

Genesis 26: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Genesis chapter 26 So Isaac settled in Gerar.

When the men of the place asked him about his wife, he said, She is my sister. For he feared to say, My wife, thinking lest the men of the place should kill me because of Rebekah, because she was attractive in appearance.

When he had been there a long time, Abimelech, king of the Philistines, looked out of a window and saw Isaac laughing with Rebekah his wife. So Abimelech called Isaac and said, Behold, she is your wife.

How then could you say she is my sister? Isaac said to him, Because I thought lest I die because of her. 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. So Abimelech warned all the people, saying, Whoever touches this man or his wife shall surely be put to death.

[1 : 41] And Isaac sowed in that land and reaped in the same year a hundredfold. The Lord blessed him, and the man became rich, and gained more and more until he became very wealthy.

He had possession of flocks and herds, and many servants, so that the Philistines envied him. Now the Philistines had stopped and filled with earth all the wells that his father's servants had dug in the days of Abraham his father.

And Abimelech said to Isaac, Go away from us, for you are much mightier than we. So Isaac departed from there and encamped in the valley of Gerar, and settled there.

And Isaac dug again the wells of water that had been dug in the days of Abraham his father, which the Philistines had stopped after the death of Abraham. And he gave them the names that his father had given them.

But when Isaac's servants dug in the valley and found there a well of spring water, the herdsmen of Gerar quarreled with Isaac's herdsmen, saying, The water is ours. So he called the name of the well Essek, because they contended with him.

[2 : 47] Then they dug another well, and they quarreled over that also. So he called its name Sitna. And he moved from there and dug another well, and they did not quarrel over it.

So he called its name Rehoboth, saying, For now the Lord has made room for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land. From there he went up to Beersheba.

And the Lord appeared to him the same night and said, I am the God of Abraham your father. Fear not, for I am with you, and will bless you, and multiply your offspring for my servant Abraham's sake.

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. When Abimelech went to him from Gerar with Ahazath his advisor, and Phicol the commander of his army, Isaac said to them, Why have you come to me, seeing that you hate me and have sent me away from you?

They said, We see plainly that the Lord has been with you. So we said, Let there be a sworn pact between us, between you and us, and let us make a covenant with you, 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.

[4 : 02] You are now the blessed of the Lord. So he made them a feast, and they ate and drank. In the morning they rose early and exchanged oaths. And Isaac sent them on their way, and they departed from him in peace.

That same day Isaac's servants came and told him about the well that they had dug, and said to him, We have found water. He called it Sheba, therefore the name of the city is Beersheba to this day.

When Esau was forty years old, he took Judith, the daughter of Beeri the Hittite, to be his wife, and Bassemeth, the daughter of Elon the Hittite.

And they made life bitter for Isaac and Rebekah. Genesis chapter 26 immediately distinguishes itself from the previous story of a famine in chapter 12.

That famine occurs to Abraham, and leads him to go into Egypt shortly after he first arrives in the land of Canaan. This is a story that resembles that story, and perhaps for that reason it's distinguished from it immediately.

[5 : 06] However, the distinction also has the effect of bringing to mind the earlier famine story, and making us think about what similarities they may have. This is actually the third wife as sister story in Genesis.

We have already read such stories in Genesis chapter 12, and in Genesis chapter 20. There are other stories that have similar features. The stories where the ancestress of some nation is threatened.

We can think of the story of Hagar in the wilderness, running out of food and drink. We can think of the story of Tamar later on, the story of Dinah, the story of Lot's daughters.

All of these are threats to the ancestress stories. And the wife as sister stories are a sub-genre of these. Many have wondered whether the compiler of Genesis just did not know what to do with three different yet similar accounts.

And yet, when we look closely at these stories, they are very different in certain respects. In the case of the first story, it's Abraham and Sarai going into the land of Egypt, Sarai being taken by Pharaoh, and then Sarai and Abraham being sent out when Sarai's true identity comes to light.

[6 : 22] In chapter 20, there's a different story. Sarai and Abraham go into the land of the Philistines this time, and it's just before the conception of Isaac.

She's taken by Abimelech. But God appears to Abimelech in a dream and warns him that he is a dead man, as he's taken someone else's wife.

In this story, there aren't plagues upon the nation, and Abraham isn't sent away with Sarah. Rather, they're told to stay in the land and to settle there. So Genesis chapter 26 is the third account of this kind.

Again, it's in the land of the Philistines. There's an Abimelech again. Probably not the same Abimelech as we met in chapter 20. The earlier Abimelech had made a treaty with Abraham, but now we see inhospitality and envy.

And this case, Rebecca is not taken. Rather, she is almost taken, or there's the threat that she might be taken. But she's seen with Isaac, laughing.

[7 : 26] And that statement that Isaac is laughing with Rebecca is again a play upon his name. He's Isaac-ing with Rebecca. In this case, the children have also been born.

Whereas in the first account, the story of Sarai in the land of Egypt, the child is still not born for quite some time. In the second account, it's just before the conception of Isaac and the wombs of Abimelech's house are opened.

And now, Esau and Jacob have been born, so there's no longer a theme of a threat to the child. There's a threat to Rebecca, but there's no threat to the children in this case here.

One thing that we should notice about this story is the similarity with the story of Abraham. The fact that Isaac is replaying many of the events that remind us of Abraham.

The very beginning of the story is a reminder of the blessing of Abraham and the fact that Isaac is receiving this blessing. He's called to sojourn in the land.

[8 : 24] God will be with him and bless him and give him the land. And it's going to be to fulfill the oath that he swore to Abraham, his father. He will multiply his offspring of the stars of heavens, give the offspring all these lands.

Now, that's a statement that's just reiterating the promise that was given to Abraham and now passed on to Isaac. And he's told that all his offspring will be blessed because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes and my laws.

Now, that five-fold list seems a little out of place within its original context. We might expect such terms in Psalm 119, for instance, where there is explicit reflection upon the law or the Torah, whereas here it seems anachronistic.

How is Abraham being presented? As if he were the paradigmatic law keeper. And that's strange because the law has not been given. But yet, maybe that's the point.

Maybe the true keeping of the law looks like Abraham. And as we reflect upon the story of Abraham, we'll have an idea what it looks like to be a keeper of the law.

[9 : 35] Abraham leaves his father's house. He believes God's promise. He cuts off the flesh in circumcision. He is prepared to offer up his son Isaac in fear of the Lord.

In all of these ways, we're seeing the deeper logic of the sacrificial system, of the law, etc. These are all ultimately about obedience to God, about offering oneself up to God and all that one possesses, leaving things behind and cleaving to God, believing his promise, cutting off the flesh in all of its different forms, and offering yourself and your hope to God.

When we see Paul using the example of Abraham in the New Testament, I believe he's using this sort of principle, that Abraham is the hermeneutical principle, the principle of interpretation by which we can understand what the law was always supposed to look like.

Now, the shadow of Abraham lies over this passage in other ways. Not only is Isaac being blessed on account of his father Abraham, not only is Isaac replaying some scenes that remind us of the story of Abraham, he's having to consolidate the work of Abraham.

The wells of Abraham have been closed up by the Philistines, and Isaac has to dig or open them again. There are other ways in which we can see the pattern of Abraham over this passage.

[11 : 00] There's been a covenant set up with Abimelech, a previous Abimelech, presumably, in chapter 21, and a new covenant has to be set up that follows exactly the same sort of pattern, and again it leads to finding water at Beersheba.

As Isaac re-establishes the old boundary marks of his father, consolidates his father's work, he ends up finding water at Beersheba, which reminds us of the covenant site that had been formed by Abraham just a few chapters earlier.

So the story of Abraham is hanging over the story of Isaac. Sometimes we find that our work is not so much breaking new ground, but consolidating the work of people who have gone before us.

That was certainly the case for Isaac within this story. There are some further things to be noticed here. At the beginning of this story, Isaac is told to sojourn in this land, and then he goes and he settles in Gerar.

And while in Gerar he plants crops, and he's blessed, and they multiply. But there's a question there. Is settling what he was asked to do?

[12 : 09] He was not told by God to settle, he was told to sojourn. Earlier on in the story of Genesis chapter 11 and 12, Abraham's father, Terah, left the land of Ur of the Chaldees and settled in Haran.

And Abraham was told to leave and to sojourn. Now what Isaac does here is, rather than sojourning, he settles. He's left a semi-nomadic pastoral lifestyle, and now he's planting crops as an agriculturalist.

He's having a lot of success, but he seems to be changing his pattern of behaviour. We can maybe think about the contrast between Lot and Abraham, where in chapter 18, Abraham is seated at his tent door, whereas Lot is in the gate of Sodom.

Here it seems that Isaac has settled in a city. He's living in a place where the king of the city can look out his window and see Isaac having relations or acting in a very familiar way with his wife.

That suggests that he's gone some way from the nomadic lifestyle of his father. Likewise, you don't plant crops on that sort of scale if you're moving around from place to place.

[13 : 23] The manner of his life has changed. Now one of the things that you do when you're settling in a particular place is you build wells, and those wells are part of your claim upon the place.

And he's re-establishing some of the wells of Abraham, his father, but he's finding that he's quarrelling about these wells all the time with the Philistines. The Philistines keep claiming these wells, and these wells are named on account of the quarrels with the Philistines.

And then eventually he moves on, he digs a well, and there's no conflict. And this well is a sign of the blessing of God, but it's also an important movement in his story that he has to uproot.

He has to move on. He has to take on the lifestyle of a sojourner again. He won't just settle in the land and become part of the citizenry of Gerar, or one of the ruling peoples within that land.

He has great power. He's living near the king. He has a great sheikdom around him. But he must move on. He must take on the life of a wanderer that God has committed to Abraham, his father.

[14 : 29] Even after digging the well of Rehoboth, he moves on. And moving on, he comes to Beersheba, and the Lord appears to him and reiterates the promise that he gave to Abraham, his father.

And he will be blessed and multiplied on account of his father's sake. So he builds an altar there, calls upon the name of the Lord, and pitches his tent, and his servants dig a well.

Now, we can maybe think about the relationship between the altar, the tent, and the well. These are three things that, in connection with each other, may alert us to some associations, maybe even with the tabernacle, the altar, and the laver.

I'm not sure. It's worth thinking about. And I'll leave that as a question for you to think about. Might also be worth thinking about possible connections between wells and women.

As we've looked through the book of Genesis to this point, we've seen the patriarchs meeting their wives at wells on many occasions. Wells are associated with the fertility of the land.

[15 : 33] Wells are the springs, or the sources of water that give life to the land around them. And the conflict over wells, the conflict over women, and then the naming of wells and the naming of children may be associated in ways that reward attention and reflection.

I'm not sure what to make of it, but I think there's something there. Two concluding questions to think about. First, consider the significance of the actions of Esau at the end of this chapter against the background of what we've seen in the story of Genesis to this point.

And the second question. Abimelech accuses Isaac of wrongdoing in not telling him that Rebekah was his wife. What hints might be given to us in the passage that Isaac was justified in his original assessment of the land?