

Abraham, Sarah, and Abimelech (Genesis 20)

Gildas Hamel

In chapter 20, Abraham is once more a *ger*, a resident foreigner at the mercy of the local potentates. In Lot's story, we are given an idea of how awful it can be to have no protectors, to be a resident forced to compose with local forces and mores.

20:1 *He travelled from there to the land of the Negev and he settled between Qadesh and Shur; he resided in Gerar.* Did he travel to separate himself further from Lot after the latter's incest with his daughters, as Rashi suggested? Three verbs are attached to Abraham in one verse: traveling, settling, being a foreign resident. The latter verb also would eventually bear the connotation of being a convert. Going south to the Negev is also going to the desert, where God may speak again. Historical note: Qadesh (and Shur) seem to have an Iron Age II level, archaeologically speaking, but no middle bronze or late bronze strata. In other words, it is likely that this story comes from the sixth or fifth century BCE, rather than from the tenth, or even less from traditions going back to the Middle Bronze period (circa -1750)

20:2 *and Abraham said to (about) Sarah his wife, she is my sister, and Abimelech king of Gerar sent (messengers? for her?) and he took Sarah.* The verse seems strangely redacted, incomplete even. Is it because this is a repeat and adaptation of the story in Egypt of Gen 12, in which the king is the Pharaoh and the story is meant to "prefigure" Israel's stay in Egypt and the story of the exodus? The question regarding the present story then is: what is different? One difference: the king of Gerar is the sort of "king" that existed in the first millennium. The narrator is imagining a "patriarchal age" of sorts but keeps falling back on what is known in the

first millennium, i.e. a society organized in monarchies. Other difference: there is no mention of Sarah's beauty.

20:3 *And God came to Abimelech in a nightly dream and said to him: you'll die over the woman whom you took; she is a master's spouse (ba'alat ba'al).* That is, she is under the control of a "master" or "lord" (*ba'al*). Note that this "king" has nightly dreams, which is less than Abraham has, but exactly the situation of Jacob at times, and Joseph later on. He also speaks to God directly, though only "Elohim" comes to him, not the Lord.

20:4 *He didn't come near her; and he said, "My lord, will you kill the foreigner (goy), even just?"* We have here something of Abraham's attitude grafted unto a "foreigner" who is an "indigenous" king, in the narrator's scheme? The problem of distributive justice is presented as a universal concern.

20:5 Abimelech continues to defend himself. He had good reasons to think that Sarah was Abraham's sister. *With pure heart and innocent hands I did this.* The vocabulary of moral rectitude and purity—but more technical vocabulary of purity from sin, *clean of hands*—used about Abram at the beginning of the saga, is here used of Abimelech, meaning that the narrator thinks of morality as widely distributed, a potentially universal attribute.

20:6 God knows. The text insists that this is imparted in the dream. And it adds an element of prediction, namely that God knew what would happen and made sure he wouldn't come near Sarah. Rashi sees here a dispute between God and Abimelech: You cannot claim "innocent hands," because in fact I prevented you from touching her, so no credit accrues to you. I didn't "empower you," according to Rashi.

20:7 *and now return the man's wife because he is a prophet and he will pray on your behalf and you will live.* The narrator gives us here a very developed (and surely late) view of prophecy. This is the first occurrence of the word prophet, and interestingly it appears in a royal context. Indeed, prophets were closely related to monarchy, as the story of Samuel makes clear, as well as texts from neo-Assyria, Aramaean kingdoms of the 8th to 7th centuries BCE, and elsewhere.