

Reflections on the Story of Prophet Abraham AS mentioned in Genesis: 12: 10-20

Aqeel Ahmad

Lecturer, Islamic Studies, SALU, Shahdad Kot Campus

Naseeruddin Mahar

Lecturer, Islamic Studies, SALU, Ghotki Campus

Nousheen Bano

Research Scholar, CRIC, Sindh University, Jamshoro

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Abstract

This paper is the study of a well-known story of Prophet Abraham peace be upon him recorded and mentioned in Judeo-Christian Muslim traditions. This story is mentioned in the book of Genesis: 12:10-20 and in Saḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, the most authentic book after the Qur'an in Islamic Tradition. This study is divided in four parts: first part is related to its textual grammatical analysis, the second part is related to its literal translation to authenticate the story's connotation, third part is related to exegesis of the concerned text in the light of exegetes and fourth part is related to the study of Islamic tradition on the story concerned. This paper argues that the story of Abraham peace be upon him under investigation Muslim scholars are divided on accepting the story mentioned in Tafsir and ḥadīth literature. The considerable number of Classical Muslim scholars accept the story in the way that it would not contradict the basic principles of Islam regarding the chastity and lofty character of the prophets as this story attributes telling a lie to Prophet Abraham AS. The Modern Muslim Scholar Maulānā Maududī rejects the story as it attributes telling a lie to Prophet Abraham peace be upon him by calling his wife named *Sārah* as his sister. This paper concludes that both the opinions about this story may be reconciled and accepted in a way that would not affect the chastity of the Prophets.

Keywords: Abraham, Genesis, Islamic Tradition, reconciliation.

Introduction

To reflect upon the passage mentioned in the first book of the Old Testament (also first of Pentateuch) (תּוֹרָה) the paper in has been divided it into four parts: first part reflects upon the grammatical analysis of the passage in which I have tried to avoid the repetition of the same points on the same words rather important words are being reflected upon from the grammatical point of view. Second part looks at the literal meaning of the passage (mostly verbatim) to better understand the meanings of it and to better represent those in the

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idiomatic translation of the passage. And the third part is dedicated to the exegetic reflections of the passage to comprehend it in the light of the works of the famous, basic, and modern scholars of the Bible in general and of the Old Testament in particular. The fourth and the last part addresses the story from Islamic point of view for comparative study.

Part 1: Grammatical Reflections

Verse 10: (1) ה'ה' : vov consecutive + ה' 3rd Masculine Singular Imperfect: Past Tense (Perfect) is also frequently expressed by means of Imperfect form with a prefixed ה vocalised in the same way as the definite article. This word is frequently used in Hebrew Bible and should be interpreted in idiomatic language with regard to the context.¹

(2) מצר'מה : Noun with suffix ה that gives meaning of direction i.e. towards: meaning towards Egypt.

Verse 11: (3) הקר'ב : 3rd Masculine Singular Perfect Hiphil: to get near, close.

אשתך : Compound of Noun אשה ending of this is changed to ת in construct and pronominal suffix ה (also related to the personal pronouns) meaning his woman/ wife.²

(4) פת מרה : compound of פת' from פה' Adjective meaning fair, beautiful the ending of this is changed into ת in construct and מרה Noun : vision, sight, appearance: Beautiful in appearance.

Verse 12: (5) אתך : Compound of pronominal suffix ה 2nd Feminine and Direct object את with a long o vowel meaning you (object not subject).³

(6) מצר'מ' : Plural form of מצר' Egyptian which is technically known as the gentilic adjective i.e. the adjective which describes the nationality or ethnic origin of a person ends in ' _ in the masculine singular and ת' _ in the feminine singular and מ' _ת' _ in the masculine and feminine plurals respectively: Egyptians.⁴

(7) זאת : Feminine Singular Demonstrative (for near reference) which is often described as pronouns and this is best thought of as adjective, since in Hebrew this behaves exactly like adjectives, meaning this.⁵

Verse 13: (8) אמר'נא : Compound of אמר' 2nd Feminine Singular Imperative which is appended by נא joined by maqeph and gives an effect of adding an element entreaty to the command. This is called 'particle of entreaty', meaning say please.⁶

(9) למענ' : Preposition and Conjunction meaning for the sake of, on account of, to the intent, in order that. This is composed of ל and מענ'.⁷

Verse 15: תקח : 3rd Feminine Singular Pual from לקח meaning to take. This is irregular verb in Hebrew, so it's perfect and imperfect is as if from different, though not unrelated, root. And, hence, Lamed is assimilated in the tet.⁸

Verse 19: הנה : once הנה- Demonstrative particle: lo! Behold! Equivalent to Arabic ان: certainly, surely.⁹

Part 2: Literal Meaning of the Text

10. And it happened famine in the land and intended Abraham towards Egypt to sojourn there as was severe famine in the land.

11. And it came about as he got nearer to come to Egypt and he said to Sarah his wife behold! please I know you are beautiful woman in appearance.

12. And it will happen when the Egyptians see you and will say this is his wife and will kill me but will let you live.

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13. Say please you are my sister so that it may well go for me on your account and my soul will live because of you.
14. And it happened as soon as Abraham entered Egypt, and the Egyptians began to see the woman as she was very beautiful.
15. And the Princess saw her, and they praised her to Pharaoh, and she was taken to the house of Pharaoh.
16. And he treated Abraham well on her account and he came to have sheep, cattle, asses, menservants, maidservants, she-asses, and camels.
17. Now Jehovah stroke Pharaoh with great plagues and his household, because of Sarah Abraham's wife.
18. So Pharaoh called Abraham 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 take her as my wife and now this is your wife, take and go
20. And Pharaoh issued commands to men, and they went with him and his wife and all that he had.

Part 3: Exegetical Reflections on the Text

This passage (Genesis: 12: 10-20) contains very important and special story of the Prophet Abraham who, undoubtedly, occupies honourable place not only Judeo-Christian tradition but also in Islamic tradition. This story tells about the journey of Abraham from Canaan (the south of Palestine) to Egypt, which took place because of deadly threat of famine which occurred in Canaan. In fact, famine is one of the basic, critical human experiences attested from the earliest records of man right down to the present day. The severity of this famine impressed itself deeply on the memory. There is variety of stories that tell how a group was saved from a famine; their background is the broader canvas of the struggle between life and death. The Old Testament narratives and the Psalms speak often of God as the one who saves from famine; this is a consequence of what is said about the creation of man in Genesis.1 and 2: human existence depends on the provision of food. God's action, therefore, is often vitally concerned with the alleviation of hunger not only in the Old Testament and the New Testament but also in the Qur'an as described in the Surah Yousuf (Joseph).

Escaping the severe famine and entering in the Egyptian power and sphere of influence which he proposes to enter, he sees himself facing yet another deadly danger of his own life and wife's honour. His wife's beauty put his life in danger.

It is in this situation in the ancient world that the ruse everywhere has its place. The ruse is the only weapon left for the powerless given over to the mighty.

As being caught between the two, he takes to subterfuge. On the border of Egypt, he foresees that the Egyptians will kill him and take his wife according to their manner and habit. The most certain way of seizing a married woman in that era was to remove her husband as can be seen in the story of David and Uriah in II Sam.11. Therefore, to come out of this new deadly danger of life he requests his wife that she would pass herself off as his sister in Egypt, (v.13), because he feared for his life (vv. 11-12) Here, he places matrimonial relationship in a brotherly relationship which is also mentioned as 'the bride is called sister'. (Song. 4, 9)

The speech shows that it is a matter of dialog even though there is no answer from Sarah. It

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is part of narrative technique that the answer can be left out where silence suffices, it indicates that Sarah agrees. The beauty of his wife could have been a deadly threat; the beauty of alleged sister brings Abraham presents. What is being said here is that Pharaoh does not merely exercise power. The presents correspond to the custom of the time and are meant to compensate the brother for the loss of his sister.

Some scholars hold view that he should have thought any other means whereby both he and his wife can remain alive. He did not think of an intervention of God, he did not appear here as a man of faith. Faced with the threat of death, he surrendered what he ought not to surrender.¹⁰

God intervenes to save the wife of his chosen friend, the mother of Israel, from disgrace and to protect the legitimate marriage. The purpose of Jehovah's intervention is the return of the wife and the restoration of the family.

Some scholars (like Gunkel) think that something must have fallen out between vv.17 and 18, something must have been said about how Pharaoh found out the cause of the disease that struck him and that Sarah was Abraham's wife. Koch gives this further support when he says that the peripety of the narrative is contained in the lines that have fallen out. J. Van Seters rightly opposes the view that something has fallen out, basing his opinion on the concentration of the narrative on Abraham which was disturbed by an extended narrative. J. Van Steres finds the following structure: 1. a crisis situation 2. a plan to deal with the crisis 3. the execution of the plan with new complication 4. an intervention from outside and 5. consequences. This is possible, but even so it does not state clearly enough that the emphasis is on the opening and closing dialogs.¹¹

Nevertheless, v.16 makes good sense: Pharaoh is afflicted even though he has acted in good faith and has given presents to the woman's brother. There is the old notion: 'It was believed...that a crime must ... inexorably demand it's fated punishment' According to this understanding Pharaoh had violated Abraham's marriage, even though he had done it unwittingly, the fact remains the consequence must follow. The later notion is that of the God who is personally at work, who is so powerful that he can protect his charge even against the mighty and can restore Abraham's wife to him.

Nothing is said about the kind of affliction that struck Pharaoh, it may have been illness, but the question remains open. Is there a point of contact between this verse and the plagues which strike Egypt and Pharaoh in Ex. 5: 7-11? There is certainly no direct link, but it can scarcely be accidental that in both places there is talk of plagues that strike the Pharaoh and Egypt. Something similar also occurs in the Ark narrative, 1 Sam.5.

There are two parts to what Pharaoh has to say to Abraham: the introduction (v. 18) is followed by the reproachful question (vv.18, 19) the question receives no answer. Abraham remains dumb. The second part consists of the giving back of the wife and the expulsion of Abraham.

The reason Abraham emerges unpunished is solely that the Pharaoh has experienced the power that stands behind him. Abraham is also put to shame by the fact that the speaker too is but a human being, he had forgotten this when he planned to save himself by deception, and in doing so had also forgotten God who can strike Abraham and the Pharaoh as well. It would now be for Abraham to reply. But Abraham is silent and shamed and repentant, condemns himself. The narrator shows that it is the Pharaoh who is really in the right. The Pharaoh provides an escort to accompany Abraham to the border. He takes care that nothing further can happen to endanger the one party or the other.

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The composition of the Abraham stories begins with a narrative that is offensive and difficult to interpret. The narrative about the jeopardizing and saving of the ancestress occurs three times in the patriarchal tradition, each time, it is true, in a distinct setting. (cf. Chs.20: 26)

We must assume that our narrator also knew the tradition according to which Sarah was Abraham's half sister. (ch.20: 12) The narrative vividly describes how accurate Abraham's forecast was. Everything develops as one would expect until God intervenes, not to punish Abraham for his lie and betrayal, but to save Sarah. How did Pharaoh connect his malady with Sarah's presence in his harem? Did the malady then leave him? The narrative gives no answer to these and other more difficult questions. Apparently, all details became unimportant after God's intervention. Thus, the story, which began so humanly and understandably, brings us at its end terribly face to face with the darkness and mystery of Jehovah's power, for which no explanation is adequate. And we have difficulty in following it because the moral problem of Abraham's guilt worries us.

He would not openly admit his weakness. It is a dismissal with hidden irony. He saves face unto the last and the couple is led from the land with an honour guard.

This story has aroused much indignation and is said to show low moral standards. Even the Jewish commentator Ramban said: 'Our father Abraham committed a great sin in exposing his wife to moral danger out of fear that he would be killed. He should have trusted in God.' Abraham has been defended by claiming that he did not exactly lie, or that a white lie in danger of death is permissible. The incorruptible truthfulness of the Bible is to be praised because it does not pass in silence over the mistakes of one of its heroes. The story shows that Israel's women can be certain that God will protect them in the greatest danger and is strong enough even against Pharaoh. He needs no help in this from human ambiguities or white lies.

In this story there are two episodes narrated: the occurrence of what Abraham had foretold and planned (vv.14-16) and the intervention of the Jehovah against Pharaoh (v.17).

Part 4: The story in Islamic Literature

This story is also mentioned in Islamic literature as a lie spoken by the Prophet Abraham [may peace be upon him] in calling his wife as his sister. It is mentioned in major hadith books and Tafsir literature (commentaries on the Qur'an) such as *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, *Sunan Abī Dā'ūd*, *Sunan al-Tirmizī*, *Musnad Aḥmad*¹², *tafsīr ibn Kathīr* and *tafsīr al-Qurṭubī*¹³. According to ibn Kathīr and al-Qurṭubī, it is not a real lie, which is condemnable and a sin, rather it is clever trick or plot to deceive others for religious purpose and hence it is permissible. According to these scholars the hadith in which this story is mentioned is authentic (*sahih*) and comply with the necessary conditions of authentic hadith.¹⁴

According to Muālānā Maudūdī, (great scholar and exegete of twentieth century) although this hadith authentic from *isnad* [chain of narrators] point of view, however, it is not authentic from *matn* [text] point of view, hence, cannot be accepted, because it's taken from Jewish literature and its against the teachings of the Qur'an and basic principles of Islam regarding the personality of prophets. Maulānā Maudūdī elaborates that this ḥadīth of ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī contradicts the text of the Qur'an¹⁵ which states that the Prophet Abraham peace be upon him was a truthful person¹⁶

Maulana Maudūdi does not interpret it in a way which removes contradiction of the teachings of the Qur'an and Islam as done by ibn Kathīr. He further points out the internal contradiction of the Biblical story that at the time of journey from Canaan to Egypt the age of Sarah was

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sixty-five years, so how a sixty-five-year-old woman could be beautiful to the extent that could put one's life in danger. Therefore, it cannot be logical.

Conclusion

The above discussion of the story of the Prophet Abraham peace be upon him mentioned in the book of *Genesis: 12: 10-20* as well as mentioned in Tafsīr ibn Kathīr, Tafsīr al-Qurṭubī, Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, Sunan Abī Dā'ūd, Sunan al-Tirmizī, Musnad Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal. In Islamic literature, three incidents of telling lies are attributed to the Prophet Abraham peace be upon him, one of which is the topic of the present research paper. Muslim scholars are divided in accepting this tradition in to two groups. The classical group accepts the tradition and interprets it in a way that it would not contradict the text of the Qur'an as well as the established chastity and lofty character of the Prophets. They Interpret that the Prophet Abraham peace be upon him, according to this tradition, called his wife as his sister meaning that she was his sister in religion i.e., Islam not a real sister. By saying this, he tried to secure his life from the threat and used the words which cause confusion to the addressees. The modern scholar Maulanā Maudūdī rejects the tradition, interpreting this tradition literally, on the ground that it contradicts the Holy Qur'an and the established lofty character of the Prophets.

In the light of above discussion, it may safely be concluded that both the opinions are reconcilable if literal interpretation is avoided.

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