



Faithful to Details

Genesis 25:1-18

How was God's promise to Abraham fulfilled? The Jewish perspective is that Abraham was father of the descendants and promise through Isaac, Jacob, and the twelve tribes. The Arab Muslims see themselves as the authentic descendants through Abraham's first-born son, Ishmael. As Christians, we follow a tradition of the promise through the Jewish lineage to Jesus, where it is extended toward all races of people. The three groups defend God's promise to Abraham as coming through their descendants and tradition, but seek certain exclusivity of participation in God's blessings. Are God's blessings so limited that there is no room for multiple blessing?

The text here relating the final stage of Abraham's life speaks of a series of sons we normally do not recall in our memory of his life story. The text initially seems to indicate that these other sons were born after Sarah's death, but it is more likely that they are the sons of a second wife of Abraham's during Sarah's lifetime. For his day, having a second wife was not beyond the bounds of normalcy, especially when dealing with an important and rich man like Abraham.

We have very little information relating to Keturah, this other wife. She was most likely a concubine, as Abraham did not give her sons part of the inheritance, though he provided for them while he still lived. The text passes over many of the details, for these details are not central to its principle interest in the Abraham narrative. What the redactors wanted to communicate was Abraham's position before God and the ancestral story of the chosen people. Mention of Keturah and her children might easily have been left out. In no other portion of Scripture to she figure with any importance.

There is, however, a reason for mentioning her here. It is not due to her personal importance, nor that of her sons, even if some of their descendants play roles of nations with whom the Hebrews interacted in the course of their history. Her mention has to do with God's promise to Abraham with its full range of details.

The Bible is not a treatise of history. It contains history, for sure, but it narrates events with a much greater purpose than telling history. It is a compendium of books which narrate the identity, character, and plans of God. As some have mentioned, its central theme is God's search for humanity. Under this larger purpose, Keturah is mentioned. Her sons also belong to the plan and purposes of God. They also find themselves under God's promise to Abraham.

At Abraham's death, Isaac and Ishmael cooperate with each other to bury their father in the cave of Machpelah, where Sara had also been buried. The text recognizes this as the appropriate junction of Abraham's descendants, recognizing that the promise and its responsibility had passed to both sons, even if the central theme of the promise would continue through Isaac. It was Isaac to whom the inheritance and promise passed in its primary portion. At the same time, we recall that the promise was greater than simply the inheritance received by the people of Israel.

When Abram's name was changed to Abraham, the stipulated reason was that he would be father to many nations. The land would be given to his descendants. The fulfillment of the promise was greater than the form in which we usually see it. These sons of Keturah are also the fathers of nations, just as Ishmael was the father of nations in his turn. To each one of Abraham's eight sons, Abraham

gave substantial gifts during his lifetime. It was the way to divide the inheritance among a man's sons in that day. The sons of the official wives divided the inheritance proper, while the other sons received gifts that would maintain them in a similar fashion.

The fact that it was only Isaac to whom the inheritance proper fell indicated that he was the only son of Abraham's legitimate wife, the others being the sons of concubines. In whatever way, all the sons participated in the promise and its fulfillment. We have no option to ignore some or others. They were all in the chain of Abrahamic descendants. Even the age designated for Ishmael indicated something of his importance to God, as advanced age was considered a sign of divine blessing.

Abraham blessed all, sending his various sons to the East to give each one space to develop in their own environment. In one way this also indicated that Isaac's descendants were to belong to the land of Palestine, but at the same time it expanded the limits of the promise to Abraham. To his descendants would belong much more land than simply that of Canaan, for theirs would also be the lands to their eastern border. Ishmael's descendants with all their tribes were designated to have the lands to the south of what would be Israel toward the lands of Egypt.

All told, God's promise was much greater than what is commonly understood among the Abrahamic traditions. In this one passage, it extends to the lands eastward and southward of Israel, just as among the three branches of Abraham's descendants. Our tendency is to think too much in rivalries among groups, while the divine tendency is to extend blessing in many directions.

Sarah' and Hagar's fighting does not extend to their sons in this passage. On the contrary, the two join together to bury their father in the cave of Machpelah alongside Sarah's remains. By the text's indication, this was no simple exercise, as it would seem that by this time the two lived in different places. On recognizing the death of their father, however, they arrived together to take their leave of Abraham, the recipient of God's promise and through whom both received God's blessing.

There are many reasons to make distinctions between individuals in Abraham's lineage. They come from three distinct women, one the legitimate wife, one a slave, and the third a concubine. Only one was the legitimate heir. As Abraham was a rich man, there were many goods to divide among his sons, with many opportunities for conflicts among the various recipients. Ishmael could have claimed the rights of the firstborn. What we see, however, is that while he still lived, Abraham divided his goods among his eight sons, avoiding those issues. At the same time, he indicated that God's blessings are sufficient to go around.

God's promise was not limited to Isaac and his descendants. The promise was much greater than that. It extended through all Abraham's sons. It is and was God's will to bring blessing to all, without exception.

We struggle over God's blessing when we feel insecure with the sufficiency of God's provision and blessings. When we accept the sufficiency of God, there is no more reason for such squabbles. God being sufficient, we can live in peace. Are we ready to recognize that God's grace is enough to encompass everyone? There is no need for our factions and arguments. Together we can all rest in God's sufficiency to rescue all without respect to ancestry and traditions. After all, the promise was for Abraham to be a blessing to all nations—even those we might consider enemies.

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