

SUNDAY MORNING BIBLE STUDY
Genesis 26 – Like Father, Like Son

Genesis 26:1– 33 is the only collection of biblical narrative centrally devoted to the middle patriarch. In comparison with the two larger-than-life figures who are his father (Abraham) and his son (Jacob), there is remarkably little narrative about Isaac. Indeed, he generally appears passive and, in places, even comic (e.g., 26:8– 9; 27:18– 23).

Genesis 26:1-5 (NRSV)

¹ Now there was a famine in the land, besides the former famine that had occurred in the days of Abraham. And Isaac went to Gerar, to King Abimelech of the Philistines. ² The Lord appeared to Isaac and said, “Do not go down to Egypt; settle in the land that I shall show you. ³ Reside in this land as an alien, and I will be with you, and will bless you; for to you and to your descendants I will give all these lands, and I will fulfill the oath that I swore to your father Abraham. ⁴ I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven, and will give to your offspring all these lands; and all the nations of the earth shall gain blessing for themselves through your offspring, ⁵ because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws.”

SOURCE THEORY: J Source = normal; E Source = **bold**; P Source = *italicized*; Redactor = ***bold italicized***.

All of chapter 26 is from the J Source except the last two verses which come from the Priestly source.

As with Abraham, God appears to Isaac and promises that he will become a numerous people and will (at least through them) come to possess the country and be a standard for people’s prayer for blessing. Like Abraham, Isaac has to cope with famine, and also like Abraham, he takes refuge in Gerar in the territory of a king called Abimelech (presumably a different one). The parallels will continue as that story unfolds.

Yet there are noteworthy distinctive features of God’s words to Isaac. One is the prohibition on going to Egypt, recalling Abraham’s command to his servant not to have Isaac leave the country in the other direction in order to find a wife. This is the promised land. Don’t leave it even under pressure. There is the related promise, “I will be with you.” God was certainly with Abraham, as Abimelech could see (Genesis 21:22), but God did not express an actual commitment to Abraham in these terms. So one could call this the Isaac promise (it will be repeated for other people, and for Israel itself, but it starts off as the Isaac promise). God’s being with Isaac does not merely mean that Isaac has a sense of God’s being there through tough times, or even that God actually is with Isaac through tough times whether or not Isaac has a sense of it. In the Bible, God’s being with you is something that makes a practical difference to how things work out. So when external circumstances seem to be working against you, God’s being with you will issue in blessing (fruitfulness and flourishing).

Paradoxically that will be true because Isaac’s father did what God said by being prepared to kill Isaac! Abraham’s commitment to treating Isaac as dispensable is the basis for God’s commitment to blessing Isaac. The attitude that parents have to their children, to God, and the way they see the relationship between these two attitudes can have profound implications for the way God deals with the children.

Former famine...Abraham. See 12:10. Isaac is in some sense recapitulating events of his father’s life. Isaac’s journey to Gerar, to King Abimelech, is parallel to the E story of Abraham and Sarah in ch. 20. In these stories, the patriarch and matriarch journey to a foreign land and claim that the beautiful wife is really the patriarch’s sister, with similar outcomes (see also note on 12:10–20).

God reveals himself to Isaac, as he had done often to Abraham, gives him instructions, and grants him his blessing. Vv. 3b–5 are later expansions on the initial blessing, providing Isaac with the patriarchal promises of land, offspring, and blessings. This expansion is based on the second angelic speech to Abraham in 22:15–18 and alludes to Abraham’s obedience in that chapter. Obeyed my voice (v. 5). Cf. 22:18.

GERAR – גֵרָר – Meaning “dragging” or “sojourning,” from the verb גָרַר (*garar*), “to drag or drag away, mostly in a circular or repetitive motion.” A town in the Negev. Abraham visited the town and entered into some type of agreement with the Philistine king of Gerar, Abimelech (Gen. 20:1–2). However, the bulk of episodes involving Gerar are in the Isaac stories: Isaac and Rebekah settle at Gerar (Gen. 26:2) but, like his father before him, Isaac tells Abimelech that his wife is his sister, because he fears someone will kill him to obtain her. The ruse is exposed when Abimelech looks out a window and sees Isaac fondling Rebekah (26:8). Isaac is guaranteed Abimelech’s protection and he subsequently sows seed in the land and becomes rich, with so many flocks and herds and such a great household that the Philistines envy him. Isaac then moves to the valley of Gerar, where he digs wells that become a source of contention with herders in the area (26:17–21). The only other references to Gerar in the Bible are in 2 Chron. 14:9–14, which presents a story of Asa’s defeat of Zerah, an invading Ethiopian (905–874 BCE). Despite several proposals, the location of Gerar remains undetermined.

ABIMELECH – אֲבִימֶלֶךְ – This name is made up of two parts: אב meaning “father,” and מֶלֶךְ meaning “king.” So this name means “Father is King” or “King is Father” or “Melech is Father.” The first Abimelech we meet is the king of Gerar during the time of Abraham (Genesis 20:1). Abraham introduced his half-sister Sarah to Abimelech but failed to submit that she was also his wife. When Abimelech then took her, God told him the truth and Abimelech relinquished Sarah. This was the second time that Abraham almost lost Sarah. The first time was to Pharaoh (12:15). Later, their son Isaac would play the same game with his wife Rebekah, again in the territory of Abimelech, king of Gerar (26:7-11). There are about 80 years between the two encounters with Abimelech of Gerar and some commentators assume there are two of them. But Abraham lived 175 years (25:7) and Isaac lived 180 years (35:28), if we assume that kings lived as long as their subjects, cloning Abimelech is not necessary. Another clue that we’re probably dealing with the same person is that both Abimelechs have army commanders named Phicol.

PHILISTINES – פְּלִשְׁתִּים – The name Philistine comes from the verb פָּלַשׁ (*palash*), which originally described the digging of burrows in river banks by rodents such as rats. By doing so, these creatures weaken the shore and may ultimately cause it to collapse. In Hebrew, this verb came to denote the verbal expression of intense grief brought about by a sudden destruction. Hence, the verb פָּלַשׁ (*palash*) mostly means to roll around in ashes or dust due to intense grief. In cognate languages it describes the digging of tunnels or burrows.

The name Philistine means Grievors, Burrowers, Weakeners, but it is obviously a part of the larger story that begins with the rebel Abraham, who departed from his home in Babylon where the art of astronomy and other sciences of the external natural world dominated. After also rejecting Assyria and Egypt, Abraham settled in Canaan, where his grandson, Jacob became the house of Israel. Significantly, not only Jacob’s grandfather Abraham and grandmother Sarah hailed from Babylon, so did his mother Rebekah and his own two wives Leah and Rachel and their maids Zilpah and Bilhah; the four arch-mothers of Israel’s twelve tribes.

The Philistines were a warlike people who, with the other Sea Peoples, migrated from the Aegean basin to the southern coast of the Levant in the early twelfth century BCE. They became one of Israel’s principal rivals. Name: The Hebrew name for the Philistines is פְּלִשְׁתִּים *pelishtim*; the Bible usually refers to their territory as ‘erets pelishtim (“land of the Philistines”) or peleshet (“Philistia”). The modern term “Palestine” is derived from the Greek and Latin names given to the descendants of the Philistines.

Since nonbiblical texts do not use the term “Philistines” before ca. 1200 BCE, most scholars assume that the appearance of this name in Gen. 21:32, 34; 26:1, 8, 14–18 is anachronistic. Although it is quite possible that there were peoples of Aegean origin in Canaan during the period of Israel’s ancestors, it seems likely that a later editor “updated” their ethnic designation by calling them Philistines. If the name “Philistine” was not used until the twelfth century BCE, a similar explanation must be given for its appearance in Gen. 10:14; Exod. 13:17; 23:31; Josh. 13:2–3.

Genesis 26:6–33 (NRSV)

⁶ So Isaac settled in Gerar. ⁷ When the men of the place asked him about his wife, he said, “She is my sister”; for he was afraid to say, “My wife,” thinking, “or else the men of the place might kill me for the sake of Rebekah, because she is attractive in appearance.” ⁸ When Isaac had been there a long time, King Abimelech of the Philistines looked out of a window and saw him fondling his wife Rebekah. ⁹ So Abimelech called for Isaac, and said, “So she is your wife! Why then did you say, ‘She is my sister’?” Isaac said to him, “Because I thought I might die because of her.” ¹⁰ Abimelech said, “What is this you have done to us? One of the people might easily have lain with your wife, and you would have brought guilt upon us.” ¹¹ So Abimelech warned all the people, saying, “Whoever touches this man or his wife shall be put to death.” ¹² Isaac sowed seed in that land, and in the same year reaped a hundredfold. The Lord blessed him, ¹³ and the man became rich; he prospered more and more until he became very wealthy. ¹⁴ He had possessions of flocks and herds, and a great household, so that the Philistines envied him. ¹⁵ (Now the Philistines had stopped up and filled with earth all the wells that his father’s servants had dug in the days of his father Abraham.) ¹⁶ And Abimelech said to Isaac, “Go away from us; you have become too powerful for us.” ¹⁷ So Isaac departed from there and camped in the valley of Gerar and settled there. ¹⁸ Isaac dug again the wells of water that had been dug in the days of his father Abraham; for the Philistines had stopped them up after the death of Abraham; and he gave them the names that his father had given them. ¹⁹ But when Isaac’s servants dug in the valley and found there a well of spring water, ²⁰ the herders of Gerar quarreled with Isaac’s herders, saying, “The water is ours.” So he called the well Esek, because they contended with him. ²¹ Then they dug another well, and they quarreled over that one also; so he called it Sitnah. ²² He moved from there and dug another well, and they did not quarrel over it; so he called it Rehoboth, saying, “Now the Lord has made room for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land.” ²³ From there he went up to Beer-sheba. ²⁴ And that very night the Lord appeared to him and said, “I am the God of your father Abraham; do not be afraid, for I am with you and will bless you and make your offspring numerous for my servant Abraham’s sake.” ²⁵ So he built an altar there, called on the name of the Lord, and pitched his tent there. And there Isaac’s servants dug a well. ²⁶ Then Abimelech went to him from Gerar, with Ahuzzath his adviser and Phicol the commander of his army. ²⁷ Isaac said to them, “Why have you come to me, seeing that you hate me and have sent me away from you?” ²⁸ They said, “We see plainly that the Lord has been with you; so we say, let there be an oath between you and us, and let us make a covenant with you ²⁹ so that you will do us no harm, just as we have not touched you and have done to you nothing but good and have sent you away in peace. You are now the blessed of the Lord.” ³⁰ So he made them a feast, and they ate and drank. ³¹ In the morning they rose early and exchanged oaths; and Isaac set them on their way, and they departed from him in peace. ³² That same day Isaac’s servants came and told him about the well that they had dug, and said to him, “We have found water!” ³³ He called it Shibah; therefore the name of the city is Beer-sheba to this day.

SOURCE THEORY: J Source = normal; E Source = bold; P Source = *Italicized*; Redactor = ***bold italicized***.

It is interesting that Genesis here speaks of Isaac’s “playing about” with Rebekah, because the verb is the one linked to Isaac’s own name, the verb that kept coming in Genesis 17–21 with the meaning “laugh.” Isaac was being himself in making out with Rebekah. So, this story about Isaac and his wife is told in a distinctive way.

In extraordinary contrast with the account of Isaac’s stupidity, Genesis goes on to describe how well Isaac did in Abimelech’s country. Now, your mother probably told you that if you behaved well, things would work out well for you, and (more important) if you behave badly, you will pay for it. Often that’s true, but often it isn’t. God doesn’t seem to view it as important to be fair (rather than saying God is fair, Jesus notes that God makes the sun shine and the rain fall on both righteous and unrighteous, which probably isn’t what your mother told you). The question of fairness and unfairness is subordinate to other priorities.

In Genesis the priority is God’s making Abraham and his offspring an embodiment of God’s blessing that will attract the world, and Isaac’s story illustrates that purpose at work. Actually, blessing Isaac when he doesn’t

deserve it is an important expression of something about God that might be expected to attract people, even if it would worry your mother. The Old Testament God operates on the basis of grace rather than merit. The more pathetic the characters in the stories are (and they can be pretty pathetic), the clearer becomes this gospel principle.

We have mixed feelings about this biblical motif, because it makes our lives less subject to calculation and control. Abimelech and his people certainly had mixed feelings about it. One issue in whose context it surfaces is water supply. The Negev area where these stories are located (Beersheba, Beer-lahai-roi, Gerar) is close to being desert; Beersheba gets about ten days of rain per year. That raises tough questions about whether anyone could live there. But there is water under the ground, and digging wells thus makes living there possible. Digging wells, however, can require huge amounts of manpower, so once wells have been dug, they can become matters of dispute.

The song notes that it never rains in Southern California, but “they never warn you how it pours” when the rains do come (I never needed galoshes in England). The Middle East can be similar. A wash is the bed of a river that flows only when there has been a storm (in Arabic it is a wadi; in Hebrew, a nahal). Living there has its dangers; you need to keep your eye open for the storms that could wash away you and your encampment. But when the rains do come, you can trap some water, and when they have gone, grass will grow for your flocks.

6–11 This is the last of the three stories of a patriarch’s attempting unsuccessfully to pass his wife off as his sister (cf. 12.10–20; 20.1–18), and the only one in which the matriarch is never brought into the foreign king’s quarters. This variation of the story of the matriarch in danger differs from the others in that the beautiful matriarch is not taken into the king’s harem (cf. 12.10–20, J; 20.1–18, E). It also has a moment of comedy when Abimelech sees Isaac fondling his wife Rebekah. The Hebrew is **יִצְחָק מְצַחֵק** “Isaac playing” (with his wife Rebekah), which is a play on Isaac’s name, here with a sexual connotation. This kind of “play” reveals the truth to the perceptive king. Is Isaac here over-confident, careless, or foolish? As with the pharaoh in 12.10–20 and with his double, King Abimelech of Gerar, in 20.1–18, Abimelech is justly offended by the patriarch’s ruse, questions him, and protects the wife. Since he did not take the wife, he does not enrich the patriarch in bride-price or recompense.

12–33 The LORD blessed him. Isaac gains wealth as promised in v. 3. His wealth provokes a separation from Abimelech reminiscent of the separation of Abram and Lot (13.1–12). The conflict with the Philistines over wells recalls Abraham’s conflict with the Philistines over the well of Beer-sheba (21.25, E). The story of the oath and covenant (v. 28) between Isaac and the Philistines (Abimelech, Ahuzzath, and Phicol, v. 26) is parallel to the story with Abraham and the same Philistines (Abimelech and Phicol) in 21.22–34 (E). Both stories conclude with the founding of Beer-sheba, meaning “well of the oath” (cf. v. 33; 21.31).

Most historians consider the reference to Philistines here (and in v. 1) anachronistic, since the Philistines did not arrive in Canaan until about 1200 bce. The dispute about the wells and the covenant-making ceremony that resolves it (vv. 17–33) are highly reminiscent of King Abimelech’s previous dealing with Isaac’s father in 21.22–32. Incidentally, nothing in this episode, or in the rest of the chapter, gives any indication that the couple’s twins have already been born (25.21–26), and one can imagine that the episode once stood elsewhere.

ESEK – **עֵשֶׂק** – The name given to a well dug by the servants of Isaac (Gen 26:20). The name means “contention,” “strife,” “hostility” and is based on the tradition of conflicts between Isaac’s herdsmen and those of Gerar over rights to its water. The exact location of the well is, of course, unknown; but the context suggests that it was located between Gerar and Beer-sheba.

SITNAH – **שִׁטְנָה** – A well dug by the servants of Isaac somewhere in the vicinity of Gerar (Gen 26:21; M.R. 112087). The biblical narrative derives Sitnah’s name, which means hostility or accusation (Heb root śāṭan),

from a dispute which arose between the shepherds of Isaac and those of Abimelech over use of the well. In this, Sitnah resembles the neighboring wells of Esek and Rehoboth (Gen 26:20, 22) whose names are also punningly connected to circumstances surrounding their construction.

REHOBOTH – רְהוֹבוֹת – The name of three places mentioned in the OT. Literally, the name means “plazas”; as a toponym it means “spacious place.” For our concerns, it is a well in the Negeb, dug by Isaac (Gen 26:22). The location is mentioned within a narrative sequence that could serve as a paradigm for the relationship between agriculturalists and pastoralists, or nomads and the state, in the 2d and 1st millennia B.C.

Genesis 26:34–35 (NRSV)

³⁴ When Esau was forty years old, he married Judith daughter of Beerli the Hittite, and Basemath daughter of Elon the Hittite; ³⁵ and they made life bitter for Isaac and Rebekah.

SOURCE THEORY: J Source = normal; E Source = bold; P Source = *Italicized*; Redactor = ***bold italicized***.

34– 35: Esau intermarries. In pointed contrast to his father Isaac, who at forty years of age married Rebekah, daughter of the appropriate patriarchal lineage (25.20), Esau at forty marries two women of Hittite families, natives of the land of Canaan (see note on 23.3; cf. the names of Esau’s wives in 36.2). These marriages make life bitter for Isaac and Rebekah, since they violate the family code (see 24.3).

Source critics attribute these verses to P and see them as the prologue to 27:46– 28:9, the Priestly explanation for Jacob’s flight to his uncle’s homestead. This Priestly note on Esau’s difficult marriages was originally connected with 27:46–28:9 (P). Its current placement helps legitimate the following story about how he was tricked out of his father’s blessing. In the genealogical notice in 36:2– 4, Elon’s daughter is not Basemath but Adah; Basemath is the daughter of Ishmael, not Elon; and Judith is absent altogether. Esau’s intermarriages to specifically Canaanite women are a jarring contrast to Abraham’s strenuous effort to find a wife for Isaac from within the clan (ch 24) and demonstrate Esau’s unworthiness to serve as the next figure in the patriarchal line.

This notice, from the P source, continues in 27.46–28.5, with Isaac and Rebekah’s insistence that Jacob return to the patriarchal homeland to take a proper wife. These P texts form a frame around the J story that follows and provide a parallel motive for his journey to Haran.

We have different ways of being foolish from Isaac and Rebekah’s way. Maybe as parents we don’t have time or energy to favor one child over another. That was their foolishness: Isaac’s favoring Esau, Rebekah’s favoring Jacob. For these parents, Esau is “his son,” and Jacob, “her son.” It leads to deceit, blasphemy, distress, and fury.

As we come to the part of Genesis where Jacob is at the center of the story, it is even more worthwhile to imagine we are Israelites (Jacobites) listening to it. Maybe the audience shuffled their feet somewhat at the picture of Jacob grasping after Esau on his way out of Rebekah’s womb—or maybe they were quite proud. Maybe they shuffled their feet somewhat at Jacob’s driving a hard bargain with Esau about a helping of stew—or maybe they felt Jacob was vindicated by Esau’s attaching such little value to his position as firstborn, with its privileges and responsibilities. Maybe they felt the more vindicated on hearing about Esau marrying a pair of Hittite girls, the people who lived around Hebron. The Hittites were good neighbors to Esau’s grandfather, but the listeners would not be surprised that marrying local people made Isaac and Rebekah bitter. Abraham had made sure Isaac himself didn’t do that, which was what had led to Rebekah’s coming all the way from Aramnaharaim to marry Isaac; and Jacob will not marry a local girl. Further, the listeners will know that no love is lost between them and the Edomites, Esau’s descendants. If they live after the exile, these same Edomites are gradually taking over much of Judah’s territory, including Hebron itself.

If they do feel negative about Esau, the story puts them in their place as it unfolds. Whereas Jacob is their guy, their ancestor, he is the one who cheats Esau out of his blessing. It is hard to imagine them reckoning that the story approves of the action of Jacob the deceiver and blasphemer. God often accuses them of being

deceivers, claiming to be committed to the God of Abraham but offering sacrifices to the local gods on the side to obtain their help, and claiming to trust God but hedging their bets by making astute political alliances. The religious unfaithfulness was not so clever in the end, and neither were the political alliances; they are Jacob all right, deceivers who will find that deceit does not pay.

At the same time, they will find (as happened in the relationship between Abimelech and Isaac) that God is not moralistic in making things work out. Jacob did not deserve the blessing, but God does not operate on the basis of merit. And God is quite happy to use Jacob's sinfulness in order to subvert the social order that says the first son should have the major privileges and responsibilities.

HITTITES – הַתִּי – The name Hittite means Terrible or Fearsome. The verb **הַתַּת** (hatat) means to deplete of strength, courage, willpower or any essential support, which results in a collapse of sorts. Nouns **הַת** (hat), **הַתַּת** (hatat), **הַתָּה** (hatta), **הַתַּחַת** (hathat) and **הַתִּית** (hittit) describe the various nuances of debilitating or paralyzing terror or fear. The identical adjective **הַת** (hat) means shattered or dismayed. Noun **מַחַתָּה** (mehitta) means destruction, ruin or terror.

The name Hittite comes from the name Heth — or directly from the Hebrew word **הַת** (hat) — but there are probably two groups called Hittites in the Bible. The famous Hittites, who had their empire north of Israel just prior to the time of the monarchy, are probably not the same as the "sons of Heth" as mentioned in Genesis. These latter Hittites were more likely a local Canaanite clan descended from Heth, the great-grandson of Noah through Ham and Canaan (Genesis 10:5 and 15:20).

The early Hittites supplied Abraham with his cave in Machpelah, which was owned by Ephron the son of Zohar and which Abraham bought to bury Sarah in (Genesis 23:8). Abraham's grandson Esau, the brother of Jacob, acquired wives from the Hittites, namely Judith and Basemath. This was much to the grief of his mother Rebekah, and father Isaac sent Jacob to Haran for a more suited wife (Genesis 27:46, 28:2, 28:10). During the days of judge Othniel, the nephew of Caleb, the Israelites at large intermarried with the Canaan nations, including the Hittites (Judges 3:5-6).

It appeared that the Hittites established their monarchy around 1750 BC and grew into such a formidable force that they rivaled Babylon and Egypt during the 13th century BC. The Hittite empire collapsed at some point just prior to the time of David (possibly due to the rise of the Philistines) but isolated cities continued as autonomous Hittite states. These proved strong enough to pose a threat even to the Arameans during the time after king Ahab and of the prophet Elisha (2 Kings 7:6).

Uriah, the unfortunate husband of Bathsheba, was a Hittite (2 Samuel 11:3), so was David's fellow Ahimelech (1 Samuel 26:6), and so were some of the wives of Solomon (1 Kings 11:1). After the return from exile, the Israelites intermarried again with the gentile nations, among which the Hittites (Ezra 9:1)