

**Genesis Genesis 22:20-24; 24:1-9**  
**Abraham Instructs His Servant**

There are things about our faith that are difficult to understand. How is it that Jesus Christ was fully God and fully man during His incarnation? How is it that God is One yet the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God? How is it that God has chosen His elect from before time began, yet we are each responsible for our response to the gospel? Such things are beyond our finite human understanding, as they should be if God is truly God.

“For My thoughts are not your thoughts,  
Nor are your ways My ways,” declares the Lord” (Isaiah 55:8).

“A God understood is no God” (Gerhard Tersteegen, 1697-1769).

Another ununderstandable reality of our faith is that God works His will through us. Whether you have a passion for history, or simply like to watch things unfold around you, it is amazing to see how God orchestrates His perfect will by using such unremarkable people as ourselves. That is to say, we all know that God has a plan from eternity past, and we also know that He works out that plan through the actions of fallen, wicked people. How He does so, balancing his sovereign will with our freedom to choose is beyond our ability to explain. How He brings about His desired ends through our decisions is inscrutable to us.

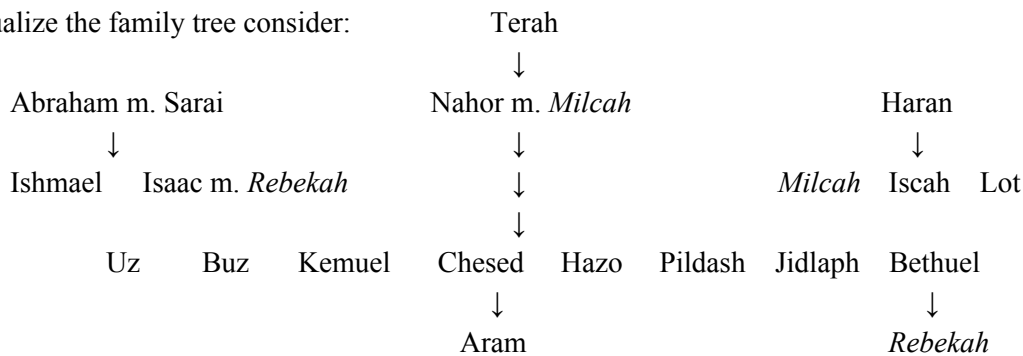
These two passages, which bookend the narrative regarding the death and burial of Sarah, are the beginnings of the epilogue of the entire Abrahamic narrative. Abraham had been called and he had gone. He had prospered, he had survived war, he had seen his son born and weaned. He had proved his faith to God in the most difficult of trials. Now that the promises of God were secured, it was time for the next chapter in the patriarchal narrative.

**Abraham’s Extended Family**

Before we enter into the study of that narrative, however, we must allow some other characters to assume their place on God’s stage. After Abraham, and Isaac had returned from their adventures in the mountains of Moriah, a visitor arrived with some news. Whether he was waiting for them when they arrived, or arrived after they had taken the time to reassure Sarah that all was well (as a husband, I can only imagine Abraham trying to explain to his wife how he had almost sacrificed their son), Scripture does not say. However, it does record that “<sup>20</sup>now it came about after these things, that it was told Abraham, saying, ‘behold, Milcah also has borne children to your brother Nahor: <sup>21</sup>Uz his firstborn and Buz his brother and Kemuel the father of Aram <sup>22</sup>and Chesed and Hazo and Pildash and Jidlaph and Bethuel.’ <sup>23</sup>Bethuel became the father of Rebekah; these eight Milcah bore to Nahor, Abraham’s brother. <sup>24</sup>His concubine, whose name was Reumah, also bore Tebah and Gaham and Tahash and Maacah” (v. 20-24). The source of Abraham’s information is not identified in Scripture. Perhaps Abraham had continued to keep in touch with his distant brother. Perhaps the source of the information was sent by Nahor after many years of silence imposed by the distance between the two branches of the family.

That the messenger stated that “Milcah also has borne children” might be a reference to Sarah having had Isaac, who had now grown to young adulthood. So this could be a messenger whom Abraham had sent to his brother informing him of the miraculous news. Now that messenger had returned with news of Nahor’s family, perhaps with the intent of forming a marriage alliance. Isaac, by now was old enough to be considered as a future marriage partner. But this is speculation, and we simply can not say with certainty. In any case, Abraham learned that his brother had been blessed by God with many sons, though interestingly, the messenger stopped his report with the birth of the eight sons born by Milcah. It is the narrator who offered the additional information about the birth of Rebekah and the sons born by the concubine Reumah.

To visualize the family tree consider:



Collectively, these descendants of Nahor came to be known as the Arameans, and were the source of the future maternal element of the chosen line (think Rebekah, Leah, Rachel). But one item that seems conspicuous was the close nature of the relationships within the family. Remembering that Abraham had married Sarai, who was his half-sister (Genesis 20:12), we can see here that Nahor had married his niece. The first of these relationships eventually were outlawed in the Levitical code.

“The nakedness of your sister, either your father’s daughter or your mother’s daughter, whether born at home or born outside, their nakedness you shall not uncover” (Leviticus 18:9).

““If there is a man who takes his sister, his father’s daughter or his mother’s daughter, so that he sees her nakedness and she sees his nakedness, it is a disgrace; and they shall be cut off in the sight of the sons of their people” (Leviticus 20:17).

Yet, we must understand that the Law had not been given at the time of Abraham, and the couple was not punished for their actions. The dispensations allowed in the early generations of the human race were extraordinary, and the genetic challenges posed by such close intermarriage were miraculously controlled by God so that humanity could flourish and continue to reproduce. So the marriage of Abraham and Sarah was both legitimate and blessed.

The relationship between Nahor and Milcah was less unusual. It was a rather typical practice of endogamy. While the marriage of a man with his aunt was prohibited (Leviticus 18:12), there was no prohibition of a man marrying his niece. Indeed, it seemed to have developed as a practice to ensure that family property remained intact, and it was common to many ancient cultures. In ancient Greece there was even a specific term for such a woman. She was called an *epikleros*. This practice was considered so

common that the Sadducees tried to confuse Jesus with a question related to the impact of the custom on the resurrection (Matthew 22:23-28). The point here, though, is that the marriage of Nahor and Milcah reunited two branches of Terah's family, and the marriage of Rebekah to Isaac would graft in the remaining Abrahamic line of the family.

### **Instructions to a Servant**

Celibacy, chosen as a lifestyle, was virtually unknown in the ancient world. Infant mortality was extremely high, estimates are that twenty-five to thirty percent of all children died within the first two years of life and another twenty percent or so before they reached adolescence. And not only were many children necessary to the survival of a family, but many men to serve in the army were necessary to the survival of the kingdom. To choose to remain celibate was simply considered to only foolish as it deprived the family of workers, but unpatriotic as it deprived the army of soldiers.

Specifically, in Hebrew culture, children were considered a gift from God and the inability to bear a child was a Hebrew woman's worst fear. For Abraham, this had been a truth very close to home as he and Sarah had waited for God to fulfill His promise of an heir. It was only natural, then, that Abraham thought carefully about securing a wife for Isaac so that the family line could be preserved.

Cultural mores aside, Abraham's immediate motivation was clear; he was getting old. "Now Abraham was old, advanced in age" (v. 1). But the description of Abraham at this time of his life included more than the fact that he was advancing in years. Scripture also reminds the reader that "the Lord had blessed Abraham in every way" (v. 1). Abraham had lived the last sixty or so years between the promises of Genesis 12 and the description of their fulfillment here in Genesis 24. The "I will bless" of the former had become "the Lord had blessed" that Abraham experienced now.

Age and wealth were frequently used in Scripture as a shorthand to indicate a mark of God's special blessing to one of His servants.

"Now it came about after many days, when the Lord had given rest to Israel from all their enemies on every side, and Joshua was old, advanced in years" (Joshua 23:1).

"Now King David was old, advanced in age; and they covered him with clothes" (1 Kings 1:1)

<sup>12</sup>The Lord blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning; and he had 14,000 sheep and 6,000 camels and 1,000 yoke of oxen and 1,000 female donkeys. <sup>17</sup>And Job died, an old man and full of days" (Job 42:12, 17).

But Abraham's blessing consisted of so much more than merely a long life and worldly goods. He had received the call of God. He had been chosen to be the source of God's blessing to all the nations of the world. Little as Abraham may have understood the eternal ramifications of that blessing, clearly the honor of being so chosen could not have been lost upon him. And yes, he had also been blessed with world prosperity. But there was so much more. He had been protected and given success in battle. His wife, barren for so long, had been allowed to conceive. And the child born to them had safely grown to

adulthood. All of these were blessings Abraham counted as he reflected on his one hundred thirty-seven years.

But the immediate need was clear. Since Abraham had accumulated much wealth during his sojourning in Canaan, this patrimony needed to be passed on to Isaac, who required a wife to continue the family line. Abraham was too old to undertake the journey himself, it seemed. Also, as we will see, he was unwilling to send Isaac to find his own bride, whether because of a lack of faith in Isaac's judgment, or because he wanted to keep Isaac close to home is not clear. Interestingly Isaac would have no scruples about sending his own son, Jacob, later when the time came for him to take a wife (Genesis 28:2).

In any case, “<sup>2</sup>Abraham said to his servant, the oldest of his household, who had charge of all that he owned, ‘please place your hand under my thigh, <sup>3</sup>and I will make you swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and the God of earth, that you shall not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I live, <sup>4</sup>but you will go to my country and to my relatives, and take a wife for my son Isaac’” (v. 2-4).

This was no simple task for a servant, even one with the responsibility for stewardship of “all that [Abraham] owned.” The name of the esteemed individual is not given, but we can assume it must have been one of the most trusted members of Abraham's household. The only other servant of Abraham mentioned by name is Eliezar of Damascus, the man whom Abraham had adopted as his heir when he believed himself to be childless (Genesis 15:2), and it could be that Eliezar is the man referred to here. The only other servants we know of are the two men who accompanied Abraham and Isaac to the mountains of Moriah, but they are described as “young men” so it seems unlikely that they would be entrusted with such a delicate and vital task (Genesis 22:3).

The Hebrew for ‘oldest’ is *zāqēn* which can mean ‘chief’ thus indicating that this was *the* most highly esteemed of Abraham's servants. This seems sensible since his responsibilities included managing Abraham's wealth and resources. The seemingly peculiar ritual of placing the hand under the thigh had references to Abraham's procreative power and referred to his role as head of the family. This symbolic act would be repeated by Jacob when he commanded Joseph to bury him in Canaan.

“<sup>29</sup>When the time for Israel to die drew near, he called his son Joseph and said to him, “Please, if I have found favor in your sight, place now your hand under my thigh and deal with me in kindness and faithfulness. Please do not bury me in Egypt, <sup>30</sup>but when I lie down with my fathers, you shall carry me out of Egypt and bury me in their burial place” (Genesis 47:29-30).

In both cases, the men ordering the swearing of the oath are too old to personally see to it that their wishes were fulfilled. And each man chose someone he trusted (either a faithful servant or a son) to carry out the required duty. The intimacy of the gesture ensured that the obligation was taken seriously.

Interestingly, there had been a time when Abraham had no qualms about his own wife being the consort of an Egyptian, or a Canaanite. And we must recall that Abraham, himself, had taken an Egyptian maid into his intimacy. Yet now this will not do for Isaac. Curiously, Abraham does not require his servant to select a wife for Isaac that believes in Yahweh. In fact, there seems to be no religious requirements at all

involved in the qualifications for Isaac's future wife. It could be that Abraham assumed that, as we will see, God would send his angel to prepare the way that God would reveal only a woman who possessed the same faith as that of the patriarch, but Scripture does not say so.

To go to Abraham's relatives meant the family of Nahor. As far as Scripture relates, there were no others in Haran ("my country") to whom the servant would be sent. And there was little reason for Abraham to think that the belief in Yahweh had spread back to his homeland. As it happened, the future family, that of Laban, was devotedly polytheistic, and was quite offended when their family gods were taken from him (Genesis 31:30).

This oath was understood to have been taken in the sight of God. The servant was made to "swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and the God of earth" (v.3) that he would discharge his duty. The language was reminiscent of Abraham's oath before Melchizedek when Abraham said, "I have sworn to the Lord God Most High, possessor of heaven and earth, that I will not take a thread or a sandal thong or anything that is yours" (Genesis 14:22-23). Abraham understood the distinctiveness of the God he served, and this is perhaps why no local woman who worshipped one of the Canaanite deities could be chosen as a wife for Isaac.

Abraham had come to understand that the Canaanites, and the gods they worshipped, were incompatible with his faith. Later, this truth would be codified into the Mosaic Law.

"<sup>1</sup>When the Lord your God brings you into the land where you are entering to possess it, and clears away many nations before you, the Hittites and the Girgashites and the Amorites and the Canaanites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites, seven nations greater and stronger than you, <sup>2</sup>and when the Lord your God delivers them before you and you defeat them, then you shall utterly destroy them. You shall make no covenant with them and show no favor to them. <sup>3</sup>Furthermore, you shall not intermarry with them; you shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor shall you take their daughters for your sons. <sup>4</sup>For they will turn your sons away from following Me to serve other gods; then the anger of the Lord will be kindled against you and He will quickly destroy you" (Deuteronomy 7:1-4).

The future history of the nation of Israel can sadly be written from the standpoint of the consequences of neglecting that command.

The servant understood the importance of his assignment. Wanting to do his job well, therefore, the servant tried to clarify his responsibilities. "The servant said to him, 'suppose the woman is not willing to follow me to this land; should I take your son back to the land from where you came?'" (v. 5). It would seem that the servant at least understood to some degree the fact that Abraham intended to dwell permanently in Canaan. Though a sojourner, Abraham had declared his intent to dwell there forever. How much the servant understood about the promises of God that this land would be Abraham's possession for generations is not stated, but it is reasonable to conclude that such a trusted servant could very well have been aware of Abraham's understanding with God. Thus the servant wondered what to do if the woman chosen for Isaac refused to move from her home in Haran to Canaan.

This servant was responsible for the running of Abraham's household, and like any good administrator, he wanted a plan for contingencies. Perhaps he even believed that Abraham, now himself so comfortable in Canaan, had not considered that his future daughter-in-law might not see the advantages of a move there. And would it not seem likely that the prospective in-laws might want to meet their future son-in-law before parting with their daughter to a distant land. His diligence in bringing up these potential conflicts only shows that Abraham made a wise decision in giving him this important commission.

Whether he had thought about this before or not, Abraham clearly recognized the dilemma. The woman in question would have to choose between her future husband and her own family. Abraham, too, had been asked to leave family, friends, and all that he knew for a foreign land. Certainly Abraham of all people could appreciate the reluctance of someone to abandon everything they had known for a life they knew nothing about.

Abraham had a ready answer. Faced with the potential choice between a wife for Isaac from his family in Haran or allowing Isaac to abandon Canaan, Abraham had no doubts as to his decision. "Abraham said to him, 'beware that you do not take my son back there!'" (v. 6). This was emphatic. The wording indicates that Abraham prioritized Isaac remaining in Canaan. Under no conditions should Isaac be allowed to return to Haran. Confidently, Abraham insisted that "the Lord, the God of heaven, who took me from my father's house and from the land of my birth, and who spoke to me and who swore to me, saying, 'to your descendants I will give this land,' He will send His angel before you, and you will take a wife for my son from there'" (v. 7).

Abraham clearly had reason to believe that God would provide a wife for Isaac from his family in Haran. How Abraham knew this Scripture does not say. Perhaps God had again appeared to Abraham and told him so. Perhaps, Abraham simply believed that God would provide for Isaac as He had done in the mountains of Moriah. But whatever Abraham believed about the provision of the wife, he also understood the logistical issues involved in the move to Canaan. Therefore, he concluded with some reservation, "if the woman is not willing to follow you, then you will be free from this my oath; only do not take my son back there" (v. 8). Coercion was not to be used if the invitation was declined. The getting of the bride was secondary to Isaac remaining in Canaan.

The servant was satisfied. He had his instructions. Therefore, "the servant placed his hand under the thigh of Abraham his master, and swore to him concerning this matter" (v. 9). The charge given, the Lord must now be trusted to arrange a wife for Isaac. The servant was to do his duty and trust that God would provide.

### **Takeaways**

Throughout this narrative we can appreciate God working out His perfect will through the lives and decisions of men and women. Whether through the loyal servant or, as we will see in the future, the ambitious Laban and independent Rebekah, God is still sovereign.

And through the narrative we see that it is God Who provides. God provided the lamb, and God would provide the wife. All that Abraham ever enjoyed was a gift from God. And so is all that we enjoy.