

The "Begats"

³⁴ The man said, "I am Abraham's servant." ³⁵ The LORD has richly blessed my master, has made him a great man, and has given him flocks, cattle, silver, gold, men servants, women servants, camels, and donkeys. ³⁶ My master's wife Sarah gave birth to a son for my master in her old age, and he's given him everything he owns. ³⁷ My master made me give him my word: 'Don't choose a wife for my son from the Canaanite women, in whose land I'm living.' ³⁸ No, instead, go to my father's household and to my relatives and choose a wife for my son.' ⁴² "Today I arrived at the spring. Rebekah came out with her water jar on her shoulder and went down to the spring to draw water. And I said to her, 'Please give me something to drink.' ⁴⁶ She immediately lowered her water jar and said, 'Drink, and I will give your camels something to drink too.' So I drank and she also gave water to the camels. ⁴⁷ Then I asked her, 'Whose daughter are you?' And she said, 'The daughter of Bethuel.'" I put a ring in her nose and bracelets on her arms. ⁴⁸ I bowed and worshipped the LORD and blessed the LORD, the God of my master Abraham, who led me in the right direction to choose the granddaughter of my master's brother for his son. ⁴⁹ Now if you're loyal and faithful to my master, tell me. If not, tell me so I will know where I stand either way." ⁵⁸ They called Rebekah and said to her, "Will you go with this man?" She said, "I will go." ⁵⁹ So they sent off their sister Rebekah, her nurse, Abraham's servant, and his men. ⁶⁰ And they blessed Rebekah, saying to her, "May you, our sister, become thousands of ten thousand; may your children possess their enemies' cities." ⁶¹ Rebekah and her young women got up, mounted the camels, and followed the man. So the servant took Rebekah and left. ⁶³ One evening, Isaac went out to inspect the pasture, and while staring he saw camels approaching. ⁶⁴ Rebekah stared at Isaac. She got down from the camel ⁶⁵ and said to the servant, "Who is this man walking through the pasture to meet us?" The servant said, "He's my master." So she took her headscarf and covered herself. ⁶⁶ The servant told Isaac everything that had happened. ⁶⁷ Isaac brought Rebekah into his mother Sarah's tent. He married Rebekah and loved her. So Isaac found comfort after his mother's death.

The Begats

I recall a Sunday school class from my early teen years. We sat in chairs that were backed up against the walls of the classroom, and our teacher would have us read one verse at a time as we worked our way through a book of the Bible. After each verse or two we would stop and talk about what it meant. What we always dreaded the most was coming to a passage that we called the "begats." We dreaded "the begats," the listings of who begat who for generation after generation. There were all of those strange old names that we had no idea how to pronounce, and "the begats" were boring. Our eyes would glaze over.

As I began to study for this week's sermon, I kept running across "begats," so to speak. Reading these genealogies as an adult was more interesting than when I was a teenager. Years ago, climbing in trees and spending the day sitting on a limb was great fun. Now I was intrigued by climbing through the family tree of Abraham. Sometime during the week, the sermon ceased being solely about Isaac and became focused on the family tree of the Patriarchs. This morning I'd like to spend some time together with you, climbing through Abraham's family tree, talking about the "begats." ■ We're told that Abraham had two brothers = one named Haran and one

named Nahor. Abraham left his family behind when he moved to Canaan. His brother, Haran, had already died, leaving an orphan son, Lot. Abraham brought Lot with him to Canaan.

■ In Genesis chapter 20, verse 12, we learn that Abraham was married to his half-sister Sarah. They're unable to have children and so Abraham had a child by Hagar, a serving woman, a child named Ishmael. Then, as God promised, Sarah has a son and they named him Isaac. Years later, after Sarah died, Abraham married Keturah, and she bore him six children. So we can say that Abraham's family tree has three branches at this point, because he had three wives. But, Abraham began lopping off branches of the family tree. He banished Hagar and her son Ishmael, and late in his life he sent Keturah away with her six children so that Isaac would not have to share his inheritance.

Our Scripture reading this morning told the story of how Abraham sent a servant to go find a wife for Isaac. The servant returned with Rebecca, who was a cousin, one generation removed, the granddaughter of Abraham's brother Nahor. Rebecca had twin boys, Esau and Jacob. Through trickery Jacob received the bulk of his father's inheritance and blessing, but it caused so much trouble in the family that he had to leave and go back to his mother's family where he was safe for many years. There, Jacob fell in love with a cousin named Rachel, the daughter of his mother's brother. He eventually married two cousins - Leah and Rachel - and he had children by them, and children by their two handmaidens, Bilhah and Zilpah. Meanwhile, Esau married Judith, but when he heard about how his parents had sent Jacob to go live with family and find wives back in the old country, Esau, out of spite, married a daughter of his half-uncle, Ishmael. Ishmael, as you recall, had been driven away with his mother, Hagar, by his grandfather, Abraham.

Jacob had twelve sons, six by his cousin Leah, two by his cousin Rachel, and four by the two serving women who probably were not kinfolk. These twelve sons are the heads of what became the twelve tribes of Israel. Now let's go take a quick look at Abraham's two brothers. ■ Abraham's brother, Nahor, married his niece Milcah, the daughter of the third brother Haran. ■ Haran's other child was Lot, who was orphaned and went with Abraham to Canaan. Lot married and had two daughters, whose names we do not know. After the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah only Lot and his two daughters escaped to the hills. There the two daughters got their father drunk and each bore a child by their father. One was named Moab the other Ben-Ammi.

These two children of incest, became the origins of the Moabites and the Ammonites, two clans that were held in very low regard by the Israelites..

■ Looking again at Abraham's brother Nahor, we see that his marriage to his niece, Milcah, produced a son named Bethuel. Bethuel's daughter Rebekah went to Canaan to be Isaac's wife. Rebekah's brother was Laban and his two daughters married their cousin Jacob. I have no earthy idea how one is supposed to draw these kinds of relationships on a family tree. It seems less like tree and more like a briar patch!

There are several things striking about this family tree. Remember, these are the patriarchs, the beginning generations that became the nation of Israel. ■ This is Abraham, chosen by God to found a new nation, through these early generations. These are important people in the history of the faith. We note that it wasn't unusual to marry a cousin, or a cousin once removed, or even a half-sister, or a niece. We might say that this family tree doesn't have as many branches as you might expect! And yet, at the same time there are branches that are cut off from the tree. Hagar and her son Ishmael, were sent away. What is often not mentioned, is that God promised to bless Ishmael and make of him a great people, as we read in Genesis chapter 21 verse 13. And indeed, Ishmael is the father of the Arab people.

At times it seems like it's important to maintain pure bloodlines, bloodlines that are protected from mixing with other people's genes. And, so it was that Rebecca was imported from another branch of the family to be wife of Isaac, and then her son Jacob married Leah and Rachel from that same branch of the family. But on the other hand, Jacob also had children by the two handmaidens, and their sons share equally in the future of the nation of Israel. This family tree has branches that get chopped off - and branches that graft together. It's not too surprising that the ancestry software I used didn't seem to know how to graph some of the relationships.

Much is said these days about family values, family values that are approved of by God. In this family tree we have to ask what are the family values imposed by cultural influences, and what family values are those imposed by God? Abraham's father had at least two wives. Abraham had three wives. Esau had two wives. Jacob had four wives. Are multiple wives a divinely sanctioned family value? Or, are multiple wives a cultural value? What sort of family value is involved in chasing away, banishing a wife and one or more of your children? Today, we frown upon marrying close relatives. But in this family tree, men married half-sisters, nieces,

cousins, and cousins a generation removed. Are these expressions of divine family values or cultural family values? Are arranged marriages an expression of divine family values, or cultural family values? If this family tree exhibits divine family values, then we have imposed our own cultural limitations on those values, because we have very negative attitudes about arranged marriage, multiple wives, and marrying close relatives. On the other hand, if this family tree is an example of the cultural family values of that time, then it's very interesting to note that, while these people, in our eyes, behaved badly at times, they are nonetheless held up as examples of righteous faith – and they became the founders of the nation of Israel, according to God's plan. Perhaps, we should not be so quick to expect perfection in every aspect of life of our heroes and leaders in ancient times – or today.

It seems to me, that we would all do well to remember that our heroes of old were not all that different from us today. Like them, sometimes we marry for the wrong reasons. Sometimes we break our families up. Sometimes our families are made up of children of different mothers. But we should be no quicker to judge the families we see around us or the families in which we live, than we are to judge the families of the ancient patriarchs. Amen.