

Genesis 25:19-34 “If it is going to be this way, why do I live?”

Romans 8:1-11 “You are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you.”

Matthew 13:1-23 “Let anyone with ears listen!”

Blessed Rebekkah

O God of love, grant us the wisdom, the strength and the courage to seek always and everywhere after truth, come when it may, and cost what it will.

You know, one thing that has happened in the last ten years or so is that marriage – the definition of, the defense of – has been in the news daily. Maybe I’m overly sensitive, but it seems to me like marriage is debated more often and more passionately than poverty or war or the degradation of the environment. It’s amazing really (amazing in a bad way). It’s queer people wanting to marry who have caused all the fuss, of course. And among people who do not want marriage to be available to same-sex partners, the Bible is very often cited as offering the model for what gets called “traditional” marriage. Seldom is the Bible used to defend economic justice, or peace, or care for creation. And of course, there is no such thing as “*the* Biblical model of marriage.”

Marriage patterns of Biblical time (which spans thousands of years) differ in terms of expectations of monogamy or polygamy; parent-arranged or husband-initiated; endogamy or exogamy (that is, marriage within the family or outside of the family); expectations for prophets or priests or “laypersons;” expectations of this world or the next; of the estimations of the length of time perceived until the end of the world and strategies for coping with the wait (whether long or short).¹ All of those issues influence various Biblical instructions or models for marriage. In addition, underlying issues of property, inheritance, procreation, strategic political alliance, and purity (to name a few) exert considerable influence on Biblical understandings of marriage. While we post-moderns think of love as an essential ingredient, in Biblical marriage the presence of love is actually extremely rare. We do have an example of the presence of love in the marriage of Rebekah and Isaac, however.

It seems worth noting that the Genesis story we read last week, which is continued in our lectionary today, is the first betrothal and marriage story in the Bible. The first marriage story in the Bible is not about Adam and Eve (they, as it turns out, were never married – they just lived together)! No, the first betrothal and marriage story is many many generations after Adam and Eve. It’s the story of Rebekah and Isaac. Last week we read about Abraham in his old age, after the death of Sarah, ordering his chief servant to return to the land of Abraham’s birth to find a wife for his seemingly estranged, grief-struck forty-year-old son Isaac. Abraham is clear that Isaac should not make the journey back to Aram-naharaim, to the city of Nahor. (Nahor was Abraham’s brother.) Rather, Abraham’s servant must make the trip and return with a woman for Isaac.

Halfway through the book of Genesis, the servant, who is unnamed, utters the first prayer for divine guidance in the Bible. The Torah says that his prayer came from his heart and that he said the prayer in his heart. He asked for something good to happen and he asked God for a sign

¹Victor Hamilton, “Marriage in Old Testament and Ancient Near East” and Raymond Collins, “Marriage in New Testament” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 4 K-N (NY: Doubleday, 1992), pp. 559-572.

(not a miracle, but a sign) – a sign of *chesed* – of steadfast love between God and Abraham. The story goes that he had scarcely finished his prayer when Rebekah, granddaughter of Milcah, who was Nahor’s wife, came to the well with a water jar and filled it up. Abraham’s servant ran toward her and asked for a little water from her jar. What happened next is amazing. Not only did she give him a drink but she then drew water for the *ten* camels he had with him. (That’s a *lot* of water and a lot of running back and forth with one water jar. Camels drink gallons and gallons of water!) While she did this running back and forth, the story goes that the servant gazed at her, silently wondering whether God had made the servant’s errand successful or not. In other words, it took some time for him to discern whether she might be the one.

By the time the ten camels finished drinking, he knew. What he knew was that she was generous and energetic, compassionate and strong. The text says that she was also beautiful – which, of course, one always is when one exhibits generosity and compassion. Abraham’s servant was apparently so moved by her hospitality, that he offered her a gold ring for her nose and gold bands for her arms. Then he asked, “whose daughter are you? And do you have room in your house for us to spend the night?” She answered that she is the granddaughter of Milcah and that they have plenty of room and she brought him home to her mother’s household where her generosity was extended to Abraham’s servant and the ten camels as well as all of the men with Abraham’s servant. Even though there are men living in this household, it is described as her mother’s household.

When Abraham’s servant tells Rebekah that he’s seeking a wife for his master’s son, and asks if she will go with him back to where Isaac is living to be Isaac’s wife, she says, “I will.” She makes her own decision to marry and leaves right away, even though her mother and brother have urged waiting a bit. Rebekah shows herself to have courage and vision, a sense of adventure, and what one of my teachers calls “a kind of cagey gumption.”² Her story about leaving the land of her ancestors, about leaving her family to go to an unknown place, is a clear echo of Abraham’s call, and it establishes her as a matriarch, blessed by God and blessed by her mother’s household. The blessing which they offer is, “May you grow into thousands of myriads,” It is still said in a traditional Jewish wedding when the bride is about to leave her household.

There’s a great detail, which I don’t want to skip over, that happens just before our Hebrew Bible reading today. When Rebekah first saw Isaac from a distance our English translation says she alighted from her camel. The Hebrew says, when she first saw Isaac from a distance, she *fell* off her camel and asked, “*who* is that man?” She learns that it is Isaac. They meet; then Isaac brought her into the tent that had belonged to his mother, and he took Rebekah as his wife. (So much for a religious ceremony.) And then Genesis says that Isaac loved her and was thus comforted in his grief over the death of his mother. He had been grieving for three years.

It is through this lens that we should view Rebekah when we look at the story in front of us today. She has been with Isaac for 20 years and has not had a child when, at last, in answer to Isaac’s prayer, she conceives and a struggle commences in her womb. Her question, “if it is to be this way, why do I live?” is a longer version of “why me?” (It can also be translated as “oy vey.”) *She* went to ask God what is up with this strife in her belly and God answered *her*: “two

² Ellen Frankel, *The Five Books of Miriam: A Woman’s Commentary on the Torah* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), p. 33.

nations are in your womb.” You might remember that God promised to make of Abraham a great nation; for Rebekah God is promising two nations, one mightier than the other, the older of which will serve the younger.

Although Isaac favors Esau, the Torah says, Rebekah favored Jacob who grew into a quiet man living in the tents (in contrast to his brother who was a skillful hunter of game). It’s Rebekah who recognizes which of her sons would become Israel. And, in the end, it was wily Rebekah who coached Jacob on how to receive the blessing from Isaac intended for Esau, after Jacob had already bought Esau’s birthright at a very deep discount. And it was Rebekah who then warned Jacob to flee for his life from Esau who was mad enough to kill Jacob. She saved Jacob’s life but she never saw her favored son again.

You know, in the beginning, from the beginning, it’s really been Abraham, Rebekah, and Jacob rather than Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.³ Rebekah belongs right there in the *Who’s Who* of the ancestors of our faith, and not just when the wives are listed (you know, Abraham and Sarah; Isaac and Rebekah; Jacob, Leah and Rachel). There is a strong sense in Genesis that Rebekah was chosen by God and that she also made the right choices for God.

So what difference might any of this make to us?

Well, Rebekah is a worthy role model of extravagant generosity, and compassion, and courage. Rebekah and Isaac’s marriage is a very rare and worthy role model of companionship through the ups and downs of long lives. However, I do not think that means that all marriages should be arranged between first cousins, once removed (even though that was Rebekkah and Isaac’s relationship)! Rebekah is also a bold witness against the tyrannical and limiting notion of the patriarchy of Biblical times – and not just Rebekah, but her mother and her grandmother as well. The story of her life testifies to the influence of the positive leadership of women in antiquity. Let anyone with ears listen!

³ Thanks to Rabbi Jane Rachel Litman for this idea.