5786 – Genesis 23-25 - Chayei Sarah (The life of Sarah)

THE BETROTHAL OF ISAAC (vv. 24:1-67)[1]

Having discharged his duty to the dead, Abraham now turns his attention to the needs of the living. **As long as Isaac is unmarried, the divine promise of posterity remains unfulfilled**. The patriarch therefore commissions his trusted servant to set out for far-off *Aram-naharaim* in order to find a wife for his son from among Abraham's own kinfolk.

This narrative, the longest chapter in Genesis, is a kind of novella, though it is somewhat dependent for its background on a knowledge of previous events. Its underlying motif is the abhorrence of the local Canaanites, who are presented in the Torah sources as unregenerately corrupt and who, for that reason, have forfeited all rights to their land.

The action in the narrative unfolds in five scenes. At the outset Abraham is the dominant personality. But the movement of the story gradually shifts to Isaac, so that at its conclusion it is the son who is the center of attention and the father has faded from the scene. The repeated phrase “my master Abraham" gives way to "my master Isaac" (v. 65). The betrothal episode effects the transition from the cycle of Abrahamic stories to the Isaac narratives. **This progression from the older to the successor generation is mediated by the servant, who has no other function here and is never heard of again**. For this reason, his anonymity is thoroughly appropriate. The fact that his statement, “I am Abraham's servant" (v. 34), constitutes the exact middle verse of the chapter is symbolic of his role: to forge the link between the generations.

The transition to Isaac and Rebekah as the successors of Abraham and Sarah and as the heirs to the divine promises is effected through the deliberate use of several literary devices. Rebekah’s departure for Canaan, recounted in verse 7, is so styled as to bring to mind Abraham's original exodus from his homeland, and the words are borrowed directly from 12:7. Key words and phrases of 12:1-3 also are repeated here, such as “native land" (vv. 4,7), "father's house" (vv. 3,7,8,41), "to the land" (v. 5,7), “blessing" (w. 1,35), and “becoming great" (v. 35). The divine order to Abraham, "Go forth," and his unfaltering response (12:1,4) are paralleled here by Rebekah's unquestioning willingness to go at once (v. 58). “I will go," she firmly declares in response to the query, "Will you go?" This crucial verb "to go" (Heb. *h-l-kh*) occurs seven times in connection with Rebekah, a sure sign of its seminal importance. Finally, the divine blessing bestowed on Abraham, “Your descendants shall seize the gates of their foes” (22:17), is repeated almost verbatim in the farewell blessing to the bride in verse 60.

One other feature of the narrative deserves special mention. **Although God does not intervene in a supernatural manner, the reader nevertheless is left with the absolute conviction that the guiding hand of Providence is present from first to last**. The narrative conveys the clear impression that the commonplace and the natural are the arena for the realization of God's unfolding plan of history.

ABRAHAM COMMISSIONS HIS SERVANT (vv. 1-9)

1. *old, advanced in years* Abraham's awareness of his extreme old age lends urgency to his quest for a wife for his son.(1) That is why he extracts an oath from his servant when a simple order normally would have sufficed. The servant's query in verse 5 assumes the possibility of the patriarch not being alive by the end of his mission. Significantly, the only other instance of the particular form of oath described in verse 2 occurs in a deathbed scene, 47:29.

Genesis 47:29-31

29 When the time drew near for Israel to die, he called for his son Joseph
and said to him, "If I have found favor in your eyes, put your hand under my thigh and promise that you will show me kindness and faithfulness. Do not bury me in Egypt, 30 but when I rest with my fathers,
carry me out of Egypt and bury me where they are buried." "I will do as
you say," he said. 31 **"Swear to me," he said**. Then Joseph swore to him,
and Israel worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff.

blessed ... in all things Abraham's wealth is to be a decisive factor in gaining consent both to the marriage and to the bride's journey to a distant land.(2)

2. *senior servant* Possibly he is Eliezer, who was mentioned in i5:7. The chief servant in an aristocratic household was invested with considerable power and responsibility.(3)

3. *Put your hand under my thigh* Gestures accompanying oath-taking are universal in the ancient world. Most frequently, they involve the raising of a hand, as in 14:22, and/or the holding of a ritual object. In later times, a Torah scroll, phylacteries, or a Bible might be held for such a purpose.(4)

The unusual nature of the present act leaves any explanation uncertain. Interpreters are unanimous that the "thigh" refers to the genital organ.(5) This may be a reference to circumcision: Holding the circumcised membrum, called the "sign of the covenant" in 17:I1, may invoke the presence and power of God as the guarantor of the oath. **But such symbolism would be valid only if it were recognized by both sides**. The gesture would be meaningless to an uncircumcised servant. If he were circum-

1 Nahum M. Sarna, Gen. Ed., *The JPS Torah Commentary, Genesis*, (The Jewish Publications Society), pp. 161-166.

cised, and this presumably was the case here, it is unclear why he did not have to touch his own membrum. Another explanation regards the "thigh" as the seat of the procreative powers. The gesture would then involve posterity in the implementation of the instructions. Verse 41 shows that a curse was invoked as part of the oath in the event of non-compliance. So the placing of the hand on the membrum may have been a gesture acknowledging that Abraham's posterity would avenge the violation. (This explanation becomes less convincing in 47:29, where Jacob adjures Joseph.) The notion that the curse has to do with sterility or loss of offspring is open to the same objection as was leveled against the first explanation.

3. The patriarch asks his servant to take an oath by “the LORD, the God of heaven and the God of the earth," a title that is unique in biblical literature. In light of the fact that the mission involves travel to a distant land, it makes sense to invoke God's universal sovereignty. The epithet may be a monotheistic version of an ancient Near Eastern oath formula in which the gods of heaven and earth were invoked as witnesses.[6]

4. ***Land of my birth*** Or “of my kinsman" ... In his repetition of the story, the servant consistently speaks of "family," or "kindred," as in verses 38, 40, and 41,

get a wife The Hebrew verb-*lakach*, literally "to take," has legal force. It is the equivalent of Akkadian *ahâzu*, "to seize, possess, marry." These terms define the marriage institution from the perspective of the groom. The narrative also reflects the custom of the parent initiating the marriage transaction.[7]

6-8. These verses contain the last words of the patriarch. Expressing his absolute faith in the workings of a benign Providence, they are in striking contrast to the first words that the text ascribes to him, an expression of doubt (15:2f.,8).

The divine promises contain two elements, posterity and national territory. Isaac, in his person and by his very presence in Canaan, symbolizes the fulfillment of both. That is why he alone of the patriarchs must never leave the land; in 26:2f. he is actually forbidden to do so, even in time of famine. He also is the only one who sowed the soil (26:12). If Isaac were to desert the land or intermarry with the local Canaanites, he would, in effect, be renouncing God's promises. His marriage is seen as part of the same divinely ordained historic process that commenced with Abraham's exodus from Ur.

7. ***the God of heaven*** The second part of the epithet of verse 3 is inappropriate because the present context is different. The emphasis is not God's sovereignty but His providence, here personified as an angel, a heavenly being.

His angel For a discussion of biblical angelology, see Excursus 10.

8. ***clear of this oath*** The Hebrew stem *nakah* denotes, among other things, "to be free of (further) obligation."

THE ENCOUNTER WITH REBEKAH (vv. 24:15-27)

The servant's prayer is answered at once and in full measure. He had not specified family relationship, and the girl turns out to be Abraham's kin. He had said nothing of beauty, and she is well endowed with it. Moreover, her chastity, a virtue highly esteemed, is unblemished.

15. ***born to Bethuel*** .. Her full genealogy is given because, as related in 22:20-24, Nahor also had children from a concubine. The child of a chief wife enjoyed higher social prestige. The relationship to Abraham is given in order to emphasize the providential nature of what occurred.

16. ***a virgin*** ... Hebrew *betulah*, like its cognates Akkadian *batultu*, Ugaritic *btlt*, Arabic *batul*, Syriac *bethultha*, does not by itself, without further definition, exclusively express virginity in the physical sense understood by the English word. Rather, the primary denotation is chronological, and the term denotes a sexually mature young girl of marriageable age, whether married or not. Thus Joel 1:8 can use the figure of a maiden (*betulah*) lamenting for the husband of her youth, and an Aramaic incantation text speaks of a *bethultha* who is pregnant. When Akkadian texts wish to stress the preservation of bodily virginal integrity, they employ the phrase *ša zikaram la idû*, "who has not known a man," which corresponds almost exactly to the additional defining clause in this verse, (i.e., “no man had ever slept with her” (v. 16).

went down ... filled ... came up She went about her business briskly and conscientiously, not wasting time in idle gossip. This made a great impression on the servant.[11]

17. In order to test her, he deliberately refrains from asking for water for the animals.

19. ***until they finish*** Her offer is not a token gesture, but an act of true generosity proffered in full knowledge of the great labor involved.

22. Partly in return for her self-imposed, arduous labors and partly to win her goodwill and to impress her family, he lavishes rich gifts upon the girl. The fact that he does so even before learning her identity has caused difficulty for the commentators. Rashi understands the servant’s action to be an expression of implicit faith in God's response to his prayer. Most Jewish exegetes prefer to reverse the order of events and cite verse 47 as proof.[12]

The specification of the weight of the jewelry is due to the fact that such items were cast according to fixed standards and used as media of exchange.

half-shekel Hebrew *beka'* is a weight so defined in Exodus 38:26. The word is probably derived from a root meaning "to split, divide." Several weights inscribed in the paleo-Hebrew script with *beka'*, or its abbreviation *b*, have been found. They have an average weight of 6.019 grams (.21 oz)

24. In detailing her family connections, she has no reason to include her father's relationship to Abraham, as had the Narrator in verse 15.

25. To provide provender (i.e., dry food, such as hay or oats, for livestock or other domestic animals) and shelter for the camels is a munificent (i.e., very generous) undertaking.

(1) According to the chronological scheme of Genesis, Abraham is now 140 years of age (21:5; 25:20) and will live for another 35 years (25:7); cf. Gen. R. 62:6.
(2) The wealth is referred to in vv. 10, 22, 30, 3s, 36, 47, 53.
(3) Cf. the status of Joseph, Gen. 39:4; Ps. 105:21; cf. 2 Sam. 12:17.
(4) For holding a sacred object while taking an oath, cf. Shevuot (Oaths) 38b. D. M. C. Englert, "Bowdlerizing in the Old Testament," in *A Light Unto My Path*, ed. H. N. Beam *et al.* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1974), 143; R.D. Freedman, "'Put Your Hand Under My Thigh'-the Patriarchal Oath," BARev (Biblical Archeology Review) 112 (1976): 3-4, 42.
(5) For thigh as euphemism, cf. Gen. 46:26; Exod. 1:5; Judg. 8:30. In favor of the circumcision association are Targ. Jon., Gen. R 59:11, Tanh. B. Gen. 120, Yal. Gen. 106, Rashi, Shadal. It is rejected by Ibn Ezra, Radak, and Hizkuni.
(6) For heaven and earth as witnesses, cf. Deut. 4:26; 30:19; 31:29;32:1; Isa. :2. The title "God of Heaven" is frequently employed in texts that derive from the Persian period; cf. Dan. 2:18f., 37: 44; Ezra 1:2 (= 2 Chron. 36:23); 5:11; 6:9f.; 7:12, 21, 23; Neh. 1:4f., 2:4, 20; cf. also Jon. 1:9; Ps. 136:26. In none of these sources is the full formula found as it is here. It should be noted that the early-eighth-century Aram. inscription of Zakkur king of Hamath invokes "the gods of heaven" (ANET, p. 655), and in an Aram. letter discovered in Saqqara, Egypt, deriving from seventh/sixth century B.C.E., a deity is entitled "[lord] of heaven and earth" (KAI 266.I-2), The Phoenician god Baal was often called "Baal of heaven," *ba'al shamem* (Yehimilk, 10th cent. B.C.E., ANET, p. 653; Karatepe, 8th cent. B.C.E., ANET, p. 654).
(7) For *l-k-h* meaning marriage, cf. Gen. 25:20; 28:6; Deut. 22:13; 23:1; 24:5; etc. For the parent initiating the marriage transaction, cf. Gen. 21:21; 28:1f.; 34:4; 38:6; Judg. 14:2; cf. Hammurabi, pat. 155 (ANET, p. 182).
(8) So Abravanel. For the angel as the personification of God's providence, cf. Gen. 48:15f.; Exod. 23:20, 23; 32:34; 33:2; Ps. 34:8; 91:11.
(9). For this usage, cf. Num. 32:22; Deut. 24:5; Josh. 2:20; 1 Kings 15:22.
(10) Aram-naharaim appears also in Deut. 23:5; Judg. 3:8; Ps. 60:2; 1 Chron. 19:6. J. J. Finkelstein, "Mesopotamia," JNES 21 (1962): 73-92. II. So Abravanel.
(11) So Abravanel.
(12) For the transposition, cf. Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, Ramban, Radak, Yehudah He-Hasid, Abravanel, Hizkuni, Tosafot to Hullin (Profane) 95b.

1. ***This progression from the older (Abraham) to the successor (Isaac) generation is mediated by the servant, who has no other function here and is never heard of again.***
   a. This is typical of narrative Hebrew literature. The people, places, events and whatever other details that are included are provided to tell the story. **Superfluous details are not included**. This does mean that the "servants" role is unimportant—it just means he did what he was called to do. He might have continued to play a major role in the affairs of Abraham's life—but he was no longer essential in the telling of the story of the transition from Abraham to Isaac.
2. *One other feature of the narrative deserves special mention.* ***Although God does not intervene in a supernatural manner, the reader nevertheless is left with the absolute conviction that the guiding hand of Providence is present from first to last.***
   a. Just like in the Book of Esther. The LORD is not mentioned even once but "the reader nevertheless is left with the absolute conviction that the guiding hand of Providence is present from first to last."
      The name of Esther in Hebrew is *Hadassah*. The name comes from the word for "myrtle," a type of shrub known for its fragrant leaves and flowers—it symbolizes resilience and strength.
3. ***Another explanation regards the "thigh" as the seat of the procreative powers ... the placing of the hand on the membrum may have been a gesture acknowledging that Abraham's posterity would avenge the violation.***
   a. Hebrews 7:4-10 (NAS)
      [4]Now observe how great this man was to whom Abraham, the patriarch, gave a tenth of the choicest spoils. [5]And those indeed of the sons of Levi who receive the priest's office have commandment in the Law to collect a tenth from the people, that is, from their brethren, although these are descended from Abraham. [6]But the one whose genealogy is not traced from them collected a tenth from Abraham, and blessed the one who had the promises. [7]But without any dispute the lesser is blessed by the greater ... [9]And, so to speak, through Abraham even Levi, who received tithes, paid tithes, [10]**for he was still in the loins of his father when Melchizedek met him**.
4. *The emphasis is not God's sovereignty but His providence,* ***here personified as an angel, a heavenly being.***
   a. Genesis 24:7
      [7]"The LORD, the God of heaven, who brought me out of my father's household and my native land and who spoke to me and promised me on oath, saying, 'To your offspring I will give this land'—**he will**

send his angel before you so that you can get a wife for my son from there.

1) מַלְאָכוֹ (*mal-a-ch<u>h</u>o*—his angel), *messenger, representative, courier, angel.* "Messenger" is an inadequate term for the range of tasks carried out by th(is Hebrew word). These were 1) to carry a message, 2) to perform some other specific commission, and 3) to represent more or less officially the one sending him. There were both human and supernatural *mala<u>ch</u>îm*, the latter including the Angel of the Lord).

2) <u>Exodus 23:20-21</u>

[20]"See, I am sending **an angel** ahead of you to guard you along the way and to bring you to the place I have prepared. [21]Pay attention to him and listen to what he says. **Do not rebel against him; he will not forgive your rebellion, since my Name is in him**.

a) "my Name is in him," i.e., either 1) he acts on my authority, or 2) he is a manifestation of Me since My character is in him.

1] Metatron? See 5785 - Deuteronomy 33-34 – V'zot HaBera<u>ch</u>ah (This is the Blessing)

3) <u>Isaiah 63:7-9</u>

[7]I will tell of the kindnesses of the LORD, the deeds for which he is to be praised, according to all the LORD has done for us-- yes, the many good things he has done for Israel, according to his compassion and many kindnesses. [8]He said, "Surely they are my people, children who will be true to me"; and so he became their Savior. [9]In all their distress he too was distressed, and **the angel of his presence saved them**. In his love and mercy he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.

a) <u>Joshua 5:13-6:2</u>

[13]Now when Joshua was near Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua went up to him and asked, "Are you for us or for our enemies?" [14]"No," he replied, "but as commander of the army of the LORD I have now come." Then Joshua fell facedown to the ground in reverence, and asked him, "What message does my Lord have for his servant?" [15]The commander of the LORD's army replied, "**Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy**." And Joshua did so.

[6:1]Now the gates of Jericho were securely barred because of the Israelites. No one went out and no one came in. [2]**Then the LORD said to Joshua**, "See, I have delivered Jericho into your hands, along with its king and its fighting men ...

4) <u>Daniel 6:22</u>

My God sent his angel, and he shut the mouths of the lions. They have not hurt me, because I was found innocent in his sight. Nor have I ever done any wrong before you, Your Majesty."

5) <u>Psalm 34:7-8</u>

[7]**The (*or* an) angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him**, and he delivers them. [8]Taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him.

6) <u>Psalm 91:11</u>

[11]For **he will command his angels concerning you** (i.e., "those who dwell in the shadow of the most high [v. 1]) to guard you in all your ways;

7) <u>Hebrews 1:14</u>

[14]**Are not all angels ministering spirits** sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?

5. ***16. a virgin*** ... *Hebrew betulah* ... ***does not by itself, without further definition, exclusively express virginity in the physical sense understood by the English word. Rather, the primary denotation is chronological, and the term denotes a sexually mature young girl of marriageable age, whether married or not****. Thus Joel 1:8 can use the figure of a maiden (betulah) lamenting for the husband of her youth ... When Akkadian texts wish to stress the preservation of bodily virginal integrity, they employ the phrase ša zikaram la idû, "who has not known a man," which corresponds almost exactly to the additional defining clause in this verse, (i.e., "no man had ever slept with her" (v. 16).*

a. In *The Holy Scriptures,* by Alexander Harkavy, published by the Hebrew Publishing Company,[2] the word *almah* is rendered "virgin" three of the seven times that it is used:

1) <u>Genesis 24:43-45</u>

[43]Behold, I (Abraham's servant) stand by the well of water; and it shall come to pass, that when the **virgin** (Heb הָעַלְמָה [*ha-almah*] LXX/παρθένος [*parthenos*]) cometh forth to draw *water,* and I say to her, Give me, I pray thee, a little water of thy pitcher to drink ... [45]And before I had done speaking ... **Rebekah** came forth ...

2) <u>Exodus 2:7-8</u>

[7]Then said (Moses') sister to Pharaoh's daughter, Shall I go and call to thee a nurse of the Hebrew women, that she may nurse the child for thee? [8]And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, Go. And the **maid** (*ha-almah*) went and called the child's mother.

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2 Alexander Harkavy, *The Holy Scriptures,* (Hebrew Publishing Company, 1951).

3) Isaiah 7:14

[14]Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, the **young woman** (Heb הָעַלְמָה LXX/παρθένος) shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

4) Psalm 68:25

[25]The singers went before, the players on instruments *followed* after; among *them were* the **damsels** (עֲלָמוֹת) playing with timbrels.

5) Proverbs 30:18-19

[18]There be three *things which* are too wonderful for me, yea, four which I know not: [19]The way of an eagle in the air; the way of a serpent upon a rock; the way of a ship in the midst of the sea; and the way of a man with a **maiden** (בְּעַלְמָה).

6) Song 1:3

[3]Because of the savor of thy good ointments thy name *is as* ointment poured forth; therefore do the **virgins** (עֲלָמוֹת) love thee.

a) *Rashi*—**maidens: *virgins***, since the text compares Him to a youth whose beloved holds him dear …

7) Song 6:8

[8]There are threescore queens … fourscore concubines, and **virgins** (עֲלָמוֹת) without number.

b. It is true that Rashi (1040-1105 CE) interpreted Isaiah 7:14 to mean a young woman, perhaps for the same reason that he made Isaiah 53 refer to Israel and not to the Messiah. But this is not enough to prove that Rashi always made *almah* to mean a young woman ... in the Song of Solomon 1:3 and 6:8 ... Rashi makes *almah* to mean "virgin!"[3] (See Song 1:3).

c. "There is no instance where it can be proved that *'almâ* designates a young woman who is not a virgin. The fact of virginity is obvious in Gen 24:43 where *'almâ* is used of one who was being sought as a bride for Isaac. Also obvious is Ex 3:8. Song 6:8 refers to three types of women, two of whom are called queens and concubines. It could be only reasonable to understand the name of the third group, for which the plural of *'almâ* is used, as meaning 'virgins.' In Ugaritic the word is used in poetic parallel with the cognate of *betûlâ*."[4]

3 Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *Jesus was a Jew,* (Ariel Ministries), p. 52.

4 R. Laird Harris, Gleason J. Archer, Jr., Bruce K Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament, Vol. 2* (Moody Press), entry on *alma,* p. 672.

d. A little over seven centuries before the birth of (Messiah) the throne of Ahaz, king of Judah, was being threatened by a coalition of the king of Israel (Pekah) and the king of Syria (Rezin). The threat of these two conspirators was to destroy David's dynasty and to establish a king of their own choice, 'even the son of Tabeel' (Isa. 7:6) ... At this critical juncture Isaiah is sent to Ahaz to admonish him to place his trust in (the Lord), and to ask for a sign of God's protecting care ... But wicked Ahaz, who placed his trust in Assyria rather thin in (the Lord), feigned a pious excuse and in mock humility refused the sign. The prophet ... then gave utterance to the oracle of the Lord in the words, "Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: behold the *almah* shall conceive, etc."[5]

e. The *almah* spoken of in verse 14 is most likely Isaiah's future wife ... The use of the definite article, *ha-almah* ('***the*** young woman or maiden'), clearly indicates someone well known to both Isaiah and Ahaz. Gleason Archer writes: 'At the time Isaiah 7:14 was given, the "prophetess" mentioned in 8:3 would have been a virgin and would have been known to Ahaz and his court as the woman to whom Isaiah ... was engaged.' It was predicted of her that she would bear a son and that his name would be Immanuel. Before this child would reach an age of full moral responsibility the two lands ruled by king Rezin and king Pekah would be forsaken (v.16). Within time, the prophecy came to fulfillment exactly as God said it would be. **The prophecy of Isaiah 7:14 therefore, was literally fulfilled during the days of Isaiah, and specifically in his son *Maher-shalal-hash-baz* (Isa. 8:13)**. What Matthew does in Matthew 1:22-23 to Isaiah 7:14 is quite similar to what he does in Matthew 2:15 to Hosea 11:1. **This is clearly typology**. As the child Immanuel, who was born during the time of Ahaz, gave hope and comfort to Judah, so also, in a much greater manner, the child (Yeshua) gives hope and comfort to the people of God that God is indeed with them as well (Lk. 1-2). Moreover, as the future mother of the antitype, Isaiah's wife to be, was a virgin up until the night of her wedding, the virgin Mary, in a much greater manner was a *virgo intacta* at the time the angel announced to her that she would become the mother of (Yeshua). Joseph had no carnal knowledge of her until after her firstborn Son was delivered, according to Matthew 1:24-25.[6]

5 William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew* (Baker Book House), p. 134.

6 Darryl Martin Erkel, *Difficult Texts in the New Testament: A Resource for Hebrew Christians* (1989), pp. 23-24.