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The Family of Abraham: Part 16—Isaac in the Land of the Philistines

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Today, I discuss Genesis 26, in which Isaac consolidates the legacy of his father, Abraham.

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Transcript

Welcome back to this, the 16th in my series on the story of the family of Abraham. We've arrived at chapter 26, in which we read the story of Isaac in the Land of the Philistines. The story begins with the tale of a famine that hits the land, and this famine is different from the famine of chapter 12.

It's explicitly distinguished from that. And why would it be distinguished from that? Well, because the story that follows replays in a great many respects the story that we see of Abraham in chapter 12, and then later on in chapter 20. It's the third of the wife-sister narratives of the Book of Genesis, and the presence of three of these narratives, as I have already commented, is a cause of speculation.

Whether the compiler, the redactor of the Book of Genesis, has all these different

traditions that are fundamentally the same story, but can't decide which one is authentic, and so includes them all, and suggests that maybe all of them are true. But when we read these stories, we should notice that they are not just the same story three times over. There are great similarities, and those similarities are of noteworthy importance, as I'll suggest in a moment, but there are also great differences.

And these differences, as we juxtapose these narratives with each other, will start to be seen to be significant in their own right too. Abraham's story is very much at the background here. I've noted that this plays off the background of the story of Genesis chapter 12, with Abraham going down to the land of Egypt and sojourning there for a while during the famine.

But if you look at the surrounding text, if you follow from the end of chapter 25 and parallel that with the end of chapter 11 to chapter 12 of the Book of Genesis, you'll see that there are a series of parallels. That the story of Abraham and the story of Isaac follow similar paths. And statements such as, Very similar to what we hear given to Abraham at the beginning of his call.

And then it's followed up with an explanation of why this blessing has been given. Now this is a surprising statement. It's a surprising statement when we consider that these words are not the words that we'd expect to find in Genesis.

These are words we might expect in Deuteronomy or perhaps in the discussion of the law in Psalm 119 or something like that. My voice, my charge, my commandments, my statutes and my laws. It's almost as if Abraham is being presented as the paradigmatic law keeper.

If you want to know what it means to keep the law, you readers of Genesis, this is what it looks like. It looks like being like the character of Abraham. Now Abraham never had the 10 commandments given to him or that body of case law that comes with that.

He just had specific instructions, a call, a vocation to leave his father's house, a commandment to sacrifice his son, things like that. And a covenant made with him and the commandment to circumcise his children. These are the commandments that he receives, but it's presented in a more paradigmatic law keeping way.

That he is the paradigmatic person who fulfills the intent of the law. That's instructive for us because he fulfills the intent of the law by living a life of faith. It's not just a matter of detailed observance of specific commands.

It's a fuller sense of a life oriented towards God, putting his life in God's hand, sacrificing his past, sacrificing his future, living by faith and loyalty. And reading it that way I think it can help us to read the rest of the body of the law, the five books of Moses, and consider what it means in fact to keep the law. It means to live like Abraham walked.

And in the New Testament we'll see this theme taken up in the book of Romans, that Abraham is our father. He is defined by faith, by loyalty. And that when we read Paul's discussion of these things, it's not primarily by the detailed observances of the Mosaic code.

It's rather that fundamental faith in God, that faithfulness, that loyalty. These sorts of themes are the ones that come to the foreground. And that's fulfilled in Christ.

And all of us, as we live by the spirit, are displaying that we are the true heirs, we're the true seed, we're the true children of Abraham. We're walking in the way that he walked. Isaac is blessed on the account of his father.

Now that again is surprising to us. We wouldn't usually think of someone being blessed on account of their parent in a very individualistic society. But this is what the text is teaching, that the next generations are blessed on behalf of Abraham.

And this is a foreshadowing of the broader way in which Abraham will be a blessing to the whole world, not just to his immediate seed, but to the larger body of people that will come across him. Everyone who comes across the influence that spreads out for him, an influence of blessing, will be touched and changed by that. And this is the ideal that is supposed to be represented by Isaac himself, as Isaac is supposed to walk in the footsteps of his father.

And at the beginning and the end of this chapter, we'll see very close references to the story of Abraham in that regard. Now, I've already mentioned the background of Genesis chapter 12 and 11 and the promise and call of Abraham and the way in which he goes into the land of Egypt and how that provides a background for this wife-sister narrative. There is further background in chapter 20 of the book.

And in chapter 20, we'll see it's also in the land of the Philistines. It's also with Abimelech. Now, Abimelech here is not the same Abimelech in almost all likelihood.

This is the son or grandson of the former Abimelech. What we have is a dynastic name like Pharaoh. Abimelech is the name of the king.

It's not necessarily the name, the personal name of the person involved. And as we read through the story, we'll see some of the path that we see in the story of Abraham being trodden over again. Now, in that story, we see it ends with a covenant made with Abimelech.

In chapter 21, we read that there's a covenant made. God is with you in all that you do. Now, therefore, swear to me by God that you will not deal falsely with me, with my offspring or with my posterity, but that according to the kindness that I have done to you, you will do to me and to the land in which you have sojourned.

And they both make an agreement with each other that they will treat each other well. Now, reading this story against the background of that, that they will treat each other in this proper way, that he will show respect to the land in which he's sojourning and be good and all these sorts of things, reading it against the background, chapter 26, against the background of that, we'll see that Abimelech and his people have not kept those things. They have not shown the honour that they should do.

And the way that they're supposed to deal well with offspring and posterity and to show kindness. Now, are they doing that? No, they're not. And the way in which the story develops, we'll see that it's characterized by certain sort of inhospitality, by animosity, envy and other characteristics like that before it is resolved.

Reading through this story, there are differences from the earlier stories of the wife-sister narratives. In the earlier wife-sister narratives, in both of them, Sarah or Sarai was taken by the foreign leader. In the first one, she was taken by Pharaoh and then God intervened.

There were plagues and then Sarai was released and Abraham was sent away. In the second, she was taken and then Abimelech had a dream and then she's released and Abraham stays in the land. So that's a difference.

That's a progression from the first story. And in this one, there's another set of differences that Abimelech just sees something. He sees something happen between Isaac and Rebecca that shows that clearly they are wife and husband, not brother and sister.

And on account of that, he says to his people that they should not interfere, that no one should touch and the person who touches will die. And in those cases, what I think you're seeing is each one of them is a progression from the previous one. And in this final one, there is also the remaining in the land for some period of time at least.

When he goes to these different places, he says, like his father did, that his wife is his sister. He knows that she is beautiful and because she is beautiful, he fears that the people of the land will take her. As I've mentioned on previous occasions, this is a ploy that is probably derived from two different things.

First of all, it's derived from the fact that as the brother, he would be in the position to guard the wife. He'd be in the bargaining position as we see in the case of Laban. Laban is the one who negotiates with Eliezer of Damascus concerning Sarah, concerning Rebecca.

And in this case, he presents himself as the brother so that he can protect her. He's not the obstacle to her, but he's the one that you go through to her. And so he's in a position to protect him and the people around him.

Again, bear in mind, he has a large company of people around him here. He's become more powerful than these landed tribes, these people who have cities and settling places. He's more powerful and they're scared of him.

He's someone who has large numbers of herdsmen, large groups of people surround him. And so he's a wealthy, powerful person with incredible power and wealth in the land, just as his father Abraham had. And more besides, he's someone who has significant influence and weight.

And for that reason, when we're reading this story, we need to recognise that he's not just got Rebecca in mind here. He's not just got his own interests in mind. He has to be concerned with all the people that are surrounding him.

Another difference with this story, the first one was a story that told about the taking of the bride before any promise of her seed had occurred. The second one occurred taking Sarah before just at the key moment where she was supposed to conceive Isaac. And so it was a threat to the bride, but also to the seed.

And it was associated with the opening of the wombs. And now Esau and Jacob are born already. And it seems that they are not on the scene here.

They're not really emphasised. And so maybe this is out of chronological order. There are other stories in the book of Genesis that seem to be out of chronological order.

But it's in here for a reason. It's placed in this particular place for a reason. It's also the only story that we really have with Isaac as an active character doing things.

Isaac is quite an enigmatic one of the patriarchs. We hear a lot about Jacob and all the things that he does and Abraham, of course. And when we read the story of Joseph and his brothers, they're all doing different things.

But in the story of Isaac, Isaac is encountered very much as that young lad. And he may not have been that young a lad. He might have been in his 30s even, going up Mount Moriah with his father and submitting to his father's will in that regard to be sacrificed.

And then we see him as an old man being deceived by Jacob. And so the only story that we really see him being really active is in chapter 26. This is Isaac as an active person.

What is he defined by? In the previous story, he's defined by his submission to his father, his saying, here I am, and his honoring of his father's will. And in this story, I think what you have is his consolidating of his father's work and also his following in his father's footsteps. It's a very similar story.

It's in the same place and it's going over the same themes. Now, Abimelech looks out of the window and as he looks through a window, he sees and there's Isaac. And he's

showing endearment or literally laughing with Rebekah, his wife.

Now, it's playing upon Isaac's name. We've seen Isaac's name being played upon in a number of respects already. It's something that is associated with Abraham's initial reaction to the news, with Sarah's initial reaction to the news, with a statement that all who hear will laugh with her, with the laughter of Ishmael, which seems to be maybe a mocking laughter.

And here it's associated with the endearment between Isaac and Rebekah. And it's what gives them away. It's what reveals that Rebekah is indeed his wife.

Now, you have the king of the Philistines looking through a window at this point. Is it the window into Isaac and Rebekah's tent or is it from his own window? One way or another, it seems that they're living in very close proximity and maybe it suggests that Isaac has settled far more than we would have expected otherwise. He's not just dwelling in a general region in tents, but he's living alongside, near the king.

And the king is able to, he's one of the well-known authorities of the region and the king has access to him and he's nearby. That's a possibility. It's interesting one way or another.

Abimelech calls Isaac and says, quite obviously, she's your wife. So how could you say she is my sister? And Isaac says to him, because I said, lest I die on account of her. Abimelech says, what is this that you have done to us? One of the people might soon have lain with your wife and you would have brought guilt on us.

So Abimelech charged all his people saying, he who touches this man or his wife shall surely be put to death. Now, is Isaac in the wrong here? He may partly be in the wrong. But look at what Abimelech says.

The idea that it's quite possible that someone might have taken his wife and by taking his wife just lain with her and brought guilt upon himself. How would that have happened? I mean, how would that have occurred without having Isaac intervening? It seems here that there's an insinuation that Abimelech's people are not very hospitable. That they are the sort of people that will just take a woman without consulting with her brother, without consulting with her family, without going through all the proper channels.

That they are the sort of people that might just grab a woman and lie with her. Now, that clearly isn't the sort of hospitality that should be shown. And here I think we need to be aware of just accepting Abimelech's judgement as if it is the right one.

You have similar things with characters like Laban and Pharaoh and the earlier Abimelech. In these stories, it's very easy to read the character as if they are the righteous one. They're accusing the covenant character of wronging them in some way.

By putting them in danger, by the fact that they could just take someone who's forbidden fruit. But yet, the very way in which they take Sarah in the earlier stories or could take Rebecca here, clearly show that this is not appropriate. That this is an act of inhospitality.

It's an act that shows that there's no respect given to custom. There's no respect given to guests. And it's clearly illegitimate.

And we should not just take their word for it, their judgement concerning it. He who touches this man or his wife shall surely be put to death. Again, it suggests maybe forbidden fruit themes playing here.

That someone might see and take, and so they're told to see and take the beautiful woman. But they're told to not take it, lest they be put to death. Isaac sows in the land and reaps in the same year a hundredfold and the Lord blessed him.

Now this is another sign of settling down that bit more. He's a bit more rooted in the land. When you're just travelling around from place to place in a more semi-nomadic type of lifestyle, then you don't sow to the same degree.

Abraham doesn't seem to have sown seed. Maybe he did have some. I mean he had grain and other things that were prepared for food in the story of chapter 18.

Maybe he did grow some grains. But here we see something that suggests that Isaac has settled a bit more firmly within the land. Is this what God intended for him? Maybe not.

He's told to sojourn in the land of Gerar, the land of the Philistines. And that sojourning is not necessarily the same thing as putting down deep roots. He maybe had to wait for that.

Maybe that was jumping the gun. But he is blessed nonetheless and he begins to prosper and continues prospering until he becomes very prosperous. He has possessions of flocks and possessions of herds and a great number of servants.

The Philistines envy him. And this situation is very similar to the one that we see at the beginning of the book of Exodus. Where Israel has prospered and expanded and multiplied and the people are starting to envy them.

They start to resent them and they start to fear them as well. That they might become more powerful than them. In chapter, in verse 16 it says, Abimelech says to Isaac, Go away from us for you are much mightier than we.

It's a similar threat that Israel poses to the Egyptians. This is a multiplying people. This is a people that are becoming very powerful.

Again, bear in mind that this is not just one man, his wife and two kids. This is a large

group of people in the sheikdom with large herds and large numbers of herdsmen, trained soldiers that can fight for them. All these sorts of things.

This is not just an isolated man and his wife dwelling in tents. So think in terms of that picture and it will give you a clearer idea. Another thing to think about in the earlier story of the wife's sister is from the region of Haran we have in that broad region.

The Nuzi tablets give us knowledge of marriage customs in that area where you would have the wife being adopted as a sister. So not just a wife, but a sister. And so this would provide some sort of basis for him using the language of sister with respect to his wife.

Now, it might also suggest that Abimelech was supposed to be familiar with this custom. And on account of his familiarity with that custom that would be associated with maybe a higher class of persons that he would respect and honour that custom. And he would not attack or he would not take the wife of this one.

But yet there seems to have been a failure to honour that. If that was indeed the case. I'm not sure it was.

All the wells that Abraham had dug previously have been covered over by the Philistines. And this again fills in some of the themes of this chapter. The covenant had been made between Abimelech and Abraham, Isaac's father, and presumably Abimelech being the father or some ancestor of this Abimelech.

And yet it has not been honoured. It's supposed to extend to offspring of the next generation. But yet there is a dishonouring of this covenant.

And as a result, you have this animosity between these parties. And the men of Abimelech have covered over the old wells that Abraham dug. And that is a challenging and it's a destroying of the legacy of Abraham in some respect.

And the story of Isaac is very much consolidating, re-establishing and entrenching the legacy of Abraham. So he departs from Gerar, pitches his tent in the valley of Gerar and then digs again all the wells of water which had been dug in the days of Abraham, his father. And in those stories we'll see conflict.

In the previous ones we see conflict over the wells. The wells were very significant in the border of the wilderness. And to dig these wells was also a sign of ownership or a sign of presence within the land.

We have wells that Abraham builds and we also have altars that he builds. These are the key things that he builds, establishes within the land. And the wells and the conflict over them are significant.

They often parallel with the stories of the women because the women are met at wells.

And the women are and the struggle over the wells. Who has the wells? Who has the fertility of the land? Who has the fertility of the women? These are similar questions.

And so the rivalry of the wells in chapter 21 and the rivalry of the wells here, these are stories that need to be read alongside the story of the taking of the wife or the threat to the wife. That the wells are the fertility of the land. And also they're named as a result of these competitions between people.

That might also recall the naming of children as we read the story of Genesis 30, for instance. The struggle between Leah and Rachel, the two sisters. They name their children after this struggle.

And we see a similar thing in the story of the wells. Whether that's the story of chapter 21 or the story of 26 here, it's a struggle over wells. It's a struggle over children.

It's a struggle over fertility. And the land and the wife being associated together on that front. And the quarrelling between Isaac's servants and herdsmen and those of Gerar leads him to move on.

He doesn't fight over these things ultimately. He is a man who takes hospitality or doesn't take hospitality. He's not someone who forces himself in these situations.

And that's an interesting thing to observe. It's also interesting to see that he seems, there seems to be a shift in this story. So at one point he is very much settling within Gerar.

Seems to be establishing there, sowing crops, things like that. And then there's struggle between him and Abimelech and the Philistines. The Philistines call him to go away and then he moves on.

And then there's struggle over these different wells. He keeps moving on and then eventually he arrives at Rehoboth. And now the Lord has made room for us for we shall be fruitful in the land.

And his ability to move on, he's going back to a more semi nomadic form of lifestyle. And that form of lifestyle, the sort of lifestyle that marked out his father, rather than the sort of lifestyle that we see, for instance, in Lot who settled in Sodom. This is the lifestyle that Isaac is called to.

Not the lifestyle that will be one of settling down, placing deep roots in a place and planting crops. He is going to be moving around. And that movement, I think, is one of the reasons why he's blessed at this particular point.

The Lord appears to him when he moves up from there to Beersheba. 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 my servant Abraham's sake. So he built an altar there and called on the name of the Lord. And he pitched his tent there and there Abraham's servants dug a well.

We see a number of features that come together. The altar, the tent and the well. And maybe there's something here that should connect with tabernacle imagery.

The labour, the altar and the tabernacle. I'm not sure. It's worth pondering those sorts of connections.

We have trees as well at other key events in Mamre and elsewhere. These features of the landscape that consistently occur and often occur alongside each other. These features have symbolic significance and play across the narrative of Genesis in a great many ways.

The altars are the first footholds, as it were, in the land. They contrast with the tower building that occurs in chapter 11. Abraham goes throughout the land and makes altars.

That's what he builds there. And God appears and he blesses him. And again, it's blessing him as the God of his father Abraham.

Blessing and multiplying him for the sake of Abraham. We've seen that at the beginning and we see it here as well. That he is blessed on behalf of Abraham.

When you look back in chapter 22, I think it helps you to understand what's taking place here. That Abraham, in giving up his son, makes his son a blessing. And a blessing, he gives his son over to God and God consolidates the legacy of Abraham.

God takes the responsibility for building up Abraham's name. Abraham does not grasp onto his legacy. Rather, God is establishing the legacy of Abraham and establishing and blessing his son for the sake of Abraham.

And because of his obedience. This is something that we are seeing here that I think needs to be tied back to that previous event in the binding about Isaac, the Acada story. At this point, once they have stopped the rivalry over the wells, once he's settled in a particular place.

And once he's resisted the rivalry that he could have gotten involved in, but yet consolidated his father's legacy. Abimelech and the leader of his army come to visit Isaac. And Isaac says, why have you come to me since you hate me and sent me away from you? But now he sees that God is with him and he wants to make an oath and a covenant with them.

And you will do us no harm since we have not touched you. Well, they haven't touched him in that respect. They haven't done explicit violence against him, but they have not

treated him with hospitality in any way at all.

They've pushed him away from them. They've been envious of him. And so, again, don't take Abimelech's words at face value.

We've done nothing to you but good and have sent you away in peace. You are now blessed of the Lord. So he made them a feast and then they ate and drank.

And then they arise early in the morning, swear an oath to each other, and then they go their different ways. And maybe we should read this story alongside the story of Jacob in the land of Laban. Jacob goes away to sojourn in the land and he ends up settling down, putting down firmer roots than he might have expected.

Then there's this struggle and the bearing of children and the naming of them after that struggle. And then there's the moving away and the rather duplicitous person that comes after and the making of a covenant at this point, because that person sees that they're blessed by God. Maybe there's a connection.

Don't know. But worth bearing in mind, if you can see any connections, more generally, if you see any connections that I'm not mentioning here, there are dozens of, hundreds of things I'm not noticing in these texts. So please mention them in the comments and share what you have seen that I've maybe not seen.

And so they make it, eat a feast as a sort of sealing of their covenant. And they go away, they go their separate ways. And at that point, Isaac's servants come and they tell him about the well that they had dug.

And they say to him, we have found water. It's a key event. It's an auspicious event.

At this particular point, they have arrived at peace and the well is discovered. The fertility of the land, the life springing up from the land has been given to them. And that's named Beersheba.

And that connects, of course, with chapter 21. Chapter 21, we have Beersheba as well. It says, Abraham set seven new lambs of the flock by themselves.

And Abimelech asked Abraham, what is the meaning of these seven new lambs, which you've set by themselves? And he said, you will take these seven new lambs from my hand, that they may be witness that I have dug this well, the well of Beersheba. Therefore, he called that place Beersheba because the two of them swore an oath there. Thus, they made a covenant at Beersheba.

So Abimelech rose with Phaikol, the commander of his army, and they returned to the land of the Philistines. Then Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba, and there called on the name of the Lord, the everlasting God. And Abraham sojourned in the land

of the Philistines many days.

It's the same story, pretty much. It's the same Abimelech, Phaicol, the leader of his army, Beersheba. It's playing out the same event.

And so you've had this covenant that has not been kept properly. And now you have the reestablishment of that, a renewal of the covenant that has been broken. And Isaac, once again, is consolidating what his father did.

He's establishing once more the fallen boundary markers. And at Beersheba, he finds well, he finds water. And it's a sign that the legacy of Abraham is rising up again, that he has achieved what he is called to do.

He has been blessed for the sake of his father. And now he is taking forward his father's blessing, reestablishing it, making sure that it is not lost. So much of Isaac's work is not something pioneering, something new.

It's about building the old boundary markers again, establishing what his father initiated. And it's often what we might be called to do. Not so much to do some wonderful new work, to start some, break some new ground or forge some new path.

It may just be a matter of consolidating what someone else has established. And the sort of work that Isaac does is not so, it's not the sort of thing that's as flashy or as exciting or as, or it doesn't seem to be as worthy of attention as what Abraham does. But it is of great importance.

What he does is reestablish and continue the legacy of Abraham. At this point, however, we read at the end of the chapter that Esau was 40 years old and he took his wives Judith, the daughter of Bere the Hittite, and Basmath, the daughter of Elan the Hittite. And they were a grief of mine to Isaac and Rebecca.

What we have is alongside and in contrast to Isaac's reestablishment and consolidation of the legacy of Abraham, their first born son is compromising that. He's marrying with the people of the land. Abraham was deeply concerned that his son not do that.

But now his son's son, his grandson is marrying the one who's in line or seemingly in line to inherit the covenant blessing. He's the one who's engaging with the women of the land. He's doing something that is quite inappropriate.

He's compromising the covenant line. And Esau, who has despised the birthright, is despising the integrity of the covenant here as well. These women are a grief to both of his parents.

And the story that follows is sandwiched between statements like this. We need to see just how important Esau's choice of wife is for the events that follow. Thank you very

much for listening.

Lord willing, I'll be back again tomorrow with a question or answer. And I'll be back next week with further thoughts on the story of Abraham. If you have any questions that you'd like to ask, please do so using my Curious Cat account.

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