

Was Abraham's Withholding Information of Sarah Wrong?

By David DeWitt

*It came about when he came near to Egypt, that he said to Sarai his wife, "See now, I know that **you are a beautiful woman**; and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife'; and they will kill me, but they will let you live. "Please say that you are my sister so that it may go well with me because of you, and that I may live on account of you" (Genesis 12:11-13).*

As they were approaching Egypt, Abram told Sarah *you are a beautiful woman*. We can conclude that she was a strikingly beautiful woman, probably comparable in appearance to an age today in the late 20s or early 30s or early 40s. Abram probably appeared as one would in their late 30s or early 40s. We can assume from the fact that Moses recorded no response from Sarah, that she agreed with the plan. Actually, she seems to have agreed with it before they left Mesopotamia. This brings up a significant ethical question. "**Was Abram wrong to ask this?**" That is, was it sinful for Abram to ask Sarah to say, or for Sarah to agree, that she was his sister?

A moral absolutist would say:

- 1) Abram lied.
- 2) It's always sinful to lie.
- 3) Therefore Abram sinned.

He should have simply told the truth and let God take care of the consequences.

There are several problems with an absolute view of ethics. An absolute view of ethics assumes we should simply do the right thing and leave the consequences up to God. In this case, that means Abram should have told Pharaoh that Sarah was his wife and leave the consequences up to God. **But** that creates several problems.

- 1) It assumes that in every situation there is only one right thing to do. I would certainly agree that we should always do the right thing. But doing the right thing includes considering all the elements in the situation.
- 2) It's a punt-to-God ethic which asks God to do what God is asking us to do. In any situation requiring a charitable act (like helping the poor or sick), one could say we should just let God take care of it and do nothing.
- 3) It's irresponsible and shortsighted to say we should always obey the moral norm in front of us without thinking about future consequences. Wisdom always includes thinking about the future consequences of our actions.
- 4) Withholding information is not always sinful.

Let's explore that a bit. Abram made a true statement while withholding information. But is withholding information always sinful? Of course many things (like vengeance) are right for God and not for man. But withholding information was also commanded by God on certain occasions.

- It wasn't sinful when God withheld the reasons for Job's suffering.
- It wasn't sinful when God told Samuel to withhold the information that he was going to Bethlehem to anoint one of the sons of Jesse to be king instead of Saul (1 Samuel 16:2).
- It wasn't sinful when Jesus asked people to withhold information about His healing (Matthew 8:4; Luke 5:14; 8:56).
- It wasn't sinful when Jesus told the disciples to withhold the information that He was the Messiah (Matthew 16:20; Mark 8:30).
- It also wasn't sinful when God withheld the revelation of the church age from the Old Testament prophets (Ephesians 3:3-9).
- In war, it's usually a good strategy to withhold information from the enemy. So in a good war, that's good.
- Matthew 6:1-18 is all about withholding information. "*Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven (6:1).*"

However, it was sinful when Satan deceived Eve with half-truths. When Satan told Eve, "*You surely will not die*" (Genesis 3:4). He withheld the information that the day she ate the fruit her immortality would be removed with the result that she would begin to age and return to dust. **Satanic lies are believable because they are partly true, they withhold information.**

Here's the difference. Abram did not try to make God look bad. Satan did. The essence of all sin is to violate the goodness of the character of God. Satan's deception has the intention of turning bad into good and good into bad.