

Rebekah, Rebecca

The Woman Whose Favoritism Brought Sorrow

Scripture Reference: Genesis 22:23; Genesis 24; Genesis 25:20-28; Genesis 26:6-35; Genesis 27; Genesis 28:5; Genesis 29:12; Genesis 35:8; Genesis 49:31; Romans 9:6-16

Name Meaning: Rebekah is another name with an animal connection. Although not belonging to any animal in particular, it has reference to animals of a limited class and in a peculiar condition. The name means a "tie rope for animals" or "a noose" in such a rope. Its root is found in a noun meaning a "hitching place" or "stall" and is connected with a "tied-up calf or lamb," a young animal peculiarly choice and fat. Applied to a female, the figure suggests her beauty by means of which men are snared or bound. Thus another meaning of Rebekah is that of "captivating." If, then, Rebekah means "a noosed cord," the loop was firmly around Isaac's neck. When Isaac took her as his bride he forgot his grief for his dead mother, and lived happily with his wife for twenty years during which time they had no children.

Family Connections: Rebekah is first mentioned in the genealogy of the descendants of Nahor, Abraham's brother (Genesis 22:20-24). When the pilgrims set out from the Ur of the Chaldees, Nahor was one of the party, and settled down at Charran where Terah, his father, died. Among Nahor's sons was Bethuel who, by an unknown wife, became the father of Rebekah, the sister of Laban. Rebekah married Isaac the son of Abraham, by whom she had two sons, Esau and Jacob. The story of Isaac and Rebekah as a love lyric full of romance and tender beauty has been retold times without number, and is a charming record that never loses its appeal.

Such an idyllic narrative is almost too familiar to need rehearsal, and too simple to require comment, yet because it constitutes one of the most romantic scenes in the Bible, its "moving scenes, so fresh and artless in their old world simplicity" have a pertinent appeal for present-day society. Ancient Bible histories with their arrestive characters and remarkable sequence of events and fortunes never fail to leave an indelible imprint on our hearts. The chapter recording how a wife was found for Isaac (Genesis 24) presents a link in the chain of events leading up to-That far-off Divine event To which the whole creation moves.

Through the marriage of Isaac and Rebekah, Abraham saw that day of Christ in which the church should become the Bride of Christ. Almost two millenniums after the days of the patriarch whom God spoke of as His "friend," there were those who considered it a privilege to belong to the race having Abraham as its fountainhead. To be "a son of Abraham" or a lineal descendant of such a grand, great old divine was an honor, but Isaac enjoyed a still greater advantage for Abraham was his own natural father. What a rich dowry of blessing must have been Isaac's because of such a close relationship. He had the inspiration of his father's godliness, and the benefit of his prayers and wise counsels-even in the matter of securing the right kind of wife.

Abraham's opposition to idolatry is seen in his request that the partner for his son, Isaac, must not be "of the daughters of the Canaanites" (24:3). As he had refused a grave for his wife, Sarah, amongst the sepulchers of the Hittites (Genesis 23), so a wife for their son must not be sought among their daughters. Thus it came about that Abraham's trusted, godly servant, Eliezer, was divinely guided to Haran where Nahor, Abraham's brother settled. Too feeble to make the journey himself, Abraham gave his servant the most careful instructions, and impressed upon him the solemn significance of his mission. Confident as to the result of the search for a suitable wife for Isaac, Abraham assured the earthly seeker that he would be guided by God's angel. Eliezer, the intelligent, prudent, obedient and praying servant went forth. Seeking a sign of divine guidance, not to prove God's faithfulness, but for his own direction in the choice of a woman of character as a wife for his master's son, the servant came to Nahor's well at Nahor, and saw in Rebekah who had come to draw water the answer to his prayer and quest.

Eliezer lost no time in telling Rebekah who he was, and from whom he had come, and the purpose of his search. He revealed his tact in the way he wooed and won the heart of Rebekah. The gifts he bestowed upon her and the good things he said of his master, secured the favor of Rebekah's family who gave its consent to the proposed marriage. Faced with instant departure from her dear ones, Rebekah is given her choice-"Wilt thou go with this man?" Without hesitation, feeling that she, too, was following the leading of God, as Eliezer had, Rebekah replied in a firm voice, "I will go." The caravan set out for Abraham's home, and now we come to a superb touch in the romantic story. Isaac was out in the fields at eventide for his usual period of meditation. He saw the approaching camels and sensed the success of Eliezer in the choice of a wife. Reaching Isaac, Rebekah, according to custom, veiled her face, and the end of this exquisite poem of the meeting of bride and bridegroom is stated in most expressive terms-"Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent, and took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her."

Marrying "sight unseen" is a most dangerous venture, but in this case it was successful because "the angel of the Lord" had directed the events leading up to the union. When Rebekah saw the handsome, mild-mannered and meditative Isaac, her heart went out to him. As for Isaac, a man of forty, and some twenty years older than Rebekah, he instantly loved the most beautiful woman he beheld, and she remained his only love. Some matrimonial matches have been described as "Lucifer Matches," because of clash of temperament and temper, but the marriage of Isaac and Rebekah was certainly one "made in heaven." There would be fewer broken homes if only young people looking for partners would seek the guidance of God as the servant of Abraham did. We agree with Alexander Whyte when he says of the ancient record of the circumstances leading to the securing of a wife for Isaac- A sweeter chapter was never written than the twenty-fourth of Genesis.... The picture of aged Abraham swearing his most trusty servant about a bride for his son Isaac; that servant's journey to Padan-aram in the far east; Rebekah, first at the well, and then in her mother's house; and then her first sight of her future husband-that long chapter is a perfect gem of ancient authorship. As with other pairs in the Bible, it is hardly possible to separate Isaac from Rebekah whose lives were so closely knit together. Yet let us see if we can sketch a portrait of Rebekah herself.

Her Character

As a damsel, that is, a maiden around twenty years of age, Rebekah was "fair to look upon," meaning that she had an unaffected beauty. She was a virgin, and had a childlike simplicity. There was no trace of wantonness in her. As with her mother-in-law, Sarah, beauty carried its dangers. During his sojourn in Gerar, Isaac feared lest the physical charms of his wife might excite the desire of the king of Gerar and so he lied. Thus Isaac passed Rebekah off as his sister-a course of action which might have had dire consequences (Genesis 26:6-16). He fell into the same error as his father before him. Andrew Fuller says, "The falls of those that have gone before us are like so many rocks on which others have been split; and the recording of them is like placing buoys over them for the security of future mariners." But in the story of Isaac the buoy served no beneficial purpose.

Beautiful Rebekah had been taken by Abimelech, but one day as he looked out of the window he saw Isaac caressing Rebekah, and he knew that he had been deceived. Isaac's untruthfulness was discovered, and the heir of God's promises was rebuked by a heathen king for his lying and deception. In the providence of God, Abimelech, an idolater, was made the protector of the child of promise (see Psalm 17:13). As "an amiable and lovely girl," as her name suggests, she was industrious, for although she was a member of a family of standing she was not afraid to soil her hands. The hard work of drawing and carrying water, the provision she made for Eliezer's camels, and the meal she prepared, speak of Rebekah as one who did not shun domestic duties. That she was a woman of faith is evident from what Paul says of her as being the recipient of a direct revelation from the Lord regarding universal blessing through her favorite Jacob (Romans 9:12).

Rebekah's best qualities come out in the simple yet heartwarming narrative describing her response to Eliezer's approach, in her service to him, and in her willingness to believe and act upon all he had told her. In his remarkable cameo of Rebekah, George Matheson uses the following terms or expressions-"a fine manner"- "remarkable tact"- "a sunbeam to her household"- "a very beautiful young woman, with the gift of physical charm which was apt to produce selfconsciousness"- "the gift of intellectual sympathy"- "Rebekah's morning ray is a ray of sympathetic insight." Modest and meek, frank and open, ready kindness, great energy and faith, graciousness matching her physical charm, describe Rebekah. When she became a mother she revealed how masterful and clever she could be-a direct contrast to Isaac who was probably more simple, slow of wit, and mild of manner than his wife. The lines of Wordsworth can express Isaac's feelings when for the first time he gazed upon the lovely Rebekah and came to experience her comforting love as she filled the empty place in his heart because of his mother's death.

She was a phantom of delight
When first she gleamed upon my sight;
A lovely apparition, sent
To be a moment's ornament;
Her eyes as stars of twilight fair,
Like twilight's, too, her dusky hair.
But all things else about her drawn
From May-time and the cheerful dawn.
A dancing shape, an image gay,
To haunt, to startle, and waylay.
I saw her upon nearer view,
A spirit, yet a woman too!

Her Children

Motherhood came to Rebekah somewhat late in life when Isaac was an aging man. For twenty years she had been childless, and conscious of God's promise that the Abrahamic Covenant could not be broken, Isaac entreated God that his long barren wife might conceive. He graciously answered his earnest intercession (Genesis 25:19-34). As his prayer was in the line of God's purpose, it was sure of an answer (1 John 5:14). The years of waiting on the part of Isaac and Rebekah show that God has His own time for the fulfillment of His purpose.

Like coral strands beneath the sea,
So strongly built and chaste,
The plans of God, unfolding,
show No signs of human haste.

In an age of almost universal polygamy, Isaac took no handmaid, concubine, or second wife. Rebekah and he were bound together by the bonds of a mutual affection, and although childless, yet became the parents of two sons who were destined to be the progenitors of different nations. But when Rebekah became the mother of twins-the first of two Bible women mentioned as giving birth to twins-the other was Tamar (Genesis 38:27)-somehow she changed and was a different character from the young bride who rode south so gaily to meet her lover in Canaan, as our next glimpse of her will show. The opposite characters of Rebekah's twins, Esau and Jacob, brought into sharp focus the dark side of their mother. As Esau was the first to emerge from her womb he had the precedence and was thus the heir of two things, namely "the sovereignty and the priesthood, of the clan-the birthright and the blessing. The birthright was the right of succession.... The blessing was something to be given during the lifetime of the father." We learn that as the boys grew, "Esau was a cunning (skillful) hunter, a man of the field; and Jacob was a plain man, dwelling in tents." At the time of their birth, Jacob seized his brother's heel-an incident prophetic of the day when he would supplant Esau. Often in children there are characteristics predictive of the manner of adults they will be.

The divergence of Rebekah's twins in temperament, inclination, occupation, and religious aspirations is most apparent. Esau was wrapped in a raiment of hair, a rough man of the wilderness, a clever hunter with something of a wild daring spirit. Jacob was the opposite of his brother. He preferred a fixed abode, to dwell in his tent rather than roam the desert. Esau was probably more brilliant, attractive, forceful, daring than his twin brother. Jacob, in spite of his weaknesses and mistakes was the finer character, and on the whole truer to the Lord and more fitted to possess the blessing of the birthright. Further, there was the difference of regard on the part of Isaac and Rebekah toward their two sons that resulted in sorrow and separation.

Isaac loved Esau, but the love was somewhat sensual. He loved his son "because he did eat of his venison." Such love is of a carnal nature, for love in its highest sense has regard not so much to what the loved one gives as to what he or she is. Rebekah loved Jacob, not because he was more of a "homebody" than his brother, or possessed a more loving nature than he, but because Jacob was the Lord's preference (Romans 9:13). Esau thought so lightly of the birthright that he was willing to sell it for a mess of pottage, and be guilty, thereby, of the sin of profanity (Hebrews 12:16). Jacob, however, recognized the solemnity of the birthright and wished to possess it. Esau thought of it as of no more value than a mouthful of food, but Jacob knew something of the sacred significance of the birthright and was therefore a more fit channel through which the blessing of God could flow to the seed of Abraham.

As Rebekah is often blamed for the partiality or favoritism she manifested for Jacob, it may be profitable to consider the matter of preference in family life. When parents single out one of their children as a favorite and shower more love and attention upon that one than the rest, such an unwise and unnatural course inevitably results in jealousy and strife. Although Isaac found "in Esau that strong practical nature, and energetic character which distinguished the woman he so dearly loved; and Rebekah saw in the gentle Jacob a replica of the father who had so strangely attracted her that first day when she met him meditating in the fields at evening," the partiality was absolutely indefensible and led to lying and deception on Rebekah's part.

What else can be expected but confusion and trouble when there is a crossing of purposes between parents concerning their children? Was the root-cause of Rebekah's unnatural and unmotherly preference of Jacob over Esau and her treatment of Esau as though he was not, the lack of deep love for her husband, and that union of moral and spiritual ideas and ideals characteristic of every true marriage? We are certainly told that Isaac loved Rebekah, but not that she loved Isaac. Somehow we feel that if husband and wife had been one in all things in that ancient home, Rebekah would have been more concerned about Jacob's character than his prosperity. But Isaac was partial to Esau and Rebekah partial to Jacob-which favoritism resulted in Esau leaving home, and Jacob fleeing from it. Rebekah's record therefore shows that while Isaac was faithful to her, she was unfaithful to Isaac in a twofold way. First, she cheated Esau, her oldest son, and Isaac's pet out of his birthright. Then she cheated Esau out of his father's blessing, which prerogative had the effect of a testamentary bequest. Comparing the chapter of the romantic meeting of Isaac and Rebekah (Genesis 24) with its perfection of writing, and the dark chapter of Rebekah's deception (Genesis 28), Alexander Whyte says, "That the ship was launched on such a golden morning only the more darkens the surrounding gloom when she goes to the bottom." Then dealing with the secret alienation that developed between Isaac and Rebekah, the same renowned expositor adds- When the two twin-brothers were brought up day after day and hour after hour in an atmosphere of favouritism, and partiality, and indulgence, and injustice, no father, no mother, can surely need to have it pointed out to them what present misery, and what future wages of such sin, is all to be seen and to be expected in that evil house.

One result of Rebekah's preference for Jacob was the spite and the sight of Esau going out and grieving his parents by marrying two ungodly women. Esau was forty years old when he did this -the same age at which Isaac married Rebekah. His parents must have seen in the foreign wives he brought home the firstfruits of the devil's garden they had sowed for themselves. "Their great grief would seem to have been almost the only thing the two old people were at one about by that time." Esau had seen little in his mother to admire and respect; therefore he was never in any mood to please her. What a different story would have been written if Esau's home had been "without partiality"!

Her Chicanery

Chicanery is described as the act of one who deliberately deceives, and this was Rebekah's sin. The destiny of her favorite son, Jacob, was strongly influenced by his mother's strong-mindedness, and thus she became the authoress of the treacherous plan to deprive Esau of his father's blessing. Isaac is old, feeble and blind, and informs the members of his household that the time has come to give Esau, officially, what was left to him after selling his birthright, namely, the blessing which carried with it the recognition of his headship, the ratification of the birthright. So Isaac told his favorite son to take his bow and arrow and go into the fields, hunt for his much-liked venison, and make a savory meal. At that time, a meal taken together was a common symbol of a saved pledge when father and son partook together. In such an hour of sacred fellowship the father bestowed upon the elder son his rank and place. Rebekah overheard, and her deceitful heart was stirred to action. She set about to thwart her husband's purpose. Her favorite son must not be displaced, and her hopes for him dashed to the ground, by the impetuous hunter whom Isaac loved. Cunningly she devised the plan of impersonation. While Esau was out in the fields hunting, Rebekah told Jacob to go to a flock nearby and bring two kids for her to dress and cook and pass off as venison. While cautious about his mother's duplicity, he had no conscience against it. What made Jacob hesitant was the fact that his brother was a hairy man, while his own skin was smooth, and that if his father felt him and sensed the deception, he would not bless him, but curse him.

Rebekah, however, was equal to this fear of Jacob, and he followed the counsels of his treacherous mother. He put the skin of the kids upon his hands and upon his neck, thus making himself feel and smell like Esau, and so deceived his aged, blind father. Doubtless Rebekah stood nearby in convenient concealment to see how her ill-conceived ruse would succeed. Smelling Esau's clothes, and feeling the false hairy hands, Isaac was a little doubtful and said, "The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau." But reassured by the repeated lies of Jacob, the deceived father bestowed the unalterable blessing upon his son, and Jacob, by fraud, became the father of Israel's race. To his discredit, he played the role successfully which his mother had drilled into him with masterly skill. Covetous of the sacred, patriarchal blessing for her favorite son, Rebekah felt she had to resort to duplicity to gain her ends, and in doing so she prostituted parental authority. "My son obey my voice" (Genesis 27:8), and Jacob the misguided son obeyed, and in his subsequent career bore the bitter fruit of his conduct when Laban deceived him regarding Rachel.

A deceiver Jacob was
Full of craft and guile;
Thro' long years he bore his guilt,
Unrepentant all the while.

Samuel Morely once said, "I am much what my mother has made me." It was so in a wrong sense in the life of Jacob, for as in the case of Athaliah, "his mother was his counsellor to do wickedly" (2 Chronicles 22:3). The thoroughness with which Jacob carried out his mother's plan of deception is surely one of the worse features of the narrative. Fearful of the failure of his mother's plot, Jacob said, "I will bring a curse upon me and not a blessing." But Rebekah replied, " Upon me be thy curse, my son, only obey my voice." The future scheming life of Jacob, however, was but the extension of the deceitful qualities of his mother, and both suffered as the result of adopting false methods to accomplish right ends.

When Esau found that he had been robbed of his blessing through the cunning scheme of his mother, he became a remorseless avenger and swore the death of his brother who was forced to flee for his life to Haran, some 500 miles away. Rebekah never saw the face of her much-loved son again. To add to her reproach she had to endure the grief of seeing her other son marry heathen women. Esau's heathen wives caused Rebekah to be weary of her life (Genesis 27:46). Esau received a promise from his father that he would be the progenitor of a great nation-the Edomites-and much misery accrued to Israel because of Edom. The wrath of Esau's enraged blood boiled in the blood of Herod the Idumean on the day he reviled the Man of Sorrows.

There are some writers who try to justify the actions of Rebekah by saying that she was prompted to take the course she did concerning Jacob because of the prediction that, "the elder shall serve the younger," but God had no need of trickery and deceit to fulfill His promise. Ambitious for her son, Rebekah sacrificed the love of her husband, the loss of the esteem of her elder son, and the peace of her soul, for the idolized son whose face she never saw again. Without doubt, Jacob was the divinely-appointed heir of Abraham (Genesis 25:23), and Rebekah seeking to overrule the purpose of Isaac in his blessing of Esau, resorted to deceit to accomplish the will of God. Her guiding principle was, "Let us do evil that good may come" (Romans 3:8), but wrong is never right (James 1:20). Esau had sold his birthright for a mess of pottage, and Rebekah catered to Isaac's carnal appetite in order to accomplish a divine purpose. Had she laid aside "all guile, and hypocrisies" (1 Peter 2:1), and reasoned with her husband about the solemn issue at stake she would have been saved from the disgrace which her worldly policy brought upon her own head and from the sorrow others had to endure. Almost the last picture we have of Rebekah is when she tearfully witnessed the hasty departure of her favorite son. "A strong-minded, decisive girl had grown into an autocratic matriarch," and ends her days a brokenhearted woman. When she died we are not told. Isaac, although much older than Rebekah, was still living when Jacob returned to Canaan over 20 years later. It is assumed that she died during Jacob's long absence, and was buried in the cave of Machpelah near Hebron (Genesis 49:31). A fitting epitaph for her grave would have been, "Died of a broken heart." The only monument Rebekah has is to be found in the Anglican marriage service of The Book of Common Prayer where we read- That as Isaac and Rebekah lived faithfully together, so these persons may surely perform and keep the vow and covenant betwixt them.

While she may have been faithful during the first 20 years of marriage while she was childless, Rebekah, by her unjustifiable treacherous and wholly inexplicable intervention for her favorite son, stained her solemn marriage.

Reviewing Rebekah's life and character what are some of the warnings to heed? Are we not forcibly reminded that love which seeks success at the cost of truth and righteousness is of the earth, earthy? The devil's maxim is, "Nothing succeeds like success." But from God's standpoint nothing succeeds which does not follow the way of truth and honesty. Then, while she had physical beauty, her domination of Jacob and her scheme to deceive her husband revealed the lack of the beauty of a godly character. Further, Rebekah is a warning to all parents that there should be no favorites in the family; that all alike should be dear to them. If there is partiality for any in a family, it should only be for those who are weak and helpless. Another warning bell is that when a wife conspires against her husband, or vice versa, they are guilty of a baseness which language cannot describe. When one partner finds that he has been betrayed by the other, the world becomes a blank.

**The mind has a thousand eyes
The heart but one,
But the light of a whole life dies
When love is done.**

There is one beneficial application we can make of Rebekah's prompt decision to follow Eliezer to meet her future bridegroom, Isaac - I will go! In connection with the higher betrothal of the soul to the heavenly Bridegroom, He comes to the sinner saying as Eliezer did to Rebekah, "Will you go with Me? Will you follow Me into that country where saints immortal reign?" When hearts respond to such an appeal, "Yea, Lord I will go. I will follow Thee, whithersoever Thou goest!" they are twice blessed.