:14-15 Then Abimelech brought sheep and cattle and male and female slaves and gave them to Abraham, and he returned Sarah his wife to him. And Abimelech said, "My land is before you; live wherever you like."(NIV)

Abimelech's Decision

This reaction was quite different than that of Pharaoh, who sent Abraham out of Egypt after discovering the truth.

20:16-17 To Sarah he said, "I am giving your brother a thousand shekels of silver. This is to cover the offense against you before all who are with you; you are completely vindicated [MOF: "in the eyes of all men your honour is cleared"]." Then Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech, his wife and his slave girls so they could have children again, (NIV)

God's Intervention

Since God healed Abimelech, He must have afflicted him in some way. Since God says it was He who prevented Abimelech from touching Sarah, we can conclude that had God not struck him, Sarah would have been defiled.

20:18 for the LORD had made every woman in Abimelech's household barren on account of Sarah, Abraham's wife. (REB)