

# The Abimelech Maneuvre

## *Living by Faith in a Fallen World*

- <sup>22</sup> At that time Abimelech and Phicol the commander of his army said to Abraham, "God is with you in all that you do.
- <sup>23</sup> Now therefore swear to me here by God that you will not deal falsely with me or with my descendants or with my posterity, but as I have dealt kindly with you, so you will deal with me and with the land where you have sojourned."
- <sup>24</sup> And Abraham said, "I will swear."
- <sup>25</sup> When Abraham reproved Abimelech about a well of water that Abimelech's servants had seized,
- <sup>26</sup> Abimelech said, "I do not know who has done this thing; you did not tell me, and I have not heard of it until today."
- <sup>27</sup> So Abraham took sheep and oxen and gave them to Abimelech, and the two men made a covenant.
- <sup>28</sup> Abraham set seven ewe lambs of the flock apart.
- <sup>29</sup> And Abimelech said to Abraham, "What is the meaning of these seven ewe lambs that you have set apart?"
- <sup>30</sup> He said, "These seven ewe lambs you will take from my hand, that this may be a witness for me that I dug this well."
- <sup>31</sup> Therefore that place was called Beersheba, because there both of them swore an oath.
- <sup>32</sup> So they made a covenant at Beersheba. Then Abimelech and Phicol the commander of his army rose up and returned to the land of the Philistines.
- <sup>33</sup> Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba and called there on the name of the LORD, the Everlasting God.
- <sup>34</sup> And Abraham sojourned many days in the land of the Philistines.

### Genesis 21:22-34

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## **Keep Me Entertained**

Martin Luther writes,

I have often stated that when Moses describes the life of Abraham, the saintliest patriarch of all, he does so very much in a manner which befits an ordinary citizen. He says nothing about miracles or about prodigious works and endeavors like those of which monks and hermits boast. He makes Abraham a very common human being who occupied himself with the affairs of the home; for he had a wife, he had children, he had numerous domestics, and with them he wandered hither and thither as necessity and convenience dictated. Hence there is here no semblance of extraordinary saintliness. Therefore the papists and especially the monks neither concern themselves much with these accounts nor read them attentively. But if in the case of this patriarch they were to see a novel form of clothing, strange customs, and a way of life different from that of all other human beings, then indeed they would extol him as a saintly man.

It is impossible to rid the world of this notion. It admires nothing except what is unusual. Therefore when it hears that Abraham wanders about so often and seeks new abodes, it says: “What is so unusual or praiseworthy about this? Abraham has this in common with many, and especially with beggars and other very ordinary people. Things worthy of praise have to be unusual to arouse admiration.”

Thus it happens that these sacred accounts are disregarded, and some magician in the market place gets more admiration and a larger gathering when he spews fire than this saintly man, who walks in faith and in the Word and waits with the utmost patience and hope for the promise which God had made to him.<sup>1</sup>

In this quote, the Father of the Reformation is on to something profound. Before us today is perhaps the most mundane of all the Abraham stories. God doesn't come to Abraham. There are no visions. There are no heavenly promises. There isn't even anything about Abraham's family. Hagar and Ishmael are gone from the scene entirely. Sarah and Isaac are in Abraham's family, but they do not appear in the story. Rather, all we have here is a conversation between Abraham, King Abimelech and his commander named Phicol.

Perhaps it is because of this that we read in the Ancient Christian Commentary Series on this story, “The last part of the chapter received very little comment in the patristic period.”<sup>2</sup> Not that the Father's made Luther mad, but it certainly did not help him that they didn't talk about this passage either. There is nothing exciting here, nothing to keep us particularly entertained. It doesn't seem to advance the Christian religion much at all. One might easily wonder why it is even in the Bible.

## **Eyes Ahead**

### *A City with Foundations*

In thinking about this perplexing puzzle, it seems to me that Hebrews gives us the simple, yet profound answer as to why this story is here when it says, “By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God” (Heb 11:9-10). Luther again writes, “It is the purpose of this [story] to give us instruction, in order that we may learn how the saintly patriarchs conducted themselves in civil affairs,

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, in *Luther's Works, Vol. 3: Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 15-20*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 3 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 315.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Sheridan, ed., *Genesis 12-50*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 100.

how respectfully they treated the government, and how kindly disposed the government was toward its subjects.”<sup>3</sup>

It is upon this idea that we will look at our story today. This verse shows us the simple life of faith. It is life lived **in** the present world (“the land of promise” and Philistia). But it is life presented as **temporary** (“a foreign land, living in tents”). It is life lived today in **hope** of tomorrow (“looking forward to the [heavenly] city”).

“In” Not “Of”

Our Lord Jesus famously prayed about the very thing Hebrews describes, “I have given [the Apostles] your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world” (John 17:14-18). It is from this statement that we get the famous cliché, “**Be in the world, but not of the world.**” But different Christians have interpreted this very differently over the centuries.

This week I stumbled upon a piece written by a former professor of mine at Bethel College. He wrote it in response to a piece by Carl Trueman called, “A Church for Exiles.”<sup>4</sup> Trueman is a Reformed Christian who begins by saying, “We live in a time of exile.” He laments the now obvious conclusion that western civilization which was built upon the sweat and blood of the Christian worldview, has now turned its back on its maker, marginalizing and increasingly persecuting those to whom it owes its very existence. It is sort of like slapping your father on the cheek while he holds you lovingly in his lap. The solution, he suggests, is for the church to once again be strong in its theology and mission, best reflected by Reformed Christianity, her worship, and her insistence that all of life is good.

Into this, my professor—who is a proud Arminian Anabaptist—argues that “true Christianity is always and everywhere counter-cultural and marginal to ‘mainstream culture’ ... and always will be resistant to mainstream culture.”<sup>5</sup> Anabaptists have always had an aversion to the present culture, no matter what it is. This has caused strange problems for them because inevitably everyone lives in some kind of culture. That’s why you end up with those of this ilk either mimicking the

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<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Vol. 4: Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 21-25*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 4 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 87.

<sup>4</sup> Carl Trueman, “A Church for Exiles,” August 2014, <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2014/08/a-church-for-exiles>, last accessed 9-4-2014.

<sup>5</sup> Roger E. Olson, “An Arminian-Anabaptist Response to ‘A Church for Exiles,’ by Carl R. Trueman, Aug 27, 2014, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2014/08/an-arminian-anabaptist-response-to-a-church-for-exiles-by-carl-r-trueman/>, last accessed 9-4-2014.

culture by creating their own “Christian [sub]culture,” cultures that look smell, and taste just like the culture around them, except it is sanctified by slapping a Jesus label on everything: Christian music, Christian art, Christian cake-factories, etc. Or, you end up with something like the Amish which basically have blessed the 19<sup>th</sup> century horse and buggy, long beard and dresses culture. See how counter cultural they are? Not really. They just adopt older ways and say that those and those alone are “Christian.” Both extremes and up, rather ironically, at the same place, in something that is only acceptable if it can be seen as “Christian.” It seems to me that this is a profound denial that God created everything good, which is also ironic, because most of these people do not believe that mankind is really all that bad, which is even more ironic, because they think that their cultures *are*.

### **Abraham and Abimelech**

At any rate, it is into this sharp disagreement of how we are to be “in” but “not of,” that I want to look at Abraham and Abimelech, for it has direct bearing on Hebrews comments on how Abraham lived. I want us to focus on **how it was that Abraham put feet to his faith on earth**. Did he sell all he had to go live on the rooftop awaiting the judgment of the Day of the LORD? Did he abandon the culture, identifying it as the great evil of the universe, only to become a hermit, a monk, or a Mennonite? What did it mean for him to have the “**assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen**” (Heb 11:1), to “**desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one**” (Heb 11:16)?

In the story we see that **Abimelech king of Gerar** has returned. Gerar is not in this story, but the meaning of the word is central to what I have just said so let me give it here. “**Gerar**” means, “**Sojourning; journeying; a lodging place; (root = to turn aside [from the way]; to tarry; to sojourn; to dwell; to fear; to be a stranger).**”<sup>6</sup> So you have a king of sojourning or dwelling, a stranger who is also a friend of Abraham returning to the Bible.

He brings with him Phicol “**the commander of his army**” (Gen 21:22). Bringing your military captain with you is probably going to raise the tension, just a wee bit, don’t you suppose? Imagine if I came over **to your house with the police**. Is Abimelech here to make war?

Phicol simply means, “**Mouth of all**” or “**strong,**” thus he is the commander who speaks to Abraham. “**God is with you in all that you do**” (22). What’s that supposed to mean? Is it a threat? Before answering, let’s think about who these men are again. Here we have a king and a military commander coming to Abraham the prophet (20:7). To put that another way, we have a very political situation that is

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<sup>6</sup> Stelman Smith and Judson Cornwall, *The Exhaustive Dictionary of Bible Names* (North Brunswick, NJ: Bridge-Logos, 1998), 78.

about to unfold before us. To put it yet another way, Abraham is about ready to [engage in politics](#). To put that still another way, Abraham is going to engage in the most dreaded of all cultural activities according to Anabaptists, and not a few other Christians. I'm calling this [the Abimelech maneuver](#). What is its purpose?

Abimelech and Phicol have been [witnesses from afar](#) how God has continued to bless Abraham, no matter what he does. He goes into Egypt and lies to the Pharaoh, and God makes him rich. He goes to war bringing 300 men against an army of giants, and God delivers him and Lot. He has a baby at the age of 100 with his wife not far behind. He is saved from the utter annihilation of the cities by the Salt Sea. He even goes to Abimelech himself under false pretenses and ends up with 10 lifetimes worth of money. Perhaps the king and the commander do not know why it is happening, maybe they have Joel Osteen theology that God wants us all to be happy, and somehow Abraham is naming and claiming it. But whatever this man is doing, it is working, and [no force on earth](#) seems to be able to stop it. Abraham is becoming a mighty lord of the region. They are worried.

So they ask, “[Now therefore swear to me here by God that you will not deal falsely with me or with my descendants or with my posterity, but as I have dealt kindly with you, so you will deal with me and with the land where you have sojourned](#)” (23). We could spend time talking about how we have [a pagan king who has acted with kindness](#), but I made that point in the previous story of Abimelech. I can also point out that we have a little [foreshadowing](#) here of the law which will not allow Israel to make allegiances with these peoples, and will in fact demand that they be destroyed. But Abraham is not bound to later laws that were given for a specific purpose in the life of a specific theocracy hundreds of years later. This foreshadowing causes us to reflect all the more on what Abraham will do in response. Finally, let's not forget that Abimelech is not coming to Abraham like Melchizedek did—by himself. He has his commander with him. Is he offering [peace through a display of force](#)?

### *The Oath*

So what *is* Abraham's response? Does he pronounce the judgment of God upon them for being involved in evil cultural pursuits? Does he run away and live in the desert on a pole for 50 years? Does he start blogging about how evil politics and the military and owning swords is? Is this what it means for Abraham to look forward to a different city? Is he the king of the counter-culture, the first hippie, the fringe of society, the persecuted church?

No, Abraham says, “[I will swear](#)” (24). It maybe that he says this under duress because of the commander. Or maybe not. We aren't told. Since I've taken this

direction of application in the sermon, it is fascinating to me that the Anabaptist **Schleitheim Confession** of 1527 is made up only seven points. The seventh spends multiple paragraphs explaining why, “**Christ, who teaches the perfection of the Law, prohibits all swearing to His [followers], whether true or false.**” **Swearing oaths** is absolutely forbidden by Anabaptists, as they see this ultra-disconnect between the two Testaments of Holy Scripture. Nevertheless, here we have Father Abraham saying, “**I will swear.**” We will look at this swearing a little later in the story.

### *Abraham’s Well*

First, there is a **cultural interruption**. Some time passes (“when”; **vs. 25**). We do not know how much. It says, “**Abraham reproved Abimelech about a well of water that Abimelech’s servants had seized**” (**25**). Later (**30**), we learn that **Abraham dug this well**. What kind of a well is this? Well, today you can go to Beersheba and see “Abraham’s well” (though it is probably not the actual well of Abraham). So it must be a “Christian well,” right? It has Abraham’s name on it. It gives out Christian water. Of course not. That is just silly. It is a well of water that anyone can drink. Digging this well is a cultural activity. Abraham was many things: prophet, warrior, defense attorney (in his argument with God), husband, father, farmer, rancher, religious acolyte, vassal king, and now hydraulic engineer and construction foreman. The picture being painted here is not exactly one of retreating from culture.

But let’s return to Abraham’s response. “**Abraham reproved Abimelech.**” Abraham’s “reprove” could be translated as something like “**berate.**” He is angry. Why? Abimelech’s servants have seized the well. They **stole it by force** or tore it away from its owner illegally. This kind of theft from governments has been going on since time immemorial, and make no mistake, these men are doing this under the pretense of their governmental power. For they are the *king’s* men, Abimelech’s servants. It is wrong. It is profoundly immoral. If someone owns property, this kind of action is theft, pure and simple.

This makes Abimelech look bad in our eyes, and we wonder what Abraham might do next, because the king has breached their agreement, their contract, their sworn oath, their handshake. Will he begin to picket? Will he go on strike? Will he take up arms to fight the Red Coats?

Before he can do anything, Abimelech quickly replies, “**I do not know who has done this thing; you did not tell me, and I have not heard of it until today**” (**26**). It is a reasonable response, for the king is not expected to know every last thing that

is going on in his kingdom, especially if it relates to treachery from his own men. They certainly aren't going to say anything.

But, until this moment, neither did Abraham. **Abraham kept his mouth shut.** This is interesting and it seems to me to be the way of faith. He has entered into culture. He has entered into an agreement with the king himself. But he will not make a fuss about wrongs done to him personally by the government under which he finds himself. Abraham is not here to make trouble. **Indeed, he has his eye on a future country.**

*And yet*, unrighteousness and injustice are clearly being done to him. And he does, in fact, **come to a point in time** when he thinks he should speak up. Remember, Abraham started this part of the conversation, not Abimelech. There came a time when enough was enough. We can't say from the text when that time was, how many breaches of personal property occurred (It is possible to take the theft as having occurred several times). But I think we can say from the text that Abraham was **just in doing this**. It was not wrong for Abraham to air his grievances to the king. How do I know? Because Abimelech agrees that what has happened was wrong. Abimelech does not say it in so many words, but the rest of the story makes it clear.

#### *The Covenant*

**“So Abraham took sheep and oxen and gave them to Abimelech, and the two men made a covenant”** (27). **The purpose of this covenant** is to allow Abimelech to rectify the situation. This covenant is more serious than the swearing of an oath, or perhaps I should put it this way—the covenant about to be entered into is the **formal, legal expression** of what the oath signified. For, covenants put formal sanctions upon those who break their word.

Let's return to this idea of **oaths** for a moment. The Anabaptists will not take oaths because of what Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount: **“But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all”** (Matt 5:34). Because they refuse to look at the immediate context or the context of the rest of Scripture, but instead just paste this verse by itself like it is some kind of proverb, they utterly fail to understand the meaning and purpose of oaths. They think of oaths as bad things. That isn't true at all.

The law will later come along and permit swearing oaths. **“Lev 19:12, “Do not swear falsely by my name.” “If you make a vow to the LORD your God, do not be slow to pay it”** (Deut 23:21). The idea always implicit in taking oaths is **truthfulness**. If you take an oath, you had better mean it. When Jesus gives his teaching on oaths, he has the Pharisees in mind. Listen to the subtle differences in the following:

**God's intent:** *You shall not swear by my name falsely.*

**Pharisaical reading (P.R.):** You shall not swear *by the name* falsely.

**God's intent:** When a man makes a vow to Jehovah or swears an oath... *he shall not break his word.*

**P.R.:** When a man makes a vow *to Jehovah* or swears an oath... he shall not break his word.

**God's intent:** When you shall make a vow to Jehovah your God, *you shall not be slack to pay it.*

**P.R.:** When you shall make *a vow to Jehovah* your God, you shall not be slack to pay it.<sup>7</sup>

The idea is that the Pharisees would be very serious in their swearing of oath's to God, but if they swore oaths to others or by others ("on their momma's grave"), they didn't have to keep their word. They got off on a technicality. Jesus' point is that if this is how you are going to treat oath taking, do not take oaths at all.

Jesus is **not making an absolute prohibition**, thus overthrowing the moral law. We know this because throughout the NT (**Rom 1:9; 9:1–3; 1 Cor 15:31; 2 Cor 1:23; 2:17; 4:2; 11:10–11, 31; Gal 1:20; Phil 1:8; 1 Thess 2:5, 10**), oaths are regularly taken. The Apostle takes an oath in the name of Jesus, "**I am speaking the truth in Christ**-- I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit" (Rom 9:1); "**God is my witness**, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you" (Rom 1:9); etc. In fact, Jesus himself takes an oath. "Then the high priest stood up and said to Jesus, 'Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?' But Jesus remained silent. The high priest said to him, '*I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.*' '**Yes, it is as you say,**' Jesus replied" (**Matt 26:62-64**). Paul will later tell the Thessalonians, "**I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers**" (**1Th 5:27**).

The point of all this is that the intent of oath taking has always and will always be that you are to **be true to your word**. In our story, there has been a breach—an accidental breach—of the oath that was taken in **Gen 21:24**. Therefore, Abraham insists that the two parties enter into a more formal, indeed even **spiritual arrangement**. This is called a **covenant**. This covenant will bind the two parties

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<sup>7</sup> See William Hendriksen and Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, vol. 9, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953–2001), 307; see also my sermon "I Pledge Allegiance" a sermon on Matt 5:33-37.



together in the same sense that the covenant God made with Abraham in ch. 15 binds the two together.

Thus, again, “Abraham took sheep and oxen and gave them to Abimelech, and the two men made a covenant” (27). Covenant is huge in Genesis, but this is the first time we have seen the term used between two humans, even though that was a very popular thing to do in the Ancient Near East.

### *Religious Overtones*

Let’s notice at this point that we now begin to move out of the realm of the strictly secular (if you want to call it that), to something more sacred—a ritual. “Abraham set seven ewe lambs of the flock apart” (28). What is the meaning of this? Well, Abimelech wonders that very question and asks it to Abraham (vs. 29). Here is Abraham’s answer, “These seven ewe lambs you will take from my hand, that this may be a witness for me that I dug this well” (30).

Now, we do not read of any kind of sacrifice going on here. We don’t know what Abimelech did with the lambs. Perhaps they were simply the equivalent of a monetary payment, such as the one Abimelech himself gave to Abraham. However, seven lambs is hardly equivalent to 1000 pieces of silver!

We do know that lambs will later be used throughout the Law for sacrificial purposes in just this way. But it is the number seven that must not be missed. It helps us see what is going on. Where have we run into this number before? It is the number we find all over Genesis 1: seven days, seven formulas repeated seven times, seven (or multiples of seven) words in sentences, paragraphs, etc.

Curiously, the number “seven” and the word “oath” are the same Hebrew word (different vowels, same consonants-- ). Thus, Luther says, “Accordingly, in this passage the word has both meanings: both swore and, if I may express myself in this manner, both “sevened.” Abraham set apart seven ewe lambs. Therefore he indicates clearly that even though he does not demand the oath, he nevertheless wants the king to swear.”<sup>8</sup> (By the way, this close connection between oaths, covenants, and “seven” is another reason to see what happens prior to the fall as God entering into a covenant). I might say that the number seven is therefore not just the number of perfection, it is the number of something profoundly sacred and covenantal.

What Abraham wants is for Abimelech to make the same recognition that was reversed in the previous encounter when Abimelech gave him 1000 pieces of silver in order to let the whole world know that he did nothing to Sarah (20:16). It isn’t

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<sup>8</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works, Vol. 4: Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 21-25*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 4 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 86.

the money that matters, it is the honor and the justice. There it was a “**sign of innocence.**” Now, the lambs are a “**witness for me**” that I dug this well” (21:30). This is Abraham’s maneuver, and it is the same as Abimelech’s.

The purpose of this exchange has an **immediate context** and broader contexts. Immediately, it serves to tell us about **the place** where this well was dug. “Beersheba.” Beersheba is two words, “*beer*” meaning “well” and “*sheba*” meaning “seven” or “oath.” So this is the “**Well of Seven**” or “**The Well of the Oath.**” Beersheba will come up again in Genesis 22; 26; 28; and 46. Later in the Bible it will be a symbolic way of referring to the southern end of the Promised Land (“from Dan to Beersheba;” **Jdg 20:1**; **1 Sam 3:20**; etc).

Curiously, there may be a **word play** on the Beer-Sheba, the lambs, the well, and the number seven in **Revelation 5:6**, “**And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth.**” One theologian writes, “John probably ... has a Hebrew pun in mind. The same word is used for ‘eye’ and ‘spring,’ the ‘eye-source’ from which living water flows. The Lamb is a sevenfold spring of the Spirit, He is Beer-Sheba, the well of oath, the well of seven.”<sup>9</sup> As such, the very name Beersheba may be Christological.

Along different lines, Calvin reminds us, “The circumstance of time is to be noted; namely, soon after he had dismissed his son. For it seems that his great trouble was immediately followed by this consolation, not only that he might have some relaxation from continued inconveniences, but that he might be the more cheerful, and might the more quietly occupy himself in the education of his little son Isaac.”<sup>10</sup> **The animals have the same effect as prayer in the NT**, “**First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way**” (**1 Tim 2:1-2**).

This covenant, made with a secular king, brought about peace for Abraham. If the original oath did not do it, this did. Perhaps the **Puritans**, that my professor so despises in his piece, had something like this very thing in mind when they entered into things like the **Mayflower Compact**, which my great... grandfather **William Brewster**, and I know a couple other great ... grandfathers in his very congregation, signed.

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<sup>9</sup> Peter Leithart; Comments on Revelation 5:6, <http://www.leithart.com/2011/03/05/seven-spirits/>.

<sup>10</sup> John Calvin and John King, *Commentary on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, vol. 1 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 552.

The purpose of this compact was to solemnly and mutually covenant and combine their efforts into a civil body politic; for their better ordering, preservation, enactment of just and equal laws, ordinances, acts, constitutions, and offices, for the good of the colony, unto which they promise submission and obedience. Were they confusing church and state? No more than Abraham was. Were they trying to create heaven on earth? No more than Abraham was. Did this cause them to stop looking for a heavenly city? No more than the covenant with Abimelech did for Abraham.

There is just nothing here in this story that I can see an Anabaptist using to support anti-cultural separatism, which, according to the **Schleitheim Confession's** fourth point is, “A separation ... from the evil and from the wickedness which the devil planted in the world ... not hav[ing] fellowship with them [the wicked] and not run[nin]g with them in the multitude of their abominations.” Abraham’s understanding of what it meant to be in the world but not of it is a very different thing from that of my Anabaptist professor and friend.

## **Public, Personal Worship**

### *Living In Philistia*

After this, we see Abimelech and Phicol rising and returning to “**the land of the Philistines**” (**Gen 21:32**). They remain what they are: kings and commanders. They return to where they are from—what would **later be** the land of the Philistines. “Philistines” here is **a gloss**, because the Philistines did not exist in Abraham’s day. The point of inserting this word into the text is to assure you that they are retreating to enemy territory, for we all know—thanks to Samson and Goliath—that the Philistines are not the friends of God. This is not a commentary on Abimelech or Phicol, but simply on the place where they now reside.

The last verse of our passage says, “**And Abraham sojourned many days in the land of the Philistines**” (**21:34**). There is a difference with Abraham, though he goes to the same place; he **only sojourns** (ironically making him the true man of Gerar, see above); he does not go back to a permanent home. This is what Hebrews is picking up on. The patriarchs did not have a place to call home like everyone else did. “**These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland**” (**Heb 11:13-14**). Again, it is not that dwelling in the land of Philistines is somehow a commentary on Abraham’s faith, but rather that he will not call this place his home.

Far too many of us live and make decisions without thinking of our heavenly home, without thinking about tomorrow (and Annie the little red-head girl singing about “Tomorrow” isn’t what I have in mind by “tomorrow”). We have our eyes much too much on today, on our own comforts, frankly, on having our best life now. Let’s be honest, we do. Otherwise, would we really complain out our homes, our churches, our food, our friends, our schools, our jobs, our lives? Of course not. Thus, Abraham displays his faith by simply living in the world by faith, looking forward to the eternal city. Setting his hope on things above, he nevertheless strives to show what heaven and its God are like by living in God’s good, but fallen world. He is not of the world but not in it. He is in the world, but not of it.

We have seen this through ordinary things that Luther said makes the popes and monks so frustrated, because they aren’t exciting. He lived his life where he was at in the presence of the people that came to him. He interacts with kings and commanders. He enters into covenants and political arrangements. He digs wells and puts down tents. He does the things that ordinary people do. He lives in the world. He does not retreat from it.

Abraham also acts with *integrity*. He does what the superior king asks him to do, showing submission to the authority over him. He refuses to let injustice go unnoticed, but tells the very king after being bound by oath that what is happening in his realm is evil. He boldly enters into an agreement whereby the secular pagan king is bound to his word. He does so for the sake of peace—peace for his family, peace for himself, peace for Abimelech. The Heimlich Maneuver tries to dislodge piece (a piece of food); the Abimelech and Abraham Maneuver’s try to deposit peace (peace between two people).

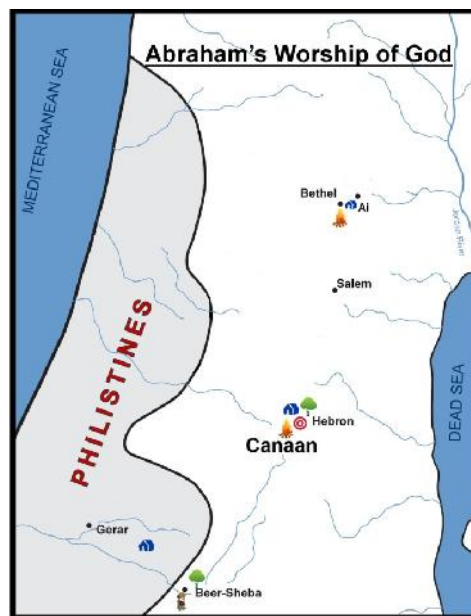
### *Living In Philistia*

But he does one more thing. In his blog, *Dr. Trueman* focuses on how the Reformation makes the biggest impact upon culture, and for him it is not by trying to create Christian political action committees. “*She cultivates a practical simplicity: Church life centers on the preaching of the Word, the administration of the sacraments, prayer, and corporate praise. We do not draw our strength primarily from an institution, but instead from a simple, practical pedagogy of worship: the Bible, expounded week by week in the proclamation of the Word and taught from generation to generation by way of catechisms and devotions around the family dinner table.*” In a word, his focus is on worship. It is worship that begins in the public arena of word and sacrament, and moves to the private arena of family and individual.

He makes the fascinating argument that, “Every time we switch on the television or go on the Internet, we are bombarded with a myriad of liturgies that exert an arcane power to shape our identities in ways of which we are often unaware.” To help us from giving into these temptations we worship. “When we hear, in clear and unequivocal words, who we are declared to us in the sermon each week and when we participate in liturgical action embodying that identity, we are well prepared for the hostile liturgies and gospels of the world we encounter from Monday to Saturday.”

Worship is exactly Abraham’s last action in our passage. For the third time now, Abraham **calls upon the name of the LORD (Gen 21:33)**. The first two times, he builds an altar (**Gen 12:7-8; 13:18**). This time, **he plants a tree**. Now, we have seen Abraham under a tree before, back in Mamre outside of Hebron when the LORD and the two angels came to him. It says, “**Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba and called there on the name of the LORD, the Everlasting God**” (**Gen 21:33**). What is going on here?

First, it can read that he planted one tree (ESV) or **a whole grove of trees (KJV)**. The LXX basically interprets this as Abraham **planting a field** and the targums combine all of this by saying that he planted **a garden** (literally, a “paradise”). Now we can add horticulturalist, gardener, and architect to Abraham’s growing list of professions. But clearly, the meaning here is religious, as he is calling upon the name of the LORD. Some argue that it is analogous to altar-building and marked the foundation of a great shrine.<sup>11</sup>



<sup>11</sup> Sarna, quoted in Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, vol. 2, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 94.

But all of this is done for the purpose of worship. This may very well be an echo of Eden. His is finding Eden in a foreign land, in a desert, by a well, through the worship of God. We learn a new name for God here. He has been called Elyon ([Gen 14:19](#)); *El Shaddai* ([Gen 17:1](#)); *El Roi* ([16:13](#)); and now *El Olam*—The Everlasting God. Why such a name here? It is because this God changes not amidst our changes. He is before us, and after us. He is the beginning and the end, the purpose for why we exist. The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever, because he is the “Forever” God. “Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength” ([Isa 40:28-29](#)). “For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations” ([Ps 100:5](#)).

Jesus says, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end” ([Rev 22:13](#)). In this chapter, he is depicted as a lamb, the one with seven eyes, sitting in the center of a great city, with water flowing from the throne, and the tree of life giving fruit in every season. Those who come to life will reign with him forever ([vs. 1-5](#)). This is his covenant and this city is his eternal Beersheba.

Let us therefore be like father Abraham and worship this God.

My God, my help in ages past,  
My hope for years to come,  
My shelter from the stormy blast,  
And my eternal home.