

Ministry of Grace

2 – Side-trip to Egypt

Genesis 12:10-20

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

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

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

Synopsis

Having responded to God's call out of Ur, and later leaving Haran after the death of his father, Abram has now entered into the land that God had promised to him. He built altars to Yahweh in Shechem and at his campsite between Bethel and Ai. Yahweh then allowed the first test of Abram's faith and commitment to his God. Because of a famine in the land, Abram decided to head to Egypt where there was plenty of food for both his family and his animals. And, lest we think that this was a casual decision on Abram's part, we need to recognize that it was a trip of about 300 miles from his campsite between Bethel and Ai to the Egyptian city of Heliopolis. Although this trip was shorter than the 700 miles from Ur to Haran or the 500 miles from Haran to Shechem, it was a trip through very dry country with very little pasture land for his animals.

On his way to Egypt, Abram instructed Sarai to tell people that she was his sister instead of his wife. His reason for this deception was because Sarai was a strikingly beautiful woman. He assumed that if the people of the land knew that she was his wife, they might kill him and take her to themselves, a rather selfish decision by anyone's standard. As he had expected, upon Abram's arrival at the capital city of Egypt, Pharaoh became aware of his presence, or more correctly, the presence of beautiful Sarai. Believing her to be Abram's sister, Pharaoh had her taken to his harem and awarded Abram with a bountiful supply of animals and servants.

However, in spite of their deceitful lie, God miraculously protected Sarai and inflicted the Egyptians of Pharaoh's household with great plagues. When Pharaoh became aware of the cause of the plagues, he confronted Abram with a stern rebuke, returned his wife to him, and sent them back to Canaan.



Figure 1 - Sojourn to Egypt

Genesis 12:10

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.

“famine” – God frequently used famine and the hunger it produced as either a test or a punishment. Being an agrarian society, they were very dependent on God’s provision of rain for their own food and for the feeding of their flocks and herds. Abram’s response to the famine was to head down to Egypt. Much of the inhabited portions of Egypt were less impacted by the lack of rain because the Nile River was their primary source of water. *What would you have done if you were Abram?* There is no evidence that Abram was being disobedient by going to Egypt, but there is no evidence that he sought God’s divine guidance in this situation either.

“sojourn” – Hebrew *gur*, meaning “to turn aside from the road.” This word describes a person who is turning aside for a temporary respite or overnight rest. Therefore, this word does not imply a permanent residence, but a temporary stay. So we see that Abram’s plan was not to leave Canaan permanently to live in Egypt, but to go there temporarily to feed his family and animals.

“Egypt” – The Hebrew word is *mizraim*. If you look at the family lineage (at the end of this study) you will see that Canaan and Mizraim were brothers, both sons of Ham. Thus, there probably existed a strong tie between the Canaanites and the Egyptians. Throughout the Bible we see Egypt as a “type,” or symbol, of the world system. Thus, Abram’s leaving Canaan and heading to Egypt is a picture of a person of faith leaving the place to where God has called him or her and turning to the world in times of difficulty.

Genesis 12:11-13

When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to Sarai his wife, "I know that you are a woman beautiful in appearance, and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife.' Then they will kill me, but they will let you live. 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."

“When he was about to enter Egypt” – According to this narrative, Abram and Sarai had this conversation as they were about to enter Egypt. According to chapter 20, however, this discussion appears to have happened earlier:

And when God caused me to wander from my father's house, I said to her, “This is the kindness you must do me: at every place to which we come, say of me, He is my brother.”
(Genesis 20:13)

There are two ways to reconcile this issue. It is possible that Abram and Sarai had this discussion either when they left Ur or when they left Haran, then had this discussion again as they were about to enter Egypt. The other way to reconcile this is to realize that it may have been only a year or two from the time that Abram left Haran until they went to Egypt. Since the comments of **Genesis 20:13** occurred more than twenty years later, Abram’s reference to “when God caused me to wander from my father’s house” may actually be referring to the time when he and Sarai were about to enter Egypt.

“you are a woman beautiful in appearance” – Sarah was approximately sixty-seven years old at this time. She died at the age of 127 and Abram died at the age of 175. So, for Sarah to have

maintained her beauty into her sixties is no different than a woman today being considered beautiful in her late thirties or early forties.

“when the Egyptians see you” – Abram had apparently been schooled (whether factual or not) on the customs and behavior of the Egyptians and their despotic king (Pharaoh).

“This is his wife.’ Then they will kill me” – We have no evidence to suppose that this was, in fact, the manner of the Egyptians or of the Pharaoh at that time. We do know that there was such a high regard for the marriage bond in Egyptian culture that adultery was viewed as a heinous crime and there is no evidence that murder was any less so. There was, however, a custom that a Pharaoh, or king, could claim any unmarried woman to become one of his wives. Abram’s fear may have been unfounded and may have been based on the fact that he left Canaan on his own rather than at God’s direction.

Whatever the reason for Abram’s fear, we see that his focus was on his own safety. It also appears that he was not in the habit of asking God for protection. His faith is obviously not very strong at this point in his life. Abram clearly states that he thought the Egyptians would kill him and let Sarai live, but he says nothing about what might happen to Sarai after they killed him. The custom of the land was that a brother had the responsibility to protect a sister and to arrange for her marriage in the absence of her father. (Notice how Laban behaved toward his sister Rebekah in Genesis chapter 24.) However, even a brother or father could not prevent the Pharaoh from claiming an unmarried woman as one of his wives. It appears that Abram was not so much concerned for Sarai’s welfare as he was his own.

“Say you are my sister” – We will discover later in this study that Sarai was Abram’s half-sister:

Besides, she is indeed my sister, the daughter of my father though not the daughter of my mother, and she became my wife. (Genesis 20:12)

Abram was not instructing Sarai to declare an outright lie, and yet the intent was to deceive, therefore it was not a truth either. Whatever is not completely the truth is not the truth at all.

Genesis 12:14-16

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

“when Abram entered Egypt” – According to secular historians Eupolemus and Artapanus, Abram went to the city of Heliopolis, a suburb of present day Cairo, where he taught astrology, and other things belonging to it, to the Egyptian priests and to the Pharaoh. Heliopolis was the capital city of Egypt at the time and the center of their religious practices. Keep in mind that “astrology” was not the fortune telling pseudo-science that it is today. It was, as the word implies, the study (ology) of the heavenly bodies (aster).

“the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful” - In spite of her being “middle aged,” Sarai was an extremely beautiful woman.

“the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house” – The Egyptians found Sarai so beautiful that she was taken to be in Pharaoh’s harem.

“for her sake he dealt well with Abram” – In exchange for having had Sarah taken to be a wife of Pharaoh, Abram was given sheep, oxen, donkeys, camels, and male and female servants.

Genesis 12:17-20

But the LORD afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife. 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? 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." And Pharaoh gave men orders concerning him, and they sent him away with his wife and all that he had.

“the LORD afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues” – We are not told in scripture what the plagues were, but we are told that they were instigated by God. According to the twelfth century Jewish historian, Jarchi, the plagues consisted of ulcer-like sores that broke out on Pharaoh, his household, and his servants.

“because of Sarai” – A literal translation of the Hebrew is, “upon the word of Sarai.” Jewish tradition is that an angel stood by Sarai to protect her and he struck with the plague whomever she said to strike.

“Why did you not tell me that she was your wife?” – According to the secular historian, Eupolemus, the Pharaoh called together his prophets, inquiring of them the cause of the plagues, and that when they told him that it was a result of Sarai having been the wife of Abram, he immediately restored her to him. Whether that is true or not, we see that Pharaoh did indeed discover that Sarai was Abram’s wife. Upon calling for Abram, Pharaoh severely, but politely, chastised him and “invited” him to take his wife and leave the country.

“they sent him away” – This could also be translated, “they escorted him away.” We see that Pharaoh was careful to treat Abram and Sarai properly due to the recently demonstrated power of Abram’s God upon Pharaoh and his household.

“with his wife and all that he had” – It appears that the Egyptian ruler did not attempt to retrieve the gifts he previously gave to Abram. So, Abram’s wealth was significantly increased as a result of his sojourn into Egypt.

So What?

The Great Pretender

Have you ever been in a situation where you cry out to God, “Lord, why is this happening to me?” Certainly you have. We all have! And, have you ever noticed that He seldom answers that heartfelt cry immediately. We want Him to fix whatever is wrong so that we can go on with our life the way we want it to be. Often it takes months or even years before we realize God’s purpose in a difficult situation, and sometimes we never know.

God allows difficult situations in our lives for several reasons. Sometimes he does this to chasten us. In those times it is important for us to recognize that there is sin in our lives. The sooner we humble ourselves and agree with God regarding our sin, the sooner our fellowship is restored with Him. In fact, that’s the very definition of confession, agreeing with God regarding our sin. The Apostle John said:

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1John 1:8-9)

The word translated “confess” is *homologeō*, which is made up of *homos*, meaning “the same” and the verb form of *logos*, meaning “a word,” or more specifically, the thought or idea behind the word. Thus, *homologeō* literally means “to have the same thoughts,” and John says that if we have the same thoughts as God regarding our sin, he will forgive us and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Sometimes, however, God allows difficulties, not to chasten us, but to draw us closer to Him. He knows our hearts and He knows that like dumb sheep we have a tendency to wander away from Him. As young Christians we just complain. We complain that it’s not fair, and we pray that He will fix whatever is wrong so that we can go on with our life the way we want it to be. Sometimes we complain to God, but often we just complain to anyone who will listen. As we grow in our faith, however, we recognize that God allows trouble to come into our lives for a purpose. We learn to draw closer to Him. Our prayer life becomes more fervent. As a result we gain strength from Him to endure through these troubled times, with His praise on our lips. That’s why James tells us:

My brothers, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing. (James 1:2-4)

A body builder lifts weights that are heavier and heavier until he reaches a point where he can’t lift any more. In the process he actually breaks down his muscles, causing micro-tears in the muscles. Then, while he is sleeping, his body repairs the micro-tears and adds a little extra tissue, causing him to become even stronger. And this is the third reason why God allows times of difficulty to assault our lives. He wants us to grow in our faith. He wants us to be strong Christians. He wants us to become more Christ-like. He wants to see how we will act and what we will do in these situations. Or, more accurately, since He already knows how we will react, He wants **us** to see how we respond to difficulties so that we can grow stronger in our faith and our relationship with Him. These are times of testing, or proving, our faith. In times like these, we need to learn to ask “What?” not “Why?”

As we go through our study of Abram, let’s observe how he responds to these times of testing. We will see that he doesn’t do very well at first, but we will see that he grows stronger as he continues his journey with God. Sometimes he falls back into his old ways, but he quickly recovers and forges ahead, keeping his eyes and ears open to God’s leading.

Abram Trial #1 – Truth or Consequences

Let’s look at this trial. Abram has been obedient to God, following His calling out of Ur and five years later out of Haran. He has finally arrived in the land that God promised to him and has been walking through it to check it out. Then, even though he had been obedient, a famine struck the Promised Land. Not only was the food supply for him and his family getting scarce, but his herds were running out of pasture land. So this was not just a matter of discomfort for Abram and his family, his very way of life was being threatened. He was about to lose everything in his checking account, his pension plan was about to go belly-up, his credit cards were maxed out, and he didn’t have Social Security. He needed to do something and do it quickly or all would be

lost. It's possible that Abram heard from the local inhabitants that he should go to Egypt because they had food and pasture land there. But God had called him here, to Canaan, hadn't he? Should he just stick it out, or should he listen to those around him and head south? Would heading to Egypt show a lack of faith on Abram's part? Do you think he prayed about it, or did he just listen to the words of those around him and follow their advice? After all, they had lived there for years and they knew how to survive such difficulties. Finally, out of necessity, he packed-up his tents, gathered his family and herds together and headed down to the land of the Nile River Delta. Was that wrong? I don't think so. I don't think the famine was the trial. I think it was God's way of setting-up the trial.

We've already learned that Egypt represents a type of the world system. It is a land full of people who do not seek after the one true God. It is a land filled with the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. And, just as he commands us to be in the world but not of the world, God wanted Abram to see how easy it is to be just like the world even though God wants us to be different. On the way, as they were about to enter the land of foreign gods, Abram gave Sarai some instructions on how to behave in this worldly land. He instructed her to "Tell these people that you are my sister. Don't tell them you are my wife." He thought his life would be in jeopardy if the Egyptians learned that he was married to the most beautiful woman in the land. Surely this little half-truth would keep him safe! Well – let's look a bit closer at this brilliant plan that Abram devised.

First of all, was it true? Was Sarai really Abram's sister? Well, yes, kind of – They had the same father, but different mothers, so she was his half-sister. That's almost the same, isn't it? It wasn't really a lie, was it? If we lay-out truth on a continuum with *truth* over on the extreme left and *lying* over on the extreme right, where does the truth cease to be the truth and become a lie? Answer: way over next to the extreme left. Anything that is not completely true is not the truth at all, especially when it is meant to deceive, and that's what Abram's intention was. Well, we know what happened. Abram's life was spared and he became even wealthier than he already had been. So what's the problem with that? The problem is that selfish ol' Abe had only been thinking about his own skin. He never considered that Sarai would be put in danger by his cleverly devised plan.

How often we get ourselves into difficult situations because of self-reliance (and often because of sin) where only God can rescue us. Such was the case with Abram. Although at first we may think that what we have done is acceptable to God, sooner or later we recognize that the result we got is not what we really wanted. I wonder how Abram felt having had his beautiful wife taken from him and having been lavished with gifts of wealth in exchange. He surely did not willingly make such a deal with the representatives of Pharaoh, but he had no choice in the matter. He was forced, by fear, to take what was offered to him. Now his predicament was greater than what he had previously envisioned. True, his life had been spared and he was richer than before, but he was now separated from his beloved Sarai, and she was in danger of being violated by the most powerful man in the world! And the worst part of all was, neither Abram nor Sarai could do anything to prevent what appeared to be inevitable.

Abram had received just what he deserved. But what about Sarai, this wasn't her fault; she had just done what she was told to do. After all, it wasn't really a lie, was it? No, no, no, no! Sarai wasn't an innocent bystander. She was in it up to her neck, just the same as Abram. Fortunately, we have a God of mercy and grace who seldom gives us what we really deserve.

We know what happened next, don't we? God stepped-in and resolved the situation, but I'm sure it was not before both Abram and Sarai suffered more than a few nights of tossing and turning in sleepless fear. I'm sure that they both spent hours in prayer, begging God to be merciful and to help them out of the situation. And God was merciful. He spared Sarai from the horrible experience that was looming before her, and Abram's wife was restored to his side, but at what cost? Abram, the future father of God's chosen people, was now known to the most powerful man in the world as a liar and a deceiver! He was banished from the land of plenty. But worse than that, everyone in Abram's family including his nephew Lot and all his servants undoubtedly knew why they were being kicked out of Egypt - Abram was a deceiver. I can only imagine how Abram must have felt as he trudged northward back to the land of famine feeling like a failure, feeling lower than a snakes belly on a dry dusty road.

Have you been there before? Have you wondered why God doesn't just take you home and put you out of your misery?

Well, snap out of it! It's not about you! It's about God!

He wants you to see Him in all His glory. He wants you to recognize who He is, not who you are. He wants your focus on His glory, not on your own self-pity. God loves you just as much as He loved Abram. He wants you to walk with Him and fellowship with Him as you travel through this life. One day He wants you to see His glory in all its magnificence, and He wants you to be able to cast your crown at His feet declaring His praise.

So lift your head. Look to him. Spend more time with Him. Learn what He wants from you. Grow in grace and in your faith. In all your ways acknowledge Him and He will direct your paths. Get your eyes off yourself and on to Him, and give Him all the praise!

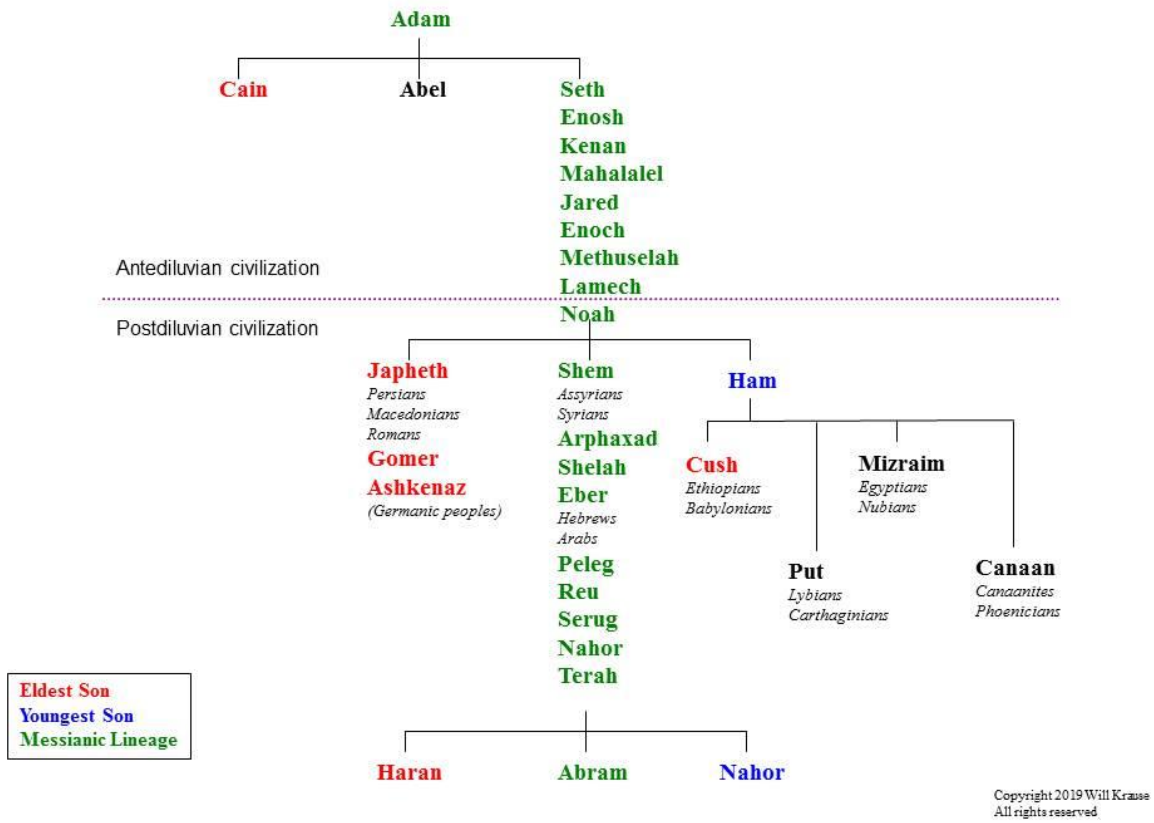


Figure 2 - Family Tree: Adam to Abram

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