

Bible Commentator
Messengers of God: A Theological And Psychological Perspective
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REBEKAH AND ISAAC AND THEIR CHILDREN

'And after all, what is a lie? Tis but the truth in masquerade'.1

Isaac, the traumatized almost blind, 2 almost autistic patriarch is invisible in many ways. What desperate thoughts can we imagine racing through Isaac's mind and heart as his father led him to the mountain, with dry wood, a flint, a knife, a rope, and a whetstone, but no lamb for the burnt offering? 3 When he finally posed the excruciating question to his father he received the non-committal, non-reassuring response that God would provide. How did Isaac react to this non-response? Did this allay his fears, reassure him? If not 'can you imagine their climb up the mountain?' 4 Which of the instruments of death did Isaac carry? 'Why did Isaac not seize his father's hands and cry out for his life? Because he was blessed in obedience.' or was 'he too frightened'? 5 Did he scream as his father took the knife against his neck? Isaac will forever be known as the 'rescued sacrifice'. 6 He will always be the son of Abraham and the father of Jacob and Esau. As the son of Abraham he can only be the successor, the only successor to the man destined to become a great nation. His brother, and his two sons each have twelve children to follow on after them. He even attempted to bless the wrong son. And he never explicitly receives Abraham's blessing.

Rebekah, perhaps the least recognized of all the Matriarchs is in fact the most powerful and significant of the matriarchs. She is the recipient of Abraham's blessing rather than her husband and she is told by God that the promised blessing from Abraham will go to her younger child Jacob. In Biblical terms it is virtually unheard of for a woman to be granted the blessing to carry forward and the mission to choose the next recipient. While Abraham is given the blessing several times by God, Isaac is never explicitly given his father's blessing. Rebekah receives the explicit blessing. She also has an encounter with God about the choice of the successor child. That mission conflicts with her role as a mother and as a wife. Her mission is her destiny but as a result she must deceive her husband the Patriarch Isaac and her son Esau. She is forced into this conflictual role by God.

Isaac does not independently seek a wife (like his father or his sons), he accepts the wife who comes with his father's servant. Abraham arranged this marriage for his son via having Eliezer, his servant, (the same servant who went with Isaac to the *akeda*) dispatched to find a wife for Isaac in Abraham's homeland and with his family. Eliezer is bound by an oath from Abraham to bring Isaac a wife and not to let Isaac marry a Canaanite. Isaac is no longer a child, why the need for an intermediary - why Eliezer? Or was Eliezer Isaac's protector? It is heavily implied that the *akeda* left its traumatic imprint so deeply on Isaac, that he is severely disabled. He is unable to initiate the mission of finding a wife even under the supervision of Eliezer. His judgment is impaired, he does not have the ability to actively and decisively act in a campaign as critical as choosing a mate. As we shall see he lives in a twilight of uncertainty, an inability to be assertive - all byproducts of his trauma. Eliezer is fully aware of Isaac's limited functioning and accepted

the responsibility of taking care of his master's son. When Eliezer responds what if the woman chooses not to follow me and marry Isaac, shall I take Isaac there to find someone else? No, do not take Isaac there. This is repeated twice (Gen. 24:6,8). Why is Abraham so fearful of sending Isaac to Abraham's kindred at Aram-naharaim? 7 In the first verse the word Abraham uses is 'hishamer', a word meaning it is a danger to my son. 8 In the second verse 'only bring not my son there again'. 9 It is clear, Abraham did not trust Isaac to choose or even being involved in the process. Eliezer succeeded and Isaac married Abraham's niece Rebekah, chosen by his father's servant.

What is known of Rebekah prior to her meeting with Isaac? When Eliezer first sees her, we are told by the narrator that she, Rebekah, is the daughter of 'Betuel, son of Milkah, wife of Nahor, brother of Abraham' (24:15). She is a very pretty young girl and a virgin (24:16). The word young girl in Hebrew in this text is spelt "na'ar". The word "na'ar" translates as young man. Tradition reads it as "na'ar'ah" (as if the 'ah' were in the text) which means young girl, but the last 'h' is not included in the text. The 'a' is a vowel and vowels are not included in the Torah text. Eliezer asks her if he can drink, she gives him her pitcher. She then draws water from the well ('down' the hill (24:16)) to fill her pitcher for all ten camels until they had done drinking (24:22). Camels coming from a long trip drink an enormous amount of water. The woman shows significant energy and aggressiveness.

He asks her who are you? She responds, 'I am the daughter of Betuel, son of Milkah, wife of Nahor'. She does not mention her own name nor her mother's name (24:24). The young girl, "na'ar" (24:28), (again without the 'ah' at the end), goes home to tell her family whom she has met. She tells her brother Laban, and he goes out to meet Eliezer. Laban then becomes the spokesman for the family. When Eliezer repeats how he met Rebekah he repeats that she said she was the daughter of Betuel, son of Milkah, wife of Nahor'. In verses 55 they ask for a few days for the "na'ar" (again no 'ah') Rebekah before she will go. In verse 57 they call the "na'ar" Rebekah to ask her view of the impending marriage. Both "na'ar"'s are without the 'ah'.

Thus Rebekah is referred to four times, by a word which in Hebrew means young man. (Despite the Jewish tradition to read it as young woman.) The calling of Rebekah four times "na'ar", is not a scribal error. It may be argued that we are being told that Rebekah has a tendency towards a male aggressive personality. 10

This overlap of a female with an aggressive personality may have been required in this marriage, given her husband's trauma and passiveness. Rebekah is then referred to as the daughter of Betuel, son of Milkah, wife of Nahor' three times, which is a correct definition of her ancestry, her father, her grandmother and grandfather are mentioned. However her mother's name is never mentioned. Her mother is not of Abraham's family, but both of her grandparents are. Her grandfather is Abraham's brother Nahor and her grandmother is Abraham's brother Haran's daughter (as well as the wife of Nahor). Her father Betuel is thus the son of Abraham's brother and the son of Abraham's niece. Most impressive and extraordinary is the fact that Rebekah was consulted not ordered if she wished to marry Isaac. Historically and sociologically women in that society were rarely asked their opinion, especially about betrothal. It is most extraordinary to be told that her wishes were asked and respected.

Rebekah consents to the marriage and returns with Eliezer. She is a powerful independent woman. She had evidently already shared the business responsibility with her brother Laban, taking care of the sheep at the well.

When Isaac sees Rebekah he is "out walking in the field towards evening" (Gen. 24:63) in the gray twilight caught between day and night. He lives in a twilight zone of uncertainty; an inability to be assertive.

Darkness and blindness represent his life. How can one not be blinded after having witnessed near death when seeing one's father approaching his neck with a knife. He is the son whose father, Abraham -our father- agreed to sacrifice him. He is the survived sacrifice. As a result of his trauma, his father receives the highest blessing. "I will shower blessings on you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven and the grains of sand on the seashore." (22:17). Isaac is the descendant referred to who moments before was bound as if he were a ram with his father holding a knife over his throat. Isaac suffers yet Abraham receives the blessing for agreeing to sacrifice Isaac. Recovery from such a monumental trauma is in fact beyond human comprehension. Does Abraham, though the prince of faith, not also suffer immeasurably from this *akeda* of his son whom he had prayed for decades?

Isaac "brought her into his mother Sarah's tent and he took Rebekah as his wife. Isaac loved her and thus found comfort after his mother's death" (24:67). His mother protected him against his older brother Ishmael (whether he needed it or not); his mother who undoubtedly would have protected him against his father and prevented the *akeda* had she had the foreknowledge; the mother who died upon hearing of the attempted *akeda* .

Why does Isaac the rich heir, not have his own tent? He marries a mother surrogate, one to take care of him. It is indicative that we heard of Rebekah's birth immediately after the *akeda* and immediately before Sarah's death (Gen. 22:23). Once Isaac's blessing is confirmed after the *akeda* his mother's job is done; his protection now will be at the hands of his wife. Can Rebekah ever compete successfully with Sarah for Isaac's affection? He was doubly traumatized, by the *akeda* and his mother's sudden death. Isaac needed his mother's loving protection more than ever before and she died.

It is interesting to note that Abraham never explicitly gives Isaac's his blessing, Isaac is never commanded to 'go' (lech) and he never leaves the land. He never sees clearly, never laughs (despite his name) does not find a wife and does not find the 'right' son to bless. Isaac's role is to be Abraham's son. He is the weak son of a strong father and the weak father of two strong twin sons. To be a strong father or strong husband is too demanding for his passive status. He receives the blessing from God not for himself but 'for the sake of Abraham' (Gen. 26:24). When Rebekah arrives Isaac, coming from Be'er Lahai Ro'i - the well of seeing - sees the camel but not Rebekah. Rebekah, however sees Isaac (Gen. 24:63-64) 11 How does Rebekah react? She came to marry her rich uncle, she was far removed from her family of origin, where she was considered an independent woman. However immediately upon seeing her husband she realizes he is damaged. But even so she could not have understood the complex family relations she had entered. The text tells us of no ceremony and gives us no exchange of words that they spoke to each other. Rebekah and

Isaac do not appear to engage in communication. And this is a prelude to the tragic lack of communication between her, Isaac and their twin children.

Isaac is the least well defined of the three Patriarchs. His difficulty in defining himself is clearly the result of the *akeda*. Both of his parents had strong personalities as we have seen. His wife, Rebekah, has a strong personality as has been intimated and as we shall see. He is certainly not modeled after his father who was able to love both Ishmael Isaac. Isaac as we shall see loves Esau who embodies what he cannot be.

Was the *akeda* a closely guarded family secret - to be safeguarded but never disclosed? Did Rebekah ever hear of the traumatic event of the *akeda* from Isaac or anyone else? Was she required to deal with the painful results without knowledge? Perhaps the inarticulate Isaac tells her in a dream:

I never did remember much about the journey to Mount Moriah. Whenever Rebekah, my beloved wife, asked me about it I told her, truly I do not remember much. I love Rebekah very much because she continues to comfort me. For almost twenty years she has spread her branches over me, fulfilling my thirst for love. But we want a child to fulfill the blessing. I pray to God for my beloved barren wife but God withheld her bloom yet another year.

One such night, while Rebekah and I were sleeping side by side I dreamed for the first time of the sacrifice that had taken place almost thirty years before. But this dream was even more real than the actual incident, perhaps because confusion had saved me from the fear. And now all the terror I did not notice was with me. A faceless man chained me to a great rock and held a knife against my neck. I saw a long hairy arm, strong and taut. I felt the blade poised to strike me down when the sun emerged from behind a cloud blinding me and we heard the voice of an angel saying 'Avraham, Avraham.'

At the same time we heard the frantic sounds of a white ram with pure white skin and deep purple horns, the color of blood. The horns had become entangled in the thorns of a nearby gnarled bush. It was then that I recognized the fierce silent man. It was my father Abraham. Abraham put down the blade and pulled the ram free from the thorns. And as my father brought it back I saw how it struggled in his hands. Then when the ram was pressed to the rock, I watched as my father pulled back the white throat, white as snow and drew the blade. I saw especially how thin and white was the neck and how cleanly the blade cut through. At last my father put down the blade and unbound me and we embraced.

I woke up and told my dream to Rebekah.

She then told me of her dream.

In desperation I set out to Mount Moriah. I ascended on the path that my father-in-law Abraham had trod with my beloved Yitzchak. As I strained to climb higher I began tiring holding on to the gnarled and twisted mountain bush. Then I

arrived at the very rock where, years before Yitzchak had been bound and a ram sacrificed in his place. The rock was enormous in size and it radiated a timeless God-imbued quality. I reached to touch it and lost my balance entirely, falling until I lay stretched out, breathless, upon it. I felt myself tied and bound, one knot upon another, and suddenly I saw Abraham's blade. I screamed in fear. I looked up and saw a rainbow and over the rainbow the likeness of a man clothed in white linen, girded with gold and Tarshish and legs like burnished copper. I heard his voice called 'Rivka, Rivka' and I became calm.

And then I conceived.

Nine months later Rebekah's face illuminated the sky and Yitzchak rushed up the mountain. Rebekah was on the sacrificial rock. Rebekah went into labor. The full moon came out from a cloud. Rebekah gave birth to two sons. The first was hairy and red. Then the second came forth with his hand on his brother's heel. The first, whom we would call Esau was born with an umbilical cord that was dark purple, the color of blood. The second son whom we would call Jacob had a cord that was soft and white as snow. It was this perfectly white cord that Isaac found most intriguing for reasons he could not comprehend. And he sensed a strange relief as he unsheathed a knife and drew the blade to sever this cord which was the last link between what might have been and what will be. 12

1 Lord Byron, Don Juan.

2 The Rabbis suggest that as Abraham was about to sacrifice Isaac tears from his eyes fell onto Isaac's eyes impairing his sight. Or in another version tears came from the angel's eyes.

3 Steiner, George, A Conversation Piece, Granta, 15, (Granta Publications, Cambridge, 1985) Pg. 173.

4 Steiner, Pg. 173.

5 Steiner, Pg 173-174.

6 From Mann, Thomas, Joseph and his Brothers (Minerva, London, 1997).

7 We are later told that Laban lived in Kharon (27:43). Apparently Nahor, Abraham's brother, also left Ur and went to where their father Terah died. Was this during Terah's lifetime? If Abraham left his father during his lifetime, did he only do that because he knew his brother would come to take care of their old father?

8 Hirsch, S.R., The Pentateuch - Genesis, (The Judaica Press, NY, 1971) pg. 393.

9 Hirsch, Genesis, pg. 394.

10 There are several other times a woman is called 'na'ar' in the Torah. In the story of Dinah she is called 'na'ar' (34:3,12,19). And in Deut. 22:15,16,17,20,21,23 24,25,26,26,27,28,29) where there is a discussion about adultery and virginhood. In every case, including Dinah an act of unkosher sexual relations takes place. These women are transformed by an act voluntarily or not into a 'na'ar'. Rebekah is transformed by personality into a male figure.

11 Steinmetz, D., From Father To Son, (John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, 1991) pg. 88.

12 A Midrash written by the author adopted from two short stories Schwartz, Howard, Gates to the New City, (Jason Aronson Inc., Northvale, N.J., 1983), one by Howard Schwartz, The Dream of Isaac, pg. 149-150 and the second by Laya Firestone, Rivka on Mount Moria, pg. 152-153.