

4 – REBEKAH: GOD THE ACCOMPLICE

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Genesis 24-27

24.1 Abraham was now very old, and the LORD had blessed him in every way. 2 He said to the senior servant [...] go to my country and my own relatives and get a wife for my son Isaac. [...] 10 Then the servant [...] set out for Aram Naharaim and made his way to the town of Nahor. [...] 12 Then he prayed, “LORD, God of my master Abraham, make me successful today, and show kindness to my master Abraham.

15 Before he had finished praying, **Rebekah** came out with her jar on her shoulder. She was the daughter of Bethuel son of Milkah, who was the wife of Abraham’s brother Nahor.

16 The woman was very beautiful, a virgin; no man had ever slept with her. She went down to the spring, filled her jar and came up again.

17 The servant hurried to meet her and said, “Please give me a little water from your jar.”

18 “**Drink, my lord**,” she said, and quickly lowered the jar to her hands and gave him a drink.

19 After she had given him a drink, she said, “I’ll draw water for your camels too, until they have had enough to drink.” 20 So she quickly emptied her jar into the trough, ran back to the well to draw more water, and drew enough for all his camels. 21 Without saying a word, the man watched her closely to learn whether or not the LORD had made his journey successful.

22 When the camels had finished drinking, the man took out a gold nose ring weighing a beka ^ε and two gold bracelets weighing ten shekels. [...]

28 The young woman ran and told her mother’s household about these things. [...]

50 Laban and Bethuel answered, “This is from the LORD; we can say nothing to you one way or the other. 51 Here is **Rebekah**; take her and go, and let her become the wife of your master’s son, as the LORD has directed.” [...]

57 Then they said, “Let’s call the young woman and ask her about it.” 58 So they called **Rebekah** and asked her, “Will you go with this man?”. “**I will go**,” she said. [...]

62 Now Isaac had come from Beer Lahai Roi, for he was living in the Negev. 63 He went out to the field one evening to meditate, ^ι and as he looked up, he saw camels approaching. 64 Rebekah also looked up and saw Isaac. She got down from her camel 65 and asked the servant, “Who is that man in the field coming to meet us?” “He is my master,” the servant answered. So she took her veil and covered herself.

66 Then the servant told Isaac all he had done. 67 Isaac brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he married Rebekah. So she became his wife, and **he loved her**; and Isaac was comforted after his mother’s death. [...]

²⁵²¹Isaac prayed to the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was childless. The LORD answered his prayer, and his wife **Rebekah** became pregnant.

²²The babies jostled each other within her, **and she said, “Why do I exist?”**

So she went **to inquire of the LORD**.

²³**The LORD said to her,**

“Two nations are in your womb,
and two peoples from within you will be separated;
one people will be stronger than the other,
and the older will serve the younger.”

²⁴When the time came for her to give birth, there were twin boys in her womb.

²⁵The first to come out was red, and his whole body was like a hairy garment; so they named him **Esau**.

²⁶After this, his brother came out, with his hand grasping Esau’s heel; so he was named **Jacob**.

²⁷The boys grew up, and
Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the open country, while
Jacob was content to stay at home among the tents.

²⁸**Isaac**, who had a taste for wild game, **loved Esau**, but **Rebekah loved Jacob**.

²⁹Once when Jacob was cooking some stew, Esau came in from the open country, famished. ³⁰He said to Jacob, “Quick, let me have some of that red stew! I’m famished!” (That is why he was also called Edom.) ³¹Jacob replied, “First sell me your birthright.” ³²“Look, I am about to die,” Esau said. “What good is the birthright to me?” ³³But Jacob said, “Swear to me first.” So he swore an oath to him, selling his birthright to Jacob. ³⁴Then Jacob gave Esau some bread and some lentil stew. He ate and drank, and then got up and left. So Esau despised his birthright.

²⁷ When Isaac was old [...], he called for Esau [and said to him]: ⁴Prepare me the kind of tasty food I like and bring it to me to eat, so that I may give you my blessing before I die.”

⁵Now **Rebekah was listening** as Isaac spoke to his son Esau. When Esau left for the open country to hunt game and bring it back.

⁶Rebekah said to her son Jacob, “[...] My son, listen carefully and do what I tell you: ⁹Go out to the flock and bring me two choice young goats, so I can prepare some tasty food for your father, just the way he likes it. ¹⁰Then take it to your father to eat, so that he may give you his blessing before he dies.”

¹¹Jacob said to Rebekah his mother, “But my brother Esau is a hairy man while I have smooth skin. ¹²What if my father touches me? I would appear to be tricking him and would bring down a curse on myself rather than a blessing.”

13His mother said to him, “**My son, let the curse fall on me. Just do what I say; go and get them for me.**” [...]

41Esau held a grudge against Jacob because of the blessing his father had given him. He said to himself, “The days of mourning for my father are near; then I will kill my brother Jacob.”

42When **Rebekah** was told what her older son Esau had said, she sent for her younger son Jacob and said to him, “Your brother Esau is planning to avenge himself by killing you. 43Now then, my son, do what I say: Flee at once to my brother Laban in Harran. 44Stay with him for a while until your brother’s fury subsides. 45When your brother is no longer angry with you and forgets what you did to him, I’ll send word for you to come back from there. **Why should I lose both of you in one day?**”

46Then **Rebekah** said to Isaac, “I’m disgusted with living because of these Hittite women. If Jacob takes a wife from among the women of this land, from Hittite women like these, my life will not be worth living.”

1. More than a dozen times in Scripture, God introduces himself as the “God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob”

Gen 50.24 And Joseph said to his brothers, “I am about to die, but God will visit you and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.”

Ex 3.25 God also said to Moses, “Say this to the people of Israel: ‘The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.’ This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations.

1. In the case of Abraham and of Jacob it is not difficult to understand why: with both, God renewed his covenant, that is his promise to be their God and make them and their descendants his people. Moreover, both Abraham and Jacob actively sought God and are presented as dynamic partners in the stories.
2. Not so however with Isaac who is sometimes referred to as the “passive patriarch”:
 - He did not go to find a wife; his servant brought a wife to him.
 - He did not go to war; and when conflict arose, he withdrew.
 - He was dominated by his father Abraham, Abimelech king of Gerar, and his sons Jacob and Esau.
 - He was led by his father Abraham to the mount Moriah to be sacrificed
 - His actions are reactions to the developing situations.
 - He appears to have little personality and is better known as the son of his father Abraham, or the father of his sons Jacob and Esau.¹
3. Indeed, a close reading of the cycle of Isaac (Genesis 21-28) gives prominence to another character, a woman, **Rebekah** who alone takes responsibility for the covenant and stands out as a remarkably pro-active character.
4. The way she appears in the narrative already stresses this point:
 - [15](#)Before he had finished praying, **Rebekah** came out with her jar on her shoulder.
 - She was the daughter of Bethuel son of Milkah, who was the wife of Abraham’s brother Nahor.
 - [16](#)The woman was very beautiful, a virgin; no man had ever slept with her.
 - She went down to the spring, filled her jar and came up again.
 - [17](#)The servant hurried to meet her and said, “Please give me a little water from your jar.”
 - [18](#)“**Drink, my lord,**” she said, and quickly lowered the jar to her hands and gave him a drink.
 - [19](#)After she had given him a drink, she said, “I’ll draw water for your camels too, until they have had enough to drink.” [20](#)So she

¹ Cf. Shaul Bar, *Isaac: The Passive Patriarch*

quickly emptied her jar into the trough, ran back to the well to draw more water, and drew enough for all his camels.

- 4.1. Besides her beauty and virginity, she is presented as vigorous (she draws almost 200 litres of water or 50 gallons!), confident, straightforward, well-mannered, hospitable, and verbs of action abound, stressing her earnestness: she does things quickly, she runs etc...
5. The way in which Abraham's servant negotiates the proposal seems to make Rebekah a passive object of transaction and indeed at one point it all seems decided by Laban and Bethuel:
50Laban and Bethuel answered, "This is from the LORD; we can say nothing to you one way or the other. 51Here is **Rebekah**; take her and go, and let her become the wife of your master's son, as the LORD has directed." [...]
6. The narrator then introduces a delay in the plot (Rebekah's parents unwillingness to let her go far away) as a narrative expedient to give the final choice to Rebekah
57Then they said, "Let's call the young woman and ask her about it." 58So they called **Rebekah** and asked her, "Will you go with this man?". "**I will go,**" she said. [...]
7. In this she starts to appear as a 'matriarch' in ways that correspond to the patriarch Abraham: just as Abraham left his homeland, so does Rebekah. Abraham acts on a direct intimation by God, Rebekah acts on the repeated assurance of Abraham's servant that God guided him to her.
8. Rebekah's singularity is then attested by the fact that she is the woman of many 'firsts'.
9. For the first time in Scripture, we are told that her marriage with Isaac is based on love:
67Isaac brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he married Rebekah. So she became his wife, and **he loved her**; and Isaac was comforted after his mother's death. [...]²
10. Then she is the first character to use *anakhi* (I am) as a term of identity – as part of the story of the pregnancy of Jacob and Esau.
2521Isaac prayed to the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was childless. The LORD answered his prayer, and his wife **Rebekah** became pregnant.
22The babies jostled each other within her, **and she said, "Why do I exist?"**
11. "Why do I exist?" (rather than the more common translation "Why is this happening to me?"): the "I" in this sentence denotes a strong sense of her identity (or her potential *loss* of identity) in relation to the threat which this brotherly conflict poses to the blessing and the covenant.

² Incidentally, Isaac is presented as going from the guardianship of his mother to that of his wife. Yet another sign of his passivity.

- 11.1. Unlike Isaac, Rebekah worries about what happens to the blessing and the covenant – she is aware that she is holding the future of humanity in her bosom.
- 11.2. What is her *raison d'être* if this vocation, if this mission is jeopardised?
12. Then we have another ‘first’ in Scripture: for the first time a human being actively seeks an answer from God – and the Lord answers to her:
 So she went **to inquire of the LORD**.
23The LORD said to her,
 “Two nations are in your womb,
 and two peoples from within you will be separated;
 one people will be stronger than the other,
 and the older will serve the younger.”
13. She does not look for an oracle, but for the relation on which the covenant is based – or rather for the relation *which* is the covenant. Since the male chain of the covenant had a weak ring (Isaac), she had to take over. And it was not difficult for her to appreciate the threat to the covenant: the fight was happening in her uterus. Nobody could understand it better. Nobody could claim a greater right to prevent it from compromising the handing over of God’s blessing. Besides, there is a suggestion that in her subsequent ruse, Rebekah is fulfilling the Lord’s pronouncement.
14. Both Esau and Jacob are her children – but while Isaac’s liking for Esau is driven by whims (his appetite!), Rebekah’s love for Jacob is determined by the appreciation of who among his sons really is more qualified to appreciate the seriousness and responsibility of being the recipient of the Lord’s blessing.
27The boys grew up, and
 Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the open country, while
 Jacob was content to stay at home among the tents.
28Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, **loved Esau**, but **Rebekah loved Jacob**.
15. This leads to the well-known scene in which Jacob, under Rebekah’s steady guidance, tricks his father Isaac into imparting the blessing destined to the first-born son to him.
- 15.1. Behind curtains, Rebekah is the leading actor of the whole scene: she devises the plan and persuades Jacob to overcome his reservations and his fears.
6Rebekah said to her son Jacob, “[...] My son, listen carefully and do what I tell you: **9**Go out to the flock and bring me two choice young goats, so I can prepare some tasty food for your father, just the way he likes it. **10**Then take it to your father to eat, so that he may give you his blessing before he dies.”
- 15.2. Interestingly, once everything is over, Isaac does not blame Rebekah, nor even Jacob. He seems to recognize that Rebekah acted righteously. Indeed,
- i. Isaac only relied on his craze for food
 - ii. Esau would have not been a worthy bearer of the promise and of the blessing (he had sold his first-born right for a stew!)

iii. Rebekah does what Isaac should have done in the first place, namely bless the most qualified of his sons.

16. God does not interfere with the ruse. On the contrary, he somehow act as an **accomplice** by making it work (just as he had done in guiding the events in such a way that Abraham's servant bumped into Rebekah when he was looking for a wife for Isaac). Had Esau come back earlier from his hunt, the whole plot would have failed – and the narrative plays on this suspense.
17. But the decisive event in the story is Rebekah's fearless and self-assured readiness to take upon herself any curse that might result from the plot:
 - [11](#)Jacob said to Rebekah his mother, "But my brother Esau is a hairy man while I have smooth skin. [12](#)What if my father touches me? I would appear to be tricking him and would bring down a curse on myself rather than a blessing."
 - [13](#)His mother said to him, "**My son, let the curse fall on me. Just do what I say**" [...]
- 17.1. Tampering with the right of the first-born to inherit the blessing promised by God could pass for a transgression of the covenant with God
 - 17.2. Analogous to the transgression which caused Eve, and Adam, to be cursed.
18. This readiness is a testimony to Rebekah's resolve to take responsibility. Since Isaac has forfeited this responsibility or is incapable of bearing it, the handing over of the blessing depends on her initiative.
19. Finally we see how, at the end, Rebekah again intervenes to do for Jacob what Abraham had done for Isaac, prevent her son from marrying a Hittite (presumably because the Hittites were pagans and therefore idolaters)
 - [46](#)Then **Rebekah** said to Isaac, "I'm disgusted with living because of these Hittite women. If Jacob takes a wife from among the women of this land, from Hittite women like these, my life will not be worth living."
20. Those who truly pay attention to the narrative know that in fact the Lord is the God of Abraham, of Rebekah, and of Jacob.