

Genesis 21:22-34 **The Treaty with Abimelech**

Scripture informs us that about 2100 years before Jesus was born, God appeared to a Semitic man who lived in Mesopotamia. His family, and likely the man himself it would seem, worshipped the moon god Sin. Nevertheless, God chose to reveal Himself to this man and give him the following command:

“Go forth from your country,
And from your relatives
And from your father’s house
To the land which I will show you” (Genesis 12:1).

In return, God promised the man, Abram, land and blessings. So, along with his wife, Sarai, his nephew, Lot, and his flocks and possessions, Abram journeyed forth along a common trade route in what today we call the Fertile Crescent until he came to rest in the land that came to be known as Canaan. This land was already inhabited by others, so Abram wandered about within its boundaries, first stopping at a place later called Shechem, then moving along to near what is today Bethel, and finally settling down in a desert region called the Negev, far to the south.

That this was the land God had promised had been made clear, however soon there was famine in the land. So Abram took it upon himself to travel to the usually fertile and well-watered lands of Egypt. Fearing for his own safety, however, he lied to the Pharaoh about his wife, claiming she was his sister. The ruse worked, in a sense, as Sarai was taken by the Pharaoh into his residence. But God preserved Sarai’s chastity, and revealed to Pharaoh her true identity. Angry though he was at Abram’s deception, Pharaoh knew better than to abuse one whom this powerful God so dearly protected. So Pharaoh gave Abram flocks and servants as a demonstration of his integrity and, with a guard to make certain he left, Abram was escorted with his many possessions back to the land of Canaan.

The consequences of Abram’s deception, while financially profitable in the short-term, eventually led to long-term problems. So wealthy had Abram become, that he and his nephew Lot, who it seems had also profited from the journey to Egypt, had difficulty sharing the natural resources of the land. Being herdsmen, the water supply was simply not sufficient to sustain their many flocks and herds. Needing to separate, Abram generously offered Lot the opportunity to choose where he would establish himself, reserving to himself what Lot refused. Lot chose the well-watered lands of the Jordan River valley and moved off. Abram returned to Canaan.

The place Lot chose was indeed fertile, but it was also under the rule of foreign kings. When the local leaders rebelled, an invasion force of those offended overlords arrived and put down the rebellion, destroying villages and taking Lot and his family as captives in the process. Upon hearing the news, Abram marshalled his not inconsiderable forces, called in favors from allies, and set off to rescue his nephew. Abram’s men encountered the army of the kings and defeated them in battle. Victorious, Abram freed Lot and, on his return, encountered the priest-king of Salem, Melchizedek. Abram offered him a tenth of all he had and received his blessing in return.

God then again appeared to Abram, reminding him of His protection and Abram's future reward. Such promises though, seemed vain to a man without an heir to whom to pass them along. Abram had adopted Eliezer of Damascus since he had no children of his own. Common as this was at the time, it was not part of God's sovereign plan. Therefore, God promised Abram a child from his own body, and He and Abram entered into a covenant. However, when time went by without the appearance of the promised child, Abram and Sarai determined to use her maid as a surrogate. While such action was in keeping with customs and law, this too was not God's plan, and the child born from the relationship, Ishmael, proved a source of trouble for the family and the future nation.

At the age of ninety-nine, a full twenty-four years after His original appearance, God again appeared to Abram and told him that the promised child would soon be born. He introduced Abram to the rite of circumcision as a sign of their covenant, and God changed his name to Abraham. In fact, God told Abraham that within a year the promised child would be born. But in the meantime, God had determined to destroy the cities where Lot had settled. Their sin was great and could no longer be tolerated. Emboldened by his relationship with God, Abraham negotiated for the preservation of those righteous within the city, assuming Lot would be among them. God agreed, and spared Lot and his family (the wife excepted).

As Abraham continued to wander throughout the region, he again panicked when confronted with the possibility that he might be killed so a local ruler could take Sarah for himself. Doubting God's protection, despite His faithfulness in the past, Abraham and Sarah agreed to tell a local ruler, the king of Gerar, that she was his sister. Once again God preserved her chastity despite their foolishness. Upon the resolution of that circumstance, Sarah at last became pregnant, and the promised child, Isaac, was born. Abraham performed the rite of circumcision upon his son, entering him also into the covenant with God.

The boy grew and flourished, however, the tensions within the family were renewed. Hagar, the maidservant, and her son Ishmael, had remained with Abraham and Sarah. Soon the family dynamic became ungovernable and Hagar and Ishmael fled. But he, too, was a part of God's plan, and God did not abandon him. He lived in the wilderness of Paran, where he would become a great nation. So Abraham stayed in Canaan, living in the lands given him by Abimelech, king of Gerar.

Abimelech Requests a Treaty

And here we resume the narrative. The author begins, "now it came about at that time, that Abimelech and Phicol, the commander of his army, spoke to Abraham saying, 'God is with you in all that you do'" (v. 22). Though the phrasing is unspecific, it is likely that the pagan king and his leading military man came to Abraham about three or four years after their previously recorded meeting in which Abraham and Sarah had deceived Abimelech. Thus "at that time" is after the celebration of Isaac being weaned and the departure of Hagar and Ishmael. Though the parting between Abraham and Abimelech had originally been marked by apparent generosity on Abimelech's part, "behold my land is before you; settle wherever you please" (Genesis 20:15), the king could not have but resented the deception that had nearly cost him so much.

Abimelech was accompanied by his chief military leader. Curiously, the name Phicol, like that of Abimelech, may be either a family name or even a title. His presence at the meeting clearly indicated that Abimelech wanted to impress upon Abraham the seriousness of his proposal, and perhaps suggested the threat of hostilities if the proposal for a treaty was rejected. It also was likely a compliment to the station that Abraham had achieved while living among the people of Gerar. Abraham was no one to be trifled with.

That Abimelech acknowledged that God was with Abraham was certainly a reflection of both the dream Abimelech had previously received, “now therefore restore the man’s wife, for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you, and you will live” (Genesis 20:7) and the resulting prayer that healed the women of his household, “Abraham prayed to God; and God healed Abimelech and his wife and maids, so that they bore children” (Genesis 20:17). But it was also, no doubt a testimony to having seen Abraham prosper during his time among his people.

We can pause here to acknowledge that there is much to be said regarding the reputation of a believer among unbelievers. We must never forget that the world is always watching us. They may mock us, or consider us irrelevant, but nevertheless they are watching, sadly some even hoping that we will fall short of the standards to which we make claim. We should not live in fear of man, nor should we strive to please man rather than God, but we ought not to underestimate the power of a good reputation, even among those who are not believers.

Because we live and work in the world, and because none of us can be perfect, the world will see us sin. The point is not that we must be perfect, but that we must live lives that reflect what we say we believe. For example, one might think that the reputation Abraham enjoyed meant that he had acted without reproach with regards to Abimelech, but we know that to be untrue. So did Abimelech. That is why he said, “now therefore swear to me here by God that you will not deal falsely with me, or with my offspring, or with my posterity; but according to the kindness that I have shown to you, you will show to me, and to the land in which you have sojourned” (v. 23).

Clearly Abimelech did not think Abraham could be trusted. Whether Abimelech was growing older and thinking about the future of his kingdom after his death, and wondering if this sojourner might take advantage of his heirs, is not clear but certainly possible. Abraham had been deceptive before, therefore Abimelech charged Abraham to treat him as he had been treated. Abimelech had been above reproach. Abimelech had acted without malice aforethought. Abimelech had made reparations to Abraham though he had done no intentional wrong. All of this was now to be required of Abraham.

Abraham agreed. “I swear it” (v. 24) he responded. Scripture does not state that Abraham required any time to think or pray about the offer of a treaty. There is no sense that he brought the matter before God. Perhaps the mere presence of Abimelech’s military commander compelled Abraham to make the treaty. Or it may be that Abraham recognized that what Abimelech was asking was fair and reasonable. After all, Abraham had prospered in Gerar. He had no reason to be duplicitous against the king or his people a second time.

Abraham Registers a Complaint

Having agreed, in principle, to a treaty of reciprocity with Abimelech, Abraham immediately tested it. “Abraham complained to Abimelech because of the well of water which the servants of Abimelech had seized” (v. 25). Water was a precious resource, and wells were the lifeblood of herdsmen such as Abraham. It was equally valuable to the agriculturalists of the region. Friction between pastoralists, such as Abraham, and agriculturalists, such as those who fed the people of Gerar, were a constant. Apparently, Abraham believed the well in question was indisputably his.

But he had not mentioned this before. Clearly the servants of Abimelech had not just now seized the well. They must have done so some time previously. Yet Abraham had remained quiet. Was he afraid of approaching Abimelech? Perhaps they had not met in the intervening three years and Abraham was not certain if Abimelech would welcome his presence. Was he taking opportunity of the newly formed treaty between the two to offer a test case of Abimelech’s sincerity? Likely both. Abraham had tolerated the taking of the well for some time, but now had the chance to regain this most valuable possession.

Abimelech responded, “I did not know who has done this thing; neither did you tell me, nor did I hear of it until today” (v. 26). Abimelech must have been surprised that, immediately upon arranging a treaty with Abraham, Abraham challenged him to keep it. His wording was reminiscent of his prior frustration with Abraham over the revelation that Sarah was his wife and not his sister as he had been told. Abimelech wanted to make clear that he had not intentionally done Abraham any harm. Whatever misunderstanding there was over the well, it was not due to intentional aggressive actions on the part of the king of Gerar.

Resolution

Foreshadowing the strategies of modern negotiators, the two men set aside the immediate issue upon which there was division and focused on the topic to which they could agree. Thus the two men continued with the process of treaty making. “Abraham took sheep and oxen, and gave them to Abimelech; and the two of them made a covenant” (v. 27).

These animals were probably killed by the two men, or perhaps by their servants. We can recall the covenant God made with Abraham (Genesis 15:10). The killing of animals was very common in the making of bilateral covenants in the ancient world. Such an act not only emphasized the tangible investment in the covenant, but also sufficed as a “may God do so to me if I do not keep the covenant we are making” statement. No specific details are given as to the treaty, perhaps it was no more than what Abimelech had simply stated, namely that they would treat each other honestly and with respect.

But with the treaty ratified, Abraham promptly returned to the issue of the well. ²⁸Abraham set seven ewe lambs of the flock by themselves. ²⁹And Abimelech said to Abraham, ‘what do these seven ewe lambs mean, which you have set by themselves?’ ³⁰And he said, you shall take these seven ewe lambs from my hand in order that it may be a witness to me, that I dug this well” (v. 28-30).

Abraham argued that he, probably his servants, had dug the well. Also, it was true that Abimelech had invited him to live in the region, and such an offer must have included certain rights to whatever water he

could find. But the giving of the seven ewe lambs was significant. The ewe lamb was necessary to propagate the herd. Parting with them was an act of generosity on Abraham's part. He was offering something significant, as a clear testimony to the importance of the well for his livelihood.

But this was not an act of bribery. Abraham simply had no intention of allowing a single well, both parties needed dozens in the arid region in which they lived, to cause division between them. Abraham was wealthy. He had been blessed by God. Therefore he took the first step in reconciling their differences. He was not bribing Abimelech, but rather offering a gift to compensate Abimelech for the well in question.

That Abimelech asked Abraham about the seven lambs ought not to surprise us. After all, Abraham had not always been transparent in his dealings with Abimelech. And by accepting the lambs, Abimelech was also accepting Abraham's version of the events, so it was important to be clear on what the lambs represented. That is, Abimelech was agreeing that it was the servants of Abraham who had dug the well. The well did, in fact, belong to Abraham, and the servants of Abimelech had acted wrongly in taking it.

There is no indication that these animals were sacrificed. Rather, they served as a witness to the transaction. Such tangible objects were often used as a testimony.

“²⁵When you become the father of children and children's children and have remained long in the land, and act corruptly, and make an idol in the form of anything, and do that which is evil in the sight of the Lord your God so as to provoke Him to anger, ²⁶I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that you will surely perish quickly from the land where you are going over the Jordan to possess it. You shall not live long on it, but will be utterly destroyed” (Deuteronomy 4:25-26).

“Joshua said to all the people, ‘behold, this stone shall be for a witness against us, for it has heard all the words of the Lord which He spoke to us; thus it shall be for a witness against you, so that you do not deny your God’” (Joshua 24:27).

Thus the treaty was ratified and the issue of the ownership of the well was resolved. To commemorate the occasion, Abraham “called that place Beersheba; because there the two of them took an oath” (v. 31). Naming the place was another a device used to retain the memory of what occurred. The name Beersheba can be translated either “well of oath” or “well of seven” either of which served to accurately represent the events that had taken place there. The well was in the southern part of the Negev, and eventually came to represent the southern boundary of Israel. The phrase “from Dan to Beersheba” became a commonplace among the people of Israel in describing the boundaries of their lands (Judges 20:1; 1 Kings 4:27). Eventually the settlement established there became home not only to Abraham, but to Isaac (Genesis 26:13) and Jacob (Genesis 46:1, 5) as well.

After “they made a covenant at Beersheba . . . Abimelech and Philcol, the commander of his army arose and returned to the land of the Philistines” (v. 32). The phrasing indicates that the men had agreed that Beersheba was not within the boundaries controlled by the king of Gerar.

Worship

When Abraham first arrived in Canaan, he “⁶passed through the land as far as the site of Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. Now the Canaanite was then in the land. ⁷The Lord appeared to Abram and said, ‘to your descendants I will give this land.’ So he built an altar there to the Lord who had appeared to him” (Genesis 12:6-7). Later, “Abram moved his tent and came and dwelt by the oaks of Mamre, which are in Hebron, and there he built an altar to the Lord” (Genesis 13:18).

Now that he had time to reflect on his new relationship with the king of Gerar, “³³Abraham planted a tamarisk tree at Beersheba, and there he called on the name of the Lord, the Everlasting God. ³⁴And Abraham sojourned in the land of the Philistine for many days” (v. 33-34).

The tree he planted was the tamarisk, an evergreen tree with many branches that produced small leaves. Often growing to thirty feet in height, it eventually provided much needed shade. Trees were often associated with symbolic religious significance, as they represented not only fertility, but specifically rebirth. The tabernacle (Exodus 37:17-24) and the temple (1 Kings 6:18) both contained representations of flora that symbolized God as the giver of life.

Abraham was clearly a man of worship. He often fell on his face before his God. In this specific case, he referred to God as *Ēl Ōlām*. Some have argued that the use of *ēl*, a common Canaanite term for deity, means that Abraham simply appropriated a local deity for his own purposes. That seems very unlikely considering the history that had passed between Abraham and his God. From the first call some thirty years ago, God had preserved Abraham through more adventures than we can recall. God had always been faithful to Abraham and had protected him both from his own foolishness and from the outside world. God had talked with Abraham, made a covenant with him, and made Abraham a great man among the peoples with whom he shared the land. A better understanding of the name is that it means “Eternal One” and reflects Abraham’s understanding that God is not only eternal, but also that His will for men and nations is eternal as well.

Such an understanding would serve Abraham well as Isaac grew and God planned to further test the faith of the patriarch.

Takeaways

First, again let us appreciate the power of a good reputation. Our reputation is not the gospel, and no one will come to Christ simply because we live out our faith, but we can do a great deal of harm by not being the kind of people about whom others will say, “God is with you.”

Second, let us remember to be people of worship. Abraham had his faults to be sure, and Scripture is not shy about revealing them, but it is also clear that Abraham was a man who was devoted to the worship of his God. We, too, ought to be people of worship. We may not plant trees to commemorate our significant moments, but certainly we can rely upon the Holy Spirit to help us bring to mind those times when God revealed His faithfulness to us.