



Sunday School Lesson
Genesis 20
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A Strange Encounter



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Quick Links to the Study

I. [Context](#)

- a. [Historical](#)
- b. [Literary](#)

II. [Message](#)

- a. [A Nightmare, vv. 1-7](#)
- b. [Confrontation, vv. 8-18](#)

Again we take a look at an episode in the book of Genesis. This time, it is in the life of Abraham. Genesis twenty is one of the more exotic narratives in the Abraham cycle of patriarchal narratives. In the Smyth-Helwys Formation series this is the second lesson under the unit theme “Repairing Relationships,” and the focus is on “Repairing Relationships with My Neighbor.” The central idea is applicable to the scripture text, but hopefully none of us will ever find ourselves in the same situation of Abraham in this passage.

I Context

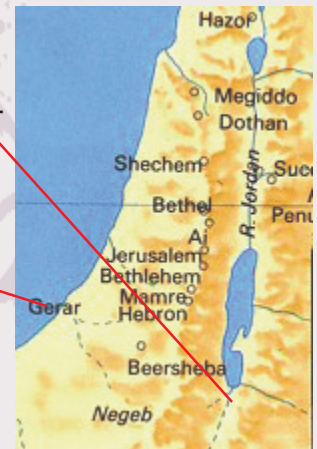
Since we have already treated the larger historical and literary issues in [the previous lesson](#), a quick summary of them is all that we will provide here. More detail will then be given to those issues more directly related to Genesis 20.

a. Historical

Regarding the **external history**, genesis came together as a finalized document toward the end of the OT era in either the exilic or post-exilic eras. Multiple written sources were utilized, that were based upon a centuries old oral tradition passed on from generation to generation among the various elements of the Israelite people.

The **internal history** of chapter twenty focuses upon events taking place at the desert settlement of Gerar. Abraham had migrated from the region of Zoar at the southern end of the Dead Sea (assuming that “there” in 20:1 implies this general region), settling first in between Kadesh and Shur. This was near the Negeb wilderness. Then he migrated northwestward to Gerar.

At [Zoar \(Gen. 19:30-38\)](#) Lot had the horrible experience of impregnating his two daughters after they seduced him out of fear that no male heir was going to be around to inherit Lot’s possessions and take care of them. Two sons were born of this foul action: Moab from the older daughter, and Ben-ammi from the younger daughter. Zoar has a terrible history in the Bible where it is mentioned [some nine times](#). Only a brief description is given in most Bible dictionaries as the illustration from the *Baker’s Encyclopedia of the Bible* below:



One of the “cities of the plain” confederated with Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboiim (Gn 14:2, 8). Zoar, also known by its earlier name Bela (v 2), is best known as the town which served as a temporary refuge for Lot and his daughters during the destruction of Sodom and the other cities of the plain (19:22, 23, 30). Despite the fact that Zoar was evidently a small town (19:22; Zoar means “little”), this place was evidently considered a significant geographical landmark in ancient times. When Abraham and Lot divided the

land, Lot selected the land “in the direction of Zoar” (13:10). When Moses surveyed the Promised Land from Mt Pisgah, Zoar was reckoned as the southern terminus of the plain of the valley of Jericho (Dt 34:3). During the prophetic period Zoar was evidently considered to be on or just south of the southern boundary of Moab (Is 15:5; Jer 48:4, 34).

Gerar shows up mostly as a boundary marker settlement as well in [the ten times](#) the name surfaces in the Old Testament. During this early period, Gerar and its king Abimelech show up in connection with both Abraham and Isaac, usually in a favorable light, as described also in the *Baker’s Encyclopedia of the Bible*:

City located in the western Negeb. It was used as a geographical landmark defining the western boundary of the Canaanite territory from Sidon to Gaza (Gn 10:19). Abraham resided temporarily in this city, at which time he deceived Abimelech the king by giving him the impression that Sarah was his sister (20:1, 2). Later, Isaac settled in this city and also disguised his marriage to Rebekah for fear of reprisals from the men of the city. Isaac eventually left the town, moving to the nearby valley of Gerar on account of his conflicts with the Philistines. Here the herdsmen of Gerar quarreled with Isaac’s servants over a newly dug well, and Abimelech king of the Philistines made a covenant with Isaac (26:1–26). It is doubtful that King Abimelech of Gerar (Gn 20:2) was the same person as Abimelech, king of the Philistines (Gn 26:8). Abimelech was probably a surname or an official title.

During the patriarchal period, Gerar appeared as a dominant Canaanite city in the Negeb; however, in Joshua’s recounting of the conquest, this town was not named among the Philistine cities yet to be conquered (Jos 13:2, 3) or in the list of cities already defeated (15:21, 22). Later, in the period of the kings, Gerar was mentioned as the southernmost city to which the Ethiopian army fled before it was completely destroyed by King Asa of Judah (910–869 B.C.) and his army (2 Chr 14:13, 14). Perhaps the fertile valley of Gedor (1 Chr 4:39; cf. Gn 26:17), formerly inhabited by the sons of Ham (cf. Gn 10:9), was identical with the valley of Gerar. Gedor was possibly a later scribal error where the copyist confused the Hebrew letter *r* for a *d*.

The site of Gerar is identifiable with Tell Abu Hureireh along the northwestern bank of the Wadi esh-Sheriiah, 15 miles northwest of Beersheba and 12 miles southeast of Gaza.

The final internal history issue relates to the identity of King **Abimelech**. The name Abimelech is mentioned [some 60 times](#) in the OT in regard to four separate individuals, but only the first 23 instances relate to the person in our passage. Quite interestingly, Isaac later on will pull a similar stunt with his wife Rebekah with Abimelech as did Abraham in our passage ([Gen 26](#)). Isaac was not as successful in establishing long term positive relations with Abimelech as was Abraham. Not much is usually said about this individual, as the article in *Eerdmans’ Dictionary of the Bible* reflects:

The king of Gerar who, believing Sarah to be Abraham’s sister, took her for his own spouse (Gen. 20:2) until God revealed to him that she was Abraham’s wife and death would be the result of his molesting her. Abimelech also appears in a similar story involving Rebekah and Isaac (Gen. 26:1–16), where he warns others not to molest Rebekah or they will be put to death, suggesting he learned from the first episode. In this latter tale he is called “Abimelech of the Philistines,” which can only be an anachronism reflecting a story told well after the events were supposed to have taken place.

He is most remembered for innocently taking, or almost taking, the wives of both Abraham and Isaac.

b. Literary

The literary setting of our passage falls in the patriarchal narratives of Gen 12-50. Of the four patriarchs to receive detailed attention in these chapters, Abraham clearly “gets the most press.” The Abraham cycle covers Gen 11:27 - 25:11. Of the 38 chapters devoted to the patriarchs, some 14 of them treat Abraham. Barry Bandstra in *Reading the Old Testament* (3rd edition) divides these cycles as follows:

1. Call and Covenant, chaps 12-17
2. Abraham and Isaac, chaps 18-22
3. Last Days, chaps 23-25

Our passage is set in the second segment of stories, reflecting the period of Abraham’s migration around the land of Canaan while he was building a massive wealth in flocks of cattle, sheep and goats. This second cycle is then subdivided by Bandstra into the following subsections:

- a. Birth Announcement, chaps 18-19
- b. Threat, chaps 20-21
- c. Testing, chap 22

Most of the content in chapters 20 and 21 revolve around Abraham and Abimelech. All of chapter 20 is given over to this. After the brief description of the birth of both Ishmael and Issac (21:1-21), attention is drawn again to a covenant between Abraham and Abimelech (21:22-34). This covenant to not lie to one another was initiated by Abimelech with Abraham (vv. 22-24) and is followed by a tense episode where Abraham proves that he had not spoken falsely regarding the digging of a well (vv. 25-34).

Thus the larger picture reminds us that the deception early on by Abraham haunted him years later and caused him to have to go out of his way to establish the image of truthfulness to this king. In spite of this, relations seemed to flow reasonably well between these two powerful men.

II. Message

The internal structure of this chapter flows mostly between the dream in which God spoke to Abimelech (vv. 1-7) and the subsequent confrontation of Abraham by Abimelech (vv. 8-18).

a. A Nightmare, vv. 1-7

NASB

1 Now Abraham journeyed from there toward the land of the Negev, and settled between Kadesh and Shur; then he sojourning in Gerar. 2 Abraham said of Sarah his wife, "She is my sister." So Abimelech king of Gerar sent and took Sarah. 3 But God came to Abimelech in a dream of the night, and said to him, "Behold, you are a dead man because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is married." 4 Now Abimelech had not come near her; and he said, "Lord, will You slay a nation, even *though* blameless? 5 "Did he not himself say to me, 'She is my sister'? And she herself said, 'He is my brother.' In the integrity of my heart and the innocence of my hands I have done this." 6 Then God said to him in the dream, "Yes, I know that in the integrity of your heart you have done this, and I also kept you from sinning against Me; therefore I did not let you touch her. 7 "Now therefore, restore the man's wife, for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you and you will live. But if you do not restore *her*, know that you shall surely die, you and all who are yours."

NRSV

1 From there Abraham journeyed toward the region of the Negeb, and settled between Kadesh and Shur. While residing in Gerar as an alien, 2 Abraham said of his wife Sarah, "She is my sister." And King Abimelech of Gerar sent and took Sarah. 3 But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night, and said to him, "You are about to die because of the woman whom you have taken; for she is a married woman." 4 Now Abimelech had not approached her; so he said, "Lord, will you destroy an innocent people? 5 Did he not himself say to me, "She is my sister'? And she herself said, "He is my brother.' I did this in the integrity of my heart and the innocence of my hands." 6 Then God said to him in the dream, "Yes, I know that you did this in the integrity of your heart; furthermore it was I who kept you from sinning against me. Therefore I did not let you touch her. 7 Now then, return the man's wife; for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you and you shall live. But if you do not restore her, know that you shall surely die, you and all that are yours."

NLT

1 Now Abraham moved south to the Negev and settled for a while between Kadesh and Shur at a place called Gerar. 2 Abraham told people there that his wife, Sarah, was his sister. So King Abimelech sent for her and had her brought to him at his palace. 3 But one night God came to Abimelech in a dream and told him, "You are a dead man, for that woman you took is married." 4 But Abimelech had not slept with her yet, so he said, "Lord, will you kill an innocent man? 5 Abraham told me, 'She is my sister,' and she herself said, 'Yes, he is my brother.' I acted in complete innocence!" 6 "Yes, I know you are innocent," God replied. "That is why I kept you from sinning against me; I did not let you touch her. 7 Now return her to her husband, and he will pray for you, for he is a prophet. Then you will live. But if you don't return her to him, you can be sure that you and your entire household will die."

Notes:

The episode begins with the setting of the scene in verse 1 in terms of transitions from the previous narrative and identification of the geographical location of the story: "[From there Abraham journeyed toward the](#)

region of the Negeb, and settled between Kadesh and Shur. While residing in Gerar as an alien..." These basic issues have already been discussed under the [internal history](#) section.

The mentioning of "as an alien" brings up an interesting issue. An earlier episode is very similar to our passage. It is found in 12:10-20 and merits listing because of the similarities:

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

14 When Abram entered Egypt the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful. 15 When the officials of Pharaoh saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh. And the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house. 16 And for her sake he dealt well with Abram; and he had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male and female slaves, female donkeys, and camels. 17 But the Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife. 18 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? 19 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 be gone." 20 And Pharaoh gave his men orders concerning him; and they set him on the way, with his wife and all that he had.

At the outset we see the "as an alien" phrase in reference to Abraham traveling to Egypt to get relief from the famine. Additionally, there is the agreement for Sarah to tell others that she is Abraham's sister. The Pharaoh takes her for his wife but suffers severe punishment for his actions. Eventually, he finds out Sarah is Abraham's wife and returns her to Abraham with orders for Abraham to leave Egypt for his deceptive action.

The idea of being an alien plays a significant role in the Bible with [some 67 uses](#) of the English word "alien" in the New Revised Standard Version. The Hebrew word גֵר ([guwr](#)) connotes living as a foreigner in a place other than one's birthplace. [This concept](#) has important ramifications for being Jewish and non-Jewish, but Abraham here is the "outsider" among Canaanites and Egyptians. Thus symbolically he stands free from their corruption as such, and will eventually become an affirmation of the exclusiveness of developing Israelite stances toward the Canaanites. Yet he is capable of getting along with the local people as the unfolding story asserts.

The other introductory scene segment surfaces in verse 2: "While residing in Gerar as an alien, 2 Abraham said of his wife Sarah, 'She is my sister.' And King Abimelech of Gerar sent and took Sarah." Abraham passed off Sarah as his sister rather than his wife, as he had [earlier done](#) in Egypt. Sometimes one quickly forgets hard lessons learned from the past. Some commentators believe this narrative is inserted here precisely to exegete the 12:9-20 episode with new angles on how God works in a similar situation.

For me the most troubling aspects of this are, first, that Abraham and Sarah were at the same time half-brother and sister, as well as husband and wife (cf. 11:31). The ancient world was a very different world than ours, and a few things have gotten better with the passing of time. Secondly, that any man would pass off his wife as a sister just in order to avoid danger to himself is difficult to stomach. Abraham did this not once, but twice. The failure of Abraham here is important to note. This most likely plays a role in the instability of his family most all of his life.

The main aspect of this part of the episode is God coming to Abimelech in a dream with a warning (vv. 3-7). A dialogue between the king and God characterizes the narrative.

a. God speaking (v. 3): "But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night, and said to him, 'You are about to die because of the woman whom you have taken; for she is a married woman.'" This happened before the king had attempted to have intimate relations with Sarah, but the divine warning was that if he did he would die as punishment from God. God revealed to the king that Sarah was a married woman already.

b. Abimelech speaking (vv. 4-5): "4 Now Abimelech had not approached her; so he said, 'Lord, will you destroy an innocent people? 5 Did he not himself say to me, 'She is my sister'? And she herself said, 'He is my brother.' I did this in the integrity of my heart and the innocence of my hands.'" The king pleads his case before God that although he had taken Sarah, he had done so only because he thought she was Abraham's sister. In contrast, no conversation between the Egyptian ruler and God took place (cf. 12:14-20). He made this discovery only through suffering divine judgment. Thus Abimelech comes off easier than did the pharaoh.

c. God speaking (vv. 6-7): "6 Then God said to him in the dream, 'Yes, I know that you did this in the integrity of

your heart; furthermore it was I who kept you from sinning against me. Therefore I did not let you touch her. 7 Now then, return the man's wife; for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you and you shall live. But if you do not restore her, know that you shall surely die, you and all that are yours.” The sovereignty of God is here affirmed. God had worked all along to prevent the king from an action that would have brought his death. Abimelech is told sternly to return Sarah to Abraham, and is warned of severe consequences if he doesn't.

One item of special note: for the first time in the Bible a word for “prophet” is used, and Abraham is termed a prophet. It is Abraham's intercessory prayer as a prophet that will save Abimelech from death when Sarah is returned. The Hebrew word נביא (*Nabiy*) used here occurs almost 300 times in the Old Testament. Thus Abraham stands at the threshold of what would become a rich Israelite tradition of prophets who would speak for God and minister to God's people.

What can we learn from these verses? One thing is clear: people don't have to be perfect before God can use them! Abraham was far from that. His actions here clearly demonstrate that. Another thing: one learns lessons often the hard way, by repeating them. That was Abraham's case. This was the second time he had done this to Sarah. Only by God's intervention had Sarah not been violated by another man. Although the culture of that time did not look down on what Abraham had done, the biblical narrative clearly affirms that this action by Abraham was considered wrong by God.

A third lesson is that God can come to other people other than his covenant people. God chose to speak to Abimelech as a means of rebuking Abraham. We sometimes need to listen to our critics, God may be trying to say something to us through them. Finally, the power of intercessory prayer is affirmed here. Abraham, in spite of his failures, was still God's prophet whose prayer could save Abimelech. God continues to do much through people praying.

b. Confrontation, vv. 8-18

NASB

8 So Abimelech arose early in the morning and called all his servants and told all these things in their hearing; and the men were greatly frightened. 9 Then Abimelech called Abraham and said to him, "What have you done to us? And how have I sinned against you, that you have brought on me and on my kingdom a great sin? You have done to me things that ought not to be done." 10 And Abimelech said to Abraham, "What have you encountered, that you have done this thing?" 11 Abraham said, "Because I thought, surely there is no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife. 12 "Besides, she actually is my sister, the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother, and she became my wife; 13 and it came about, when God caused me to wander from my father's house, that I said to her, 'This is the kindness which you will show to me:

NRSV

8 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. 9 Then Abimelech called Abraham, and said to him, "What have you done to us? How have I sinned against you, that you have brought such great guilt on me and my kingdom? You have done things to me that ought not to be done." 10 And Abimelech said to Abraham, "What were you thinking of, that you did this thing?" 11 Abraham said, "I did it because I thought, There is no fear of God at all in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife. 12 Besides, she is indeed my sister, the daughter of my father but not the daughter of my mother; and she became my wife. 13 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

NLT

8 Abimelech got up early the next morning and hastily called a meeting of all his servants. When he told them what had happened, great fear swept through the crowd. 9 Then Abimelech called for Abraham. "What is this you have done to us?" he demanded. "What have I done to you that deserves treatment like this, making me and my kingdom guilty of this great sin? This kind of thing should not be done! 10 Why have you done this to us?" 11 "Well," Abraham said, "I figured this to be a godless place. I thought, 'They will want my wife and will kill me to get her.' 12 Besides, she is my sister – we both have the same father, though different mothers – and I married her. 13 When God sent me to travel far from my father's home, I told her, 'Wherever we go, have the kindness to say that you are my sister.'" 14 Then Abimelech took sheep and oxen and servants – both men and women – and

everywhere we go, say of me, "He is my brother.'" 14 Abimelech then took sheep and oxen and male and female servants, and gave them to Abraham, and restored his wife Sarah to him. 15 Abimelech said, "Behold, my land is before you; settle wherever you please." 16 To Sarah he said, "Behold, I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver; behold, it is your vindication before all who are with you, and before all men you are cleared." 17 Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech and his wife and his maids, so that they bore *children*. 18 For the LORD had closed fast all the wombs of the household of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife.

brother.'" 14 Then Abimelech took sheep and oxen, and male and female slaves, and gave them to Abraham, and restored his wife Sarah to him. 15 Abimelech said, "My land is before you; settle where it pleases you." 16 To Sarah he said, "Look, I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver; it is your exoneration before all who are with you; you are completely vindicated." 17 Then Abraham prayed to God; and God healed Abimelech, and also healed his wife and female slaves so that they bore children. 18 For the LORD had closed fast all the wombs of the house of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife.

gave them to Abraham, and he returned his wife, Sarah, to him. 15 "Look over my kingdom, and choose a place where you would like to live," Abimelech told him. 16 Then he turned to Sarah. "Look," he said, "I am giving your 'brother' a thousand pieces of silver to compensate for any embarrassment I may have caused you. This will settle any claim against me in this matter." 17 Then Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech, his wife, and the other women of the household, so they could have children. 18 For the LORD had stricken all the women with infertility as a warning to Abimelech for having taken Abraham's wife.

Notes:

This second part of the passage deals with the confrontation between Abimelech and Abraham. This time the outsider is the hero and Abraham wears the black hat. The scene also revolves around a conversation between the two men.

a. Scene setup (v. 8): "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." The deep fear reflected not only by the king but his servants disproves Abraham's flimsy excuse in verse 11: "Abraham said, 'I did it because I thought, There is no fear of God at all in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife.'"

b. Abimelech taking (vv. 9-10): "9 Then Abimelech called Abraham, and said to him, 'What have you done to us? How have I sinned against you, that you have brought such great guilt on me and my kingdom? You have done things to me that ought not to be done.' 10 And Abimelech said to Abraham, 'What were you thinking of, that you did this thing?'" Quite interesting is a comparison between Abimelech and the Egyptian pharaoh. The character of each surfaces in the way they confront Abraham for the same action: "18 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? 19 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 be gone.'" G. J. Wenham in the *Word Biblical Commentary* has a helpful summation:

This dialogue between Abimelech and Abraham is similar in fashion to the Pharaoh's address to Abraham in 12:18-19. Both say "What have you done?" echoing 3:13. But thereafter the speeches and actions diverge markedly. Pharaoh put all the blame on Abraham; Abimelech admits he is partly to blame. Pharaoh gave Abraham no chance to reply; Abimelech does. Pharaoh expelled Abraham from Egypt immediately; Abimelech lets Abraham have the pick of the land. In short, this story paints quite a sympathetic portrait of Abimelech, to which this dialogue makes a central contribution. Abimelech's speeches are not simply harsh condemnation. Rather, they mix moral indignation with a sense of shock, and Abraham's lame replies tend to increase our sympathy for Abimelech.

9 This verse contains two rhetorical questions and a statement of fundamental moral principle. With "What have you done to us?" cf. 12:18, "What have you done to me?" Whereas Pharaoh was concerned for himself, Abimelech is worried about his kingdom, a point reinforced by the second question, "How ... you have brought upon me and my kingdom a great sin?" Abimelech is concerned especially for his subjects' welfare, the mark of a good ruler (cf. LH 1:27-49; 24:1-78; Ps 72; Isa 11:1-5). Furthermore, whereas Pharaoh just asked Abraham why he had lied, Abimelech asks "How have I sinned against you?" The very phrasing implies his moral earnestness. Abimelech suggests he must have behaved terribly badly to provoke Abraham to make him fall into a "great sin," a well-known Near Eastern description of adultery (Rabinowitz, Moran). Compared with Pharaoh's colorless "I took

her,” Abimelek’s “great sin” and “ways that never ought to be done” (cf. the same usage for flagrant sexual misbehavior in 34:7; 2 Sam 13:12) again highlight his moral concern.

b. Abraham speaking (vv. 11-14): “11 Abraham said, “I did it because I thought, There is no fear of God at all in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife. 12 Besides, she is indeed my sister, the daughter of my father but not the daughter of my mother; and she became my wife. 13 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.” The first justification Abraham offered (v.11), although sincerely felt, was completely unjustified by the reaction of Abimelech and his servants to God’s instructions to him (v. 8). Appearances were not reality. The second reason (v.12) was accurate, as Abraham explains the full connection between himself and Sarah. Thus he didn’t technically lie to Abimelech; just didn’t tell him the full truth. Thirdly (v. 13) what Sarah said earlier was in compliance with an agreement made years before. Quite interestingly Sarah’s striking beauty became a risk rather than an asset; one that made Abraham do strange things rather than standing up for her.

c. Abimelech speaking (vv. 15-16): “15 Abimelech said, “My land is before you; settle where it pleases you.’ 16 To Sarah he said, ‘Look, I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver; it is your exoneration before all who are with you; you are completely vindicated.” The king spoke kind words to both Abraham and Sarah. Again Wenham (WBC) has a helpful summation:

Abimelek’s generosity comes again to expression here. Chaps. 13–14 disclosed that Abraham was a very wealthy sheikh with large flocks and herds, so that he and Lot had to separate, because there were too many of them to dwell together (13:6). Yet Abimelek, king of the small city-state of Gerar, allows Abraham the pick of his land. “Look, my land is before you. Dwell wherever you like.”

“A thousand silver shekels” (a shekel = 12 grams/0.4 ounces). Fifty shekels was the maximum ever asked for in bride money (Deut 22:29); the typical old Babylonian laborer received a wage of about half a shekel a month. This gives an indication of the scale of Abimelek’s compensation. But note the barbed “I am giving ... to your brother”—not “to your husband.” Despite his prompt obedience to God’s instructions and his display of magnanimity toward Abraham, Abimelech still resented Abraham’s behavior.

“That is for you as compensation,” lit. “covering of eyes.” The exact meaning of this unique phrase is unclear. The gift makes one blind to what has happened (cf. 32:21 [20]; Job 9:24). But it is not clear whether it is Sarah’s eyes or other people’s eyes that are covered, in other words, that they no longer look on her as a compromised woman. The last clause, “in everything you will be justified,” seems to favor the latter, though it is grammatically difficult.

The king’s generosity here is remarkable -- and very much unlike the Egyptian pharaoh who ordered Abraham to leave Egypt immediately. The barbed reference to Abraham as Sarah’s brother would surface again in the later encounter where Abimelech challenged Abraham to “now therefore swear to me here by God that you will not deal falsely with me or with my offspring or with my posterity, but as I have dealt loyally with you, you will deal with me and with the land where you have resided as an alien” (Gen 21:23).

d. Closing scene (vv. 17-18): “17 Then Abraham prayed to God; and God healed Abimelech, and also healed his wife and female slaves so that they bore children. 18 For the Lord had closed fast all the wombs of the house of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham’s wife.” Abraham, the prophet, prayed for Abimelech. The result was not just deliverance from death, but healing. This is explained as the failure to have children from the time that Sarah was taken into the king’s house. One point that emerges here: the time period for this episode has to cover a period of several months, if not years. Additionally, it explains that divine punishment for taking Sarah into the king’s house was going on, although nothing is said about it in God’s vision to Abimelech.

This is one of those “happy ending” kind of stories. The narrator wants us the reader to understand that when anyone gets in God’s will, good things happen. Also, it reminds us that everyone makes mistakes and sometimes they are huge. But when we have a willingness to do God’s bidding, not only is there forgiveness but there is healing, which means blessing.

Although this narrative has a strange tone to it, we can learn much from it about doing God’s will and avoiding mistakes -- which always have consequences.

NASB

1 Now Abraham journeyed from there toward the land of the Negev, and settled between Kadesh and Shur; then he sojourned in Gerar. 2 Abraham said of Sarah his wife, "She is my sister." So Abimelech king of Gerar sent and took Sarah. 3 But God came to Abimelech in a dream of the night, and said to him, "Behold, you are a dead man because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is married." 4 Now Abimelech had not come near her; and he said, "Lord, will You slay a nation, even *though* blameless? 5 "Did he not himself say to me, 'She is my sister'? And she herself said, 'He is my brother.' In the integrity of my heart and the innocence of my hands I have done this." 6 Then God said to him in the dream, "Yes, I know that in the integrity of your heart you have done this, and I also kept you from sinning against Me; therefore I did not let you touch her. 7 "Now therefore, restore the man's wife, for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you and you will live. But if you do not restore *her*, know that you shall surely die, you and all who are yours."

8 So Abimelech arose early in the morning and called all his servants and told all these things in their hearing; and the men were greatly frightened. 9 Then Abimelech called Abraham and said to him, "What have you done to us? And how have I sinned against you, that you have brought on me and on my kingdom a great sin? You have done to me things that ought not to be done." 10 And Abimelech said to Abraham, "What have you encountered, that you have done this thing?" 11 Abraham said, "Because I thought, surely there is no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife. 12 "Besides, she actually is my sister, the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother, and she became my wife; 13 and it came about, when God caused me to wander from my father's house, that I said to her, 'This is the kindness which you will show to me: everywhere we go, say of me, "He is my brother.'"" 14 Abimelech then took sheep and oxen and male and female servants, and gave them to Abraham, and restored his wife Sarah to him. 15 Abimelech said, "Behold, my land is before you; settle wherever you please." 16 To Sarah he said, "Behold, I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver; behold, it is your vindication before all who are with you, and before all men you are cleared." 17 Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech and his wife and his maids, so that they bore *children*. 18 For the LORD had closed fast all the wombs of the household of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife.

NRSV

1 From there Abraham journeyed toward the region of the Negeb, and settled between Kadesh and Shur. While residing in Gerar as an alien, 2 Abraham said of his wife Sarah, "She is my sister." And King Abimelech of Gerar sent and took Sarah. 3 But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night, and said to him, "You are about to die because of the woman whom you have taken; for she is a married woman." 4 Now Abimelech had not approached her; so he said, "Lord, will you destroy an innocent people? 5 Did he not himself say to me, 'She is my sister'? And she herself said, 'He is my brother.' I did this in the integrity of my heart and the innocence of my hands." 6 Then God said to him in the dream, "Yes, I know that you did this in the integrity of your heart; furthermore it was I who kept you from sinning against me. Therefore I did not let you touch her. 7 Now then, return the man's wife; for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you and you shall live. But if you do not restore her, know that you shall surely die, you and all that are yours."

8 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. 9 Then Abimelech called Abraham, and said to him, "What have you done to us? How have I sinned against you, that you have brought such great guilt on me and my kingdom? You have done things to me that ought not to be done." 10 And Abimelech said to Abraham, "What were you thinking of, that you did this thing?" 11 Abraham said, "I did it because I thought, There is no fear of God at all in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife. 12 Besides, she is indeed my sister, the daughter of my father but not the daughter of my mother; and she became my wife. 13 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.' " 14 Then Abimelech took sheep and oxen, and male and female slaves, and gave them to Abraham, and restored his wife Sarah to him. 15 Abimelech said, "My land is before you; settle where it pleases you." 16 To Sarah he said, "Look, I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver; it is your exoneration before all who are with you; you are completely vindicated." 17 Then Abraham prayed to God; and God healed Abimelech, and also healed his wife and female slaves so that they bore children. 18 For the Lord had closed fast all the wombs of the house of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife.

NLT

1 Now Abraham moved south to the Negev and settled for a while between Kadesh and Shur at a place called Gerar. 2 Abraham told people there that his wife, Sarah, was his sister. So King Abimelech sent for her and had her brought to him at his palace. 3 But one night God came to Abimelech in a dream and told him, "You are a dead man, for that woman you took is married." 4 But Abimelech had not slept with her yet, so he said, "Lord, will you kill an innocent man? 5 Abraham told me, 'She is my sister,' and she herself said, 'Yes, he is my brother.' I acted in complete innocence!" 6 "Yes, I know you are innocent," God replied. "That is why I kept you from sinning against me; I did not let you touch her. 7 Now return her to her husband, and he will pray for you, for he is a prophet. Then you will live. But if you don't return her to him, you can be sure that you and your entire household will die."

8 Abimelech got up early the next morning and hastily called a meeting of all his servants. When he told them what had happened, great fear swept through the crowd. 9 Then Abimelech called for Abraham. "What is this you have done to us?" he demanded. "What have I done to you that deserves treatment like this, making me and my kingdom guilty of this great sin? This kind of thing should not be done! 10 Why have you done this to us?" 11 "Well," Abraham said, "I figured this to be a godless place. I thought, 'They will want my wife and will kill me to get her.' 12 Besides, she is my sister – we both have the same father, though different mothers – and I married her. 13 When God sent me to travel far from my father's home, I told her, 'Wherever we go, have the kindness to say that you are my sister.'" 14 Then Abimelech took sheep and oxen and servants – both men and women – and gave them to Abraham, and he returned his wife, Sarah, to him. 15 "Look over my kingdom, and choose a place where you would like to live," Abimelech told him. 16 Then he turned to Sarah. "Look," he said, "I am giving your 'brother' a thousand pieces of silver to compensate for any embarrassment I may have caused you. This will settle any claim against me in this matter." 17 Then Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech, his wife, and the other women of the household, so they could have children. 18 For the LORD had stricken all the women with infertility as a warning to Abimelech for having taken Abraham's wife.