

GENESIS

A THEOLOGICAL COMMENTARY

THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, ISAAC AND JACOB

DR CHARLES VOGAN

A WIFE FOR ISAAC: THE NATION (*GENESIS 24*)

The stories in Genesis are about real people going through real experiences that all of us can identify with. That's why it's so easy to turn the book into moralisms: did this character do the right thing? Or did he or she fail God in their testing? Because the stories seem to focus solely on their behavior under God's watchful eye, the most obvious lessons (to us!) to draw from them are guides for our own moral behavior as we go through the same circumstances. And while we're at it, we also pass moral judgment on the characters in the story: did they do the right thing according to our standards?

But if that's the only purpose for Genesis, we could just as easily use any other religious literature for the same purpose. Most religions center on morals, all the way from ancient Middle Eastern cults and Confucianism to modern Unitarianism. Genesis, however, is a unique book in that God is revealing something new in the history of man – it's the intrusion, if you will, into our world of something from outside of the world, a spiritual Treasure that this world doesn't have, that can change the heart of man and set him on the way to a new kind of life. Genesis talks about a reality that other religions can't offer: the Covenant Promises made to Abraham.

This story of Abraham finding a wife for his son Isaac has been one of the most moralized stories of the Bible, as if the point of the story is simply the rules for godly marriage. The usual interpretation is that the key characters were careful to follow the LORD's leading in this enterprise to marriage; therefore, the lesson runs, we too should follow the LORD's leading in finding a marriage partner and we can then hope for a blessed outcome as well.

Well, that may be true, but that's not the point. Everything in Genesis has to do with the **Covenant** – this story is no exception. Moralizing the story makes man (and woman) the focus, as if the right results will happen if *we* do the right thing; in other words, it becomes a man-centered religion. And a man-centered religion takes us down the wrong path; it does nothing at all for our salvation. The point here is not about marriage but about God fulfilling the third Promise of the Covenant for Abraham and his descendants. It's *what God does* in the story that makes it so valuable for our faith.

Blessed in every way – At this point Abraham has spent 65 years following the LORD in his new life in Canaan; he is now 140 years old. The LORD has taught him almost every aspect of the Covenant Promises, given him a personal “foretaste” of them, blessed him richly because of them, and made him a force to be reckoned with among the nations. The Covenant has become a real treasure in Abraham's life by now.

The time has come to pass on this treasure to his son. Being blessed “in every way” isn't referring just to physical blessings. It refers mainly to the power behind those blessings – the God who has been doing the impossible for Abraham. It's *that* Treasure that is so valuable to Abraham and his Family, and that's what he wants to pass on to them. The most amazing evidence of this power is in his own son Isaac's birth. But other things have been

happening along the way that point to the presence and wisdom and power of God creating situations that will separate Abraham from others around him and enrich him spiritually. Abraham the shepherd has had kings bowing down before him. He has seen his God working miracles on his behalf, in Egypt and in Canaan. His own achievements (see Genesis 14 for an example) proved that God goes with him and prospers whatever he does. His sons, as the LORD promised him, will themselves turn into nations and become great. There was nothing ordinary about Abraham's life so far – in fact, there are even greater things yet to be done in the Family of Abraham that the Patriarch himself can only wonder at – the Nation of Israel, the rise of kings, the Temple, and the ultimate Heir who would enlarge Abraham's Family all around the world. Abraham "saw" all these things in his faith. (John 8:56) *That's* the Treasure he is ready to hand over to his son.

Abraham has personally experienced the concept that God intends to create a new life for his people, and fill it with the power of Heaven so that the dead can come back to life and man can once again live in the presence of God – as his son. The potential here is beyond our imagination; it certainly isn't something that other religions have to offer. And it involves much more than physical blessings. The Patriarchs themselves were fully aware of what they were passing on to their sons. And those of their descendants who also lived in faith were aware of what they were actually bequeathed by their Forefathers.

The servant's oath – We can conjecture that the *way* that Abraham and his servant made this oath reflected the seriousness of it. To Abraham, this matter was as serious as life and death;

his servant needs to take it just as seriously. It just may be that Abraham will die before Isaac finds a wife, and this whole business may be in the hands of the servant.

The *reason* for the oath was simple: Abraham was "old, well advanced in years." He had no way of knowing if he would live long enough to see his son Isaac married.

The *content* of the oath was that Isaac *must not* marry one of the Canaanite women. At this stage of the Covenant, the identity of those who will receive the Covenant Promises was critical. It's not just that the women of Canaan were objectionable in themselves (though false religions do produce an immoral and decadent character) but it was the idolatry that was so unacceptable. Everyone is a sinner; but when someone worships the wrong god, there is no way that sin can be properly addressed and it's only going to get worse. And the family sins will inevitably get passed on to the children. Strike at the cause, and the disease will go away. Or in this case, avoid the carriers of the disease: the son needs the right wife, spiritually speaking.

This is the first time in Scripture that we see this principle of *don't intermarry with the Canaanites*. It will be a recurring theme for the rest of the Old Testament. In fact it was one of the primary causes of Israel's troubles for centuries: from the time of the Judges, through the period of the Monarchy (remember Solomon's wives?), the rebellion of the Northern Tribes (remember Jezebel?), and even when the Israelites returned home after the Exile (see Ezra 9-10). God warned them explicitly about this crippling sin at the

very beginning of the Nation's history, on the borders of the Promised Land:

Take care, lest you ... make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and when they whore after their gods and sacrifice to their gods and you are invited, you eat of his sacrifice, and you take of their daughters for your sons, and their daughters whore after their gods and make your sons whore after their gods. (Exodus 34:12, 15-16)

As you can see, God has strong feelings about his people going after false gods. And he knows that marriage is the easiest and most powerful way to draw a person into this dark world of sin and death. Because the emotional and physical forces of the marriage bond are so strong, we will do whatever our partner demands of us to guarantee what we want from them. Besides, it's too often the case that the husband follows his wife's lead when it comes to religion; and if our partner loves another god, our souls are in jeopardy whether we know it or not. It's almost a guarantee that we will compromise our own faith.

The severity of God's spiritual standards are too much for the average person in this world of sin and death. And in marriage the battle between light and darkness will inevitably produce stress and problems and opposing sides if one is faithful to God and the other one isn't. True religion doesn't bend the rules concerning marriage between believers and unbelievers; God demands a higher allegiance to himself than to your partner:

Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness?

Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? (2 Corinthians 6:14-16)

Marriage only works when both of you are on the same page spiritually.

Later on the descendants of Abraham will begin marrying "local girls", but that's only when the Covenant Family is firmly established and the rules are set in stone, so to speak. At this point, however, the LORD is about to create the Family, and Abraham wants to pass on the Covenant to a woman who will appreciate its spiritual nature. As it turns out, Rebekah was the perfect choice – see Genesis 27 where she works hard to make sure her son Jacob receives this inheritance.

Instructions – Abraham's servant was no fool. He could see right away that what his master was requiring of him would be extraordinary if it worked, which means it probably wouldn't work. First, the girl probably wouldn't agree to come; second, if Isaac wanted a wife that wasn't an idolater, he would have to go back "home" to Haran to find someone suitable.

So Abraham had to educate his servant. There's more than a marriage at stake. The God who called Abraham to the Promised Land was doing something important here, and he wasn't going to let a few impossibilities get in his way. So God was going to send his angel before the servant so that the impossible would happen. The power and wisdom of God is going to clear the way and make sure that God's spiritual goals are fulfilled. The "laws" of the natural world – and the way things "naturally

work” as we humans experience them – are going to be set aside and the Kingdom of God is going to grow in its place to form a Family and a Nation which will provide the world with spiritual answers to its problems.

What the servant must *not* do, under any circumstances, is take Isaac back to Haran. Haran is not “home” anymore. The LORD made it very plain to Abraham that home is now Canaan for him and his descendants. The Promises are tied to the Land.

The servant’s prayer – Now Abraham’s servant has the necessary elements to carry out his mission. Of course if this mission is part of God’s plan to further the Covenant, the servant must start by turning to God himself and asking for his guidance and resources.

In this he demonstrates two insights: *first*, he knows he must completely depend on God for the success of his mission. He therefore prays to the right God – “O LORD, God of my master Abraham.” Targeting the right God by name means one will tap into Heaven’s resources, and look to Heaven’s goals; in this case, the Covenant. And the servant asks for “success” by doing, essentially, a miracle – sending the right girl to him right away, through a particular series of circumstances. He knew that Abraham’s God did miracles, which only come from Heaven’s treasury. By doing a miracle (versus a naturally expected event) the success would have God’s mark upon it, a testimonial of the presence of the real God.

Finally, he asks that, by bringing about this circumstance *in this way*, God would show “steadfast love to my master Abraham.” At first glance this is a strange thing to ask for, since the servant has been sent out to find a wife for

Isaac! But it makes perfect sense if we remember that the marriage is not the primary issue here. By finding the right wife for Isaac, God will be keeping his “Covenant of love”¹ with Abraham. The concept that God is showing “steadfast love” (the Hebrew word *chesed* חֶסֶד also can be translated “faithfulness, loyalty, kindness, goodness”) reflects *what it is* that God is doing for Abraham: giving him and his Family a way of escape from condemnation of sin, giving him access to the presence of God and being reconciled to him, giving him special status of a son in the Father’s House, giving him the fullness of the Inheritance of God, starting a Family that would extend out to cover all the earth. These aren’t the kinds of things that men and nations usually expect of their gods. It’s the act of a Father’s love, nothing less, for his precious Son and Heir. *This* is what the servant is referring to, what he’s asking for, when he asks for God’s guidance to find the right woman for Isaac. This marriage is a necessary step toward fulfilling the Covenant of love between God and Abraham and his descendants.

The *second* insight that the servant had was that prayer is not so much telling God how to do things (he already knows what to do and how to do it); instead it’s consciously submitting to God, and learning in what ways that God will provide – *that’s* the point of prayer. In other words, prayer reflects a change *in us*, not in God’s plans. It’s like reciting the lesson until the teacher is satisfied

¹ There are a number of passages in the Old Testament that connect these two ideas: for example, Deuteronomy 7:9, 12; 1 Kings 8:23; 2 Chronicles 6:14; Nehemiah 1:5; 9:32; Psalm 25:10; 89:28; 106:45; Isaiah 54:10; 55:3; 56:6; 61:8; Ezekiel 16:8; Daniel 9:4.

that we know it correctly. When God heard back from the servant his exact plan, point for point, he knew that the servant understood the instructions and he was ready to go do his duty. Only then would God bless the servant's efforts; God only blesses *his* work, *his* Kingdom, not man's opinions. God blesses obedience, not independence. Prayer is *learning God's will, works, and ways*.

God's servants walk a tightrope in this world, because only if they do exactly what they are told to do and let God do his part (remember Abraham's mistake with Hagar) will the mission succeed. Otherwise the results will be messy and complicated due to the interference of man's ignorance and sins.

Rebekah's character – The way the culture was like in those days, we can probably assume that women and men didn't casually mix in public, which means that Rebekah's actions toward a stranger at the well would have been contrary to expectations. But since the servant deliberately prayed that the right girl would not only give him water when asked, but go the extra mile and offer to water his camels (a job normally done by slaves), we can therefore assume that this was *not* characteristic of girls toward strangers. He prayed for the angel to do something extraordinary.

And that means we're once again encountering what we've seen before: a *righteous person*. Remember that the LORD came to Abraham and was received in the same way – graciously, effusively; Abraham was more than helpful, desirous to make them comfortable and he took care of their needs. The LORD found the same thing in Lot as opposed to the rest of the people in Sodom. Rebekah, in other

words, is the kind of person of whom Paul speaks, someone in whom the graces of the Spirit are working.

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. (Philippians 2:3-4)

We may not be so impressed in our day because we feel that people can make their own way in a land of plenty and high tech. But in their world, water and food and rest for oneself and one's animals often meant the difference between survival or hardship; and there were no inns in town. People depended on each other much more than we do now. The burden, in other words, was not on the traveler but on the local citizen. But since human nature was the same then as it is now, the servant was positively impressed by Rebekah's attitude about his rather considerable needs.

The final answer to prayer came when he discovered that Rebekah came from Abraham's family. So now he knew for certain that the LORD led him to the right girl. The additional note about her beauty puts a practical aspect into the overall picture – in other words, Isaac will be satisfied with his wife; he won't be looking at anybody else in Canaan and adulterating the Family line with idolaters (see Proverbs 5:15-20).

Giving thanks for guidance – Notice how the servant acknowledges and gives thanks for *two* separate things: *first*, that the LORD "has not forsaken his steadfast love and his faithfulness toward my master." *Second*, that the LORD "has led me in the way to the house of my

master's kinsmen." He's still keeping it clear in his own mind that there are two separate missions at work here – the Covenant with Abraham, and getting a wife for Isaac. By accomplishing the second, the LORD will be fulfilling the first.

Laban's welcome – And now we are introduced to Laban, Rebekah's brother. One tends to be suspicious of Laban in light of what he will do to Rebekah's future son Jacob (see Genesis 29-31). Whatever he may have thought about Abraham's God at this point, later he certainly didn't appreciate the work of that same God in Jacob's behalf at his expense. We hate to think ill of someone at the beginning of their career, but the true nature of the heart comes out over time, developed by circumstances, so that we do indeed know the man by what he has done at the end of his life. (Ecclesiastes 7:1) The later account of Laban's character helps us to see the seeds of disingenuous motives in this first encounter with him.

Notice that Laban is drawn to the obvious wealth and authority of this stranger: "As soon as he saw the ring and the bracelets on his sister's arms, and heard the words of Rebekah his sister, 'Thus the man spoke to me ...'" At this point Laban may be overawed by Abraham's authority in the family and thus he behaves himself in this situation. Notice too that in those days, when someone proposed marriage, he was expected to give a "dower" or bride price to both the bride and the family of the bride. This is most probably why Laban would be so interested in seeing the mission succeed (in light of his overt greed and manipulation in how he treated Jacob later).

Testimony – In order to give the Spirit of God freedom to work in this situation, the servant wisely recounts everything that has been happening to Abraham's family, step by step from the beginning, leaving nothing out. He tells them about

- The Covenant that God made with Abraham.
- Abraham's new life in Canaan.
- The miracle that God did in giving Sarah a son, Isaac.
- Abraham's mandate for how to find a wife for his son.
- The servant's questions about procedure in this difficult case.
- The presence of God's angel on the trip, paving the way.
- The servant's prayer in how to be led.
- The fulfillment in Rebekah.
- That this was the right family to come to.
- And finally the servant's prayer of thanks for answering his needs.

Now, the servant tells the family, you decide for yourself what's going on here.

There's two ways to tell a history: man's way, and God's way. History is made up of data and *the interpretation of that data*. When man looks at something, he will tell it in a way that usually leaves God and morality out of the picture. But when God tells the same story it looks completely different. This account of the servant is telling what happened from God's point of view. There's a spiritual element to the entire thing, from the beginning to the end – God's Covenant rules the events of Abraham's Family. So obedience to

the LORD is critical. God himself was making sure that Abraham and his Family was richly blessed, through his own power and wisdom.

So the servant makes sure the family knows this whole thing was the LORD's doing, not his. Abraham, the servant, Rebekah, her family – they have to realize that they are part of a bigger Plan than they realize. God is involving himself in this marriage for purposes that will unfold over the next 4000 years. So if you have a problem with it, he essentially says, your argument is with God, not me. But if you agree, you'll be joining something that is bigger than all of us.

Someone's testimony is unanswerable. When we just tell others what God has done, there's simply no way to deny what we are saying short of calling us a liar. If we fall back to doctrine, we give others plenty of room to argue with us; not so with testimony. This was the best approach for the servant to take in order to convince them that God was behind these circumstances, and they should therefore do the right thing.

The family's permission – Oh for the days when girls were not independent of their families! There is collective wisdom in the family, especially in those who are older and more experienced and don't have hormones and emotions dictating their decisions. Our modern custom of girls away in college sleeping with uncounted guys and then deciding on which one to marry – and only then does her family know anything about what she's been doing – would have been considered prostitution in Bible times. Notice that the text says that Rebekah was “a maiden [*Hebrew בתולה*, a “*virgin*”] whom no man had known.”

That was important to them – and to her future husband.

What the family heard, of course, were attractive reasons for thinking that Rebekah was marrying into a safe family, with good prospects. To them, at least to the servant's face, the fact that the LORD seemed to be directing this situation was convincing. Rebekah, however, was seeing bigger things ...

Rebekah accepts – There seemed to be some disagreement about when the servant could return home. He wanted to go the next day, but the family wanted him to stay a while – for some unspecified reason. Again, knowing something about how Laban worked things in relation to Jacob (40 years later) it may have had something to do with securing Rebekah's allegiance to the family and, worse yet, to the family gods – in other words, that she would consider her father's home her real authority, more so than her new husband. That would, in the long run, be more financially rewarding for Laban. The family no doubt saw it that way since they decided favorably for the arrangement without even consulting Rebekah.

Once again the angel of the LORD had to step in here and do a miracle: in order to solve the problem of when to depart, the family *for some reason* put the question of the marriage to Rebekah herself – perhaps thinking that she would vote for a delay, in order to “first say farewell to those at my home,” (Luke 9:61) which would be natural enough for a girl leaving her home forever.

And now *another* miracle transpired, but in order to appreciate what happened we have to put ourselves in Rebekah's shoes (or sandals!). Here's the situation: some stranger shows up, says that some

other stranger's God told him to come looking for a wife for his son. Now everyone expects her to go hundreds of miles away, with never a hope of seeing home and family again, live in a foreign land and culture, surrounded by strangers, and marry someone she has never seen and knows nothing about. Her family, without asking her, just signed the contract. *And she agrees!* What girl in her right mind would do that?

A girl who has faith – Rebekah hears the voice of Abraham's God, just as he himself heard it years ago when he received the call to "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you." (Genesis 12:1) She isn't responding to the riches, or to the future husband, or to the servant; she's responding obediently to God's call on her life. She isn't just marrying the *man*, but the *Plan*. This careful speech of the servant was actually God's Word entering into Rebekah's world.

We know from the entire Bible that obedience to God's Word is a sign of true faith.

But be doers of the Word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. (James 1:22)

Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. (James 2:18)

She made the right decision to become part of the Covenant Family. She took part in the Covenant blessings (something she had no rights to by staying home), her descendants would become great in history, her faith would help promote the Kingdom of God and, therefore, would entitle her to be listed

among the faithful. Quite a dowry from the LORD! And we know she valued this spiritual dowry from her actions in future chapters of Genesis.

Here also is where we see the LORD's way of treating the woman in a marriage relationship: she shares fully in her husband's life, including his spiritual journey. Therefore she also must agree (willingly, of her own consent) to the terms of the Covenant. Before God "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus and ... heirs according to promise." (Galatians 3:28-29) The soul has no gender; God treats all alike spiritually. Rebekah stands to share in the Covenant inheritance because *she* wants it, not because her family told her to.

Marriage – And the happy ending is that Rebekah went back with the servant, Isaac and she fell in love at first sight, and they were married.

What is more pertinent to the rest of us is that God achieved his goal as well. Here is the beginning of the fulfillment of the Covenant Promise of the Nation made to Abraham. The Patriarch can rest easy now, knowing that his son is married and the Family can begin. Without a wife for Isaac, there can be no Family; once the Family starts, however, the line grows exponentially until they become a great Nation that takes over Canaan, and God works through them for the spiritual benefit of the whole earth.

The Point – The last significant Promise that God kept for Abraham was to secure a future for the Covenant. Without heirs the Promises would have come to an end with Abraham; and since he himself only experienced a "foretaste" of each of the

Promises, he could hardly claim to have laid hold of the fullness of the Covenant. The scope and depth of the Covenant were huge.

These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. (Hebrews 11:13)

This was especially true in Abraham's case. Many scholars think that because Abraham was the first in the line, he naturally only had a vague idea of what the Covenant entailed. But that's not true: he had a very good idea, in fact he was given the Gospel of Christ in the Word that came to him. In the events he experienced, it's true that he didn't receive much himself. But he knew what it was that he was passing on to his son Isaac. All the Patriarchs knew.

But that succession to the next generation was important, because the Covenant Promises would be fully developed, but only over long periods of time, through the lives of millions of people. In fact it's still going on in our day: the work of the Church is actually the working out of the Abrahamic Covenant for all the children of Abraham.

Now that he has found a wife for his son, Abraham can pass the Covenant inheritance on to the next generation. In Isaac's family the Nation of Israel is born: in Rebekah's womb was Jacob, the father of the Twelve Tribes of Israel. This is no longer just Abraham's Inheritance.

But what's even more significant is that Abraham found a *suitable* wife for his son – someone who would share the

inheritance of the Covenant Promises, someone who would willingly join the Family and walk in faith with her husband. Abraham had to go back to his old home, his old world, invite her and bring her out.

“Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the Church. (Ephesians 5:31-32)

And I saw the holy City, new Jerusalem, coming down out of Heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. (Revelation 21:2)

This sets the proper basis for our inclusion into God's Family: we are not by nature suitable for the Covenant; our sinful nature disqualifies us. But God includes us by marriage to the Son. The Father has found a suitable wife for his only Heir.

Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the Church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. (Ephesians 5:25-27)

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Genesis: A Theological Commentary

ISBN 978-1547101634



Ravenbrook Publishers

A subsidiary of
Shenandoah Bible Ministries

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