

HELPS FOR BIBLE STUDY ON THE BOOK OF GENESIS

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Genesis 24

This chapter relates God's faithful fulfilling of His promise to Abraham in His supplying for Isaac a God-fearing wife. God's promise to Abraham was, centrally, the Christ, including the promises of the land of Canaan (Gen. 13:15), of an innumerable posterity (Gen. 13:16) and of the blessing of the nations of the earth (Gen. 18:18). The fulfillment of the promise demands that Isaac, in whom Abraham's seed is to be called (Heb. 11:18), marry and have a son to be, with Abraham and Isaac, heir of the promise. The repeated reference to the providential control of God in the matter of Isaac's getting a wife (cf. vss. 27, 50), the confidence of Abraham that God would prosper the venture through the agency of His angel, evidently, the "Angel of Jehovah" (vs. 7 cf. Gen. 22:15), and the stress throughout the chapter on God's covenant name, Jehovah, point up the truth that the search for a wife was more than an "ordinary" endeavor by a believing parent to get a believing wife for his son. Involved is the realization of the promise of God in the coming of the Christ. In this light Abraham's vehement insistence that Isaac not marry a Canaanite woman must also be viewed. It was, at bottom, an abhorrence of entrusting the Christ to the godless.

Abraham's advanced age motivates him to instruct his servant concerning the marriage of Isaac. Since he approaches the time of death, he takes precautions against the possibility that Isaac, now about forty (Gen. 25:20), fall into a marriage, after Abraham's death, with one of the heathen women among whom he lives. Since Isaac is forty when he marries Rebekah and since Abraham was one hundred when Isaac was born (Gen. 21:5), Abraham is about one hundred and forty years of age, at this time. Sarah has been dead three years (cf. Gen. 17:17 and Gen. 23:1), which also must have impressed Abraham with the nearness of his own death. In fact, however, Abraham lives for thirty-five more years (Gen. 25:7), dying when his grandsons, Jacob and Esau, were about fifteen years (cf. Gen. 25:26).

The opposition of Abraham to Isaac's marrying a Canaanite is absolute so that the servant must swear by "Jehovah, the God of heaven and the God of earth" (vs. 3) not to get a Canaanite woman for Isaac. The form of the oath is the placing of a hand under Abraham's thigh, which curious rite is only elsewhere mentioned at Genesis 47:29. The explanation of Abraham's charging the servant rather than Isaac himself seems to be, in part, the extraordinary status of the servant and, in part, the tractable nature of Isaac. The servant is probably Eliezer of Damascus, mentioned previously in Genesis 15:2, although he is never referred to by name in chapter 24. The servant of Genesis 24 evinces faith and Godliness in high degree which is implied of Eliezer in Genesis 15:2. Besides, the servant occupies a position of highest rank in Abraham's household (vss. 2, 10) so that even the son and heir was accustomed to obeying him which harmonizes with the description of Eliezer in Genesis 15:2, "steward of my house". Abraham's assumption that Isaac would honor instruction by the servant, against marriage with a Canaanite speaks well of Isaac. But, at the same time, Abraham's firmness on this matter contrasts with Isaac's toleration of Esau's marriage to not one but two of the heathen (cf. Gen. 26:34, 35 in the light of Gen. 25:28 and 27:1-4). The reason for Abraham's refusal to allow such a marriage lay in the Canaanites' being an accursed race. God's curse upon them is to be traced back to Noah's prophetic curse upon his grandson, Canaan (Gen. 9:25). The Canaanites were an idolatrous,

depraved race, fitting the description of Romans 1:18ff. Of their impending destruction, God had made Abraham aware in Genesis 15:16 (“Amorites” standing for all the Canaanites) and in the visitation of wrath upon Sodom and Gomorrah.

Excepting the special factor of Isaac’s bringing forth the Christ, believers today are prohibited for similar reasons from contracting marriages with unbelievers. Thus, I Corinthians 7:39 commands marriages “in the Lord” and II Corinthians 6:14-18 inveighs against an “unequal” yoking of believer with unbeliever. The societies might well discuss the practical implications for dating and marrying. Note that Abraham makes no allowance for any “conversion through marriage”.

In response to the servant’s question whether his inability to bring a wife from Mesopotamia to Isaac would necessitate the servant’s bringing Isaac to Mesopotamia (vs. 5), Abraham forbids Isaac’s ever returning to the land from which Abraham came. The idea of the servant is that it might be necessary for Isaac to woo his wife personally. Abraham reacts strongly against the suggestion that Isaac go back (“Beware thou,” vs. 6). The reason why there may be no return is given in vs. 7. The fulfillment of the covenant, salvation, was bound up with the land of Canaan and in the land of Canaan the heirs of the promise must strictly abide. To leave Canaan at all, except in cases of direct Divine command as in Genesis 46:1-4, gives evidence of carelessness concerning salvation and doubt concerning the promise. It would be *a fortiori*, worse to leave Canaan for that country out of which God had called the patriarch. But Abraham is confident that no such reluctance will foil his intention and that God will assuredly direct a maid (“the woman,” vs. 8) to marry Isaac “sight unseen.” Abraham, here, as throughout his life, rests upon the promise. Jehovah had sworn to bring forth “the seed of Abraham” from Isaac so that He is responsible for supplying the wife that is necessary. The concession of Abraham in vs. 8 is not due to his nagging doubt but to the conscientious qualms of the servant who hesitates to swear to perform something that he may not be able to accomplish. The servant, reassured not only by Abraham’s concession but also by the unwavering faith of his master, swears to seek a wife for Isaac in Mesopotamia, not to marry Isaac to a Canaanite, and not to take Isaac back to Mesopotamia (vs. 9).

Although the primary concern in the first nine verses is for the coming of Christ, several other truths also stand out. Abraham manifests that careful oversight of (his ??? marriage that ought to mark every ??? parent. Carelessness of parents ????? to the dating and marrying active??? dren reflects disdain for God-gi???? bility.) (The page was folder over here). Isaac’s submission (at forty) to his father’s guidance on the matter of his mate condemns any defiant independentism of children also on the selection of husband or wife. Calvin remarks on vs. 3: “it is not lawful for the children of a family to contract marriage, except with the consent of parents; and certainly natural equity dictates that, in a matter of such importance, children should depend upon the will of their parents.” It is obvious, finally, that if the alternatives are singleness and marriage with an unbeliever, singleness is alone the approved course.

As directed by Abraham, Eliezer goes to Abraham’s country and kindred (vs. 4), that is, the “city of Nahor” in Mesopotamia (vs. 10). This place is not Ur of the Chaldees, where Abraham originally lived (Gen. 11:28ff.), but Haran (or, Charran, as in Acts 7:2, 4), to which Abraham had moved with Terah and Lot (Gen. 11:31) and from which Abraham and Lot had come to Canaan. Although there is no mention of Nahor’s having moved from Ur to Haran, it is evident from Jacob’s flight to Laban in Haran that Nahor and family were also in Haran (cf. Gen. 27:43; 28:10).

The faith of the servant is worthy of notice. He commits himself and his task to Jehovah in gratitude for the successful outcome of his journey (vs. 26, 27) and ascribes to the Lord the glory (vs. 48). If the servant is Eliezer of Damascus, his Godliness is a realization already in the Old Dispensation of the New Dispensational fulfillment of God's promise that in Abraham all the nations of the earth would be blessed. He is saved, but only in Abraham, a true child of Abraham, that is, not merely by physical descent but by faith (cf. Gal. 3:7). Besides, the complete reliance of the servant upon Jehovah and, especially, upon God's promise to Abraham and the covenant relationship of God with Abraham ("Lord God of my master Abraham," vs. 12) underscores the main idea of these verses, Jehovah keeping His promises, bringing forth the Christ and saving His people. Even the obtaining of Rebekah comes not by might or human wisdom, but by the gracious activity of the Lord.

To some, Eliezer's prayer in verse 14 is suspect. They view it as tainted by the servant's presumption in dictating to God the way in which God should bring the woman of His choice to the servant. The servant errs in a manner roughly comparable with the tempting of God by Israel in the wilderness (cf. Ps. 78:19, 41). That the specific arrangement of details by the servant (vs. 14) was not motivated by unbelief but by faith is evident: 1) from the fact that the servant bases his request upon the covenant promise to Abraham (vs. 12). 2) from the fact that the servant is praying. 3) from his basic assumption that God had appointed a woman to be Isaac's wife (the servant does not leave it an open question whether God would provide a woman as Israel left it an open question whether God intended to care for them). 4) from God's speedy answer to the request in exactly the manner described in the servant's prayer. The servant's concern is not whether God intends to provide a woman but how the servant may recognize the woman. The identifying characteristic of the bride-to-be is hospitality, a love for the neighbor, which the servant expects in that woman chosen to be a help meet for the heir of the promise (vs. 14).

The maid that God has chosen and whom He brings to Eliezer is the daughter of Abraham's nephew, Bethuel (vs. 15, vs. 48 employs the word *brother* in a broad sense).

Terah

Abraham—Nahor

Isaac Bethuel

Rebekah—Laban

Besides being related to Abraham and Isaac, Rebekah is a beautiful virgin (literally, "of a good form exceedingly, a virgin") and hospitable. She not only accedes to the servant's request for water for himself but offers to water his camels and carries out both functions with haste (vss. 17-20).

The reaction of Eliezer in vs. 21 merely indicates that in so weighty a matter, the servant desires further confirmation that Rebekah is the right woman, the information that she is related to Abraham (vs. 27), the permission of her parents to let her go (vss. 49, 50) and the consent of the maid herself (vs. 58). That he gives her valuable jewelry (vs. 22), even before he knows who she is, indicates that he rests assured that she will prove to be God's choice. Calvin faults the servant for lavishing Rebekah with these ornaments (bracelets and a nose ring, not earring as rendered by the A. V. cf. vs. 47 and Is. 3:21). Regarding the use of such adornments, Calvin, thinking evidently of I Timothy 2:9: "women (should) adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety: not with broided hair or gold or pearls or costly array," states that "because the cupidity of women is, on this point, insatiable; not only must moderation, but even abstinence, be cultivated as far as possible." (*Commentary on Genesis, in loc.*)

The dominating figure in Nahor's household is his grandson, Laban. He takes the lead in welcoming the servant to the house (vss. 29-31), provides for the comfort of the servant (vs. 32), advises Eliezer to state his mission (vs. 33) and wields authority with Bethuel over Rebekah and the marriage proposal (vs. 50, where Laban's name appears first cf. vss. 53, 55). Laban's crafty, greedy nature, glaringly evident in his subsequent dealings with Jacob (Gen. 29-31), appears already here. His greeting of the servant is motivated by the jewelry displayed by Rebekah (vs. 30) and the warmth of his welcome is proportional to his notion of Abraham's wealth. From the beginning, he aimed at the dispensing of presents (vs. 53). Nor was he displeased by the prospect of an alliance with affluent Abraham. His seemingly pious "Come in, thou blessed of the Lord" (vs. 31), rings hollow. No doubt, Laban had picked up from Rebekah the fact the Eliezer had worshipped Jehovah (cf. vss. 26-28).

The servant, single mindedly pursuing the end of his journey, refuses to eat until he has related to the family his intention and obtained their verdict (vs. 33). The theme of his speech (vss. 34-49) is Jehovah's revelation that He wills the marriage of Rebekah and Isaac. This becomes clear to the listeners as is shown by the response of Laban and Bethuel in vss. 50, 51. In the speech the servant conveys to his audience the prosperity of Abraham (vs. 35), the status of Isaac, as the only son to inherit Abraham's riches and the marriageable age of Isaac (vs. 36). This latter fact becomes relevant when it is remembered that Isaac could conceivably be as old as Bethuel, Isaac's cousin and Rebekah's father. Although Laban probably heard nothing more in this speech than that Isaac would make a naturally suitable marriage partner, spiritually sensitive ears, such as Rebekah's could hear a deeper truth, the truth that the blessing of Abraham was the blessing of the covenant, that the birth of Isaac was a wonder, that the hand of Jehovah in selecting her was the hand that meant to use her to perpetuate the seed of the covenant until Christ came. This consciousness, in whatever degree of clarity it might have been, produces Rebekah's simple "I will go" (vs. 58) so that she leaves behind family and friends for a strange land and an unseen husband. Too often, the incident of her deception of Isaac is allowed to obscure the fact that she was a remarkable woman in many respects but also of faith.

With Rebekah's consent (vs. 58), a consent not only to leave immediately but also agreement to become Isaac's wife, the servant retraces his way to Canaan. The familial blessing of Rebekah seems to have been a customary formula (vs. 60). It consisted of the desire that she mother a numerous and victorious offspring. To "possess the gate" of one's enemies means to dominate one's enemies (cf. Gen. 22:17). "As gates were in ancient times the principal places of resort, as not only their markets were held there, but also their courts of justice and their deliberative assemblies, hence it is common for the scriptures to speak of the power of a city being concentrated in its gate or gates. The possession of the *gates* was therefore the possession of the *cities* to which they pertained" (Bush, *Notes on Genesis*). Regardless of the consciousness of the pronouncers of the benediction, God blessed Rebekah with precisely this blessing. Typically in the nation of Israel and centrally in Christ and His Church, Rebekah brings forth the innumerable and victorious host.

The meeting of Isaac and Rebekah occurs when Isaac is in the field meditating or praying. His meditation concerned the promises of God, specifically, the current mission of Eliezer. That God presents him with Rebekah at just this time must speak to him of the faithfulness of God and of God's regard for the prayers of His people.

God's crowning benefit to Isaac is the gift of love between the two, a love rich and deep since rooted in the love of two believers for Jehovah and His covenant, a love ardent with the ardency of the bond of perfection between Christ and His Church.

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