

ABRAM IN EGYPT

from
A Critical and Exegetical Commentary
on
THE BOOK OF GENESIS
With a New Translation
(1873)

by
James G. Murphy, LL.D., T.C.D.,
Professor of Hebrew, Belfast

"And there was a famine in the land: and Abram went down into Mizraim [Egypt] to sojourn there; for grievous was the famine in the land. And it came to pass, when he was come near to enter into Mizraim, that he said unto Sarai his wife, Behold, now, I know that thou art a woman fair to look upon. And it shall come to pass that the Mizrites shall see thee and say, This is his wife; and they will kill me, but they will save thee alive. Say now, thou art my sister; that it may be well with me for thy sake, and my soul may live because of thee. And it came to pass, when Abram was gone into Mizraim, that the Mizrites beheld the woman that she was very fair. And the princes of Pharoh saw her, and commended her to Pharoh; and the woman was taken into Pharoh's house. And he treated Abram well for her sake; and he had sheep and oxen and he-asses and men-servants and maid-servants and she-asses and camels. And the LORD plagued Pharoh and his house with great plagues, on account of Sarai, Abram's wife. And Pharoh called Abram and said, What is this thou hast done unto me? Why didst thou not tell me that she was thy wife? Why saidst thou, She is my sister, and I took her to me to wife? And now behold thy wife, take her and go thy way. And Pharoh commanded men concerning him; and they sent him away, and his wife, and all that he had." (Genesis 12:10-20)

10. This first visit of Abram to Mizraim, or Egypt, is occasioned by the famine in the land of promise. This land is watered by periodical rains. A season of drought arrests the progress of vegetation, and brings on a famine. But in Egypt, the fertility of the loamy soil depends not on local showers, but on the annual rise of the Nile, which is fed by the rains of a far-distant mountain range. Hence, when the land of Kenaan was wasted by drought and consequent famine, Egypt was generally so productive as to be the granary of the neighboring countries. As Kenaan was the brother of Mizraim, the intercourse between the two countries in which they dwelt was natural and frequent. Dry seasons and dearth of provisions seem to have been of frequent occurrence in the land of Kenaan (Gen. xxvi. 1, xli. 56, 57). Even Egypt itself was not exempt from such calamitous visitations. Famine is one of God's rods for the punishment of the wicked and the correction of the penitent (2 Sam. xxiv. 13). It visits Abram even in the land of promise. Doubtless the wickedness of the inhabitants was great even in his day. Abram himself was not out of the need of that tribulation that worketh patience, experience, and hope. He may have been left to himself under this trial, that he might find out by experience his own weakness, and at the same time the faithfulness and omnipotence of Jehovah the

promiser. In the moment of his perplexity he flees for refuge to Egypt, and the Lord having a lesson for him, there permits him to enter that land of plenty.

11-13. It is not without misgivings, however, that Abram approached Egypt. All the way from Ur to Haran, from Haran to the land of Kenaan, and from north to south of the land in which he was a stranger, we hear not a word of apprehension. But now he betakes himself to an expedient which had been preconcerted between him and Sarai before they set out on their earthly pilgrimage (Gen. xx. 13). There are some obvious reasons for the change from composure to anxiety he now betrays. Abram was hitherto obeying the voice of the Lord, and walking in the path of duty, and therefore he was full of unhesitating confidence in the divine protection. Now he may be pursuing his own course, and, without waiting patiently for the divine counsel, venturing to cross the boundary of the land of promise. He may therefore be without the fortifying assurance of the divine approval. There is often a whisper of this kind heard in the soul, even when it is not fully conscious of the delinquency which occasions it. Again, the countries through which he had already passed were inhabited by nomadic tribes, each kept in check by all the others, all unsettled in their habits, and many of them not more potent than himself. The Kenaanites spoke the same language with himself, and were probably only a dominant race among others whose language they spoke, if they did not adopt. But in Egypt all was different. Mizraim had seven sons, and, on the average, the daughters are as numerous as the sons. In eight or nine generations there might be from half a million to a million of inhabitants in Egypt, if we allow five daughters as the average of a family. The definite area of the arable ground on the two sides of the Nile, its fertilization by a natural cause without much human labor, the periodical regularity of the inundation, and the extraordinary abundance of the grain crops, combined both to multiply the population with great rapidity, and to accelerate amazingly the rise and growth of fixed institutions and a stable government. Here there were a settled country with a foreign tongue, a prosperous people, and a powerful sovereign. All this rendered it more perilous to enter Egypt than Kenaan.

If Abram is about to enter Egypt of his own accord, without any divine intimation, it is easy to understand why he resorts to a device of his own to escape the peril of assassination. In an arbitrary government, where the will of the sovereign is law, and the passions are uncontrolled, public or private resolve is sudden, and execution summary. The East still retains its character in this respect. In these circumstances, Abram proposes to Sarai to conceal their marriage, and state that she was his sister; which was perfectly true, as she was the daughter of his father, though not of his mother. At a distance of three or four thousand years, with all the development of mind which a completed Bible and an advanced philosophy can bestow, it is easy to pronounce, with dispassionate coolness, the course of conduct here proposed to be immoral and imprudent. It is not incumbent on us, indeed, to defend it; but neither does it become us to be harsh or excessive in our censure. In the state of manners and customs which then prevailed in Egypt, Abram and Sarai were not certainly bound to disclose *all* their private concerns to every impertinent inquirer. The seeming simplicity and experience which Abram betrays in seeking to secure his personal safety by an expedient which exposed to risk his wife's chastity and his own honor, are not to be pressed too far. The very uncertainty concerning

the relation of the strangers to each other tended to abate that momentary caprice in the treatment of individuals which is the result of a despotic government. And the prime fault and folly of Abram consisted in not waiting for the divine direction in leaving the land of promise, and in not committing himself wholly to the divine protection when he did take that step.

It may seem strange that the Scripture contains no express disapprobation of the conduct of Abram. But its manner is to affirm the great principles of moral truth, on suitable occasions, with great clearness and decision; and in ordinary circumstances simply to record the actions of its characters with faithfulness, leaving it to the reader's intelligence to mark their moral quality. And God's mode of teaching the individual is to implant a moral principle in the heart, which, after many struggles with temptation, will eventually root out all lingering aberrations.

Sarai was sixty-five years of age (Gen. xvii. 17) at the time when Abram describes her as a woman fair to look upon. But we are to remember that beauty does not vanish with middle age; that Sarai's age corresponds with twenty-five or thirty years in modern times, as she was at this time not half the age to which men were then wont to live; that she had no family or other hardship to bring on premature decay; and that the women of Egypt were far from being distinguished for regularity of feature or freshness of complexion.

14-16. The inadequacy of Abram's expedient appears in the issue, which is different from what he expected. Sarai is admired for her beauty, and, being professedly single, is selected as a wife for Pharoh; while Abram, as her brother, is munificently entertained and rewarded. His property seems to be enumerated according to the time of acquirement, or the quantity, and not the quality of each kind. Sheep and oxen and he-asses he probably brought with him from Kenaan; men-servants and maid-servants were no doubt augmented in Egypt. For she-asses the Septuagint has mules. These, and the camels, may have been received in Egypt. The camel is the carrier of the desert. Abram had now become involved in perplexities, from which he had neither the wisdom nor the power to extricate himself. With what bitterness of spirit he must have kept silence, received these accessions to his wealth which he dared not to refuse, and allowed Sarai to be removed from his temporary abode! His cunning device had saved his own person for the time; but his beautiful and beloved wife is torn from his bosom.

17. The Lord, who had chosen him, unworthy though he was, yet not more unworthy than others, to be the agent of his gracious purpose, now interposes to effect his deliverance. *And the Lord plagued Pharoh.* The mode of the divine interference is suited to have the desired effect on the parties concerned. As Pharoh is punished, we conclude he was guilty in the eye of heaven in this matter. He committed a breach of hospitality by invading the private abode of the stranger. He further infringed the law of equity between man and man in the most tender point, by abstracting, if not with violence, at least with a show of arbitrary power which could not be resisted, a female, whether sister or wife, from the home of her natural guardian, without the consent of either. A deed of ruthless self-will, also, is often rendered more heinous by a blamable inattention to the character or position of him who is wronged. So it was with Pharoh. Abram was a man of blameless life and

inoffensive manners. He was, moreover the chosen and special servant of the Most High God. Pharaoh, however, does not condescend to inquire who the stranger is whom he is about to wrong; and is thus unwittingly involved in an aggravated crime. But the hand of the Almighty brings even tyrants to their senses. *And his house.* The princes of Pharaoh were accomplices in his crime (v. 15), and his domestics were concurring with him in carrying it into effect. But even apart from any positive consent or connivance in a particular act, men, otherwise culpable, are brought into trouble in this world by the faults of those with whom they are associated. *On account of Sarai.* Pharaoh was made aware of the cause of the plagues or strokes with which he was now visited.

18-20. Pharaoh upbraids Abram for his deception, and doubtless not without reasons. He then commands his men to dismiss him and his, unharmed, from the country. These men were probably an escort for his safe conduct out of Egypt. Abram was thus reproved through the mouth of Pharaoh, and will be less hasty in abandoning the land of promise, and betaking himself to carnal resources.