

Exegetical Notes – Genesis 26:1-15

“Isaac and Abimelek - Part 1”

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(Genesis answers three basic theological questions. The first question is, “Whose world is it anyway?” The text answers the question by affirming that it is God’s world by right of creation. It is God’s world because God made it. The second question Genesis asks is “How do we get along in God’s world God’s way?” The answer is by trusting God and obeying Him. Family becomes the concern and Genesis begins to answer the third question, “How do we get along in God’s world God’s way particularly with the members of our own family?” In Genesis 25, we have visited the family of Abraham, and we have seen how Abraham’s family was fractured because Abraham did not trust God completely and did not follow the plan of God for marriage. We saw how the family of Isaac, Abraham’s heir, was divided by parental favoritism. So far, we have not seen a family that remained healthy and intact. This text continues by showing what happened in Isaac’s family.)

Genesis 26:1-15

Verse 1

¹ Now there was a famine in the land—besides the previous famine in Abraham’s time—and Isaac went to Abimelek king of the Philistines in Gerar.

- “There was a famine in the land.” Food was scarce in the place where Isaac lived. In Genesis 12:10 there is mention of a previous famine during the time of Abraham. The previous famine had caused Abraham to move his family to Egypt. But this is not that famine.
- Abraham is dead (see Genesis 25:1-11). Isaac is the head of Abraham’s family now.
- Abimelek is a title, like king, not a name. So the person called Abimelek here is not the same Abimelek mentioned in chapter 12 to whom Abraham went. Abimelek is the title given to the king of Gerar.

- As the leader of his family, Isaac went to consult with Abimelek about the problem.

Verses 2-6

² The Lord appeared to Isaac and said, “Do not go down to Egypt; live in the land where I tell you to live. ³ Stay in this land for a while, and I will be with you and will bless you. For to you and your descendants I will give all these lands and will confirm the oath I swore to your father Abraham. ⁴ I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and will give them all these lands, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, ⁵ because Abraham obeyed me and did everything I required of him, keeping my commands, my decrees and my instructions.” ⁶ So Isaac stayed in Gerar.

- When the famine struck the land in Abraham’s time, Abraham decided to go and live in Egypt (see Genesis 12:10). God did not instruct Abraham to go to Egypt. It was Abraham’s idea, and it caused Abraham much trouble (see Genesis 12:11-20).
- In this case, YHWH appeared to Isaac and told him specifically NOT to go to Egypt to escape the famine but to remain in the place where he already lived.
- YHWH renewed the promise he had given to Abraham to Isaac (see Genesis 12:1-3). God promised that Isaac’s descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky. God promised to give Isaac and his descendants the land in which they lived. God promised that through Isaac’s descendants all the nations of the earth would be blessed. Jesus Christ, the Messiah, would come from the descendants of Isaac and so through them, all the nations on earth would be blessed.
- Abraham is lifted up, again, as the model of a man who trusted God. Abraham was not a perfect model of trust. Genesis shows us times when Abraham did not trust God. When he did not trust God, he always suffered for it, as he did in the time of the previous famine in the land. The point is found in the answer to the “second question.” “How do we get along in God’s world God’s way?” We trust and obey. When Abraham followed this prescription and trusted God, he was blessed. When he did not, he suffered for his lack of trust. He is then the model for us. We should trust God and obey him.
- In trusting God, Isaac did not follow Abraham’s practice and go to Egypt. He remained in Gerar.

Verse 7

⁷ When the men of that place asked him about his wife, he said, "She is my sister," because he was afraid to say, "She is my wife." He thought, "The men of this place might kill me on account of Rebekah, because she is beautiful."

- While Isaac did not move to Egypt, he did the same thing his father, Abraham, did when he moved to Egypt. Abraham lied about who Sarah, his wife, was, saying that she was his sister instead of his wife because he feared Pharaoh would kill him so that he could marry Sarah (see Genesis 12:11-20).
- Isaac did exactly the same thing. He told Abimelek and the men of Gerar that Rebekah was not his wife but his sister. He did this of his own accord. He was not instructed to lie by God. He did so because he did not fully trust God to take care of him and protect him. Despite the promise of God, Isaac acted according to his own plan as had his father, Abraham.

Verses 8-11

⁸ When Isaac had been there a long time, Abimelek king of the Philistines looked down from a window and saw Isaac caressing his wife Rebekah. ⁹ So Abimelek summoned Isaac and said, "She is really your wife! Why did you say, 'She is my sister'?"

Isaac answered him, "Because I thought I might lose my life on account of her."

¹⁰ Then Abimelek said, "What is this you have done to us? One of the men might well have slept with your wife, and you would have brought guilt upon us."

¹¹ So Abimelek gave orders to all the people: "Anyone who harms this man or his wife shall surely be put to death."

- Abimelek noticed that Isaac treated his "sister" more like a man would treat his wife than his sister. So he questioned Isaac about what he had observed.
- Isaac confessed that he had lied to the king and that Rebekah was not his sister, but his wife. He told the king that he had done this out of fear for his life. In essence, Isaac confessed that he had not put his trust in God but in himself and in a lie.
- The king pointed out that Isaac had put the entire nation in peril. Someone might have taken Rebekah and had sex with her and so brought shame on everyone. He then gave specific orders that no one was to harm Isaac or Rebekah.

Verses 12-15

¹² Isaac planted crops in that land and the same year reaped a hundredfold, because the Lord blessed him. ¹³ The man became rich, and his wealth continued to grow until he became very wealthy. ¹⁴ He had so many flocks and herds and servants that the Philistines envied him. ¹⁵ So all the wells that his father's servants had dug in the time of his father Abraham, the Philistines stopped up, filling them with earth.

- God kept his covenant with Isaac. Isaac became very wealthy. So much so that the people around him were envious of his wealth. God is always faithful to His promises. He is entirely trustworthy.
- The envy of his neighbors caused them to try to hinder Isaac's success. They filled up the wells that Abraham had dug in the land. They were trying to stop the blessing of God on Isaac.

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