

K. A. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, vol. 1B, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2005), 122–130.

### 3. Abram and Sarai in Egypt: Blessing Begins (12:10–13:1)

The events of Abram's sojourn in Egypt, set between the promises of blessing (12:1–3, 7) and the acquisition of riches (13:2), show God is bringing to pass the promises. This account joins the previous episode where the Lord appears to Abram in Canaan (12:4–9), confirming that both inside and outside Canaan the Lord blesses him. However, whereas 12:4–9 tracks Abram's fidelity to God, the episode in Egypt does not commend his actions. The narrative does not convey the impression that Abram is awarded with riches for his conduct; neither does it explicitly condemn him. The author leaves it to Pharaoh to chide the patriarch for his deceit (vv. 18–19). The blessing depends on God's call, not Abram's conduct.

Where conduct does come into play is Pharaoh's mistreatment of the patriarchal family, though in ignorance. The kidnapping of Sarai illustrates the promise of blessing or curse upon the nations (12:3). Despite Pharaoh's ignorance of Sarai's marital status, the Lord counted her mistreatment against him by inflicting plague (v. 17). We will show that the author wants us to read the three "wife-sister" episodes (12:10–13:1; 20:1–18; 26:1–13) in concert (see below), which may suggest that Abram had some intercessory role in behalf of Pharaoh as he did for Abimelech (20:17–18; so for Lot, 18:16–33; see comments on 47:7).

On the surface, the sole reason for this episode is famine (12:10), but the lexical ties between this story of famine-turned-riches and the Lot conflict to follow (13:2) imply that the Egyptian episode created the occasion for the family's riches. Verse 10 has "the famine was severe" (*kābēd hārā'āb*), which in Hebrew is similar to 13:2, "become very wealthy" (*kābēd mē'ōd*). The Lord used the famine to initiate the series of events that resulted in the blessing of the patriarch's house, despite the patriarch's fear and deception of Egypt's king. From the mouth of Pharaoh, Abram hears again the command the Lord had first spoken to him, "Go" (*lēk*; v. 19; 12:1). Abram himself later confesses that any blessing he would receive comes only by God's provision (14:23). Another irony at work may be the repetition of "very" (*mē'ōd*) at 12:14 (Sarai was "very beautiful") and 13:2 (Abraham became "very wealthy"). By virtue of Sarai's beauty, not Abram's ability, the family was enriched. Reportedly, the passage insists that the events turn on account of Sarai (vv. 13, 16, 17), though she is mute throughout the story.

Abram's encounter with Pharaoh foreshadows the last years of Jacob, who with his sons take up residence in Egypt where they are enriched by the court and thereby avoid famine (45:16–20; 47:1–12). Abram's experience in Egypt also offered a typology for the Israelites who were enslaved and freed only after the infliction of grievous plagues, the tenth touching Pharaoh's house through the death of his son. Such a correspondence between father and descendants is underlying the prediction of the Egyptian sojourn in 15:13–14. As with Abram, the Hebrews emerged after their ordeal with many possessions so that it was Egypt that was "plundered" (Exod 3:21–22; 11:2–3; 12:35–36). The second "exodus" from Babylon (Ezra 1:6) may also echo the enrichment of its members by their neighbors. Thus "the past is not allowed to remain in the past" whose lessons continue to instruct God's people.

Also elements in the narrative harken back to the garden episode of chaps. 2–3. Although there are substantive differences in the two stories, similarities in plot and shared vocabulary suggest that the reader is to compare the two. Both accounts involve the backdrop of food (plenty or famine), depend on the idea of deception, and portray the wife in a critical role. Following the

discovery of the deception, there is the interrogation of the parties (by God/Pharaoh), admission of the deed (by Adam/Abram), and expulsion of the parties (from Eden/Egypt). Also the subsequent stories tell of family schism (Cain-Abel/Lot-Abram). Important shared lexical items are lit., “What is this you have done [*’āšītā*] to me?” (12:18; 3:13); “Why didn’t you not tell [*higgadtā*] me?” (12:18) and “Who told [*higgîd*] you?” (3:11); “I know [*yāda tî*]” (12:11) and “God knows” (*yôdēa*) and “like God knowing” (*yôdē’ē*) (3:5); “you will live [*yēhayyû*]” (12:12) and “the mother of all the living [*hāy*]” (3:20); “I will be treated well [good] [*yîtab*]” / “he treated Abram well [good] [*hêtîb*]” (12:13, 16) and “good [*tôb*] and evil” / “good [*tôb*] for food” (3:5–6); “for your sake” (*ba’ābûrēk*) / “for her sake (*ba’ābûrāh*)” (12:13, 16) and “because of you (*ba’ābûrekā*)” (3:17); the officers “saw” (*wayyir’û*) her/she “was taken” (*wattuqqah*) (12:15) and the woman “saw” (*wattēre*) and “took” (*wattiqqah*) (3:6); and lit., “they sent him away” (*waysallēhû’ōtô*, 12:20) and lit., “[the LORD God] sent him away [*waysallēhēhû*]” (3:23).

The significance of reading the two events together is the remarkable difference in the outcomes. Adam and Eve lose the plenty of the garden by complying with the tempter’s deception. This result is reversed in the Abram incident: Abram and Sarai emerge from Egypt wealthy because Pharaoh fell for the deception. The reversal, of course, does not suggest that God condones Abram’s behavior, rather that the Lord will bless Abram and Sarai even though they jeopardized the blessing as did Adam and Eve.

WIFE-SISTER EPISODES. This story is the first of the three celebrated “wife-sister” accounts (12:1–13:1; 20:1–18; 26:1–13) in the patriarchal history. The first and second appear in the Abraham narrative and relate the abduction of Sarai by foreign hosts: Pharaoh in Egypt (12:10–13:1) and King Abimelech in Gerar (20:1–18). The third is the (threat of) abduction of Rebekah by the king of the Philistines in Gerar, also named Abimelech (26:1–13). The three stories possess similarities (e.g., 20:1–18 and 26:13 are set in Gerar), and it is contended that they share in this basic plot: (1) a problem arises; (2) a plan is devised; (3) the plan is carried out but with some complications; (4) an outside intervention occurs; and (5) good or bad consequences follow.

How to explain the relationship of the three episodes is a special topic among scholars. Typically, source critics attribute the triplet to two parallel but independent literary documents: the Yahwist (J) presented 12:10–13:1 (Abram in Egypt) and 26:1–13 (Isaac in Gerar), and the Elohist (E) produced 20:1–18 (Abraham in Gerar). The E account was a compositional variant of the same Abram story provided by the Yahwist in 12:10–13:1. Form and tradition critics departed from this opinion, observing that 20:1–18 is neither a true parallel nor independent of 12:10–13:1 but rather a moralistic adaptation of the story answering the question of “guilt” (20:9) raised in the former Abram story. The Isaac-Rebekah incident (26:1–13) reflects both stories, achieving a parallel between Isaac and his father. R. de Hoop proposes the trilogy is a political allegory critiquing David, who like Abimelech and Pharaoh “took” Bathsheba (2 Sam 11:4) but unlike them murdered her husband (Uriah). De Hoop considers the wife-sister motif a pro-Solomonic account to legitimize his reign. Although the precise relationship of the stories varies among form and tradition critics, they hold in common that (1) the stories were not originally reporting three separate events and (2) were not authored by the same person. T. L. Thompson challenges the notion that the three stories can yield a hypothetical original and can be or should be related developmentally. Although they share the same motifs, they are treated differently in their Genesis context. They are not self-contained units but integral to their respective narratives. What they possess in common is actually their Genesis connections. The three stories are contemporaneous, perhaps showing an awareness of the other but certainly not an interdependence whether oral or written.

Along with the traditional source explanation described above, E. A. Speiser proposed that the wife-sister stories possessed a somewhat garbled rendition of an underlying Hurrian marriage custom (at Nuzi) in which a husband at the time of his marriage also adopted the bride as his “sister.” Although the proposal of a Hurrian connection with the practice of the patriarchs has been strongly resisted,<sup>107</sup> J. K. Hoffmeier has ventured another social custom, the diplomatic marriage, as a possible explanation. Diplomatic marriage involved a monarch’s desire to form a friendly alliance with another king by giving his daughter in marriage. Hoffmeier suggests this may explain the literary connection between the wife-sister stories and

the treaties at Beersheba that accompany them. Since the patriarchs had no daughters to achieve a diplomatic marriage, by a ruse they substituted their wives as sisters for the purpose of enacting a treaty. Although Hoffmeier's proposal may result in viewing the accounts as three separate occurrences of diplomatic marriage, the suggestion of diplomatic marriage does not adequately explain why the patriarchs took the drastic step of substituting a wife when alternatively they could have proffered concubines or, if necessary, by deception presented a concubine as a princess. If Hoffmeier's solution is correct, however, the actions of the patriarchs were especially despicable since the pagan kings themselves did not practice wife swapping and repudiated adultery (see comments on 20:8–10).

T. D. Alexander's literary analysis of the wife-sister accounts led him to agree that the three accounts are separate events, but he relied on the firmer exegetical ground of explaining the stories contextually in their present arrangement. After comparing the three accounts in their details and their structural arrangements, he found that the trio are best explained as independent stories that came from one author. They were composed by the author, who modified them during their incorporation into Genesis; they thus prove to be complimentary stories addressing the wife-sister motif and not literary duplicates or variants of the same episode. Genesis 20:1–18 and 26:1–13 presuppose 12:10–13:1, avoiding unnecessary duplication of earlier details and expanding on different aspects of the motif. For example, the dialogue with the king in 20:8–16 gives a detailed explanation of Abram's rationale for the deception, whereas the motif of deception is only briefly treated in chaps. 12 and 26. The author invites the reader to consider the three incidents together as they are found in the Genesis plot.

That Abraham and Isaac repeated the gimmick is not surprising in light of Abram's admission, "Everywhere we go, say of me, 'He is my brother'" (20:13). As for the mysteries of Sarai's aging and beauty (sixty-five years and ninety years [12:4; 17:17]) in chaps. 12 and 20 and of the continued potency of the elderly Abraham (e.g., Keturah's children, 25:1–4 [with 18:11–12; 21:7]), these elements along with some chronological problems in the stories are usually attributed to the existence of different sources (P's chronology) and the fictive nature of the accounts. The rabbis explained the apparent difficulties of their aging by ascribing to them the effects of the miracle of rejuvenation, which included her youthful appearance and his virility.<sup>10</sup> Alternatively, the longevity of the patriarchs (Sarai, 127 years [23:1]; Abraham, 175 years [25:7]) may explain her attractiveness even at sixty-five years (see comments on 12:11–13). It should be remembered also that 20:2 does not say that Abimelech took Sarah because of her beauty. Some other motivation for her abduction, such as the king's interest in forming a treaty with the Hebrews, may be the explanation (see comments on 20:2).

**STRUCTURE.** The arrangement of this pericope is bounded by the descent of Abram into Egypt, "Abram went down" (12:10), and his return, "Abram went up" (13:1). Sandwiched between are the speeches of Abram and Pharaoh in a chiasmic order within the pericope. Sarai's viewpoint is not reported.

- A Descent of Abram and Sarai (12:10)
- B Abram instructs Sarai (12:11–13)
- C Pharaoh kidnaps Sarai and the Lord intervenes (12:14–17)
- B' Pharaoh instructs Abram and his men (12:18–20)
- A' Ascent of Abram (13:1)

The final verse (13:1) reiterates the outcome of the prior events by "his wife and everything he had" (12:20). As a bridge it anticipates the Lot pericope (13:2) by referring for the first time to Lot's presence: "and Lot went with him" (13:1).

**(1) Abram Instructs Sarai (12:10–13)**

*<sup>10</sup> Now there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to live there for a while because the famine was severe. <sup>11</sup> As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, "I know what a beautiful woman you are. <sup>12</sup> When the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife.' Then they will kill me but will let you live. <sup>13</sup> Say you are my*

*sister, so that I will be treated well for your sake and my life will be spared because of you.”*

**12:10** Famine forced the migrations of the three patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (12:10; 26:1; 42:5; 47:11–13). Both Abraham and Jacob went to Egypt, where they could survive the droughts of Canaan. Egypt’s Nile and, through irrigation, the Tigris-Euphrates valley provided a stable agricultural environment compared to Canaan, which was totally dependent on rainfall. Famine was not exceptional in the history of the ancient Near East, including the river valleys. In the cases of Abram and Jacob the famine in Canaan was sufficiently “severe” to travel outside the land (12:10; 47:13), whereas Isaac journeyed locally to Gerar, where the Lord prohibited him from descending to Egypt (26:1–2). Although famine is associated with divine curse (e.g., Deut 28:23–24; Amos 4:6–8) or at least divine absence (Ruth 1:1, 6), there is no hint of divine disapproval of the patriarchs or any objection to their leaving Canaan. In the case of Jacob, it is specifically condoned by the Lord (46:3–4).

“To live there for a while” translates the term *gûr*, meaning “sojourn,” which usually describes a temporary residence. However, the same language describes the ten-year sojourn of Naomi’s family in Moab (Ruth 1:1, 4). Abraham later identified himself as an “alien [*gēr*] and a stranger” (23:4; cp. 17:8) as did Isaac and Jacob (28:4; 35:27). The importance of the stranger in patriarchal history is illustrated best in chaps. 18–20, where the custom of hospitality plays a central role. A “sojourner” (*gēr*) is a person who lives among a population with whom he usually has no family affiliation (but cp. 32:4) and does not have full citizenship rights. Later, special protections are afforded for aliens living among Israel on the basis that Israel once had been sojourners in Egypt (e.g., Deut 16:9–12; Gen 15:13).

**12:11–13** When reading the incident together with Abram’s later confession to Abimelech (20:11–13), we discover the full rationale and the premeditated plan of the deception. Abram fears two things: (1) Sarai’s beauty will draw the attention of powerful men (12:11–12), and (2) since these men do not abide by the ethic of Abram’s God, they will murder him and take her for a wife (20:11). By a ruse Sarai presented herself as his sister (12:13) and, accordingly, acknowledged Abram as “my brother” (20:13). The genius of the ruse was its half-truth. Abram could claim the truth—“she really is my sister” (20:12)—since they had the same father, and at the same time he avoids reference to her as wife (12:12). But the folly of Abram’s plan was its consequences. Although he would save his life, he jeopardized his future by placing at risk Sarai, the mother of the promised son. Moreover, others suffered because of the deception, bringing guilt on themselves unknowingly (12:17–18; 20:9; 26:10).

That Abram’s fears were probably well founded may be seen in David’s abduction of Bathsheba and the murder of her husband, Uriah. How long Abram thought such a story could go undetected we cannot know. Sarai is essential to the success of the plot, but as for culpability, Sarai is little more than a pawn in the caper and bears no guilt. The guilt lies with the men (see more below); in both 12:10–13:1 and 20:1–18 she has no dialogue. We have no idea what she thinks of this matter, but we may surmise that her silence meant compliance with her husband’s wishes. Generally, Hebrew narrative does not describe the physical features of the characters unless it is necessary for the plot. Modern readers stumble before the description of Sarai as a “beautiful woman” at sixty-five years old (v. 11). This reflects the significant cultural gap between our day and the time of the patriarchs, when beauty was measured by one’s eyes and form (e.g., 29:17). In the Gerar incident (20:1–18), it is not clear whether her beauty is assumed as the reason for the king’s interest or if Abimelech’s interest was her eminent status as Abraham’s relative.

(2) *Pharaoh Abducts Sarai (12:14–17)*

<sup>14</sup> *When Abram came to Egypt, the Egyptians saw that she was a very beautiful woman.*

<sup>15</sup> *And when Pharaoh's officials saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh, and she was taken into his palace. <sup>16</sup> He treated Abram well for her sake, and Abram acquired sheep and cattle, male and female donkeys, menservants and maidservants, and camels.*

<sup>17</sup> **But the LORD inflicted serious diseases on Pharaoh and his household because of Abram's wife Sarai.**

**12:14–17** Verse 14 accentuates Sarai's beauty, "very" (*mē'ōd*) beautiful," explaining why Pharaoh's officials picked her out readily. Her acquisition into the royal harem is suggested by her residence in the "palace" (v. 15). Abduction of beautiful women may have been common as the reward of warfare; Israel's law set boundaries on the practice, requiring marriage (Deut 21:10–14).

Verse 16 is a brief but important digression in the story line. As for the gifts offered Abram, the language of bridal gift (*mōhar*; see comments on 34:12) does not occur, but compensation may have been the motivation for the gifts, not merely favor toward Abram. The animals and human servants listed are typically associated with wealthy persons (e.g., Job 1:3).

The NIV's translation of v. 17, "But the LORD inflicted" highlights the contrast between Abram's welfare and that of Pharaoh. "Diseases" translates the Hebrew for "plagues," which is the same word describing the ten plagues against Pharaoh (Exod 11:1). The term refers to skin disease in Mosaic legislation (Lev 13), and the verbal form describes the leprous judgment by the Lord against Uzziah (2 Kgs 15:5). "His house" probably refers to the members of his royal court, including his harem, as with King Abimelech (20:7, 17).

(3) *Pharaoh Expels Abram (12:18–13:1)*

<sup>18</sup> *So Pharaoh summoned Abram. "What have you done to me?" he said. "Why didn't you tell me she was your wife?" <sup>19</sup> Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her to be my wife? Now then, here is your wife. Take her and go!" <sup>20</sup> Then Pharaoh gave orders about Abram to his men, and they sent him on his way, with his wife and everything he had.*

<sup>1</sup> **So Abram went up from Egypt to the Negev, with his wife and everything he had, and Lot went with him.**

**12:18–20** Unlike the parallel wife-sister stories (20:7; 26:8), this brief account does not explain how Pharaoh discovered the ruse. His three successive questions demonstrate indignant anger against Abram, describing his behavior as an offense against him personally (vv. 18–19). Again, due to the terseness of this account no place is given to Abram's response, and Pharaoh immediately follows his interrogation with the presentation of Sarai, lit., "behold [*hinnē*] your wife." Pharaoh insists on his departure, whereas Abimelech, probably impressed with Abram's status as a prophet (20:7), welcomes him to live in Gerar (20:15). The dismissal is not left to Abram's timing; Pharaoh ensures his expulsion by assigning "men," a different term than "officials" (v. 15), to escort him and Sarai with "everything he had."

**13:1** The closing verse to the Egypt pericope reports Abram's return to the Negev, repeating 12:20 by the phrase "everything he had" (*kol 'ăšer lô*). The phrase signifies the wealth he had accumulated to this point (cf. Jacob, 31:21; 46:1; Potiphar, 39:6). Also, the same Hebrew describes Abram's wealth, which will be Isaac's inheritance (24:36; 25:5; also see 24:2). For the second time (12:5), the narrative reports Lot's presence with Abram, preparing the reader for the Abram-Lot stories to follow. Mention of Lot last after Abram's possessions may hint at the separation to come.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> K. A. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, vol. 1B, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2005), 122–130.