

## **Abimelech, king of Philistia, & Phichol: chief of his army – Floyd Nolen Jones, Th.D., Ph.D.**

In Genesis 20 Abraham and his wife Sarah (a half-sister; Gen. 20:12) journeyed to Gerar in the southern part of the land of Philistia. Fearing that these pagans would slay him in order to take the still very beautiful 89 year old Sarah, the patriarch deceived Abimelech, the Philistine king, by saying that she was his sister (a half truth).<sup>1</sup>

Hearing of her, the monarch took Sarah unto himself, but God protected her by first smiting the house of Abimelech with impotence and barrenness (20:17–18). Then He revealed the truth to Abimelech in a dream and added that Abraham was a prophet. The next morning, the king confronted and reproved both Abraham and Sarah over the ruse but gave them gifts of oxen, sheep, servants, a thousand pieces of silver and said they could stay anywhere they chose in his land. After this, Abraham prayed and the Lord healed all that had been afflicted.

Still a tension naturally remained between the two men over the affair. Thus, following the account of Isaac’s weaning in the next chapter (Abraham then being 105 years old),<sup>2</sup> the two men met to permanently establish peace between themselves (Genesis 21:22–34) – Abraham himself being a powerful force (cp. Gen. 14:14).

**Genesis 21:22** it came to pass...Abimelech and Phichol...chief captain of his host spake to Abraham

But before making a peace agreement with Abimelech, Abraham “returned the favor” by now reproofing the king over a water well that had been violently taken from him by the king’s servants. After Abimelech assured Abraham that he was innocent of the matter and had been unaware of the incident until that moment, the two then *cut* a covenant in the presence of Phichol.<sup>3</sup> So far, so good. But some 90 years later in the days of Abraham’s son Isaac we find:

**Genesis 26:26** Then Abimelech went to (*Isaac*) from Gerar...and Phichol...chief captain of his army.

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<sup>1</sup> Abimelech’s taking Sarah into his harem shows that, even in those early times, kings claimed the right of taking to themselves unmarried women, not only of their subjects, but of any who sojourned in their lands. It was not uncommon to murder the husband of a married woman in order that the tyrant could take his wife. Sarah was reproved for being married but not wearing a veil which, by the custom of that region, she should have done.

<sup>2</sup> Isaac being then 5 years old: Floyd Nolen Jones, *Chronology of the OT*, pp. 58-59; Pierce’s 2003 edition of Ussher’s 1658 *Annals*, paragraph 87; Martin Anstey’s 1913 *Chronology*, pp. 113-114.

<sup>3</sup> Two Hebrew words are involved here. The first is **כָּרַת** (Strong’s #3772 = *karath* = to cut). It is rendered “made” in most translations. Whereas it literally means “made by cutting”, it may also stand alone as “made”. Still, the context always implies the cutting of flesh; hence, the shedding of blood would always follow.

Briefly, the other word is **בְּרִית** (*beriyth* or *berith*) which means “covenant” (Strong’s #1285). Put together, we have “to cut or make covenant by the shedding of blood”. Such a covenant is also known as “a blood oath”. Depending upon the culture involved, the ritual involved the symbolically killing of the participants by cutting the raised right hand (death to my old life of being independent and becoming alive into a new relationship whereby we mutually now depend on each other). The idea is that two become one by the shedding of blood, and the scar is the seal of the pledge. This and all given below are scattered throughout Scripture.

Some other features are that of the giving of a gift, the sharing of a meal (especially bread & wine), the taking of an oath in the presence of one or more witnesses, the erection of some kind of public memorial (plant a tree, erect a pile of stones, exchange rings etc.), add or change names etc. Indeed, such are included in a marriage (Mal. 2:14; e.g., the hymen is broken on the wedding night and two become one flesh by the shedding of blood).

Children (born or unborn) are protected by covenant, as they are in the father before they were born (Heb. 7:9-10). However, when they become old enough to understand its meaning and responsibilities, they have to personally choose whether they want to so continue – but the provision had already provided protection for them. One must be willing to give themselves completely away to another when considering whether to enter into covenant.

The problem is straightforward. Following the covenant between Abraham and Abimelech (with Phichol, the chief captain of his army, present), we find Isaac also making a treaty with a Philistine king named Abimelech in the presence of a “Phichol chief captain of his army” (Gen. 26:26–33) – yet the latter is about 90 years after the Abraham account in Genesis 21:22–34.

Now this causes much consternation among Christian and secular scholars alike. Although a few grudgingly concede that it is possible the Genesis 20 & 21 passages and the account in chapter 26 could be the same Abimelech, in their bible dictionaries and commentaries we find: (1) the story of Isaac in Gerar has been *confused* with that of Abraham in Egypt (12:10–20) and in Gerar with Abimelech, (2) as the events are 90 years apart, the Abimelech in 26:1 is not the same as in chapters 20 & 21: he is his son, (3) perhaps Abimelech is not a personal name but rather a royal title, like Pharaoh or Caesar. In addition, they offer that Phichol was either (A) the name of an office or (B) the Phichol in chapter 26 is the son or grandson of the one in Genesis 21.

Before we resolve this “biblical problem”, let us address in part the above surmising. The first simply represents a lack of faith in God’s Word. The repetition in the Genesis 12, 20, 21, and 26 accounts are deliberate. Its purpose is to show that the blessing and promise given to Abraham was passed on to his son, and later to Isaac’s descendants. That Abimelech is not a personal name but a royal title is foolishness – his title is clearly recorded for all to see: he is “king of the Philistines”. The same may be said for Phichol. Such is not the name of his office – for his title is also plainly stated: Phichol is “the chief captain of his army”. Observe: if Abimelech and Phichol are not personal names then God has given us *two titles* for each of them but left both with no name. Inconceivable! Their other solutions will be dealt with in that which follows.

Due to a severe famine, Isaac moved north c.60 miles from the well Lahai-roi (Gen. 25:11, 26:1) to Gerar of Philistia. Fearing for his life because of Rebekah’s beauty, just as his father had done concerning Sarah, Isaac said she was his sister (but was a second cousin). Abimelech did not bring Rebekah into his harem, but when the deception was discovered he upbraided Isaac; however, the king continued to treat the patriarch most graciously. Isaac remained in the vicinity of Gerar until contention over water between his servants and Abimelech’s became too violent. Finally, the two made (cut) a covenant at Beer-sheba (Lit. the well of the oath), the very same place Abraham and Abimelech had earlier covenanted – and once again with a Phichol present.

Now the solution: it is uncomplicated Bible chronology 101. Again, Abraham was at least 105 at Isaac’s weaning. The context indicates that he was very close to that age when he cut covenant with Abimelech (Gen. 21:22–34). Abraham died about 70 years later – at 175 (175 – 105 = 70; Gen. 25:7). Around 20 years after this, Isaac and Abimelech made covenant which gives us the c.90 year span between the 21:22–34 and 26:26:33 treaties (70 + 20 = 90). If we now suppose that Abimelech and Phichol were around 50 at Genesis 21, they would have been 50 + 90 = 140 years old at chapter 26. This age is more than reasonable when we compare it to Abraham’s 175 and Isaac’s 180 year (Gen. 35:28–29) life spans. Both the math and logic are straightforward.

Moreover, it is completely unreasonable to believe that two different men living 90 years apart have the same names, same designations (king & chief captain of the army): that their families gave offspring the same names, that they later obtained the same titles, and that both are Philistines. Such is simply too much coincidence. Hence, we confidently conclude that the Abimelech and Phichol of Genesis 21 are the selfsame men having those names in Genesis 26. Abraham and Isaac cut covenant with the *same* man. The problem was only a mirage: it never really existed at all. We simply need to trust the infallible Word of God just as we find it. Selah.