

“My beloved is mine” (Song of Solomon 2:16)

## **The Old Testament: A Worthy Labor**

Studying the Old Testament is at once both a marvelous joy and a challenge. Herein we find inspiring stories of faith, sacrifice and obedience of those who called down the powers of heaven to bless their lives, their families and all that they possessed. Yet herein we also find stories that are curious if not baffling to our present day values and perspectives. Such is the case for our present lesson that covers six fascinating and varied chapters from the Book of Genesis. In brief, these six chapters cover the time from Isaac marrying Rebecca to Jacob’s marriage of Rachel and Leah. Intertwined in these narratives are numerous references to promised blessings, birthrights, and the power of God in sustaining his covenant promises. These narratives also take us through highlights of those venerable individuals, couples and families that we associate with birthright blessings and marriage in the covenant.

Now the task before us is a challenging one. It would be impossible in this article to sufficiently cover the many principles, ideas, interpretations, cultural contexts and curious questions that these six chapters evoke. Indeed a lifetime of learning awaits any who wish to follow the never ending stream of books and articles written concerning every aspect of these six chapters. However, speaking from personal experience no amount of reading *about* the scriptures can replace *reading the scriptures*. In fact, Gospel Doctrine classes will be fulfilling in proportion to the time that class members read the scriptures to be discussed in class.

I will take a two-fold approach to these chapters. Following the sequence of each chapter I will focus on several ideas of deep importance: covenants and covenant making (particularly marriage covenants), prayer, faith and the Abrahamic promises. In so doing, it is a conscious choice to not exhaustively treat all of the questions that inevitably arise in the mind of any who open the Old Testament to read. Rather, since our time in Gospel Doctrine is precious then we should spend our times with that which is most precious.

## **Marriage in the Covenant (Genesis 24)**

Genesis 24 opens with aging Abraham, who had been blessed in all things by the Lord, desiring that his son Isaac find a worthy companion that the promises of the Lord might be renewed and fulfilled. To accomplish this important mission Abraham called his faithful servant Eliezer ((Eliezer means “God is his help,” “God is help,” or “God of help.” This is an appropriate name for the role God played in answering Eliezer’s prayer of faith. Cf. Genesis 24:12-14, 21, 48.)) to assist him. ((Based on Ancient Near Eastern adoption patterns, it is likely that Eliezer was Abraham and Sarah’s adopted son. There are at least two reasons to make this suggestion. First, the Greek Septuagint (a translation of the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek completed around 275 BC) uses the word *paida* which means “servant” or “boy/son.” This suggests that Eliezer was more than just a *doulos* (Greek for “servant” or “slave”). He held a position of honor and prominence in the household of Abraham and indeed probably at one point (before the birth of either Ishmael or Isaac) held the position of son for childless Abraham and Sarah. The second reason that Eliezer may have been Abraham and Sarah’s adopted son comes from Ancient Near Eastern laws. Ancient tablets dating to about 1500 BC discovered in the 1930’s from a site called Nuzi (what is today in Northern Iraq/Mesopotamia) make provision for a childless couple to adopt a servant as a son and thus become the heir to the family blessings, birthright and inheritance. If this was the case, his status as heir was displaced successively by the births of Ishmael and then Isaac even though his status as a *paida* “servant/son” most likely remained. See *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, edited by David Noel Freedman, vol. 4 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), pp. 1156-1162.)) In an act of great solemnity Abraham asked Eliezer to covenant with him “by the Lord, the God of heaven, and the God of earth” to find a wife for Isaac

from among Abraham’s kindred. Genesis 24:9 records that Eliezer, according to Abraham’s direction, “put his hand under the thigh of Abraham” covenanting that he would fulfill Abraham’s request that a worthy companion be found for Isaac. ((The JST reads “hand” for “thigh.”)) This is a sign of a most significant covenant. That Eliezer placed his hand under the thigh of Abraham, which is close to the seat of the powers of procreation, symbolizes not only the sacred nature of the covenant but serves also as a sacred reminder that such a covenant would ensure posterity by bringing Isaac and Rebecca together. ((It is possible that the JST reading of “hand” for thigh” could be interpreted as meaning that Abraham took the hand of his servant and placed it under his own thigh. See Dennis and Sandra Packard, *Feasting Upon the Word*, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1981), p. 65.))

Faithful Eliezer took his journey to the city of Nahor some 425 miles to the north. ((It is possible that the city of Nahor was synonymous with the city Haran (cf. Genesis 11:31).)) Upon arrival to the city he came upon a well of water where he stopped to pray. This good servant’s prayer was heartfelt, simple, yet powerful (Gen. 24:12-14). His faith was evident. He trusted the promises pronounced by Abraham that God’s angel would go before him and prepare the way (Gen. 24:7). He prayed that the Lord would reveal to him the woman that was to marry Isaac. The story is well known: Rebecca indeed came to the well and in an act of great service offered water for Eliezer, all his camels and then offered him hospitality with her family. Eliezer then praised the Lord for his kindness and goodness, particularly in fulfilling his promises unto Abraham: “Blessed be the Lord God of my master Abraham, who hath not left destitute my mater of his mercy and his truth” (Gen. 24:27). Indeed the Lord is merciful unto his children and the Lord is a God of truth. He will fulfill his covenants and promises unto us.

The remainder of Genesis 24 deals with the arrangements of the marriage agreement between Rebecca, her brothers Laban and Bethuel, and Eliezer. ((Ancient Near Eastern marriage customs were quite different than what we are familiar with today. The family unit was of course an economical unit headed by the father or patriarch. Each member of the family was a contributor to the success and survival of the family. In these terms, individual members of the family could be seen as economic units or property. Many marriages were arranged by the parents or fathers without consent of the daughter or son. If a man sought to marry a woman, he would negotiate with the father. Usually the man would pay a bride price, a sum of money, goods or property that would compensate the bride’s family for the loss of income that they would suffer by losing their daughter to another family. Additionally, the bride would bring into the marriage a dowry, essentially her portion of the family inheritance. In theory this was to be her personal possession and property to be executed as she deemed fit, although in practice the dowry that she brought often became subsumed into her husband’s inheritance. If a man desired to marry a woman but her father was no longer alive, then he had to negotiate with her brothers, who had assumed the role of the father and the responsibility for the family. However, in these cases, the woman’s consent was essential. Thus we can see in the case with Rebecca that since her father was no longer alive the marriage negotiations were carried out by her brothers but in the end she was offered the choice to marry Isaac and she had to give her consent.)) The question was put to Rebecca if she would leave her family and home to marry Abraham’s son Isaac. Within a short time she consented and the family made preparations to send her to a new future. Before she left her brothers blessed her as a future mother in Israel saying, “be thou the mother of thousands of millions” (Gen. 24:60).

### **Blessings and Birthrights (Genesis 25)**

A common motif throughout the scripture can be described by the following outline:

1. Promise of a blessing
2. Desire for fulfillment of the blessing

3. Obstacles hinder fulfillment of blessing
4. Faith is exercised
5. Miraculous fulfillment of the blessing

This general pattern is played out in specific ways through the scriptures. One of the common instances of this motif is:

1. Promise of posterity
2. Desire for posterity
3. Barrenness obstructs that fulfillment
4. Faith is exercised
5. Miraculous birth; the promise is fulfilled.

This specific pattern occurs with Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Hanna. The pattern (though not necessarily this specific example) is not unlike what most of us have experienced in life. We have received promises from the Lord. We desired those promises in the righteousness of our hearts. Yet seemingly impossible obstacles stood in the path. But miraculously after we exercised faith and patience those promises became reality.

Such was the experience of Rebecca. She was barren; Isaac prayed in her behalf; she conceived. Yet it was a double portion. She was pregnant with twins, two brothers who would also be two rivals struggling with each other even in the womb. In faith Rebecca inquired of the Lord concerning this matter and he revealed to her that the younger son would indeed be the birthright son and heir to the promises. This sets the stage for the next several chapters that highlight the struggles and maturation of Esau and Jacob. ((The name Jacob in Hebrew means “supplanter.” Thus he later supplants Esau in his position as birthright son.))

### **The Promises Tested and Renewed (Genesis 26)**

Just as Abraham had come to his promised land only to find it a barren waste as it was in the midst of a terrible famine, so too Isaac, the heir of the great Abrahamic promises (property, posterity, priesthood) was affected by another famine in the promised land. As a side note, how many of us expect *our* promise lands to be scorched by famine? We can see from the lives of Abraham and Isaac that God has lessons to teach and hearts to test.

The Lord appeared unto Isaac in the midst of the famine and renewed all of the promises made unto his father Abraham. Additionally, the Lord counseled him to stay in the land of Gerar, the location to which Rebecca and Isaac had previously retreated in order to escape the famine. But the promises just renewed were soon to be tested.

Like his father before him Isaac declared to the Philistines that Rebecca was his sister. ((This story shares striking resemblance to that of Genesis 12:10-20 & Genesis 20:1-18. These stories have long puzzled many readers for various reasons. Why would the patriarchs apparently deceive others? How is it that King Abimelech did not see the connection between Abraham and Sarah claiming to be siblings and their son sharing the same story about his own wife? Etc. Those who are concerned with the morality of the patriarchs (i.e. those who want to find a reason to explain away the apparent trickery or deceit) have usually dealt with the issue in one of two ways. First, they have suggested that the Lord commanded these couples to claim that they were siblings. Evidence for this can be found in Abraham 2:22-25. Others have suggested that Abraham/Sarah and Isaac/Rebecca did not lie about being brother and sister. Some of the scriptures seem to indicate that these individuals either were uncle and niece (see Abraham 2:2) or cousins and thus being part of the same kins group they were in effect brother and sister. Genesis 20:20 complicates the relationship situation

somewhat, however. This verse seems to indicate that Abraham and Sarah were half-siblings; they both had the same father but different mothers. Let me offer a third way to look at this. It is useful for us to realize that some of the stories in the OT do not sit well with our modern sensibilities and perceptions. In other words, perhaps the Biblical authors are making use of these stories for different purposes other than to comment on the relative morality of the patriarchs and whether they truly lied or not. Perhaps these stories are shared to underline that God is in charge, that he will save his promises for the sake of the righteous, or to show how through cunning the Israelite forebearers were able to gain great status, wealth and honor from the hands of the pagan gentiles. We must always remember that there are some questions that we have about the Bible that the Bible was not designed to answer. Ultimately the answers to questions such as these do not matter for our salvation and eternal joy.) After some length of time, however, king Abimelech discovered that Isaac and Rebecca were husband and wife. Concerned that any one of his people could have done wrong with Rebecca, thus incurring the displeasure of God, king Abimelech issued orders that protected and benefited Isaac and Rebecca. Thus the promises of covenant marriage were tested and saved. Not only did this save Rebecca and Isaac from losing their marriage, but it was a blessing in disguise. Their new found protection from the king allowed them to prosper greatly in the land.

However, the promises of the land would be tested as well because the Philistines grew envious of the material blessings showered upon Isaac. So Isaac and Rachel decided to move in order to avoid conflict and problems with the Philistines. The Lord’s promises went before them and opened up the way. The Lord again appeared unto Isaac and renewed the Abrahamic promises and covenants with him.

### **The Claim to the Birthright (Genesis 27)**

We learned in Genesis 25:23 that God had decreed that Jacob was to be the heir of the birthright blessings. Genesis 27 completes what was started in Genesis 25:29-34 where Esau despised and sold his birthright to Jacob. The time had come for Isaac to officially declare his heir, to offer his blessing and to give the birthright. However, we may find it odd that Rebecca and Jacob resort to craftiness to literally pull the wool over the eyes of a blind man to receive a blessing. Plainly the text indicates that Jacob, with the proddings of his mother, tricked his father. Yet perhaps our modern sensibilities can find solace in the fact that the Lord had declared to Rebecca that Jacob was to be the heir, together with the fact that not only had Esau sold his birthright, he despised it. Whatever way we wish to look at the story, it is helpful to remember that a biblical story set down 3000 years ago may not be entirely palatable to us as it may have been to someone of Ancient Israelite culture where cunning and “wisdom” were highly valued and praised. Indeed, Rebecca and Jacob from that context are Biblical heroes for the way that they exercised cunning and “wisdom” to secure the divinely promised blessings. ((Many scholars have labored over the issues in Gen.25-27 that relate to the apparent deceit and trickery. It is curious to note that we find a pattern of trickery redolent throughout Genesis. Consider the following examples: The serpent tricks Eve (she eats the fruit), Abraham and Sarah trick Pharaoh (wife-sister story), Abraham and Sarah trick King Abimelech (wife-sister story), Isaac and Rebecca trick King Abimelech (wife-sister story), Jacob and Rebecca trick Isaac (Jacob gets the blessing), Laban tricks Jacob (Laban gives Leah first before Rachel), Jacob tricks Laban (Jacob gets many flocks), Joseph’s brothers trick him (he is taken into captivity), Joseph’s brothers trick Jacob (they say that Joseph is killed), Joseph tricks his brothers (when they are in Egypt he does not reveal himself to them). Does this mean that the Bible is teaching us to use guile and deceit? Hardly! Again, we must remember that these scriptures were written in a culture and using literary tools that are not always apparent to us. Just as the Doctrine & Covenants reflects the time period of the 1830’s - 1840’s and the New Testament reflects the time period of the Greco-Roman world, so too the Old Testament reflects the cultures and time periods from which it

derives. Having said all of this, I will offer one way among many to look at these stories. Some have viewed these “trickster” stories as ancient Israelite hero stories. These were the stories crafted to show how the great heroes of Israelite ancestry found success and fulfillment of God’s blessings unto them. For further reading on this perspective (the folklore perspective) see Susan Niditch, *A Prelude to Biblical Folklore: Underdogs and Tricksters*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000). She argues that these stories show how the “underdog” (Israel and Israelite ancestral heroes) triumphed over all of their foes.)

The end of Genesis 27 describes Esau’s growing hatred for Jacob. The potentially violent situation created a context for Jacob to flee from his home (in Gen. 28) and seek refuge with his uncle Laban. We will momentarily see that this providential circumstance leads Jacob to finding his future wives within the covenant. This is in contrast to Esau who chose to marry outside the covenant and cause grief for his parents. In a disheartened complaint from Rebecca laments to Isaac, “I am weary of my life because of the daughters of Heth,” which Esau took to wife (Gen. 27:46). Perhaps in response to this Isaac admonished Jacob, “thou shalt not take a wife of the daughters of Canaan” (Gen. 28:1).

A few comments about Ancient Near Eastern marriage customs may shed some light on the importance of marrying within the covenant (cf. also note 6). Many of the marriages described in the Old Testament are endogamous marriages, that is a marriage within a family or a kins group. Thus Abraham and Sarah are brother and sister (uncle and niece), Isaac and Rebecca are cousins as are Jacob, Leah and Rachel. In Ancient Near Eastern cultures one of the main reasons for endogamous marriages was to keep inheritances within the family. In other words, if a family member married outside of the family that individual’s inheritance would then be transferred to the other family. Or looking at it from a different perspective the inheritance would be lost. This ancient cultural pattern has obvious correlation to the importance of marrying within the covenant so that the promised blessings and heavenly inheritances are not lost or given away.

### **The Birthright Blessings Confirmed and Renewed (Genesis 28)**

After fleeing the wrath of his brother, Jacob found himself alone on his journey to Haran. In that place he slept, using the stones as pillows. That night the Lord appeared unto him, the rightful heir by divine decree of the birthright and the blessings pertaining unto it, just as He had appeared unto Isaac his father and Abraham his grandfather. There that night on a bed of stones Jacob learned that he too would become father of nations, that all families of the earth would be blessed through him, that God would be with him throughout his life and that the land upon which he lay was his and his posterity’s forever and ever. Jacob covenanted that the Lord would be his God and he built an altar to mark the sacred spot called *beth-el* “house/temple of God.”

### **Covenants at the Well (Genesis 29)**

When Jacob finally reached Haran he came upon a well. It was there that he first laid eyes upon Rachel (Hebrew = “ewe lamb”). Their initial encounter was one of great joy. ((See Genesis 29:11 where the traditional emotions of recognized kinship are displayed.)) Soon Laban invited Jacob to work for hire and they agreed upon seven years of labor so that Jacob could marry Rachel. In sparse but sufficiently romantic terms the scriptures say of that time, “and Jacob served seven years for Rachel; and they seemed unto him but a few days, for the love he had to her” (Gen. 29:20). Eventually Jacob worked for 14 total years for Laban and married both his daughters (Leah and Rachel) in the covenant. ((Laban tricked Jacob on his wedding night and gave him Leah before Rachel, although Rachel was wedded to him a week later. For more ideas about this episode see note 9.)) Thus the promises were fulfilled. And thus the cycle that began with Abraham continued with Jacob and was repeated again with Joseph and then with Ephraim and his posterity throughout the ages unto our day when the fullness of the covenant principles are revealed for our joy and

salvation, if we choose.

To conclude we will turn our hearts back to the significance of the wells encountered in scripture. As was just discussed, Jacob met his future bride Rachel at a well. Similarly it was at the same well that Eliezer the servant of Abraham met Isaac’s future bride Rebecca. Furthermore, in the midst of the blessings and prosperity Isaac enjoyed from God he made a covenant with king Abimelech at a well called *beer-sheva* (well of the covenant). It was at the well of Jacob that Jesus announced himself to the Samaritan woman. For those living in the semi-arid lands of Judea and Israel wells were the source that sustained all life. They were the pure and living waters that gave freely. These wells refreshed and renewed the most weary traveler. These wells offered the water of healing, the water of refreshment, the water of life. It is only fitting that the relationships that brought forth life and that have blessed the lives of all the earth met and covenanted at wells, sources of living water. It is Christ himself who is the living water, the author of life, the giver of life. He is the bridegroom who sits by the well, waiting for his glorious bride to seek him at the well where they may together make eternal covenants and forever drink the waters of life.