



Knowing God

Genesis 12:4-20

Getting to know someone is a process. Knowing someone enough to trust them completely requires an investment of time. One does not know another person after a visit of five minutes or after a two-hour meeting. One can know aspects of a person in a short time, but it is necessary to spend more time in fellowship to really get to know another. It is a process of a whole lifetime to truly know another person, in part due to the fact that we ourselves change along the way. In part, it is because only through a trajectory of time that we can open ourselves from our prejudices to know aspects of another that do not fit with our predetermined definitions. It takes time to see another as they really are, no just as we may have imagined them.

Abraham knew God. Well, he was getting to know God. He had journeyed hours, days, months, and years to get so far with this God he still did not know very well. He had trusted that, differently from the so-called gods of the cities through which he passed, *Yahweh* had power to protect and guide him wherever he went. In a journey of more than one thousand miles he had tried and found God sufficient. For his time and context, he had traveled far in his pilgrimage of faith. He did not stand tall on the shoulders of giants in his knowledge of God. He lived in a context within which no one thought as we do of an all-powerful God who singlehandedly created the world without the need of any help or outside intervention, nor needing any help in maintaining this same created order.

The peoples of his day thought of little gods with much less power, sovereignty, knowledge, and control. They considered wars between cities as revelations of the power of their gods, for they saw the fights as struggles among deities, not simply between the men who served them. They thought of the power of their gods as limited by or to specific geography. They did not grasp that there could be one God without such limitations. Abraham, however, heard the call of *Yahweh* to leave the land of his fathers and begin a journey to a far land, trusting that *Yahweh* would protect him along the way.

Abraham was a giant of faith on the shoulders of whom others have stood to know a little more about God. He did what in his day was extraordinary on trusting in the sovereignty of *Yahweh* in distant lands, among peoples who worshipped other gods. He traveled very far in his pilgrimage of faith. After years of traveling with his herds of animals, he arrived in the land God had indicated to him. It was at this point that his faith came to the point of being questioned, as in this land the rains necessary for keeping his herds and crops alive ended. He distanced himself from the land to which God had called him, heading down to Egypt, the economic and political power of the world at that time.

There was no drought or hunger in Egypt. There, it was believed that the Egyptian gods were sufficiently strong, powerful, and indulgent to maintain the coming of the rains. Perhaps it was at this juncture that Abraham first failed in his confidence. Either God had been unable to meet his needs in Canaan, or God did not see it as important enough to do so. There being no problem in Egypt, perhaps it was a question of the Egyptian gods being more powerful than his own.

Whatever the detail, Abraham's faith was shaken on arriving in Egypt with Sarai, his wife and half-sister. On entering Egypt, therefore, he sought refuge in the fact of her being his sister, in order to not have her taken from him by force, killing him in the process of taking her. He felt exposed and unprotected in a foreign land and in a delicate situation, an easy target for abuse.

Abraham was fearful. He looked to the power of Egypt. He saw the characterization of their gods. He saw and heard what was said about the protection and provision offered by these gods. He saw the force of Pharaoh with his armies. He saw the fertility of the land. What had been sufficient provision for him on the part of *Yahweh* along the long journey of another time lost focus along with his new preoccupation. He faced his need in contrast to a lavish supply in a foreign land. He thought, reflected, and became anxious. His uncertainty took control of his attention and diverted his attention from his history with *Yahweh*.

He had been trusting *Yahweh*, but now he saw a new obstacle and his faith was fading. In other lands, he had passed through with confident strength. He was the leader of a clan that counted on many fighting men. He had trusted God, but at the same time he had measured his strength against that of the small towns by which he had passed. It is one thing to trust God before an enemy whose city counts on less people than one's own contingent. It is another thing to trust God when one believes one's own life is at risk. This is what Abraham now faced in Egypt.

Abraham well knew his wife's beauty. He knew as well that it was to be expected that a king would take the most beautiful women to make up his court. It was easily possible that they might kill Abraham to take possession of Sarai, just as he imagined. He proposed to elaborate a plan on his own to protect his life. He asked Sarai not to say she was his wife, but simply to say that she was his sister. It was not exactly a lie, but it was in the sense of hiding the truth. They went along in their interests and purpose in protecting Abraham's life before what they considered to be his danger before the Egyptian court. What they forgot to do was to seek God's direction.

As they believed, the king, Pharaoh of Egypt, wanted to add Sarai to his court. They did not think to consider that God, *Yahweh*, was also in the midst of the context that so worried Abraham and Sarai. *Yahweh* intervened in the court of Egypt. We don't know how much time passed, but at least enough to give evidence to the fact that the women of the Egyptian court were not getting pregnant. At that point, Pharaoh began to seek a reason for which his harem had been visited by a plague of infertility. For Abraham's context, it was a worrisome situation. The pulse of his gods' power could be measured in questions of fertility, both of bounty in agricultural produce, as well as in human fertility.

Abraham had sought refuge in Egypt, a land supposedly protected and controlled by the most powerful gods of the known world. The superpower of the period, however, had no recourse against the intervention of *Yahweh*. In some way the text does not explain to us, Pharaoh became aware that Sarai was more than simply Abraham's sister, but his wife, as well. He came to understand that his harem was being judged for Pharaoh's indiscriminate taking of Sarai when he was not allowed to have her. In time, Abraham did not simply recover Sarai, but was expelled from the land of Egypt.

Amid the happenings, he learned something more about God, *Yahweh*, whom he served. He learned that God was beyond the problems and difficulties that caused Abraham fear. He learned that it was not necessary to fear the power of Egypt's gods, armies, and agricultural produce. He learned that *Yahweh* was up to dealing with his doubts, worries, and anxieties. He should have sought God's direction in the first place. Where are we in our pilgrimage of faith? Can we learn from the example of people like Abraham, or do we need to go personally down the same paths? We need to know God better, taking the time to cultivate that relationship and dependence.

—*Christopher B. Harbin*