

THE RISE OF ISAAC: THE COVENANT GOES TO THE NEXT GENERATION

I. Starting in chapter 23, the older generation begins to die off and the covenant is transferred to Isaac, the first covenant given to the next generation.

A. In chapter 23, Sarah dies and Abraham insists on purchasing land for her burial, thus staking his first claim to the Promised Land.

- Her body is the first one to consecrate the ground.

- In addition, it is clear from chapter 11, verse 32 that Terah died two years earlier. (Terah was seventy when he became the father of Abraham, and thus 80 when Sarah was born. Sarah lived 127 years. Thus, Terah would have been 207 when Sarah died; Genesis says that he lived for 205 years.) The previous generations are dying off; the new generations must now take over.
- Chapter 25, verse 20 indicates that Isaac was forty when he married Rebekah. Thus, Terah would have died three years before his marriage. There is a poignancy that she did not live to see her son marry and have children. That is perhaps one reason why the text does not say she lived to a ripe old age, as it does with Abraham.

B. When she dies, Abraham not only wants a fitting burial, which the local people would gladly have given, but also to purchase the land for her burial.

- He recognizes that he is currently a resident alien, and thus does not have a permanent residency there. A burial place will give him and his descendants a permanent claim.

- The local people, the Hittites want to give him a burial place for free. At one level, they do not want to take money from a guest. But at a deeper level, they may not want this powerful man to have a legal claim to any of the territory.
- C. Abraham then specifies exactly which land he wants and who the owner is, namely the cave of Machpelah owned by one Ephron. We do not know much about the place, except that it faced Mamre, which Abraham considered home. At one level, the place may have been important because it faced Abraham and Sarah's home. But Abraham may have name that particular land because Ephron would be the most likely to sell at the right price.
- Later Abraham himself, and then Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob and Leah were all buried there. See Gen. 49:29-32, 50:13. While the Israelites were in Egypt, the burial sites of the patriarchs would remain, keeping their legal ties to that land.
- That site has ever since been revered by Jews, than Christians and Muslims, which is in the current town of Hebron. There is a mosque on the site, which is still surrounded by massive walls (8-9 feet thick and 197 feet long) that were probably built by Herod in the first century B.C.
- D. At first, Ephron also wants to give Abraham the land. But then, when he says that he would gladly give even a field worth 400 shekels (about 160 ounces) of silver, Abraham takes advantage of the opportunity and offers him that exorbitant amount for the field. (Later, Jeremiah would pay only 17 shekels for a field, and Omri would pay 6000 shekels for land upon which the entire city of Samaria was built. See Jer. 32:7; 1 Kings 16:27.
- E. It is noteworthy that, even with God's promise of the land eventually, Abraham thought it important to establish a legal claim. The claim would come not through military or technological power (i.e. conquest, annexation or agriculture) but rather through reverence for the dead. Filial piety would ever be a hallmark of the Chosen People.

II After Sarah dies, Abraham sends a servant to find a wife for Isaac. The unnamed servant is most faithful in arranging for the marriage of Isaac with his distant cousin Rebekah.

A. The scene begins with recounting Abraham's blessings of prosperity and old age. But now he wants to see the final blessing, a daughter-in-law and grandchildren.

B. Noteworthy, he does not speak directly to Isaac, but rather to a trusted servant. But he is still in charge of Isaac's affairs. It would appear that Isaac is among Abraham's people, but desiring to start being his own man.

1. He insists that the servant swear a deep oath that he would find a wife for Isaac from Abraham's own kindred, which would most likely come from the descendants of Abraham's brother Nahor, mentioned in chapter 22.

- The placing of hands under the thighs probably indicated a curse of sterility or persecution by future generations if the oath is broken.

- There was as yet no prohibition against marrying foreign wives, as the locals would be. That prohibition would come later. See Duet. 7:3; Ezra 10.

- Rather, Abraham may have been worried that a foreign wife would lead Isaac astray. Or perhaps he simply wanted to keep the blessings within the family.

2. The servant prudently asks what he should do if the eligible women will not come to the Promised Land.

- Abraham responds that the most important thing is to keep Isaac from the old land. Abraham may well have been worried that if Isaac went back to Haran or Ur, he would not return.

-But Abraham is confident of success, assuring the servant that God will send a "messenger," presumably an angel ahead to help the mission succeed.

3. The servant is never named, despite his obvious importance and talents. The most likely candidate is Eliezar, whom

Abraham mentioned in chapter 15 as the one who would inherit the covenant, with Abraham at the time childless. However, he is not named, possibly to focus on the centrality of God's providence.

- C. The servant, who is both intelligent and prayerful, goes to the city where Nahor is living, which is in Aram Naharim
1. Aram Naharim was apparently in northern Mesopotamia, near Harah, where Abraham's father Terah stopped. Apparently, some of the children of Nahor, Abraham's brother lived there.
  2. The servant shows his intelligence: (1) by bringing many gifts, showing Abraham's prosperity; and (2) proposing a test for the woman he meets, namely, that she be hospitable by offering him and his camels a drink.
  3. However, the servant asks God to make this test work and give him a sign that he is right by the woman saying the right words. He refers to God as "God of my master Abraham," indicating a humility in not wanting to invoke God in his own name.
- The servant twice asks God to deal "with grace" toward Abraham. The term here for grace, *hesed*, will become a central theme in the Bible, reflecting God's determination to make the covenant work.
- D. The prayer and test work perfectly as Rebekah immediately comes out with a jar of water and responds generously to the servant's request.
1. Rebekah is the daughter of Bethuel and granddaughter of Nahor, Abraham's brother. The text, however, focuses not on Nahor, but upon his wife Milcah; this grandmother seems to be the more important figure in raising Rebekah with such character. At the beginning, the servant knows none of this.
  2. Rebekah is shown as a fitting wife on every count. She is a beautiful virgin who shows great generosity.
    - In response to the servant's request for a drink, she not only offers to give drink to the camels, but to get enough for all the camels to "fill up." Camels can drink 25 gallons of water, indicating that the task of giving them enough water is an enormous one, but one she takes on cheerfully.
    - It sounds odd that the man simply watched her as she got all of this water. But in that culture, it was women who carried water; she may also have had servants helping her.

- E. Confident that she is the one that God wants, he immediately gives her expensive gifts before she identifies herself.
1. He gives a small gold nose ring and two gold bracelets of ten shekels (about 4 ounces) each.
  2. She then tells him that she is of the family of Nahor, with emphasis, however, again on Milcah. Milcah was the daughter of Abraham's now deceased brother Haran. She had married her uncle Nahor, Abraham's other brother.
  3. The servant remembers to thank God for his success, crediting His grace.
- F. Rebekah then tells "her mother's house" about the event and her brother Laban, who seems to be in charge, is agreeable.
1. The focus on her mother indicates that Bethuel, her father, does not seem to be a central figure.
  2. Upon seeing the gold ring and bracelets, Laban is favorably disposed to the visitor. Here, as with his dealings with Jacob later, Laban is on the alert for gain.
- G. The servant recounts his mission and the encounter with Rebekah, with some details added or embellished to make his case more favorable.
1. The servant basically describes the mission accurately, but he makes the command to find a wife from Abraham's own people stricter, saying in verse 40 that the woman must be of his father's (Terah's) house. Terah died five years earlier and seems to have been rather forgotten. The servant is honoring him.

2. The servant emphasizes the prayer and test he had set forth, and how Rebekah was plainly the one set aside by God.
3. In describing Rebekah's response, the servant does not emphasize Milcah as much as Rebekah did. Laban may have been somewhat resentful that his household is known more for his grandmother than his father or himself.
4. The servant also gets the order mixed up. He says he gave her the gifts after she told him who she was rather than before. He may not want Laban to think he has been reckless; or he may want to flatter Laban by emphasizing the importance of his family.

H. Laban and the household are immediately favorable and they consent to the wedding proposed.

1. They recognize the hand of God at work. They may also have been favorably disposed to the wealth that the servant brings.
2. No one seems to worry that Isaac is not present. Unlike the servant, they seem to be more concerned with the joining of the families than with the personalities involved.
3. The servant, probably seeing their concern with wealth, brings out all of his costly presents.

- I. Having succeeded in the mission, the servant wants to depart immediately, and finally is able to do so.
  1. On the next morning, with Rebekah's mother apparently back (her father Bethuel is presumably deceased), the household wants the servant to wait awhile. The motive is not clear. They may have simply wanted a longer farewell, although they do not seem that concerned with Rebekah. They may also have wanted to bargain or investigate the matter more.
  2. In any case, the servant wants to leave as soon as possible. One reason may have simply been eagerness to return home with the mission accomplished. Another reason may be that he was nervous that they may try to go back on the arrangement.
  3. The family finally thinks to call Rebekah and ask what she thinks about the whole arrangement, not just departing immediately, but whether she wants to go with the servant to an unseen husband. Perhaps to the family's surprise, she agrees eagerly. It seems that she was anxious to get away from what looks like a rather greedy household.
  4. The family, to its credit, gives her a blessing that is remarkably similar to the one God gave to Abraham after he passed the test regarding Isaac. But in this context the recipient is the woman leaving, not the father, or the family whom she is leaving.
- J. The servant then returns to Isaac, who at this point is in the Negeb region, to the south of Abraham's location.
  1. This text indicates again that Isaac is being at least somewhat independent of Abraham.

2. The text emphasizes that Rebekah does not even recognize Isaac when she first meets him. Nevertheless, when the servant explained the situation, Isaac wanted her for his wife, and they were married very soon. Despite the complete ignorance of each other before the marriage, it begins on a very happy note, as she gives him consolation for the death of Sarah. There will be disputes later, however, as Isaac favors the more earthy, athletic son Esau, while Rebekah favors the smaller, cleverer (in both a good and bad sense) Jacob.

III. The text then switches back to Abraham and Isaac one more time to conclude its discussion of their roles.

A. Perhaps to everyone's surprise, Abraham marries again and has six children. These children would become the founders of various Arab tribes. Most important are: Midian, Sheba and Didan.

1. Midian apparently is at least one of the founders of the Midianite tribe, who would play a part in Israel's history, beginning with the fact that it is Midianite traders who buy Joseph as a slave and sell him in Egypt. See Ex. 2, 18; Judges 6.

2. Sheba would become a wealthy kingdom to the south of the Arabian peninsula. The queen of Sheba would visit Solomon because of his wealth, symbolizing the gathering of the rulers of the earth around him. See 1 Kings 10:1-13.

3. The Dedanites would become associated with the Edomites, descendants of Esau who lived to Israel's east. See Is. 21:13; Jer. 25:23, 49:8.

B. Abraham then dies at the age of 175.

- This death actually takes place after the birth of Jacob and Esau, described in the next chapter. Their births occur

when Abraham is 160. His death is described here in order to wrap up the account of him and pass onto Isaac.

- Ishmael returns to help bury Abraham. Despite the injustices done to him, Ishmael, who is now 90 years old, still loves Abraham and perhaps realizes the blessings that have come to him through Abraham.
- The text makes it clear that the blessings of Abraham passed onto Isaac. This is the first intergenerational transfer of the blessings of God. From now on, the blessings will be transferred from one generation to the next.
- The text does not say it here, but according to chapter 10 Shelah the grandson of Shem and great-grandson of Noah dies the year before Abraham. Arpachshad, the son of Shem had died some years earlier.

C. Then, in order to complete the discussion of Ishmael, the text turns to him and describes his children and his death.

1. He has twelve sons, who found twelve tribal groups, just like Jacob will do later. It is clear that God is still blessing him.
2. Ishmael dies 47 years after the death of Abraham. This event occurs well after the birth and struggles of Jacob and Esau. The text does not describe it here, but Shem the son of Noah has recently died; only eber from the first people after the Great Flood is still living, and he will die soon. The past generations are all going away and the age of the covenant with the Chosen People has arrived.