

PARASHAH SEVENTEEN

GENESIS 20:1-18; ISAIAH 61:1-10; GALATIANS 3:15-29

notes by Tim Hegg

The Covenant Faithfulness of the God of Abraham

When we read this *parashah*, we are struck with its similar refrains. It sounds like a replaying of the events of chapter 13 with just a few changes in the cast. Before, when Abram descended to Egypt in search of food, he feared that the Pharaoh would look at Sarai, his beautiful wife, and take her for his harem. He concocted the deception that Sarai was his sister in order to save his own neck. This was just after God had given him the divine promise of the covenant, which included blessing and protection. Here, Abram is now Abraham, and Sarai is Sarah. The names have changed as the result of God's continuing faithfulness to demonstrate His covenant faithfulness. Yet even after clear reaffirmation of the covenant promises to Abraham, including the specific promise that God would bring a son through miraculous means (overcoming the physical impossibilities of conception in Sarah who was well beyond child bearing age), Abraham is unwilling to trust God's word explicitly. He even puts the promise of the seed at risk (at least from a human standpoint) because he willingly gives Sarah to Abimelech! The chosen covenant partner is weak in his faith (notwithstanding Rom 4:19)—he seeks to find his own solution to the issue of self-preservation rather than trust explicitly in God's word.

Here we see the frailty of the human soul. There is no doubt at this point in the narrative that God intends to bless Abraham and Sarah, and that His covenant is secure to them. Nor could anyone question the obedience of Abraham as he walked in covenant relationship with God. Doesn't the text explicitly tell us that Abraham trusted in God, and that his faith was reckoned as righteousness (15:6)? Yet here there seems to be a lapse in Abraham's faith and faithfulness. How could he revert to a "she's-my-sister" kind of faith? Didn't he realize and accept the tremendous promise of God to him, that he would be blessed and divinely protected? Yes, he did accept and believe, and his faith was real. But he was also human, and he shows his weakness in this pericope. It is not our faithfulness that garners God's grace; it is God's grace that maintains our faithfulness. That is the real message of this *parashah*.

Abraham journeyed from the region of Mamre-Hebron to Gerar, which was some 15 miles northwest of Beersheva. The text tells us he "sojourned" (וַיֵּשְׁבֶה) in Gerar. Perhaps he thought that the divine retaliation against the people of Sodom and Gomorrah would extend to his current place of residence, and so he travelled south just for good measure. He entered the domain of the Philistines, ruled by Abimelech ("my father is king"), and as such he was a *ger* (גֵּר), meaning he did not enjoy the privileges of citizenship in this political domain. From a human standpoint, he was venerable and unprotected.

The later explanation to Abimelech (v. 11) for why he once again relied upon a lie for self-protection is: "I thought there was no fear of God in this place." There is self-indictment in this assessment! Abraham, in correctly judging that Abimelech and the Philistines would not act in accordance with God's covenant, betrays his own weakness. When he states that "there is no fear of God in this place," he unwittingly describes his own lack of faith. If the "fear of God" was ever to be witnessed "in this place," it should have been in the manner in which Abraham himself displayed a willingness to trust in God's protection and covenant promises.

But this scenario is given to us in the flow of the Abrahamic narrative once again to emphasize the essential nature of the Abrahamic covenant, that it rests upon God’s faithfulness, not Abraham’s. This does not mean that Abraham’s lack of faith is okay, nor that his apparent weakness in faith, as demonstrated in this story, is somehow a fitting paradigm for us. If anything, it calls us to reassess how we exercise our faith in our own troublesome circumstances. Rather, the primary point of the story is the demonstration of God’s faithfulness to Abraham. The covenant He had given is far bigger than Abraham—it encompassed the whole story of redemption. As such, it could not ultimately depend upon Abraham. It rested squarely upon God’s sovereign will and ability to maintain the covenant, even in spite of man’s weakness and inability. God is not dependent upon man’s faithfulness. Even when we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself (2Tim 2:13). The covenant promises remain intact because God is the One Who fulfills the covenant.

This truth is first demonstrated in God’s sovereign control of Abimelech and his court. The king of Gerar is confronted by the King of the universe, and the indictment is not pretty! “You are dead” (הִנְנֶה מֵת, v. 3). The language is emphatic. It is not as though Abimelech is given a warning: “you will die if you don’t change your actions.” No, the court of heaven has already declared the verdict: guilty! And the sentence is handed down: death! And the reason? “The woman you have taken (for yourself) is married” (בְּעֵלָת בַּעַל, literally, “a married one of a master”). The covenant of marriage between a man and his wife is sacred in God’s eyes, and those who attempt to break it are guilty in the court of God’s justice.

But why did Abimelech take Sarah in the first place? Was he really that interested in a 90 year old foreigner? Had God’s previous promise, that she would give birth to Isaac within a year, miraculously restored her youthful beauty? Probably not (though the Sages toy with this idea). Rather, Abimelech most likely figured that he could enter into a covenant of peace with the powerful bedouin, Abraham, by enacting a political marriage with his “sister.”

The dream alarms Abimelech. At first he may have figured that the gods (אֱלֹהִים) have come to him in a dream. Yet he addresses God as “Lord” (אֲדֹנָי), and the Masoretes point the word to remind us to Whom he addresses his reply. Abimelech uses the same argument (v. 4) that Abraham used in chapter 18:23— “O Lord, will You slay people even though innocent?” In his own eyes, by his own standards, Abimelech stands innocent. But God looks at the heart: “I knew you did this with a blameless heart” (בְּתָם-לִבְבְּךָ). In other words, “your intentions toward Sarah were in accordance with your own standards of right and wrong. What you did was surely acceptable within your culture.” But God knew his heart. The language of v. 2 indicates that Abimelech did come requesting Sarah from her “brother” Abraham, but that he exercised his sovereignty as king: “he sent and took” (וַיִּקַּח . . . וַיִּשְׁלַח). He considered that foreigners (גֵּרִים) were his for the taking.

So God’s response to Abimelech’s claim of innocence is a bit tongue in cheek: “Yes, I know that you acted in the integrity of your heart, and that is why I kept you from sinning against Me” (v. 6). Note that carefully: “sinning against Me” (מִתְּוֹ-לִי). If Abimelech had violated Sarah, he would have, in light of many Ancient Near Eastern law codes, sinned against Abraham, since Sarah would have been considered his rightful property. In this regard, Abimelech would have been guilty of theft. But the covenant of marriage is based upon divinely given sanctions. Marriage is not a natural part of creation: like the Sabbath (which does not occur naturally in the universe as a matter of the cycle of time ordered by the sun or the moon), marriage is a divinely sanctioned gift to mankind. When it is violated, it is first and foremost a sin against God. This is why, in all valid

marriages, God is evoked as a witness to the marriage vows.

But there may be something more we are supposed to understand in this pointed indictment of Abimelech. In chapter 18 we learned of the divine promise that Sarah would give birth within a year. We should most likely understand, then, that in our present *parashah*, Sarah was pregnant. The child forming in her womb was the promised seed, the son of promise, the heir of the covenant. Sarah's ability to conceive had been especially the miraculous act of God on her behalf. Had Abimelech continued to act according to the intentions of his heart, he would have been sinning against God as the "Lord" (בַּעַל) of Sarah in this unique pregnancy.

So God steps in. His faithfulness to the covenant is clear. Even a pagan king, exercising his "rights" within his own culture and political power, could not overcome nor thwart the intentions of the Almighty. The promise of the covenant son would continue unabated. Nor could Abraham's lapse of faith bring the covenant into disrepair. God's sovereignty will not be frustrated, even by man's faithlessness.

In coming to Abimelech in a dream, another important theological truth is revealed: God's mercy is extended to mankind through His self revelation. It would seem that Abimelech most likely considered the dream as the appearance of the gods to him. But v. 6 makes an interesting point. Here it says, "And God (הָאֱלֹהִים) said to him," using the article ("the") with *Elohim*: "the God said to him." The sudden use of the article in this place would suggest that God revealed Himself to Abimelech, not as simply one more god in the pantheon of his pagan beliefs, but as the One true God of Abraham. When the true God reveals Himself, it is a disclosure of grace. And note how God first reveals Himself to Abimelech: "You are dead!" The message of condemnation is a message of grace. For apart from such a revelation from the true God, mankind presumes he is not dead. It is only when God, in His mercy, shows to mankind the true nature of his fallen estate, that man is blessed to see his dire need of salvation.

The remedy for Abimelech is important: "restore the man's wife—since he is a prophet, he will intercede for you—to save your life" (v. 7). Abimelech's salvation for the death penalty pronounced by God comes through the intercession of Abraham as His prophet. Here, midrashically, we see a most important kernel of truth, foreshadowing the larger scope of redemption embedded in the Abrahamic promise: salvation, even for the foreigner, comes through the Abrahamic promise. Those who claim only Adam as their father, are destined to death. Life comes to the children of Abraham. Paul knew this, which is why he is so intent upon teaching the Gentiles, as well as the Jews, that only those who call Abraham their father are secure in the covenant promises of salvation (Rom 4). Likewise, the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews writes: "For assuredly He does not give help to angels, but He gives help to the seed of Abraham" (Heb. 2:16). He does not say "to the seed of Adam" but to those who would find their identity as covenant members with Abraham.

Abraham, as a prophet, stands between Abimelech and God. He is therefore in a position to intercede for the king, and to garner God's mercy on his behalf. This is because Abraham is God's friend (2Chr. 20:7; James 2:23). God's covenant grace is extended to those who find a connection to God's covenant partner, Abraham.

Abimelech wastes no time in acting upon God's revelation to him. In the morning, he summons his court and relates to them the situation. Then comes the humbling confrontation with Abraham. The pagan king calls righteous Abraham to account for his lack of faith! "What were you thinking?" "Why did you do such a terrible thing?" Abraham stands guilty before a Philistine. And in his faithlessness, he also reveals that he was wrong about Abimelech. There was a fear of God in

this place! Of course, Abraham was correct in presuming that there was no fear of God there, that is, if one gives to Abraham his faulty presumption that God had not, *and could not*, reveal Himself to Abimelech. But God is able to reveal Himself to whomever He desires, and reveal Himself He did! Thus Abimelech acted in immediate obedience to the revelation he had received. He restores Sarah, and pays a handsome sum as legal notification that he was not a thief, and that he had not retained a woman who legally (and morally) belonged to another man. Here, as quite often in the biblical narrative, the pagan's obedience outweighs that of God's own chosen people.

Abraham's attempts at rationalizing his actions are pretty feeble in light of the whole story. He undertakes to show himself innocent on the basis of a "half-truth" ("half-truths" are actually whole lies). Sarah was his sister in one sense, in that she was the daughter of his father, but not the daughter of his mother. Before the giving of the specific Torah commands (e.g., Lev 18:9, 11; 20:17; Deut 27:22), the marriage to one's half sister apparently was practised and not considered incestuous, at least by the normal codes of the Ancient Near East. And even afterward, in the biblical accounts this occurred (Amnon and Tamar, 2Sam 13:13; cf. Ezek 22:11), though we must consider this later practice as a direct violation of Torah, as the narratives suggest.

Abraham admits that from the time he left his home in Ur ("when God made me wander" = "when God commanded me to leave"), as a bedouin, he was vulnerable to the power of more established cities and kingdoms. His early patterns of self-preservation were difficult to overcome. Part of his scheme was a pact he had made with Sarah, that she would go along with his lie to hide her relationship as his wife. The low estate of women in the Ancient Near East is made apparent by such a notice. For while the Ancient world considered a wife as property of the husband, God had not revealed the sacred bond of marriage in these terms. The wife, as a "helper" (עֵזֶר, Gen 2:18) was the equal of the husband, supplying to him what he lacked ("it is not good for man to be alone"). She was created as עֵזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ, a "helper as his equal," someone who corresponded to him as his companion. We learn from the biblical stories that whenever a woman is not granted her high position as one created in the image of the Creator, God's pattern for marriage is interrupted, and trouble inevitably ensues.

We might ask why Sarah went along with the scheme. Perhaps she is as much to blame as Abraham for allowing the whole deception to persist. In a strict assessment of ethics, she also participated in the lie—that is clear. But in the reality of things, she probably had little choice. Her ability to protest was greatly diminished by the circumstances and by the cultural mores under which she lived. All that was left to her was to trust God for what she could not herself accomplish. According to Peter (1Pet 3:1-6), her willingness to submit to Abraham, even in the worst of situations, was honored by God through His divine protection. Sarah was "untouched" because in the final analysis, God was her protector even when her husband failed to be.

I hasten to add that this praise of Sarah, in her place of vulnerability, to submit to Abraham, should not be used as a basis for saying that wives should submit to husbands who require them to act ungodly. No wife is asked by God to submit to the sinful demands of a husband. But there must be wisdom in how one responds to such demands. Often, a woman who has submitted herself to God, will find a way to make a wise and godly appeal to her husband, and in so doing, to find a way both to honor God (first) and to show a willingness to submit to her husband as well. The submissive spirit of a wife (according to Peter) may be used by God to change the heart of a disobedient husband.

In the final reversal, Abimelech makes a legal (and thus public) transaction with Abraham. He

returns Sarah, offers any of his land as a place for their dwelling, and gives to Sarah's "brother" a handsome payment to assuage any sense of damages which had been incurred. In calling Abraham Sarah's "brother," Abimelech persists in his plea of innocence—he had acted on the basis that Sarah was independent and therefore legally his to take.

The final resolution of the narrative tension comes when Abraham prays for Abimelech. It is Abraham's intercession that brings about the healing of Abimelech and his court. God had "closed the wombs" of the women of Gerar, a Hebrew idiom meaning He had not allowed conception to occur. This would indicate that the time span of this narrative is at least a matter of months.

Our *parashah* ends with the notice that Sarah was, in fact, Abraham's wife: "For the LORD had closed fast all the wombs of the household of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife." All of Abraham's deception, along with Abimelech's perception, are cast aside by God's assessment. Sarah is vindicated.

But in the end, we are struck with God's faithfulness to the covenant, in spite of man's lack of faith. God's promise remains steadfast: the plan He has, to bring to the world the promised Son, moves forward according to His will.

The challenge before us, however, is whether or not we will live and act in accordance with God's revealed will. Can we, in the midst of circumstances which seem to be out of control, trust God for what He has promised? Can we exercise faith, laying hold of the substance of things hoped for, living out our lives on the evidence of things not seen? May God strengthen our faith as we persevere in the way of faith.

The choice of the *haftarah*, Is 61:1–10, by the ancient Sages, is based upon the obvious parallel of a common theme: the sovereign hand of God will bring about the promise He has made to His chosen people, planting them in the Land, and bringing foreigners (who otherwise were their enemies) to serve them (v. 5). Moreover, the covenant is stated to be eternal: "And I will faithfully give them their recompense and make an everlasting covenant (בְּרִית עוֹלָם) with them" (v. 8). Thus, the *haftarah* emphasizes the key theological element presented in the Torah *parashah*, namely, that the eternal viability of the covenant with Abraham is secure in the hand of the Almighty.

No one can be certain exactly what readings of the prophets accompanied the various Torah *parashot* in the 1st Century synagogue, though where a uniform schedule of readings was used, it seems most likely that it was the triennial cycle. Most scholars agree that the one year cycle was adopted in the post-destruction era. It is interesting, however, to consider the possibility that the triennial cycle of *haftarah* readings suggested by the *yalmideinu* ("we learn") midrashim do reflect a common tradition in at least many of the early synagogues. Our interest in this comes from the fact that Yeshua, in the synagogue at Nazareth, is the *haftarah* reader (Lk 4:16f). When the scroll of Isaiah is handed to Him, He opens to our *haftarah* (Is 61:1f) and reads it and then gives His very short *derash* (explanation): "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Had they, like we, just finished reading Gen 20? It is impossible to say for sure, but if so, the words of Isaiah in the mouth of Yeshua Himself, are given their clear impact: the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant would be accomplished through the life and work of Yeshua Himself. It was not the merits of Abraham upon which the covenant rested, but upon the merits of Yeshua, God's chosen Messiah.

And this is the point of Paul's words in our Apostolic portion chosen for this Shabbat. The promise of God was given to Abraham's "seed," language which affords Paul the basis for an insightful midrash. "Seed" (זֶרַע, *zera*) is a collective singular, and Paul uses this to emphasize that

Yeshua, as the promised Son, is the zenith of the “seed of Abraham,” and as such, is the ultimate and final locus of God’s fulfilled promise. If the promise were based upon the covenant of the Torah, then obedience to the Torah would be required for the promise to be fulfilled. But as our Torah portion clearly teaches through the example of Abraham, the promise is not based upon the obedience of men, but upon the faithfulness of God, and ultimately upon the faithfulness of His Messiah, Yeshua.