

MARRIAGE IN THE PATRIARCHAL PERIOD
AND PRESENT-DAY LESSONS FOR YOUNG ADULTS

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ABSTRACT

In Genesis chapter 24, there is a detailed account of how Isaac acquired his wife, Rebekah. This paper demonstrates that the account in Genesis does fit within its historical context of the patriarchal period and there is no reason to doubt its details. This account is trustworthy as an archaeological document, but more than that, it is God's Word. As such, not only can we look at the account as an example of how marriage worked among the believers in the patriarchal period, but we can also glean lessons that are still intended for marriage today. The final goal of the paper is to see what wisdom God has for adolescents and young adults who are considering marriage for themselves. Many lessons may also be applied to those who have already been married as they evaluate their own marriages and how they match up with God's ideals. This paper will show how Rebekah is described as a daughter and a wife who displays a servant's attitude through her actions. Her attitude will be shown to be part of the biblical ideal for a woman. On the other hand, although Isaac has a small role in the account, his love for his wife speaks to the duty of husbands.

This paper contains three main components: a translation, a commentary and an explanation of the larger issues of Genesis 24. The textual translation of Genesis 24 as presented herein is my own composition based on a reading of the Hebrew. The exegetical commentary expounds on the nuances reflected in the translation and explores many of the minor exegetical questions. Then the final part of this paper explores the major textual questions throughout the chapter.

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PART 1: TRANSLATION AND EXEGESIS

¹ Now Abraham was very old, and the LORD had blessed him in everything. ² So Abraham said to his servant, an elder in his house, who was in charge of all that he had, “Put your hand under my thigh. ³ Swear by the LORD God of heaven and earth that you won't get a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites among whom I am living. ⁴ Instead, go to my land, and to my relatives, and take a wife for my son, Isaac.”

⁵ And the servant said to him, “What if the woman doesn't want to go back with me to this land? Should I return with your son to the land from which you came?”

⁶ But Abraham said to him, “Make sure you don't return with my son there. ⁷ The LORD God of heaven took me from my father's house and from my family's land. He spoke to me and swore, 'To your offspring I will give this land.' God will send his angel ahead of you and you will take a wife for my son from there. ⁸ And if the woman isn't willing to go back with you, then you will be free from this oath of mine, just don't make my son return there.” ⁹ So the servant put his hand under his master Abraham's thigh and took an oath about this.

The very first sentence in this narrative includes an important detail: the LORD had blessed Abraham very greatly. The LORD called him out of his homeland and blessed Abraham with family, an heir, livestock and land. The LORD had also blessed Abraham with long life on the earth. In this one sentence we can see the faithfulness and love of God. But there is more. The wealth of Abraham will become very important throughout the narrative.

Abraham saw his end coming and saw a need to find a wife for his son. Since the death of Sarah, there was a lack of female presence in the household. The role of the women was more than just raising children and housekeeping as many contemporary American housewives practice.¹ Instead, women were also economic contributors and managers of domestic industry.² Luther describes,

Accordingly, Abraham gives up all managing after Sarah's death. He did not want such a great burden put upon himself in his very advanced age – although he took a wife later on – and it is for this reason that he is thinking of a person suitable for governing the domestics. Meanwhile, however, he makes use of the service of his senior servant, who was in charge of the household for three years.³

Abraham may have wanted to provide for his son purely out of his own duty as a father to make

1 Diana R. Garland, *Family Ministry: A Comprehensive Guide*, 02 ed. (IVP Academic, 2012), 253.

2 Ibid.

3 Martin Luther, *Luther's Works Lectures on Genesis/Chapters 21-25*, vol. 4 (Concordia Publishing House, 1964), 223.

sure his son is taken care of after his passing. It is also quite probable that Abraham saw that there were certain feminine duties within the household that had been limping along since Sarah had died. Abraham had more than one reason to provide a wife for Isaac. Whichever reasons he had on his mind there was a need to find a wife for Isaac.

But no ordinary woman would do. The stipulations that Abraham puts on the wife-to-be are important because they had to fall in line with God's promise to Abraham. God was going to give the descendants of Abraham the land in which they were living. To accomplish this, God was going to dispossess the Canaanites of their land. They were to have no more claim to it.⁴ So Abraham made sure that his servant would not jeopardize that promise by giving the Canaanites any claim to it through ties with Abraham's lineage. Abraham also had to ensure that the line of the Savior would be set apart as a holy people. He would not have wanted the faith of his family mixed in with the false gods of the Canaanites. During the time of the exodus, God made this clear by commanding, "Do not let them live in your land, or they will cause you to sin against me, because the worship of their gods will certainly be a snare to you."⁵ Abraham made the servant swear that he would go back to his homeland, and particularly to his own relatives to find a wife for Isaac.

The pact is sealed as the servant puts his hand on Abraham's ארץ. The same kind of act is only repeated in Gen 47:29, where Jacob tells Joseph to take an oath as he approached the end of his life. No oath should be taken lightly. Even so, there may be more subtext here in swearing an oath while touching the ארץ of a dying man. Westermann takes this as a special kind of oath that is the last will of a dying man.⁶ It is difficult to say if this kind of oath was used more commonly for other kinds of oaths and not only as an end-of-life oath. Both of the contexts in which this kind of oath is used are at the end of life.⁷ The word ארץ is used for the area below the navel and above the knee. Elsewhere in Scripture it is used as the place for attaching a sword.⁸

4 Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis (New International Commentary on the Old Testament Series) 18-50* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 140.

5 *The Holy Bible: New International Version*, Electronic Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), Exodus 23:33.

6 Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36* (Augsburg Publishing House, 1985), 384.

7 Genesis 24:2, 47:29

8 Exodus 32:37; Judges 3:16, 21; Psalm 45:4; Song of Songs 3:8

Still, the symbolism here probably has to do with a connection to the reproductive organs.⁹ Luther pictured the servant placing his hand on or under the thigh.¹⁰ Luther notes how the Jews thought the thigh was used because it was the site of circumcision, but Luther preferred to think that the picture was that the Savior was going to come from the loins of Abraham's line.¹¹ So the threat then would be that if the oath was broken that the servant would lose his place among God's people. Leupold opposes this view, imagining that it would be too base a thing for the servant to have touched the *membrum virile*.¹² In short, Abraham did not necessarily have the servant touching his genitals, though it is possible.

The servant then asked Abraham what to do if everything did not go according to plan. Of course, he would not want to travel so far and then have to travel back for new orders from his master. It is of particular interest that the servant asks, "What if the woman doesn't *want* to go back with me to this land?" Faithful servant as he may be, the plan may fail through no fault of his own. Whatever degree of say that the bride-to-be has in the matter is the degree to which the plan is out of his hands. He is appropriately reluctant to bind himself to an oath in such a matter. This verse makes it sound very much as if the woman herself will have the choice as to whether she will come back or not. We will return to this point later.

From Abraham's perspective, he seems very confident that his servant will successfully acquire a wife for Isaac from his own people. He says very simply, "God will send his angel ahead of you and you will take a wife for my son from there". It is unclear whether Abraham had this revealed to him by direct revelation from God or not. This specific account of this promise is not recorded for us in Genesis. It might have been revealed to Abraham directly from God, or from one of his angels, as in the Sodom and Gomorrah episode or in his "sacrifice" of Isaac. If this was revealed to Abraham explicitly, then his whole contingency plan for his servant is purely for the servant's ease. If not, Abraham could have deduced this information from God's previous promises to make him into a great nation.¹³ God further promised that he would multiply Abraham's descendants through Isaac.¹⁴ If no wife could have been found for Isaac

9 Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, Electronic Ed. (Logos Research Systems, 2000), 438.

10 Luther, *Genesis*, 4:230.

11 *Ibid.*

12 H.C. Leupold, "Chapter XXIV," in *Exposition of Genesis* (Columbus, Ohio: The Wartburg Press, 1942), 659.

13 Genesis 12:2, 17:4, 18:18

14 Genesis 17:19

from among the Canaanites, then it was a safe conclusion that he could find one among Abraham's own family. In either case, the success of the plan did not rest with the woman who would follow *after* the servant, but rather in the angel who would go *ahead* of him.

¹⁰ The servant took ten of his master's camels and he left, with all kinds of his master's good things. He traveled to Aram Naharaim, Nahor's city.

There are those who look at the appearance of the word “camel” here with difficulty. In the minds of these commentators, domesticated camels in this period were so rare as to reflect an anachronistic blunder on the part of the author.¹⁵ We do not fault the biblical account in its historicity. We read the account as it is clearly written. Not only is this a historical document, but it is also part of God's inerrant Word. If we doubt what is written here to any degree, then the study of this chapter has no truth to convey to us. In fact, Mathews insists, “Historical integrity is teleologically essential for interpretation.”¹⁶ For more on this topic, please refer to the later section of this paper on camels in the patriarchal period.

Besides the camels, Abraham's servant took several of the most luxurious of all Abraham's possessions along on the journey to Aram Naharaim. While the servant clearly carried with him a lot of precious things, it does not say that he took everything that Abraham had. Here the word “all” probably just refers to “all kinds of” good things.¹⁷ They were to be good gifts for Abraham's family and for the future bride of Isaac. And since there was so much to carry, it made sense that they took along several camels in the caravan. Besides bringing along all these gifts, the camels that the caravan used to carry the gifts were further testimony to Abraham's great wealth.¹⁸

But there was another reason to have more than one or two camels along the journey. They wanted numbers for safety reasons. In our extremely mobile culture of 21st century America vehicles and airplanes make travel all too easy, but it was not that way in the patriarchal

15 E. A. Speiser, *Genesis: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, 1st ed. (Anchor Bible, 1964), 178.

16 Kenneth Mathews, *The New American Commentary Genesis 11:27-50:26, Volume 1B* (Holman Reference, 2005), 26.

17 Wilhelm Gesenius, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, ed. E. Kautzsch and A. E. Cowley, 2nd Revised & Enlarged (Oxford, 1960). §127b.

18 Gordon Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary Vol. 2, Genesis 16-50* (Thomas Nelson, 1994), 143; Stephen Caesar, “The Wealth and Power of the Biblical Patriarchs,” *The Wealth and Power of the Biblical Patriarchs*, 2006, <https://www.biblearchaeology.org/post/2009/10/14/The-Wealth-and-Power-of-the-Biblical-Patriarchs.aspx#Article>.

period. It is important to keep in mind that not only did long distance travel take considerably longer, but it was not safe and only a select few would ever make long journeys. Oppenheim described ancient Middle East travel thus:

Apart from the coming and going of army contingents, of caravans with donkeys carrying loads from city to city, of foreign envoys traveling under military protection, and of royal messengers, there was little other traffic on these routes. Traveling was made dangerous by marauding deserters, groups of migrants, runaway slaves, and wild animals, and there seem to have been very few periods in the history of the region when private letters could be sent from city to city (as in the Old Babylonian period) or a private person could move around freely.¹⁹

In the narrative we do not read anything about the journey. It seems to have been an uneventful trip. God protected this caravan on this important journey. Whatever had transpired on the road had little to no bearing on the progression of the story other than that the servant's caravan got to Nahor's city.

¹¹ He made the camels kneel outside the city near the well. It was evening, when the women go out to draw water. ¹² And he said, "LORD, God of my master Abraham, let this all work out for me today. Deal favorably with my master Abraham. ¹³ I'm standing by the spring, and the daughters of the men of the city are coming out to draw water. ¹⁴ Let it be that the girl to whom I say, 'Please give me your jar so I can drink,' and she says, 'Drink, and I'll water your camels, too' –let her be the one you have chosen for your servant Isaac. In this I will know that you have dealt favorably with my master."

When the servant arrived, he got about his business immediately. He did not head to the home of Abraham's family right away. Whereas before it sounded like he knew what he was going to do when he got to Haran, now it seems the reverse. If he really had all this planned out ahead of time he should not have been sitting by this well searching for a bride. He should have gone looking for Abraham's family.

As he sat by the well, the servant did see that the women of the city were coming out to draw water and he said a prayer to perhaps have his business completed right on the spot. He asked God for a sign of his approval on one of these young women. Why did the servant pray to the LORD? His motives are hidden from the reader. If he really did believe in God, then this is

¹⁹ A. Leo Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization*, First Edition (University of Chicago Press, 1964), 119–120.

probably just a believer's prayer for God's will to be done. If this servant had not placed true faith in God, then this amounts to a faithless request of God.

One might question if the servant really knew the God to whom he was praying. His address in the prayer is to “the LORD, God of my master Abraham.” This could theoretically reflect a polytheistic faith in pagan gods. One might understand him to say, “LORD, I know that Abraham is your servant, even though I am not. I am really doing this for him, so please give me what he would want most.”

But, much more probable is that his prayer reflects a faith in the one true LORD of all. This was the head servant in Abraham's household. He would have been circumcised according to God's covenant with Abraham.²⁰ And Abraham would have been practicing his faith at home and also teaching the members of his household about the LORD. The servant probably brought up Abraham's name because God had made special promises to Abraham and his line. God surely would not go back on his word.

The test was laid out plainly. The servant was going to ask one of these young ladies for some water from the jars they were filling at the well. If one of the girls went out of their way to not only give this stranger a drink, but also his camels, then it would be a sign that God had chosen that girl for Isaac.

The servant pleaded with God to do חַסְדִּים with Abraham. The whole prayer is said in the name of Abraham and on behalf of Isaac. God's relationship of חַסְדִּים with Abraham is the basis upon which the servant would like God to listen to his prayer and comply with his request. The word חַסְדִּים is connected in the Old Testament with God's one-sided covenant relationship with Israel. We often translate the word as “mercy” or “faithful love”. In Paul Eickmann's study, he explains:

Thus the translation *mercy* will regularly fit for the Lord's חַסְדִּים (though not for the חַסְדִּים Israel is to show the Lord!): his mercy flows from his faithful love. Yet for a consistent translation *faithful love* seems to reflect the Lord's covenant more aptly, especially in the book of Hosea.²¹

20 Genesis 17:10-14.

21 Paul E. Eickmann, “I Desire Mercy, Not Sacrifice” (presented at the Cottonbelt Pastoral Conference, Living Word Ev. Lutheran Church, Mobile, Alabama, 2001), 4, <http://www.wlssays.net/files/EickmannSacrifice.pdf>.

In Peters' study, he found that the word can vary between *love* and *mercy* on the one hand, and *faithfulness*, *loyalty* on the other.²² He also points out that the Septuagint translated with *eleos*, which also influenced the Vulgate's "*miser cordia*," but that the term "steadfast love" best expresses the thought in this chapter.²³ Peters concludes that,

Both the Old and the New Testament testify to one and the same love of God, whether the one speaks of "the love of the Lord toward the children of Israel" (Hos. 3:1), or the other of the "great love wherewith he loved us" (Eph. 2:4).²⁴

So in Genesis 24 אֱלֹהִים speaks to the relationship of Abraham and the LORD. And God's אֱלֹהִים to Abraham always showed a fulfillment of his promises. In these verses the servant asked God to allow this test to succeed and provide the woman for whom he had been searching. He asked all of this in line with God's faithful love toward Abraham.

¹⁵ Before he had finished speaking, Rebekah was coming out with her jar over her shoulder. She was born to Bethuel, the son of Milcah, the wife of Nahor, the brother of Abraham. ¹⁶ The girl was very beautiful, a virgin; no man had slept with her, and she was coming down to the spring and she filled the jar and came back up.

¹⁷ The servant ran to meet her and said, "Please give me some water from your jar."

¹⁸ She said, "Drink, my lord," and she quickly lowered her jar to her hands and gave him a drink. ¹⁹ When she had finished giving him a drink, she said, "I'll draw water until your camels are done drinking." ²⁰ So she hurried and emptied her jar into the trough, and she ran back to the well to draw, and she drew for all his camels. ²¹ The man was watching her silently to find out whether or not the LORD had given him success.

As the servant is saying this prayer silently, Rebekah shows up. Immediately the narrator includes her pedigree. It has the effect of saying, "All done! God has answered the prayer." For the servant, the situation has not yet been totally resolved, but for the audience it has. Rebekah is further described as a beautiful virgin, and in a position to pass the test of the servant because she had come to draw water at just that instant.

We are careful not to draw too much from the servant's prayer. It is by no means a

22 Paul W. Peters, "The Old Testament Covenant Term Chesed," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 50, no. 4 (October 1953): 261, www.wlssays.net/files/PetersChesed.rtf.

23 Paul W. Peters, "The Old Testament Covenant Term Chesed," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 51, no. 1 (January 1954): 44, www.wlssays.net/files/PetersChesed.rtf.

24 Paul W. Peters, "The Old Testament Covenant Term Chesed," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 51, no. 4 (January 1954): 242, www.wlssays.net/files/PetersChesed.rtf.

prescriptive example for young adults to follow when they are looking for a spouse. What we have recorded instead is a descriptive example of what this servant did. And we do not even have much indication about how God felt about it. If the servant did not pray in faith, then he should not have expected God to comply. God only listens to the prayers of believers.²⁵

And nowhere in the Bible does God give a promise allowing believers to find a future spouse by means of a test. We can only look for a spouse and pray that God bless our decision. We leave our petitions with God and acknowledge that he will still exercise his greater wisdom as he answers those prayers. Christians pray with confidence²⁶, but we should not try to force God to comply and attempt to bind God's will.²⁷ Martin Luther grasped this concept. He says of this servant's prayer,

As a result of this prayer there arises the question whether one may prescribe to God a time, a place, a person, and a measure of the thing for which we are asking; for since God is very free, one should pray in such a manner that we do not bind God to any circumstance but simply say: "Thy will be done" (Matt.6:10).²⁸

So then did the servant commit a sin by trying to twist God's arm? Luther did not think so. He had the opinion that the servant probably did not say these words to God "clearly and distinctly", but rather that they were said in a "sigh and desire of his heart".²⁹ Furthermore, Luther says the servant does not use the indicative or the imperative mood with God. Rather, he has a silent wish that God would do this against everyone's expectation.³⁰ But even if the servant did say this exact prayer silently to God he could have still done so with a proper servant's attitude.

But this episode in history does not mean that God will give all believers a sign that they are marrying the right person. For example, if a believer who is looking to find a wife prays, "LORD, I'm going to drop my wallet at the park. Please let the woman who returns my wallet to me be the woman that you want me to marry." The wallet may find its way back to the owner and it may not. If it does get back to him by a young lady, such a sign is ordinary enough that it

25 1 Peter 3:12

26 James 5:16

27 Luther, *Genesis*, 4:261.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid., 4:262.

does not necessarily prove God's involvement. And what if the person who returned the wallet were male, or already married? Would the conclusion be to repeat the test? Would he need to wait a while before trying again? And if the wallet does not come back right away, how long should the young man wait before he goes back and picks the wallet up again himself? There are many possibilities that would need to be sorted through. The test would not prove very conclusive. In another example, a believer could flip a coin with a very certain outcome either being heads or tails. But no matter what the outcome, that person does not have a promise from God that he will carry out that test. So it is a poor way to find out God's will.

In a different situation a believer might ask for something impossible so that they could be certain of God's supernatural involvement. For example, the prayer might be, "LORD, if you want me to marry my girlfriend, then cause a minor earthquake in the next 15 seconds." More than likely 15 seconds will pass and nothing extraordinary will have happened. And in that case the believer has no indication whether God's answer was "Do not marry the girl," "Do not marry her yet," or "I do not feel like answering you this way." Finally, if there were an unexpected earthquake during that time period it would be pretty good proof of supernatural involvement, but not necessarily of God's involvement. Satan and his angels can perform powerful acts and false miracles. So even a prayer for a miracle is not completely conclusive.

In all of these things believers should not be prescribing to God how he must communicate to us. We have no assurance that he will communicate with us immediately (outside of his Word). But we do have the assurance that what God says in the Bible is his Word.³¹ What we *should* do is look for the kind of spouse that God would want us to have according to his Word. With that in mind believers can look around and make the choice to value those virtues in a partner that God emphasizes himself. Upon finding a faithful partner, we can also ask God to bless our decisions and plans.

What things does God tell believers to value in a spouse? A good place to start is by studying the wife of noble character as recorded in Proverbs 31. This section sets out a long list of good qualities for a wife to have. This ideal woman is hardworking and strong.³² She is so productive that not only her own house is blessed,³³ but there is even enough to go around for the

31 2 Peter 1:19-21; 2 Timothy 3:16; 1 Thessalonians 2:13

32 Proverbs 31:13, 17

33 Proverbs 31:21

needy.³⁴ She also has the inner beauty of faith.³⁵ Beyond what is listed in chapter 31 of Proverbs, we also take note of what is *not* mentioned. The description neither confirms nor denies the outward beauty of this woman.

In 1 Peter, we find that a good wife is submissive and faithful. He writes, “Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. Instead, it should be that of the inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit...”³⁶ He also calls special attention to the patriarchal period by mentioning Sarah’s submissiveness to Abraham as the ideal.³⁷

We find God’s description of an ideal woman within his Word. So when young Christian men set out to find and value a woman who is industrious, submissive, charitable and faithful it pleases God. And when young Christian women strive to be such a woman, it pleases God. This is what we can count on for certain.

So was the prayer of this servant a prayer of “childlike faith”?³⁸ Namely, was he handing the situation over to God in confident prayer? Was he willing to have God’s answer be “not yet”, or “no”? Or did the servant really demand something of God that he had not promised? And if the servant did go too far and attempt to force God’s action, why does it seem like things worked out for him?

Some commentators will point out that the kind of test Abraham’s servant used might not have been all that arbitrary. There was a built-in safety feature within his test. No matter what he could walk away with a nice bride for Isaac. Even if the servant did have faith in the one true LORD and said a believing prayer to God, there were no guarantees that God was going to answer it according to the servant’s wishes. God might have provided a young woman in a different manner altogether. Even if Abraham’s LORD did not exist, or if he was not the strongest power at work here, or if his answer was “no,” then there was still hope. Namely, if the servant would be able to find a young girl who would not only give him a drink, but would volunteer to also water his camels, then he would have found a smart match for Isaac anyway. To be able to pass the test, the woman would have to show that she was willing and able to do

34 Proverbs 31:20

35 Proverbs 31:30

36 *NIV84*. 1 Peter 3:3-4.

37 1 Peter 3:5-6

38 Leupold, “XXIV,” 664.

manual labor, and to go out of her way for a stranger.³⁹ Youthful strength and a willingness to get work done would be good characteristics of Isaac's future wife.

In Schein's paper, he outlines three main approaches to this test. First, the servant might have been using divination to try and locate the proper girl to take back with him. But Schein quickly discounts this option because Rebekah didn't actually follow the prescribed omen for which he had been looking. Namely, the servant had prayed for the woman to say, "Drink, and I will also water your camels," but Rebecca says, "Drink," gives the servant water and then says, "I will also water your camels." In an omen, this variation was enough to make it fail.⁴⁰

The second option put forward is that of a character test. Schein rejects this option because the test wouldn't be a very good one. A young woman may pass the test, but she might not be single or a virgin. He also points out that even an eligible young lady might not want to be part of Abraham's covenant with God. Or, Rebekah might just have been nice to the stranger out of greed, since she saw his camels and caravan. Because of the possible shortcomings of a character test, Schein rejects the second option, too.⁴¹

Schein deduces that the test is a tactic the servant used to try and convince the family to give away their daughter. The main problem is that without Isaac along the journey doubts may be raised on the part of the prospective wife and family. The servant is portrayed, "...like a merchant who must sell goods without letting the customer see the merchandise."⁴² He writes, "The purpose of the test, then, is not to select a wife, but to fabricate a Divine omen of approval for the match so that the marriage proposal will be accepted."⁴³ In that case the servant would be a con man using lies to fulfill his master's charge.

When the servant got to Rebekah's house, Schein believes, his goal was to rush the family into a hasty decision. He did not want to give the family time or reason to raise doubts about the omen or the marriage.⁴⁴ Then once the family consented, the servant was eager to leave. He probably would have tried to leave that night, but it was already too late to start out.⁴⁵ For this

39 Menakhem Perry, "Counter-stories in the Bible: Rebekah and Her Bridegroom, Abraham's Servant," *Prooftexts* 27, no. 2 (Spr 2007): 294.

40 Andrew Schein, "The Test of Rebecca," *Tradition* 31, no. 4 (Sum 1997): 28.

41 *Ibid.*, 29.

42 *Ibid.*, 30.

43 *Ibid.*

44 *Ibid.*, 32.

45 *Ibid.*

same reason, according to Schein, the servant is eager to set out early the next morning.⁴⁶ In his conclusion, Schein writes, “The choice of Rebecca as Isaac's wife did not occur haphazardly, but due to a brilliant and carefully executed plan by Abraham's servant.”⁴⁷

However, the problems with Schein's argument are that it does not address the issue of what the servant would have done if Rebekah had not agreed to water the camels. If the servant was set on getting Rebekah for Isaac's wife, then he did not appear to have a very good contingency plan for her possible responses. What would the servant have done if Rebekah had ignored him or said, “no”? Schein presupposes that the servant had already done his research and believed that Rebekah would pass.⁴⁸ But the text in Genesis 24 mentions nothing specifically about the servant getting any information about Rebekah or any other local family before saying his prayer.

It is best to view the servant's actions here as a prayer. This is how the story most naturally reads. It accounts for Abraham's promise that God would bless the journey. This view also allows some flexibility in how God would answer the prayer. Even if there was a pause between the time when Rebekah said, “Drink,” and when she said, “I will water your camels, too,” this would not be enough to determine the failure of the test. The events happened extremely close to the sign for which the servant had prayed. Luther's understanding follows this theory. Luther held that the servant expressed a wish through prayer and it seems the safest understanding of these words.⁴⁹

But was the servant sinning by putting God to the test?⁵⁰ Not necessarily. If the servant did say a prayer with a submissive attitude to God's will, it could still be done in faith. Whatever other questions may linger for us must be allowed to remain.

The next thing we should take notice of here is why the servant called Rebekah over in the first place. Was she the first girl he saw? Was Rebekah a happenstance choice from among the coming mob of young women? Maybe she was just the first person to come up with a full jug. The servant may have chosen Rebekah because she was particularly beautiful. The text itself leaves us to guess.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid., 31.

49 Luther, *Genesis*, 4:261.

50 “Do not put the LORD your God to the test.” - Deuteronomy 6:16

In Perry's understanding of the events, there is a “counter-story” within this whole account in which the servant really wants to have Rebekah for himself. Perry says that the reason the servant asked Rebekah for a drink was personal interaction with this beautiful young woman. The servant thought she was pretty and wanted to flirt. Perry goes on to say that Rebekah reciprocated these feelings as she complied with his wishes. He writes,

The man speaks to her; she responds to his ambiguous request and lets him drink in physical proximity, because she likes it. She prolongs this pleasurable situation as much as possible (giving him not “a bit of water” as he requested, but “his fill”), and when it is not possible to keep up this deed any longer, she looks for an excuse to continue the adventure—and suddenly occur to her his kneeling camels, which he himself did not mention. Why does she volunteer to water them? Is it out of exemplary hospitality? But she does not offer water to any of the men accompanying him (his servants in her eyes), who remain thirsty. All her deeds are directed at this man personally, not at the others who are with him, or at any Isaac.⁵¹

It is an interesting argument, but there is no compelling reason to read so much into this interaction. Perry's argument shows how easy it can be to impose a theory onto the text. Perhaps there was some sort of flirtatious interaction between the servant and Rebekah, but the text really does not demonstrate that. We should not be too forceful with what *may* fit between the lines and stick to what *is* there, whether implicitly or explicitly. The account reads that the servant came up with a simple test by which he would find out if God had put his stamp of approval on the servant's choice. Then, having spotted a young lady with the means by which to pass the test, he asked her for some water.

During this meeting at the well, Rebekah proves to be a hardworking servant. The fact that she is even at the well to draw water at all shows us that she is an industrious woman. And from the text, it sounds like drawing water was really young women's work. This type of work especially falls under work for the young women, those who are old enough to be carrying a big jar of water, but still young enough that they would be up to the task. Even as Rebekah carried out common work for a young woman, she shows that she has a particular personality to get down to work. Teugels puts it this way:

But if Rebekah is a 'doer', she is certainly not a 'talker'. Her answers are limited to the

⁵¹ Perry, “Counter-stories in the Bible,” 298–9.

necessary. She never initiates a conversation. In this she is the counterbalance of the servant, who hardly ever stops talking. But even he ceases speaking when Rebekah shows herself as an indefatigable whirl of action, and merely watches her in silence (v. 21).⁵²

Again, Teugels writes,

The characterization of Rebekah in Genesis 24, as has been said, is chiefly attained through description of her actions. She is a 'doer', one who acts rather than speaks. Rhetorically this trait is conveyed by the large number of action-verbs used of her—in particular the verbs 'to hurry' (מהר), and 'to run' (רוץ), but also descending, drawing water, giving to drink. The many actions bespeak an intention to represent Rebekah as an active person.⁵³

This is the kind of woman who will be perfect for Isaac. She is a hardworking young woman with a heart to serve.

Through this whole interaction there is an ironic role-reversal between Rebekah and this servant. The whole while the servant takes a rest as Rebekah does the work. The servant finds a well and sits by it as he prays for the work to get done for him. Instead of praying to find the right house he prays for the right girl to come to him. And instead of watering his own camels, he asks for someone to do it for him. Conversely, Rebekah proves to have a real servant's heart. She is quite industrious from beginning to end. The reason she came out in the first place was to get some more water for her household. Then, after she had filled her jug, she freely offered to water not only the servant, but also the ten camels that were with him. Even one camel can drink up to 40 gallons (150 liters) at a time.⁵⁴ One wonders how many times she had to replenish the jar in order to satisfy so many. While the servant sat and pondered, Rebekah was hard at labor. When she did speak, she was right to the point.

This test does not prove to be very decisive anyway. Even after Rebekah had passed the test, we read that the servant “was watching her silently, to find out whether or not the LORD had given him success”. This test did not end up convincing the servant, even though it was basically what he had asked for.⁵⁵ He should have stuck to his job of finding the relatives of

52 Lieve M. Teugels, “‘A Strong Woman, Who Can Find?’ : A Study of Characterization in Genesis 24, with Some Perspectives on the General Presentation of Isaac and Rebekah in the Genesis Narratives,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* no. 63 (S 1994): 98.

53 *Ibid.*, 97.

54 “Dromedary Camels,” February 1, 2013, <http://www.dandydesigns.org/id36.html>.

55 Perry, “Counter-stories in the Bible,” 299.

Abraham in the first place. If it had turned out that Rebekah was not of the proper lineage, then it would seem like the servant would have had to go back to the drawing board anyway.

²² When the camels had finished drinking, the man took out a gold nose-ring weighing a half-shekel, and placed two gold bracelets weighing ten shekels on her arms. ²³ He asked, "Whose daughter are you—please tell me. Is there a place for us to stay the night at your father's house?"

²⁴ She said to him, "I am the daughter of Bethuel, the son of Milcah, whom she bore to Nahor." ²⁵ And she said to him, "We have lots of straw and fodder, and a place to spend the night."

²⁶ Then the man bowed down and worshiped the LORD. ²⁷ He said, "Blessed be the LORD, the God of my master Abraham, who has not abandoned his favor or his faithfulness to my master. As for me, the LORD has guided me on this path to the house of my master's brother."

Take note of the moment at which the servant decided to lavish gifts on Rebekah. We have already established that the servant's test with the water jug was not conclusive. Did he anticipate the answer she was about to give? Or was the jewelry merely a gesture of thanks for the water? If he were paying her back for the water, he was extremely generous in comparison to the service rendered.

The account does not rule out that the description is not fully chronological. We do not need to assume that first, the gifts were given, and second, that Rebekah started to tell him about her family. It really only fits together if the servant had already acquired the knowledge of Rebekah's background before he gave her anything. It would have been improper for the servant to be so extravagant with his master's property just to tell some nice girl "Thank you". The gifts offered were very costly. Even the half-shekel nose ring was valuable. Delitzsch comments, "Half a shekel of gold, no very great weight in itself, but great for this ornament, which was fastened to one of the nostrils."⁵⁶ A shekel is about twelve grams (0.4 ounces).⁵⁷ Another important factor is that nose-rings were often used as gifts of betrothal.⁵⁸ So it is very hard to understand these gifts as a token of thanks. Also, as the servant would later recount the events, Rebekah revealed her identity first.⁵⁹ This is the best way to understand the sequence of events.

When the servant asked Rebekah about her family and a place to stay he seemed very

⁵⁶ Franz Delitzsch, *A New Commentary on Genesis*, vol. II (Morrison and Gibb Limited, 1899), 108.

⁵⁷ Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary*, 145.

⁵⁸ Delitzsch, *A New Commentary on Genesis*, 1899, II:108.

⁵⁹ Genesis 24:47

excited. Depending on how one chooses to punctuate his words, one could be left with a couple of different options. It could be that he said, “Whose daughter are you—please tell me. Is there a place for us to stay the night at your father's house?” Or it could be taken as, “Whose daughter are you? Please tell me—is there a place for us to stay the night at your father's house? The Masoretes prefer the first option. In both cases the reader can sense the emotional excitement that the servant was feeling. He did not even give Rebekah time to answer before he interjected.

As for the “we” in his question, the servant is talking about himself and his companions. The casual reader might miss this detail and think that the servant was making an indecent proposal.⁶⁰ That is not the case. The servant did not travel alone, because he did not travel light. There were ten camels besides provisions for the road. They also carried with them several precious items from Abraham's wealth. He had precious cargo in tow and it would have been unsafe for a one-man caravan. Moreover, he needed to provide safe travel for Isaac's future wife on the return journey.

²⁸ The girl ran and told her mother's house about these things. ²⁹ Now Rebekah had a brother whose name was Laban. Laban ran to the man outside by the spring. ³⁰ He saw the rings and the bracelets on his sister's arms, and he listened to his sister Rebekah's words, “...That's what the man said to me.” He went to the man and found him standing with his camels by the spring. ³¹ He said, “Come, you who are blessed by the LORD. Why are you standing outside? I have prepared the house, and a place for the camels.”

³² So the man came to the house and unpacked the camels. Then he gave the camels straw and feed. There was also water for him and the men with him to wash their feet. ³³ Food was set out in front of him to eat, but he said, “I won't eat until I've said what I've got to say.”

“Speak,” Laban said.

³⁴ He said, “I am Abraham's servant. ³⁵ The LORD has blessed my master, and he is very rich. And he gave to him sheep and cattle, silver and gold, male and female servants, camels and donkeys. ³⁶ Sarah, my master's wife, gave birth to my master's son after she was already old. And my master gave to him everything he had. ³⁷ And my master made me swear this oath: 'Don't get a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites in whose land I am living. ³⁸ Instead, go to my father's house, to my clan, and get a wife for my son.’

³⁹ “I asked my master, 'What if the woman doesn't come back with me?’

⁴⁰ “He said to me, 'The LORD, before whom I have walked, will send his angel with you, and he will bless your path and you will take a wife for my son from my clan and from the house of my father. ⁴¹ When you go to my clan, then you will be free from my oath. And if they don't give her to you, then you will be free from my oath.’

⁶⁰ Perry, “Counter-stories in the Bible,” 299.

When Laban saw the jewelry on Rebekah and heard her story he hurried to see that the man was well received into their home. Laban went out to the servant to invite him in. Laban made sure that everything was ready at the house to receive this guest. He saw to it that lodging was prepared for the guests and camels. Then it was time for some food.

But who set the table? In verse 33, Leningrad has וַיִּשֶׂם "and it was placed..." This would probably mean that either Laban or someone else in the household put out the food for the guests. This fits well with Ancient Mesopotamian hospitality. It could also be understood that the verb does not leave the reader with any indication of who carried out the action. It is noteworthy that the LXX and Syriac editions translate with an active "and he placed..." This leans more toward the idea of the servant himself setting the table, since the servant is the closest antecedent. By the context, it is much more logical that food was prepared for the guests and set out for them to eat. They were being received into the home. They should not have been expected to do the housework. This is further supported in that the man protests that he wants to speak before they eat. He already had in mind to speak before dinner and when he saw it being set out he said, "Wait." The family was eager to please these guests but it was time to do business. The servant did not want to delay any more. According to Keil and Delitzsch, "The servant discharged his commission before he partook of the food set before him."⁶¹

As the servant retells the story, more details become available to the reader. In sections of Scripture like this, where the events of a story are retold, we remember that the Holy Spirit wastes no ink. We could have just been informed, "So the servant told Laban everything that had happened." This reiteration of the events is a deliberate literary device. As such, it requires more than a cursory glance to see why the retelling by the servant is recorded here. The author puts us into the mind of the servant, and possibly provides clarification on the details of the events as they were initially reported.

As the servant recounted his master's orders, he included a couple of details previously omitted. He said that his master said that, "the LORD, *before whom I have walked* will send his angel..." This shows that Abraham is someone to be respected and honored. He has had a very intimate relationship with God. The servant really wants to impress upon Laban and the family

61 Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Julius Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes*, vol. 1, 10 vols. (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988).

that the LORD really has blessed his journey, and it would be a waste for them to refuse his request to take Rebekah back with him. Another detail is included with, “Or, if when you go to my clan *they don't give her to you...*” Here, the emphasis is placed on the family's decision as to whether or not this woman would come back. It is not so much about what the young woman had to say about it. Back in verse 8, it really has to do with the woman's willingness to come back with him. As Perry writes,

The issue of Rebekah's will is also expunged. Abraham's actual “if the woman should not want” (8) is substituted with the false “if you come to my clan and they refuse you” (41), according to which the right of refusal belongs only to the men of the family.⁶²

Still, there is a possibility that one decision would be a heavy influence on the other. It did sound initially that the woman's voice would be the deciding factor. Here, as the servant speaks to Laban, it seems as if the important factor is her family and particularly the men. Maybe since Rebekah had already seemed to go along with it, the only factor left was what the family would say. Or maybe Rebekah's decision would simply reflect the wisdom of the men in her family, regardless of her personal feelings. It is difficult to say how much each factor could have played into the overall decision. What is abundantly clear is that the decision of the men is a factor, but we cannot determine for sure how big a factor. This is a sign of a functioning family. They do not act independently from one another, but make this important decision as a unit.

⁴² “So I came to the spring today and I prayed, 'LORD, God of my master Abraham, if it pleases you, make the trip that I'm going on a success. ⁴³ I'm standing by the spring of water; if a young woman comes out to draw and I say to her, “Please give me a little water to drink from your jar,” ⁴⁴and if she says to me, “Drink, and I'll draw for your camels, too,” let her be the woman whom the LORD has chosen for my master's son.’

⁴⁵ “Before I finished praying in my heart, right away Rebekah was coming out with her jar over her shoulder. She came down to the spring and drew water. So I asked her, 'May I please have a drink?' ⁴⁶ So she quickly lowered her jar from her shoulder and said, 'Drink, and I'll water your camels, too.' So I drank, and she watered the camels as well.

⁴⁷ “Then I asked her, 'Whose daughter are you?’

“She replied, 'I'm the daughter of Bethuel, the son of Nahor, whom Milcah bore to him.’

⁶² Perry, “Counter-stories in the Bible,” 301.

“So I put the ring in her nose, and the bracelets on her arms. ⁴⁸ Then I bowed down and worshiped the LORD, and I blessed the LORD God of my master Abraham who had guided me in the right way to get a wife for his son from my master's brother's daughter. ⁴⁹ So now, if you are showing love and faithfulness to my master, tell me. And if not, tell me, so I will know which way to turn.”

In the servant's retelling of his interaction with Rebekah, it is extremely close to what we read previously. We should take note of how the servant leaves out the manner in which he received the water from Rebekah. He neglects to mention that Rebekah was the one who held the jar as he drank from it. Perry says his motive in doing this is to hide his flirtatious exchange with Rebekah from her family.⁶³ We do not need to insist on this. It is quite possible that he just thought that it was an insignificant detail in the story, and left it out. Or perhaps he thought it was an obvious detail that did not need to be stated explicitly. He recounts the parts of the story that were important insofar as they fulfill the prayer that he had prayed. He just wanted to prove that God has put his approval on this marriage. Both the details of the interaction and the ancestry of Rebekah came into play as important parts of being able to make this match work.

It would be interesting to see what the servant would have done if God had not cooperated in this matter. Would he have just found a way to run into Abraham's family and then forgotten about his prayer? Would he have prayed for a different test first? Would he have stayed at the well drinking water from the young girls until one of them finally offered to water his camels? The important thing is that since the events played out the way they did, there was plenty enough evidence that Rebekah was the perfect fit for Isaac's wife.

Finally, in this account we can see that it was not until *after* Rebekah had revealed her identity that he gave her gifts. Clearly they were not given out of generosity for her watering of the camels. These gifts were reserved for the bride-to-be.

⁵⁰ Laban and Bethuel answered, “This is from the LORD. We can't tell you one way or the other. ⁵¹ Rebekah is right here in front of you! Take her and go! She will be the wife of your master's son, just as the LORD said.”

⁵² When Abraham's servant heard their answer, he bowed low to the ground, worshiping the LORD. ⁵³ The servant took out gold and silver jewelry and clothes and gave them to Rebekah. And he gave expensive presents to her brother and mother.

Again, this conversation is between the servant and Rebekah's father and brother. We

⁶³ Ibid., 295–6.

take note that once the servant speaks to them, the matter is over. They do not ask Rebekah for her opinion afterward. Whether their opinion at this time was the only one that mattered, or whether theirs was the only one that was still in question is unclear. Once they hear the story and all the evidence in it, they leave their own opinions out of the deal. They do not want to overrule the LORD's plans.

Rebekah seems to be standing around listening to the whole conversation. We do not hear that she was called over to the men. Was it out of place for her to speak among the men, or had she already made her wishes clear earlier? Either way, she shows submissiveness to their final decision. This says a lot about her character; she showed respect to her father and brother by not chiming in again with her own thoughts.

Then the servant bowed down in worship, and paid the *bride-price*. Leupold explains,

A kind of dowry or wedding present was regularly bestowed by a bridegroom when an agreement of marriage had been reached. Such a gift gave proof of his financial competence. In this instance there is first of all a gift to the bride, then a gift to those who gave her in marriage. There is no purchase involved here; merely a tangible way of bestowing tokens and pledges of goodwill.⁶⁴

John Jeske elaborates,

The family's response once again brought the servant to his knees in worship. He then distributed the gifts he had brought. Some were gifts for Rebekah, and some were for her parents and her brother. The social custom of the day required a prospective bridegroom to give his future in-laws a special gift known as the "*bride-price*." This gift served a number of purposes. It provided evidence that the marital agreement was made in good faith, and sealed the covenant between the two families. It established the social standing of the groom. Since the bride would be leaving the father's household, the bride-price reimbursed him for the loss of a worker. And it served as a sort of prepaid alimony in case the husband later deserted or divorced his wife.⁶⁵

The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament also records,

The *mōhar* was a sum of money or its equivalent, which the fiance paid to the girl's father as a compensation to the family. It was not, strictly speaking, the purchase price, but the customary wedding money.⁶⁶

64 Leupold, "XXIV," 679.

65 John C. Jeske, *Genesis*, Revised, People's Bible Commentary (Concordia Publishing House, 2004), 201–2.

66 R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr, and Bruce K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*,

After this price had been paid, the deal was sealed. All that was left to do was get some rest and get ready for the journey back to Isaac.

⁵⁴ Then he and the men with him ate and drank and spent the night. When they got up in the morning, he said, "Send me to my master".

⁵⁵ Her brother and mother replied, "Let the girl stay with us for ten days or so. Then she can go."

⁵⁶ He said to them, "Don't delay me since the LORD has made my trip successful. Send me so I can go to my master."

⁵⁷ So they said, "We'll call the girl, and ask her."

⁵⁸ So they called Rebekah and they said to her, "Will you go with this man?" "I'll go," she said.

After last night's events had already come to pass, the servant was ready to get going on the journey home. Now he is met with a little hesitancy from the family. His request seemed too hasty. Had the subject of their departure time only just now come up? Only yesterday things were going on as usual in the household, and now the family was about to lose Rebekah permanently. There is some debate about how long the family had intended to keep the girl. The Hebrew uses "days". But the plural here might be used to mean "a year".⁶⁷ Elsewhere the plural "days" is used of the annual sacrifice (1 Sam 1:21, 2:19, 20:6). "Days" can also be used to mean months. In Judges 19:2, it is explained by using the word "months".⁶⁸ So then they might have been proposing that the girl remain for "a year or ten (months)."⁶⁹

When the family asks Rebekah about her wishes, it looks to be that she is only weighing in on the time of departure. Some look at this question and try to make it seem like she is weighing in her vote as to whether or not she will be married off at all.⁷⁰ But she is not here deciding on whether or not she will go. That had been decided yesterday already. It does not make much sense to read it in such a way that Bethuel and Laban were hesitant to step in the way of the LORD's plan for her to marry Isaac, but perhaps now Rebekah would. Neither does it

Electronic Edition (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1999), 492.

67 Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Electronic Ed. (Logos Research Systems, 2000), 400.

68 וַתְּהִי־יָשֶׁם יָמִים אַרְבָּעָה חֳדָשִׁים "...and she was there days, four months." Judges 19:2.

69 Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary*, 150.

70 Elizabeth Cady Stanton, "THE BOOK OF GENESIS: CHAPTER VII," in *Woman's Bible* (Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, 2006), 28–32.

make sense that the servant had passed out the gifts that would serve as a bride-price, but now she is given the opportunity to renege. No, the option before her has to do with this latest request for her to stay for another ten days or so. Again, we take note that Rebekah got right to the point. With a one word answer, she was ready to get on the road. She was a doer, not a talker.

⁵⁹ So they sent their sister Rebekah away, along with her nurse, Abraham's servant, and his men. ⁶⁰ They blessed Rebekah and said to her:

**"Our sister, may you become thousands upon thousands,
and may your offspring inherit the gate of their enemies."**

⁶¹ Then Rebekah and her maids left, riding on camels as they followed the man. The servant took Rebekah and left.

⁶² Now Isaac was coming from Beer Lahai Roi. He was living in the land of the Negev. ⁶³ In the evening, Isaac went out to think in the field. When he looked up, he saw camels coming. ⁶⁴ When Rebekah looked, she saw Isaac, and got down from her camel. ⁶⁵ And she asked the servant, "Who is that man walking in the field to meet us?"

The servant replied, "He is my master." Then she took her veil and covered herself. ⁶⁶ The servant told Isaac everything that he had done. ⁶⁷ So Isaac brought her to his mother Sarah's tent and married Rebekah. She became his wife, and he loved her. So Isaac was comforted after his mother's death.

As the caravan reached its destination, the two finally met. While the caravan was still approaching from off in the distance, Isaac happened to be walking in the field. He looked up and took notice of the caravan. As Rebekah drew near, she noticed some man in the field and asked the servant to identify him. When the servant had explained that the man was his master, we can tell that Rebekah knew that this was her betrothed. She did not need a further explanation. She immediately hops down from the camel, and puts on her veil. Both of these are signs of respect in Eastern culture.⁷¹

Contrary to Perry's argument, Rebekah *did* understand who she was meeting. Perry's "counter-story" is that this whole time Rebekah thought she was supposed to marry the servant. He says that now, with this new information about his master, Rebekah got startled and fell off her camel. But this is not how the account reads. It says that Rebekah got down from the camel and then found out who the man was. Perry continues as he claims that Rebekah quickly covered herself with a veil because she had been "immodestly exposed, intimately free with a

⁷¹ Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 1:261.

stranger who is not her fiancé”.⁷² But such a statement ignores the rest of the people in the caravan. There were probably several men along with Rebekah, her nurse, and the servant. If she had been immodestly dressed, then one more man would not have made a difference.

Besides, the word נפל does not have to mean “fall accidentally,” there can be an “intentional” falling as well.⁷³ The word can mean to “dismount,” which is used elsewhere in connection with a chariot.⁷⁴

Now that the servant had successfully finished the long journey to get a wife for Isaac, the only thing left was a wedding. And after the servant explained to Isaac what had transpired during the course of his journey, and how he had gotten a wife for him, they were married. We do not read much of a description about the ceremony involved. What is included is the important detail that they were married in the tent of his mother, whose death he had been mourning. Isaac found much consolation in having Rebekah around. She filled that void in his life that had been there since Sarah had passed away.

Everything about the situation shows that their marriage was a loving union brought about by and including the LORD. There are many lessons that we could take from this union. We read explicitly that Isaac “loved” Rebekah. How much of the servant's errand was revealed to Isaac before the servant's return is uncertain. But upon return, the servant explained everything and Isaac was pleased. He made the choice at that very moment to go through with the marriage plan, and to love his new wife. It also has something to say about Isaac's submissiveness to his father who had arranged all of this. And he did so at the age of 40.⁷⁵ Even as a grown man, Isaac recognized that his duty to his father did not end when he reached adulthood.

72 Perry, “Counter-stories in the Bible,” 306–7.

73 Koehler and Baumgartner, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 710; Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 657.

74 2 Kings 5:21

75 Ge 25:20

PART 2: MAJOR TEXTUAL QUESTIONS

Who is the servant?

Throughout the entire account of Genesis 24, the servant himself is never actually identified. In keeping with that fact, I refused to name him throughout the exegetical portion of this paper. At this point it is noteworthy that this servant is often assumed to be Eliezer, who had previously been named in Genesis 15:2. This assertion comes from Jewish lore.⁷⁶ Many commentators introduce the name Eliezer without making any defense at all for this conclusion. Luther does the same in his lectures.⁷⁷

Interestingly, in Genesis 15 Eliezer is not called a servant.⁷⁸ What *is* said is that Eliezer is the *בֶּן-בֵּיתִי*, that is, "an inmate" of Abraham's house, as distinguished from *בֶּן-בְּיָרְדֵי*, "home-born".⁷⁹ In this section, Abraham prayed to the LORD God to give him a son to be his heir.⁸⁰ If he were left without a son, Abraham's estate would be passed off to Eliezer. Since Eliezer is a part of the household, and is clearly not part of the family bloodline, we can determine that he is a servant. And it follows that where no heir is found at the master's death, the estate would be passed to the servants. So whoever was the highest servant in the household would be the one to inherit his master's estate. From this we can deduce that at the time that Abraham spoke these words, Eliezer was the chief servant in the house.

What is often then assumed is that Eliezer maintains his rank, and has a long enough life to still be around as Abraham's life comes to an end. Not only that, but it is assumed that this servant is still in good enough health to make such a long journey in his old age. Leupold notes,

It seems a rather rare case that one servant should be in another man's employ for such a length of time. In fact, it would seem that Eliezer must have been in Abraham's employ more than twenty years to arrive at a position of such influence as he held according to 15:12. That would necessitate by the time of this chapter eighty consecutive years of

76 Moshe Reiss, "THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, REBEKAH AND JACOB," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (June 2004): 94.

77 Luther, *Genesis*, 4:229.

78 Jack M. Sasson, "THE SERVANT'S TALE: HOW REBEKAH FOUND A SPOUSE," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 65, no. 4 (October 2006): 249.

79 Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 1:211.

80 Genesis 15:2

service!⁸¹

These facts are reckoned as follows: First, God gave Abraham the promise of a son (instead of Eliezer) before Ishmael was born. And we know that Abraham was 86 when he had Ishmael.⁸² We also know that Abraham was one-hundred years old when Isaac was born to him.⁸³ And when Isaac was married, he was 40 years old.⁸⁴ This means a gap of at least 54 years between the time that Eliezer had been named Abraham's chief servant and the events in Genesis 24.

In Genesis 24 the servant is then identified as אֶלְעָזָר זָקֵן, but this phrase does not provide much information. The word זָקֵן could be used to prove that he was the oldest servant in his household.⁸⁵ It could also be a technical term like "chief servant,"⁸⁶ or "senior administrator".⁸⁷ All of these descriptions may be true of this particular servant, and they would all fit if Eliezer is the chief servant. But there is nothing textual to demand that Eliezer is this servant. We must stick to the concrete facts that are recorded within the Bible. Pastors should be careful not to introduce this character by saying that he is Eliezer. Instead, it is proper to say that there are many who believe that this servant was Eliezer.

I believe that the absence of the servant's name is a rhetorical feature of the text. Had he wanted to, Moses could have included the servant's name. However, he did not. So throughout the account he is referred to as "servant," or "man". Both terms preserve his anonymity. He is called "servant" thirteen times throughout, and "man" eight times. As it does so, it gives him less of a role of prominence in the narrative, although much of what happened directly involved him. Some commentators believe that the reason for omitting his name is to emphasize his relationship to Abraham.⁸⁸ There seems no reason why each of the two terms was used throughout the narrative other than variety.

81 Leupold, "XXIV," 658.

82 Genesis 16:16

83 Genesis 17:17

84 Genesis 25:20

85 Koehler and Baumgartner, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 278.

86 Leupold, "XXIV," 658; Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 278.

87 Mathews, *The New American Commentary Genesis 11*, 326.

88 Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary*, 141.

What did marriage look like during the patriarchal period?

Genesis 24 offers us a good peek into marriage during the patriarchal period. We can look at things from the perspectives of Abraham's involvement as father, the servant's role to both of his masters, Rebekah's role as future wife, Rebekah's family's role as they give away the bride, and Isaac's role as future husband. Each one of these glimpses throughout the narrative provides us with a larger picture of what things were really like.

The real question to answer is, "How much choice did Rebekah have?" Going through the account, there are those who find arguments on both sides. I have already gone over each of these points above as we walked through the story, but I will treat them again here.

As the servant was clarifying his orders with Abraham, he said, "What if the woman doesn't want to come back with me to this land?"⁸⁹ From the way that he forms the question, it does sound like Rebekah has the choice in the matter. We take note that not only her will is involved, but also that nobody else is mentioned who might play a factor. Then, in reply, Abraham said, "And if the woman is not willing to go back with you, then you will be free from this oath of mine, just do not make my son live there".⁹⁰ Again, the only will mentioned is the will of the bride-to-be.

Now, some would look at this same exchange and say that Abraham is the one who called all the shots in this union. Robert Gillies wrote,

What's also interesting on this point is that Isaac, the son in question, doesn't seem to have much say in the matter and nor does Abraham's wife, Sarah. It's left to the servant and his master Abraham to work out the details of what has to be done and then to get on and do it.⁹¹

While Gillies does well to see the servant's role and Abraham's role, he should not have even mentioned Sarah, because she had already passed away. We definitely recognize Abraham's will and the role that a father played in ancient marriage. He had a duty to provide for his son, especially as he was nearing his end. Abraham also had to consider that should this servant return with a young lady, she would be serving him in some way, too. This is particularly true since Sarah had passed away. Luther says, "What this passage teaches is that parents should

89 Genesis 24:5

90 Genesis 24:9

91 Robert Gillies, "3rd July: Proper 9," *Expository Times* 122, no. 9 (2011): 439, doi:10.1177/0014524611401530.

concern themselves about an honorable marriage for their sons and daughters.”⁹² His point is that Abraham's role as father demands that he not ignore his duties in this matter.

Later, after the servant left on his mission and was sitting at the well, he recognized that this was a special circumstance. Not only was the girl's will going to be involved, but also the will of God. So he prayed to God, “...Let her be the one you have chosen for your servant, Isaac.”⁹³ There is no mention of anybody else involved. At the very least, God's will is the most important one involved in the equation. The servant recognized that God had a voice of his own that needed to be revealed.

Later on, when the servant made it to Rebekah's house, it was evident that the family, and particularly the men, had something to say about the marriage. When he got there, it sounds like all the family was gathered together, but that only the men had a part in the discussion while the women remained silent.⁹⁴ Laban and Bethuel listen to the story anew from the servant. Then, he asked them, “So now, if you are showing love and faithfulness to my master, tell me. And if not, tell me so I will know which way to turn.”⁹⁵ The “you” in that sentence is a plural, which we find specified in the next sentence. “Laban and Bethuel answered, 'This is from the LORD. We cannot tell you one way or the other.’”⁹⁶ Out of whoever was present and listening to the servant's words, only the men of the family respond to the inquiry. Even so, there is a clear recognition that it is the LORD's will that mattered.

The next morning, with the servant ready to leave for home, the family tried to delay their departure. The servant asked a final request of the family. “Send me to my master.”⁹⁷ It doesn't make much sense that he is asking all over again, “Will you let Rebekah go with me at all?” The question really reads more naturally, “Will you let Rebekah go with me right now?” So when they called Rebekah to ask her what she thought, the question had to do with the *time* of departure, and not so much whether she wanted to go *at all*.⁹⁸

When she finally gave her answer, “I'll go,” there are those that would try to make it seem

92 Luther, *Genesis*, 4:223.

93 Genesis 24:14

94 This is supported by the fact that they say, “Rebekah is right here in front of you!” - Genesis 24:51; Also in that the servant puts the jewelry on Rebekah, evidently nearby. - Genesis 24:53

95 Genesis 24:49

96 Genesis 24:50

97 Genesis 24:54

98 Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 1:260; Leupold, “XXIV,” 682.

as if this were a closed-case scenario, and Rebekah had the final say, or even the only voice that mattered. Elizabeth Stanton writes,

The whole narrative shows Rebekah's personal freedom and dignity. She was alone at some distance from her family. She was not afraid of the strangers, but greeted them with the self-possession of a queen. The decision whether she should go or stay, was left wholly with herself, and her nurse and servants accompanied her.⁹⁹

But Rebekah's distance from the family does not necessitate her freedom of will. It only shows that the journey to the well was reasonably safe enough for her to make and that fetching water was part of the duty of women. Later, Stanton again comments, "It is refreshing to find in the fifty-eighth verse that Rebekah was really supposed to have some personal interest and rights in the betrothal."¹⁰⁰ However, we cannot look at this one phrase in the text, "I'll go," and claim that it resolves everything. The point is not about Rebekah's willingness to marry or not. The point is how much her own voice counted.

There is no subsequent mention of anyone's will involved in the account. In the case of Isaac, we are left to wonder how much he knew about the servant's errand. It is unclear how much, if anything, Abraham had relayed to Isaac about the matter before the caravan returned with his new wife. When they arrive, Isaac does not ask, "Is this her?" Instead, the servant "told Isaac everything that he had done."¹⁰¹ It seems like Isaac's will is the most inconsequential in the account. He may not have even known for what purpose the servant had traveled away.

I believe this has a lot to say about the entire view of marriage during the patriarchal period. Isaac recognized that this was God's will and did not want to oppose that. He also understood that he had a choice to love this woman. What I mean is: volition is also involved in love, not purely emotion. Their relationship was not based on the feeling in the pit of their stomachs, nor in how fast their hearts raced at first sight. A man's duty is to love his wife and it is not something that is entirely left to chance. There is a choice to be made. That is not to say that it was not easy for Isaac. We are told that Rebekah was beautiful.¹⁰² Still, she was veiled at their first meeting, so any initial feelings for her could not have been based on aesthetics.

99 Stanton, "THE BOOK OF GENESIS."

100 Ibid.

101 Genesis 24:66

102 Genesis 24:16

In short, Genesis 24 presents us with multiple perspectives of the people involved in this union. The account really shows that Rebekah did go along with this marriage. She was not dragged away like a captive. Neither was she sold or bartered off like a piece of property by the will of her family. In the verses that sound like she has a say of her own, we wonder to what degree her choice mattered. Did the real choice remain with the men in the family? If so, it still would not discount that her own family would like to offer her what she desired. Or, did the voice of the family only play a minor role which Rebekah could have later vetoed? It does not seem that way. Throughout the whole story, Rebekah sounds like a young woman who is willing to serve as a daughter of her current household. She is also ready to accept her role as wife, and that any selfish concerns are immaterial to her. She is eager to serve and please her new husband in her new role the same as she was eager to help her family in the previous one.

Do camels belong in the patriarchal period?

As we read Genesis 24, we should accept what it says. For starters, this is a historical document. Unless we have severely compelling evidence to disagree with the document, we should listen to what it says. Good historians do not ignore evidence purely because it does not fit with one's own assumptions. But of course, this is much more than a historical document. We also come to the text with the presupposition of faith which says that this is God's Word. Every detail included in it must be true.

But because there are gainsayers who want to dissect the document or to call the whole thing a fabrication, it is good to say something about the historical accuracy of this account. There is contention about the use of domesticated camels in the patriarchal period. Some would say that it is too early a date for use of domesticated camels, so the author of the text (or whoever the later redactor was) must be blamed with an anachronism.

One writer, Robert Alter, is of the opinion that it seems odd to have camels used in this account, because everything else in the account is historically accurate. He wrote,

What is puzzling is that the narrative reflects careful attention to other details of historical authenticity: horses, which also were domesticated centuries later, are scrupulously excluded from the Patriarchal Tales, and when Abraham buys a gravesite, he deals in weights of silver, not in coins, as in the later Israelite period. The details of betrothal

negotiation, with the brother acting as principal agent for the family, the betrothal of the dowry on the bride and betrothal gifts on the family, are equally accurate of the middle of the second millennium B.C.E.¹⁰³

As we look at this statement, Alter himself is recognizing that it does not make any sense for this one historical inaccuracy to have been placed in the text when so much attention to detail has been displayed through the rest of the narrative. This is actually evidence to show that domesticated camels do belong in the text just the way it reads. The “problem” only comes up if one tries to make the case that domesticated camels should not be present in this time period.

Many believe that there is no evidence of camels in this time period. Such people throw out the textual evidence to begin with, which is unfair treatment of the narrative. Delitzsch, speaking on Genesis 12 says, “The camel however...is nowhere represented upon Egyptian monuments, nor even mentioned in ancient records, so that the mention of camels in this passage is surprising.”¹⁰⁴ This argument alone does not prove that camels had not been domesticated by this time period. It just shows that Delitzsch was unaware of any archaeological testimony to support it.

However, it has been demonstrated from archeology that between around 2000 and 1200 BC, camels were used, albeit minimally.¹⁰⁵ And there has been actual extra-biblical archaeological evidence that shows camels were domesticated very early on. Klingbeil notes that both the Bactrian two-humped camel, along with the one-humped dromedary had been domesticated in lower Mesopotamia and southern Arabia by 2500 B.C.¹⁰⁶ Among the earliest and most convincing evidence is from Egypt, where a portrait of a camel in pottery was found dating from circa 2000-1400 BC.¹⁰⁷ In Canaan, a camel jaw was found from a Middle Bronze tomb at Tell el-Far'ah North around 1900-1550 BC.¹⁰⁸ And in Byblos, there has been found a figurine kneeling on a camel, with the hump and load missing.¹⁰⁹ There is also mention of

103 Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2008), 118.

104 Franz Delitzsch, *A New Commentary on Genesis*, vol. I (Morrison and Gibb Limited, 1899), 386.

105 K. A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, annotated edition (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006), 338.

106 G. A. Klingbeil, T. Desmond Alexander, and David W. Baker, eds., “Historical Criticism,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (IVP Academic, 2003), 411.

107 Kitchen, *Reliability of the Old Testament*, 339.

108 Ibid.

109 Ibid.

domesticated camels from a Sumerian lexical work (called HAR.ra-*hubullu*) going back to early second millennium.¹¹⁰ Kitchen sums up, “The camel was for long a *marginal* beast in most of the historic ancient Near East (including Egypt), but it was *not* wholly unknown or anachronistic before or during 2000-1100.”¹¹¹

Not only can we see that camels do have evidence to support the historicity of an early domestication within the period of the patriarchs, but also that Abraham¹¹² and Isaac¹¹³, Jacob,¹¹⁴ Esau,¹¹⁵ and Jacob's sons¹¹⁶ had access to these animals. Stephen Caesar describes,

The Biblical portrayal of the Patriarchs as wealthy agro-pastoralists who traveled between Mesopotamia and the Levant meshes well with historical reality in the Fertile Crescent. Both in the Bible and in secular history, camel domestication was almost certainly the exclusive domain of the wealthy. The Biblical narratives unequivocally portray Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as extraordinarily wealthy men who, like the *tamkârum*, traveled frequently, operated in family groups, owned and farmed land, and amassed fortunes in precious metals and livestock.¹¹⁷

Caesar comes up with the only proper conclusion. He writes,

Based on extra-Biblical literary evidence and the Genesis narrative itself, there is every reason to accept the likelihood that the Patriarchs occupied the highest echelon of Levantine society—the only social group that was able to afford domesticated camels. When combined with the archaeological evidence supporting the plausibility of limited camel domestication in the Bronze Age from Mesopotamia to Egypt, it stands to reason that the mention of camels being owned by the wealthy, mobile, combatant Patriarchs is not an anachronism but a reflection of historical reality.¹¹⁸

Klingbeil also agrees, as he summarizes his research saying,

It would thus appear that Abraham’s “camel connection” is not a good example for an anachronism but rather can be confidently explained in the context of either the early or late date connected to the patriarchal period, beginning around the end of the third

110 Ibid.

111 Ibid.

112 Ge 12:16

113 Ge 24:61

114 Ge 30:43; Ge 31:17,34; Ge 32:8

115 Ge 32:16

116 Ge 37:25

117 Caesar, “The Wealth and Power of the Biblical Patriarchs.”

118 Ibid.

millennium B.C.¹¹⁹

So there is no reason to think that the presence of camels in Genesis 24 is any kind of textual problem. First, we have archaeological findings that support this understanding. Second, this view takes the Genesis account for what it is – a historical document. Most importantly, we have the assurance that this is God's Word. Early camel domestication (especially among the wealthy patriarchs) presents no problem for us whatsoever.

What do the words בְּתוּלָה and נֶעֱרָ signify?

There can be no doubt that Rebekah was a young woman, and a beautiful virgin at that. The Hebrew words used here are בְּתוּלָה and נֶעֱרָ. About each of these words much could be said. Understanding the exact meaning becomes especially important in other texts, such as in Isaiah and in Ruth. Here, there is no debate as to the nature of Rebekah's sex, marital status, or sexual purity. There is some debate as to which word tells us that.

The first word, נֶעֱרָ draws our attention. Only by its pointing can we tell that it is a feminine word at all. Otherwise we might mistake it for נֶעֱר, the masculine form. It's missing the final ה as in נֶעֱרָה, which is the feminine form found throughout the rest of the Old Testament. We find that this three letter word is used to denote the feminine gender throughout the Pentateuch only.¹²⁰ It is of special note that in Deut 22, where the word is pointed many times as הֶנֶעֱר, although it is still quite obviously used to denote a female. But in Dt 22:19 there is an exclusive example of הֶנֶעֱרָה which is found nowhere else throughout the entire Pentateuch. This may suggest that it is a word whose usage goes so far back that it changed over time. That is, initially the three letter root נֶעֱר may have included both sexes, but then later assumed a final feminine ה to be more specific. If it were merely a matter of orthography, one wonders why there is such a delineation between the Mosaic texts and the rest of the Old Testament. However,

119 Klingbeil, Alexander, and Baker, "Historical Criticism," 411.

120 Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 655.

according to GKC §17c, it is deemed, "a survival of a system of orthography in which a final vowel was written defectively."¹²¹ In either case it gives testimony to an old text, with antiquated forms.

Now that we see that the servant was looking for a young woman, and Rebekah did most definitely fit that description, let's see exactly what is meant by the term. Some will say that *betulah* has to do with the physical maturity of the woman, rather than her virginity.¹²² A key verse to look over is Joel 1:8, where a *betulah* mourns over the "husband of her youth".¹²³ Some would like to say that because of this, *betulah* cannot have a sense of virginity, but only of age. But Beck did a marvelous job at his examination of the different terms. He explains:

In Genesis 24, the Septuagint translates *naarah*, *bethulah*, and *almah* with *parthenos*. This does not mean that *parthenos* is used loosely for virgin or non-virgin. In this chapter all three terms are used of a girl who "has not known a man" (v. 16), and all three terms imply virginity, which the Septuagint expresses by *parthenos*.¹²⁴

In short, there is a piling on of terminology that labels Rebekah as a young woman, and a virgin. Of course, the context itself continues on to specify that she had "not known a man". So there is not much need to belabor any questions of her sexual purity further here.

What was Isaac doing in the field? The meaning of לָשׂוּת

In the reading of verse 63, we encounter the Hebrew word לָשׂוּת to which we now turn our focus. In the narrative, the reason that Isaac was out in the field that day was for this purpose. By this context alone, there is a wide variety of things that Isaac might have been doing out in the field. The description subsequently offered by Rebekah in verse 65 is not very helpful. It only says that she saw Isaac walking. He could have been thinking, praying or a number of other things at the same time. The fact that he was walking is a separate issue. Furthermore, just because Isaac went out with the intention of performing this action does not mean that he had actually been caught in the act when the caravan approached. So verse 65 has

121 Gesenius, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*. §17c.

122 Perry, "Counter-stories in the Bible," 297.

123 Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 147.

124 W. F. Beck, "What Does Almah Mean?," *The Lutheran News* (1967): 7, <http://www.wlsessays.net/files/BeckAlmah.PDF>.

little, if anything, to say about the word לָשׂוּת. The immediate context does not clarify a solid definition.

Looking to translations of this word are not altogether helpful, either. The Septuagint says, "to gossip" (ἀδολεσχήσαι), the Vulgate renders, "to meditate" (*ad meditandum*), and other more modern translations vary.¹²⁵ The Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament notes about the LXX versions, "The LXX uses a variety of translation variants. The most frequent include *adoleschein* or *adoleschia* and *diegeisthai*, though no clear issues of content seem to guide the choices."¹²⁶ Even among the ancient translations there is variance, and this comes from the uncertainty of what the word means.

Others take this word to mean "pray". In his own translation, Luther rendered "zu beten." Even so, we note that in his commentary he also wrote,

It denotes the private and secret conversation when two who are walking together converse. At that time Isaac did not think of his bride but went out with a friend, with whom, during their walk, he conversed about God's promises, about marriage, or about the management of the household.¹²⁷

One could understand Luther as saying that "to pray" and "to converse" are somewhat synonymous. If Isaac were out in the field praying one could also say that he was "conversing" with God. Keil and Delitzsch evaluated Luther's understanding as having, "substantial correctness".¹²⁸ Targums Neofiti, Onkelos, and Pseudo-Jonathan also weigh in with the understanding, "to pray".¹²⁹ However, even among all these translators, one may be left wondering how accurate a rendering these translators have produced given the disagreement of even more ancient translations.

Lexicography leads to further debate. There is debate in regards to the root from which this word really comes. Is the root שׂוּח? If so, we can look to other verses in the Old Testament for support. Job 15:4 puts this in parallel to יִרְאָה, suggesting that maybe inner contemplation is

125 Koehler and Baumgartner, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 1311–12.

126 G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 14 (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 89.

127 Luther, *Genesis*, 4:299.

128 Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes*, Gen 24:61-67.

129 Gregory Vall, "What Was Isaac Doing in the Field (Genesis Xxiv 63)," *Vetus Testamentum* 44, no. 4 (1994): 514.

meant rather than something auditory.¹³⁰ Similarly, parallels in Psalm 73 suggest that the word does not focus primarily on audible forms of expression, but on meditation.¹³¹ But some contexts, such as Ps 55:2,17, and 102:1 have contexts of praying and asking the LORD to “hear”.¹³² These verses probably suggest an auditory connection with the noun $\eta\psi$. The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament defines the root by saying,

The basic meaning of this verb seems to be “rehearse,” “repent,” or “go over a matter in one’s mind.” This meditation or contemplation may be done either inwardly or outwardly. Since English differentiates these two notions, the word is usually rendered “meditate,” or “talk.”¹³³

Could the word as used in Genesis 24 be specifically "to lament"? It is probable. Isaac had been missing his mother and needed some comfort. But Leupold sees this as an impossibility, saying that it had been too long since Sarah's passing already for him to still be mourning.¹³⁴ It had already been three years.¹³⁵ The counter-argument to Leupold is found in the context of verse 67. It reads, "So Isaac was comforted after his mother's death." This demonstrates that it is entirely possible and probable that Isaac was indeed still in mourning over the loss of his mother. Vall took things a step further, saying that not only was Isaac still in mourning, but specifically that he went out to the field to “complain” to God about losing his mother.¹³⁶

But Rendsburg takes the word in an entirely different direction, claiming a definition of something like “urinate,” or “defecate”. He cites other cognate languages as he wrote,

The Hebrew root *swh/syh* means "excrete, urinate, defecate" It has cognates in Arabic *shh* "urinate, defecate" and Soqotri *shh* "urinate", as well as in the Haran (an Ethiopian language) nominal form *sahat* "urine".¹³⁷

However, his argument is unconvincing. First, cognate languages are not the best support.

130 Botterweck, Ringgren, and Fabry, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 14:86.

131 Ibid.

132 Ibid., 14:87.

133 Harris, Jr, and Waltke, *Theological Wordbook*, 867.

134 Leupold, “XXIV,” 687.

135 Established by the fact that Sarah was 90 when Isaac was born (Gen 17:17), and lived to be 127 (Gen 23:1).

Isaac is now 40 (Gen 25:20), so that makes for a difference of three years.

136 Vall, “What Was Isaac Doing in the Field (Genesis Xxiv 63),” 523.

137 Gary A. Rendsburg, “Lāsūah in Genesis Xxiv 63,” *Vetus Testamentum* 45, no. 4 (O 1995): 558.

Second, even among those cognate languages BDB disagrees as it lists Aramaic ܢܝܫ “speak” and Arabic (šāḥa (y)) “be eager, diligent”.¹³⁸ Third, the Hebrew passages that Rendsburg cites do not really demand such an interpretation. He leans more on translations and Targums rather than on the context of the Old Testament passages he cites. Rendsburg lists 1 Kings 18:27, which by the context just says that Baal might be preoccupied with something. The context leaves several possibilities open, because Baal may be “thinking” just as easily as he could be “relieving himself”. Under the same passage, BDB says “musing”.¹³⁹ The second reference, from Isaiah 5:25, is not even the same root, but rather from סוּח. Under this reference, BDB suggests the word “offal,” meaning “waste” or “trash.”¹⁴⁰ And in Proverbs 23:29, there is no reason to avoid the use of “complain” or “lament” in the context. Altogether, I find Rendsburg's support for translating “urinate” or “defecate” far too forced.

In the end, we have to translate this verse one way or another. The best choice is to leave an uncertain word in its own uncertainty. It is best not to make a translation that would be more specific than one's own certainty about the word allows. Obviously, Isaac was walking in the field. And it seems a pretty good estimate to say that he had something on his mind, but we cannot say for sure whether he was talking aloud, thinking to himself silently, or praying. Far less certain is the content of those thoughts and possible words.

Aramaisms in Genesis 24

Commentators may try to find in Genesis 24 examples of Aramaisms in the text. There are reasons why readers may want to find these Aramaisms within the text. It could be an attempt to stamp a later date on the book of Genesis, or on this particular chapter. It could be a theory that wants to point to a later redactor of some sort who allowed some late language to find its way into the text. Still other commentators see no Aramaic in the text at all.

But in his article, Gary Rendsburg proposes that there are several places throughout the account of Genesis 24 that have “Aramaic-like features”. He promptly explains that this does not mean that there are “Aramaisms” in the text. He expounds,

¹³⁸ Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 966.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 967.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 691.

The term “Aramaic-like features” is to be distinguished from the term “Aramaisms.” The former refers to linguistic traits found in pre-exilic texts, whose presence can be explained by one of two reasons: either the texts are northern in origin, or the settings of the texts have an Aramean flavor. The latter refers to those features, found primarily in the post-exilic corpus, which reflect clear Aramaic influence over Hebrew.¹⁴¹

The main thrust of his article is that these Aramaic-like features must not be misidentified and used to try to attribute the text to Persian-period Jewish scribes.¹⁴² In the case of Genesis 24, these features are said to be an artistic feature of the author, and helps place the reader within the northern geographical region of Aram.

We will go over the arguments that Rendsburg makes for these Aramaic-like features. He first points to the phrase, “God of Heaven,” in verses 3 and 7. This specific name for God appears to be a copy of the more common Aramaic “אֱלֹהֵי שָׁמַיָא”. To this argument, one might only need to say that the paucity of the term within Biblical Hebrew does not demand that it be a copy of the Aramaic name for God. To see this as a link to Aram, we not only have to demonstrate that the term is common in Aramaic, but that it is also not a common phrase in Hebrew.

So to the degree that “God of Heaven” is found at all in Hebrew, particularly pre-exilic Hebrew, the argument loses ground. And there are a few examples outside of Genesis 24 that exhibit this coupling of terms in Hebrew. The best example is found in the first chapter of Jonah in verse 9. Its presence in Jonah gives an example of a book that is both written in Hebrew, and is pre-exilic. Nehemiah also uses the phrase in the first chapter in verses 4 and 5, and in the second chapter in verses 4 and 20. In 2 Chronicles, “God of Heaven” shows up in chapter 36 verse 23. The prophet Ezra uses “God of Heaven” in 1:2 in Hebrew, but then later in Aramaic in 5:11, 7:12, 21, and twice in 7:23. Daniel also uses the Aramaic a total of three times (2:18, 37, 44). All told, the Old Testament makes use of the Aramaic phrase אֱלֹהֵי שָׁמַיָא eight times, and the Hebrew אֱלֹהֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם nine times. More importantly, the phrase “God of Heaven” appears only three times in pre-exilic writings, but 14 times after the exile. As we see this phrase in Genesis

141 Gary A. Rendsburg, “ARAMAIC LIKE FEATURES IN THE PENTATEUCH,” *Hebrew Studies* 47 (January 2006): 163.

142 *Ibid.*, 175.

24, Rendsburg's argument that this is an Aramaic feature is compelling, but not altogether unquestionable. The pre-exilic Hebrew corpus does not contain a large record of this particular phrase, but it is still possible that it was common in spoken Hebrew even before the exile. In that case, it would not be a pointer to Aram or Aramaic at all.

The next argument that is used is that the phrase “אֲשֶׁר לֹא־תִקַּח” in verse 3 is really a mimic of the usual Aramaic wording.¹⁴³ Normally Hebrew uses the phrase אִם to begin an oath formula. Whenever this phrase is used outside of Genesis 24 in the Old Testament in relationship to an oath prohibition, it is post-exilic. In 2 Chronicles 18:15, a similar phrase is used¹⁴⁴ thus, “The king said to him, “How many times must I make you swear to tell me nothing but the truth in the name of the LORD?”¹⁴⁵ In Malachi 3:19 (Eng 4:2), the LORD takes an oath himself promising, “Not a root or branch will be left to them”.¹⁴⁶ And in Esther 2:10, Mordecai made Esther swear not to tell anybody about her nationality.¹⁴⁷ This too is a compelling argument to support Rendsburg's thesis.

The next citation listed is the verb גמא in verse 17, which does have an Aramaic equivalent.¹⁴⁸ However, here again we have to be careful not to assume that just because there is a limited use of this word in the Old Testament Hebrew corpus, that it is thereby proven to be a foreign word altogether. Rendsburg himself on this point notes that we have to make an assumption on this one, namely that it, “is not part of the standard Hebrew vocabulary”.¹⁴⁹ This is not a completely solid argument to find an Aramaism, or Aramaic-like feature, but it has some merit.

In verse 20, the verb ערה comes under scrutiny. It is not a *hapax legomenon*, and we can see a well established meaning, “to be bare”. It is used of making heads bald (Isa 3:17), stripping a person naked (Lam 4:21), uncovering shields (Isa 22:6), and exposing wood beams

143 Gary A. Rendsburg, “SOME FALSE LEADS IN THE IDENTIFICATION OF LATE BIBLICAL HEBREW TEXTS: THE CASES OF GENESIS 24 AND 1 SAMUEL 2:27-36,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 121, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 25.

144 אֲשֶׁר לֹא־תִדְבַר אֵלַי רִק־אַמַּת בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה

145 *NIV84*. 2 Chronicles 18:15.; 1 Kings 22:16

146 אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יֵעֻזְב לָהֶם שָׂרֵשׁ וְעֵנָף

147 צָנָה עָלֶיהָ אֲשֶׁר לֹא־תִגִּיד

148 Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 167.

149 Rendsburg, “FALSE LEADS,” 27.

(Zep 2:14). With these contexts we can get a feel for the word that says, “lay bare,” or “expose.” Of particular interest is a usage found in 2 Chronicles 24:11, where this word is used of a chest that gets emptied of its money. There the word does not have to mean “pour out,” but could also mean “lay bare” the inside of the chest. So here too in Genesis 24:20, we ought to understand the word as meaning simply “lay bare” the inside of the water jar, rather than see a special connection to “pour liquids” onto the text. The sense of the action in Genesis 24 does not change either way, but Rendsburg uses this connection with “pour liquids” to assume that the root is another Aramaic feature in the text.¹⁵⁰ Rendsburg's point is simply not compelling.

In verse 21 there is a *hapax legomenon* from the root שׂא . This may be another example of a common root about which we just do not have much biblical evidence. Leathes too feels certain that there are many examples of normal words with rare or nonexistent biblical attestation. He writes, “There can be no doubt that a large number of Semitic roots were once in use, of which no trace survives in the Old Testament, and therefore it is quite possible that, if we had a knowledge of these roots, many difficult words would at once be explained and made clear to us.”¹⁵¹ With that in mind, we should not be too eager to find these connections. A paucity of textual evidence does not necessitate an absence or even rarity of its usage. So as we examine the point that Rendsburg tries to make for שׂא , we are once again skeptical. There is no conclusive evidence as to how that word's usage developed. Rendsburg supports the possibility that it was an Aramaic root that was later adopted into Hebrew. Again his main focus is to say that its presence here must be an Aramaic feature. His point here is really an argument from silence.

From verse 38, the phrase אֲלֵ-אֲמָר is next scrutinized. The sense of it, “but, rather” is easily understood. Rofe once again tried to attribute a link to later MH אֲלֵ . Rendsburg says this has an “Aramaic origin, as all scholars recognize”.¹⁵² He maintains that Aramaic was the language that carried the root so that later Hebrew picked it up. Still, BDB says of this example

150 Ibid.

151 Stanley Leathes, “Foreign Words in the Hebrew Text of the Old Testament,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 18, no. 4 (October 1, 1886): 527.

152 Rendsburg, “FALSE LEADS,” 28.

that "the explanation by Aramaic אֲלֵא is not supported by Hebrew usage."¹⁵³ So there is still no definitive link to the alleged Aramaic features in this text.

In verse 53, Rendsburg points to the noun וּמְגִדָּת, "choice gifts," as an Aramaic link as well. There is no denying the similarity between the Hebrew word and the Aramaic מְגִדָּת / מְגִדָּת. But there are other examples in the Old Testament of the same word. In Ezra 1:6, it is included in a list of articles of silver and gold, and goods and livestock. In 2 Chronicles 21:3, it is again put in a list that includes silver and gold articles. In 2 Chronicles 32:23, מְגִדָּת are listed as something good and valuable. The noun מְגִדָּת appears in only three chapters for a total of eight times in the Old Testament. In the Song of Solomon (4:13,15,16), the root means "excellent fruit" as found in a flourishing garden. Then later in the same book (7:13) מְגִדָּת is used in connection with blossoms and fruits. And in Deuteronomy 33, מְגִדָּת is used for the choice things from the sky, moon, hills, and earth.¹⁵⁴ Rendsburg also points out that both short and long forms of the word (but especially the long form) occur more frequently in Aramaic.¹⁵⁵ Be that as it may, it still does not particularly stand out as an Aramaic feature in itself. Because of the examples that we can observe elsewhere, and particularly in Song of Solomon and Deuteronomy, we are not compelled to find strong links to Aram in this word.

The last piece of evidence offered in Rendsburg's analysis of the text is the word כַּד for "jar". We can see that there are cognates in New Hebrew, Aramaic, Syriac, and Ugaritic.¹⁵⁶ But even if Rendsburg's assessment is correct, and כַּד does show up only in northern settings,¹⁵⁷ it still does not prove absence in other regions. Again, just because we can see it in Aramaic, does not mean that it is a particularly northern word. It is possible that the word is a common one in many dialects.

Now, having gone down this list of examples, one does not need to find Aramaisms or

153 Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 50.

154 Deuteronomy 33:13,14,15,16

155 Rendsburg, "FALSE LEADS," 30.

156 Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 461; Koehler and Baumgartner, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 460.

157 Rendsburg, "FALSE LEADS," 31.

Aramaic-like features in Genesis 24. Truthfully, it would be wonderful to be able to establish these links solidly. If one could, it would prove a very interesting connection of Genesis 24 to the northern geographical region of Aram. As such, it would also be another attestation to the wisdom and beauty of the Spirit who guided the writing of Moses. Unfortunately, the evidence is not convincing enough for us to make conclusive claims.

On the plus side, Rendsburg does make a very good case in showing that these Aramaic features are absent in the rest of the Pentateuch. If the Pentateuch were a late composition, then these features should be easily observable all throughout, but they are not. So even if a definitive decision could be made about these Aramaic features, we do not have to conclude that they point to a Persian-period dating of the Pentateuch.¹⁵⁸

How does Genesis 24 compare to other patriarchal narratives?

Out of all the patriarchal accounts, the marriage of Isaac and Rebekah is the most lengthy and detailed account of a marriage within that period. But was their marriage an exception or a rule? The other narratives within Genesis provide the context for Isaac and Rebekah's marriage, but also many examples against which to compare their marriage. When studying the other patriarchal marriages, it quickly becomes clear that the ideal marriage for the patriarchs was a marriage to one woman to whom no other man was married. This woman could be fairly close in family relations before their marriage. The main reasons for marrying family members among Abraham's descendants were to keep the line of the Savior pure and to keep the one true faith in the LORD as a central component of a proper marriage.

It is easily seen in the same period even outside of Abraham's family that it was considered wrong to take another man's wife from him. In one instance, Abram had arranged with Sarai that she was to tell Pharaoh that she was not his wife, but his sister.¹⁵⁹ After Pharaoh had taken Sarai as his wife, the LORD showed Pharaoh his displeasure by sending diseases on Pharaoh and his household.¹⁶⁰ When Pharaoh learned the truth, he was angry with Abram and asked why he had lied about his relationship to Sarai.¹⁶¹ Even Pharaoh understood that it would

¹⁵⁸ Rendsburg, "ARAMAIC LIKE FEATURES," 175–6.

¹⁵⁹ Genesis 13:13

¹⁶⁰ Genesis 13:17

¹⁶¹ Genesis 13:18-20

not have been right to take another man's wife. Abraham and Sarah did something similar with Abimelech king of Gerar.¹⁶² But the LORD warned Abimelech in a dream against taking Sarah for his own. One notes how no lengthy explanation of proper marriage was required for him. The LORD simply said, “She is a married woman.”¹⁶³ Later, Isaac took the same approach to Abimelech with his wife Rebekah, saying that she was only his sister.¹⁶⁴ But again, Abimelech became angry because he knew that if someone else had taken Isaac's wife they would have been guilty.¹⁶⁵ Even among the pagans, it was not acceptable to take another man's wife.

What is also evident is that polygamy was practiced among the patriarchs. This was continued throughout the Old Testament. Conservative scholars will point to God's institution of marriage with Adam and Eve as the main proof for teaching God's intention of monogamy. William Kessel notes, “Whether monogamy in the Old Testament was the ideal or the command of God, however, remains open to debate.”¹⁶⁶ Regardless, within these polygamous marriages many problems arose. These problems were one testimony to the earliest people that polygamy should be avoided.

Sin was the reason why polygamy was practiced among the patriarchs, and the consequences were easily seen. Jacob married Leah and Rachel¹⁶⁷ as well as their two servants.¹⁶⁸ But because of the fighting that took place between these sisters, it is clear that this marriage arrangement was not ideal. Esau married three women total, thereby grieving his parents.¹⁶⁹ It is not easy to know whether this grief came from them being Hittites or because of the polygamous relationship. In the case of Abram, it is not necessarily safe to view Hagar as his second wife, although Genesis does use the word **לְאִשָּׁה**.¹⁷⁰ Hagar was a concubine. She was probably closer to what we would consider a surrogate mother rather than a second wife. Jealousy did not take long to fuel Sarai to drive Hagar out of the house.¹⁷¹ Polygamy was really

162 Genesis 20

163 Genesis 20:3

164 Genesis 26:7

165 Genesis 26:10

166 William B. Kessel, “Polygamy and the Patriarchs” (presented at the AZ District Pastoral Conference, First Lutheran Church, Prescott AZ, 1998), 4, <http://www.wlssays.net/files/KesselPolygamy.pdf>.

167 Genesis 29:28-29

168 Genesis 30

169 Genesis 26:34,35, 28:9

170 Genesis 16:3

171 Genesis 16:6

the root cause of much of the trouble in the patriarchal families.¹⁷²

Among the catalog of sins that the patriarchs did commit, what should we think about God's silence in regard to their polygamy? Jeske outlined some basic truths. First, "The Scripture makes no attempt to hide the sins of God's ancient people."¹⁷³ Second, "God does not approve of everything he tolerates."¹⁷⁴ Third, "God can overrule the evil intent of people and bend their wicked deeds to serve his good purposes."¹⁷⁵ Beyond these principles, people may come up with different solutions to the actual question of whether or not God condoned their actions or merely allowed them. What is not open for debate is whether these patriarchal practices should carry over into present day believers' lifestyles. Polygamy is forbidden in the New Testament.¹⁷⁶ Therefore, we do not practice it among ourselves. And we are to hold out the truth of the one man and one woman relationship among all people. In cultures where polygamy already exists, though, the question is how.¹⁷⁷

Of special significance is whom the patriarchs chose for their wives. Abraham had God's promises to be made into a great nation and inherit the land of Canaan. His children could not marry whomever they wished. First, there could be no intermarriage with the surrounding peoples in that area or else those nations would once again have claim to the land through marriage. There needed to be clear distinctions between Abraham's offspring and the other tribes. Secondly, intermarriage with pagan cultures would lead to idolatry. This would not have been proper for believers, and especially not for those looking to eventually receive the Messiah through their bloodline.

To resolve these issues, the patriarchs took on wives from within Abraham's family. Isaac married his second cousin, Rebekah.¹⁷⁸ And when Isaac was older, he told his son Jacob not to take a Canaanite wife, but to marry his first cousin.¹⁷⁹ Because of Isaac, Esau saw the importance that his parents had placed on marrying one of Abraham's descendants. So he took

172 William Russow, "What IS the Teaching of the Bible on Polygamy?" (presented at the Fall Pastoral Conference, Christ Ev. Lutheran Church, Bison, South Dakota, 1981), 3, <http://www.wlssays.net/files/RussowPolygamy.pdf>.

173 Jeske, *Genesis*, 247.

174 *Ibid.*

175 *Ibid.*

176 Mark 10:5-10; Ephesians 5:33, Titus 1:6

177 Kessel, "Polygamy and the Patriarchs," 6.

178 Genesis 24:15

179 Genesis 28:1,2

on Ishmael's daughter for second his wife.¹⁸⁰ In time, Jacob ended up marrying two of his first cousins, both Leah and Rachel.¹⁸¹

There are many parallels between the account of Isaac and Rebekah, and the account of Jacob and Rachel. When Jacob first encountered Rachel, she was out doing her daily work, which was shepherding, just as Rebekah had been out filling the water jars.¹⁸² Then Jacob offered to water Rachel's flock from the well¹⁸³, much like Rebekah had done for Abraham's servant's camels. Once Rachel had found out who Jacob was, she ran to Laban similar to what Rebekah had done after meeting the servant.¹⁸⁴ And once again, Laban gladly received Jacob into his home as he had done with Isaac previously.¹⁸⁵ Twenty years later, Jacob and all the family returned to Canaan on camels together as the servant had done when he brought back Rebekah to Isaac.¹⁸⁶ There are a lot of striking parallels, but they do make sense, given that the situations were so similar.

Besides marrying relatives, some of the patriarchs are recorded to have taken maidservants for their own wives. First, when Sarai had not given birth to a son for Abram, she gave her servant Hagar to him.¹⁸⁷ Second, Rachel offered her servant Bilhah to Jacob because Leah had already given him four sons, but Rachel had not given him any.¹⁸⁸ Then again, when Leah was convinced that she would not be bearing any more children for Jacob, she offered Zilpah, her servant, to him.¹⁸⁹ Lastly, Reuben also slept with Bilhah,¹⁹⁰ though this was wrong to defile his father's bed.¹⁹¹ In each of these situations, there were negative consequences. The relationships caused division and anger in the home. Hagar ran away because of the way Sarai had treated her.¹⁹² Even Rachel and Leah, who should have been close sisters, were fighting each other jealously.¹⁹³ And because of Reuben's actions with his father's concubine, he lost some of

180 Genesis 28:6-8

181 Genesis 29

182 Genesis 29:9

183 Genesis 29:11

184 Genesis 29:12

185 Genesis 29:13

186 Genesis 31:17

187 Genesis 16:3,4

188 Genesis 30:3,4

189 Genesis 30:9

190 Genesis 35:22

191 Genesis 49:4

192 Genesis 16:6

193 Genesis 30

his father's blessing.¹⁹⁴

Within all these accounts, precious little is said about particular marriage ceremonies or wedding customs. But one custom that does have some clear examples is the bride-price that sealed the marriage contract. The price Jacob paid was 7 years for Rachel,¹⁹⁵ though he was given Leah instead.¹⁹⁶ Then Jacob paid the bride-price of another 7 years of service in order to get Rachel, too.¹⁹⁷ In another instance, Shechem promised to pay the necessary price for Dinah after he had raped her.¹⁹⁸ So the bride-price that was paid to Laban's family for Rebekah does stem from an established custom of the day.

When comparing the account of Isaac and Rebekah's marriage to the others, one is left amazed at how well things went for the two of them. They were both blessed by God in their marriage. And as they avoided polygamous entanglements, they were spared from probable family complications. Genesis 24 also highlights that a good woman was one who was not previously attached to another man, nor sexually corrupted in any form. Rebekah's marriage to Isaac also shows that one of the most important things to the patriarchs was maintaining a household where faith in the LORD was central to family life.

What lessons from the patriarchal period are applicable to believers today?

There are many lessons that we can draw from Genesis 24 that are still important to think about even today. God's Word does not get old. Here we see a beautiful picture of a godly family and marriage. Abraham used his role and duty as a father to provide a wife for his son Isaac. And Rebekah was a good wife for many reasons. She was a helpful and hardworking woman of faith. God showed his approval of this union by granting success to the mission of the servant and by blessing the marriage immediately with love.

Again, this account is more than just a beautiful love story. It is the true record of historical events. The mere fact that the account exists is in itself evidence of that. Beyond that, it is part of God's inspired Scripture.¹⁹⁹ So we can be certain that it is an accurate picture of a

194 Genesis 49:4

195 Genesis 29:18-20

196 Genesis 29:25

197 Genesis 29:27-28

198 Genesis 34:12

199 2 Timothy 3:16; Luke 24:27

marriage in that time period. And when taken in comparison with the other patriarchal accounts, we can get a good view of marriage among believers almost 4000 years ago. Genesis 24 stands out among these others in that it gives the longest and most detailed view of a marriage among the patriarchs.

This story shows the heart of Rebekah in a vivid way. We can look at all the different actions of Rebekah and see that she was a godly servant. There is nothing in the account to suggest that she was a complainer who wasted time trying to leave chores unfinished or handing them off to someone else. On the contrary, Rebekah is shown to have a servant's heart that sees what needs to be done and gets to work. She does not need to be told twice. She does not even need to be asked once. Rebekah finds pleasure in helping other people whether they are family, friends or complete strangers. It is one of the important traits that makes Rebekah desirable as a wife for Isaac.

Part of Rebekah's godly attitude is her willingness to submit to the decisions of her family. Though it is tough to prove exactly how much say Rebekah had in her day-to-day life or even in this betrothal, we can notice the willingness of Rebekah to honor her family. When the men were making plans for her future, she did not interject or leave an impression of being upset at their decision. When she saw a thirsty stranger at the well, she offered to help. She fits in as a humble servant, an obedient daughter and a loving sister. Rebekah is an example of how God wants to bless us through family members. One can picture how good a helper Rebekah was. She contributed to the harmony of the family as they divided out certain duties to different individuals. And Rebekah's willing attitude helped maintain the bonds of peace between all those relationships. Rebekah had appeal for being a future wife because of her hospitality and servant's attitude.

As to her sexual purity, the story leaves no doubt. Rebekah is an honorable young woman. She is faithful, beautiful, eager to serve, and sexually pure. She is everything that a young man would want in a future wife. Her sexual purity is a testimony to the godly propriety of her life.²⁰⁰ This is an important message for young men and women to understand as they approach adolescence and adulthood. The ideal for sexual purity is to abstain from sexual relations until marriage. We also note how Rebekah does not hesitate to leave and be married to

200 1 Corinthians 6:12-20

Isaac. It was not that she was avoiding sexual relations altogether. Sex is God pleasing inside of marriage.²⁰¹ Clearly, Rebekah did not regard union within marriage as anything that was unbecoming of a godly life.

Readers should not miss the blessing that faith plays in a marriage. In this account, it is very evident how important faith was to Abraham as well as to the wider family. A large part of what made Rebekah desirable was her belief in the LORD. Marriage is a relationship that husband and wife share, but it is also a relationship that each shares with God.²⁰² By the time Isaac and Rebekah's son Jacob was old enough to marry, they too stressed the importance of marrying a wife of faith.²⁰³ A godly spouse is particularly good for us to emphasize to young adults. We want to teach our children, as the patriarchs did, to continue to nurture our relationship with the LORD and to seek a spouse who desires to do the same.

Another obvious emphasis for young people is that children should be viewed as a blessing from God. Just as Rebekah was leaving her family in Nahor they said, “Our sister, may you become thousands upon thousands, and may your offspring inherit the gate of their enemies.” The entire family was hoping that she and Isaac would have many children. 20 years later, Isaac found himself praying to the LORD to provide children because Rebekah had not yet conceived.²⁰⁴ They both wanted children and were patiently waiting and relying on God to grant them. And the LORD answered abundantly by sending twins.²⁰⁵

It is also evident that women who went on without bearing children could become angry and even ashamed. This is seen more clearly when Rachel could not provide Jacob any children. She went so far as to tell Jacob, “Give me children, or I'll die!”²⁰⁶ Later, when God finally gave her a son she said, “God has taken away my disgrace.”²⁰⁷ She was so happy that she named him Joseph, hoping that the LORD would *add* to her another son.²⁰⁸ We need to remember these stories and point to them as clear examples of how we should view children. They are God's

201 1 Corinthians 7

202 Ephesians 5:22-33

203 Genesis 27:46-28:9

204 Genesis 25:20-21,26

205 Genesis 25:23

206 Genesis 30:1

207 Genesis 30:22

208 Genesis 30:24

gifts so we should appreciate them.²⁰⁹

But children are not a guarantee in marriage. If God should choose to make a couple wait for children, then they should do it patiently and with reliance in God's promises. The difference for the patriarchs was that they fully expected children from their own lineage. God had given them promises that they would have vastly numerous amounts of offspring.²¹⁰ They knew that, at some point, children were going to come. We do not have those same promises. For young couples looking to have their first child, we need to encourage patience, prayer, and contentment. We must not speak beyond what God has promised to us.

Beyond the blessing of children, marriage is an opportunity for couples to share companionship with one another. In the case of Isaac, he had been missing his mother, Sarah, since she had passed away. But God took care of him in his sadness. He provided a wife for Isaac to comfort him. The two started a new relationship together that gave them each someone with whom to share their time and experiences. That was the way God intended it from the beginning.²¹¹

Within that close companionship, God wants the couple to share love together. But that love is a purpose and a product of marriage, not part of its essence.²¹² That means that a marriage is still a marriage even without love. But a loveless marriage goes against God's intended design.²¹³ In Genesis 24, readers should observe that love is possible even in arranged marriages. Believers can *choose* to love their spouse even without making certain to fall in love deep and long before engagement. What a powerful message to share in cultures that still make use of arranged marriages. It is also a nice reminder to share with those who may be worried if they will be able to love their future spouse over so many years, and for those who no longer feel love within their current marriage. The love in a marriage ultimately comes from God as a gracious gift which flows from our love for his Son.²¹⁴

In many ways the marriage of Isaac and Rebekah was very blessed, but these two were still sinful people. For all the faith that both Isaac and Rebekah display, we also see that there

209 Psalm 127:3

210 Genesis 22:17, 26:4

211 Genesis 2:18

212 "A Study of Marriage, Divorce, Malicious Desertion and Remarriage In the Light of God's Word," 1989, 10, <http://www.wlsessays.net/files/WELSMarriage.pdf>.

213 Colossians 3:19; Genesis 2:18,23,24; Ecclesiastes 9:9

214 Ephesians 5:21

were times when sin did pop up into their lives. They were both led into sin when they stayed in Gerar. There, they lied about Rebekah's relationship to Isaac by saying that she was his sister for fear of the Philistines.²¹⁵ Rebekah sinned again when she told Jacob to impersonate Esau in order to secure the blessing.²¹⁶ We need to keep the sins of all the patriarchs in mind and be realistic about marriage. There will be times that we lie, deceive and even lead each other into sin. But we always run back to God's promises for the solution.

The last big point of emphasis that I see for this narrative is the providence of God. Abraham was certain that his LORD was not going to let him down. Abraham had every confidence that, just as God had been able to provide on Moriah, he was going to provide this time with a wife for Isaac. Through all the interactions of the servant, Rebekah, and her family, God made sure to work things out in accordance with his promise to make Abraham into a great nation. God was able and ready to provide Rebekah for Isaac. And she was everything for which Isaac could have asked. She was hardworking, submissive and beautiful. Through Rebekah, God gave Isaac a companion, a lover and fulfillment of his promises. In Genesis 24, we find that not only does God provide his people with what they need, but often too with an overabundance of the things they want.

215 Genesis 26:7

216 Genesis 27:10

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