



PRANDIUM

The Journal of Historical Studies

UNIVERSITY of TORONTO MISSISSAUGA

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Source: Prandium - The Journal of Historical Studies, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Spring, 2013), pp. 37-44

Published by: The Department of Historical Studies, University of Toronto Mississauga

Stable URL: <http://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/prandium/article/view/19656>

The Genesis Apocryphon: A More Divine Abraham

Rhea Reyes

Hailed as one of the most extraordinary archaeological discoveries of the 20th century, the Dead Sea Scrolls found in Qumran give a glimpse into the past. The Genesis Apocryphon (1QapGen), discovered in 1947 amongst the seven main scrolls found in Cave 1, was the last to be transcribed and translated from this cave due to the poor condition of the text. Written in Aramaic, the text was very brittle, and only four complete columns out of the original twenty-two could be preserved; many columns especially from the beginning and the end are unpreserved.¹ Some scholars believe that this scroll could be an autograph, meaning that the manuscript may be the original text the scribe composed; no other copies of Genesis Apocryphon have been found at Qumran or elsewhere.² Of what can be deciphered, it seems the scroll is written mainly in first person. It consists of narrations that account the stories primarily of Noah and Abram³ but also of Enoch and Lamech. In this essay, the story of Abram and Sarai in Egypt contained in the Genesis Apocryphon will be examined. The story follows Abram and Sarai journeying to Egypt because of a famine. While in Egypt, obstacles occur to show that God is always on their side. An elaborate dream results in Abram pretending his wife is his sister subsequently he loses her to the Pharaoh.

The Genesis Apocryphon is a “reworked Pentateuch text.” The Book of Genesis is a part of the Pentateuch, which consists of the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. The Genesis Apocryphon can be considered a revised version of that original biblical book. Since the Genesis Apocryphon follows so closely to the Book of Genesis found within the Hebrew Bible many scholars believe that it is a type of Midrash. A Midrash can be an explanation, assessment or an interpretation on sections of the Hebrew scriptures where notes are usually incorporated into the text. Since there is added narration, it could be argued that the Genesis Apocryphon is a Midrash. On the other hand, some scholars believe that the Genesis Apocryphon is more accurately described as a Targum, for the scroll is written in Aramaic. A Targum, originally oral, is a translation or an interpretation created in the language that was commonly used during the Second Temple period, Aramaic. Rather than addressing the question of whether the Genesis Apocryphon was written as a Midrash or a kind of Targum, however, this essay will focus on the question of why the text was written. Moreover, the essay will ask whether the section on Abram and Sarai was

¹ Menahem Mansoor, “Genesis Apocryphon,” in *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A College Textbook and Study Guide*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 53. Although within Joseph Fitzmyer’s “Genesis Apocryphon” in the *Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, it notes that there were twenty-three columns and only three are completely preserved.

² Joseph Fitzmyer, “Genesis Apocryphon” in *Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

³ Daniel A. Machiela, “The Genesis Apocryphon (1Q20): A Reevaluation of its Text, Interpretive Character, and Relationship to the Book of Jubilees” (PhD diss., University of Notre Dame, 2007), 3.

written as a means to fix some theological or ethical discrepancy the Qumran community saw between the text of Genesis and its own interpretation, or whether the author of the Apocryphon composed his text for the purpose of elevating the patriarch Abraham.

In many Jewish and Christian texts, dreams function as a form of divine communication between God and the recipient, which can be seen with Abram in the selected passage. The passage within the Genesis Apocryphon begins with Abram's dream of a cedar and a palm tree that he sees as representatives of himself and Sarai. The Hebrew version of Genesis does not feature this dream. Gen12: 11-13 in the *New International Version* states:

As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, 'I know what a beautiful woman you are. When the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife.' Then they will kill me but will let you live.

The passage continues with Abram asking Sarai to call him her brother to spare his life from the Egyptians. Abram's dream of a cedar and palm tree is not mentioned in any other Jewish nor Christian writings.⁴ The author makes use of dreams as an important method for giving "divine revelation"⁵ throughout the scrolls. In fact, Abram's ability to "explain [the dream's] significance"⁶ without any aid from God or contemplation emphasizes the author's push towards giving Abram a more pious character within the Genesis Apocryphon. The addition of the dream within the Genesis Apocryphon can be seen as a justification for Abram and his wife to lie to the Pharaoh since Abram is given a "divine message" from God in the form of a dream. As a consequence, it reinforces Abram's piety.

There is a great emphasis on emotions and detail in the section of the Genesis Apocryphon in which the Pharaoh acquires Sarai. Here, it becomes particularly clear why scholars have placed the Genesis Apocryphon in the category of "re-written Bible". The events leading to the capture of Sarai are described swiftly in Gen 12:14-16 (NIV):

When Abram came to Egypt, the Egyptians saw Sarai was a very beautiful woman. And when Pharaoh's officials saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh, and she was taken into his palace. He treated Abram well for her sake, and Abram acquired sheep and cattle, male and female donkeys, and male and female servants, and camels.

In the above quote, the apprehension of Sarai seems to occur very rapidly once they enter into Egypt. This can be contrasted with Genesis Apocryphon, where the author chooses to include that she "was exceedingly careful for five years."⁷ This timeline of Abram and Sarai living in Egypt for five years before she is taken away also reflects the same timeline mentioned in Jubilees 13:10-16.⁸ Beate Ego has argued that the incorporation of this detail into the Genesis Apocryphon along with the omission of the detail that Abram received livestock for Sarai may have happened because the text in Genesis can be seen to portray Abram in negative light. It is interesting that the idea of Abram receiving gifts for giving Sarai to the Pharaoh was left out of

⁴ Sidnie White Crawford, "Genesis in the Dead Sea Scrolls", in *The Book of Genesis: Composition, Reception, and Interpretation*, ed. Craig A. Evans et al. (Boston: Brill, 2012), 362.

⁵ Machiela, 289.

⁶ 1QapGen 19.18.

⁷ 1QapGen 19.22.

⁸ Crawford, "Genesis in the Dead Sea Scrolls," 363.

the Genesis Apocryphon. The scribe probably wanted to avoid the implication that Sarai was being sold to Pharaoh and Abram was “profit[ing] from the whole transaction”⁹ since it would not portray him in a positive light. This was not a characteristic that the author of the Genesis Apocryphon would want to assign to Abram and thus this scene was removed from the revised version. The Genesis Apocryphon also notes that the Pharaoh’s men had heard great things about Abram and his wife, so they sought him out for his “knowledge of goodness, wisdom, and righteousness.”¹⁰ Here, 1QapGen opts to promote Abram’s distinguished characteristics by including this detail that supports the idea of his “revolutionary wisdom.”¹¹ It is not until this encounter that the Pharaoh’s men see the magnificent beauty of Sarai, which they describe to the Pharaoh in significant amount of detail. The Hebrew Genesis does not describe at all how the Pharaoh’s men viewed Sarai; the text simply states that they saw her. The thorough description of Sarai’s beauty in 1QapGen is quite unique to Jewish and Christian literature.¹² Other than within the Genesis Apocryphon, this “language of praise”¹³ is only seen in the biblical book of *Song of Songs*.¹⁴ The mention of Sarai’s beauty, albeit not quite as vividly described, remains a common theme in latter rabbinic literature.¹⁵ The author of the Genesis Apocryphon uses a great amount of detail almost to convince the reader that Sarai’s capture was inevitable. In addition, it does defer the argument that the “transaction” between Abram and Pharaoh was for profit and implies instead that it was predetermined, provoked by Sarai’s beauty rather than by Abram’s business dealings.

There is great conflict between Abram and the Pharaoh within the Genesis Apocryphon once Sarai is taken from Abram. The struggles and conduct of Abram within the passage emphasize the greatness God has bestowed upon Abram. Within the Genesis Apocryphon, the Pharaoh had heard that Abram was a great teacher and his men visited him with great gifts to listen to his words.¹⁶ The author took a lot of liberty with the part of the story that describes the relation of Abram and the Pharaoh. In comparison, the Bible states simply, “but the Lord inflicted serious diseases on the Pharaoh and his household because of Abram’s wife Sarai.”¹⁷ The Genesis Apocryphon first mentions that Abram is in danger when Pharaoh apprehends Sarai, which is something that the Bible does not describe. The Apocryphon mentions that once the Pharaoh had seen Sarai, he intended to kill Abram, but because of Abram’s dream, Sarai knows to say that he is her brother.¹⁸ This differs from Genesis which only mentions that Abram is treated “well for her sake”, not at all mentioning any plans of Pharaoh wanting to execute him. It seems that the author of the Genesis Apocryphon wanted to incorporate this little detail to create a more compelling story as well as to make Abram’s dream relevant and in agreement with God’s plan; Abram correctly interpreted his dream that was given by God as a form of prophesy. As

⁹ Beate Ego, “The Figure of Abraham in the Genesis Apocryphon’s Re-narration of Gen 12:10-20” in *Qumran Cave 1 Revisited*, (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2010), 235.

¹⁰ 1QapGen 20.24.

¹¹ Ego, 236.

¹² Fitzmyer, “Genesis Apocryphon.”

¹³ Hindy Najman. “Early Nonrabbinic Interpretation” in *The Jewish Study Bible*, Oxford Biblical Studies Online.

¹⁴ Fitzmyer, “Genesis Apocryphon.”

¹⁵ Sidnie White Crawford, “Sarah” in *Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

¹⁶ 1QapGen 19.23-24.

¹⁷ Gen 12:17.

¹⁸ 1QapGen 19.9.

mentioned earlier, after Pharaoh received Sarai, Abram was given servants and livestock but that component was left out of the Genesis Apocryphon. Instead, once Sarai is taken from Abram, he and his nephew are overwhelmed with sadness. The Genesis Apocryphon stresses Abram's desolation with the phrases "wept copiously" and "anguish."¹⁹ These words induce the reader to feel for Abram and remove any doubts about what seemed like an easy surrender to the Pharaoh. In this time of need, Abram faithfully turns to God in prayer, another occurrence not mentioned in Genesis. Abram first exalts God, and then petitions that justice²⁰ be visited on the Pharaoh and his men in hopes to protect his wife from being violated by the Pharaoh or his men. There is a lot of emotion tied to this prayer, uttered in constant sobbing, once more illustrating Abram's devotion to God. As a result of Abram's prayers, "that night God Most High sent a baneful spirit to smite [the pharaoh] and every man of his household."²¹ Ego notes that God's quick response "illustrates Abraham's elevated relationship with God."²² Genesis does not mention the prayer but states instead that God had punished Pharaoh and his men because of Sarai. It seems that in Genesis, God had carried out these actions to protect Sarai from any harm rather than because he was answering Abram's prayer. In the Genesis Apocryphon, Abram's prayer brings a closer and more personal relationship between God and Abram. Since Sarai lived with Pharaoh for "two full years,"²³ some scholars or religious followers could question her "purity"²⁴ or whether she could have been "violated,"²⁵ but any lack of certainty about Sarai's faithfulness is removed in the Genesis Apocryphon with the detail that God had sent "an afflicting spirit against the pharaoh."²⁶ In fact, the text blatantly states that although they were together in marriage, Pharaoh could not and did not have sexual intercourse with Sarai. Therefore, the "priestly [blood] line"²⁷ was not compromised. This idea continues to highlight Abram's great relationship with God in that he protected his wife and his future children. Although the broad strokes of the story in 1QapGen correspond with the Genesis story, the embellishments in 1QapGen continue to enhance the image of Abram.

Through the process of releasing Sarai from Pharaoh, God's power shines through Abram. Within Genesis, Pharaoh is quickly aware that Abram had some responsibility for his malady:

So Pharaoh summoned Abram. "What have you done to me?" he said. "Why didn't you tell me she was your wife? 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!" Then Pharaoh... sent him on his way, with his wife and everything he had.²⁸

In the Genesis Apocryphon, the passage differs greatly. Pharaoh's and his men's disease became worse after the first two years he had Sarai under his custody, so that even when he

¹⁹ 1QapGen 20.10-12.

²⁰ Ego, 238.

²¹ 1QapGen 20.16.

²² Ego, 239.

²³ 1QapGen 20.18.

²⁴ Machiela, 14.

²⁵ "Tales of the Patriarchs", in *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation*, trans. and with commentary by Michael Wise, Martin Abegg, Jr., and Edward Cook. Revised edition. (New York: HarperOne, 2005), 89.

²⁶ "Tales of the Patriarchs," 101.

²⁷ Machiela, 14.

²⁸ Gen 12:18-20.

commissioned “healers, magicians, and wise men,”²⁹ they could not help banish away the ailment but instead they themselves were infected. As God carries out his punishment towards the Pharaoh, Abram is helped by God and Sarai is returned to him. In Genesis, there is no detail as to the length of time Pharaoh was ill, nor is there mention of how he knew that Abram was at fault. The Genesis Apocryphon elaborates on this point by explaining that through a dream, one of the Pharaoh’s men, Hyrcanos, sees Abram praying for the Pharaoh and healing him. When Lot, Abram’s nephew, objects to Abram’s prayer since Pharaoh still had Sarai, the Pharaoh finds out that Sarai is indeed Abram’s wife. This additional detail in the Genesis Apocryphon is also omitted from *The Book of Jubilees*. Since the author of Genesis is so succinct at this point, the later scholars must have felt that much detail is needed to clarify this part of the story. In line with Genesis, the Genesis Apocryphon has the Pharaoh calling for Abram and questioning what has been done. The section in which the Genesis Apocryphon differs is when the Pharaoh asks Abram to “pray for [him] and [his] house that this evil spirit may be exorcised from [them].”³⁰ The Pharaoh in Genesis simply dismisses Abram and his wife not asking to be healed by Abram, and the reader is left without an explanation as to whether or not he and his men could be healed. This emphasizes the difference in spiritual ability Abram has in the Genesis Apocryphon in which Abram is seen to have a special connection with God.

It is not until Sarai is returned that Abram heals Pharaoh by “prayer but also by the laying of his hands” on Pharaoh’s head.³¹ This scene is quite important, for it is the first time the ritual of laying hands is mentioned in Jewish writing.³² Although a similar mention both of laying of the hands and rebuking of the spirit appears in the New Testament (Luke 4:40-41)³³ there is no mention of this act in any Rabbinic writing, nor is it mentioned in the Hebrew Bible. The scene also emphasizes God’s divine ability and his ability to pass it on to the patriarch Abram. Since this is not common in Jewish sources, it has an especially greater impact on the Jewish audience.

The author of the Genesis Apocryphon emphasizes Sarai’s celibacy with Pharaoh, when the pharaoh makes “an oath that he had not touched her.”³⁴ In the Genesis Apocryphon, Abram and Sarai are lavished with gifts when the Pharaoh sends them out of Egypt, contrasting the Pharaoh in Genesis who sends them off with only the things they already owned. Recall that in the Genesis story, Abram received servants and livestock earlier when Sarai was taken from him, but this detail was omitted in the Genesis Apocryphon. Although the stories correspond with each other in that Abram’s wealth increased, the author of the Apocryphon sought to make a greater impact by making sure that the wealth was not obtained in a ungodly manner, thus portraying Abram in the best possible way.

In sum, the Genesis Apocryphon provides supplementary detail to the Book of Genesis in, a type of a text known as the “reworked Bible.” Throughout the Genesis Apocryphon, but more specifically the story of Abram and Sarai in Egypt, the additions allow the characters to be seen more throughout the text. Scholars believe that this was precisely the reason why the

²⁹ 1QapGen 20.20.

³⁰ 1QapGen 20.28.

³¹ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Genesis Apocryphon of Qumran Cave 1: A Commentary*, (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1971), 141.

³² Ego, 241.

³³ Ego, 241.

³⁴ 1QapGen 20.30.

Apocryphon was written; the author felt the need to alter the scriptural portrayal of the characters by adding details that cast them and the story in a more favourable light such to emphasize Abram's divine nature. Since no other copies of the Genesis Apocryphon have been found in the caves, it was probably not a particularly important or authoritative text in the Qumran community. The additional elements added to the text have not been passed on or are seen in any other Jewish or Christian source either. The scriptural Book of Genesis, however, was an important book in the Qumran community, since there were many copies found. The unique text of Genesis Apocryphon opens a fascinating window into the thought-world of the early interpreters of the scriptural text of Genesis and provides an opportunity to analyse the literary and theological sensitivities of ancient Jewish writers.

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