

[NS] The Cave of Machpelah

Abraham's spiritual odyssey reached its climax with the Akedah. For all intents and purposes, his biography is complete. But two important issues remain: the concern with mortality and the preoccupation with posterity. The former finds expression in the acquisition of a hereditary burial site, the latter through the selection of a wife for Isaac so that the succession of the line may be secured. These are the topics of chapters 23 and 24, respectively.

The account of the purchase of the Cave of Machpelah is extraordinarily detailed, indicating the importance the episode had assumed in the consciousness of Israel. There are several possible reasons for this emphasis. Not only is it the first recorded death and interment in the history of the Jewish people, but it also concerns none other than Sarah, the first matriarch. Abraham's actions are indicative of the great respect for the dead and of the importance of proper burial that remain a characteristic of the Jewish faith.

Machpelah is the first piece of real estate in the promised land secured by the founding father of the nation, and its acquisition presages the future possession of the entire land. Since all three patriarchs and three of the matriarchs eventually were interred in the cave, it most likely enjoyed popular veneration as a shrine and as a symbol of national and social unity. This may well have influenced David's choice of Hebron as the first capital of Israel.

Finally, the narrative in a very real sense presents another mute affirmation of Abraham's faith. In the preceding chapter, the divine promises were reiterated and expanded. Now Abraham faces harshly contrasting reality: to gain a mere burial plot he must receive permission from the local population and pay out a large sum of money. His insistence on acquiring the estate in perpetuity is an expression of faith that his descendants would indeed inherit the land.

The narrative itself is suffused with legal terminology and practice, an understanding of which is essential to its interpretation. First, Abraham labors under two disabilities that derive from his status as an alien: He cannot avail himself of local burial facilities without municipal permission, and he cannot acquire land.

Second, even if these restrictions were to be overcome, he would still face the problem of procuring an inheritable estate to be used by future generations, for an alien could not normally own land in perpetuity.

Third, apart from legal problems, there is the reluctance of landowners to part with their property, a pervasive and deep-seated attitude throughout the ancient Near East. The land is looked upon as an ancestral trust. All this is reinforced by the strong influence of communal solidarity, the consciousness that disposal of real estate to an alien may upset the local demographic balance, impair social cohesion, and weaken the community in its relationship with neighboring cities and tribes. Given these circumstances, it is small wonder that the entire community was involved in transacting a sale of land.

Abraham wishes to ensure that his purchase is final and irrevocable, his ownership absolute and incontestable. For these reasons, he refuses a gift. Donations are notoriously insecure in

law. They may be challenged by heirs or by other members of the family or community, or even by the donor himself should his goodwill wane. Only a payment that is manifestly accepted by the seller of his own volition ensures the unchallengeable nature of the transaction. That is why Ephron, not Abraham, must first state the price and why, once that is done, there is no further bargaining.

The Betrothal of Isaac

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 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" (verses 4,7), "father's house" (verses 3,7,8,41), "to the land" (verses 5,7), "blessing" (verses 1,35), and "becoming great" (verse 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 (verse 58). "I will go," she firmly declares in response to the query, "Will you go?" This crucial verb "to go" 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.

Following Isaac's marriage, the biblical text reports nothing more of the activities of Abraham, even though the chronological system of Genesis informs us that he lived for another thirty-five years. His death and burial are now recorded, preceded and followed by genealogical lists of his descendants. Thus the entire cycle of Abrahamic traditions, which was preceded by a detailed list of Abraham's ancestors, is encased within a framework of genealogies. The closing section, which shows how God's promises to the patriarch were realized, is dependent on, and presupposes, a knowledge of those earlier promises.

[WTC] Rebekah's role

Isaac's love for Rebekah is the first mention of spousal love in the Bible. Like other ancient Near Eastern sources, the Bible shows a concern with preserving family possessions, both tangible (land) and intangible (blessings and identity). Arranged marriages serve this purpose. Love, however, is also mentioned as a motive for marriage: Jacob loves Rachel (Genesis 29.30), and Michal loves David (1 Samuel 18.20). With Isaac, love follows rather than precedes marriage. We do not know whether Rebekah loves Isaac. Reports of a woman's love for a man are rare, found only with Princess Michal and in sensual terms in Song of Songs.

The Bible is largely silent about marriage procedures. In fact, Genesis 24 remains the most detailed biblical source on this subject. The customs it describes largely correspond to information from ancient Mesopotamian texts. According to both sources, parents usually arrange the marriage (as when Samson asks his father and mother to get him a wife in Judges 14.2-3). Brothers sometimes act in this role. The groom or his family brings gifts for the bride's family. In the Bible, these gifts are called mohar, a term without the misleading commercial overtones of its usual English translation as "bride-price." The servant's gifts in Genesis 24 may represent the mohar. In some Babylonian documents, the bride's father also gives gifts.

Genesis 24 emphasizes Rebekah's role in the marriage negotiations. The servant bestows expensive gifts mostly on Rebekah herself ("objects of silver and gold, and garments"), with only some for her brother and mother (24.53; note the silence about the father). Moreover, she chooses when to go to her husband (24.55-58). In contrast, the groom, Isaac, plays no role in the arrangements. These details emphasize the union of Rebekah and Isaac as one in which the woman is assertive and the man compliant. This depiction sets the stage for Rebekah's prominence in subsequent episodes.

Tamara Cohn Eskenazi

Points to ponder for Chapter 23:

Sarah died in Chevron and Avraham "came to grieve for" her. What was she doing in Chevron—and why was Avraham somewhere else?

Why is it important to establish that Sarah died in the Land of Israel?

Why does the Torah describe the negotiations for the purchase?

Why is Avraham insistent on this particular burial site?

Why does he insist on paying for the site when it is offered to him free of charge?

If the offer is a mere courtesy meant to start bargaining, why does he simply agree to the opening asking price, without bargaining?

What is the significance of the term *ger v'toshav*; often translated as resident alien, but translated by Friedman more literally as "an alien and a visitor," and what does this story teach us about our responsibilities to the foreigners who live among us?

Why is the burial plot called "the Cave of Machpelah"?

Parashat Chayei Sarah (Genesis 23.1-25.18)

Chapter 23

1 Sarah's lifetime—the span of Sarah's life—came to 127 years. **2** Sarah died in Kiryat-arba—now Hebron—in the land of Canaan; and Abraham came [proceeded—JPS, CS] to mourn Sarah and to weep for her.

3 Then Abraham rose from beside his dead and spoke to the Hittites [the children of Heth—REF; sons of Het—EF], saying, **4** “I am a resident alien [an alien and a visitor with you—REF; a sojourner settled—EF; a foreigner living for a time—CS] among you; sell me a burial site among you, that I may remove my dead for burial.”

5 And the Hittites replied to Abraham, saying to him, **6** “Hear us, my lord: you are the elect [a chieftain—REF; one exalted of—EF; a mighty prince—CS, RA] of God among us. Bury your dead in the choicest of our burial places; none of us will withhold his burial place from you for burying your dead.”

7 Thereupon Abraham bowed low to the people of the land, the Hittites, **8** and he said to them, “If it is your wish that I remove my dead for burial, you must agree to intercede for me with Ephron son of Zohar.

9 Let him sell me the cave of Machpelah that he owns, which is at the edge of his land. Let him sell it to me [let him give me title—EF], at the full price, for a [an inalienable—CS] burial site in your midst.”

10 Ephron was present among the Hittites; so Ephron the Hittite answered Abraham in the hearing of the Hittites, all who entered the gate [the council-gate—EF] of his town [in the hearing of all the Hittites and all the town leaders—CS], saying,

[WGP] 1. Sarah's lifetime lived. The chapter actually focuses on her death and burial, not her life. However, the notice that the marriage of Isaac and Rebekah is consummated in Sarah's tent (24.67) suggests that her life continues through the next matriarch.

[WGP] 127 years old. Sarah is the only matriarch whose age at death is reported. Her age surpasses the ideal 120 with the sacred number of 7.

4. a resident alien Abraham mentions his status because it is key to the request that follows; a resident alien was unable to purchase real estate.

sell me The Hebrew verb *n-t-n* (נ-ת-ן) is employed seven times in the course of the negotiations. It can mean “to give, sell, pay.” Its many meanings allow the dialogue to proceed in delicate and dignified atmosphere, if somewhat contrived, politeness.

a burial site Hebrew *achuzat kever* essentially denotes an inheritable sepulcher. This is the key to the transaction since the cave is to serve future generations of the family of Abraham.

6. Hear us This appeal, employed here six times in one form or another, is characteristic of the language of legal proceedings.

[RA] elect of God On the surface, this is a courtly gesture of extravagant generosity. But there is ambiguity of intention here: a certain exaggeration in calling Abraham a prince of God “among us” (he had claimed to be only “with” them); and a pointed deletion of any reference to a “holding” or to transfer of property.

7. bowed low. The patriarch is respectful and courteous, but not ingratiating or obsequious.

8. Ephron son of Zohar The Bible rarely records the father's name for a non-Israelite. This exception suggests that Ephron was a man of nobility.

[RA] at the edge of his land Abraham wants to make it clear that he will not need to pass through or encroach on the rest of the Hittite property.

[RA] at the full price At this point, Abraham makes it altogether unambiguous that the “grant” he has been mentioning means a sale

Guide to the Translators and Commentators used here

EF: Everett Fox REF: Richard Elliott Friedman RA: Robert Alter NS: Nahum Sarna CS: Chaim Stern

SRH: Samson Raphael Hirsch RASHI: Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchak OJPS: Old Jewish Publication Society version WGP:

W. Gunther Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*

TWQ: *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*

11 “No, my lord, hear me: I give you the field and I give you the cave that is in it; I give it to you in the presence [before the eyes—REF, EF] of my people. Bury your dead.”

12 Then Abraham bowed low before the people of the land [the land-owning citizens—CS], **13** and spoke to Ephron in the hearing of the people of the land, saying, “If only you would hear me out! Let me pay the price of the land; accept it from me, that I may bury my dead there.”

14 And Ephron replied to Abraham, saying to him, **15** “My lord, do hear me! A piece of land worth 400 shekels of silver—what is that between you and me? Go and bury your dead.”

16 Abraham accepted Ephron’s terms. Abraham paid out [weighed out—REF, EF] to Ephron the money that he had named in the hearing of the Hittites—400 shekels of silver at the going merchants’ rate.

17 So Ephron’s land in Machpelah, near Mamre—the field with its cave and all the trees anywhere within the confines of that field—passed **18** to Abraham as his possession, in the presence of the Hittites, of all who entered the gate of his town [and of all the town leaders—CS].

19 And then Abraham buried his wife Sarah in the cave of the field of Machpelah, facing Mamre—now Hebron—in the land of Canaan.

20 Thus the field with its cave passed from the Hittites to Abraham, as a burial site [And the field and the cave that was in it were established for Abraham as a possession for a tomb from the children of Heth—REF].

[REF] **11 I give you the field.** But he has not given it to him. They are bargaining and Ephron follows the practice of adopting an extraordinarily gracious opening position. But one is not supposed to take him up on it, and Abraham in fact does not. This, in turn, sheds light on the extraordinary offer that Lot makes, to give his daughters to the people of Sodom for abuse.

11. Abraham seems to have had in mind only the cave. Ephron offers it together with the field as a gift. There is no way of telling whether the offer is sincere or simply the opening gambit in anticipation of the usual oriental bargaining.

13. Well aware of the legal instability of gifts of land, Abraham turns down the offer.

[WGP] **15. 400 shekels of silver** Abraham wants no gift; he needs a purchase title like any citizen. Ephron takes full advantage and exacts what appears to be a very high price. While differences in time and monetary value make comparisons difficult, it might be noted that Omri (9th century B.C.E.) paid 6,000 shekels for the land on which Samaria was built (1 Kings 16.24) and that a small plot like Machpelah could be had for 17 shekels about 600 B.C.E. (Jeremiah 32.9). The contractual arrangements follow a definite legal pattern known in the ancient Near East.

16. at the going merchants’ rate, a specification necessary in view of the variations in the shekel weight. There was a common and a royal weight, and within each also a light and heavy standard.

17. Mamre As was explained in connection with the War of the Kings, Mamre was the designation of one of the ancient and influential families in Hebron, and it seems to have lent its name to one of the town’s important quarters. Mamre was an easily identifiable landmark, the name being perhaps elliptical for the famous “terebinths of Mamre.”

19. Abraham buried his wife This terse statement, bereft of any descriptive detail, epitomizes the simplicity and lack of ostentation that have always characterized traditional Jewish burial rites.

20. passed Literally, “arose.” The Hebrew stem k-v-m (ק-ו-מ), used here, has legal force as a technical term in connection with property transfers and other situations.

Points to ponder for Chapter 24:

1. Why does Avraham believe the Canaanite women are unsuitable for Yitzchak? After all, he has Canaanite allies. His nephew had no trouble marrying off his daughters to local men. Why could not Yitzchak do the same?
2. If the issue is idol worship, what difference does it make whether he marries a Canaanite or someone from Aram-naharaim? Everyone worships idols! As the commentator Abravanel notes, “Nachor and B’tu-el were just as idolatrous” as the rest of the Aramaeans.
3. Compounding these two questions is this: Did Avraham actually instruct his servant to go the home of B’tu-el? In the text, he commands the servant to go “to the land of my birth and get a wife for my son.” It is the servant who says to Lavan and B’tu-el that Avraham commanded him to “go to my father’s house, to my kindred, and get a wife for my son.” If Avraham merely sent the servant to Aram-naharaim, then we again must wonder what’s wrong with the Canaanite women.
4. Assuming Avraham did send the servant to his family to seek a wife for Yitzchak, is this not a violation of God’s own will? Did not God tell Avraham to abandon his home, his family and his land and go to Canaan? Is that not meant as a rejection of Avraham’s home, family and land as unworthy of the First Patriarch?
5. Why did the servant choose this particular test to locate the “right bride”?
6. Why does the servant take the events as narrated in Verses 22 and 23 and reverse them in recalling the events to Lavan (Verse 47)?
7. If Lavan and B’tu-el are idol worshippers (we know from reading ahead that Lavan placed great store in his household idols and Joshua says in Chapter 24 of his own book, “In olden times, your forefathers—Terach, father of Abraham and father of Nachor—lived beyond the Euphrates and worshiped other gods”), why would they say “The matter was decreed by Adonai; we cannot speak to you bad or good”? Why should they be moved by what some “alien god” decrees? And what exactly was it that suggested to them that God decreed anything, other than that is what the servant claimed?
9. Is Lavan a good guy or a bad guy here?

Chapter 24

1 Abraham was now old, advanced in years, and the Lord had blessed Abraham in all things. **2** And Abraham said to the senior servant of his household, who had charge of all that he owned, "Put your hand under my thigh **3** and I will make you swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and the God of the earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites among whom I dwell, **4** but will go to the land of my birth and get a wife for my son Isaac."

5 And the servant said to him, "What if the woman does not consent to follow me to this land, shall I then take your son back to the land from which you came?"

6 Abraham answered him, "On no account must you [take great care not to—CS; wrch yourself not to—RA] take my son back there! **7** The Lord, the God of heaven, who took me from my father's house and from my native land, who promised me on oath, saying, 'I will assign this land to your offspring'—He will send His angel [messenger—RA; a divine emissary—CS] before you, and you will get a wife for my son from there. **8** And if the woman does not consent to follow you, you shall then be clear of this oath to me; but do not take my son back there."

9 So the servant put his hand under the thigh of his master Abraham and swore to him as bidden [lit. about this matter].

10 Then the servant took 10 of his master's camels and set out, taking with him all the bounty of his master; and he made his way to Aram-naharaim, to the city of Nahor. **11** He made the camels kneel down by the well outside the city, at evening time, the time when women [girls—REF, CS] come out to draw water.

1. old, advanced in years Abraham's awareness of his extreme old age lends urgency to his quest for a wife for his son. That is why he extracts an oath from his servant when a simple order normally would have sufficed. The servant's query in verses assumes the possibility of the patriarch not being alive by the end of his mission.

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. senior servant Possibly he is Eliezer. The chief servant in an aristocratic household was invested with considerable power and responsibility.

Put your hand under my thigh Interpreters are unanimous that the "thigh" refers to the genital organ. This may be a reference to circumcision. Holding the circumcised membrum, called the "sign of the covenant," may invoke the presence and power of God as the guarantor of the oath. Verse 41 shows that a curse was invoked as part of the oath in the event of noncompliance.

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.

4. land of my birth. In his repetition of the story, the servant consistently speaks of "family," or "kindred."

7. the God of heaven The first 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.

10. took ... set out ... made his way In conformity with the non-descriptive biblical narrative style, the details of the long journey are ignored. Only the goal and its achievement are considered worthy of description.

10 of his master's camels The sizable convoy is indispensable to the progress of the story, for it is designed to make a powerful impression on the girl and her family, to serve as the instrument for testing her character, and to have the practical purpose of providing the means of homeward transportation for the bride and her entourage.

12 And he said [prayed—CS, RA], “O Lord, God of my master Abraham, grant me good fortune this day, and deal graciously with my master Abraham: **13** Here I stand by the spring as the daughters of the townsmen come out to draw water; **14** let the maiden [girl—REF, CS] to whom I say, ‘Please, lower your jar that I may drink,’ and who replies, ‘Drink, and I will also water your camels’—let her be the one whom You have decreed for Your servant Isaac. Thereby shall I know that You have dealt graciously with my master.”

15 He had scarcely finished speaking [praying—CS], when Rebekah, who was born to Bethuel, the son of Milcah the wife of Abraham’s brother Nahor, came out with her jar on her shoulder.

11. It was natural for a newly arrived stranger to head for the public wells. He could replenish his water supplies and at the same time cull much valuable information about the town and make useful contacts, for the well served as a meeting place for the townsfolk and shepherds. Jacob, too, gravitated at once toward the well on arriving at Haran in 29.2, and Moses did the same thing when he fled to Midian in Exodus 2.15. In each case, the encounter at the well eventuated in a betrothal. The three scenes share a number of features in common.

at evening time When the chores are done, and the sun-baked day has cooled, the young women who go out to draw water can dawdle over the task and engage in leisurely conversation.

12-14. The unnamed servant of Abraham is the first person whom Scripture records as praying for personal guidance at a critical moment. The prayer is of interest because it is a “prayer of the heart,” uttered spontaneously and without formality. It implies a concept of the individual as a religious unit in his own right, as distinct from the community. Individual, direct contact with God and an understanding of God as approachable are prominent motifs in the religion of Israel. They find expression for the first time in the simple, pious prayer of the servant.

12. grant me good fortune It should be noted that the servant does not ask for a miraculous divine intervention or for a revelation that would designate Isaac’s bride-to-be. He prays, rather, that the rational criteria of suitability that he himself determines— the ideal wife must be hospitable to strangers, kind to animals, and willing to give of herself to others—might be in accordance with God’s will and be effective.

14. The grueling nature of the prescribed test can be appreciated only if it is realized that a single camel—and here there were 10!—requires at least 25 gallons of water to regain the weight it loses in the course of a long journey. It takes a camel about 10 minutes to drink this amount of water.

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.

16 The maiden was very beautiful, a virgin whom no man had known. She went down to the spring, filled her jar, and came up.

17 The servant ran to her and said, "Please, let me sip a little water from your jar."

18 "Drink, my lord," she said, and she quickly lowered her jar upon her hand and let him drink.

19 When she had let him drink his fill, she said, "I will also draw for your camels, until they finish drinking."

20 Quickly emptying her jar into the trough, she ran back to the well to draw, and she drew for all his camels.

21 The man, meanwhile, stood gazing at her, silently wondering whether the Lord had made his errand successful or not.

22 When the camels had finished drinking, the man took a gold nose-ring weighing a half-shekel, and two gold bands for her arms, 10 shekels in weight.

23 "Pray tell me," he said, "whose daughter are you? Is there room in your father's house for us to spend the night?"

24 She replied, "I am the daughter of Bethuel the son of Milcah, whom she bore to Nahor." **25** And she went on, "There is plenty of [shredded] straw [mixed with feed] and feed at home, and also room to spend the night."

26 The man bowed low in homage to the Lord **27** and said, "Blessed be the Lord, the God of my master Abraham, who has not withheld His steadfast faithfulness from my master. For I have been guided on my errand by the Lord, to the house of my master's kinsmen."

16. a virgin... Hebrew *betulah*, like its Semitic cognates, 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 *betulta* who is pregnant. When Akkadian texts wish to stress the preservation of bodily virginal integrity, they employ the phrase "who has not known a man," which corresponds almost exactly to the Hebrew defining clause in this verse.

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.

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. That he lavishes rich gifts upon the girl 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.

25. To provide provender and shelter for the camels is a munificent undertaking.

28. her mother's household In this society a girl would ordinarily refer to her home as her mother's house.

28 The maiden ran and told all this to her mother's household. **29** Now Rebekah had a brother whose name was Laban. Laban ran out to the man at the spring—**30** when he saw the nose-ring and the bands on his sister's arms, and when he heard his sister Rebekah say, "Thus the man spoke to me." He went up to the man, who was still standing beside the camels at the spring.

31 "Come in, O blessed of the Lord," he said, "why do you remain outside, when I have made ready the house and a place for the camels?"

32 So the man entered the house, and the camels were unloaded. The camels were given straw and feed, and water was brought to bathe his feet and the feet of the men with him. **33** But when food was set before him, he said, "I will not eat until I have told my tale." He said, "Speak, then."

34 "I am Abraham's servant," he began.

35 "The Lord has greatly blessed my master, and he has become rich: He has given him sheep and cattle, silver and gold, male and female slaves, camels and asses. **36** And Sarah, my master's wife, bore my master a son in her old age, and he has assigned to him all he owns.

37 Now my master made me swear, saying, 'You shall not get a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites in whose land I dwell; **38** but you shall go to my father's house, to my kindred, and get a wife for my son.'

39 And I said to my master, 'What if the woman does not follow me?'

[RA] 30. when he saw... A brilliant moment of exposition of character. The narrator makes no comment about what kind of person Laban may be. His sharp eye on the precious gifts surely invites us to wonder about him—though, for the moment, we might conclude that he simply sees here evidence that Isaac comes of good family. Hovering suspicions about Laban's rapacity will be confirmed many decades later in the course of his slippery dealings with Jacob. In contrast to the marriage so easily arranged for Isaac, Jacob will face immense difficulties, created by Laban, in working out the terms of his betrothal.

34-39. In a remarkably long and detailed speech, the servant recounts his entire experience. Tactfully, the narrative leaves unmentioned Abraham's original separation from the family and the proscription on bringing Isaac to them.

[RA] As several modern commentators have noted, he makes numerous adjustments of the language he is quoting because of the practical and diplomatic requirements of addressing this particular audience. Thus, the narrator simply said that "Adonai had blessed Abraham in all things." The servant, cognizant that this is a preamble to a proposal of marriage, fleshes out that flat statement by speaking of how his master has "grown great" in sheep and cattle and other livestock, in slaves and silver and gold.

40 He replied to me, 'The Lord, whose ways I have followed, will send His angel with you and make your errand successful; and you will get a wife for my son from my kindred, from my father's house. **41** Thus only shall you be freed from my adjuration: if, when you come to my kindred, they refuse you—only then shall you be freed from my adjuration.'

42 "I came today to the spring, and I said: O Lord, God of my master Abraham, if You would indeed grant success to the errand on which I am engaged! **43** As I stand by the spring of water, let the young woman who comes out to draw and to whom I say, 'Please, let me drink a little water from your jar,' **44** and who answers, 'You may drink, and I will also draw for your camels'—let her be the wife whom the Lord has decreed for my master's son.'

45 I had scarcely finished praying in my heart, when Rebekah came out with her jar on her shoulder, and went down to the spring and drew. And I said to her, 'Please give me a drink.'

46 She quickly lowered her jar and said, 'Drink, and I will also water your camels.' So I drank, and she also watered the camels.

47 I inquired of her, 'Whose daughter are you?' And she said, 'The daughter of Bethuel, son of Nahor, whom Milcah bore to him.' And I put the ring on her nose and the bands on her arms. **48** Then I bowed low in homage to the Lord and blessed the Lord, the God of my master Abraham, who led me on the right way to get the daughter of my master's brother for his son.

[RA] 40. What the servant is careful to delete in his repetition of the dialogue with his master are all the monotheistic references to the God of heaven and earth and the covenantal promises to give the land to the seed of Abraham. Similarly excluded is Abraham's allusion to having been taken by God from his father's house and the land of his birth—a notion the family, to whom this God has not deigned to speak, might construe as downright offensive.

[RA] from my kindred, from my father's house. Abraham had actually said, quite simply, "from there," but at this point the servant chooses to elaborate his master's meaning in terms that emphasize to the kinfolk Abraham's admirable sense of family loyalty.

41. my adjuration The curse attaching to an oath as the penalty for noncompliance, as specified in Numbers 5.21f.

45. Rebekah The girl had not revealed her name. How the servant knew it is not stated.

[RA] 47. I inquired of her And I put the ring in her nose. The one significant divergence in the servant's report of the encounter at the well is that he claims to have asked Rebekah about her lineage before placing the golden ornaments on her, whereas he actually did this as soon as she had drawn water for all the camels, and only afterward did he inquire about her family. This alteration of the order of actions is again dictated by considerations of audience. The servant, having seen the stipulation of his prayer completely fulfilled by the beautiful girl at the well, is entirely certain that she is the wife God has intended for Isaac. But to the family, he does not want to seem to have done anything so presumptuous as bestowing gifts—implicitly betrothal gifts—on a young woman without first ascertaining her pedigree. This is a small but strategic indication of the precision with which social institutions and values are adumbrated in the dialogue.

49 And now, if you mean to treat my master with true kindness, tell me; and if not, tell me also, that I may turn right or left."

50 Then Laban and Bethuel answered, "The matter was decreed by the Lord; we cannot speak to you bad or good. **51** Here is Rebekah before you; take her and go, and let her be a wife to your master's son, as the Lord has spoken."

52 When Abraham's servant heard their words, he bowed low to the ground before the Lord. **53** The servant brought out objects of silver and gold, and garments, and gave them to Rebekah; and he gave [precious—REF, CS] presents to her brother and her mother.

54 Then he and the men with him ate and drank, and they spent the night. When they arose next morning, he said, "Give me leave to go to my master." **55** But her brother and her mother said, "Let the maiden remain with us some 10 days; then you may go."

56 He said to them, "Do not delay me, now that the Lord has made my errand successful. Give me leave that I may go to my master."

57 And they said, "Let us call the girl and ask for her reply." **58** They called Rebekah and said to her, "Will you go with this man?" And she said, "I will." **59** So they sent off their sister Rebekah and her nurse along with Abraham's servant and his men.

60 And they blessed Rebekah and said to her,

50. Laban and Bethuel It is not only strange that Laban takes precedence over his father but also that the father plays no further role in the proceedings. In verse 53, he is not listed among the recipients of gifts, and in verse 55 it is Laban and his mother who carry on the negotiations. The conclusion that Laban occupies a special position in the family is inescapable. Numerous ancient Near Eastern texts demonstrate that in a patriarchal society the brother had important duties and powers in regard to his sisters. There are also legal documents that detail the joint exercise of authority by mother and son in the marriage of a daughter.

[RA] Bethuel The convincing conclusion of many textual critics is that the appearance of Bethuel is a later scribal or redactional insertion. The surrounding narrative clearly suggests Bethuel is deceased when these events occur. Otherwise, it is hard to explain why the home to which Rebekah goes running is referred to as "her mother's household." It is her brother who is the male who speaks exclusively on behalf of the family; only her mother and brother are mentioned, never her father, elsewhere in the report of the betrothal transaction. and even in this verse, "answered" is in the singular, with an odd switch to the plural occurring only for "said."

55-58. What is at issue here is not consent to the marriage—it has already been given and its formalities completed—but agreement to quit the familial hearth at once for a distant land, foregoing the customary elaborate leave-taking ceremonies such as Laban describes to Jacob in 31.27.

[RA] 57. Let us call the girl. Alter disagrees with Sarna. Rebekah is asked to consent to the marriage, a practice also found in some Nuzi documents.

59. her nurse In 35.8 Rebekah's nurse is identified as Deborah, and her death and burial are recorded. She was obviously an esteemed member of the family. Having attended and reared Rebekah from birth, she must have remained as a member of the household and now accompanies her as a chaperon.

[WGP] As in other societies, for a young woman to retain her old wet nurse as permanent companion is a sign of social status (one recalls Shakespeare's Juliet). The nurse's name will be given when she is accorded an obituary notice in chapter 35.

“O sister!
May you grow
Into thousands of myriads;
May your offspring seize
The gates of their foes.”

61 Then Rebekah and her maids arose, mounted the camels, and followed the man. So the servant took Rebekah and went his way.

62 Isaac had just come back from the vicinity of B’er-lachai-ro-i, for he was settled in the region of the Negev. **63** And Isaac went out walking [to meditate, according to some—Shammai] in the field toward evening and, looking up, he saw camels approaching.

64 Raising her eyes, Rebekah saw Isaac. She alighted from [lit. fell off] the camel **65** and said to the servant, “Who is that man walking in the field toward us?” And the servant said, “That is my master.” So she took her veil and covered herself.

66 The servant told Isaac all the things that he had done. **67** Isaac then brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he took Rebekah as his wife. Isaac loved her, and thus found comfort after his mother’s death.

Chapter 25.1-18

1 Abraham took another wife, whose name was Keturah. **2** She bore him Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah.

3 Jokshan begot Sheba and Dedan. The descendants of Dedan were the Asshurim, the Letushim, and the Leummim.

4 The descendants of Midian were Ephah, Epher, Enoch, Abida, and Eldaah. All these were descendants of Keturah.

[RA] 63. went out walking. The verb la-su-ach (לשׁוּחַ) translated as “walking,” occurs only here, and no one is sure what it really means. [Sichah (שיחה) means conversation, which is how some say that Isaac went into the field to pray. To “pray” is to converse with God.—Shammai]

67. into the tent of his mother By this act, Rebekah formally becomes the successor to Sarah the matriarch. The continuity of the generations is assured.

[RA] Interestingly, no mention whatever is made of Abraham at the end of the story. Many have construed his charging of the servant at the beginning of the story as a deathbed action: it would not be unreasonable to surmise that he is already deceased when the servant returns (the genealogical notation concerning Abraham in the next chapter would be out of chronological order). The conclusion of the betrothal tale in this way creates a curious symmetry between the household of the bride and the household of the groom. She, evidently, is fatherless, living in “her mother’s household.” It is quite likely that he, too, is fatherless; and though he was bereaved of his mother still earlier, it is to “his mother’s tent” that he brings his bride.

loved her The first reference to love in the Bible (22.2) concerned the tie between parent and child; this, the second, relates to the bond between husband and wife.

Chapter 25.1-18

1. Abraham took another wife Over forty years earlier the patriarch had judged himself to be too old to sire children, it is hardly likely that he had six sons after the age of 140. Hence, the present report does not relate to a time subsequent to Sarah’s death and Isaac’s marriage, but to many years before. That is why verse 6, like I Chronicles 1.32, refers to Keturah as a “concubine,” not a wife.

5 Abraham willed all that he owned to Isaac; **6** but to Abraham's sons by concubines Abraham gave gifts while he was still living, and he sent them away from his son Isaac eastward, to the land of the East.

7 This was the total span of Abraham's life: one hundred and seventy-five years. **8** And Abraham breathed his last, dying at a good ripe age, old and contented; and he was gathered to his kin. **9** His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron son of Zohar the Hittite, facing Mamre, **10** the field that Abraham had bought from the Hittites; there Abraham was buried, and Sarah his wife.

11 After the death of Abraham, God blessed his son Isaac. And Isaac settled near Beer-lahai-roi.

12 This is the line of Ishmael, Abraham's son, whom Hagar the Egyptian, Sarah's slave, bore to Abraham. **13** These are the names of the sons of Ishmael, by their names, in the order of their birth: Nebaioth, the first-born of Ishmael, Kedar, Adbeel, Mibsam, **14** Mishma, Dumah, Massa, **15** Hadad, Tema, Jetur, Naphish, and Kedmah. **16** These are the sons of Ishmael and these are their names by their villages and by their encampments: **12** chieftains of as many tribes.

5-6. The preceding list naturally raises the question as to how Isaac's status might be affected by the existence of so many brothers. We are therefore informed of three measures taken by the patriarch to remove any possible opposition to Isaac and to ensure his son's undisputed succession.

First, Isaac is formally declared to be the sole heir to all the father's effects.

Second, Abraham makes gifts to his other sons while he is still alive. The purpose and meaning may be illuminated by Hammurabi's laws, paragraph 171 of which stipulates that if the sons of concubines are not formally legitimated by the father "during his lifetime," they may not share in the paternal estate.

Third, the purposes of the two preceding measures are finally secured by the separation of the half-brothers from the clan of Abraham and their migration to another land.

7. According to the chronology of Genesis, Abraham resided in the land exactly 100 years.

8. old and contented Such a summation of a life is found with no other personality in biblical literature. The phrase describes not his longevity, which is otherwise mentioned, but the quality of his earthly existence.

11. After the death of... Literally, "It was after the death of..." The Hebrew expression occurs nowhere else in the Torah but is again used in Joshua 1.1, Judges 1.1, and 2 Samuel 1.1 in connection with the passing of Moses, Joshua, and Saul, respectively. In each instance, it indicates a historic turning point has been reached; an era has come to an end, but the continuity of the leadership has been assured.

God blessed...Isaac He made him the recipient of the covenant in fulfillment of the promise of 17. 21.

16. All 12 Ishmaelite tribes are said to have lived in "villages." From several biblical references, it is clear that the "villages" were unfortified encampments, often dependent on neighboring towns.

12 chieftains The phrase harks back to 17.20 to indicate that God's promise has been fulfilled. The "chieftain," The foregoing 12 are taken to be the eponymous ancestors of the Ishmaelite confederacy, that is, the historical personalities from whom the tribes and places listed received their names.

17 These were the years of the life of Ishmael: 137 years; then he breathed his last and died, and was gathered to his kin. **18** They dwelt from Havilah, by Shur, which is close to Egypt, all the way to Asshur; they camped alongside all their kinsmen [he fell facing all of his brotherslit. & REF].

17. From the patriarchal period on, the Bible only records the life spans of the heroes of Israel. This notice about Ishmael is exceptional and appears because of two earlier chronological notes, namely, Abraham's age at his birth and the boy's age when he was circumcised.

18. The territorial boundaries of the Ishmaelite confederation, or the geographic limits of their settlement and migration patterns, are now given. The tradition derives from the period prior to the rise of the Amalekites, for by the days of Saul this people had occupied the identical area, according to I Samuel 15.7, and had apparently displaced the Ishmaelites.

they camped...their kinsmen The Hebrew has the singular "he...his" because it harks back to the prediction of 16.12 which speaks of Ishmael, the person. The stem n-f-l, here rendered "camped," is the same as that used in Judges 7. r 2 of predatory tribes "spread" over the plain, deployed for incursions against Israel.