

Confirmation of the Covenant to Isaac. Heir of the Messianic Blessing.

Genesis 26

The Covenant with Abraham Confirmed

The theme of this portion of Scripture is the confirmation of the covenant with Abraham. The patriarch *did* know the content of the covenant, but this was the first time that the LORD appeared to Isaac to reaffirm the oath that He had sworn to Abraham (compare 22:15-18). This took place in the land of the Philistines.

As had happened in Abraham's days, a famine struck, affecting Canaan southward to the Negeb. Isaac was still living at Laharoi, from where his flocks wandered out. But when also the vast steppes dried out, he travelled westward to Abimelech in Gerar. This was the same person who previously had made the covenant with Abraham, and this covenant, as was customary, would pass from father to son (compare 21:22-24, 27). Besides, Gerar was outside the area struck by famine, being a fertile land, about 22 km to the south of Gaza along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea.

Verse 2 indicates that Isaac considered going on to Egypt. No reason is stated. More than likely it was because this land, the breadbasket of the surrounding areas, offered more room and security, although there was the threat of the rough treatment received by his father Abraham. Perhaps, too, he noticed that the Philistines were not too pleased with the thought of having such a wealthy prince of herdsmen settling within their country. But whatever is the case he does seem to have entertained some plans. Then the LORD appeared to him with the command not to do this; he had to stay in Gerar as a stranger. It was at this appearance that the LORD confirmed what He had sworn to Abraham, if Isaac would

stay in Gerar, thus within the boundaries of the land which God had promised (compare 15:18ff.). We can read the contents of the promise in verses 4 and 5. Here also it becomes apparent that the promise includes the multiplying as the stars of heaven, the numerous posterity, the possession of all these countries, that is, *the whole land of Canaan*, and “*in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed*” (KJV; compare Outline 8).

From these last words it becomes very clear that the promise is Messianic; it would be fulfilled in the Lord Christ. This then also applies to all the preceding promises (the seed, primarily in the New Testament, is the Church, and Canaan symbolizes the rest found in life eternal, as it is now already granted in part to the people of God).

As a result, Isaac remained in Gerar.

Now the LORD had also promised Isaac, as patriarch, that He would be with him, and would bless him (verse 3). We will see in what follows how the fulfilment started already in Gerar. But we will then also see the satanic opposition, which God used to test his faith, that Isaac would face. When after a certain length of time the men of that place came to him with Rebekah on their minds, he took refuge, as Abraham had done, in a lie, fearing that they would kill him if he told the truth, that Rebekah was not his sister, but in fact, his wife. And that was a danger, not from the side of Abimelech, who was wary enough of taking Rebekah into his palace, but from the side of the townsfolk. Thanks to the protecting hand of the LORD, however, nothing happened. Isaac was lacking in faith, but the LORD watched over His servant in His faithfulness. Much later Abimelech saw, as he looked from the window of his palace, Isaac fondling his wife. For this the patriarch was summoned to give account: Why had he let people think that Rebekah was his sister? Through his lie, a great debt could have been brought upon the inhabitants of Gerar. Abimelech then commanded, on pain of death, that no one was even to touch Isaac and Rebekah. And thus Isaac stayed in Gerar.

The Messianic Blessing—A Rich Blessing

If the protection given in the city had already proved to be a blessing, what followed was truly spectacular. Isaac, who did not want to depend

constantly on grain from the storehouses of the king for his large company in the vicinity of Gerar, obtained a large piece of farmland on loan on which to grow grain. The famine still continued everywhere but in the land of the Philistines. The patriarchs are normally considered great herdsmen, but here we see Isaac as a wealthy farmer.

Then the amazing thing happens, that the harvest yielded one-hundred-fold, a *bumper-crop*, something which almost never occurred. For the LORD blessed him. And the blessing continued to increase, so that he became rich, also in cattle; his wealth grew until he was very rich. The surplus production could be converted into money, with which he expanded the already thousand-fold population of his camp with a large number of slaves.

This provoked the jealousy of the Philistines. They envied him. They will have looked on for a few years. The famine was still not over, and it would have been more than shameful if, in those circumstances, they had sent him and all his people out into the sun-scorched, waterless Negeb. This was against all eastern rules of hospitality. But their feelings were vented. They viciously filled up the wells dug by the servants of Abraham in days gone by. New ones could easily be dug, but their enmity had been shown. And Abimelech's relationship with Isaac also changed. As soon as the drought in the Negeb had passed, he sent the patriarch away, giving as reason that Isaac had become much mightier than the Philistines . . . something we can take with a grain of salt.

We may call this special blessing Messianic. Contrary to the way it was with other nations, the prosperity and wealth could be viewed within the framework of the Covenant, and as prophecy of the rich Messianic blessings in the new dispensation. Although the emphasis has been placed on the spiritual aspect *after* Christ's coming, as opposed to the material aspect *before* Christ's coming, the fact remains that both in the Old and in the New Testament heavenly and earthly blessings are the fruit of Christ's sacrifice for sin. This was the case already *before* the sacrifice had been made, because the LORD then already gave His blessings, on credit (so to speak), because it was certain that the debt of sin would be repaid.

Isaac, therefore, moved away, and went the 90 km to the Valley of Gerar, in the extreme south of the Negeb, where Abraham also had wandered (20:1). Here a small footnote should be made.

The name “Valley of Gerar” (nowadays: “Wadi of Gerur”) was probably derived from a city or settlement of that name which was already known in the time of the patriarchs, and was situated in a fertile area on the south edge of the Negeb. In 1928 the British archaeologist, Flinders Petrie, excavated a sand-covered heap of ruins, finding remnants of an ancient palace and of grain storage sheds (approximately 4 hours west of Kadesh-Barnea). Since then, many have concluded that this was the ancient Gerar from the stories of the patriarchs. In this city Abraham and Isaac were supposed to have sojourned. But neither of these conclusions can be definitely proven. Even if we do accept that there was a city named Gerar situated there, it is still not proven that this was the city where the two patriarchs stayed. It is very well possible that there were two places named Gerar; in tens of cases the Bible mentions places with duplicate names. But Scripture only speaks of *one* Gerar, which, according to 10:19 was not far from Gaza, in the fertile Philistine coastlands of the Mediterranean Sea. We will stick to the traditional view that the patriarchs stayed *there*. We do read in 20:1 that Abraham settled in the steppes between Kadesh and Shur, and that he sojourned in Gerar, which is not further specified than in 10:19, and which we therefore consider to be the Gerar near Gaza. Genesis 20:1 does not specifically say that the city was near Kadesh. Genesis names the places where Abraham stayed, and then states that he wandered in the south of the Negeb, and having travelled north, that he stayed in Gerar.

Also in the Valley of Gerar, the Philistine herdsmen, who wandered far from home with their herds, harassed him (compare 37:14-17). There too, after Abraham’s death, they had filled in the wells. However, Isaac caused them to be re-excavated and called them by the names which Abraham had given them, thus indicating his right to them. He discovered other wells, one of which had flowing water, but the Philistines quarrelled with him about that water, and again at another well this happened. This did not please Isaac, so he moved to the north, where there were no disputes

over the water, so that he named the place “Rehoboth” (the LORD has made room for us). After that he moved even further north, to *Beersheba*, where Abraham had once made a covenant with Abimelech. There God appeared to him a second time, with these encouraging words: “I am the God of Abraham your father; fear not, for I am with you and will bless you and multiply your descendants for my servant Abraham’s sake.” Isaac sorely needed that, with all the enmity he had encountered, and considering all that would follow. He established a place of sacrifice where a public worship service was held, set up his tent there, and there his servants dug a well.

Around this time he was visited by Abimelech, who brought with him Ahuzzath, a civil magistrate, and Phicol, the commander of his army. It was intended to impress, and yet the king was driven by fear. Remembering how he had been dismissed, Isaac asked why they had come to him. With oriental cunning they did not discuss the legality of the dismissal (for it had been of someone with whom Abimelech had been bound by a covenant). They left it as it was. They did acknowledge that the patriarch had been blessed by the LORD, and that they therefore had come to make a covenant, guaranteeing that Isaac would not harm them (as if that had ever happened!); and they dare add: “. . . we have not touched you and have done to you nothing but good and have sent you away in peace.” The patriarch must have asked himself if they were sincere in saying that; their actions were being portrayed a little too favourably! Still, another state of mind was being displayed than at the last parting. Here again was the hand of the LORD, on Isaac’s side. In reality they were more afraid of Isaac’s God, than of Isaac himself.

The last words of verse 29 (“now the blessed of the LORD”) we should see as spoken by Abimelech with regard to himself: it was a request that he also be blessed.

After the customary covenant banquet they swore the covenant oath, early the following morning, and then the visitors started on the long journey home, led out by their host. On that day a new well was found, which was named Shibah, probably at some distance from Abraham’s well. The city later built on that site was called Beersheba, named after

this well of Isaac, as distinguished from the region Beersheba which was named after Abraham's well. This also was a continuing blessing after Abimelech's departure.

Esau's Marriage with Two Heathen Women

At the conclusion of this chapter Scripture notes that Esau married two Hittite women. We know from the story of Sarah's burial that Hebron was at that time occupied by a pioneer group of Hittites, one of the advanced settlements after the great Hittite migration out of the northern part of Asia Minor, as is generally accepted. The distance from Beersheba to Hebron is not quite 50 km; so it is not unlikely that Esau wandered that far afield. As he was the son of a mighty herdsman, it is quite possible that these women were of noble birth. For the first time in the history of the patriarchs we read of a marriage with the daughters of Canaan, the son of Ham (Genesis 10:15), descendants of the accursed one. For the first time we read of bigamy in Terah's line, something resulting from sensual lust. And as Esau continued to live in Isaac's encampment it becomes even more defined when we read: "they made life bitter for Isaac and Rebekah."

This whole occurrence is nothing less than *Esau's break with the patriarchal church*. Perhaps it is not an overstatement to say that heathendom was being brought into the camp, and yet Esau remained Isaac's favourite. The patriarch probably still hoped for the best.

Many wish to reverse the order of chapter 25 (starting at verse 21) and chapter 26. Then, the children would have been born in Beersheba, after their stay in Gerar, therefore. For in chapter 26 they have not yet been mentioned. Then Isaac and Rebekah would have been too old in Gerar to fondle each other as young lovers especially on the road in front of the palace windows. And if Rebekah was already a mother, she could hardly have posed as Isaac's sister. Nonetheless, we will stick to the chronological order of these stories. *Chapter 26 clearly assumes that Abraham was already dead (26:15 and especially verse 18)* And when Abraham died at 175, the boys had long ago been born, for Abraham died when Isaac was 75; Isaac was born when Abraham was 100, begot his sons when he was 60 and when Abraham was 160, and thus both boys were already

15 when Abraham died at 175. And since we read of Abraham's death in 26:18, when Isaac had already left Gerar and was wandering through the south of the Negeb, Esau and Jacob could not have been born after that in Beersheba.

As far as the objections to this are concerned:

- a. Let us assume that Isaac went to Gerar about 5 years after Abraham's death, he was 80, Rebekah 60, and the boys 20. The age of 80 we can equate with middle-age, which makes it very possible that Isaac and the 20 years-younger Rebekah would not be too old to fondle each other as young lovers while walking.
- b. It is also entirely reasonable that Rebekah could have hidden her motherhood by letting the boys hide themselves as young servants among the servants.

Placing the birth of Esau and Jacob, and the occurrences during their early years after chapter 26:1-33 is contrary to the obvious indications of Scripture.

Questions

1. What does it mean that Isaac was not allowed to go to Egypt?
2. Who or what is meant by "the seed" (KJV) in 26:24?
3. Did that promise also include Esau?
4. Why did Abimelech desist from taking Rebekah into his palace?
5. Does Canaan still typify the kingdom of the Messiah today?
6. Was Isaac's constant avoiding of quarrels with the herdsmen weakness or strength of faith?
7. Was it alright with Isaac that a wife was taken who did not belong to the patriarchal church?