

Rebekah & Isaac: A Love Story?

Sermon on Genesis 24:62-67

Abraham's wife Sarah had died and Isaac, their son, was still grieving her death. Father Abraham decided that it was time for Isaac to have a wife. He sent a trusted servant to find a suitable bride for Isaac, but she had to be from Abraham's homeland.

Genesis 24 is a rather long chapter. So, I will look at it in sections.

Find a Bride for My Son! (v. 1-9) ...is more or less what Abraham tells a servant at the very beginning of chapter 24.

The custom of parents finding suitable partners for their children goes back a long way. We are not told what or whether Isaac knew of all this. It's simply obvious when I look at Abraham's story throughout Genesis that he never spoke much and never shared much. Not with Sarah, his wife, nor with Isaac, his son. Abraham was the boss and decided for those who were with him.

Abraham gave the servant two specific conditions. First, he said, "Do not choose a wife for Isaac from the women where I'm living." We don't know exactly, why he wanted that. It seemed a tradition to get wives from a people close to you. The Canaanites still seemed strangers to Abraham and his family.

There was second condition. The servant asked if he should take Isaac back to the land where Abraham came from (v. 5) and Abraham promptly said No! In other words, he said, "Don't even think about it."

I sometimes wonder why Abraham wanted to keep Isaac close to himself and away from the old home country... Was Abraham afraid? ...afraid of something happening to Isaac? ...afraid of Isaac becoming another person as he travels?

Remember: God had told Abraham to offer Isaac as a burnt offering years before. Only at the last minute an angel prevented Abraham from sacrificing his own son.

Abraham was a rich and powerful man, but did he maybe fear Isaac would free himself from his father as he'd spend time away from him? ...that Isaac would not come back but stay and live a new life away from the family bonds and the power of his father? We will never know.

Abraham also gave the servant an end of his mission. The servant would be free from his task if the elected bride refused to come back to Abraham and Isaac's new home. What a task to do! We can imagine how many questions must have gone through the servant's mind.

One of them surely being: **How Will I Know if She's the Right One?** (v. 10-32)

The servant did a wise thing here. He prayed! He certainly prayed a lot before and during the trip; after all, he had 10 camels loaded with the best Abraham had to offer. They needed God's protection to make it safely to Mesopotamia, Abraham's home country.

The servant set his own conditions. How would he know which young woman would be the best for Isaac? So, he prayed: If she's willing to provide water for the animals, she was bound to be the right one.

We're not told how long the servant or the caravan waited for the water, but Rebekah appeared—before the servant finished praying... And not only did she give the servant some water, but she drew enough water for 10 camels – which must be a lot. We don't know how much water she pulled from the spring, but there was enough for everyone and everything. Rebekah must have been strong, self-confident, open minded and welcoming.

The servant no doubt was pondering if Rebekah was truly the right one, but she had a kind spirit. So, the servant gave her some gifts, perhaps rewarding her for her kindness and hard work. These gifts included a gold ring and two wrist bracelets. Then he asked, "Whose daughter are you, and is there room for us at your father's

house?” (v. 23). She said there was room and plenty of straw and feed for the animals.

One other thing Rebekah said was that she was the daughter of Bethuel, who was Nahor’s great-granddaughter! Nahor was Abraham’s brother (Gen. 11:27), who had remained in Mesopotamia with their father, Terah, while Abram, Sarai, and Lot left for Canaan (Gen 11:31). So, she was a distant member of Abraham’s family. This would fulfil Abraham’s first condition.

But, what would Rebekah and her family say? (v. 33-60) The servant had to let them know why he had come all the way to them.

This section is quite a long story. The servant shared with them who he was and why he had come so far. He also explained how Rebekah had met the very test he had hoped for.

Then he made a request. He wanted to know if Laban and Bethuel, Rebekah’s brother and father, would “deal kindly and truly” (v.49) with Abraham, his master and his wish to find a wife for his son. He begged them to be honest with him, so that he knew whether to stay or to leave. I can imagine those two men looking at Rebekah’s new gold jewellery and wondering if the servant had more goods he was willing to give...

Laban and Bethuel replied to the servant’s request. We might expect them to say, “It’s OK with us but...wait a bit, won’t you? And maybe ask Rebekah who is here before you.” But according to verse 51, they said, “Here she is. Take her and go.” We are in Old Israel or even before there was an Israel – so most probably women were not asked what they wanted. They belonged to the men: fathers, brothers and so on.

The servant saw that he had fulfilled the task and showered Bethuel’s family with the gifts he had brought along from Abraham. After a night which he spent with Bethuel’s family, he wanted to set off. But obviously the family had changed their mind a bit. They requested to keep Rebekah for a little while. They wanted her to stay for 10 days. Did they really want her to go?

The servant wouldn't agree to her staying longer, however. I can see him, perhaps mounted on his own camel, saying, "No, we're leaving now. Send me away, that I may go to my master" (v. 56). Now the family decided to ask something they probably hadn't asked Rebekah before, and it's a beautiful question: "Will you go with this man?" Will you leave the land of your birth, your family and friends, your sheep and the other animals? Will you leave all you ever knew and go to a place you know nothing about? Will you leave us and marry a man you've never seen before?" There were many emotions in that question... And knowing about the ancient world, we know that Rebekah's departure may mean that she will never see her family again. However, Rebekah had made a decision, and it's a simple, three-word response: "I will go."

As Abraham himself had left his home country, so did Rebekah. Abraham had left to follow God's call; Rebekah was leaving to become his daughter-in-law. Rebekah may not have been the first bride to leave her home country and marry someone she never had seen before, and she wasn't the last.

The journey to a new land and a new life (v. 61ff)

The writer gives some very fast-moving, vivid descriptions in the last verses. First, we see Rebekah and her maids getting on the camels and heading to the land of Abraham. How much they knew of it, we're not told, but I'm sure the servant told her stories about Isaac and Abraham and the new land in which she would soon live.

Then we're told about Isaac himself.

It seems as if Abraham had not told Isaac that he had sent a servant out to find a wife for him. Isaac was out in the fields. He was still grieving over the loss of his mother. His mother's death must have affected him a lot. Maybe he even had a very special relationship with her after the incident of his father almost killing him. There is no place in the Bible where we are told what that whole incident had done to Isaac and his mother. Who are you, after your husband had tried to kill your only son – the son you had waited for so long and who you'd named Isaac – God laughs, because you

were so happy about his late birth? Who are you, after your father had raised the knife against you? How wounded must mother and son have been?

After Sarah's death Isaac had moved down south, into the desert. He'd chosen aloneness over the company of his father and his father's household. Here we picture him, lonely, full of melancholy, maybe depressed, certainly brooding, - a survivor of a terribly sad family tragedy.

Here he sees a camel caravan coming and starts walking toward it. Rebekah's already dismounted from the camel, and she's asking the servant, "Who's he, walking in the field heading this way?" The servant says, "That's Isaac, my master!"

Rebekah took a veil and covered herself.

Only then Isaac learns through the words of the servant that Rebekah is his wife-to-be. All a bit hard to take, isn't it? Where is Isaac's life? His independence? His self-determination?

What must a man with a story like Isaac look like? How much sadness must there be around him? How much loneliness and despair? How much closeness to darkness and death? What does a man look like who was a victim and only just about survived?

Magdalene Frettlöh, a German theology professor claimed in one of her essays that she thinks Rebekah did not dismount her camel but fell from it, when she saw the desperate man full of pain who was her husband-to-be. And that Rebekah covered her face in order to not let Isaac see the shock in her eyes about his life-long aching...

So, what do those two see when they look each other in the eye for the first time?

Rebekah sees pain and grief in Isaac's eyes. And in Rebekah's eyes there is sympathy and a mix of pity and mercy, and maybe shock: shock at the heart-breaking loneliness of the man she is supposed to live with. The quality of Rebekah seems to be that she doesn't step away from Isaac's suffering. She goes in there with him and leads him out of grief and pain into new life.

We read that Isaac took her in his mother's tent, made her his wife, and began loving her. Comfort enters Isaac's so far petrified life. Rebekah brings the blessing which seems to have gone, lost through Sarah's death – or maybe long before. It is not Rebekah who seeks safety at Isaac's side, but Isaac who finds shelter in the life with Rebekah.

Isaac's growing love to Rebekah enables him to leave death and mourning behind and enter a new life.

Isaac and Rebekah's story is certainly not a story of love at the first sight. Their love for each other is growing gently and slowly... Isaac, the survivor, needs time to trust the new love. Rebekah deals with farewell and letting go. She can share her experience of leaving things behind and trusting in new beginnings with Isaac. And thus, help him leave the darkness behind and see in his life the light.

Rebekah comes into Isaac's life like an angel. Like the angel who met Hagar in the desert, or God's messenger who fed Elijah when exhaustion and disappointment had taken over...

She is a God-send who meets him at a well and brings back the water of life in his story of wounding and breaking. She shows him that God sees his pain, hears his cry, and turns his hardship into joy.

Rebekah has the love that brings Isaac back to life.

Amen.