

Genesis 25:1 – 26:35

^{25:1} Now Abraham took another wife, whose name was Keturah. ² She bore to him Zimran and Jokshan and Medan and Midian and Ishbak and Shuah. ³ Jokshan became the father of Sheba and Dedan. And the sons of Dedan were Asshurim and Letushim and Leummim. ⁴ The sons of Midian were Ephah and Epher and Hanoch and Abida and Eldaah. All these were the sons of Keturah. ⁵ Now Abraham gave all that he had to Isaac; ⁶ but to the sons of his concubines, Abraham gave gifts while he was still living, and sent them away from his son Isaac eastward, to the land of the east. ⁷ These are all the years of Abraham's life that he lived, one hundred and seventy-five years. ⁸ Abraham breathed his last and died in a ripe old age, an old man and satisfied with life; and he was gathered to his people. ⁹ Then his sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron the son of Zohar the Hittite, facing Mamre, ¹⁰ the field which Abraham purchased from the sons of Heth; there Abraham was buried with Sarah his wife. ¹¹ It came about after the death of Abraham, that God blessed his son Isaac; and Isaac lived by Beer-lahai-roi.

¹² Now these are the records of the generations of Ishmael, Abraham's son, whom Hagar the Egyptian, Sarah's maid, bore to Abraham; ¹³ and these are the names of the sons of Ishmael, by their names, in the order of their birth: Nebaioth, the firstborn of Ishmael, and Kedar and Adbeel and Mibsam ¹⁴ and Mishma and Dumah and Massa, ¹⁵ Hadad and Tema, Jetur, Naphish and Kedemah. ¹⁶ These are the sons of Ishmael and these are their names, by their villages, and by their camps; twelve princes according to their tribes. ¹⁷ These are the years of the life of Ishmael, one hundred and thirty-seven years; and he breathed his last and died, and was gathered to his people. ¹⁸ They settled from Havilah to Shur which is east of Egypt as one goes toward Assyria; he settled in defiance of all his relatives.

¹⁹ Now these are the records of the generations of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham became the father of Isaac; ²⁰ and Isaac was forty years old when he took Rebekah, the daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, the sister of Laban the Aramean, to be his wife. ²¹ Isaac prayed to the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD answered him and Rebekah his wife conceived. ²² But the children struggled together within her; and she said, 'If it is so, why then am I this way?' So she went to inquire of the LORD. ²³ The LORD said to her, 'Two nations are in your womb; and two peoples will be separated from your body; and one people shall be stronger than the other; and the older shall serve the younger.' ²⁴ When her days to be delivered were fulfilled, behold, there were twins in her womb. ²⁵ Now the first came forth red, all over like a hairy garment; and they named him Esau. ²⁶ Afterward his brother came forth with his hand holding on to Esau's heel, so his name was called Jacob; and Isaac was sixty years old when she gave birth to them. ²⁷ When the boys grew up, Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the field, but Jacob was a peaceful man, living in tents. ²⁸ Now Isaac loved Esau, because he had a taste for game, but Rebekah loved Jacob. ²⁹ When Jacob had cooked stew, Esau came in from the field and he was famished; ³⁰ and Esau said to Jacob, 'Please let me have a swallow of that red stuff there, for I am famished.' Therefore his name was called Edom. ³¹ But Jacob said, 'First sell me your birthright.' ³² Esau said, 'Behold, I am about to die; so of what use then is the birthright to me?' ³³ And Jacob said, 'First swear to me'; so he swore to him, and sold his birthright

to Jacob. ³⁴ Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew; and he ate and drank, and rose and went on his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

^{26:1} Now there was a famine in the land, besides the previous famine that had occurred in the days of Abraham. So Isaac went to Gerar, to Abimelech king of the Philistines. ² The LORD appeared to him and said, 'Do not go down to Egypt; stay in the land of which I shall tell you. ³ Sojourn in this land and I will be with you and bless you, for to you and to your descendants I will give all these lands, and I will establish the oath which I swore to your father Abraham. ⁴ I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven, and will give your descendants all these lands; and by your descendants all the nations of the earth shall be blessed; ⁵ because Abraham obeyed Me and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes and My laws.' ⁶ So Isaac lived in Gerar. ⁷ When the men of the place asked about his wife, he said, 'She is my sister,' for he was afraid to say, 'my wife,' thinking, 'the men of the place might kill me on account of Rebekah, for she is beautiful.' ⁸ It came about, when he had been there a long time, that Abimelech king of the Philistines looked out through a window, and saw, and behold, Isaac was caressing his wife Rebekah. ⁹ Then Abimelech called Isaac and said, 'Behold, certainly she is your wife! How then did you say, 'She is my sister'?' And Isaac said to him, 'Because I said, 'I might die on account of her.''' ¹⁰ Abimelech said, 'What is this you have done to us? One of the people might easily have lain with your wife, and you would have brought guilt upon us.' ¹¹ So Abimelech charged all the people, saying, 'He who touches this man or his wife shall surely be put to death.' ¹² Now Isaac sowed in that land and reaped in the same year a hundredfold. And the LORD blessed him, ¹³ and the man became rich, and continued to grow richer until he became very wealthy; ¹⁴ for he had possessions of flocks and herds and a great household, so that the Philistines envied him. ¹⁵ Now all the wells which his father's servants had dug in the days of Abraham his father, the Philistines stopped up by filling them with earth. ¹⁶ Then Abimelech said to Isaac, 'Go away from us, for you are too powerful for us.' ¹⁷ And Isaac departed from there and camped in the valley of Gerar, and settled there. ¹⁸ Then Isaac dug again the wells of water which had been dug in the days of his father Abraham, for the Philistines had stopped them up after the death of Abraham; and he gave them the same names which his father had given them. ¹⁹ But when Isaac's servants dug in the valley and found there a well of flowing water, ²⁰ the herdsmen of Gerar quarreled with the herdsmen of Isaac, saying, 'The water is ours!' So he named the well Esek, because they contended with him. ²¹ Then they dug another well, and they quarreled over it too, so he named it Sitnah. ²² He moved away from there and dug another well, and they did not quarrel over it; so he named it Rehoboth, for he said, 'At last the LORD has made room for us, and we will be fruitful in the land.' ²³ Then he went up from there to Beersheba. ²⁴ The LORD appeared to him the same night and said, 'I am the God of your father Abraham; do not fear, for I am with you. I will bless you, and multiply your descendants, for the sake of My servant Abraham.' ²⁵ So he built an altar there and called upon the name of the LORD, and pitched his tent there; and there Isaac's servants dug a well. ²⁶ Then Abimelech came to him from Gerar with his adviser Ahuzzath and Phicol the commander of his army. ²⁷ Isaac said to them, 'Why have you come to me, since you hate me and have sent me away from you?' ²⁸ They said, 'We see plainly that the LORD has been with you; so we said, 'Let there now be an oath between us, even between you and us, and let us make a covenant with you, ²⁹ that you will do us no harm, just as we have not touched you and have done to you nothing but good and

have sent you away in peace. You are now the blessed of the LORD.’’³⁰ Then he made them a feast, and they ate and drank.³¹ In the morning they arose early and exchanged oaths; then Isaac sent them away and they departed from him in peace.³² Now it came about on the same day, that Isaac’s servants came in and told him about the well which they had dug, and said to him, ‘We have found water.’³³ So he called it Shibah; therefore the name of the city is Beersheba to this day.³⁴ When Esau was forty years old he married Judith the daughter of Beerli the Hittite, and Basemath the daughter of Elon the Hittite;³⁵ and they brought grief to Isaac and Rebekah.

Historical and Cultural Background

- *Abraham’s Other Sons:* Mostly Bedouin tribes in the areas of Sinai, Arabia, and Syria. The Midianites became enemies (Gen.35:36, 37:28; Ex.2:15 – 3:1; 18:1; Num.25:16 – 18; Josh.13:21; Judg.6:1 – 7:25). Dedan was later grouped with Esau as an enemy (Jer.49:8). So Abraham’s choices are probably negative.
- *Isaac Dug Wells:* Water was vital, of course, so Isaac’s digging of wells reflected his desire to bless his descendants and community. Possibly, Isaac’s success at finding water reflected his prayerfulness as well. Finally, wells of water also reminded people of Eden, where a source of water overflowed into four rivers (Gen.2:10 – 14).
- *Birthright:* In ancient times, the birthright was a sacred honor and responsibility. Generally, family names and titles were given to the eldest son. He also inherited a double portion of the economic assets. In the Hebrew context, the birthright also meant spiritual responsibilities – to know God and make God known, to be fair in managing conflicts in the family, etc. In the special case of Esau and Jacob, the birthright signified being the one who would carry God’s promise of blessing as a blessing to the world.
- *Hebrew Names:*
 - Jacob: The verb ‘will serve,’ *ya’abod*, sounds much like Jacob, *ya’aqob*; Bruce Waltke notes there is a play on words in the phrase, ‘and one people shall be stronger than the other; and the older shall serve the younger’
 - Esau: The noun ‘younger,’ *sa’ir*, sounds much like *se’ar*, ‘hairy’; another verbal pun or wordplay
 - Judith: Probably means ‘praised’
 - Basemath: Probably means ‘sweet-smelling’

Questions

1. This is a long passage to look at, so let's look at how the paragraph topics flow together. What appears to be the narrator's logic in telling the story this way? Let's look at the first two paragraphs before we look at Isaac and Rebekah.
2. Why does Abraham get married to Keturah? Is this a good or bad thing?
 - a. Abraham was 100 years old when Isaac was born, and Sarah was 90 years old. Sarah lived until she was 127 years old, and Abraham was 137 years old. That means that Isaac was 37 years old when she died; he married Rebekah at age 40. Abraham lived for 38 years after Sarah's death.
 - b. Why did Abraham get married again? Apparently God's blessing of Abraham renewed him physically. He was able to marry again, this time to Keturah, and 'concubines' are mentioned in 25:6, and presumably 'concubines' refer to both Hagar and Keturah. Since Sarah was the true wife of Abraham, as also shown by Abraham being buried next to Sarah, Keturah is not fully a wife.
 - i. Why did he do this? Perhaps for companionship? Perhaps for sex? Isaac was living in Lahai-Roi, separately from Abraham.
 - ii. At least he seems to have wanted to bless more children, not to the same degree as Isaac, but bless them nonetheless.
 - iii. Was Abraham right in doing this? Technically, it was ok since he was a widower and could remarry. He seems to have treated his sons fairly by giving them gifts.
 - iv. But there is an element of questionable wisdom because we see that the Midianites were opponents of Israel later. It is possible that Abraham's lack of self-restraint caused problems for Israel later.
 - c. But, obviously the blessing to Abraham does pass to Isaac (25:11). All the other sons of Abraham go 'east' (25:6, 18). East represents the place from which Abraham and Sarah came. Ur is to the east. Babel was to the east. Cain went east of Eden (4:16). God stationed an angel with a flaming sword to the east of the garden of Eden (3:24).
3. God blessed Ishmael, and this seems to be the point of his genealogy (25:12 – 18).
 - a. We are reminded that Hagar the Egyptian bore Ishmael. He had twelve sons, which shows that God was ready and willing to bless Ishmael right away. This is a precursor to Jacob having twelve sons. And these twelve became 'princes according to their tribes.'
 - b. But it is also highly suggestive that God was ready to bless Isaac and Rebekah with twelve sons, too! Yes, Isaac had to pray for Rebekah to conceive (25:21). But why couldn't he pray more than that? There is something strange about Isaac. We get the sense that the story didn't have to go this way.
 - c. (Very Technical Manuscript Note)

'In Genesis xxvi, 18, the Samaritan text reads "Elon the Hivite" for "Elon the Hittite"; and in xxxvi, 3, 4, 10, 13, 17, Mahalath for Bashemath. The daughter of Ishmael in Genesis xxviii, 9, whom Esau married, is called Mahalath, but in Genesis xxxvi, is called Bashemath in the Masoretic text, Mahalath in the Samaritan text.

According to the Masoretic text in these three passages there is a contradiction. Here according to [critical scholar Julius H.] Wellhausen is "the most palpable contradiction in the whole of Genesis." He even goes so far as to say: "I do not shrink from expressing the alternative; either the whole critical literature of the historical books of the Bible is groundless and futile, or Gen. xxvi, 3, 4 seq.; xxviii, 8 seq., originate from different sources," Gen. xxxvi, 1-5, 9-19 (*Die Composition des Hexateuch*, ss. 51, 52).

In the Samaritan text the contradiction disappears. There are two Elons, one a Hivite, and the other a Hittite, and a daughter of each Esau married. Esau had five wives—Judith the daughter of Beeri the Hittite, Bashemath the daughter of Elon the Hivite; both of whom were a grief to Isaac and Rebekah, and neither of whom is recorded to have had any children; Adah the daughter of Elon the Hittite; Aholibamah, the daughter of Anah; and Mahalath, the daughter of Ishmael. These last three were the mothers of all Esau's children, Bashemath in the Samaritan being always in chapter

xxxvi, in the genealogy replaced by Mahalath the daughter of Ishmael. With these variants the supposed contradiction absolutely vanishes. (p. 204)¹

4. What do you make of Isaac and Rebekah? What are they like?
 - a. Isaac is like his son Esau. Presumably Rebekah is more like Jacob.
 - b. How are Isaac and Rebekah like Abraham and Sarah?
 - i. Waiting for children for a long time. In their case, 20 years
 - ii. They have two sons, not separated by years, but twins
 - iii. Two nations are represented by their two sons
 - iv. God blesses Isaac (and implicitly, Rebekah) verbally (26:2 – 5)
 - v. They travel because of famine to Gerar.
 - vi. Out of fear, Isaac lies to Abimelech of Gerar (26:6 – 11), like Abraham lied about Sarah. This is a big event. Why is this here?
 1. To show how difficult it is for this family to overcome their fears and lying.
 2. To show that Rebekah is just as much of a part of God's plan and blessing as Isaac. Even though God spoke to Isaac and blessed him, Isaac could not discard Rebekah or view her as second class. This episode serves to remind Isaac that Rebekah is heir of the blessing as well, because it stresses the sacredness of their marriage. In fact, Rebekah will play the greater part of partnership with God because she is the one to whom God spoke, and she is the one who will make sure the blessing correctly falls on Jacob.
 - vii. Isaac and Rebekah are protected and blessed by God in a foreign land like Abraham and Sarah were (26:12 – 14)
 - viii. Isaac redug the wells that Abraham dug (26:15 – 33)
 - c. How are they unlike Abraham and Sarah?
 - i. Their sons are twins rather than separated by years
 - ii. Isaac does not heed the word-promise of God towards his son Jacob, unlike Abraham and Sarah who did
 - iii. Isaac played favorites with his sons, unlike Abraham who loved both
 - iv. Isaac's son Esau did not marry within the faith – it reflects on Isaac's parenting style and favoritism towards Esau, whereas Jacob needs to connive to get the blessing
5. How do Isaac and Rebekah compare with one another?
 - a. Isaac prays (25:21) but later seems to be dominated by his appetite. He favors Esau because Esau brings him meat. Not only is that arbitrary, it is driven by his stomach. There is a pattern in Abraham and Isaac in their older age; they become more driven by their appetites, not their spiritual sensitivity.
 - b. Rebekah hears the word from God about her two sons (25:23). God doesn't tell Isaac the prophecy directly. Presumably Rebekah tells Isaac soon afterward. But she is the one to be spiritually sensitive. She knows which son God wants to bless and which God wants to be the heir. This is why Rebekah's introductory story in Genesis 24 is so prominent in featuring Rebekah's character and faith and willingness to repeat the adventure of Abraham and Sarah. Spiritually speaking, she is closer heir of Abraham and Sarah, even though Isaac is certainly included and involved.
 - i. Why does God deal with Jacob and Esau in this way? Can't both be blessed? In a sense, no, because one line has to be the line through which Jesus comes, biologically. But also Esau seems to live according to his stomach, appetite, and physical senses. He is a sensual person, like his father Isaac seems to become as he gets older, and as Abraham might have been as he got older. The episode of the birthright with Jacob (probably in the presence of others, in any case having legal status) indicates that Esau does not live by God's promises, and not in faith and hope in God, and not out of a concern for his descendants. He lives more for the present and for himself. Esau also willingly becomes a polygamist, marrying two wives both apparently outside the faith (26:34 – 35). His Hittite wives are probably not as hospitable as the family of Abraham – they are probably

¹ Rev. Canon Garratt, "On the Samaritan Text of the Pentateuch," *Journal of the Transactions* (London: Harrison & Sons, 1904), p.5; <http://shomron0.tripod.com/articles/garrattpentateuch.pdf>

- more selfish. And Esau's own sensuality probably indicates that his wives are a little bit like him, which is strongly suggested by the grief they bring to Isaac and Rebekah. Hence, Esau disqualifies himself.
- ii. Jacob on the other hand, resembles Abraham and Sarah. He lives in a tent, like they did. *Jacob is more like his mother Rebekah*, more interested in the future, even though he does manipulate his brother. Rebekah is a better partner to God than her husband.
 - iii. It didn't have to happen this way. If Isaac had still been spiritually sensitive, he could have developed and managed his sons better. They did not have to be at odds. The language of 'separation' of two peoples in the womb of Rebekah does not mean that God thinks or makes Esau cursed while Jacob is blessed. 'Separation' is language from Genesis 1, where nothing is inherently bad; all is good. Good things can be separated from each other. Esau could have surrendered the birthright peacefully to Jacob. Eventually, Esau and Jacob reconcile and Esau seems to have his own relationship with God. But alas, things could have been different.
- c. But how does Isaac show his faith in God?
 - i. Wells (and trees) symbolized your investment in the future. Because you do all the work but your future descendants and others get to enjoy all the benefits. Isaac is interested in the future because he digs or redigs wells.
 - ii. Illus: There is an Eastern Orthodox saint named Elder Porphyrios who died in 2013, who was apparently able to pray and locate water, so people could dig wells. He helped towns and monasteries. What Isaac is doing here might be similar. Faith in God always results in blessings for others, in some way.
 - iii. John Chrysostom, a well-regarded early preacher, also appreciated Isaac for being willing to give up his wells: 'Especially his forbearance, because, when digging wells and being driven from his own territory, he did not proceed against his enemies (Gen.26:15 – 33). Instead, he endured even seeing his wells reburied, and always moved on to another place, not going out to meet his aggressors, but standing out of the way and everywhere withdrawing from his own possessions until he might satisfy their unjust desire.'²
 - iv. Faith in God also results in little reflections of Eden, reminders of the garden.
 - v. Application: How is your faith in God reflecting Eden, reminding people of the garden?
6. Why is the story of Isaac and Rebekah – some 80 years of life – reduced to just a few odd moments?
 - a. Application: Possibly, they have become more sensual people driven by appetite, especially Isaac. The older he gets, the less spiritually sensitive he becomes. Possibly, from God's perspective, the highest points of their lives are the ones that bear the greatest similarity to Abraham and Sarah's highest points.
 - b. How do you feel that God wants you to have a faith that is deeply personal but not very original? I mean, yes, you're unique and your story is unique. In subtle ways. But from God's perspective, the greatest moments of your life will look like the greatest moments in the lives of all God's people. With God, the underlying pattern of your life is not very unique. There is a high degree of shared moments of faith, wisdom, and insight.
 - c. Illus: A Harvard junior named John interviewed me for a paper on urban ministry. He's not a Christian, but has asked some spiritual questions because his girlfriend became a Christian. His last question was whether I wanted to tell him anything else. I said, 'I want to stress that I am not original.' I had mentors who did this. I also told him the story of the Christian parabolani, those who risked their lives in the first few centuries by moving into plague-stricken cities with 5 times the population density of Manhattan. They cared for the sick. They buried the dead. Some lost their lives. But because of their faith and presence, many gave their lives to Jesus. They were just copying Jesus, who relocated from heaven to earth, being vulnerable to love vulnerable people.

² John Chrysostom, *Homily 1 in Homilies in Praise of Paul*, paragraph 7, translated by Margaret M. Mitchell, *The Heavenly Trumpet: John Chrysostom and the Art of Pauline Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), p.444