

Isaac's Marriage. Abraham's Second Marriage. His Death and Burial.

Genesis 24, 25:1-11

The Father of the Believers Looks After the Future of His Seed

Genesis 24 commences by noting that Abraham was old and well advanced in years. Night had started casting its shadow over his life. He was already about 140 years old, for he was 100 years older than Isaac, who at that time was about 40 (25:20), and since Sarah was born 10 years after her husband, and was 127 years old when she died, this narrative took place three years after her death.

It also says: "The LORD had blessed Abraham in all things." There was, so to speak, nothing to wish for regarding the fulfilment of God's promises, except that Isaac still had no wife.

This Scriptural evidence probably tells us why Abraham concerned himself with his son's marriage. Only this did Abraham lack in his life. That Isaac married was essential for the realization of God's promise. We may also assume that the patriarch had spoken about this with his son.

It was not simple. Marriage with a Canaanite woman was out of the question: no mixing of the seed devoted to God with heathens. All that remained then were relatives in Haran, where the fear of God was still to be found. But then the future bride would have to come to Isaac, for it was out of the question as far as Abraham was concerned to allow Isaac to leave the inherited land to go to Haran. In this matter Abraham proved superior to his son who did allow Jacob to get a wife in Haran.

It was, then, not an easy matter, but Abraham was a man of faith,

and besides, he had matured through experience, and had been strengthened in his trust in God. We may assume that Isaac, also a man of faith, matured by his childhood experience, was able to honour his father's decision; when his God-given bride arrived, was he not busy meditating in the solitude of the field on God's wonderful ways in the life of his father, and busy praying for all that pertained to himself?

And so it came to pass that Abraham notified his oldest and trusted slave of his decisions, and made him promise with an oath that he would act accordingly. A wife from among his relatives, or no wife at all. Extremely radical. But at this time also, Abraham was the man who refused to compromise command and promise. The LORD would provide. These words he used when he was about to sacrifice his son, and in this spirit he also spoke now that he offered the future as a sacrifice to the LORD. So the chief slave goes on his way—with a caravan of ten camels loaded with precious gifts—the long way to Mesopotamia, to the city of Nahor.

The rest of this tale is beautiful and simple, permitting us to be brief. By the providence of God, after a journey of many days, he arrived at the well of the city of Nahor, outside the gate, towards evening, that is, about 3 o'clock in the afternoon. It was the time when the women of the city came to draw water for the night. There he kneels down to pray for the sign from God that the girl who proves willing to give the camels water may be the person meant for Isaac.

His prayer was not yet finished, when Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel, son of Milcah, wife of Abraham's brother Nahor, arrived and went down to the well to fill her jar, at his request gave him to drink from the jar, immediately offered to give the camels water also, and then walked back and forth to fill the large trough.

With increasing certainty the servant watched. When the camels had finished drinking he gave her a gold nose ring weighing 7-8 grams and two gold bracelets for her arms weighing 150 grams each. He was convinced that this was the maiden meant for the marriage, and he received the confirmation when she identified herself at his request and, moreover,

invited him to spend the night with her family. We see how God-fearing this servant of Abraham was when he immediately kneels to praise God Who had not forsaken His steadfast love and faithfulness towards his master, but had prospered his ways in the search for the right house. When the girl, having run home, told everything to those living with her and had shown her ornaments, her brother Laban hurried out to invite the stranger in and to prepare a worthy reception for him.

It is noteworthy that we read “her mother’s household” and that also later Laban, her brother, is mentioned, and their father Bethuel, but not Nahor, Rebekah’s grandfather, who probably had already died. Also to be noted is that Laban was especially enchanted by the gold, but this also has been used by God to further the matter for which the servant had come. And finally, it is remarkable that Abraham’s trusted and God-fearing servant, who had entered these relatives’ house not for himself, but on behalf of his master, refuses to partake of the meal before him, in spite of his tiring journey, until he has first related the purpose of his journey and subsequent happenings.

Then follows the whole story, from beginning to end, and we are inclined to wonder why it is described again so fully. Let us then notice *how* the servant tells it all! It becomes a report of all that the LORD had done, a preaching of the ways of God; we can say: this was a very concrete proclaiming of the Word! Even Laban, as well as Bethuel, had to acknowledge God’s leading hand, and they immediately give their consent to the marriage, which causes the servant, in the presence of all, to praise the LORD. He gives Rebekah even more jewellery of silver and gold, and clothing, as well as gifts to her brother and mother.

The next morning Abraham’s servant did not want to tarry by complying with their request to stay yet another ten days, and Rebekah also agreed to leave that very morning. So it happened, after her family has blessed her: “Our sister, be the mother of thousands of ten thousands; and may your descendants possess the gate of those who hate them!”

Having come to the Negeb near the camp towards evening, at some distance from the camp, by the providence of God, the meeting took

place with Isaac, who had gone out to the field to meditate and pray in the solitude. Rebekah, who obviously had been told that the end of the journey had been reached, had a feeling that this was her bridegroom. She slid down from her camel, it being unseemly to speak to him from above, and when she heard the confirmation that this man was indeed the son of Abraham, she covered herself with her veil, according to custom. When the servant had made a report of his journey, Isaac brought her into his mother's tent, whereby the marriage was solemnized, and he came to love her. So Isaac was comforted after his mother's death.

It is noteworthy that Abraham is not mentioned here. He will have returned to Hebron after visiting his son. Sarah's tent had evidently been brought back to Isaac's camp to serve as a bridal tent. Also the patriarch's desire to see Isaac married was now fulfilled—by faith. Here we see how the LORD continues His work in giving descendants at the proper time who would become a great nation, yes, and by bestowing the promised blessing for all generations on the face of the earth. We clearly see here the providence of God, that particular providence by which He reveals Himself in His work as the God Who is faithful in His covenant. What happened here could never be repeated; it was unique how also this marriage was made in the fear of God with Isaac and Rebekah who did not know each other, and without ulterior motives.

The Father of the Believers Isolates His Seed by Sending Away the Sons of Keturah

This then is the conclusion of what is written about the life of Abraham. What now? Does the history of his life end by portraying him as a man who spent his last days living carnally? For we read that he again took a wife, named Keturah, probably from among his slaves, but one who was considerably younger than he was, for he begot half a dozen sons by her.

Calvin was not too pleased with this “frivolity” on Abraham's part in his old age, although he did think it possible that this story is an appendix and took place around the time of Hagar. But this does not appeal to several commentators. It would be impossible to understand that Abraham would cohabit with a slave woman after the birth of Isaac while his lawful wife

was still alive. Moreover, there is no indication of this in the narrative, and the author places it as a continuation to the marriage of Isaac.

True, Abraham had given all to Isaac (24:36), but this is to be understood in the sense that Isaac, as manager in the Negeb camp, was also generally accepted as lawful heir, because his father had given him *legal* possession of everything, while later children only received a gift. And that Keturah is called a concubine is probably to denote her position as a slave.

But the greatest problem seems to be that Abraham had lost his virility, although he had received strength to beget Isaac. Still, this does not need to be a difficulty: Augustine already pointed out that God rejuvenated his lifepower to such an extent that it lasted for decades yet.

Inquiring now after the significance of this portion of Scripture, noticing that these later children are named “sons of Keturah” and nowhere in Scripture as sons of Abraham, we can say that the accent does not fall on their birth, but on their being *sent away*. The story is also not intended as a continuation of the genealogy, any more than with the children of Nahor. No, all the emphasis here is placed on Abraham’s act of faith. Abraham, although he must also have loved these sons, still sent them away to the East, with only a gift. This took place in the last 35 years of his life.

Instead of his weakness, Scripture here proclaims the strength of his faith. He sends them away, thinking of Isaac, the only child receiving the promise concerning the innumerable seed. No more than Ishmael could they help to build the promised covenant generation from which the Messiah would once be born according to the flesh.

Abraham, matured in faith, had that promise in view until the last moment. Truly, he learned to take up the cross, the cross of self-denial, even losing children, through faith. Marrying at an advanced age does not conflict with this. The opinion that a late marriage would be something inferior is not supported anywhere in Scripture, and is not disapproved of with regard to Abraham.




Abraham's Death and Burial

At the end of his status as stranger he obtained the “city which has foundations . . .” out of grace, as all his works of faith were by the good grace of God. He was 175 years old at the time. His sons, Isaac and Ishmael, buried him in the cave of Machpelah near Hebron, where Sarah was also buried.

However, God's blessing continued. The history of God's revelation went on, for “after the death of Abraham God blessed Isaac, his son,” who still lived at the well Lahai-roi in the Negeb, not far from Beersheba. God's work continued—to bring the Son into the world Who, coming from the father of faith, also became the perfecter of faith.

Questions

1. Is it not strange that Abraham played such an important role in the choice of a marriage partner for Isaac?
2. To what extent should this guide us in our totally different age, seeing that the LORD wants to teach us also through the example of the saints?
3. Is it true that “one does not marry the family” as is often said?
4. Does true marital love have anything to do with covenant obedience?
5. Can we take a happy marriage of unbelievers as an example for us? What does it lack?
6. Abraham's servant asked for a sign at the well in Haran. May we do the same?
7. Why would Scripture also mention the descendants of Keturah who became fathers of nations?

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8. Why is Ishmael called a son of Abraham, in contrast to the sons of Keturah? They were Abraham's children also, weren't they? And what is their relationship to the covenant of circumcision?
 9. What is the origin of the false dualism between marriage as something inferior and life in faith?
 10. What is meant in Hebrews 11:10 by "a city which has foundations"?