

# OpenTheo

## January 20th: Genesis 20 & John 10:1-21

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### Alastair Roberts

Abraham and Sarah in the land of the Philistines. Jesus the true Shepherd and the door of the sheep.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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## Transcript

Genesis chapter 20. So he said, And God said to him in the dream, So Abimelech rose early in the morning, and called all his servants, and told them all these things. And the men were very much afraid.

Then Abimelech called Abraham and said to him, And Abimelech said to Abraham, Then Abimelech took sheep and oxen, and male servants and female servants, and gave them to Abraham, and returned Sarah his wife to him. And Abimelech said, To Sarah he said, Then Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech, and also healed his wife and female slaves, so that they bore children. For the Lord had closed all the wombs of the house of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife.

Chapter 20 of Genesis is one of those chapters where we might be forgiven for thinking that we're reading another chapter in Genesis entirely. There are three stories within the

book of Genesis that have a very similar form where one of the patriarchs goes to a foreign land to sojourn there for a while and his wife is taken or there's a threat that the wife might be taken and then the true identity of the wife is revealed and then they're sent away with many gifts. This is a story that we've already read in chapter 12.

There's a similar story in chapter 26. Such stories are what Robert Alter has described as typescenes. A typescene could be described as a fundamental template of a story that can be modified in different ways.

So within the Old Testament we can think of accounts of women meeting men at wells and we also have an example of that in the New Testament of course. We might also think of the annunciation of the birth of a Savior. There are a number of examples of that in the Old Testament but also in the New.

These are fundamental patterns of stories that can be told many different times with variations. Now when we see a typescene it's important not just to pay attention to the similarities and the fundamental sameness of these stories. That would be a mistake.

The stories are never exactly the same. The variations are no less significant than the similarities. What a typescene does is place stories alongside each other so that as we reflect upon their similarities and differences we might come to a deeper understanding of their meaning.

So when we arrive at Genesis chapter 20 we've already heard this story in one sort of form before. These events are told as historical events. The point is not that these things are just made up tales but rather they're told with significant repetition and with correspondences that cause us to reflect upon their meanings over against each other.

This story has differences from the previous story that we saw in chapter 12 but also similarities. On this occasion Abraham does not go down to Egypt. He goes to the land of the Philistines.

The Philistines if we've looked at chapter 10 and paid attention to it they're one of the people groups that descend from Israel and that people group from Ham. This is a people group that's associated with the Egyptians. It's important because as we go through the text here we'll see that they are playing a role that's similar to the Egyptians in certain respects.

As we go through the story of the book of Samuel we'll again see the character of the Philistines connected to the Egyptians. So judgments upon the Philistines and sojourning with the Philistines these are events that are interactions with an Egypt related people. Another thing to bear in mind here is that the Philistines were not one of the people groups whose land was to be given to Abraham.

They were a people group that oppressed the land at various points but they were

adjacent to the land. They were not actually going to lose their land to Abraham and his seed. Why does Abraham go outside the land at this point? Probably because of the destruction upon Sodom and Gomorrah which may have rendered the land fairly barren at this point.

If we look at the story of Genesis 12 or the story here in chapter 20 or the chapter 26 story concerning Isaac each one of the stories follows something of the pattern of an Exodus narrative. There is a threat to the land, they move into a foreign land with all of their possessions, there is a threat to the bride and the seed, there's a judgment upon the wicked, there is an accusation against the righteous, there's humiliation of foreign gods and then there's deliverance by God going with great gifts and being established in new land. Now this is the basic Exodus motif and we can see it more elaborated in certain contexts but more constrained and limited in others.

We've already seen an Exodus motif played out in the previous chapter concerning Sodom and certain details within that story highlight a connection between the story and the story of the Exodus. Things like two people coming to test the place, outrage coming up to the Lord, threat at the doorway, meal of unleavened bread, fleeing the city etc etc and in this chapter we have a different sort of Exodus paradigm playing out. A story with resemblances with other stories that we see in Genesis.

This event also occurs at a very significant juncture in time. If we think about what we've read in the previous chapters God has promised to Abraham and Sarah that they will have a son within a year. The taking of Sarah at this particular point is a threat to the promise, it's a threat to the possibility of Isaac's birth in the first place.

So it seems to be a very clear assault by the serpent upon the seed of the woman. There's a threat to the bride as there was in chapter 12 but also crucially here to the seed. In the chapter 12 account we see that God intervened with plagues and other things upon Pharaoh but here there is a more specific threat and there's not just generic plagues.

God appears in a dream to Abimelech warning him that he will die because of what he has done. These are themes of Genesis chapter 3, the judgment of the fool. He has taken something that is not his and he will die as a result.

He claims innocence that he does not know that Sarah was the wife of Abraham for all he knew Sarah was Abraham's sister. Now Abraham has used this ruse before. He has already claimed that Sarah was his sister when he went down to Egypt.

Hasn't he learned his lesson? And there are ways in which this is clearly not a positive event the way that this plays out. It's not good for Sarah to be taken and there's an expression here of the limitation of Abraham's power. God has to intervene on this occasion just as he did in chapter 12 to deliver Abraham from his plight and his

predicament.

But yet is Abraham sinning? As we saw in the previous case this is a consistent ploy that he is using. This is something that he does in every single place that he goes to. When Abimelech inquires concerning what has happened to Abraham, Abraham says that he did not believe that the fear of God was in that place and so he did not want to be killed on account of his wife.

Now we can often see this as Abraham just wanting to save his own skin but it's important to bear in mind that Abraham is the head of a sheikdom. He has at least two or three thousand people along with him. If he's killed they're in great danger and so there is a problem for him.

If he pretends to be the brother of Sarah then he can be courted. He's someone that has leverage. He's someone that the king of the place will want to make peace with and want to treat well so there can be some alliance made so that the men of Abraham can be his men and be allied to him.

However if Sarah is Abraham's wife, Abraham is an obstacle and Abraham should be removed from the situation. So that ploy is one that has a certain reasoning to it and it's not merely out of selfish interest. Abraham saving his life is something that will save the lives of the people around him as well.

It's something that he does consistently for this reason. God intervenes but who is at fault here? Primarily Abimelech. Abimelech is acting in a tyrannical manner.

He does not 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 can't intervene to play for time or do whatever he needs to protect Sarah. He's put in a very vulnerable position so God acts to intervene and establish Sarah back with Abraham at this point.

What he's doing at this point is protecting the seed and the bride. Behind all of these points we need to see the work of serpent-like figures, the brood of the great dragon and in these repeated events what we're seeing is an assault upon the woman and her seed as we see in Revelation chapter 12. In these different chapters then we're seeing this played out.

In chapter 3 verse 15 we're told that the woman and her seed will crush the serpent's head and the enmity is placed between the woman and the serpent for this reason and so these stories are playing out a great archetype, an archetypal story behind the lesser stories, a motif playing out and the subtle variations help us to understand these stories at the juncture at which they occur. The judgment that occurs upon Abimelech and his house is also important. The judgment of wombs being closed up.

Now this may have to do with Abimelech's impotence because it's a fairly brief period of time. How would they know that the wombs were closed and that they were not fertile? It could be that the women are miscarrying. Maybe they're just not able to come to delivery properly.

Something is happening anyway that is alerting them to the fact that they are under judgment and within that size of people group it might take maybe a month or two to realize that something serious is amiss and as a result that there is some sort of divine judgment and this judgment concerning the seed is a sign that there is something going on with the birth of Isaac here. Isaac is being prevented from being born and so as long as Isaac is prevented from being born the wombs of the people of Abimelech are closed up. There's a poetic justice here within that situation.

Why does Abimelech take Sarah? Is it because Sarah is particularly beautiful? Well this is some decades after the original events of chapter 12 when Sarah was taken by Pharaoh. Maybe her appearance is not the reason here. Maybe it's more the fact that she is associated with someone who has great power and if she is taken she will be someone who creates a strategic alliance.

Having the sister of the ruler of this great sheikdom as your consort would put you in a position of significant power. In a position maybe to take over that whole sheikdom. When God appears to Abimelech he tells him to restore Sarah to Abraham but also to get Abraham to pray for him.

Abraham is a prophet. This is the first time we see this word used in the Bible. Abraham has already been described as a seer but here he is a prophet.

A prophet is someone in many cases who participates in the divine council as we saw in chapter 18. Someone who when God is deliberating concerning his purposes is present and a participant. Abraham is part of this discussion and he has influence upon the way that God's purposes play out in the world.

And so Abimelech is called to ask Abraham to intercede for him. It also presents Abraham as a figure who is engaged in blessing the nations. There is a blessing upon the nation here.

As Abraham prays the wombs of this nation will be opened up. There's association here also between the blessing of Sarah and the blessings of the Gentiles. These two things go together with the movement of Abraham into a greater degree of prophethood.

At the beginning of Abraham's story we saw him engaging in more priestly activity. Building altars, leading people in the land in worship, calling upon the name of the Lord in the various places that he establishes altars. Then we see him engaging in kingly activities, warring against the kings within the land.

Now we have him going a step further. He's more like a prophet. He's not just dealing with people in the land here.

He's involved with the life of the surrounding nations. Not just creating an initial foothold of sanctuaries and altars but now speaking to people who are kings in the nations roundabout, acting as a prophet within those contexts. The movement then in the story of Abraham, a maturation.

This is among other things an anticipation of what will happen later on in the story of Israel. What other things can we see as we compare and contrast this with chapter 12? Recognize significant similarities and significant differences. One of the differences here is that Abimelech asks for Abraham to stay.

See my land is before you dwell wherever it pleases you. While Pharaoh wanted Abraham to leave his land as quickly as possible, Abimelech wants to be blessed by Abraham within his land. There's an extension here again of what we see in the promise to Abraham.

Abraham will be fruitful, multiply and all these sorts of things and nations will be blessed through him. Abimelech is noticing that as Abraham is present with him he will be healed and blessed. Abraham is a man of God, a man that God is with and a man that God is blessing and so people who bless Abraham will be blessed with believing Abraham.

So there's an important progression here. One question to reflect upon. Chapter 20 involves themes of deliverance.

The deliverance of Sarah, also the deliverance of opened wombs and the deliverance of the child. The story of the Exodus has very similar themes connected with birth. The birth of the firstborn.

Can you see some of the ways in which the story of the birth of Isaac might shed light upon the story of the Exodus? How is the birth of Isaac an Exodus event and how is the Exodus a birth event? John chapter 10 verses 1 to 21. This figure of speech Jesus used with them but they did not understand what he was saying to them. So Jesus again said to them, I am the Good Shepherd.

The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd and does not own the sheep sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees. And the wolf snatches them and scatters them.

He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the Good Shepherd. I know my own and my own know me.

Just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. And I lay down my life for the sheep.

And I lay down my life for the sheep. And I lay down my life for the sheep. And I lay down my life for the sheep.

And I lay down my life for the sheep. And I lay down my life for the sheep. And I lay down my life for the sheep.

And I lay down my life for the sheep. And I lay down my life for the sheep. And I lay down my life for the sheep.

And I lay down my life for the sheep. And I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep that are not of this fold.

I must bring them also and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me because I lay down my life that I may take it up again.

No one takes it from me but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.

There was again a division among the Jews because of these words. Many of them said, He has a demon and is insane. Why listen to him? Others said, These are not the words of one who is oppressed by a demon.

Can a demon open the eyes of the blind? When reading John chapter 10 it's important that we do not detach it from that which precedes it. It is still a response to the Pharisees and the leaders of the Jews after the healing of the blind man. In casting the formerly blind man out of the synagogue the Jews were claiming authority over the flock of God acting as false shepherds.

And this is the background for the conversation that Jesus has describing himself as the shepherd and the door to the sheep. And some of the themes being explored here are ecclesiological themes. Themes that relate to the church as the flock of Christ.

The imagery of sheep and shepherding comes to the surface here but it's not the only time within the gospel that we see this. In chapter 1 we see it as Jesus is the lamb. In chapter 21 where Jesus tells Peter to feed his sheep.

And here he is the shepherd and the door to the sheep. The biblical background to shepherd imagery is immensely important. Israel descended from shepherds.

If you think about characters like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, these were all shepherds. Joseph was a shepherd. The great leaders of the nation, Moses and David, were shepherds.

Both literally and symbolically. Moses led the people out with his shepherd's rod and

David was the great shepherd of the house of Israel. In passages like Ezekiel 34 and Jeremiah 23 verses 1 to 4 the unfaithful shepherds, the unfaithful rulers of Israel were condemned.

Elsewhere we see God himself being described as the great shepherd of his people in places like Psalm 23. In this chapter Jesus alludes to verses such as Micah chapter 2 verses 12 to 13. I will surely assemble all of you O Jacob.

I will gather the remnant of Israel. I will set them together like a sheep in a fold, like a flock in its pasture, a noisy multitude of men. He who opens the breach goes up before them.

They break through and pass the gate going out by it. Their king passes on before them, the Lord at their head. God's flock is gathered together and led out by the gate.

Christ calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. Now this might be seen as an image of the Exodus. Remember that the Exodus is described as the leading of a flock out of Egypt with the rod of the shepherd Moses.

That imagery is used in places like Isaiah chapter 63 verses 11 to 12, Psalm 77 verse 20 and elsewhere. There's a striking of the false shepherd of Pharaoh. This sort of shepherd imagery might also help us to understand other episodes within the gospel.

In chapters 5 and 6 for instance. In chapter 5 Jesus meets a lame man near the sheep gate bringing him back into the temple fold of Israel. Jesus here describes himself as the true door for the sheep.

In chapter 6 Jesus leads a large multitude out like a flock across the sea and provides them with food. There's a strange detail in chapter 6 verse 10. There was much grass in the place.

Now why point that out? In chapter 10 verse 9 we see a suggestion of an answer. He will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. Who is the doorkeeper or the watchman? In verse 3 it's probably the faithful leader of the people in contrast to the Jewish leaders and the Pharisees.

The biblical imagery of the shepherd as we've seen already is fairly deeply rooted within the text. But the shepherd is a rough and violent figure often. Not especially like our vision of shepherds.

When we hear about shepherds we might think about idyllic scenes, bucolic landscapes in the lake land in England, or we might think about these very tame pastoral settings. But yet that's not what we find in scripture. The shepherd is often a figure who struggles with wolves, with wild beasts, with thieves and bandits, and with the perils of the wilderness.



He's associated with death and conflict and difficulty. We need to measure our concepts of pastoral ministry against biblical models. If we think about the pastoral ministry we're often thinking about that very domestic idyllic scene and the way that the shepherd is just this gentle, kind, tender figure.

And there's certainly that aspect of tenderness and gentleness with the flock. But the shepherd also has to be a conflictual character able to drive off wolves, protect the flock, give safe and good pasture. Someone who's able to suffer hardship and die for the sake of the flock.

The flock is in dangerous territory and we need tough and dedicated leaders. Now there's an allusion to Numbers chapter 27 verses 15 to 17 here. In that place Joshua is established as the leader of the people in replacement of Moses.

And there's a reference to coming in and going out there. Moses spoke to the Lord saying, Let the Lord the God of the spirits of all flesh appoint a man over the congregation who shall go out before them and come in before them who shall lead them out and bring them in that the congregation of the Lord may not be a sheep that have no shepherd. Christ refers to the people of Israel as like sheep without a shepherd on a number of occasions.

And he is the true shepherd. Jesus' use of the terminology I am at this point also relates his identity to that of God. He is not just the great Davidic leader.

He is God himself come to deliver his people. One of the primary points of this section is to highlight the intimate relationship between sheep and shepherd. The sheep have been given into Christ's hand by his father.

He calls them all by name. They know and respond to his voice. You can maybe think of Mary Magdalene in chapter 20 verse 16.

It is when Jesus calls her by name that she recognizes his voice. In chapter 5 verse 25 there's another example of a parallel. The dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live.

Lazarus is a further example. Even the grave cannot prevent the sheep from hearing their shepherd's voice. And the true shepherd is someone who will lay down his life for the sheep.

Unlike the hired hand, we can think about the Jewish leaders, we can think about the Pharisees. These are not going to lay down their lives for the people. But the true shepherd will.

Jesus here speaks also of forming a larger flock. A flock that involves other sheep from elsewhere. Jesus brings in the Samaritans, brings in Gentile sheep, he'll form one new

flock of both Jews and Gentiles.

And the church is very much in view in this imagery. Remember again that the background of this is someone who has been cast out of the synagogue. Someone who's a paradigmatic believer or disciple.

Someone who has been delivered by Christ, given new sight, brought through the healing waters, and made part of a new people. He's cast out of the old people but now he's going to be part of a new flock. And Christ is forming this new flock around himself at this time.

It's profoundly encouraging to reflect upon the fact that the Father commits us as his sheep into the hands of his Son, the true shepherd. And no predator can snatch us from his protection, nor from that of the Father. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ.

This is the image that is presented in this chapter. That Christ is the true leader of his people. But not just this grand shepherd operating on a great scale, but one who has an intimate love and knowledge and commitment to his sheep.

One who will lay down his life for his sheep. One who has that intimate connection that his sheep know his voice and he can address each one of them by name. This is a deep and intimate connection.

Not just the connection that we might associate with a king or a lordly ruler over a great nation, but one who has an intimate connection with those who are his own. A question to reflect upon. Jesus makes a startling statement in verse 17 and the logic of it is worth reflecting upon and thinking about.

I lay down my life that I may take it up again. What is the logic of that statement and how does it better help us to understand the death and the resurrection of Christ?