Did Abraham Lie about His Wife, Sarai?

Before he journeyed into Egypt, Abraham was instructed by God: "Behold, Sarai [later Sarah], thy wife, is a very fair woman to look upon; therefore it shall come to pass, when the Egyptians shall see her, they will say—she is his wife; and they will kill you, but they will save her alive; therefore see that ye do on this wise: Let her say unto the Egyptians, she is thy sister, and thy soul shall live" (Abr. 2:22–23).

This passage is paralleled in Genesis 12:10–13.[1] The rationale behind Abraham's actions is clear enough. He was fearful that Sarai's beauty would endanger him when the couple arrived in a strange, foreign land. A key difference between the accounts in Genesis and the Book of Abraham, however, is that the Book of Abraham portrays God as instructing Abraham to engage in the subterfuge, a detail not found in the Genesis account. The question that naturally arises is whether Abraham was lying by saying Sarai was his sister instead of his wife,[2] and, if he was, whether that lie was morally justified.[3] Some readers of the Book of Abraham are

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1. This so-called "sister/wife" motif is picked up again at Genesis 20:1–18 and Genesis 26:6–11 but involves different characters. For some perspective on this motif, see Gaye Strathearn, "The Wife/Sister Experience: Pharaoh's Introduction to Jehovah," in *Sperry Symposium Classics: The Old Testament,* ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2005), 100–116; and James K. Hoffmeier, "The Wives' Tales of Genesis 12, 20, and 26 and the Covenants at Beer-Sheba," *Tyndale Bulletin* 43, no. 1 (1992): 81–100.

2. See Yael Shemesh, "Lies by Prophets and Other Lies in the Hebrew Bible," *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Society* 29 (2002): 88–89; and Shira Weiss, *Ethical Ambiguity in the Hebrew Bible: Philosophical Analysis of Scriptural Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 130–38.

3. Duane Boyce, "Why Abraham Was Not Wrong to Lie," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (2022): 5–27, has recently defended the rightness of Abraham's action by making the philosophical argument that in some circumstances lying and deception are not

especially troubled by what appears to be God commanding Abraham to lie.

One important thing to keep in mind is that Genesis 20:12 identifies Sarai as Abraham's half-sister. "So it is at least possible that Sarah belonged to Abraham's extended family and was thus considered to be his 'sister' in the sense of a near blood relative."[4] With this in mind, Abraham appears to have been using somewhat ambiguous terminology and not necessarily making an outright false statement.[5] This ambiguous language may also have been playing on Mesopotamian legal definitions, but this point is debated.[6]

Whether or not this tactic would have played well in a Mesopotamian context, it would have worked in ancient Egyptian, since in that language "a wife was often called the 'sister' (*snt*) of her husband, but not because they had the same parents: instead, the term was one of

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only morally permissible but perhaps even expedient and challenges the assumption that lying is always or categorically immoral. Boyce's argument deserves to be carefully evaluated on its philosophical merits (something which falls outside the scope of this treatment that focuses on the ancient context for Abraham's life). For now, one thing we might be able to say is that the evidence adduced here helps us better understand that Abraham's actions in his ancient cultural setting may not necessarily be at odds with Boyce's moral argumentation and may in fact complement it. Contrary to Boyce, "Why Abraham Was Not Wrong to Lie," 6–7, we do not necessarily see how his moral arguments for the rightness of Abraham's lie obviate the need to first consider the patriarch's words and actions in their immediate ancient setting.

4. Strathearn, "Wife/Sister Experience," 103. See additionally the remarks in Hugh Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt,* 2nd ed., ed. Gary P. Gillum, Collected Works of Hugh Nibley 14 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies at Brigham Young University, 2000), 361–63.

5. "[The biblical text] is implying that [Abraham] did not lie to Abimelech [and also Pharaoh in Genesis 12:13] but only concealed vital information from him." Shemesh, "Lies by Prophets and Other Lies in the Hebrew Bible," 88.

6. Older scholarship favored reading the sister-wife motif in Genesis in light of the discoveries of Mesopotamian legal texts that seemed to indicate that a man could legally adopt his wife as a sister to further ensure marital security. See, for example, E. A. Speiser, *Genesis,* The Anchor Yale Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1964), 91–94; and Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis: The World of the Bible in the Light of History* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), 102–3. This reading and understanding of the Mesopotamian legal material, however, would later be challenged. See, for instance, Samuel Greengus, "Sisterhood Adoption at Nuzi and the 'Wife-Sister' in Genesis," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 46, Centennial Issue (1975): 5–31; Iain Provan, V. Philips Long, and Tremper Longman III, *A Biblical History of Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 113–15; and Barry L. Eichler, "On Reading Genesis 12:10–20," in *Tehillah le-Moshe: Biblical and Judaic Studies in Honor of Moshe Greenberg*, ed. Mordechai Cogan, Barry L. Eichler, and Jeffrey H. Tigay (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 24–26.

affection, indicating that the family relationship between husband and wife by marriage was as close as that between real brother and sister."[7] This appears to reinforce the point that Abraham could be viewed as taking advantage of an ambiguity that would have worked especially well in thwarting the murderous intentions of the Egyptians. "The custom of referring to one's wife (*hm.t*) as one's sister (*sn.t*)" in ancient Egyptian culture therefore takes on deep significance for this passage. "For an Egyptian audience, Abram's calling Sarai his sister would not have precluded her being his wife."[8]

Finally, it is noteworthy that a text from the Dead Sea Scrolls called the Genesis Apocryphon depicts Abraham being warned in a dream of the danger he faced when traveling into Egypt because of Sarai's beauty. This in turn prompted his equivocation with Pharaoh.[9] While this text does not overtly say that God told Abraham to "lie" about his relationship with Sarai, it heavily implies that he was divinely forewarned of the situation. This harmonizes nicely with the account in the Book of Abraham.

Further Reading

Boyce, Duane. "Why Abraham Was Not Wrong to Lie." *BYU Studies Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (2022): 5–27.

Nibley, Hugh. "The Sacrifice of Sarah." In *Abraham in Egypt,* edited by Gary P. Gillum, 343–81. 2nd ed. The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley 14. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Foundation for

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7. James P. Allen, *Middle Egyptian: An Introduction to the Language and Culture of Hieroglyphs,* 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 41. Compare Rainer Hannig, *Ägyptisches Wörterbuch I: Altes Reich und Erste Zwischenzeit* (Mainz, Ger.: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 2003), 1153–54; and Rainer Hannig, *Ägyptisches Wörterbuch II: Mittleres Reich und Zweite Zwischenzeit* (Mainz, Ger.: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 2003), 2247–53.

8. Eichler, "On Reading Genesis 12:10–20," 34 n. 43; compare Nahum Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 95; Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt,* 361–63; and John Gee, *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2017), 102.

9. John A. Tvedtnes, Brian M. Hauglid, and John Gee, eds., *Traditions about the Early Life of Abraham* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2001), 26–29; Daniel A. Machiela, *The Dead Sea Genesis Apocryphon: A New Test and Translation with Introduction and Special Treatment of Columns 13–17* (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 2009), 70–72; James L. Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible: A Guide to the Bible as It Was at the Start of the Common Era* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998), 255–56.

Ancient Research and Mormon Studies at Brigham Young University, 2000.

Strathearn, Gaye. "The Wife/Sister Experience: Pharaoh's Introduction to Jehovah." In *Sperry Symposium Classics: The Old Testament,* edited by Paul Y. Hoskisson, 100–116. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2005.