

GENESIS
Week 23, chapters 24 and 25

READ GEN 24 all

The Scriptures are preparing us to move on from Abraham as the focus, to Isaac, then to Jacob, and then the Israelites.

Just as Abraham needed children for the covenants of promise to be carried on, so did Isaac. And, the first step towards that end was a suitable wife. Abraham knew that the choice of a wife for Isaac was all-important. So, he used his highest, best, most trustworthy servant to go find Isaac a wife, but.....in a manner carefully prescribed by Abraham. The first matter is, the choice **MUST** not be a Canaanite woman. After all, if Abraham and his descendants were to possess the land, it would not be well for Isaac to enter into an alliance, marriage, with one whose family might soon be dispossessed of their land. Besides, Abraham did not want a woman raised in the Canaanite religions to raise the children of the promise. Second, in the unlikely event the servant was unsuccessful in persuading the chosen wife to come down to Canaan, the servant was **NOT** to bring Isaac up to Mesopotamia for the marriage.

So, the servant is sent north, back to Abraham's homeland, Mesopotamia. Further, he is to find a family member for Isaac to marry. Now we can understand why back in Chapter 22 we were given Abraham's brother's genealogy.....for Abraham was hopeful it would be from among these that Isaac's future bride would come.

Abraham was not worried, for he knew God was preparing the way for this. The worried party was the servant, not Abraham. That said, the fact that Abraham made the servant recite an oath, plus the fact that Abraham was very old now, and fully realizing that his last breath could come at any moment, says that Abraham suspected he might not live to see the day his son, Isaac, obtained a wife. Therefore, since he might not be around to examine and give his blessing to the proposed wife, he gave all the requirements and disqualifications for a wife for Isaac to his servant to carry out in his stead.

This oath is recited with Abraham requiring the servant to put his hand under Abraham's thigh. That some kind of gesture accompanies an oath was normal for that and all eras, including our modern age. Even in Abraham's time, we have records of a hand being raised as part of swearing to a promise. But, what does this "hand under the thigh mean"? Well, this is a Hebrew idiom; and it is referring to Abraham's genitals. Now, as weird and just plain icky as that might sound, there is a meaning to this that the ancient Rabbis have spoken of that makes sense (whether they're right about it or not, I cannot say).

It is in the male genitals that the sign of the covenant with Yahweh is carried; circumcision. ^{NAS} **Genesis 17:11** *"And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you.*

Later in Genesis, we will find Jacob, Abraham's grandson, requiring the same exact "hand under the thigh" gesture of swearing an oath from Joseph. So, this odd action is seen as invoking the power and presence of God as the One who created the covenant, and also the One who guarantees the oath. We find this exact gesture nowhere else in any other culture at any time. And, the only two mentions of it in the Bible are the ones I just gave to you.....and they involve the Patriarchs and the carrying out of the provisions of the covenant.

The words of instruction Abraham gives to his servant are the last recorded words of Abraham in the Bible. And, the transition we see between some his first recorded statements versus what we read now is striking. Here, his faith is firm, there is no worry because all is in God's hands and he completely trusts that Yahweh will bring about all that He promised to Abraham. Before he asked "how will I know that I will possess the land"? And, he lied about Sarah being his wife. And, he wanted to know how he would have descendants if Sarah was barren, and so on. This is what years and years of walking with God brings.....maturity in faith. It just doesn't happen fast, does it?

This trusted servant, probably still Eliezer of Damascus spoken of in earlier chapters, has been much affected by Abraham: for he journeys back to Mesopotamia, Abraham's birthplace, and as he arrives in the city of Nahor, he prays to God that God's will would be done. Notice, that although in some bible versions Eliezer is shown calling God "Adonai" or "Lord", in the original Hebrew, he calls God "Yahweh". He uses God's personal name.

And, here we see something we'll encounter often in the Bible: a woman, or women, coming to the well to fetch water. This is not a romantic notion or some literary device; women of the Middle East in that era stayed separate from men for the most part. There were certain times of the day when it was understood that women would go to the water well, or to a spring or a river, to draw water.....a standard task for women.....and usually men would not be around. This was all about traditional modesty. And, in particular this applied to unmarried girls and young women. Therefore, often when we get a narrative about a male Bible character encountering a woman at the well or spring, there is this sense of surprise.....the girl is startled....at the site or voice of a man. This practice is still prevalent in many parts of the world today.

An interesting part of this chapter occurs in verse 10, because it speaks of Abraham's servant taking 10 camels with him for his trek to the north to go wife hunting. Most archaeologists will say that this cannot be, because camels were unknown to the region at this time.....this time being around 1850- 1900 BC. Some fairly recent findings, though, shed some light on this matter.

Records found in southern Mesopotamia from the Old Babylonian Kingdom era (around 2000 BC), make mention of drinking camel's milk. Further some Sumerian and Akkadian writings from that same era make mention of a creature used for transportation that literally is called "a donkey-of-the-sea-land". And, with those writings were pictographs of Dromedaries.....what we erroneously call "one-hump camels". In fact a Dromedary

is not a Camel. A Dromedary is a one humped creature and a Camel is a two-humped creature. It seems as though the original habitat of the Camel was Mesopotamia and the Far East, while the original habitat of the Dromedary was the Arabian Peninsula, far to the south. That Abraham might have Dromedaries makes all kinds of sense, as he roamed the southern regions and constantly dealt with Semite tribes of the south. So, this idea that Genesis 24 is a much later addition or redaction just doesn't hold water.

Now, understand: Eliezer WENT to the well, at the time of day he did, because he knew that's when he'd find some eligible females.....this wasn't some type of fortuitous coincidence. In the Middle East, if you wanted to find a young girl, this was the place. He sees some girls coming, and proceeds to lay out kind of a fleece before God: that is, he sets up a kind of test so that he can be sure that the woman he picks for Isaac is the woman God intends. And, wouldn't you know it, before he can even finish speaking to God, the answer to his prayers arrives in the form of Rivka, Rebecca, daughter of B'tu'el. B'tu'el was Abraham's nephew; he was the son of Abraham's brother, Nahor. So, B'tu'el, Rivka's father, would have been Isaac's 1st cousin. Rivkah, as a daughter of Isaac's 1st cousin, was kind of a 2nd cousin. So, the relationship between Isaac and Rivka was by blood, but not too close. Because Rivka spoke the exact words Eliezer had set out as a fleece, he knew he was on the right track. But, he kept silent for he wanted to see how this all played out....he wanted to be sure. That she kept drawing water until all 10 camels Eliezer had brought with him were fully satisfied was probably pretty impressive to Eliezer, and so he takes the next step.

Eliezer gives the girl, Rebecca, gifts of significant value including.....yes.....a nose ring. Not at all an unusual piece of jewelry for that day. Of course, Rebecca races home and tells her mother and the other female clan members what had just happened. When Rebecca's brother, Laban, who will play an important role in the biblical story some time in the future, sees the expensive jewelry worn by his sister, he runs to meet this man who gave her these things. While meeting a stranger, a guest, is always a big deal back in that day, the fact that this is a WEALTHY stranger is what excites Laban. Laying on the schmooze, Laban even invokes the name of Yahweh in greeting Eliezer. We shouldn't be too impressed or draw too much from this: latter we will find out that Laban possessed MANY gods, so he was just being cordial in using the name of the god that Eliezer's master worshipped.

Eliezer is invited to stay with the family, but to first have a meal. First things first. Eliezer is a loyal servant.....and he's on a mission.....so he wants to know if he's just wasting his time. He states straightaway for the record who his master is, and what his goal is. Then, so there can be no doubt that the girl's modesty was not violated, nor that she had committed anything untoward in speaking with a male, and that all intentions were honorable, he restates all that was told to him, and how he carried-out his duty, and how it led him to Rivka.

In customary Eastern hospitality, Rebecca's father and brother say that it is far from them to go against God's will for their daughter. Little doubt, it was not that they were so anxious to get rid of Rebecca; it was that they already knew from the expensive bracelets

and nose ring that the customary gifts they would receive in exchange for the giving of her hand would, in this case, becoming from a wealthy man and therefore be a King's ransom. And, so it was. After a little more bartering, Rebecca, along with the women who cared for her as a child, accompanied Eliezer back to Canaan.

Notice, interestingly, how little role the father, B'tu'el plays in all this: Laban, Rivka's brother, is the dominant player from Rivka's side of the family. This is unusual. The only explanation would be that B'tu'el was feeble from age or sickness, and, as would have been customary, Laban (probably B'tu'el's firstborn) took over the duties as guardian of the clan's unmarried females.

Thus, in verses 54-55, when we see Eliezer asking for leave to take Rivka and go, it is her mother and brother.....not her father.....who requests that she not go just yet. A little more dickering and, upon Rivka stating that she was ready to go, permission to leave was granted. And, the Scriptures tell us that Rivka's "nurse" accompanies her on the journey. Apparently this nurse is a much-loved family member that could well have actually been the infant and toddler Rivka's wet nurse, who eventually became a sort of companion and guardian of Rivka. In fact, the Hebrew word translated "nurse", here, is **meneket**, which MEANS wet nurse. Of course, Rivka was well beyond that stage of life, so it likely indicates that this personal nurse began her stay with the family as Rivka's wet nurse and continued on from there.

As Rivka, her nurse, and several handmaidens mount the camels and get ready to leave for Canaan, a benediction is pronounced over Rivka. To my surprise, this was NOT a standard pronouncement given in that era over a young girl traveling to enter into marriage. Rather, this is a divine prophecy, that I'm sure her family had no idea they were speaking; and it concerns her producing a large number of descendants AND that these descendants would have victory over their enemies. This, of course, plays in perfectly with the covenant Yahweh had made with Abraham; the covenant which now would be inherited by Rivka's future husband, Isaac.

The caravan arrives back from its journey, and Isaac and Rebecca lay eyes on each other for the first time. The covering of her face with the veil is kind of interesting. I've heard many teachings on this part of Genesis, and it was always taught that women in that era covered their faces with veils in the presence of males. Well, that simply is not the case. Hebrew women didn't wear veils. There is no mention of Sarah wearing a veil. And, it was also not Mesopotamian custom to wear veils as a show of modesty.

There was some use of veils in that part of the world, in that era, as kind of a decoration; even as a show of wealth. The only customary use of a veil among Israelites, Canaanites, Mesopotamians, Sumerians, and so on had to do with wedding and betrothal procedures. It was customary for the bride to be married with her veil down, and the groom not allowed to see her without that veil for some amount of time before the wedding ceremony (a little history of where the modern practice of a bridal veil is usually in place during a wedding ceremony, and is lifted by the groom upon completion of the wedding vows). So, what this likely indicated was that Rivka was letting Isaac know that a) she

was the one his father had chosen for him, and b) that she had consented to be his wife, and in fact, the betrothal period had already been entered into.

Isaac was 40 years old when he married Rebecca. The father and mother for the next generation of the line of promise were now in place. What is kind of interesting is that we are told that Isaac and Rebecca went into the tent of Isaac's departed mother, and apparently it became theirs. Remember, in this era the men and the women generally stayed separated, even after marriage. Husbands and wives, particularly if they were wealthy or the heads of large clans, slept in separate quarters. Actually, what happened here is that this bride and groom entering Sarah's tent was symbolic of Rivka assuming the position of matriarch that Sarah held until her death. Sarah's tent had been maintained just for this ceremonial purpose, until a bride for Isaac had been chosen.

I very much like how the chapter ends when the Scripture states that Isaac found great comfort, finally, in the loss of his mother by marrying Sarah. Obviously, up until Rivka, Sarah had been his primary contact with the female world. He must have been quite close with his mother.

GENESIS CHAPTER 25

READ Gen 25:1-11

Wow, there's a lot of information jam-packed into this chapter. I suspect that prior to 1948 and the absolutely unthinkable fulfillment of the prophecy that Israel would be re-born as a nation of Jews, this listing of tribes coming from Abraham would have been relatively unimportant except for librarians and historians. But, now that Israel has returned to their homeland, and with the happenings of the Middle East that are shaking the whole earth like never before, these genealogical listings take on a little more important tone for the Church, especially; as does the strange circumstances of the birth of Isaac's twin sons, Jacob and Esav.

This is the winding up of the story of Abraham, and in later verses, Ishmael. We are given some final information about Abraham that we simply need to make some mental notation about. First, Abraham took another wife, a woman named Keturah, of whom we know next to nothing. Bible scholars are not even totally clear whether or not Abraham was married to Sarah at the same time as a Keturah. That said, after some further studying and researching, I think it is clear that we should NOT assume that Abraham's taking Keturah "as a wife" was in chronological sequence with the previous chapter of Genesis; that is, that Keturah came after Sarah. This literary device the Torah employs by interrupting the sequence of events, going back a few years and adding some new information about someone or something, is not unusual for either the Bible as a whole,

or other writings from other cultures in that era, and even eras well before and well after that.

One possibility concerning the timing of Keturah stands out above all the rest to me: these sons of Abraham, born through Keturah, could have been born to Abraham BEFORE Isaac. This is because Abraham was far past human ability for a male to sire a child, as it was for Sarah to produce a child, when Isaac was conceived. Therefore, unless these sons from Keturah were “miraculous conceptions”....which is unlikely.....they had to have come well BEFORE Sarah bore the miracle-baby, Isaac. Now, of course, one could argue that upon God making Abraham capable of siring Isaac, Abraham regained fertility for an extended period of time. Maybe; and several scholars choose that approach. Anyway, I just want you to see that it’s pretty much impossible to nail down exactly when Abraham took Keturah as a wife, and when these other children were born, and whether these sons came before or after Isaac.

We’re told that Keturah gave Abraham several children, of which 6 are mentioned. We have no idea who Keturah is, or who her ancestors were. Now, as is customary in the Bible, only the male children are mentioned, but it’s unthinkable that Keturah didn’t also give Abraham several daughters as well. However, it is clear that the etymology of Keturah’s name is the Hebrew word *ketoret*, which means *spices*. And, in fact, certain tribes that have long been suspected as being descendants of Abraham and Keturah were associated with the spice trade in ancient times. It is also helpful for us to know that the prime spice-producing region for the Middle East at that time, and for many centuries to come, was an area of southern Arabia today known as Yemen. This also shows just how extensive and regular trade and travel was among these ancient peoples, so very long ago.

We will run into several of these named children of Keturah later on in Scripture, and yet others will never be heard of again; so let me point out one son in particular because the territory he settled would play a large role in Moses’ life: that son is named Midian. And, true to his mother’s name, the Midianites were known as spice-traders, particularly of the highly valued frankincense. Their territory was located on the Arabian Peninsula, bordered by the eastern edge of finger of the Red Sea today called the Gulf of Aqaba. These are the same Midianites and the same region where Moses fled from Egypt, where God came to Moses in a burning bush, and where Moses found a wife. In fact, it is my view that the Gulf of Aqaba is the Biblical Red Sea that Moses led the Israelites through to safety when they were fleeing from the armies of Pharaoh.

These 6 sons of Keturah, along with the son of Hagar the Egyptian girl, Ishmael, would go on to form what we can loosely call the Arab peoples....people who populated the Middle East and Northern Africa. But, be aware that the term “Arab” wasn’t even valid until some time after the reign of King David; that is, there was no such identifiable and named people group called “Arabs” or “Arabians” until probably at least 900 BC, some 9 centuries after the time we’re currently studying.

We are told in V5 that Abraham gave all he had to Isaac, which would have made Isaac a very wealthy and powerful man. But, it also, most certainly, set the stage for enormous

jealousy and strife between Isaac and his large cadre of half-brothers and sisters.....especially Ishmael. And, that strife and jealousy continues to this very day. With all those brothers and sisters.....dozens at the least.....Abraham was going to have to do something to assure that his son Isaac was decisively and without opposition elevated above all the rest and given a clear path to continue along the road of covenant promise that Yahweh had ordained. And, so, yet again we have a dramatic example of the ongoing God-principle of dividing, electing and separating.....and this time, the subject of the division and separation is Isaac.

After we are told in V5 that Abraham gave everything to Isaac, we're also told that Abraham gave gifts BEFORE HE DIED to the sons of his *concubines*. Now, don't get confused here: Although most bibles say Abraham took Keturah as a wife, and some time earlier Hagar as well, they were not technically actual wives as was Sarah. They were concubines.....kind of a different class of wife. These so-called wives would not have been given a Ketubah, a marriage contract. There would not have been a marriage ceremony. Rather, there would have been a simple declaration by Abraham of their status of being included in his household, and as legitimate mothers of his children. These concubines were well-treated and respected, and enjoyed the status of being joined to Abraham's clan, but they did not have the exalted place as a true legal wife, and their children would have had *lesser* rights of inheritance than the sons of the true legal wife. In fact, the law of that era was that it was entirely up to the father to choose which, if any, of his children from concubines would gain inheritance. So, while Isaac got all of the inheritance and family authority, the other sons of Abraham, by means of his concubines, got gifts.....likely fairly substantial gifts because Abraham was so wealthy. Now, were there other concubines than just Keturah and Hagar? Possibly. But, at this point, it is unclear. Abraham then sent these sons of his concubines away to other territories; dividing and electing ALWAYS leads to separating. Notice the parallel with God permitting circumstances to unfold that led to the necessary separation of Abraham from his nephew Lot. Also notice what direction they were sent: EAST! Why east? Why didn't Abraham send them to the north, or the south, or the west? Just keep making little mental notes of the direction EAST.

In verse 7, Abraham dies at the ripe old age of 175 years. What a life Abraham lived! Oh, that each of us could have such a close and intertwined life with the Lord, and that His purpose would be played out through us. We are told that he was gathered to his people. This is a term far different from "dying" or "being buried in the ground" or "went down to Sheol". Rather it implies a sort of reunion with those, likely from the line of Seth, Noah, and Shem, who had come before him. It also speaks to a belief that death is not the end; a concept that will from here forward be built upon only slightly in the OT Scriptures, but will take on a greater meaning with the advent of Christ in the NT. That said, let me repeat something that I want you to watch for as we study Torah: while there is a hint of something beyond death in the statement "gathered to his people", there is NO mention of "going to Heaven when we die". I've done a fairly thorough study of death and dying in the OT, and I can tell you with some confidence that what lay beyond the grave.....an afterlife, if you would.....is not discussed with any depth at all in the OT; and it seems from the varying terms for death and dying.....all the terms being vague and

general...that it was very fuzzy in the minds of the people of the OT what an afterlife, if any, amounted to. For some Hebrews, it is obvious from Scripture that their great fear of dying without a son to carry on the family name, spelled the end of their own essence as well. That in some unexplained way, a father lived on through his son. Not reincarnation, maybe not even with any consciousness at all..... and the idea of the human spirit being this vessel of existence after death is also not well defined in the OT. The thought that somehow a human would live in Heaven, with God, simply didn't exist.....at least until the close of the OT about 400 BC.

We are informed that Ishmael and Isaac came together to bury their father, and as would have been customary when possible, the husband was buried with his wife. Abraham was buried in the same tomb as Sarah.....the Cave of Machpelah at Hebron..... and later Isaac and Rebecca would join them in that same location, as eventually would Jacob.

In V11, God makes it clear to any who might doubt where the line of promise led, when it says that 'God blessed Isaac'. The handing of the torch from Abraham to Isaac is now complete. Isaac is the new patriarch of the Hebrews, and Abraham is but a memory.