

Genesis 25:1-18 The Death of Abraham

Abraham had lived quite a life. Called from Haran when he was already seventy-five, for one hundred years he had journeyed with God. Sometimes they had walked side by side. At other times Abraham had strayed off on his own. But through it all God had proved faithful.

Abraham had been blessed (*bārak*). This had been the central theme of his life. And this promise had been foremost as his journey with God had begun.

“¹Go forth from your country,
And from your relatives
And from your father’s house,
To the land which I will show you;
²And I will make you a great nation,
And I will bless you,
And make your name great;
And so you shall be a blessing;
³And I will bless those who bless you,
And the one who curses you I will curse.
And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed” (Genesis 12:1-3).

Furthermore, this blessing was confirmed to Isaac, alone among the offspring of Abraham. “It came about after the death of Abraham, that God blessed his son Isaac; and Isaac lived by Beer-lahai-roi” (Genesis 25:11). But in this passage today, we mark the death of Abraham, and it seems worthwhile as we study it to reflect on the life of the great patriarch and to remember the lessons he learned as he walked with God.

A New Family

At some point near the end of his life, “Abraham took another wife, whose name was Keturah” (v. 1). This is the only passage in Scripture in which she is mentioned, and there is some potential confusion in the description the Bible gives of her. At first, she is described as Abraham’s wife, but later in this same passage, Keturah is referred to as one of Abraham’s many concubines (v. 6). Thus her position is uncertain in terms of modern language.

At the time, however, it may have been less so. For example, Bilhah was referred to as Jacob’s concubine (Genesis 35:22) and also as his wife (Genesis 30:4). If Keturah was Abraham’s wife, it might be thought that Abraham married her after the death of Sarah. If she was merely his concubine, it is more likely that Sarah was still alive when Abraham began his relationship with her. Since Scripture is unclear on the matter, we are left with no clear answer. We can see though that, unfortunately, having many wives and concubines was becoming more common among the Israelites. God’s original plan of one man and one woman united in marriage had not endured unchanged. So common had it become, in fact, that it was not looked upon as unusual, or inappropriate.

The union between Abraham, aged though he was, and Keturah proved fruitful as “²she bore to him Zimran and Jokshan and Medan and Midian and Ishbak and Shuah. ³Jokshan became the father of Sheba and Dedan. And the sons of Dedan were Asshurim and Letushim and Leummim. ⁴The sons of Midian were Ephah and Epher and Hanoch and Abida and Eldaah. All these were the sons of Keturah” (v. 2-4.)

The six sons born to Abraham by Keturah marks the first time Abraham had been blessed with more than one child by a wife or concubine. We cannot know why fertility, so valued in this society, was sparingly given by God to Hagar and Sarah, but more generously given to the relatively unknown Keturah. God had His reasons, and we must be satisfied with that. But we must note that the inclusion of Keturah’s children does not diminish the extraordinary nature of Isaac’s birth. Instead, it may be better to look at this second family as another fulfilment of God’s covenant with Abraham,

“³Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him, saying,

⁴As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you,
And you will be the father of a multitude of nations.

⁵No longer shall your name be called Abram,
But your name shall be Abraham;

For I have made you the father of a multitude of nations.

⁶I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of you, and kings will come forth from you” (Genesis 17:3-6).

The names of Keturah’s children are shrouded in obscurity. Zimran may have been the ancestor of an Arabian tribe located near the Red Sea. Medan and Ishbak are unknown, though they are generally thought to be associated with Arabia. Jokshan is likewise associated with Arabia, largely based on the fact that his sons, Sheba, and Dedan, are located there. By the way, this Jokshan is not related to the Joktan of the Table of Nations (Genesis 10:25-29), though he, too, found a home in the Arabian peninsula. Also, this Sheba and Dedan mentioned here are not to be confused with the Hamitic descendants of Raamah (Genesis 10:7). This similarity of names can best be explained ethnogeographically by remembering that over the centuries people migrated and intermarried and thus tribal identities became muddled.

The land of Shuah was the home of Bildad, one of Job friends (Job 2:11). Midian is the best known of the brothers, and is traditionally associated with northwest Arabia, just east of the Gulf of Aqaba. It was the place to which Moses fled when he left Egypt (Exodus 2:15). The Midianites also advanced into Moab and Edom (Genesis 36, Numbers 22) and later even into Palestine (Judges 6-8). Over time and no doubt through intermarriage, the Ishmaelites and Midianites became assimilated together so that their names were interchangeable (Genesis 37:25-28, 36).

This genealogy says nothing of the children of Zimran, should he have had any. Instead it is recorded that the second son, Jokshan had two sons, Sheba and Dedan. Again descendants of the first born, Sheba, are omitted and the genealogy moves to Dedan, the younger brother. The three children of Dedan, Asshurim and Letushim and Leummim, are impossible to identify however, but we may assume that they, too, are Arabian in location. The third son, Medan, is not given any heirs, and of the five sons of Midian, Epher, Hanoch, Abida, and Eldaah are difficult to identify with precision, though Ephah is mentioned along with

Midian in Isaiah 60:6 as trading in spices and gold. The best guess is that each of these was also a tribe associated with the Arabian peninsula. Finally, the last son, Shuah, is not mentioned as having any heirs, though again, this does not necessarily mean that his marriage was unfruitful, but simply that Scripture chose not to include them.

With such plentiful offspring, it might have been assumed that Abraham would have needed to divide his wealth to ensure all his children were provided for. But that was not the case. “⁵Now Abraham gave all that he had to Isaac; ⁶but to the sons of his concubines, Abraham gave gifts while he was still living, and sent them away from his son Isaac eastward, to the land of the east” (v. 5-6).

According to later Mosaic practice, the firstborn son was to inherit a double share of the family estate (Deuteronomy 21:15-17). Abraham, naturally, was not under this Law, and instead did Isaac much better. He gave him “all that he had” and simply provided gifts and provisions to his other children. Also, we should note that though Abraham gave gifts to the sons of his concubine, their removal to the east (Arabia) demonstrated Abraham’s desire to eliminate any potential rivals to Isaac and the true line of blessing. We have seen this pattern of behavior before, in the sending away of Hagar and Ishamel (Genesis 21:14).

The Descendants of Ishmael

We move ahead now to the descendants of Ishmael. This genealogy, like the others we have already seen in Scripture, should be viewed as an example of God’s faithfulness in fulfilling His promises. Also, as we have seen, the rejected line is given before the chosen line in Scripture. The descendants of Isaac will be discussed in a later passage. For example, we can recall the genealogy of Cain was given before that of Seth and that of Japeth and Ham before Shem. Even the linguistic formula is similar, “now these are the records of the generations of Ishmael, Abraham’s son, whom Hagar the Egyptian, Sarah’s maid, bore to Abraham” (v. 12). This *tōlēdōt* formula was the key structural device for such genealogies.

Notice that Ishmael is described as both the son of Abraham and the son of Hagar. This clearly indicates that while he was related to the patriarch, he was not of the chosen line. This important fact was further emphasized by reminding us that Hagar was an Egyptian, a nation that would prove quite hostile to the chosen line. We are also reminded that Hagar was a slave, one with an inferior status in the household. Yet, despite all this, God had promised Hagar that her descendants would flourish as well. “Moreover, the angel of the Lord said to her [Hagar], ‘I will greatly multiply your descendants so that they will be too many to count’” (Genesis 16:10). Thus Ishmael, too, was a recipient of the blessing God gave to Abraham, and that blessing manifested itself in a long life and flourishing offspring. God was faithful.

The descendants of Ishmael are given in the usual straightforward manner. “¹³These are the names of the sons of Ishmael, by their names, in the order of their birth: Nebaioth, the firstborn of Ishmael, and Kedar and Adbeel and Mibsam ¹⁴and Mishma and Dumah and Massa, ¹⁵Hadad and Tema, Jetur, Naphish and Kedemah” (v. 13-15). The listing of names gives twelve sons. No mention is made here of the daughters born to Ishmael (Mahalath and Basemath) who eventually married Esau (Genesis 28:9). This marriage united the two rejected family lines in the patriarchal narrative.

Instead, attention is drawn to the sons, who generally lived in the northwestern area of Arabia. The firstborn was Nabaioth, who Arabic texts associated with the settlements near Ha'il in northern Arabia. Kedar, whose name in the Hebrew means "dark or black" (Song of Solomon 1:5), lived in the Negev and spread out as far as the eastern delta of the Nile. Adbeel and Mibsam are more difficult to identify geographically.

Most of the information we have about the other sons is found in secular texts, mainly those of the Assyrians, with whom these Arabian tribes often warred. Some scholars have placed Mishma at an oasis near the lands of his brother Tema in Arabia where caravan routes converged. Dumah is related to the oasis at Dumat al-Ghandal in the same area. Massa is associated with the Massean tribe of Arabia. Hadad appears as the father of Edomite kings (Genesis 36:35-39). Jetur was a region in the Transjordan when it was conquered by the Israelites (1 Chronicles 5:18-19). Naphish appears in the same text. Kedemah simply means "to the east" so we might surmise that of these brothers who settled in the region of northern Arabia, this family settled to the easternmost.

These sons are further described. "These are the sons of Ishmael and these are their names, by their villages, and by their camps; twelve princes according to their tribes (v. 16). This language implies the transitory nature of the peoples. Being herdsmen, they were migratory. The word for 'camps' can also mean tents, thus giving further evidence to the mobile character of these people. That they needed to be migratory was due not only to the way they earned their livelihood, but also to the fact that these people groups were significant in size. The term used for 'tribes' implies a group of significance and is only used with reference to non-Israelite peoples. It is important to notice also, that this description was also an indication of God's promises being fulfilled. God had said, "as for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I will bless him, and will make him fruitful and will multiply him exceedingly. He shall become the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation" (Genesis 17:20). And thus it came to pass.

Ishmael's death is recorded with the same brevity as that of his father. "These are the years of the life of Ishmael, one hundred and thirty-seven years; and he breathed his last and died, and was gathered to his people (v. 17). Of his descendants "they settled from Havilah to Shur which is east of Egypt as one goes toward Assyria; he settled in defiance of all his relatives" (v. 18). From there they spread out, as we have seen, throughout northwest Arabia. Havilah is not known with precision, but Shur is likely at the western stretches of the Negev as one nears the Nile delta.

The Death of the Patriarch

But we must return to the account of the death of Abraham, as that is the key narrative in this passage. His passing is marked without ostentation in Scripture. "These are all the years of Abraham's life that he lived, one hundred and seventy-five years. ⁸Abraham breathed his last and died in a ripe old age, an old man and satisfied with life; and he was gathered to his people. ⁹Then his sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron the son of Zohar the Hittite, facing Mamre, ¹⁰the field which Abraham purchased from the sons of Heth; there Abraham was buried with Sarah his wife" (v. 7-10).

This brief obituary is divided into three parts - Abraham's age at the time of his death, the fact that God had blessed him, and his burial. Abraham had lived a long life, even by patriarchal standards. He had resided in Canaan for a century. That "he breathed his last" was a typical format for describing someone's death. That "he was gathered to his people" was another phrase used in the Old Testament on ten occasions, each in the Pentateuch, to describe the fact that the deceased joined his ancestors in the realm of the dead.

A reminder of the chronology might be helpful. Abraham had come into Canaan when he was about seventy-five years old. At eighty-six he fathered Ishmael (Genesis 16:16) and at one hundred he fathered Isaac (Genesis 21:5). Thus Abraham was one hundred forty when Isaac was married (Genesis 25:20). When the twins Esau and Jacob were born some twenty years later, Abraham was one hundred sixty (Genesis 25:26). At Abraham's death his son Ishmael was eighty-nine and Isaac was seventy-five.

The description of the burial includes the fact that both Ishmael and Isaac were involved. Since this is the only place in Scripture where the two men are mentioned together, we can assume that the relationship between the two was not intimate. Later we will see that the estranged brothers Jacob and Esau also put aside their differences to jointly bury their father (Genesis 35:29). Still, it can also be inferred that both sons loved Abraham and were able to put aside whatever feelings they may have had in the interests of honoring their father upon his death. That Abraham was buried in the cave of Machpelah beside Sarah is a touching reminder of the only land that Abraham ever truly owned in Canaan.

But it is one thing to live a long life, and another to be happy in it. Scripture says that Abraham was "satisfied with life" (v. 8). He died full of peace. He died contented. One hundred years of walking with God will produce that.

After Abraham was buried, the two sons departed. "It came about after the death of Abraham, that God blessed his son Isaac; and Isaac lived by Beer-lahai-roi" (v.11). This theme of blessing had been integral to the entire Abrahamic narrative. It is also pointed to the fact that the blessings Abraham received, and those of Isaac as well, were gifts from God. The blessings of Abraham's life were not matters of Abraham's own personal good decision making nor of simple good fortune. In fact, as we have seen, Abraham often made very poor decisions, and experienced the natural disasters of a fallen world such as famine. That he was blessed was the act of God alone. And that blessing would continue as the eternal promise that it was.

Takeaways - Life Lessons

But as we look at our last upon Abraham, let us survey his life and remember the signposts of his journey with God. We must begin with the call. In the prime of life, Abraham was told by God to make an extraordinary step of faith. He was commanded to give up all that he had known, all that he had relied on, and to travel to an unknown destination. Not all of us are likely to receive such a command from God, but we must acknowledge that each of us is commanded by God to do something.

Very quickly, though, Abraham strayed. He feared for his life in the new land, and famine drove him to Egypt. But it was less the famine than the lack of faith that got Abraham into trouble, as he lied about his

relationship with his wife. From this we can learn that the walk of faith is a difficult one, and one in which even the best of us are bound to fail. We are sinners by nature, and while our sin nature does not have ultimate power over us, it is powerful enough indeed, and we ought never to let our guard down.

Thankfully, Abraham repented and returned to his God. And God had allowed him to prosper despite himself. So much so, that the land could no longer sustain the flocks and herds of both Abraham and his nephew, Lot. But Abraham trusted that God would provide for him. He trusted God's promises for land and offspring. So much so that he acted generously toward Lot when they could no longer remain together. So we too ought to trust our future to God, rather than our worldly possessions.

As Abraham increased in wealth and status, so too did his responsibilities. When invading armies put down a local rebellion and carried away his nephew, among others, it was Abraham who was called upon to lead the rescue. Again Abraham saw God's protection, as his campaign was successful. And when returning, Abraham encountered the priest Melchizedek, he acknowledged that it was God Who had preserved him. Likewise let us always remember that it is God Who protects us and preserves us.

God then made a covenant with Abraham. And Scripture makes it abundantly clear that Abraham was counted righteous or, in the language of the New Testament, Abraham was "saved" because of his faith. To be sure, Abraham demonstrated that his faith was genuine by the works he would do, but his salvation was exclusively the work of God in graciously considering Abraham's *belief* as saving faith. So it is with us. Hopefully we are working out our salvation, but we are saved by God's gracious and sovereign choice as He gives us faith to respond to Him.

Sadly, all did not go smoothly. Abraham and Sarah decided to try to impose their timetable on God's will. Hagar entered the narrative and through her relationship with Abraham, Ishmael was born. Though Abraham and Sarah might have believed that this was the fulfillment of God's covenant promises, it was not God's will, and the results of Abraham's decision were long lasting. Ismael's descendants would be enemies and threats to Sarai's own children throughout their history. In fact, the beginnings of Hebrew slavery in Egypt are rooted in the descendants of Abraham and Hagar's child. God has a perfect plan and a perfect timetable for that plan. It is foolish for us to try to intervene and accomplish what we think is God's will in our own flesh.

Then God came to visit Abraham. He dined with him and told him of His plans for the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Thinking of his nephew, Abraham negotiated with God. Yet in fact, what is on display here was not the power of Abraham's negotiating ability, but the mercy and justice of a holy and righteous God. So we must pray fervently, and present our requests before God, by let us rely not on our own powers of persuasion, but upon His grace and love to accomplish what He will.

And even after this holy encounter, Abraham failed again. Again he feared God would not protect him and again he told another many that Sarah was his sister. We can marvel at the hopelessness of Abraham at times. But we can also reflect on our own failing and find them not too far removed from his. And through it all we can see that God protects His own. Even from themselves.

Finally the promised child was born. Isaac, not Ishmael, was the one whom God has chosen. The birth of Isaac is a wonderful demonstration of the faithfulness of God. In His own perfect time, God brought about what He had promised. But with the birth of Isaac, the tension in the family between Sarah and Hagar increased. So much so that Hagar and her son were sent away. But God had a promise for them as well, and the parting between Abraham and the mother of his firstborn was bittersweet. Abraham had confidence that God would be faithful to His promises.

And Abraham continued to prosper. His reputation among the peoples with whom he lived increased. So much so, that a king sought an alliance with him. Abraham was seen as a man whom God favored. There could be no higher compliment. And then this relationship with God was put to its greatest test. God again called Abraham to go to a distant place, this time not to live, but instead to offer his son as a sacrifice. And again Abraham unquestioningly obeyed. Abraham did not hold back from God what was most precious to him. Abraham was no compartmental believer. He did not reserve for himself parts of his life that were his alone. And God honored Abraham's faith, spared Isaac, and provided the sacrifice Himself.

As he neared the end of his days, Abraham sought to find a wife for his son, that the family line and God's blessings might continue for future generations. Again throughout that narrative we see God's sovereign will unfolding through the actions of Abraham's servant, Laban, Rebekah, and others. God was sovereign, and God provided. And now, content and satisfied with God at the end of many years, "Abraham breathed his last and died in a ripe old age, an old man and satisfied with life; and he was gathered to his people" (v. 8).

It was a remarkable life, and one filled with lessons for us all. May God give us attention to it and direct us to apply its truths to our lives, that we also might walk with God as Abraham did.