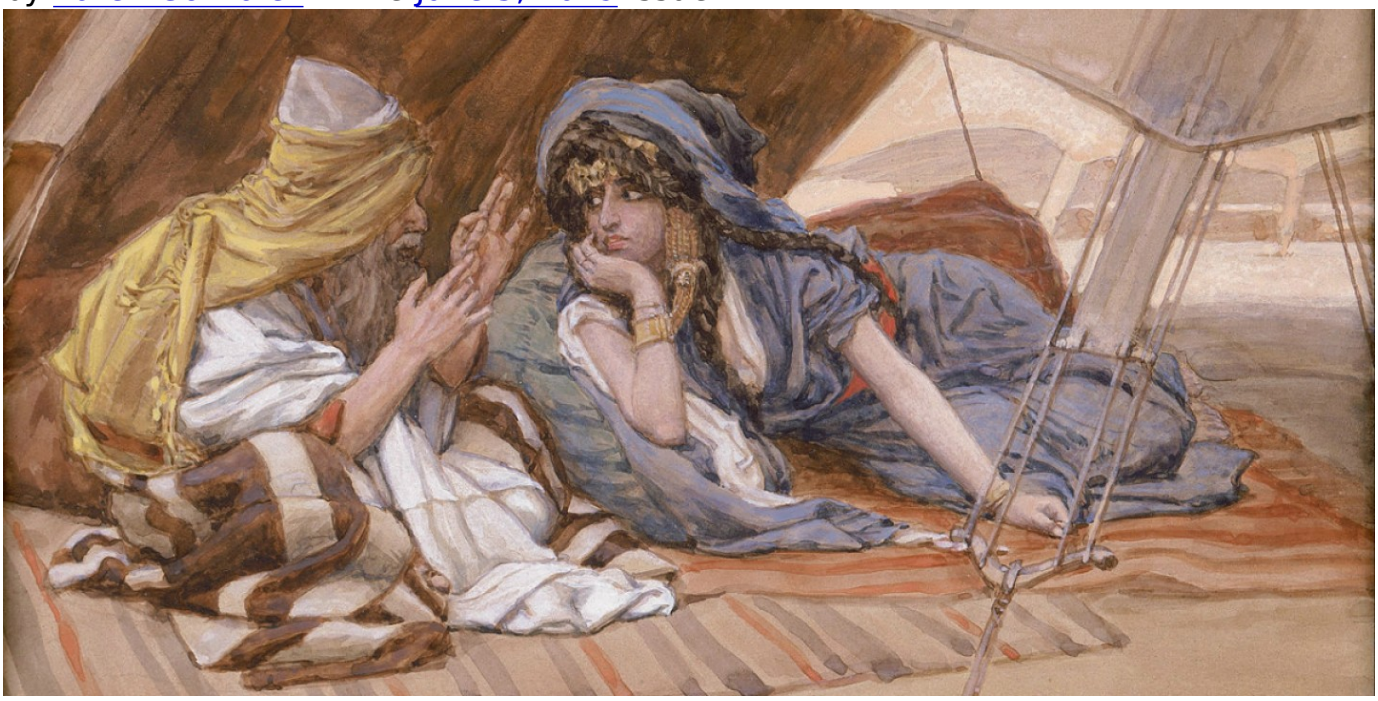
Abraham broke the law, crossing borders and trafficking his wife

Why do we forgive him so much more easily than migrants today?

by Karen González in the June 5, 2019 issue



James Tissot, *Abram's Counsel to Sarai,* gouache on board, 1896–1902

Most of us are not accustomed to thinking of Abraham as an immigrant, let alone a criminal one. However, Genesis introduces us to Abram (whose name will later change to Abraham) just as God is asking him to migrate to the land of Canaan (Gen. 12:1). In just a few verses the nomadic Abram finds himself amid a famine, which drives him to migrate again to find sustenance in what would become the preferred destination for the hungry: Egypt. “Abram went down toward Egypt to live as an immigrant since the famine was so severe in the land” (12:10, CEB).

The climate in the ancient world of the Near East fluctuated greatly, thanks to its location between the Mediterranean Sea and the Arabian Desert. The semiarid land was unpredictable for those who depended on it to produce food, like the nomads who fill the pages of Genesis. But ancient Egypt had no such problems. The Nile and

its fertile delta and riverbanks provided abundantly for inhabitants and drew small bands of immigrants like Abram and his family.

Abram does not have permission from the authorities to enter Egypt. But he and his family seek only to find sustenance and a livelihood. They do not intend harm to the people upon whose land they trespass.

Out of fear, Abram presents his wife Sarai—later known as Sarah—as his sister when they arrive in Egypt. She is beautiful and, apparently, desirable. Believing the Egyptians will kill him in order to have Sarah, he acts out of self-interest, using her to protect himself. “Tell them you are my sister so that they will treat me well for your sake, and I will survive because of you,” he says. Abram prefers to sacrifice Sarai’s well-being rather than suffer himself. And indeed, while Sarai is sent to the pharaoh’s household, Abram prospers: “Things went well for Abram because of her: he acquired flocks, cattle, male donkeys, men servants, women servants, female donkeys, and camels.”

In modern terms, we could say that Abram traffics his wife. He receives payment and grows wealthy from her sexual exploitation. He commits fraud by presenting her as his sister, a convenient half-truth. He coerces her into a situation with no way out. This is the very definition of human trafficking.

Sarai has no voice in this matter. She is doubly displaced, as both an immigrant and a victim of human trafficking. Notably, this will not be the last time Abram traffics his wife. In Genesis 20, after God makes a covenant with him and changes his name, Abraham enters the territory of the Philistines (also without authorization) and repeats these actions.

Most Christians forgive Abraham for his transgressions. We understand their placement within God’s larger story. We assume that this kind of thing must have happened all the time in the ancient Near East. Yes, Abraham may have made mistakes, but he is still the father of Judeo-Christian faith. The author of Hebrews counts Abraham among the heroes of the faith: “By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was going to receive as an inheritance” (Heb. 11:8). We know that Abraham broke the law, but we make allowances for his crimes because we consider the mitigating circumstances that brought him to such terrible actions.

Yet many of us don’t extend that same consideration to unauthorized immigrants whose crime is crossing the US-Mexico border, a criminal misdemeanor. I have sat with immigrants and taken down their stories for affidavits attached to immigration petitions. In those conversations, many speak with regret about having had to break the law. They first tried to do things the right way, often several times. But their visa application was rejected, or they were told when they applied for asylum that they hadn’t proven a credible fear of persecution. In desperation, many of them then endured a perilous journey and did whatever they had to do to survive. Sometimes this included breaking the law by crossing the border into the United States and making a home for themselves when they arrived.

Women often tell their stories through tears, reluctant to speak of the sexual assault they experienced along the way. According to Amnesty International, more than 60 percent of immigrant women who cross the border into the United States are sexually assaulted on the journey.

Like Sarah, immigrant women are more vulnerable to human trafficking than women who are not immigrants. Some organizations have said that as many as 80 percent of trafficking victims are foreign-born women and girls. It’s not uncommon to hear stories of women working in appalling conditions, under lock and key without a day of rest, while also experiencing sexual abuse.

It’s tempting to conclude that if immigrants to the United States broke the law by crossing the border, they must be prone to criminality—that we must be suspicious of them because they pose a danger to citizens. But research on the link between immigration and criminal behavior shows, over and over again, that immigrants are less likely than native-born Americans to commit serious crimes or be imprisoned.

None of this means that laws are unimportant or should be broken at will. When we find ourselves in situations we would rather escape, breaking the law should not be our first impulse. Many of the laws given in the US Constitution were intended by the Founding Fathers to protect the republic they sought to build.

But I wonder if we value our human-made laws more than the human beings that they were designed to guide and protect. The immigration laws of Canada or the United States or China or Germany are not God’s immutable laws. The United States is a constitutional republic whose laws change all the time because citizens recognize that the law is not inerrant. At one time in our history, it was legal to own

people as property. It was legal to count an African brought here in chains as three-fifths of a person. It was legal to deny women the right to vote or own property. People eventually recognized these laws were unjust, and they were amended. Some were rightly repealed altogether.

Good laws are organic, not static. They respond to people and their unique vulnerabilities. They resist harming people who get caught up by forces beyond their control as they try to help their families survive.

Immigration laws cannot love our immigrant neighbors. Only we, people, can do that. Laws can, however, protect immigrants from falling prey to those who see their vulnerability and seek to take advantage by victimizing them. When I consider the situation in which Sarah and Abraham found themselves, I wonder how laws might have provided protection and care for them too.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Trafficking Sarah." It was excerpted from The God Who Sees: Immigrants, the Bible, and the Journey to Belong *by Karen González, just published by Herald Press © 2019. All rights reserved. Used with permission.*