

THE FIRST BOOK OF MOSES CALLED GENESIS

GENESIS CHAPTER 20

VERSES TAKEN FROM "THE TANAKH. THE JEWISH BIBLE."

20:1...Abraham journeyed there to the region of the Negeb and settled between Kadesh and Shur. While he was sojourning in Gehar,

20:2...Abraham said of Sarah his wife, "She is my sister." So, King Abimelech of Gerah had Sarah brought to him.

As in Egypt, Abraham was apparently afraid that if the reigning power in the region through which he was passing knew Sarah was his wife, he would be killed so that the ruler could take Sarah into his harem. To save his life, he again represented his wife Sarah as his sister.

20:3...But God said to Abimelech in a dream by night and said to him, "You are to die because of the woman that you have taken, for she is a married woman."

The Torah relates Abimelech saw God in a night-time dream perhaps to distinguish his encounter with God from that of Abraham, who saw God more directly in visions during waking hours. On the other hand, as Robert Alter states in his book, "Genesis," "This potentate (Abimelech) is immediately given a higher moral status than Pharoah in Chapter 12. To Pharoah God speaks only through plagues, whereas Abimelech is accorded a direct address from God in a night-vision."

God's statement, which literally reads, "she is married to a man," implies Abimelech would have taken Sarah had God not intervened.

20:4...Now Abimelech had not approached her. He said, "O Lord, will You slay people even though innocent?"

The Hebrew reads, “O, Lord, will you slay a “goy” even though righteous?”

The word “goy” means “nation,” not “non-Jew,” as it came to be used much later in Jewish life. Thus, in the Torah, “goy” refers to the Jewish nation as well as to the non-Jewish nations. Exodus 19:6, for example, commands Israel to be “a holy ‘goy.’”

Abimelech pleaded he was innocent—he would not have taken Sarah if he knew she was married. Just as Abraham in the case of Sodom, (Genesis 18:25) Abimelech argued with God by appealing to God’s universal moral standards.

20:5...He himself said to me, “She is my sister!” And she also said, ‘He is my brother.’ When I did this, my heart was blameless and my hands were clean.”

Abimelech responded to God accurately, Abraham and Sarah lied to him about their relationship.

He offered an honest plea to God and defended himself, though his words sound somewhat self-serving. If he was so innocent, why did he take Sarah without her consent? On the other hand, a king’s taking women he wanted was so common in the ancient and medieval worlds, we should judge him according to the moral norms of his day. Example, think about Noah being righteous...”in his generations.” (Genesis 6:9)

20:6...And God said to him in the dream, “I knew that you did this with a blameless heart, and so I kept you from sinning against Me. That is why I did not let you touch her.”

God did not specify how He prevented Abimelech from being intimate with Sarah. It probably was not the dream that deterred Abimelech since that would likely have taken place while asleep after having relations with her. We can therefore assume God did something physical to him to prevent Abimelech from being physically intimate with her.

God described adultery as a sin against “Me,” (God) not against the woman’s husband. (Abraham) This is the first iteration of the Torah view that adultery is a sin against God, not only against one’s spouse. (See Genesis 39:9)

20:7...Therefore, restore the man’s wife—since he is a prophet,

The Hebrew word translated as “prophet,” (navi) is more accurately translated “spokesperson.” The Biblical “prophet” was a spokesperson—a mouthpiece—for God. Biblical prophets only rarely prophesied in the sense of telling the future. (for example, Jeremiah 30:1-3)

This is the first mention of this term in the Bible, and its only mention in Genesis.

20:7 (Cont.) ...he will intercede for you—to save your life.

This prayer—asking a wronged party (Abraham) to pray that God forgive the person who wronged him (Abimelech) —is the first mention in the Bible of a prayer offered by one person on behalf of another. Abimelech will be forgiven if Abraham prays on his behalf.

20:7 (Cont.) ...If you fail to restore her, know that you shall die, you and all that are yours.”

20:8...Early next morning, Abimelech called his servants and told them all that had happened, and the men were greatly frightened.

“The men were greatly frightened”—of whom? Presumably, God, not Abimelech. They recognized God as the source of the dream—a God with the power to impose grave consequences for sin and disobedience.

20:9...Then Abimelech summoned Abraham and said to him, “What have you done to us? What wrong have I done that you should bring so great a guilt upon me and my kingdom? You have done to me things that ought not to be done.

20:10...” What, then, “Abimelech demanded of Abraham, “was your purpose in doing this thing?”

Abimelech faulted Abraham for causing him to sin. Abimelech had a point. He was annoyed that Abraham's (and Sarah's) lie misled him and put him in this dangerous position.

20:11... "I thought," said Abraham, "surely there is no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife."

Not all Jewish religious commentators found Abraham's argument convincing. Nachmanides, (Hebrew, Ramban) for example, questioned Abraham for immediately making this assumption. According to Nachmanides, Abraham should not have been suspicious of the king and people because Gerar was not Egypt.

I myself find Abraham's argument persuasive. He knew how people acted in his time, especially in a place where there was no fear of God, especially toward strangers, and especially toward unmarried women.

GOD-FEARING IS A MORAL LABEL AND CAN APPLY TO PEOPLE OUTSIDE OF ONE'S OWN FAITH.

By implication, Abraham acknowledged there can be good, God-fearing people outside of one's own religious group. This is an important lesson for people of all faiths. When that happens, we can begin to do as the Prophet Micah instructs, "Walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8)

For much of Western history, decent men and women were often referred to as "God-fearing." It was a great compliment. But in our secular age, the term is almost never used.

Even Voltaire, (1694-1778) an enthusiastic atheist and the godfather of the aggressively French Enlightenment, acknowledged: "I want my lawyer, my tailor, my servants, and even my wife to believe in God because it means that I shall be cheated, and robbed, and cuckolded less often. If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him."

20:12...And besides, she is in truth my sister, my father's daughter though not my mother's, and she became my wife.

Abraham's argument here is pretty weak. Sarah was indeed his half-sister but, failing to acknowledge that she was also his wife made this a half-truth. They left out the more important half.

This is another example of the antiquity of the Torah text. Given that later Torah law—Leviticus 18:9, 11, 20:17, and Deuteronomy 27:22—prohibited marrying a half-sister.

20:13...So when God made me wander from my father's house,

Abraham used the name for God, (Elohim) followed by a plural verb, "hitu" ("made me wander") even though elsewhere it is always followed by a singular verb. Abraham did so not because he believed there is more than one God but, because in the world of polytheism he likely felt that Abimelech would be more apt to understand him if he spoke of God in the plural.

20:13 (Cont.) ...I said to her, "Let this be the kindness that you shall do me, wherever place we come to, say there of me, He is my brother."

20:14...Abimelech took sheep and oxen, male and female slaves, and gave them to Abraham, and he restored his wife Sarah to him.

20:15...And Abimelech said, "Here, my land is before you, settle wherever you please."

20:16...And to Sarah he said, "I herewith give you your brother a thousand pieces of silver,

This is a rare instance of sarcasm in the Torah. Abimelech refers to Abraham as Sarah's brother, even though he now knows the true identity of their relationship. To best appreciate the sarcasm, read the verse aloud and emphasize the word "brother."

20:16 (Cont.) ...this will serve you as vindication before all who are with you, and you are cleared before everyone."

20:17...Abraham then prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech and his wife and his slave girls, so that they bore children,

20:18...for the Lord had closed fast every womb of the household of Abimelech because of Sarah, the wife of Abraham.