

## 2. Isaac

The offering at Moriah stands as the climax of the Abraham narrative, and so the high point of Abraham's life in covenant with God. The angel's declaration following his sacrifice of the ram indicates that the covenant was now to be transferred to Isaac (cf. 12:3 and 22:18). Abraham had fulfilled his role in the inauguration and development of the covenant, and the time had come for Yahweh to become the God of Isaac. This transference is evident in the particulars of the Isaac narrative in chapters 24-26.

- a. Following God's reaffirmation of the covenant in relation to Isaac, the text turns its attention to the obtaining of the next covenant matriarch. Isaac was to replace Abraham as the covenant patriarch, and so there also needed to be a replacement for Sarah. If the promise of a multitude of descendents was to be realized, God would have to provide a wife for the covenant heir.

Sarah's replacement is appropriately the first matter of concern in the Isaac narrative, and the text emphasizes this transition by sandwiching Sarah's death between Rebekah's genealogy (22:20-24) and her marriage to Isaac (24:1ff). Sarah's replacement enters the narrative before she passes away, and no sooner does Sarah die than Rebekah assumes her place. Rebekah is the new covenant matriarch, and the text makes this clear in three respects:

- 1) The first looks toward the future and so has to do with *promise*. Rebekah is introduced as a member of the larger Abrahamic household, and when she left with Abraham's servant to join Isaac in matrimony, her family pronounced a prophetic blessing upon her that intimately connected her to the covenant and its promises (cf. 24:60 with 22:16-17).
- 2) The second is set in the context of *fulfillment*. Having taken Rebekah as his wife, the new covenant patriarch brought her into his mother's tent and there consummated his union with her (24:67). Rebekah had entered into Sarah's place and would carry forward the covenant promises to her; Rebekah would indeed become the mother of thousands of ten thousands – a great nation that would possess the gates of their enemies.
- 3) The final indication in the text of Rebekah's status proceeds out of the previous one. Rebekah had become the new covenant matriarch, but she was bearing no children. Like Sarah before her, Rebekah was barren, and Isaac was compelled to implore the Lord for His favor toward her (25:21). With the first covenant pair, the fulfillment of the promise of a descendent depended upon the Lord's sovereign power. Isaac was, in every sense, the miraculous child of promise, and so it was to be with the third generation seed. If Isaac and barren Rebekah were to become the progenitors of a multitude of descendents (cf. again 21:12, 22:17, 26:1-5, 23-24 with 24:60), the Lord of the covenant would have to intervene and fulfill the promise through His own divine power.

b. The next context reinforces Isaac's role as Abraham's replacement by emphasizing his unique covenant status.

- 1) After Sarah's death Abraham remarried and his second wife bore six sons for him. Though, like Ishmael, they were legitimate sons of the first patriarch, they were not *Sarah's* offspring, and therefore not sons of the covenant. And so, while the six sons of Keturah received earthly endowments from their father Abraham, they remained outside the covenant: They were sent *away from Isaac* to reside in the area *east* of the promised land (25:1-6, cf. 3:24, 4:16, and 11:2 for the significance of dwelling to the east away from the sanctuary land).
- 2) The text further highlights Isaac's status by providing and commenting on Ishmael's genealogy (25:12-18). In parallel with the covenant seed – and in accordance with God's promise regarding him (16:10, 17:20), Ishmael also became the father of twelve royal tribes. But his descendents would not inherit the covenant and its promises.

Like the descendents of Keturah's sons, Ishmael's descendents were outside of the covenant household. Their inhabitation was south and east of Canaan from the desert of Shur on the Sinai Peninsula to Havilah going east toward Assyria. God had appeared to Hagar and made His promises to her and her son at Beer-lahai-roi, but that site was now Isaac's dwelling place; symbolically, he had displaced his brother (cf. 16:19-20, 25:11).

c. Immediately following Ishmael's genealogy, Genesis provides a brief account of Isaac's "generations" in terms of his sons Jacob and Esau (25:19-34). The purpose for this passage is to introduce the next covenant generation, much as Rebekah's genealogy was provided before her actual entrance into the storyline. It does so by relating the transference of the birthright from Esau to Jacob, and is paralleled by the account of Jacob receiving Isaac's blessing in chapter 27. In between these two contexts focusing on Jacob and Esau, the author inserts his account of a period in Isaac's life that preceded the birth of the twins (26:1-11). Bruce Waltke comments on the reason for this insertion:

*"Obviously the story [in 26:1-11] is anachronous [that is, chronologically out of sequence], for if Isaac and Rebecca had children, their marriage would have been apparent to the Philistines from the beginning. The narrator often arranges scenes by poetic and theological concerns rather than chronology. This scene has been carefully placed between the deception stories of the birthright and the blessing. God's obvious blessings to Isaac in this scene illustrate the protection and prosperity entailed in the inheritance of blessing." (Genesis Commentary)*

Waltke's point is that the narrator's intent was to highlight the significance of the covenant birthright and blessing by interjecting between them a context (chapter 26) that shows in broad terms just what the covenant granted to its possessor.

And so, after addressing Jacob's obtainment of the birthright, the narrative returns to Isaac and the early years of his marriage to Rebekah. It recounts three of the patriarch's experiences that are notable by being almost identical recurrences of ones Abraham had had. In this way as well, the text emphasizes that Isaac has assumed the place and role of his covenant father.

- 1) The first involves a famine that drove Isaac and Rebekah to Gerar in the land of the Philistines (26:1ff; cf. 20:1). There Isaac repeated his father's sin, claiming to the men of that region that Rebekah was his sister out of fear for his own life. After some time, God providentially arranged for Abimelech to discover the truth, and as he had done many years earlier, the king confronted the covenant patriarch with his offense (26:8-10).

Isaac's deed paralleled his father's, but so did its implication for the fulfillment of the covenant. When Isaac arrived in Gerar, God appeared to him and instructed him to remain there rather than go down to Egypt in search of food. (The day would soon come when the covenant seed would depart Canaan because of famine and sojourn in Egypt, but that time had not yet arrived.) Isaac was to remain in the land with the confidence that the Lord of the covenant was with him and would surely bless him as He had his father before him (26:2-5).

In the light of that assurance, his unbelief is astonishing: Like his father, Isaac had no reason to fear the men of Gerar, and his readiness to hand over Rebekah to another man showed willful disregard for the covenant and its fulfillment. But once again God intervened to preserve His covenant in the face of human unbelief and unfaithfulness.

By his action Isaac showed contempt for the covenant, but God upheld it nonetheless just as He had done with Abraham. The Lord who had passed alone between the halves of the sacrificial animals when the covenant was ratified continued to prove Himself faithful. He prospered Abraham during his time in Gerar (ref. 20:14-15) and exalted him as a mighty man in the sight of Abimelech and his subjects, and so it would be with Isaac.

Isaac's presence in the land of the Philistines was more settled than his father's, and God testified of His future plan for His covenant people in Canaan by causing the land to yield abundantly for Isaac during his sojourn there (26:12-14). Faced with famine, Isaac and Rebekah had headed south and west in search of food, intending to go as far as Egypt. But God instructed him not to leave Canaan, but to remain in the border region of Gerar with the promise that He would provide for him and bless him greatly. And so it was; by the Lord's hand of blessing Isaac reaped a hundredfold and increased greatly in flocks and herds. The covenant household would indeed endure, prosper, and possess the land – not because of them, but because of the Lord who remains ever faithful.

- 2) The second episode focuses on Beersheba, Abraham's first permanent foothold in the land. Abraham had dug the well at Beersheba – along with several others – during his own stay in the land of Gerar, and in the years following his death the residents of that area had filled them up. Later, when Abimelech sent Isaac out of the city of Gerar into the surrounding countryside, he reopened his father's wells and assigned to them the names Abraham had given them (26:15-18). By itself, this activity points to Isaac's status as the covenant successor to Abraham, but the narrative goes beyond that in making the point.

As he journeyed to Beersheba the Lord again appeared to Isaac and reaffirmed the covenant with him. This appearance is important in that it came at the end of a period of opposition in which Isaac was forced to abandon his own wells – his own foothold – in the region of Gerar. During that time it may well have seemed to him that God had forgotten or forsaken His promise to give him those lands (ref. again v. 4), and the Lord's appearance at Beersheba addressed that concern (26:23-25). That this theophany occurred at Beersheba is significant for at least two reasons. The first is that Beersheba was Abraham's first true possession in the land of Canaan. It constituted a germinal fulfillment of God's covenant promise, and so it was entirely appropriate that God would reiterate the promise to Isaac in that place. But Beersheba was also a foundational expression of sacred space. As Abraham's land grant at Beersheba promised the future possession of all of Canaan, so the shrine he built there looked to the day when the entire land would be God's sanctuary.

God's appearance to Isaac at Beersheba reinforced His promise regarding Canaan – both its possession and its holy status. Acknowledging this, Isaac built his own altar and called upon God's name, further expressing his faith by pitching his tent there and digging a second well (26:25).

- 3) Lastly, as he had done with the first covenant patriarch many years earlier, Abimelech came out to Isaac at Beersheba. Once again he came with Phicol, the commander of his army, but this time he also brought one of his advisors. The reason for his visit was exactly the same as it had been with Abraham, and the encounter led to essentially the same result.

Abimelech came to ask Isaac's favor for himself and his kingdom because he recognized that God was with him as He had been with his father; Isaac was now "*the blessed of the Lord*" (26:29). As such, Abimelech sought a covenant with Isaac that would perpetuate the one he had made with Abraham. And so, after feasting together, the king of Gerar exchanged oaths with the new covenant patriarch (vv. 30-31). Isaac had assumed his father's place as God's covenant son, and soon that title would pass to Jacob. The Lord had determined to be the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; the blessing would join the birthright, and the promise would stand.