

GENESIS

A THEOLOGICAL COMMENTARY

THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, ISAAC AND JACOB

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ISAAC IN CANAAN (*GENESIS 26*)

We've already seen a great deal of Isaac in the story of Genesis, but it was in the context of the elements of the Covenant as Abraham received them from God. In other words, as Abraham learned about the terms of the Covenant, the LORD used his son Isaac as an object lesson. First, Isaac, born by the power of the Spirit, was the promised *Son*. Then later the LORD moved Rebekah's heart to come back with Abraham's servant and marry Isaac, starting the *Family* of Abraham. Finally, when Abraham was instructed to sacrifice Isaac, the LORD provided a substitute sacrifice and spared Isaac's *life*.

We shouldn't miss the point here: it's the Father/Son model that God is using to teach us about the concepts of the Covenant. Our interest lies in what God does with Abraham's son – the Promise, the kind of birth, the “resurrection”, the Bride, the inheritance – all this is obviously shadowing an eternal reality intended for all of God's children.

At this point in the story Abraham was dead, and now Isaac is on his own. God had promised his Covenant to Abraham and *his descendants*, and the time has come to demonstrate the power of that promise. God wants to show that he is indeed going to give Isaac everything that he had given to his father Abraham, without exception. The entire Inheritance now passes visibly to the Son.

A famine in Canaan – As happened before in Abraham's day, there was a famine in Canaan that made Isaac think that perhaps he should move his family to Egypt for a while. Not only was Egypt more stable in hard times like these (with an economy based on the ever-present Nile), the conditions which caused the Canaanite famine would not also be present in Egypt.

But here the LORD stopped Isaac from doing what was “reasonable” and he made this a test case for the Covenant. “Live here,” he told Isaac, “in the middle of the famine, and I will be with you and bless you.” It would have been natural enough for Isaac to simply believe the stories about God that he heard from his father Abraham and be content with a mere “religion”, but that's not how God works. Each generation must see and know God for themselves; he is not just a God of tradition but a living God. “Without faith it is impossible to please

him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.” (Hebrews 11:6) In this way each generation of God's children directly experiences the reality and power of being Heirs of the Covenant. So, God spoke directly to Isaac.

Isaac inherits the Covenant – Isaac had come of age. He was now the head of the Family and responsible for its welfare. The Heir became the Executor of the estate. It's a role that every Heir of the Covenant must play as they “grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ” for the purpose of using the treasures of Heaven for “building up the Body of Christ.” (Ephesians 4) The Father creates us, trains us, and prepares us for this responsibility.

The LORD spelled out the terms of the Covenant to Isaac because, legally, he

had to be clear about the content and the certainty of the Promises. There was nothing new, and nothing had changed; what was once Abraham's was now Isaac's. The terms of the Abrahamic Covenant never change because they address the same basic human needs that we all have, and bring the same eternal Treasures from Heaven to fill those needs. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." (Hebrews 13:6)

- The **land** – "all these lands"
- The **nation** – "like the stars"
- The **son** – "to your offspring"
- The **Blessing** – "to all nations"

Notice one more comment that the LORD made in this review of the Covenant – he would do all these things for Isaac and his descendants "because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws." There are two things to observe here: *first*, Abraham's obedience meant life for his descendants. As he obeyed the LORD, we then are blessed. Our faith is passed down to us from Abraham. And it works like this for all the heirs: we are responsible for not only our own walk with God, but for future generations as well. They depend on the lifeline that we maintain with our God. We see later, not only in stories of the Israelites but also in the New Testament teachings of Jesus, that the "future generations" aren't usually going to be our physical families; often, as Jesus told us, family members become our spiritual enemies and it turns out they aren't the true Israel. But there are spiritual Family members (as the Church understands the word) that depend heavily on our spiritual obedience to the LORD. This Covenant *is* a generational

thing. Our brothers and sisters depend on our ministry to them – because we have access to vital spiritual resources and we faithfully pass them on to others.

Second, there are fine distinctions between the words "charge, commandments, statutes and laws." Since this is a legal document, and much will depend on the parties involved following the requirements of that legal agreement, we should therefore be familiar with the Covenant's stipulations. The *charge* was God giving Abraham the Covenant as an inheritance to be passed on to his Family. The *commandments, statutes and laws* were the specific instructions that God gave Abraham during his walk of faith, the principles of the Covenant itself (describing the terms of the Covenant – God's promises and the nature of Abraham's walk with God), and (as we read later) the Law of Moses, which is the full definition of what righteousness is, providing the necessary foundation of holiness to live with this holy God. In fact, by the time the Israelites were delivered from Egypt, formed into a Nation at Mt. Sinai, received the Law, and trained in the desert, they then had the whole legal agreement laid out in front of them – they were ready to experience the fullness of the Covenant that God promised to Abraham and his descendants. In other words this was no small matter.

Problems over Rebekah – The second test of Isaac's faith (the first was to stay in famine-ridden Canaan) concerned his wife Rebekah and the dangerous situation they were all in while living among the Canaanites. Notice how the LORD took the son through the same tests that his father Abraham went

through – and the God of the Covenant would protect him as he did his father.

Canaan was a wretched place, morally speaking. Archaeological discoveries and manuscripts from that era show us a culture and mindset that would be the modern pornographer's paradise. They had multiple gods and goddesses that reflected the philosophy and practices of the times, providing a permissive atmosphere to do whatever their senses demanded. Sexual perversion was not only allowed by the governing bodies, it was part of their worship, culture and political structure. For example, many cities had an official phallic statue, representing sexual powers (gods), placed at the edge of town that visitors could touch on their way in with the anticipation of fulfilled fantasies during their stay there. The cities were full of prostitutes, concubines, multiple wives, temple sex worship, homosexuality, bestiality, incest, pederasty – all the depraved sexual behaviors that have been found all over the world, all through history, were accepted and typical behavior in the culture of Canaan. Sodom was not unique in its world.

Abraham and his family no doubt were extremely uncomfortable around these people; they didn't trust them at all. Anything could happen, and did happen – and the pagans of course justified everything they did in some way. There must have been something about Abimelech and the men of the town that struck both Abraham and Isaac – a sexual perversion, their language, their obsessions, the determination to do whatever they wanted regardless of how immoral it may have been – that made the threat of abduction of the females a very real and obvious possibility. If anything, the Canaanites would have

found fault with Isaac for being so weird that he couldn't fit in with a culture that lived only for pleasure; to them, *he* would have been the one with the problem. (See 1 Peter 4:1-6)

Once again, just as his father Abraham was faced with the same dilemma, Isaac calculated that everyone's life was at stake here. He used the same strategy that his father did – claiming Rebekah as his sister – but this time encouraged with the example of his father's success. A sister, the townsmen could woo and marry; a wife, they would only murder the family to get – suddenly, in the middle of the night. It wasn't an act of cowardice on his part, it was realism; and it wasn't just a desperate measure. Isaac was turning to his father's God for a specific solution: the God who delivered Abraham from his problem is going to deliver his son and heir out of the same problem. We, who are after the fact, know what God did to rescue him, but Isaac saw it by faith. The LORD had promised him that he would “multiply your offspring,” and Rebekah was part of that plan.

Abimelech's panic – This time the situation didn't even get as close to danger as it did in Abraham's day. We aren't told that any man had taken Rebekah from the camp; as far as we know, she was still with Isaac. But when Abimelech saw “Isaac laughing with Rebekah his wife,” he (based on painful experience!) immediately surmised that they were husband and wife and he panicked. Abimelech knew all too well what it meant to fool with this family. The lessons he had learned from his encounter with Abraham were still in his memory, perhaps still present in physical ways because of how the LORD struck his household years ago for

his indiscretion. He wasn't going to go through *that* again!

Notice that there was no mention of an honorable marriage being a possibility for these people, just casual sex: "One of the people might easily have lain with your wife, and you would have brought guilt upon us." The Canaanite way was to rob, rape, and then pay up if necessary. We will see this later in the story of the Shechemites and how they treated Jacob's daughter Dinah.

Not only did Abimelech quickly straighten out the situation, but he also justified Isaac's faith in Abraham's God. He issued orders to his people that nobody was to touch this man or his wife, upon pain of death. Again, this wasn't out of righteousness or godliness on his part – it was out of fear of God, based on his experience.¹ This is the same order that he gave concerning Abraham after the first incident. As the father is treated, so the son is treated.

And there was no mention of blaming Isaac for it, either – he said specifically that "you would have brought guilt *upon us*." In other words, the Philistines would have been guilty for touching her. Abimelech understood Isaac's power to harm them, by bringing down the wrath of God upon their heads for committing a crime against God's people. See 1 Chronicles 16:19-22. Abimelech knew

¹ If Abimelech had truly repented of doing wrong against God during the episode with Abraham (as many critics of Abraham attest), then this second event with Isaac would never have happened. He would have imposed moral reforms among his people. Therefore Abimelech's motivation for being careful with Isaac was purely self-serving. His nature hadn't changed at all.

exactly whom God would blame and punish in this incident.

And we're going to see that, as Abraham found wealth at the hands of the pagan Abimelech, so Isaac would also prosper at his hands. He also would be rewarded for his faith.

Isaac's prosperity – The LORD fulfilled his promise to Isaac. Because Isaac listened and didn't go to Egypt, his farming venture in the "land of famine" was a huge success: he "reaped in the same year a hundredfold." In fact, everything worked out well for him as his property grew in herds, servants and possessions, to the envy of his pagan neighbors.

The LORD was keeping his promise and prospering Abraham's descendants. The Canaanites had turned the land into a moral wasteland and were creating a heavy doom for their future posterity, not prosperity and peace. Isaac, on the other hand, was demonstrating what life would be like for the Covenant people in this same land. Out of darkness comes life and light when the Creator is at work. Nature and immorality and idolatry were all against Isaac, and yet against all odds the Heir prospered because "the good hand of my God was upon me." (Nehemiah 2:8)

Resistance from the locals – As Isaac kept sowing and reaping rich yields, and digging wells and finding water – all in a land supposedly in the middle of a severe famine – this naturally aroused the jealousy of the Canaanites. What they didn't know, and what they couldn't see, was Isaac's God working on his behalf. That was the true power behind these amazing blessings. So in jealousy they started working against him by filling up his wells with dirt.

They played this game with him until they eventually drove him over 15 miles out of town – away from Gerar and out into the desert where the town of Beersheba is now located. If we needed proof that the Canaanites were not going to give up their land and homes to “strangers and aliens,” Covenant or no Covenant, here it was. Abraham’s Family was *not* welcome among them. The reason is revealing: as long as God’s people fit in with the culture, and eventually assimilate, then all is well. But when they prosper because they are separate from the culture and follow their own God (and his moral system) instead of the local idols, then they become targets and are therefore not welcome. It’s become a characteristic of every situation in which God’s people find themselves when they’re in the midst of unbelievers: the animosity that builds up is a painful testimony to the presence of a holy God with his people, and what that powerful reality means around the unholy. There will never be peace between light and darkness.

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)

But it takes a great deal of faith, and courage, and passion for the things of God, to separate oneself from the world and refuse to observe the unbeliever’s rules. The personal cost has always been great.

An altar at Beersheba – If Isaac had to go out into the wilderness to live with his God, then that’s exactly what he

would do. The Philistines didn’t challenge his new well at Beersheba, so he put down his tent stakes there, built an altar and “called on the name of the LORD.”

This act of worship by the Covenant heir is always a significant part of the story – Abraham did it, Isaac is doing it here, and Jacob would do the same. They are worshiping the God of Abraham, the God who would eventually fulfill the promises and make Israel into a great nation. Even though we are later told in Exodus (400 years in the future) that it was only then that the LORD revealed his special Name to his people, here are the Patriarchs praying to that same God in their own prayers. *Yahweh* (which is the Hebrew word behind our capitalized English word LORD) was a specific God among all the “gods” of the nations.

This shows at least two things: *first*, the same God who led Israel out of Egypt and into the Promised Land was leading the Patriarchs, and *everyone knew that all through their history*. God told Moses and the Israelites several times that he was their forefathers’ God; it validated what he was doing for them – he was fulfilling the Abrahamic Covenant.

Say this to the people of Israel, ‘The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.’ This is my Name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations. (Exodus 3:15)

Second, we needn’t stumble over the statement in Exodus that –

I am the LORD. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob,

as God Almighty, but by my name the LORD I did not make myself known to them. (Exodus 6:2-3)

The meaning of the Name Yahweh was not yet known by the Patriarchs; but the God whom the Name describes *was* known to them. It was Moses who wrote Genesis, and he's showing us the continuity of the works of *the same God*. Faith is not one's doctrinal stand, or one's position in the historical timeline of God's people, but rather walking in the presence of the only living God. God was starting something here in the lives of the Patriarchs that he would later bring to a consummation with the Israelite nation; Isaac (along with the other Patriarchs) simply followed and obeyed God as he led them through their part of the overall process. Isaac's contribution, therefore, was critical for the success of the entire Nation.

Peace with Abimelech – It seems that Abimelech must have lain awake in bed at nights worrying about Abraham's son. The Covenant heirs worry the people of this world more than they are aware (at least when they *act* like Covenant heirs). Abimelech, his personal advisor, and his army commander all came to Isaac out in the wilderness to negotiate a treaty between the Philistines and Isaac. It was obvious to them that the power of a real God was guiding and prospering Isaac in everything he did; and they feared that power if it was ever turned on them (as had happened once before). Here was an interesting turn of events for Abraham's son: the ordeal that Abraham himself went through procured blessings for his son years later; the Covenant was still protecting Isaac from his father's enemies. Once again we see that those related to Abraham would be cared for *because of* Abraham and the agreement that the LORD made with him. The

promise was to Abraham and *his* descendants.

They made peace – Isaac promised not to harm them (!) – and they parted amicably. But Abimelech was probably after more than what he told Isaac. Beersheba was almost 15 miles away from Gerar, and *here* is where Abimelech wanted his potential threat to stay – no closer. The timing of their visit makes that obvious. The fact that Isaac dug a well here and found water probably suited Abimelech just fine – with a successful well, Isaac's people would be more prone to settle down for a while. So their "peace" wasn't altruistic but political in nature. The pagans didn't want this holy people of God any closer, because the testimony of their righteous lives severely condemned the Philistines' immoral culture.

Esau's wives – Not that unbelievers were so far away from the camp. Unfortunately Isaac's own son, his eldest son Esau, had no regard for Isaac's God. Esau chose women from the Canaanites (here is exemplified the dangers of intermingling one's family with the world). And of course the women would bring their families' idols, traditions, and behavior into Isaac's camp. No doubt that behavior appealed to Esau who had no heart for holiness; but it was a grief to his parents. The seeds were being sown for a future confrontation between those who were on the LORD's side, and those who were not. There *will* be repercussions over Esau's spiritual insensitivity: pain for the whole family, war with his brother and mother, and permanent loss for his part.

We are all involved in a spiritual warfare, between the forces of light and dark. Those who follow Abraham's God will be rewarded, and those who turn

against him – even if they come from a “good” family – will be punished. And when the time comes, our family loyalty could be – but *must not* be – a stumbling block. “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.” (Matthew 10:37) Our allegiance now is first to the spiritual Family of Abraham, not to our physical families. It will often be the case that “a person’s enemies will be those of his own household.” (Matthew 10:37) But unfortunately Isaac will forget this in his relationship with his godless son Esau.

The Point – On all fronts, the LORD proved his faithfulness to the Covenant with Abraham by providing the same protection and prosperity for his son Isaac, the Heir of the Covenant. If the inheritance of the Covenant had been in name only, that would have been of little worth to Isaac. In fact, he would have wondered if he really *were* the Heir if, when faced with the same problems his father had, he had called vainly on Abraham’s God and had received no answers.

Now let’s expand this out for all of Abraham’s Family. The Covenant Promises given to Abraham were for him and for *all* of his descendants – Jews or Gentiles, whoever has the faith of their father Abraham.

So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. (Galatians 3:9)

And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise. (Galatians 3:29)

The Covenant Promises are Family property: “The promises were made to

Abraham and to his offspring.” (Galatians 3:16) They were specific resources that address the fundamental *spiritual* needs of all of God’s heirs, no matter where or when they live. These Promises constitute, in fact, the Gospel of Christ, a power that saves sinners, protects them from their enemies, and changes them into sons of God, able to enjoy the inheritance of their Father in Heaven.

Now if these promises were given to Abraham for his Family, then his Family has the right to call on Abraham’s God and claim those same promises. Just as Isaac met God face to face and received his inheritance, so must all of God’s children – they must come face to face with the true God, experience a new birth (miraculous, as was Isaac’s birth), and begin living under the protection of the Covenant. It’s important to understand that we modern believers don’t receive anything new; if God blesses us, it’s with the same Covenant Promises that he gave our spiritual forefathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the Heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. (Ephesians 1:3-4)

In Isaac’s specific case, the LORD made him rich and prosperous in a land where others were failing and starving (the second Covenant Promise). He was in touch with the resources of Heaven. That’s precisely what believers desperately need now – in a world full of death and suffering, sin and darkness and ignorance, enemies and dangers.

We aren't called to leave the world (Isaac was told to stay in Canaan), but our High Priest asked that we might be protected by the presence of our God while we're here.

I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. (John 17:15)

As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the Word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty. (Matthew 13:23)

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