



Provision at a Distance

Genesis 24:1-21

Abraham had left the lands of his ancestors, traveling on pilgrimage with God to a distant land. It was not simply his journey that distinguished him from the peoples among whom he traveled. According to the witness of the Jews, the main difference between Abraham and his neighbors was a religious distinction. It was from this perspective that the Jews read the narrative of the search to find a wife for Isaac. There would be no taking a wife for his son from among the inhabitants of Canaan, more than anything because of their forms of worshipping pagan deities.

They understood that there are very important religious distinctions in the formation of a family, influences that may define the religious identity of a later generation. To avoid such external influences among the Jews, they avoided allowing their sons to marry the women of other nations. This came to be part of Mosaic Law that they were not to marry women of other peoples. In certain periods of history this aspect of the law was ignored, but in later times this prohibition was accepted as being very important. The purpose behind this was religious, seeking to maintain the purity of cult to Yahweh in contrast to the idolatry of the nations that surrounded the chosen nation.

In Abraham's effort to find a wife for his son from among his relatives, the Jews saw the nation's need to be zealous in maintaining themselves pure before God. There are other aspects of this narrative, however, that were just as important as the search for a worthy wife for Abraham's heir. This was the divine action in providing an appropriate wife for Isaac from very far away.

Abraham was already advanced in years. His wife had died and he was concerned with locating a wife for his son. The social context of the day was very different from that of today. It was the role of the father to seek a wife for his son. Current considerations of romantic love, the initiative of young people in making their own marital arrangements, and mutuality among equals were non-existent. This was much more of an economic arrangement to provide for the needs of the son.

This is not the way we would consider marriage today. This is not the way Jesus treated women and marriage in his day, either. Jesus treated women in a way that demonstrated their own worth, conferring upon them opportunities which society limited to men. He spoke to them as having the same worth as a man. He offered them the same opportunities to learn that he gave to the rest of his disciples. It was to women he first entrusted the message of his resurrection. Meanwhile, in this moment of Abraham's life, we see a picture of ancient arrangements for the purchase of a bride for Isaac, Abraham's son and heir.

Abraham entrusted his Damascan steward, Eliezer, with the great responsibility of acquiring a wife for his son from among his relatives. Eliezer departed on the journey of upwards of 450 miles, returning to the land of these relatives. He did not know what awaited him along the journey, nor at its destination. He took some time to make the journey, since traveling by camel is not quite the same as an automobile race. Coming near the place where Abraham's relatives lived, he sought God's guidance in prayer. He did not pray as we might expect, but called out to "the God of my master, Abraham." He recognized God. He conceded the proper authority to God, but he still did not consider this his own God. It was the God of Abraham, for it was to Abraham whom God had given the promise. Even so, God heard him, respecting both his words and intent to fulfill the charge given him by Abraham.

He sought God's help to locate the appropriate girl to marry Isaac. He defined something of the character of this girl as he made his request to God. He asked that it be the one of whom he asked for a drink of water who should offer water not only for him, but also for his camels. This was the kind of girl he wanted and asked that this be the kind of girl God would choose for Isaac. He then stationed himself by the well to wait for the women of the city to arrive to draw water from the well.

There was in Eliezer's prayer more than simply a search for direction. The fact that she would give him water would tell him something about her dealings with foreigners. It was an indication of her character and sense of justice for those deprived of rights in society. The fact that she would give herself the task of giving water both to him and to the camels indicated her zeal in helping those in need, even at great personal cost. What was missing in such a demonstration, however, was that she be a marriageable girl from among his master's relatives.

Then came Rebecca to draw water from the well. The steward asked her to give him some water to drink, and with pleasure she offered him water, going on then to offer water also to all his camels. This was no simple proposition, as he travelled with ten of the animals, each one of which could drink a great quantity of water at once. Ignoring the amount of work she was giving herself, Rebecca positioned herself to offer water, drawing enough with her jar for each one of the camels to drink to satisfaction.

The steward already knew with this that Rebecca was the kind of wife he sought for Isaac. She did not run from work, but energetic and compassionate with strangers. Just as Abraham had said, he recognized that God had sent his messenger ahead of Eliezar to locate the one he should bring back as a wife for Isaac. He marveled while he watched her draw water from the well and emptied it into the water trough for the camels. He had prayed to God, but he had not expected it to be so easy to find the girl he was to bring back to his master Abraham to become Isaac's wife.

God had taken Abraham out of the house of his father, from the lands his relatives knew, and had taken him to a distant land. God was with his master in the land of promise, but even so he heard the steward and prepared his way in the land around Haran. It was one thing for Abraham to trust in God's protection and direction throughout his pilgrimage to a distant land, but now that God would hear and heed Abraham's servant in one land while hearing and caring for Abraham in another was something much more extraordinary.

Eliezar was learning something about his master's God. He was facing a new proposition about the identity and character of Abraham's God. This God was not as limited as the gods of the surrounding nations were believed to be. He was able to direct people in different places, provide for the needs of an heir from far away, without this being difficult. He was still unsure how this story would end, but he could see that distance was no problem at all for God.

This Damascan steward found that God was up to the measure of his doubts, worries, and uncertainties. Distance that was an impediment to man was no difficult condition to God. Even so, this was a new understanding regarding God's provision, a provision to which distance was no hindrance to hearing the prayers of a Damascan placed in charge of locating a wife for the heir of his master. Do we place limits and conditions on God's provision, or have we learned to trust in this great God who is able to meet the needs of Abraham as well as those of his steward?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*