

Genesis 12:10-20
Abram and Sarai in Egypt

Few things are as certain about the Christian's walk as its inconsistency. We all experience moments of great obedience and faith, and then hours later we fall flat on our face committing the most flagrant of sins. We move from self-control to self-indulgence with ease. We cycle between patience and anger, gracious speech and gossip, submission and rebellion with a rapidity that would leave us astonished if it did not happen so regularly. One wrong word, one unaware driver, one unintended act, can turn us from a saint into a sinner in an instant.

C. S. Lewis spoke of this in one of my favorite passages from one of my favorite books.

“Humans are amphibians - half spirit and half animal. . . . As spirits they belong to the eternal world, but as animals they inhabit time. This means that while their spirit can be directed to an eternal object, their bodies, passions, and imaginations are in continual change, for to be in time means to change. Their nearest approach to constancy, therefore, is undulation - the repeated return to a level from which they repeatedly fall back, a series of troughs and peaks.” C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*

The apostle Paul described the same phenomenon,

“¹⁵For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate. ¹⁶But if I do the very thing I do not want to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that the Law is good. ¹⁷So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me. ¹⁸For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. ¹⁹For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want” (Romans 7:15-19).

Abram was no different. This great patriarch was capable of times of almost unbelievable trust in God - the narrative we will study about the command to sacrifice Isaac comes to mind. But he was also capable of the most grotesque sins, as today's passage will illustrate.

Historical Context

Abram had trusted and obeyed. He had followed God's very general command to “go forth from your country . . . to the land which I will show you” (Genesis 12:1). He had abandoned his homeland, his extended family, his business connections, and even his nearest relatives to set out with only his wife and the nephew they had in their charge. To be sure Abram was not poor, he had flocks, herds, and even slaves. But this was still a noteworthy act of obedience and an explicit act of trust in God.

The journey of some four hundred miles from Haran to Canaan seems to have passed without incident. Eventually Abram and his family arrived in Canaan, and after a few temporary stops, settled in the southern portion called the Negev. There, no doubt, the family hoped they would experience God's blessing and see His promises fulfilled.

However, at some point after Abram and his family arrived in the southern part of Canaan called the Negev, the area was struck by famine. The natural place to turn at such a time was Egypt. Every summer monsoons provided rainfall to the Ethiopian highlands. By the fall, this water had made its way northward into the Nile River valley and the Nile reached its peak in what are today's months of September and October. This predictable flooding of the Nile River meant that Egypt was usually blessed with an abundance of food. Egyptians could plan their planting and harvesting according to a defined schedule, and were spared the unexpected droughts and floods of other river valley civilizations.

Writings from a variety of cultures in the ancient world offer evidence of them turning to Egypt for relief when harvests were insufficient to feed their own expanding populations. Also, we have evidence from archaeology. In the tomb of Khnumhotep III there is a mural of dozens of Asiatic men, women, and children in Egypt, clearly there to trade for food. The tomb was made about c. 1880 BC, or about two hundred years after Abram's visit, but it is likely indicative of the general migration of peoples in the ancient world.

Geographically, Egypt was easily accessible. Migration from Palestine into the Nile delta was unhampered by any significant natural impediments. Over time, then, many peoples from the ancient Near East migrated in groups, or instead sent emissaries to Egypt, to acquire food. Scripture relates the story of one of these petitioners,

“¹Jacob saw that there was grain in Egypt, and Jacob said to his sons, why are you staring at one another?’ ²He said, ‘behold, I have heard that there is grain in Egypt; go down there and buy some for us from that place, so that we may live and not die.’ ³Then ten brothers of Joseph went down to buy grain from Egypt” (Genesis 42:1-3).

The Egyptians were usually hospitable, welcoming these strangers, as this was an opportunity to engage in a profitable trade with a desperate people.

When Abram arrived in Egypt, had he journeyed as far as Memphis, he might have gazed in wonder at the Great Pyramids at Giza. These monuments of the Old Kingdom were already some 400 years old. However, the great empire that had built them had fallen into decline by the time of Abram's arrival. Since Abram was born in 2166 BC and left Haran when he was seventy-five (Genesis 12:4), he probably arrived in Canaan (a journey that could be accomplished in less than a year) in about 2091 BC. While Scripture does not give a time period as to how long Abram lived in Canaan before the famine occurred, there is no reason to think it was an extended period of time, so we can assume that Abram arrived in Egypt probably around 2090-2085 BC.

In power at this time was, historians think, Wakhare Khety Achthoes III of the Tenth dynasty, who ruled c. 2120-2070 BC. Interestingly, we have a text written about this time called “Instruction for King Meri-ka-Re” in which the author instructs his son about the treachery of the “Asiatics” another Egyptian term for the people of the Near East. Meri-ka-Re was the son of Wakhare Khety Achthoes III, so the connection is reasonable considering the details of the narrative we are about to study.

On a literary level, as we look at the narrative of Abram's sojourn in Egypt, we must note certain similarities with the narrative of the Garden of Eden. The parallels of food (plenty or famine), the role of the woman (Eve and Sarai), the use of deception (Satan, and Abram), the consequence of expulsion (Eden and Egypt), and the resulting family dysfunction (Cain/Abel, Abram/Lot) are all too evident.

Yet, the consequences of the two events are remarkably different. After the Fall, Adam and Eve lacked the bounty they had enjoyed. On the other hand, Abram increased in wealth as a result of his deception, in fact it was the relatively innocent Pharaoh who suffered.

Flight into Egypt

"Now there was a famine in the land; so Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land" (v. 10). Abram was not alone among the patriarchs to be forced (or to choose) to migrate because of famine. Isaac and Jacob would do so as well. Isaac was able to relocate relatively locally, he journeyed to Gerar and was stopped by God from going into Egypt, "now there was a famine in the land, besides the previous famine that had occurred in the days of Abraham. So Isaac went to Gerar, to Abimelech king of the Philistines. ²The Lord appeared to him and said, 'do not go down to Egypt; stay in the land of which I shall tell you'" (Genesis 26:1-2). Jacob, "now there was no food in all the land, because the famine was very severe, so that the land of Egypt and the land of Canaan languished because of the famine" (Genesis 47:13) and Abram was not so fortunate.

No mention is made of the famine being a consequence of divine anger at either Abram or the Canaanites, nor is Abram prohibited from making his way to Egypt. Famine at this time was not at all rare. Most civilizations lived at a subsistence level, and the slightest change in weather patterns, the onset of a crop disease, or even the attack of locusts or other insects at the wrong time could mean disaster.

As Abram and Sarai moved toward Egypt, we note that there is no mention of Lot in the narrative. This does not mean, however, that Lot did not go with them. Often Scriptural narratives focus on only the most important people and events. We will see that Lot increased in wealth, and easily may have benefitted along with Abram as a result of their migration into Egypt. Also, as we have mentioned, the biblical text makes no comment on Abram's temporary (the word for sojourn describes a temporary residence) removal to Egypt. It neither commends him for taking care of his family, nor rebukes him for a lack of faith in God's provision. We know that Abram had lived as an alien before. Yet his behavior in Canaan is markedly different from his behavior in Egypt.

The Plan of Abram

As Abram and his family neared Egypt, he announced a plan. Whether it had suddenly occurred to him the danger he might be in, or whether he had been brooding about it for the entire journey, Scripture does not say. Nevertheless, "¹¹when he came near to Egypt, that he said to Sarai his wife, 'see now, I know that you are a beautiful woman; ¹²and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'this is his wife'; and they will kill me, but they will let you live. ¹³Please say that you are my sister so that it may go well with me because of you, and that I may live on account of you'" (v. 11-13).

Abram's concern was based on two assumptions. First, he assumed that Sarai's beauty would attract the attention of Egyptian men who might be powerful enough, given the circumstances, to take her from him. Second, he feared that since these men were not likely to abide by the ethics of Abram's God, they might kill him to take Sarai. Since she was, in fact, his half sister, the lie presented itself with a built-in rationalization. As Abram later tried to explain when he tried this same ruse a second time, he had acted ¹¹"because I thought, surely there is no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife. ¹²Besides, she actually is my sister, the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother, and she became my wife" (Genesis 20:11-12).

Abram tried to neutralize a potentially hazardous situation by requesting, notice he does not command, Sarai to claim she is his sister. Many attempts have been made to try to explain this bizarre behavior on Abram's part, though it seems the simplest suggestion is that he recognized that if the Egyptians wanted his wife, they might have to kill him to have her. We can recall the narrative of David, Bathsheba, and Uriah the Hittite as a later example.

As often happens when one person is trying to convince another to do something they would not naturally do, Abram began with a compliment. He focused on his wife's beauty. It is not noted in Scripture that Abram told Sarai that she might be at risk. Perhaps he had not considered that. He mentions only himself. But Sarai is, after all, as much a participant in the promises of God as he is. She is to be the mother of the promised son. Perhaps Abram implied that if he were killed, she might be taken as a wife by an Egyptian, but Abram's argument is only that if she will admit to being his sister, he will be spared. He never seems to have informed her of the potential risks for her if she went along with the plan.

It is also interesting to think about Abram's long-term plan. Surely at some point he would have to tell the Egyptians that she was his wife. Perhaps he may have hoped that by portraying Sarai as his sister, the worst case scenario would be some awkward negotiations for her marriage that he would have to refuse. It may be that he never considered that she might simply be taken from him by force, though that seems a bit ingenuous.

Scripture has no record of Sarai's response. We cannot know what she thought of her husband's plan. Her silence leads the reader to presume she did not voice any objections. One can recall Adam's silence in the Garden when Eve was tempted. The consequence of her compliance would be severe. She was not only in danger, but would be forced into living with a man who was not her husband.

The Actions of Pharaoh

So, ¹⁴"it came about when Abram came into Egypt, the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful. ¹⁵Pharaoh's officials saw her and praised her to Pharaoh; and the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house. ¹⁶Therefore he treated Abram well for her sake; and gave him sheep and oxen and donkeys and male and female servants and female donkeys and camels" (v. 14-16).

Abram had been proved correct in his two assumptions. First, he was married to an attractive woman. And we ought also to mention that Sarai is at least about sixty-five years old. Since she lived to be 127 (Genesis 23:1), she was considered middle age for her time. A nice compliment. The second thing about

which Abram was correct, was that he was vulnerable. As a foreigner he and his wife both were, if not completely defenseless, at least exposed. We do not know how Abram deduced that the Egyptians had acquired a reputation for abducting wives. Clearly the laws of hospitality so central to biblical teaching were not necessarily practiced by the Egyptians.

The Egyptians thought Sarai was not only beautiful, but “very beautiful,” which explains why she was brought to the attention of Pharaoh. How her beauty first came to the attention of Pharaoh's officials we are not told. The Pharaoh often kept a harem of women, and perhaps some eager official trying to endear himself to his ruler mentioned the exotic foreign women he saw. Abram must have seen guards at the border, and he encountered any number of other officials as he moved into Egypt, began to trade, and settled to live.

Sarai was “taken into Pharaoh’s house” (v. 15). Apparently he was impressed, for he rewarded Abram. “He treated Abram well for her sake; and gave him sheep and oxen and donkeys and male and female servants and female donkeys and camels” (v. 16). Though the Hebrew word used, *mōhar*, is not that which is usually used with reference to a bridal purchase, the transaction seems too much like it to be discounted entirely. It may be that since we are dealing with different cultures, and not Hebrew only, the transaction, and wording, was modified to suit the needs of both parties.

We must wonder if Abram had foreseen this development. In any case, we can see here a contrast from the trusting and faithful Abram of the previous passage. Trying to put the best face possible on Abram’s behavior, it has been argued that Abram was trying to ensure that the promises of God would be fulfilled. If he had been killed by the Egyptians, all would be lost, and no seed would be produced. It is a foreshadowing of the narrative of Abram and Hagar, when again, he tried to take matters into his own hands. Ultimately, though, we can see that in Haran, Abram had trusted God for his future. In Egypt, he did not.

Still, had become a wealthy man. But as is often the case, material wealth is not necessarily a sign of God’s favor. That is, Abram was blessed because God chose to bless him, not because his righteous actions merited such reward. In fact, Abram sacrificed his wife to gain the flocks, herds, and slaves. In other words, it was Sarai's beauty, not Abram’s righteousness, that was the catalyst for his increased wealth. And this wrongly acquired increased abundance would cause further problems upon Abram’s return to Canaan. He and his nephew, Lot, who also had prospered, would be unable to share the land between them. This would result in Lot’s departure to the region of Sodom and Gomorrah, and eventually into Lot’s captivity by rival kings and the ensuing war with Abram’s allies. The consequences of Abram’s deception would haunt him for years.

One particular textual point to address concerns the mention of camels. Some commentators have argued that since camels were not domesticated until much later in the second millennium B.C. this is an anachronism that argues against the authority of Scripture. It is true that in many important Ancient Near Eastern texts such as the Mari texts, the Amarna Letters and all Ugaritic texts, camels are not mentioned, despite the frequent descriptions of nomadic peoples. Also, there is no specific mention of camels in the narrative of the separation of Abram and Lot (Genesis 13).

However, when Abram sends for a wife for Isaac, camels are mentioned (Genesis 24). And there are other extra-biblical texts that do mention camels at about this time (c. 2100 BC). Finally, it is difficult to argue from silence. There is nothing in the Scripture that precludes camels being part of the general term for herds, so there is no reason to use their mention in this narrative as an argument against the accuracy and authority of Scripture.

The Intervention of God

Not only had Sarai been silent thus far, but apparently so had God. Finally God acted. The narrative changes from Abram's plan to God's plan. ¹⁷"But the Lord struck Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife. ¹⁸Then Pharaoh called Abram and said, 'what is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? ¹⁹Why did you say, "she is my sister," so that I took her for my wife? Now then, here is your wife, take her and go.' ²⁰Pharaoh commanded his men concerning him; and they escorted him away, with his wife and all that belonged to him" (v. 17-20).

The word for plague is just that. It is the same word that will be used to describe one of the plagues that God, through Moses, would bring on Egypt many centuries later. It was a disease of the skin. The disease would be addressed in the Mosaic Law,

²"When a man has on the skin of his body a swelling or a scab or a bright spot, and it becomes an infection of leprosy on the skin of his body, then he shall be brought to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons the priests. ³The priest shall look at the mark on the skin of the body, and if the hair in the infection has turned white and the infection appears to be deeper than the skin of his body, it is an infection of leprosy; when the priest has looked at him, he shall pronounce him unclean" (Leviticus 13:2-3).

We do not know how Pharaoh came to relate the two incidents, that is, how he eventually connected his having taken the wife of this Hebrew with the onset of plague in his house. Perhaps God allowed his pagan counselors to divine the source. But what is clear is that Pharaoh was angry, as his three questions to Abram, indicate. "What have you done? . . . Why did you not tell me? . . . Why did you say? . . . are all asked without seeming to wait for a reply. To Pharaoh this was an act against him personally. He had trusted Abram. He had made a financial arrangement with him for the purchase of his *sister*. Now he discovered that this Hebrew had lied to him. As Abram stood before Pharaoh while he vented, he finally must have truly feared for his life. And we must note that even as a pagan Pharaoh understood that Abram's actions were wrong. Pharaoh had asked Abram three questions, and each indicated that the act committed by Abram was morally evil.

Pharaoh had committed a sin of ignorance. There were two forms of this according to the Mosaic Law. One was a sin committed through negligence. That is, the sinner knew that his act was wrong, but he did not commit the act on purpose. The second form of the sin was an action that the sinner did not know was wrong. That is the case with Pharaoh. Yet, the Old Testament does not exonerate the sinner in either case. Sacrifice was required. However, the Law had not been given, and the Law would not have applied to an Egyptian Pharaoh anyway. Our point is that we can see that even those outside the covenantal system were accountable to God for their actions.

And we can also see that God had promised to bless those who blessed Abram and curse those who cursed him, so God honored that promise despite the actions of Abram. In this case God cursed Pharaoh and his house even though he had acted in ignorance. God would always protect His people. And God would always keep His word.

Pharaoh, in fact, had little choice given the circumstances. If Pharaoh had experienced plagues for taking the wife of Abram, what might have happened if Pharaoh had killed him? Surely Abram's God would not allow that action to go unpunished. Neither did Pharaoh ask Abram to return the wealth he had acquired in Egypt. He was simply ordered to leave the country. One gets the sense that Pharaoh wanted to be rid of this troublesome foreigner whose God was so powerful. We are reminded again of the "Instruction for King Meri-ka-Re" written by the man likely to have been Pharaoh at this time. And Abram was given a bodyguard that undoubtedly served two purposes. The first was to make certain Abram did leave the country. The second was to ensure Abram's safety as he did so. Pharaoh wanted no more of the wrath of this Hebrew's God.

Abram left Egypt. As we will see, he made his way back to Canaan, eventually returning to the very place he had worshipped God before.

“¹So Abram went up from Egypt to the Negev, he and his wife and all that belonged to him, and Lot with him. ²Now Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver and in gold. ³He went on his journeys from the Negev as far as Bethel, to the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Ai, ⁴to the place of the altar which he had made there formerly; and there Abram called on the name of the Lord” (Genesis 13:1-4).

Takeaways

Abram was a man of great faith. Great enough faith to abandon all he knew to be good and comfortable and to follow his God to an unknown destination. Great enough faith to later be willing to kill his only son at God's command. But Abram was also a man who failed miserably.

We can take away from this narrative two things, I think. First, is the reminded that the walk of faith is a difficult one, and one in which even the best of us are bound to fail. We are sinners by nature, and while that nature does not have ultimate power over us, it is powerful enough indeed. Like Abram, when we do inevitably sin, let our object be to seek our God. Let us repent and return to Him, and worship Him for the God He is.

Second, we can see that God's plans are fulfilled despite the actions of fallen man. God protected Abram despite his own bad decisions. God's plan for the future was not corrupted by Abram's foolish attempt to take matters into his own hands instead of trusting God by faith. Our God is greater than both our sin and our folly. Nevertheless, we ought not to presume upon the grace of God. Instead, let us pray that we may we walk by faith close to Him to avoid sin and folly.