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The Family of Abraham: Part 10—A Threat to the Seed and the Opening of the Wombs of the Gentiles

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In this episode of my series on the Family of Abraham, I discuss Abraham's sojourn in Gerar, Abimelech's taking of Sarah, and the opening of the Philistines' wombs.

My book, *Echoes of Exodus*, which explores many related themes, can be purchased here: <https://amzn.to/2ugyNyP>.

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Transcript

Welcome back to this, the tenth in my series on the story of the family of Abraham. We've arrived at chapter 20 of the book of Genesis. This chapter takes place immediately after the events of the destruction of Sodom and the appearance of the angel of the Lord and the two other angels to Abraham at the Oaks of Mamre.

Abraham at that point leaves that area. He goes towards the south, towards the area of Gerar, and he stays with the Philistines. Now, if we think about the context of what's just taken place, it would seem that there's been a devastation upon the land.

The land is not sufficient to uphold people anymore for a period of time. And so he has to leave the land and find security elsewhere. It might be worth bearing in mind that Sodom was previously described as akin, that whole area that Lot had gone to, was akin to the Garden of Eden.

It was akin to Egypt as well. And now we see Abraham heading down in the direction of Egypt, but not to Egypt itself. Rather, he goes to the land of the Philistines.

And the Philistines, if you look in chapter 10, they were one of the people groups that descended from Israel. And that people group descended from Ham. But this people group is a people group that's associated with the Egyptians.

And that is important because we go through the text here, and as we go through the text in places like the book of Samuel and elsewhere, the Philistines are connected with the Egyptians. And so judgments upon the Philistines, sojourning with the Philistines, these sorts of events, interactions with the Philistines, are interactions with an Egypt-related people. And that is important to bear in mind.

It's on the background that is significant for what's taking place. Another thing to bear in mind, the Philistines were not one of the people groups whose land would be given to Abraham. Rather, they were a people group that oppressed the land at various points, but they were adjacent to the land.

They weren't actually one of the people groups whose land was handed over to Abraham and his seed. Further things to notice, that this is a story that is familiar to us. We've already heard a story like this in chapter 12 as Abraham goes down to Egypt.

And it would seem that we're treading over the same ground again. And some have speculated that there are three different accounts in the history that were given of patriarchs sojourning in a foreign land, pretending that the wife is actually the sister, and then having the wife taken by the foreign king, and all these things happening and eventually going free. And with all these different stories, they said, okay, we can't decide which one is genuine, we'll just include them all.

Or for some other reason that they decided to include them all rather than to separate them. Now, we, I clearly don't hold that position, but it does raise the question of why do we have these three accounts? Three accounts of events that seem very similar. Has Abraham not learned his lesson? And in the case of his son Isaac, has he not learned the lesson of his father? We'll see in chapter six, there's a very similar event that takes place there.

What is taking place? Now, I think that first of all, we need to recognize that there are many occasions in scripture where we see what are called type scenes, events that take a similar form, or that follow a particular template, as it were, and vary that template.

And within these type scenes, there are significant variations and significant similarities. And the meaning of the events are found in the similarities and the differences.

There's a family resemblance between a number of different narratives, and these narratives shed light upon each other. Now, these are a subspecies of a broader species of a broader genus, as it were, of stories which are related to the Exodus. So, if you look at the story of Genesis chapter 12, or the story here in chapter 20, or the chapter 26 story concerning Isaac, each one of these stories follows something of the pattern of an Exodus narrative.

There's some threat in the land, then they move into this foreign country with all their possessions. There's a threat to the bride and the seed. And then there's judgment upon the wicked.

There's the accusation of the righteous, there's humiliation of foreign gods. There's deliverance by God, going with great gifts and being established in the land. Now, that's the basic Exodus motif, and we can see it more elaborate in certain contexts and more constrained and limited in others.

In the previous chapter, we've already seen an Exodus motif played out, and certain details within that story that highlight a connection between that story and the story of the Exodus. Salient details like the two people that come to test the place, that the outrage has come up to the Lord concerning. The threat at the doorway, a meal of unleavened bread, fleeing the city, being taken by the hand and brought out of the city, not looking back, the establishment of a pillar of memory.

Now, in that case, it's the pillar of salt that the wife of Lot turns into. Then there's going to the mountain. And all these different events are Exodus themes.

What we have in this chapter is another Exodus type story, but it's a story that shares particular resemblances with these other stories that we find in Genesis. And these stories are not just similar, they're also different in certain respects. This event occurs at a critical moment.

Now, we've heard about the destruction of Sodom. That occurs immediately after the events that when God appears to Abraham at the Oaks of Mamre, he says that within one year, Sarah will have a child. So there is a very small window of time here.

This is immediately after those events, pretty much. Sodom has been destroyed and immediately after that he journeys towards the south, towards Gerar. So there's about a window of three months here.

And it's a critical moment. It's in this period of time that Isaac is supposed to be conceived. And during that period of time, that is when Sarah is taken by Abimelech.

So there's a threat, not just to the bride here, as there was in chapter 12, but also to the seed. In that previous chapter, we see that God intervened with plagues and other things against Pharaoh. Here, there is a specific threat.

And it's not just generic plagues. God, first of all, appears to, he appears in a dream to Abimelech and he tells him, you're a dead man. Dying, you shall die.

You've done this, taken this forbidden fruit and there's judgment upon you. And it's themes of Genesis 3 with the judgment of the fall. It might recall that particular event.

Now, he claims innocence, that he did not know that in fact, Sarah was the wife of Abraham. For all he knew, she was in fact his sister. Now, Abraham in this chapter continues the ruse that he had used earlier.

Has he just not learned from his lesson? I think that would be, there are ways in which what's happening here is not seen as a positive thing. Clearly, it's not good for Sarah to be taken. And there's something, some expression of the limitation of Abraham's power that God has to intervene on both of these occasions to get Abraham out of a tight spot.

What's happening? Is Abraham sinning? Well, as we saw in the previous case, there is a consistent ploy that he's using. Or in that case, he uses it as he goes into Egypt. But here we see it's a consistent ploy that as he explains what he does, this is something that he does every single place that he goes to.

When Abimelech inquires concerning what has happened to Abraham, Abraham says, So, as he goes into this area of Gerar, he does not believe that the fear of God is in that place. So, he has this ploy that he has had consistently. This is not just something that's happened on one or two occasions.

This is something that he does consistently. Wherever he goes, he says that Sarah is his sister. Why does he do that? Again, as I've explained in the previous occasion, it's because in that position, he's in a better place to protect both her and the group of people within his sheikdom.

So, he's got this large group of people around him, probably at least 3,000 people. And if he is seen as an obstacle to Sarah, he will be killed. And if he is not an obstacle to Sarah, but someone to be bargained with for Sarah, then he's in a position to protect both Sarah and the people around him.

Unfortunately, these kings, they don't do the bargaining process first. They just take the wife and then they'll deal well with the brother, but they're not going to go through the bargaining process and he can't play for time as he would do. So, God intervenes.

Now, who is at fault here? Well, primarily Abimelech. Abimelech is acting in a tyrannical manner. He doesn't know that he is taking another man's wife, but he is taking Sarah

without any negotiation with Abraham, without consulting with him.

And so, Abraham is powerless to act. Abraham is not able to intervene, to play for time, to do whatever he needs to do to protect Sarah. He's in a very vulnerable position and so God acts to intervene and establish Sarah back with Abraham at this point.

Now, in doing so, he's protecting the seed. He's protecting the bride. Behind all of these events, I think what we should notice is that there are tyrannical figures, serpent-like figures, but these are the brood of the great serpent, the great dragon.

And in these repeated events, what you are seeing is a repeated assault by the great serpent, the great dragon, upon the people of God, upon the seed, upon the woman and her seed, just as we see in Revelation chapter 12. There's a paradigmatic vision there of the serpent's assault upon the woman and her seed. And in these different chapters, we're seeing this being played out.

In chapter 3, verse 15, we see that the woman is promised that her seed will crush the serpent's head. And there's enmity placed between the woman and the serpent. And these stories are playing out that great archetype, that great archetypal story is behind all these lesser stories.

So there's a big motif playing out. But there are also these subtle variations that help us to understand these stories at the particular juncture at which they occur. At this juncture, it's more about preventing the seed from coming.

And the judgment that occurs upon Abimelech and his house is associated with this. The judgment is that their wombs are closed up. And it seems maybe that Abimelech is impotent as well, perhaps for this period of time.

Now, it's a three month period, so it's not a long period of time. What might be in mind? Maybe the women are miscarrying. Maybe they're just not being able to deliver properly.

Something is happening that is alerting them to the fact that there is some judgment occurring. And within that size of a people group, maybe it would take a month or two to realize that something very wrong is happening. And as a result, that there is some divine judgment.

And this judgment concerning the seed is a sign that there is something, something going on in association with the birth of Isaac here. That Isaac is being prevented from coming. Isaac can't be conceived as long as Sarah is in the house of Abimelech.

Now, here it's not that Sarah is seen as particularly attractive that she's taken. Rather, maybe Abimelech wants to have children of his own through Sarah. Why would he want to do this? I mean, surely Sarah is a shriveled old crone at this point.

She's passed 100. Well, I don't think that's the way we're supposed to read this. As James Jordan suggests, when we're looking at this chapter, we should think about Sarah as probably a woman in her 50s, the equivalent of a woman in her 50s.

They're living to longer ages and she's gone through menopause in the past, but she's not old. She's someone who is still, she still has an attractive appearance to some extent. And she's someone who would be desirable as a consort for a powerful leader.

Now, on that line, it's also worth considering the political game that could occur through strategic matches. Abraham's got the sheikdom around him and Sarah is at the very heart of this. She's the sister of the leader of the sheikdom.

So if you take that woman as your bride, you create a strategic alliance with that sheikdom and it creates, galvanises your power within the region. So maybe that's in view. I'm not sure.

But for one reason or other, Abimelech sees Sarah and takes her, sees her as desirable. And as a result, there is a judgment upon the people. God appears to Abimelech.

And then the interesting thing is, God does not just say that he should let Abraham go. Rather, he says, So there's a threat that occurs here. There's an association between threat and blessing.

One party to be delivered or there will be judgment. And we see that this is similar to what happens in the Exodus. God tells Abimelech to ask Abraham to pray for him.

He's a prophet. That's the first time we see this word used in the Bible. Abraham is a prophet.

He's already been described as a seer. But here he's a prophet. He's someone who participates in the divine council, as we saw in chapter 18.

He's someone who, when God is deliberating concerning his purposes, Abraham is there. Abraham is part of this discussion. And as he's part of this discussion, he has influence upon the way that God's purposes play out in the world.

And Abimelech is called to ask Abraham to intercede for him. And that also presents Abraham as a figure who is engaged in blessing the nations. There is a blessing upon the nation here that as the wombs later on of Abimelech and as the womb of Sarah is opened, the wombs of Abimelech's household are opened as well.

There is the association between the blessing of Sarah and the blessing of the Gentiles. And these two things go with the movement of Abraham into a greater degree of prophethood. At the very beginning, we see him engaging in more priestly activity, building altars, that sort of thing, calling upon the name of the Lord in these various

places as he establishes altars.

Then we see him engaging in kingly activities as he wars against the kings within the land in chapter 14. And here we've gone a step further. Abraham is more like a prophet.

He's involved in the surrounding nations, not just within the land itself, not just creating this initial foothold of sanctuaries and altars, but now involved in the surrounding nations and speaking to them and acting as a prophet within those contexts. So there is a movement in the story of Abraham from priesthood to kingship to prophethood. And in this movement, we're seeing something of the broader scope of history in Scripture that there is this pattern of movement from priest to king to prophet.

The priest is the household servant of the temple, the servant of God's house, who acts as the steward within God's palace and works on God's behalf to entertain his guests, as it were, prepare food, these sorts of things, guard the doors. The king is someone who exercises judgment and rules within the land. And the prophet is someone who works within the empires, within the surrounding kingdoms, who participates in the divine council.

And at each level, there's a movement out, a movement into a greater degree of maturity. What happens at the end of this story that's different from the story of chapter 12? Again, recognise significant similarities and significant differences. Here, one of the differences is that Abimelech asks for him to stay.

Abimelech says, see, my land is before you. Dwell where it pleases you. Then to Sarah he said, behold, I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver.

Indeed, this vindicates you before all who are with you and before all others. Thus she was reproved. What Abimelech does that's different from Pharaoh in chapter 12, Pharaoh tells them to go, to return to the land.

But Abimelech wants them to remain. He wants to be blessed with Abraham. There's an extension here, again, of what we see in the promise to Abraham, that Abraham will be fruitful, he will multiply and all these sorts of things and nations will be blessed through him.

This is part of what we're seeing and Abimelech is noticing it too. Abraham prayed for him and he was healed. The wombs of his house were opened up.

And he sees that Abraham is a man that God is with, that God is blessing and he wants to be blessed for the sake of believing Abraham. And as he entertains Abraham and shows him hospitality within his land, he believes that he will be blessed with Abraham. Now that is a progression, a progression beyond what we see in chapter 12 and a movement out into the fulfillment of this promise that God has given to Abraham.

We see a reality filled promise, as it were, of what will later be the case. Other things to notice here that he gives a thousand pieces of silver to Abraham and that vindicates Sarah on the one hand, that Sarah has not, he has not lain with Sarah. And it's a vindication that he was in the wrong.

Something's been rectified. He's acknowledged his wrong to Sarah and to Abraham. And in giving the money to Abraham, he also, the idioms here aren't entirely clear within this chapter, within this particular verse of the chapter.

But my suspicion is it's probably referring to the fact that as he gives that money to Abraham, Abraham is equipped again to act as the guardian of Sarah. That he acknowledges that this is a covering for Sarah's eyes, that there is a sort of veil over Sarah, that he has pierced through, that he has gone directly to Sarah and taking Sarah from Abraham. He's uncovered Sarah in some sense, removed her from her head.

And in restoring her to Abraham and in giving Abraham a thousand pieces of silver, he's acknowledging the place of Abraham as Sarah's guardian and protector. And he's acknowledging the wrong that he has done to both of them within this situation. So, putting this together within the broader themes of the book, we see a movement from priest to king to prophet in this chapter.

We see a movement of blessing out from Abraham, not just to his immediate group, but also now out to other people who are touched by his influence. We see a development of this particular theme, an Exodus type theme, but a specific subspecies of the Exodus theme. And this subspecies is connected with the events of chapter 12 and chapter 26.

In this case, it focuses upon the threat, not primarily just to the woman, but to the seed. That the wombs are closed, that this is a threat that occurs within this specific window of time. This window of time within which Isaac is to be conceived.

And then what we see next is that Isaac is conceived. Isaac comes out of this event. There's a connection between the birth of Isaac and this deliverance.

So Exodus and this theme is connected with birth. I've commented upon this at length within various other treatments of this theme in my 40 Days of Exodus series and also in my book, Echoes of Exodus. Exodus is associated with birth.

We see at the beginning of the Exodus story that it focuses upon women. It focuses upon women giving birth. It focuses upon the Hebrew midwives.

It focuses upon Jochebed who gives birth to Moses. It focuses upon Miriam and Pharaoh's daughter. And in all of these stories, what you're seeing is a threat to the woman and her seed.

Israel is groaning in pangs in slavery and it's in bondage. And it's bondage and it's

pangs. These things were associated with birth.

It's waiting to be delivered. And God's statement to Moses that Pharaoh has to let his people go, that Israel is my firstborn son, and that if Pharaoh does not let God's firstborn son go, he will destroy the firstborn sons of Pharaoh. We're seeing very similar themes play out here.

In the story of the Exodus, it culminates with blood on the doorpost. We've seen the doorpost associated with birth and death in the previous two chapters. Birth in the story of Abraham in chapter 18.

Death in the story of Lot in chapter 19. And here in chapter 20, there is this theme of deliverance. Deliverance of Sarah, but also deliverance of the womb being opened up.

The deliverance of the child. And in the story of the Exodus, the connection of the Passover with the dedication of the firstborn child and the law of the firstborn that's given immediately after that. And then this passing through the waters of the Red Sea so that they are brought to birth through that event.

All of these things are connected. Exodus is associated with birth. And here within this chapter, we are seeing part of what lies behind that.

That the firstborn son, the firstborn son of promise of Abraham is delivered through an Exodus event. And there is something about the very identity of Isaac that finds its root and its origin in this deliverance. And that helps us to see some of the themes that are playing out later and why they play out in the way that they do.

Habimelech wanting him to stay. We'll see more about these themes in the coming chapter. And hopefully I'll get to that tomorrow.

Thank you very much for listening. Lord willing, I'll be back again tomorrow with further on this topic and these chapters. If you have any questions, please leave them on my Curious Cat account.

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God bless.