

Week 4 – Gen 12:10-12:20 – Abraham in Egypt

Previously, with Abraham growing up in an idolatrous culture and Sarah's barrenness (Gen 11:27-33), we saw Abraham receiving a call from God and his subsequent trust in God and obedience to the call (Gen 12:1-9). Abraham's reception and response to the call is why he is accounted as a hero of the faith in Heb 11:8

Yet right after this high point what we are about to see, on the face of it, appears to be a low point for the man of faith.

10 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. 11 When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to Sarai his wife, "I know that you are a woman beautiful in appearance, 12 and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife.' Then they will kill me, but they will let you live. 13 Say you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared for your sake."

Abraham's life is under threat and therefore the promises of God are under threat. First, his life is under threat due to a severe famine. Abraham's solution to this problem is leave the promised land for Egypt (v10).

On the one hand this is tantamount to unbelief. Instead of trusting that God would preserve him in the land he had been sent to he takes matters into his own hands and heads for Egypt. Not the only time he does this (e.g. producing offspring with Hagar).

- Egypt was the standard refuge during periods of famine because the Nile provided a more secure food supply.
- Word translated "sojourn" has connotations of a long-term venture – "to settle" – which is interesting given his typical nomadic lifestyle

However, while a move to Egypt may ward off the threat of famine, as Abraham is about to enter Egypt he suddenly starts to worry that his life will still be under threat because in Egypt 1) he will be an alien in a foreign land and 2) Sarah is considered to be beautiful (v11) – the result of which is that Abraham fears "they will kill me" (v12).

What is fascinating here is that Abraham was technically a foreigner in the land of Canaan but he wasn't worried about the Canaanites killing him over Sarah. So what is special about Egypt?

His solution to this problem is to claim that Sarah is his sister (v13) – which although partly true is still a blatant act of dishonesty. Commentators disagree on how to interpret Abraham's actions:

1. Most commentators believe that Abraham thought that as Sarah's brother he could marry her off to any suitor who sought her hand and thereby save his life. On the face of it, that appears to be incredibly selfish and callous. Look at his rational v13 "say you are my sister, that it may go well for me and my life will be spared" It appears that he is willing to give up his wife just to save his own skin.

2. But to give Abraham a little credit it is also possible that he thought that by being her brother he could fend off possible suitors by allowing promises of marriage without actually giving her away.

We see an example of this in Gen 24 where Laban, Rebekah's brother, allows her to marry Isaac v50 "Behold, Rebekah is before you; take her and go, and let her be the wife of your master's son (Isaac)" but then later he delays the whole process "Let the young woman remain with us a while, at least ten days; after that she may go" (v55). Problem is that eventually they are married, so its questionable how long Abraham thought he could delay. Perhaps long enough to run away? We don't really know.

Even if we conclude that his plan to say Sarah was his sister was well intentioned and that he never really intended to give her up – one could still make the argument that he is 1) being dishonest and 2) failing to trust in God

This presents a stark contrast with the previous episode where we saw his trusting and responding faithfully to the call of God.

Now lets look at how his plan unfolds.

14 When Abram entered Egypt, the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful. 15 And when the princes of Pharaoh saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh. And the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house. 16 And for her sake he dealt well with Abram; and he had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male servants, female servants, female donkeys, and camels.

On the one hand it seems as though the plan works. Egyptians agree that Sarah is indeed beautiful and she is taken into Pharaoh's palace (v15) and as Abraham had hoped – Pharaoh "dealt well with Abraham" (v16) and he received various animals and servants and he leaves Egypt a wealthy man. But at what cost?

There is a big problem here?

"taken into Pharaoh's house" – all the commentators agree that this is doubtless a case of adultery, which is supported by the fact that Pharaoh says "I took her for my wife" (v19). Basically Sarah became part of Pharaoh's harem. The gifts and wealth Abraham received were the customary offerings of betrothal presents.

Clearly Abraham's plan backfired. It is hard to imagine that he would be willing to allow his wife to commit adultery as throughout the ANE adultery was considered

one of the greatest sins. But if he had hoped to delay any promises of marriage to potential suitors the one suitor he could not fend off was Pharaoh himself.

Interestingly, there are terms and ideas here that parallel Gen 2-3.

- Both Sarah and the tree of knowledge of good and evil are described as *pleasant in appearance* and there is a *seeing and taking* of the desirable person/fruit.

So while Abraham is not *explicitly* rebuked for his actions (his leaving the promised land or his deception) this language provides a subtle commentary that what is unfolding is not a good thing.

The likelihood of adultery is further supported by the response of God and Pharaoh. **17 But the Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife. 18 So Pharaoh called Abram and said, "What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? 19 Why 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." 20 And Pharaoh gave men orders concerning him, and they sent him away with his wife and all that he had.**

Severe plagues were unleashed on Pharaoh and his household. The nature of the plague is not precisely defined but the term often refers to skin diseases such as leprosy.

Again there is an interesting contrast here in that Abraham is not directly punished for his actions but Pharaoh's inadvertent sin in taking Sarai (after all one could argue that he didn't know he was committing adultery) is met with plagues. In fact the phrasing "what...why...why" gives a sense of grievance and surprise.

Difference may be in that Pharaoh is not one of the chosen family – on the one hand the text is pointing out that even those outside of the covenant family are held accountable (Pharaoh is punished). But more importantly the text is illustrating part of divine promise in 12:3 to "curse him who dishonors you".

Also note that the phrase "What is this you have done" was the exact same phrase put to Eve in the Garden.

Pharaoh after realizing the situation tells Abraham to leave and take Sarah and his possessions with him. Pharaoh's anger comes across in the phrasing. **Now then, here is your wife; take her, and go** actually "Here...wife...take...go"

Why does Pharaoh let Abram go, why not kill him? After all Abraham's dishonesty had involved the king in adultery, which was regarded throughout the ANE as a great sin, punishable by death. It is likely that he realized that if committing adultery with Sarah led to plagues then the consequences of killing him may be even more severe. He is implicitly acknowledging God's protection of Abraham - a fact that Abraham himself should have recognized in the first place.

The fact that Pharaoh “gave men orders concerning him” suggests that he was very concerned for Abraham’s safety as he left Egypt.

“sent him away” – phrase typically used for expulsion – used to describe Israel’s exodus from Egypt but more importantly the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden.

What is the purpose of this story?

A lot of people think that the OT is full of stories that serve as moral examples for us to follow. In a sense that is true after all in Deut 21:23, 27:26, Hab 2:4, Lev 18:5 in Gal 3:6-18 – Abraham is indeed presented as historical example to follow.

So what do we do when we see stories that do not clearly serve this purpose?

Again, there are several subtle hints in the text that Abraham’s actions, although not directly rebuked, are not condoned. We see this particularly in the linguistic parallels with Gen 2-3. Also commentators agree that Abraham’s silence to Pharaoh’s rebuke serves to acknowledge his own guilt and the justice of Pharaoh’s anger.

So why, after we see the great hero of the faith in the previous narrative are we then presented with a decidedly unheroic story?

The answer in part is found by recognizing that this story is not interested in parading Abraham as a moral example rather it is focused on the promises of God. In this story we see a threat to the promises. The question is raised: If Abraham dies (either by famine or at the hand of the Egyptians) will the promises of God fail? We see this idea over and over again in Scripture. The point is that nothing, nothing whatsoever can thwart God’s promise to bless and redeem for himself a people – **not even the actions of the promise bearers themselves**. This was true for Abraham and it is no less true for us today. As Paul says in Romans 8:38-39 **For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

So this passage is not about Abraham and his character so much as it about God’s faithfulness to his covenant promises **in spite** of Abraham’s character.

But there is actually a lot more to this story. And we see this when we consider typology. The text is purposely drawing parallels between this episode in Abraham’s life and the exodus from Egypt:

- Both Abraham and later Jacob and his family (Gen 41-47) were driven into Egypt because of famine.

- Abraham feared that he would be killed in Egypt. Right before the exodus a later Pharaoh tried to kill all the Hebrew boys (Ex 1:8-16). This is why Abraham feared he would be killed by the Egyptians and not the Canaanites. There is a foreshadowing of what was to come

8 Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. 9 And he said to his people, "Behold, the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us. 10 Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they multiply... 15 Then the king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, 16 "When you serve as midwife to the Hebrew women and see them on the birthstool, if it is a son, you shall kill him, but if it is a daughter, she shall live."

- Abraham planned to settle in Egypt and later...

Gen 47:11 Then Joseph settled his father and his brothers and gave them a possession in the land of Egypt, in the best of the land, in the land of Rameses, as Pharaoh had commanded.

- Abraham received wealth in Egypt. The Israelites were given gold and jewelry on leaving Egypt (Ex 12:35)
- Plague prompted their release with similar instructions given for departure and the same verb "sent" used for their expulsion (Ex 11:1; 12:31-32)

These parallels indicate there is an **Abraham-Israel typology** – a foreshadowing in the life of Abraham about the history of later Israel. Interestingly, in Gen 15:13-16 when God is establishing his covenant with Abraham (formal ratification of the promises), the future bondage of the Hebrews in Egypt is prophesized, which provides a concrete example of the typology:

13 Then the Lord said to Abram, "Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs (just like Abraham was) and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. 14 But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, (just as God did with Pharaoh in Gen 12) and afterward they shall come out with great possessions (just as Abraham did).

The use of typology here serves to highlight the consistency of God's character.

So where is Christ in this story. Well we can expand the typology, i.e., an Abraham-Israel-Christ typology.

Matt 2:12-15: Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." 14 And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt 15 and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt I called my son."

Jesus, like Abraham, went to Egypt under threat of death. Just as Abraham's departure from Egypt foreshadowed the exodus so Matt compares Jesus' return from Egypt with the exodus and therefore with this episode in the life of Abraham.