

# The faithful of old— studied by the young

## Rebekah: the chosen wife for Isaac

Naomi Evans and Hannah Parker

**T**HE FIRST TIME we read of Rebekah in Scripture we learn that she was Abraham's great niece (Gen. 22:23). The record regarding Rebekah has much to teach us about how we should respond to the call of the Word and apply it practically. We can draw out many lessons from her life, learning as much from her weaknesses as from her strengths.

### **Abraham's servant is led by God to Rebekah**

In Genesis 24:4 we read Abraham's instructions to his servant: "thou shalt go unto my country, and to my kindred, and take a wife unto my son Isaac". The previous verse informs us that Abraham specifically did not want his son to marry a Canaanite woman. The Canaanites were descendants of Ham (9:18) and were cursed (vv. 25-27). They became idolatrous, serving many gods (Ex. 23:23-33) and at times leading the children of Israel astray with their corrupt practices (Ps. 106:34-38). From these passages we can clearly see why God wanted His chosen people to remain separate from people who disregarded His laws (the first of the Ten Commandments being, "Thou shalt have no other gods before Me"—Ex. 20:3). We likewise need to be separate from the things of the world in preparation for the Kingdom age, when finally "there shall be no more the Canaanite in the house of the LORD of hosts" (Zech. 14:21).

So, after listening to Abraham's instructions, his servant travelled into Mesopotamia, to the city of Nahor, in search of a God-fearing woman who understood, and lived in accordance with, God's commandments. Before he entered the city, the servant went straight to a well to water his camels after the journey (Gen. 24:11). We read in Genesis 24:12-14 that here the servant prayed to God to guide him in his appointed task and to show him a sign: "Behold, I stand here by the well of water; and the daughters of the men of the city

come out to draw water: and let it come to pass, that the damsel to whom I shall say, Let down thy pitcher, I pray thee, that I may drink; and she shall say, Drink, and I will give thy camels drink also: let the same be she that Thou hast appointed for Thy servant Isaac; and thereby shall I know that Thou hast shewed kindness unto my master". Of course, we know that the woman with whom he would speak was Rebekah.

It is important for us to reflect on what this seemingly simple act actually entailed. She willingly gives water to a stranger, showing her kindness and eagerness to help others. What is significant is that she goes further than this and offers to provide water for the camels until they have "done drinking" (v. 19). We read in the record that the servant had brought ten of Abraham's camels (v. 10). Camels are capable of drinking huge quantities of water, sometimes over one hundred litres. Presumably therefore Rebekah would have had to draw an astonishing amount of water up from the well.

She showed a remarkable willingness not only to help others but also to go beyond what was usually required. In the Sermon on the Mount Christ commands us to have this attitude: "whoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain" (Mt. 5:41). We should strive to apply this in our lives, to do all that we can to serve Christ in helping our brethren and sisters and being aware that there is always work to be done. We too need to "Let [our] light so shine before men" (v. 16) that people see that we are different and separate.

### **Rebekah accepts her destiny as Isaac's wife**

Abraham's servant recognises in Rebekah the woman God has chosen to be Isaac's wife. He discovers that she is of Abraham's kindred when she recounts to him her descent in Genesis 24:24. He praises God for His provision: "Blessed be the LORD God of my master Abraham, Who hath not

*She offers to provide water for the camels  
until they have “done drinking” . . .*



Picture: Mark Pennington

*She showed a remarkable willingness not only to help others but also to go beyond what was usually required.*

left destitute my master of His mercy and His truth: I being in the way, the LORD led me to the house of my master's brethren" (v. 27). He gave gifts of jewellery to Rebekah (v. 22) and she ran to tell her family what had happened (v. 28).

Not all of Rebekah's family, however, had the same generous nature and meek spirit she displayed. Significantly, we read in the record that her brother Laban, who seems to have acted as head of the household, was motivated to invite the servant into his home by the costly "earring and bracelets upon his sister's hands" (v. 30). The family lived at a place called Nahor (v. 10),<sup>1</sup> which means 'snorer' in the Hebrew. Taking into account the record's emphasis on Laban's materialistic preoccupations, it seems that, although he was part of faithful Abraham's wider family, he had been affected by this city that, as its name suggests, was spiritually asleep.

Rebekah's mother and brother wanted to delay her departure: "Let the damsel abide with us a few days, at the least ten; after that she shall go" (v. 55). The Hebrew words translated here as "days, at the least ten" can indicate a significantly longer time period of a full year, or ten months. When Rebekah is asked, however, if she will go with the man immediately, she says simply and without hesitation, "I will go" (v. 58).

The servant was eager to return to his master with Rebekah, as he said: "Hinder me not, seeing the LORD hath prospered my way" (v. 56). He was committed to carrying out the task appointed to him by both Abraham and God. Rebekah

1. The "city of Nahor" in Genesis 24:10 can also mean the city where Nahor lived. This could have been Haran; see Genesis 11:31; 27:43 and Acts 7:2.—E.D.M.

displayed a similar readiness to serve, and her committed response shows her understanding of God's will. As she leaves, her family bless her, saying, "be thou the mother of thousands of millions, and let thy seed possess the gate of those which hate them" (v. 60). These words echo the promises made to Abraham in Genesis 17, where God tells Abraham he will make him "a father of many nations", give his descendants "all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession", and establish an "everlasting covenant" with Abraham's seed (vv. 5-8).

Rebekah's understanding and appreciation of God's greater plan and purpose led her to respond positively to the servant's call. The call of the gospel should likewise provoke a response in us, leading us to dedicate ourselves to a life in Christ. We can have hope that we too will have a part in the inheritance promised to Abraham, when Christ returns to set up his Father's Kingdom: ". . . that the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ; that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith" (Gal. 3:14).

### **Rebekah meets her husband**

We now come to the point in the record when Rebekah meets Isaac for the first time: "And Rebekah lifted up her eyes, and when she saw Isaac, she lighted off the camel" (Gen. 24:64). She takes a veil, and covers herself (v. 65). A parallel can be drawn here between the way in which Rebekah meets Isaac and the way in which Abigail meets her future husband David in 1 Samuel 25:23: "when Abigail saw David, she hasted, and lighted off the ass, and fell before David on her face, and bowed herself to the ground". Both women, then, demonstrates submissiveness and respect. They constitute excellent examples of humility, showing us that a wife should recognise her husband as "the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church" (Eph. 5:23).

The first marriage we have recorded for us, of course, is that of Adam and Eve. Interestingly, Eve was created from Adam's side (Gen. 2:21-23). She was not formed from his head so she would be dominant and headstrong, nor from his feet so she would be trodden down, but from his side so she would be "an help meet for him" (v. 20). She was to be a companion for Adam, because God had said that "It is not good that the man should be alone" (v. 18). We read of Rebekah being a help to Isaac in Genesis 24:67, where she comforts him following his mother's death.

### **Rebekah becomes a mother**

In Genesis 25:21 we read that "Isaac intreated the LORD for his wife, because she was barren: and the LORD was intreated of him, and Rebekah his wife conceived". The Hebrew word here translated "intreated" denotes prayer, and in the same verse we read that Isaac's prayer was answered. Interestingly, this word also denotes reciprocally listening to prayer, so we have the communication between faithful Isaac and his God.

Isaac would have known that his son would continue the line of the promised seed. Verse 20 records that "Isaac was forty years old when he took Rebekah to wife", and verse 26 records that "Isaac was threescore years old" when Rebekah gave birth to her twins, Esau and Jacob. Rebekah was barren for twenty years, therefore, both she and Isaac knowing that the promised seed would continue through them. This waiting would have taken an amazing amount of patience, trust and faith on both of their parts.

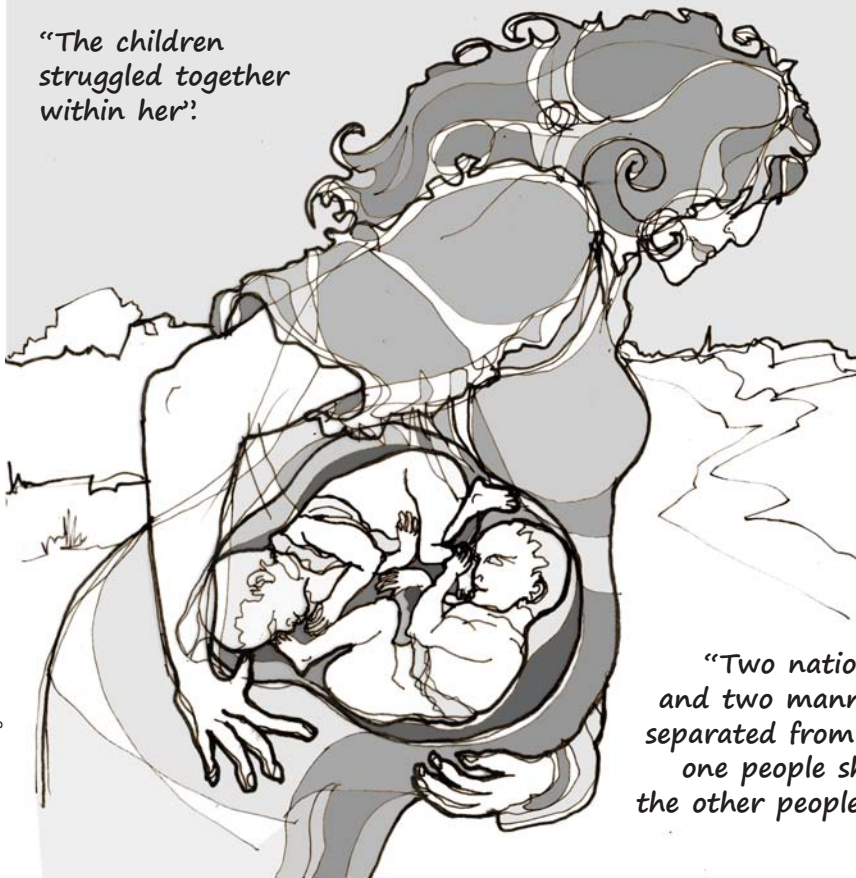
We see here a contrast with the way Sarah, Isaac's mother, handled her barrenness. Sarah took matters into her own hands and brought Hagar before Abraham (16:3,4), and we know that the child that was born was Ishmael. However, we know that the seed had to go through Isaac and God brought about His will how He intended. Isaac takes this matter to God and trusts in Him to open Rebekah's womb.

Genesis 25:22 records that "the children struggled together within her". We can obtain the sense of the Hebrew word that is here translated 'struggled' by looking at how it is used elsewhere in Scripture. In Judges 9:53 the same word is translated as 'to brake' and relates to the breaking of Abimelech's skull by a piece of a millstone. This use of the word helps us to comprehend its forcefulness in Hebrew.

It is understandable, therefore, that Rebekah "went to enquire of the LORD" (Gen. 25:22) when she was feeling such torment within her. The Hebrew word here translated 'enquire' can also be rendered 'seek'. An example of this use of the word can be found in 2 Chronicles 12:14, where Rehoboam is recorded as not preparing "his heart to seek the LORD". Genesis records that Rebekah, in contrast to Rehoboam, inquired diligently; seeking comfort from her God Who she trusted would provide an answer to reassure her. Rehoboam, however, did not do this and thus "did evil".

In Genesis 25:23 we have God's response to faithful Rebekah's question: "the LORD said

*"The children  
struggled together  
within her".*



Picture: Mark Pennington

*"Two nations are in thy womb,  
and two manner of people shall be  
separated from thy bowels; and the  
one people shall be stronger than  
the other people; and the elder shall  
serve the younger".*

unto her, Two nations are in thy womb, and two manner of people shall be separated from thy bowels; and the one people shall be stronger than the other people; and the elder shall serve the younger". Just as when Rebekah was blessed by her family, here again she gains an insight into her part in God's plan. We too can learn, through the study of Scripture, about our part in God's "eternal purpose which He purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord: in whom we have boldness and access in confidence through our faith in him" (Eph. 3:11,12, RV).

### **Rebekah's involvement with Jacob and the birthright**

When the time came for the blessing to be given, then, Rebekah was fully aware that, in order for God's words during her pregnancy to be fulfilled, the line of the promised seed would continue through Jacob rather than Esau. In the record we read that Esau had already "despised his birthright" (Gen. 25:34) by selling it to Jacob for a bowl of pottage. Rebekah, taking matters into

her own hands, disguised Jacob as Esau so that the blind and ill Isaac would bestow the blessing on the younger son (27:5-30).

This time it is not recorded that she prayed to God for guidance. Trouble for her family followed. Esau wanted his brother dead for taking his birthright and his blessing, and Rebekah's beloved Jacob was exiled for his own safety (vv. 41-45). We should be wary of judging Rebekah for her actions in this particular situation, however, as we do not read in Scripture that she was condemned by God.

### **Final thoughts**

We read in Romans 15:4 that "whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope". Through meditating on the record of Rebekah's life and the circumstances she faced we learn how she was ready to separate herself and commit her life to following God's principles. It is worthwhile to consider her responses and the lessons she had to learn,

to help us form and act upon the right convictions.

Rebekah provides an example of someone whose understanding of God's purpose directed her actions, even if, in going about things in her own way, she made some mistakes. Perhaps it is these trying moments in this remarkable woman's life that resonate most strongly with us, as we face difficult decisions and testing times in our lives.

The last time we read of Rebekah in Scripture is in Genesis 49:31,<sup>2</sup> where we read of her being

buried with Abraham, Sarah and Isaac. There, with her faithful family, she awaits the resurrection. Let us, too, keep in our minds the day of our Lord's return. "Be ye also patient; stablish your hearts: for the coming of the Lord draweth nigh" (Jas. 5:8).

- 
2. Rebecca, as the mother of Jacob and Esau, is mentioned in Romans 9:10, where Paul speaks of "the purpose of God according to election".—*E.D.M.*