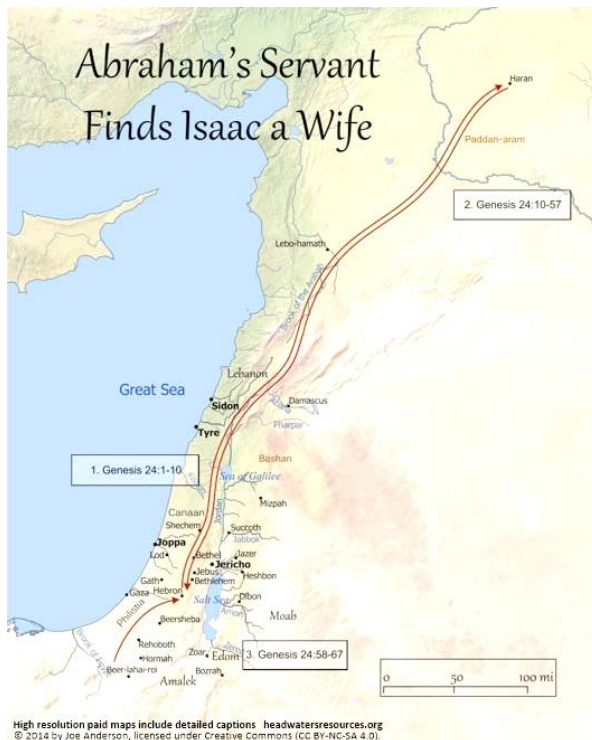


# The Patriarchs

## Genesis Chapter 24 – Isaac Meets Rebekah

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### Abraham's Servant Meets Rebekah's Family



The account of how Rebekah becomes Isaac's wife forms one of the longest episodes in the book of Genesis. The author in chapter 24 highlights how God controls events so that, after a long journey from Canaan to northern Mesopotamia, Abraham's servant is guided directly to Rebekah. The journey from Hebron, where Sarah was buried, to Nahor in the district of Haran where Rebekah lived, was approximately 520 miles along ancient routes. It was a journey that would have taken Abraham's servant approximately 21 days to travel. A man traveling alone could go an average 25 miles a day or so, faster than a caravan, whose travel speed would be about 17–23 miles per day.)

Ironically, Isaac's future son Jacob, will make this same journey as he flees from his brother Esau.

### The Servant Arrives

**Genesis 24:29-33 (ESV)** <sup>29</sup> Rebekah had a brother whose name was Laban. Laban ran out toward the man, to the spring. <sup>30</sup> As soon as he saw the ring and the bracelets on his sister's arms, and heard the words of Rebekah his sister, "Thus the man spoke to me," he went to the man. And behold, he was standing by the camels at the spring. <sup>31</sup> He said, "Come in, O blessed of the Lord. Why do you stand outside? For I have prepared the house and a place for the camels." <sup>32</sup> So the man came to the house and unharnessed the camels, and gave straw and fodder to the camels, and there was water to wash his feet and the feet of the men who were with him. <sup>33</sup> Then food was set before him to eat. But he said, "I will not eat until I have said what I have to say." He said, "Speak on."

“Rebekah had a brother. . .” is providing supplementary information for the reader, not provided in the genealogy of Nahor-Milcah.

**Genesis 22: 22-23 (ESV)** <sup>22</sup> *Now after these things it was told to Abraham, “Behold, Milcah also has borne children to your brother Nahor: Uz his firstborn, Buz his brother, Kemuel the father of Aram, Chesed, Hazo, Pildash, Jidlaph, and Bethuel.”* <sup>23</sup> *(Bethuel fathered Rebekah.) These eight Milcah bore to Nahor, Abraham's brother.*

### **Relation of characters in this chapter...**

Nahor is Abraham’s brother. Milcah would have been Abraham’s sister-in-law. Nahor and Milcah have eight son’s listed in Genesis chapter 22. One of the son’s, Bethuel, is the father of both Rebekah and Laban. As a result, Laban and Rebekah would have been Abraham’s great nephew and niece.

Interestingly, the name Laban means “white” in Hebrew. Who Laban is, is important to the author since Laban is central to the events here in chapter 24 and the subsequent events later on in the life of Isaac’s son Jacob.

**Question for Discussion:** Laban warmly and eagerly greets Abraham’s servant, even going so far as to call him “blessed of the Lord”. Why do you believe he was so quick to validate the servant’s stature and trustworthiness?

Laban does not yet know the identity of the servant, so the phrase "blessed of the Lord" is just a polite greeting to a rich man, riches being a sign of divine blessing. But as often in Scripture, the words are truer than Laban realizes. The Lord’s blessing of Abraham and his household is the starting point of the story, and on his very first encounter with the servant Laban acknowledges this fact.

**Question for Discussion:** Abraham’s servant has been treated royally since his arrival. His camels watered and fed, his feet washed and a banquet placed before him. All are in good spirits and everyone ready to begin the feast, when the servant asks that everything be stopped until he delivers his message. What do we make of this? What do you believe this says about the servant?

### **The Servant Speaks**

**Genesis 24:34-51 (ESV)** <sup>34</sup> *So he said, “I am Abraham's servant. <sup>35</sup> The Lord has greatly blessed my master, and he has become great. He has given him flocks and herds, silver and gold, male servants and female servants, camels and donkeys. <sup>36</sup> And Sarah my master's wife bore a son to my master when she was old, and to him he has given all that he has. <sup>37</sup> My master made me swear, saying, ‘You shall not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, in whose land I dwell, <sup>38</sup> but you shall go to my father's house and to my clan and take a wife for my son.’ <sup>39</sup> I said to my master, ‘Perhaps the woman will not follow me.’ <sup>40</sup> But he said to me, ‘The Lord, before whom I*

have walked, will send his angel with you and prosper your way. You shall take a wife for my son from my clan and from my father's house. <sup>41</sup> Then you will be free from my oath, when you come to my clan. And if they will not give her to you, you will be free from my oath.'

<sup>42</sup> "I came today to the spring and said, O Lord, the God of my master Abraham, if now you are prospering the way that I go, <sup>43</sup> behold, I am standing by the spring of water. Let the virgin who comes out to draw water, to whom I shall say, "Please give me a little water from your jar to drink," <sup>44</sup> and who will say to me, "Drink, and I will draw for your camels also," let her be the woman whom the Lord has appointed for my master's son.'

<sup>45</sup> "Before I had finished speaking in my heart, behold, Rebekah came out with her water jar on her shoulder, and she went down to the spring and drew water. I said to her, 'Please let me drink.' <sup>46</sup> She quickly let down her jar from her shoulder and said, 'Drink, and I will give your camels drink also.' So I drank, and she gave the camels drink also. <sup>47</sup> Then I asked her, 'Whose daughter are you?' She said, 'The daughter of Bethuel, Nahor's son, whom Milcah bore to him.' So I put the ring on her nose and the bracelets on her arms. <sup>48</sup> Then I bowed my head and worshiped the Lord and blessed the Lord, the God of my master Abraham, who had led me by the right way to take the daughter of my master's kinsman for his son. <sup>49</sup> Now then, if you are going to show steadfast love and faithfulness to my master, tell me; and if not, tell me, that I may turn to the right hand or to the left."

<sup>50</sup> Then Laban and Bethuel answered and said, "The thing has come from the Lord; we cannot speak to you bad or good. <sup>51</sup> Behold, Rebekah is before you; take her and go, and let her be the wife of your master's son, as the Lord has spoken."

The servant summarizes for Laban his commission and journey. He repeats the crucial information to his hosts in a way that emphasizes the fortuitous hand of God in the servant's success. His testimony reshapes the account—sometimes curtailing, amplifying, or rearranging—so as to convince the family and Rebekah that it is God's will that she return with him, ending his story with a call to make their decision on the spot.

There is a little bit of wordplay between Laban's initiating request, "Then tell [nāgad] us" in verse 33, and the servant's urgent counter request at the end of his story, "tell [nāgad] me" in verse 49. The response of Laban and Bethuel, "The thing has come from the Lord" in verse 50 shows that the servant's case has won their support.

### **Ways That Abraham's Servant Shapes the Series of Events...**

- The servant underlines Abraham's positive motives in looking for a wife for Isaac from his relations, rather than his aversion to acquiring a Canaanite daughter-in-law. Abraham sent the servant to "my country, my clan." Having actually found an eligible bride much more closely related than anticipated, the servant reports

Abraham as saying, "Go to my father's house ... take a wife for my son from my clan and my father's house". The servant puts into words Abraham's deepest hopes, that his son would marry within the extended family, though Abraham himself had not dared to be so specific.

- By playing up the kinship aspect between Isaac and Rebekah, the servant minimizes the pain of her separation from her family. He also plays down the possible resistance that the bride might feel about leaving home. Whereas he had asked Abraham what he should do if "the woman is not willing to go with me to this land", in the retelling the potential reluctance of the would-be bride is played down. Here he simply asks, "Suppose the woman will not come with me". The possibility that Isaac might leave home and travel back to his father's homeland, which was raised by the servant and twice rejected by Abraham, is now carefully omitted. Just to mention it might put ideas into the family's head!

**Question for Discussion:** Abraham's servant places an emphasis on the fact that Abraham has great wealth and success. Why do you think he would choose to begin his story this way?

**Question for Discussion:** The servant reshapes the account slightly to emphasize specific attributes of his journey and mission. Is he trying to manipulate the household of Bethuel? If so, is this wrong?

After hearing the servant's account, Laban and Bethuel declare in response that *'the thing has come from the Lord; we cannot speak to you bad or good.'* Where God has 'spoken' through the design of events, there remains little room for human speech. It's not surprising that, though the material and familial considerations must have had some effect, the narrator makes the kinsmen single out the divine act of providence as the reason for their acceptance of the servant's offer.

## Rebekah Accepts

**Genesis 24:52-61 (ESV)** <sup>52</sup> When Abraham's servant heard their words, he bowed himself to the earth before the Lord. <sup>53</sup> And the servant brought out jewelry of silver and of gold, and garments, and gave them to Rebekah. He also gave to her brother and to her mother costly ornaments. <sup>54</sup> And he and the men who were with him ate and drank, and they spent the night there. When they arose in the morning, he said, "Send me away to my master." <sup>55</sup> Her brother and her mother said, "Let the young woman remain with us a while, at least ten days; after that she may go." <sup>56</sup> But he said to them, "Do not delay me, since the Lord has prospered my way. Send me away that I may go to my master." <sup>57</sup> They said, "Let us call the young woman and ask her." <sup>58</sup> And they called Rebekah and said to her, "Will you go with this man?" She said, "I will go." <sup>59</sup> So they sent away Rebekah their sister and her nurse, and Abraham's servant and his men. <sup>60</sup> And they blessed Rebekah and said to her, "Our sister, may you become thousands of ten thousands, and may your offspring possess the gate of those who hate him!"

<sup>61</sup> *Then Rebekah and her young women arose and rode on the camels and followed the man. Thus the servant took Rebekah and went his way.*

Note again the emphasis on the servant's piety. Only after all this presumably lengthy discussion did the servant relax and enjoy his meal and a well-earned rest. True to form, while we might admire his skillful presentation of Abraham's case, his immediate reaction to the acceptance of the offer is to thank God for their acceptance.

Betrothal was customarily sealed in the ancient Near East by large capital transfers from the bridegroom's family to the bride's family. It appears that the "*costly ornaments*" given to Laban and his mother probably were equivalent to the bride-money. Usually this bride-money was later passed on to the bride by her family when she married as part of her dowry.

However, here Abraham's servant gave Rebekah herself "silver and gold and garments," items that figure frequently in dowry lists. Whether this was a mark of sheer goodwill or he feared that Rebekah's grasping brother would not give her an adequate dowry is not said. Nevertheless, it is unusual and somewhat interesting.

**Question for Discussion:** After the household has accepted the servant's offer, he is abrupt and allows no passage of time before requesting leave. Immediately upon rising the following day, he requests that they begin their journey back to Canaan. Put yourself in the place of Rebekah's mother, father or brother. How would you respond to the servant's request to leave immediately?

**Question for Discussion:** Is the servant demonstrating a lack of sensitivity here? What do you think his motivation was to return so quickly to his master?

The servant fails to convince Laban and his mother of the need for a speedy taking of leave. As a way out, Rebekah is invited to say whether she is prepared to go immediately. Maybe Laban calculated that the attachment to home and respect for her mother's opinion would surely make her ask for a delay. After all, some delay in Rebekah's trip back with the servant would have been entirely appropriate.

Where Rebekah unreservedly answers, "I will go" (*hālak*). She is the "female Abraham" who is challenged with a divine call to leave family and homeland on the testimony of the servant's answered prayer.

## Isaac Meets Rebekah

**Genesis 24:62-67 (ESV)** <sup>62</sup> Now Isaac had returned from Beer-lahai-roi and was dwelling in the Negeb. <sup>63</sup> And Isaac went out to meditate in the field toward evening. And he lifted up his eyes and saw, and behold, there were camels coming. <sup>64</sup> And Rebekah lifted up her eyes, and when she saw Isaac, she dismounted from the camel <sup>65</sup> and said to the servant, "Who is that man, walking in the field to meet us?" The servant said, "It is my master." So she took her veil and covered herself. <sup>66</sup> And the servant told Isaac all the things that he had done. <sup>67</sup> Then Isaac brought her into the tent of Sarah his mother and took Rebekah, and she became his wife, and he loved her. So Isaac was comforted after his mother's death.

These last five verses in chapter 24 read like the climax of a love story on the Hallmark channel. The emotional and human elements at play here as Rebekah is presented to Isaac are compelling and riveting.

So many interesting elements are at play. Would Rebekah find Isaac attractive? Would she find his personality compatible? Would he find her attractive and acceptable as a wife?

With the marriage of Isaac, the story has reached its goal. Abraham's wishes have been carried out, the servant has done his duty, and the divine promises can be further fulfilled. Just as Isaac is now head of Abraham's family, so Rebekah steps into Sarah's shoes and becomes the leading woman in the patriarchal household.

A reading of Genesis chapter 24 might cause one to marvel at God's providence. However, we should not miss the fact that human responsibility was also evident. The servant faithfully carried out his assignment.

- He was loyal to his holy commission to further God's program to bless mankind.
- He trusted God implicitly, looking in prayer to God's leading.
- Covenant loyalty was his predominant motivation.
- He praised God even before his assignment was completed.

**Question for Discussion:** What stands out most to you from Genesis chapter 24? What do you believe the key message is that we can take from this chapter and make application of in our personal lives?

So the choice of a bride for Isaac was God's. The sign confirmed it. Laban recognized it. Rebekah complied with it. Those who do the will of God, prayerfully and obediently, are led by God.

**Proverbs 3:5-6 (ESV)** <sup>5</sup> Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. <sup>6</sup> In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.