

“Women of the Bible: Rebekah”

*Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?”
And I said, “Here am I. Send me!”*

Genesis 24:12-58; 27:1-13; Isaiah 6:8 ¹

When we think of the ancient origins of the nation of Israel, we often, even to this day, refer to “Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” as the patriarchs from whom the nation is descended. As we examine the lives of some of the women of the Bible this summer, we begin with the wives who shared those long-ago adventures.

These women don’t get as much “press” as their husbands, but as we saw last week with Sarah, it is very frequently the wives of famous men who are the chief source of both their strength and their success. Can I get an “Amen”?

For this morning’s journey, I’m pleased to tell you that I’ve been lucky enough to gain access to some amazing and nearly unknown ancient documents that offer unique insight into some of the events recorded in the Bible. What I’ve found is an archive of memoirs written by some of the more famous personalities in the biblical record. This morning I’d like to share one written by a woman named Rebekah.

According to the best records we have, Rebekah lived a little more than 4,000 years ago, in the twenty-first century B.C.—the mirror of our twenty-first century A.D. This was the time when Native Americans were migrating from Asia to North America, when Stonehenge was being erected in England, and when the ziggurats were being built in Mesopotamia—the land between the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers. The events recorded in this journal actually begin in Mesopotamia, in what we know as southern Iraq, and end in what we know as Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel. Let me share some excerpts with you

“I have no idea who will read this, if indeed anyone ever will. But since our historical records are all written by men, I feel a need to give a woman’s perspective on some of the events that I’m sure will be recorded in the histories of my time.

“My name is Rebekah, daughter of Nahor and Milcah, and wife of Isaac, the son of Abraham and Sarah. Let me begin by telling you a little bit about my family.

“My great-grandfather was Terah, from Ur of the Chaldeans. Ur was a great port city not too far from the Gulf of Arabia. Great-grandfather Terah had three sons, Abraham, Nahor, and Haran. Abraham married his half-sister, Sarah, but they didn’t have any children, at least not for a long time. Nahor married his niece, Milcah, his brother Haran’s daughter, and had eight children with her, the youngest of whom was my father, Bethuel. Haran died while still a young man and his wife lost contact with the family. I don’t even know her name. He had three children, my second cousins Milcah (also my grandmother), Iscah, and Lot.

“After my great-uncle Haran died, great-grandfather Terah decided to move the clan from Ur to the land of Canaan on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea. The journey was a very long one, though, and the clan only made half the trip, resettling instead in the town of Haran near the borders of Paddan-aram and Aram-naharaim.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on July 3, 2016. Unless otherwise noted, Scripture is from the *New Living Translation* (Tyndale, 1996).

“When great-grandfather Terah died, great-uncle Abraham took his part of the clan and moved on to complete the unfinished journey to Canaan. We didn’t hear any more from them for nearly seventy years. It was during that time that I was born, after my older brother, Laban.

“My life as a child was pretty uneventful. Laban and I fussed and fought like most siblings, but we had a happy family overall. We were farmers and shepherds, like most other families of our time, so we worked hard for what we had. Even with the hard work, though, I was thought to be very beautiful, and people frequently told me so.

“When I was fifteen, my rather simple life took a most unexpected turn one evening as I went outside the village to the spring to draw water for supper, as I did every day. As I approached the spring, I noticed a stranger there with several camels. We saw strangers occasionally, but this man was doing something very unusual. As I got closer, I saw that he was praying! I didn’t say anything, because girls and women weren’t supposed to speak to men outside our families, but went on down to the spring to draw water.

“As I came back up the hill from the spring, this man came over to me and said, ‘Please give me a drink.’ Well, Daddy taught me to be polite, so I said, ‘Certainly, sir,’ and gave him a drink from my jug. Then I was surprised to hear myself say, ‘I’ll draw water for your camels, too, until they have had enough!’ I didn’t know why I said that. Watering camels is a lot of work, but somehow I just had the feeling I ought to do it.

“When I had finished, the man reached into his pouch and gave me a gold ring for my nose and two large gold bracelets for my wrists! I was shocked and speechless! Then he asked me, ‘Whose daughter are you? Would your father have any room to put us up for the night? I can pay for the lodging.’

“‘My father is Bethuel,’ I said. ‘My grandparents are Nahor and Milcah. Yes, we have plenty of straw and food for the camels, and we have a room for guests.’ At this the stranger fell down to the ground and worshiped the LORD, saying, ‘Praise be to the LORD, the God of my master, Abraham! The LORD has been so kind and faithful to Abraham, for he has led me straight to my master’s relatives!’

“Abraham? Abraham! I had heard Daddy speak of Abraham around the fire at night, but no one had heard from him since long before I was born. I ran home to tell Daddy, and then Laban ran back to bring the man home and take care of his animals. We invited the stranger to eat with us, but he said, ‘I can’t eat until I have told you why I have come.’

“‘I am Eliezer, Abraham’s servant,’ he said. ‘The LORD has blessed my master richly, and he has become a great man. When Sarah, my master’s wife, was very old, she gave birth to my master’s son, Isaac, and my master has given him everything he owns. My master made me promise that I would not let Isaac marry one of the women of Canaan, but would find a wife for him from his relatives in Aram-naharaim.’

“‘I didn’t have any recent information about where my master’s relatives lived, but the LORD brought me to your village. So this afternoon when I came to the spring I prayed this prayer, ‘O LORD, the God of my master, Abraham, if you are planning to make my mission a success, please guide me in a special way. Here I am, standing beside this spring. I will say to some young woman who comes to draw water, ‘Please give me a drink of water!’ And she will reply, ‘Certainly! And I’ll draw water for your camels, too!’ LORD, let her be the one you have selected to be the wife of my master’s son.’”

“‘And before I had finished praying this prayer, Rebekah arrived at the spring and fulfilled my request! So now I need to know whether or not you will allow her to return with me.’

“Oh, my goodness, what a surprise that was!!! I understood now that it was the LORD who caused me to water those camels; but to leave my country, my relatives, and my father’s house to marry my cousin Isaac, whom I had never met—indeed, of whom I had just now heard for the first time!?! I felt so faint that I had to sit down . . . and as I found a seat I heard Daddy saying in a choked-up voice, “The LORD has obviously brought you here, so what can we say? Here is Rebekah, take her and go. Yes, let her be the wife of your master’s son, as the LORD has directed.”

“At this, Eliezer brought out all the riches of the dowry he had brought. We had dinner, talked awhile, and went to bed . . . but I, at least, didn’t sleep. My world was spinning. My heart was bursting. Surely the LORD didn’t want me to leave my Momma and my Daddy at fifteen, probably never to see them again! Finally, I cried myself to sleep.

“The next morning, Eliezer got up and packed to leave. Momma said, ‘Please, stay a week or two before you leave.’ But he wouldn’t hear of it. Daddy turned to me and asked me, ‘Little one, are you willing to go with this man?’ And I could hardly believe it when I heard myself say, ‘I will go.’ And so it was that in less than twenty-four hours, I went from being a simple farm girl to the bride-to-be of a desert prince, leaving all and everyone that I had ever known to obey the still small voice of God.

“Our journey to Canaan took several weeks. It was evening when we saw Abraham’s village in the distance. As we got closer, I could see someone walking toward us. I asked Eliezer who it was, and he said, ‘It is Isaac, my master.’

“My heart flew up into my throat. Marrying someone you’ve never met before, much older than you . . . the very idea! ‘I must be crazy,’ I thought to myself as I put my veil on. . . .”

We don’t have time today to read this whole thing, so I’m going to skip forward in the journal to another very important part. Rebekah’s husband, Isaac, was twenty-five years older than she, and he was no ordinary husband. Born to Sarah and Abraham when they were 90 and 100 years old, Isaac was the promised son through whom all of God’s covenant promises were to be fulfilled.

Like Sarah and Abraham, Isaac and Rebekah had a hard time having children, but after twenty years of marriage they finally had twin sons, Esau and Jacob. After a difficult pregnancy, their delivery was pretty tough, too. Esau, the first-born, was extremely hairy, which is what his name means. Jacob’s name was a figure of speech for “he deceives,” a name he would live into later. Even with such a name, though, the LORD revealed to Rebekah that Jacob was the carrier of the Promise, not Esau. Apparently Isaac did not know this. We pick up the story sixty years later, when the twins are forty years old

“There were many similarities between the life Isaac and I had together and the life Abraham and Sarah had. We both had a hard time getting pregnant, and we both had two sons, one of whom was an outdoorsman and one of whom wasn’t. Abraham had twice tried to pass Sarah off as his sister rather than his wife in order to save his own skin, and that cowardice pretty much ruined their relationship. Like father, like son, I guess, because Isaac tried to do the same thing with me. We kept up appearances, but there was really very little left of our marriage after that.

“Although he lived another eighty years, Isaac had become nearly blind by the time he was a hundred years old, and he decided that it was time to pass on the power of The Blessing to his first-born, Esau. Esau had always been Isaac’s favorite son. Isaac wasn’t much of a hunter, so maybe he admired his son’s ability in taking game. At any rate, Isaac certainly loved to eat the game Esau brought home!

“As for me, I had always been partial to Jacob because the LORD had told me that he was the Son of Promise when he was born. Besides, some kids are just easier to love than others, and I had a hard time with Esau.

“I happened to overhear the conversation when Isaac told Esau to go get some game in preparation for receiving The Blessing. This was bad. Receiving The Blessing was a BIG Deal, and it had to go to the Son of Promise. Isaac had never believed me when I told him that The Blessing had to go to Jacob, but it was crunch time now. I had to make my move, and quickly.

“I had expected all along that it would come to this, so I had thought it through carefully. I told Jacob to bring in some goats for dinner. I would prepare them the way Isaac liked, dress Jacob in Esau’s clothes, and strap hairy skins to his arms. That way, Jacob would smell and feel like Esau. Jacob didn’t want to do it, not because he opposed the deceit, really, but because he thought he’d be found out. ‘Don’t worry,’ I told him. ‘I know how to handle your father.’

“My plan worked, as I had known it would. Isaac wasn’t taken in easily, but he eventually released The Blessing: *‘The smell of my son is the good smell of the open fields that the LORD has blessed. May God always give you plenty of dew for healthy crops and good harvests of grain and wine. May many nations become your servants. May you be the master of your brothers. May all your mother’s sons bow low before you. All who curse you are cursed, and all who bless you are blessed.’* Success!

“There was more to do, of course. My trick was soon discovered, and Esau was so furious that he decided to kill Jacob. That would never do. It was time for the rest of my plan.

“Esau had aggravated us by marrying several Hittite women, so I used that leverage to play the land-of-your-fathers trump card. I reminded Isaac how important it had been for him to marry within his family clan. ‘I’m sick and tired of these local Hittite women,’ I told him. ‘I’d rather die than see Jacob marry one of them.’

“Isaac finally agreed, and told Jacob not to marry any of the Canaanite women: *‘Instead, go at once to Paddan-aram, to the house of your grandfather Bethuel, and marry one of your uncle Laban’s daughters. May God Almighty bless you and give you many children. And may your descendants become a great assembly of nations! May God pass on to you and your descendants the blessings he promised to Abraham. May you own this land where we are now foreigners, for God gave it to Abraham.’*

“So we sent Jacob away, retracing the journey that had once brought me to Canaan as a young girl, and taking him back to my father’s house. I haven’t seen him since, but I pray that The Blessing of Abraham may yet be fulfilled in his life.”

Well, that’s not “the rest of the story,” but it’s a good portion of it. Let me quickly list seven things we can learn from what Rebekah has told us this morning:

1. Rebekah’s deceit reminds us that the Bible honestly records many things that the Bible does not endorse. As we saw with Sarah last week, our efforts to “help God out” when things don’t seem to be going as we want them to go can generally be depended on to lead to painful outcomes.
2. We’re reminded yet again that parental favoritism between children destroys marriages and families, sometimes for generations.
3. Eliezer’s experience with Rebekah at the well reminds us that God sometimes answers prayer in swift and dramatic ways in order to accomplish heaven’s purposes.

4. Rebekah's response to Eliezer's request at the spring reminds us that we do well to pay attention to spiritual promptings—and to obey them—even if they don't seem to make sense to us in the moment.
5. Rebekah's departure from her family reminds us that obedience sometimes requires us as parents to release our children into God's purposes far, far away. This is never easy; but those who change the world are seldom found taking the easy way.
6. We need to remember that God continues to ask the question, "*Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?*" to meet the challenges of the New Creation in every generation.
7. Finally, Rebekah's youthful courage and the legacy of her life illustrate the blessings that come to those who respond to God's call by saying, "**Here am I. I will go. Send me.**"