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Report on the Rabbinic Dissertation Submitted

by

Barry H. Block

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Ordination

Rebekkah: Portraits in Midrash

This thesis is a collection and close analysis of the extensive midrashic tradition about Rebekkah, which focusses mainly on Genesis 22: 20-24, 24, 25: 19-24, 27: 1-17, 41-46; 28, 1-3 and 35: 8-9. The author's intent is to not only understand how the rabbis viewed Rebekhah as matriarch and Isaac's wife, and the role she played in the biblical narrative, but also to gain insight into the ways in which they departed from the pshat of the biblical text.

Since Rebakkah plays such a primary role in the narratives in which she is found, the author was interested in seeing how the rabbinic interpretation deals with Rebbekah's dominance vis-a-vis Isaac, her role in shaping the outcome of the conflict between her sons and her seeming direct communication with God. This then might shed light upon how the rabbis deal with female biblical characters in general and how their interpretative portraits may serve modern readers in their search for models for their own lives.

The first step in Mr. Block's investigation was a close textural examination of the key biblical passages involving Rebekkah. In so doing, he paid attention to the major thrust of the biblical

material; the key questions about Rebekkah's role and the problems with the biblical material, including textual concerns. After examining the primary biblical material and highlighting the biblical writer's characterization of Rebekkah, the author gathered all the relevant rabbinic texts by utilizing the available verse indices and topical anthologies. The indices directed him to the full range of aggadic compilations, from proto-rabbinic texts like Philo's treatises, and the Book of Jubilees through the medieval midrashic anthologies and the later biblical commentaries. After gathering and studying the midrashic material, it became clear that many of the major midrashic themes regarding Rebekkah were repeated over and over again so that organizing the material according to the midrashic compilations would not be practical. Therefore, the author chose to trace the rabbis' treatment of each of the biblical passages in order. The analysis of the biblical material is summarized at the outset of each chapter.

In Chapter One, the midrashic treatment of the genealogy of Nahor in Genesis 22:20-24 is presented. The rabbis emphasize the connection between Rebekkah and Isaac, since the genealogy follows directly on the Akedah. They are bound together by past events which lay the basis for their future relationship. Chapter Two deals with Genesis Chapter 24 and in it, the author uncovers the rabbis' emphasis upon the reasons why Rebekkah is chosen as Isaac's wife and as matriarch of Israel. The early texts emphasizes God's role in Rebekkah's selection, which is picked up again in the later medieval compilations, while the classic rabbinic texts stress

either Abraham' actions or Rebekkah's qualifications. By selecting Rebekkah, the proper person is in place to insure the continuity of the covenant after Abraham. In interpreting the few verses in Genesis 25:19-24, the rabbis reveal an ambivalence regarding Rebekkah, i.e., whether or not she received direct revelation from God, and the degree to which she plays a dominant role in the story of Jacob and Esau. The same tension is found in their treatment of Genesis 27, in which she plays the major role in the trickery of Isaac. Most of the comments about her are very positive, emphasizing in different ways how Rebekkah carried out the intention of God. The final chapter deals with Rebekkah's death, which is not mentioned in the Bible. Most of the rabbinic material on her death surrounds Genesis 35:8 which actually describes the death of Rebekkah's verse.

Although it is wry difficult to gain a clear understanding of any large thematic collection of aggadic material, the author has handled the material on Rebekkah in a most competent and insightful manner. He has not only represented to the reader major chunks of midrash in a very organized fashion, highlighting key themes and tensions, but also has conclusively demonstrated that basic tensions exist vis-a-vis Rebekkah in the mind of the rabbis. The rabbis extend the biblical portrait of Rebekkah in order to show why she is absolutely fit for her role, wherein she is responsible for the continuity of the Abrahemic covenant. They tell us of her birth, relationship with God, attitude towards her husband and sons, and her death, thereby filling in the nuances of her

character and the importance of her life. Nevertheless, they also struggle with her relationship with God, with her communication with God and the degree to which she personally controls the events in the life of her family. Through all the tensions, however, we see a composite portrait of a strong, decisive personality who is touched by God's presence in her life.

Mr. Block is to be highly commended for his research, analysis and insightful comments on the text material gathered. He demonstrates ability to both analyze text and to integrate diverse material. In addition, he writes with clarity in a complete straightforward manner. To be sure, more could have been done to enhance the rabbinic portrait of Rebakkah, e.g., comparative material from other religious traditions on Rebekkah - Christian and Moslem - might shed light on the rabbis attitudes towards her character and actions. Similarly, had the author raised questions about God's relationship and communication with the other matriarchs as seen through midrashic tradition, it might have set the conclusion he draws regarding Rebekkah against a more extensive backdrop. Nevertheless, this provides us with an excellent angle by which to view the rabbis treatment of an important female biblical figure and to gain insight into another part of their worldview. As a result, he has also whetted our appetites for a taste of how contemporary writers might deal with characters such as Rebekkah.

Respectfully submitted,

Dr. Norman J. Cohen
Professor of Midrash

March 24, 1991

REBEKAH: PORTRAITS IN MIDRASH

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I would like to express my appreciation to my thesis advisor, Dr. Norman J. Cohen. At every stage of this project, from choosing a topic to making final revisions, I have been the beneficiary of his wise counsel. I, of course, am responsible for any shortcomings in this thesis. Any success, however, would have been impossible without Dr. Cohen's assistance.

The research for this thesis was carried out primarily in two libraries, the Klau Library of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in New York and the Hyman Judah Schachtel Library of Congregation Beth Israel in Houston, Texas. I am grateful to the staffs of both libraries. In Houston, I was fortunate to have available to me, not only the collection of the Schachtel Library, but also -- and more importantly, in fact -- the personal library of Rabbi Samuel E. Karff. I could not have carried out the early stages of my research had he not been so generous with his collection. I was also given an early boost by Rabbi David E. Fass, who provided me with an enormous bibliography on Rebekah that he had compiled while doing his own work on the matriarch

Many people are responsible for assisting me in arriving at this special moment in my life, the completion of my rabbinic thesis and the eve of my ordination. I have been nurtured by my parents, sister, grandparents, other

family members, loving friends, the rabbis who have been my mentors, numerous members of the faculties of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Los Angeles and New York, my classmates, and the members of the communities that I have been privileged to serve. Each of them has been, in so many ways, the teachers who have prepared me for the rabbinate.

This thesis is dedicated to the matriarchs in my own family, my grandmothers, Sabina Loewenberg Block and Bertha Alyce Masur Shlenker Segall. The Talmud teaches us that "the legacy of the righteous is their deeds." Sabina Block has devoted her life to building a loving family. Bertha Alyce Segall has expended considerable energy and resources to strengthen the Jewish community of Houston and beyond. Each of my grandmothers has, in her own way, built a legacy through her life. I shall always be enriched by them.

INTRODUCTION

My rabbinic thesis began in the Fall of 1988 at the B'not Mitzvah of twin girls in the Congregation where I was working at the time as a rabbinic intern. After the girls had read from the Torah, chanted their Haftarah, and delivered personal prayers based on the week's portion, the senior rabbi, a middle-aged man whom I know well and respect, and who is not entirely insensitive to feminist thinking, rose to deliver his sermon for the morning. The rabbi began by talking about the extent to which biblical characters can serve as models for modern Jews who seek to live meaningful Jewish lives. He then turned to speak more personally to the girls who had become B'not Mitzvah this morning, and talked about biblical personages after whom they might pattern their own lives. The characters to whom he referred, drawing stirring examples from both biblical narrative and midrash, were the patriarchs of Israel: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

The congregation, including the B'not Mitzvah and their family, received the sermon well. It had indeed been a moving moral charge. But I was disturbed. I wondered to myself, and soon asked the rabbi directly, how he could call upon two young women to pattern their lives after three male biblical characters. The rabbi was dumbfounded. He had never considered the problem; but, at the same time, he knew that I was right. He laughed at himself, noting the gap between his rabbinic education and mine: he had attended a

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion that trained only men for the rabbinate and cantorate, and where he had never heard the word "feminism" uttered. My rabbinic school, despite its being the same institution, and despite its sometimes sluggish progress toward adding women to the faculty and women's issues to the curriculum, is a very different place. I have studied with more women than men in a place where feminist concerns are often discussed.

Nevertheless, the senior rabbi and I shared one significant problem. Neither of us knew nearly as much about the women of the Bible as we knew about the men. Neither he nor I felt that we could have delivered a sermon calling upon the B'not Mitzvah to pattern their Jewish lives after those of Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, and Rachel without spending a significant amount of time studying both biblical narrative and midrash. Neither of us, nor, we suspected, the majority of the rabbis and student rabbis we knew, were sufficiently familiar with the characters of biblical women to say much about them.

My original hope for this thesis, therefore, was to rectify this situation in its entirety. I imagined that I would survey the biblical and rabbinic material on all four matriarchs, and perhaps even write modern midrashim about them. Almost from the outset, however, I realized that such a project was too ambitious for a rabbinic thesis. For the present project, at least, I needed to concentrate on one

matriarch, delving deeply into as much midrashic material about her as I could find.

I selected Rebekah, because her unique participation in the biblical narrative singularly fascinated me. Despite the significance of Sarah, Leah, and Rachel to the stories of their respective generations, there can be no doubt that their husbands play greater roles in the Bible than they do. Contrastively, Rebekah is often the primary actor in the episodes in which she appears, especially when compared to the relatively minor role played by her husband, Isaac. Rebekah is actively involved in the action of Genesis 24, during which she becomes betrothed to Isaac; her husband is almost entirely absent from the scene. She is in contact with God in Genesis 25, receiving the Divine word that Jacob is to be dominant over his older twin, Esau. Moreover, Rebekah is the most potent character in Genesis 27, scheming to assure that her favorite son, Jacob, receives his father's blessing. I wondered how the rabbis would react to this matriarch who so consistently overshadows her husband. I was curious about how midrash would view her communication with God.

I set out, therefore, to find as much midrashic material as possible on the second matriarch. Turning to Hebrew topical indices, primarily Oṣar Ha'agadah,[1] I found

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[1]Moshe David Gross, Oṣar Ha'agadah (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kuk, 1955).

that there frequently is not even a listing for "Rebekah," and I feared that there might not be sufficient midrashic material to warrant a thesis. Nevertheless, some references could be found there, with "Rebekah" listed as a subsections under entries for "Isaac," "Jacob," and "Patriarchs." I was able to glean many more citations from the notes to Louis Ginzberg's Legends of the Jews,[2] and from the notes to David E. Fass's manuscript, "Unbinding Mother Rebekah," which was generously provided to me by the author.[3]

The citations I gathered pointed me in several different directions, ranging from proto-midrashic works of the intertestamental period to medieval biblical commentary, and including exegetic, homiletic, and narrative midrashim, as well as the later midrashic anthologies. By the time I had researched these sources, I had learned of the existence of sufficient rabbinic material on Rebekah to justify a thesis, even if it could not be easily accessed in one place. I had also come to believe that certain ones of my hopes for my thesis would have to be deferred: there was now too much material to allow me to venture further, into examining modern midrash on the matriarch or into writing my own. I did, however, consult modern commentary on the

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[2]Louis Ginzberg, Legends of the Jews, vol. V, tr. Henrietta Szold (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1968).

[3]David E. Fass, "Unbinding Mother Rebekah," unpublished manuscript, 1990.

biblical narratives themselves -- including Robert Alter's The Art of Biblical Narrative,[4] J.P. Fokkelman's Narrative Art in Genesis,[5] and E.A. Speiser's Anchor Bible "Genesis"[6] -- in order to gain a greater understanding of the biblical text before moving forward into close analysis of the midrash.

I read practically all of the material in its original language, and translations of all Hebrew and most Aramaic passages in this work are my own. I did, however, make use of English -- and, in one case, French -- translations where they are available, particularly to pinpoint particular passages that would merit examination. In addition, the English translations of the intertestamental literature and of the Zohar are quoted directly. The New Jewish Version translation of the Bible is used throughout the thesis,[7] unless otherwise noted. The exceptions are those scriptural quotations within midrashic passages which would not be comprehensible unless translated according to the midrashic understanding of them.

Extensive thought was given to the organization of the

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[4]Robert Alter, The Art of Biblical Narrative (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1981).

[5]J.P. Fokkelman, Narrative Art in Genesis (Amsterdam: Van Corcum, Assum, 1975).

[6]E.A. Speiser, Anchor Bible, "Genesis" (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964).

[7]The Holy Scriptures (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1985).

midrashic material. Some consideration was given to ordering the material chronologically, focusing first on the intertestamental period, then on classical rabbinic literature, and finally on the medieval material. The extensive repetition of midrashic strains over time, however, made such an organization impractical. I therefore decided to arrange the material according to the order of the biblical narrative, examining issues as they arise in the biblical text. This organization has the added advantage of allowing the midrashic material to be examined in largely the same order in which it is found in most of the individual midrashic works.

The thesis begins, therefore, with a look at the midrash on the Nahor genealogy in Genesis 22:20-24, where Rebekah's name first occurs. Here, the rabbis attempt to establish deep connections between the future matriarch and her husband-to-be from the very first reference mention of her name. The midrashim, as we shall see, view the genealogy primarily as an announcement of Rebekah's birth, which they believe to be intimately connected to the binding of Isaac, the account of which immediately precedes the genealogy.

Chapter II focuses on Genesis 24, the long narrative beginning with the search for a bride for Isaac and ending with the couple's union. The principal concern of the midrashists, as they confront Genesis 24, is Rebekah's

fitness for her new position as Isaac's wife and as a matriarch of Israel. In the process, the rabbis weigh the relative importance of the roles played by God, Abraham, and Rebekah herself in assuring that the proper match is made.

Next, we turn to examination of the few short verses, Genesis 25:19-24, in which the fact that Isaac and Rebekah can not conceive is announced, there is a prayer for progeny, Rebekah's difficult pregnancy is described, and the matriarch has an encounter with God in which Jacob's future dominance over Esau is revealed to her. It is here that the ambivalence which characterizes the midrashic attitude toward Rebekah becomes most clear. The rabbis are willing neither to see the matriarch as entirely dominant in a situation, nor as totally absent from it. Moreover, the midrashists are both reluctant to view Rebekah as being in direct conversation with God, while being at the same time unwilling to accept that she would be absent when Isaac prays to God on her behalf.

The same midrashic ambivalence characterizes the rabbis' reactions to the extensive portions of Genesis 27 in which Rebekah appears to be dominant. Here, she secures Isaac's blessing for her favorite son, Jacob, and arranges Jacob's escape from Esau's wrath. Again, the midrashists portray her as being in contact with God even when the Bible does not, but still do not allow for a direct conversation between the matriarch and God. Again, the rabbis betray

ambivalence toward Rebekah's dominance, refraining from extensive comment on the portions of the chapter in which her commanding role can not be ignored.

Finally, we turn in Chapter V to exploration of the question of Rebekah's death, which is not mentioned in the biblical text itself. Unlike the biblical authors, the rabbis are not willing to leave the matter of her death unresolved. There is considerable rabbinic material which explains for Rebekah's death, mostly by building on a difficult verse, Genesis 35:8, which describes the death of Rebekah's nurse. Much effort is expended to assure readers that we can be secure in the knowledge that the matriarch has indeed died, been buried, and been mourned.

Each chapter begins with a brief overview of the biblical text itself, providing a background for studying the midrashic material. For the most part, the rabbis strived to tie their comments to the text itself, emphasizing bases in the Bible itself even for theories that seem to stray far from the text's simple meaning. It is likely that the rabbis did not view themselves as creating portraits of Rebekah that were distinct from that of the Bible. Rather, they probably saw themselves as building on what they believed to be hints in the text in order to supply details and subtleties, and to correct potential misunderstandings that one might have after reading the biblical narrative.

Not all of the midrashic portrayals of Rebekah described in this thesis are positive. Occasionally, they even betray misogyny. Nevertheless, my hope is that this thesis will provide the opportunity for others to avoid being in the position in which the senior rabbi I described at the beginning of this introduction found himself. Examining Rebekah through the portraits of her painted by the rabbis allows us the opportunity to create our own stories, listening both to the tradition and to our own experiences, just as the rabbis read the biblical text and, inevitably, responded to the world in which they lived.

CHAPTER I

GENESIS 22:20-24: THE NAHOR GENEALOGY

22 [20]Some time later, Abraham was told,
"Milcah too has borne children to your
brother Nahor: [21]Uz the first born, and Buz
his brother, and Kemuel the father of Aram;
[22]and Chesed, Hazo, Pildash, Jidlaph, and
Bethuel" -- [23]Bethuel being the father of
Rebekah. These eight Milcah bore to Nahor,
Abraham's brother. [24]And his concubine,
whose name was Reumah, also bore children:
Tebah, Gaham, Tahash, and Maacah.

The reader of Bible first encounters the matriarch Rebekah immediately following the story of the binding of Isaac, in this genealogy at the end of Genesis 22. Interestingly, though, the information provided in this genealogy does not at first glance seem to be primarily about Rebekah. Rather, Abraham is informed that his brother has sired sons through his wife, Milcah. Only in the parenthetical comment that follows the revelation to Abraham are we told that one of the sons of Nahor and Milcah, Bethuel, is the father of Rebekah.

The rabbinic literature provides an exploration of three questions about this text. Notably, these three questions might also present themselves as problems to the biblical reader who is unaware of the rabbinic literature.

First, one might ask, "Why do we have this genealogy at all?" Nothing that immediately follows or precedes the genealogy seems to have anything to do with it. We do not again meet Rebekah or any of the others mentioned in the genealogy until chapter 24, and no explanation is provided within the selection itself. To be sure, these verses do not contain the only genealogical comment provided in the

Bible -- and especially in Genesis -- without a particular context. While the biblical reader might be satisfied with an explanation that genealogical concerns were central to the biblical authors, the rabbis were not.

Next, the reader will find the opening words of the text, "some time later," to be rather curious, particularly if one is reading in Hebrew, vayehi aḥarei haddevarim ha'elleh, which might be more literally translated, "And it came to pass after these things." One might ask, "after what particular words or events?" The simple answer to this question would seem to be, "after the events of the binding of Isaac." That response, however, poses more questions than it answers, since it raises the problem of what the genealogy has to do with the binding of Isaac. Indeed, this problem is a central concern of the rabbis who confront this text.

Finally, the reader of Bible must be struck by the word "too" (Hebrew gam) in verse 20. "If Milcah too has borne children," one might wonder, "who has done so in the first place?" Perhaps the simplest answer is that the information provided in verse 24, that Nahor's concubine has borne children, is somehow assumed to be already known. Now, then, Abraham would be told that, in addition to the concubine, "Milcah too has borne children." However, Reumah's giving birth has not been previously recounted, and no other child-bearing is mentioned in verses closely

preceding this selection. Concern over the meaning of the word gam, then, does present itself both to the biblical reader and to the rabbis.

A. Why the Genealogy at All?

As we begin to investigate the rabbinic responses to the three questions defined above, we should not be surprised to find only the medieval commentators troubled by the fact that the genealogy appears at all. While they invariably find justifications, "Why is this here at all?" is a question characteristic of the more critical medieval commentators, while the earlier rabbis are content to accept -- and only then to comment and expand on -- the text that is before them.

Specifically, the question of why the genealogy is provided at all is addressed by Rashi, Ramban, and Ibn Ezra,[8] all of whom answer the question in essentially the same manner. The commentators turn our attention to the parenthetical remark which begins verse 23, uvetu'el yalad 'et-rivqah, "Bethuel being the father of Rebekah," or literally, "Bethuel sired Rebekah." These words, the commentators tell us, are the key to understanding the entire genealogy. Rashi comments, "All this genealogy is

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[8]Rashi to Genesis 22:23; Ramban to Genesis 22:23; Ibn Ezra to Genesis 22:23, all in Miqra'ot Gedolot (Jerusalem: Eshkol, 1976). All references to the biblical commentaries of Rashi, Ramban, Ibn Ezra, and Sforno are from this text.

told only for the sake of this verse,"[9] and the other commentators remark similarly. In other words, since Rebekah is the only personnage mentioned in the genealogy who gains prominence later, the commentators argue that this text appears to provide us with a familial framework in which to place the matriarch, Rebekah.

Moreover, the commentators might be arguing quite specifically that the purpose of this genealogical passage is to announce the <u>birth</u> of Rebekah. It may well be that they are reading the Hebrew words literally, "And Bethuel sired Rebekah." This reading would announce that Rebekah has been born, rather than simply providing parenthetical information to identify Bethuel, as the New Jewish Version renders, "Bethuel being the father of Rebekah." If the commentators are indeed reading verse 23a as informing us of Rebekah's verse, their argument about the entire genealogy would not merely be that it appears to provide us with a familial framework in which to place Rebekah, but specifically that the entire genealogy appears as an opportunity to announce Rebekah's birth, which is not otherwise recounted, and therefore intimates her future importance.

In any case, the medieval commentator's explanation of the genealogy of Genesis 22 is incomplete. While they do

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[9]Translations of rabbinic texts, unless otherwise noted, are those of the present author.

tell us why this text exists; they do not provide us with an understanding of why it appears where it does, immediately following the story of the binding of Issac and preceding the account of Sarah's death and burial, a full chapter prior to our first real encounter with Rebekah herself.

B. Vayehi aḥarei haddevarim ha'elleh

The placement of the genealogy is a significant aspect of the second concern, the meaning of the words vayehi aḥarei haddevarim ha'elleh. Indeed, the immediate reaction of the biblical reader who asks, "After what things?" must be to wonder what connection might exist between this genealogy and the story of the binding of Isaac, which even begins with the same words. For the rabbis, the words vayehi aḥarei haddevarim ha'elleh necessarily connect a passage to that which precedes it. Therefore, they do not ask, "Does this have anything to do with the binding of Isaac?" but rather, "What does this have to do with the binding of Isaac?"

Two answers to this question are found in Genesis Rabbah. First, we are told that Abraham received the news of Rebekah's birth as comforting words after the distressing events of the ʿaqeidah: "While he was yet on Mr. Moriah, he received the good tidings that his son's partner was born."[10] Subsequently, we are told that Abraham is told the

[10]Genesis Rabbah 57.1.

news of Rebekah's birth in order to prevent him from marrying Isaac to a Canaanite woman, an action he had resolved to take after realizing that Isaac would have died childless had he indeed been sacrificed when he was bound.[11]

While the two explanations are quite different from one another, I would argue that the differences between them are not central to our purpose, for the divergence centers around differing interpretations of the binding of Isaac, not on different understandings of the revelation related to Rebekah. In the first explanation, the <u>ʿaqeidah</u> is viewed as an event that primarily affects Abraham: he is to be comforted in its aftermath. In the second explanation, it is Isaac who is central to the <u>ʿaqeidah</u>: he would have died childless had he indeed been sacrificed.

Four striking similarities between the two explanations, on the other hand, do provide us with significant insights. First, both explanations are built on the assumption that the function of Genesis 22:20-24 is to announce the birth of Rebekah, which is evident from the phrase repeated in both explanations, "that his son's partner [not "his brother's children"!] was born." Indeed, it would seem that it is this assumption which prevents earlier rabbis from asking the question posed by the medieval commentators that is discussed above, namely, "Why

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[11]Genesis Rabbah 57.2. See also Rashi to Genesis 22:20 and Midrash Aggadah to Genesis 22:20 in this regard.

does this genealogy appear at all?" Second, both explanations assert -- or announce an assumption by using the words "his son's partner" to refer to Rebekah -- that the selection of Rebekah as Isaac's wife is part of the revelation to Abraham at the end of Genesis 22. This is remarkable in light of the fact that the biblical text of Genesis 24, which will be explored in the next chapter, does not begin with Abraham's sending his servant out to find Rebekah, but merely with his sending the servant to find a wife for Isaac from among his kin. Third, both explanations view Isaac's marriage to Rebekah as significant primarily for Abraham, rather than for Isaac (or, for that matter, for Rebekah). According to the first text, it is Abraham, not Isaac, who is comforted after the ʿaqeidah by the knowledge that Isaac's mate, namely Rebekah, has been born. According to the second, it is Abraham, not Isaac, who is concerned that Isaac might have died childless. Finally, we turn to the most basic similarity between the two explanations: both focus on the connection of Genesis 22:20-24 to the ʿaqeidah. One has the sense that the rabbis, in the face of near death, are emphasizing the continuity of life in the Abraham family by unanimously viewing the revelation of Rebekah's birth as a response to the binding of Isaac.

C. Milcah too

Perhaps the most obvious textual problem in Genesis 22:20-24 is the appearance of the word gam, "too," without an apparent antecedent. Two women are offered by the rabbis as implied antecedants: Reumah, Nahor's concubine, and the matriarch Sarah. One other explanation does not provide a woman as the antecedent, but rather assumes that the word gam refers to Nahor and is meant to compare him to Abraham.

The response that Reumah is referred to by the word gam is unique to Sforno,[12] who asserts his theory without explanation or purported moral and appears to be simply providing what he believes to be the simple meaning of the text. Indeed, Sforno's explanation may well be the only reasonable one for the simple meaning, especially if one assumes that the word "too" applies to the entire sentence in which it appears: "Milcah too has borne children to your brother Nahor." The only other woman who is said to bear children to Nahor is, after all, Reumah. The problem remains, of course, that Reumah is not mentioned until verse 24, which renders the word "too" unclear in verse 20.

Much more interesting for our purposes are the parallels that are drawn between Milcah and Sarah or, alternatively, between Nahor and Abraham. The earliest text that proposes such a parallel is Genesis Rabbah, which explains:

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[12]Sforno to Genesis 22:20.

> Just as this one had eight children by his wives and four by his concubines, so did this one have eight children by his wife and four by his concubine.[13]

Two medieval texts, however, draw the parallel between the mothers, asserting that Milcah, like Sarah, was a barren woman who conceived in old age.[14] Midrash Haggadol goes even further, arguing that "when Sarah our mother was visited, all the barren women were visited, and even [Milcah] was visited with them."

The most striking aspect of these parallels, that of Abraham and Nahor taken together with that of Sarah and Milcah, is the implied equation of Isaac and Rebekah. Not only are future husband and wife first cousins once removed, Isaac's parents and Rebekah's grandparents share similar circumstances beyond family relationship. Furthermore, according to the two medieval texts cited above, Rebekah's father and Isaac were conceived under similar circumstances.[15] Moreover, a further implication is that the barrenness that is later to touch Isaac and Rebekah themselves is a legacy from the families of origin of both. A specific implication of the Midrash Haggadol passage is that Isaac and Rebekah are linked from the very beginning: Rebekah's very existence is dependant on God's favor toward

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[13]Genesis Rabbah 57.2.

[14]Midrash Haggadol to Genesis 22:20 and Ramban to Genesis 22:20.

[15]Ibid.

Abraham and Sarah, since Bethuel was born, and therefore Rebekah was made possible, as a result of the act of grace that produced Isaac.

D. Summary

Rebekah's birth is not mentioned in the Bible. Indeed, we do not meet the second matriarch in person until we encounter her at the well in Genesis 24. We do, however, hear her name when we learn about her family in the genealogy found in Genesis 22:20-24. In fact, Rebekah is only mentioned there in a parenthetical note. The rabbis, however, make much of this first utterance of the matriarch's name, finding this to be the announcement of her birth, unanimously positing connections of the revelation of her birth to the binding of Isaac even while differing as to the exact nature of those connections, and linking Isaac's parents to Rebekah's grandparents through a variety of similarities that go beyond the already compelling fact that Abraham and Nahor are brothers.

Despite a few dissenting opinions and divergences that center around ancillary matters, there is little variety and certainly no sharp disagreements among the portraits painted by rabbinic responses to Genesis 22:20-24. There is, rather, a clear theme. Isaac and Rebekah are bound to one another not only in their future, but also in their past. The events of their own lives, and even the events of their

parents' and grandparents' lives, are linked in any number of ways. The rabbis seem to be telling us that we have moved from the binding of Isaac at the altar to the binding of Isaac to Rebekah. And they are indeed bound, at this present moment immediately following the ʿageidah, in the past through the linkage of their families, and in the future through the impending marriage which has now been announced.

CHAPTER II

GENESIS 24: THE MATCH

24 [1]Abraham was now old, advanced in years,
and the LORD had blessed Abraham in all
things. [2]And Abraham said to the senior
servant of his household, who had charge of
all that he owned, "Put your hand under my
thigh [3]and I will make you swear by the LORD,
the God of heaven and the God of the earth,
that you will not take a wife for my son from
the daughters of the Canaanites among whom I
dwell, [4]but will go to the land of my birth
and get a wife for my son Isaac." [5]And the
servant said to him, What if the woman does
not consent to follow me to this land, shall
I then take your son back to the land from
which you came? [6]Abraham answered him, "On
no account must you take my son back there!
[7]The LORD, the God of heaven, who took me
from my father's house and from my native
land, who promised me on oath, saying, 'I
will assign this land to your offspring' --
He will send His angel before you, and you
will get a wife for my son from there. [8]And
if the woman does not consent to follow you,
you shall then be clear of this oath to me;
but do not take my son back there." [9]So the
servant put his hand under the thigh of his
master Abraham and swore to him as bidden.

[10]Then the servant took ten of his master's
camels and set out, taking with him all the
bounty of his master; and he made his way to
Aram-naharaim, to the city of Nahor. [11]He
made the camels kneel down by the well
outside the city, at evening time, the time
when women come out to draw water. [12]And he
said, "O LORD, God of my master Abraham,
grant me good fortune this day, and deal
graciously with my master Abraham. [13]Here I
stand by the spring as the daughters of the
townsmen come out to draw water; [14]let the
maiden to whom I say, 'Please, lower your jar
that I may drink,' and who replies, 'Drink,
and I will also water your camels' -- let her
be the one whom You have decreed for Your
servant Isaac. Thereby shall I know that You
have dealt graciously with my master."

[15]He had scarcely finished speaking, when
Rebekah, who was born to Bethuel, the son of
Milcah the wife of Abraham's brother Nahor,
came out with her jar on her shoulder. [16]The
maiden was very beautiful, a virgin whom no
man had known. She went down to the spring,
filled her jar, and came up. [17]The servant

ran toward her and said, "Please, let me sip
a little water from your jar." [18]"Drink, my
lord," she said, and she quickly lowered her
jar upon her hand and let him drink. [19]When
she had let him drink his fill, she said, "I
will also draw for your camels, until they
finish drinking." [20]Quickly emptying her jar
into the trough, she ran back to the well to
draw, and she drew for all his camels.
[21]The man, meanwhile, stood gazing at her,
silently wondering whether the LORD had made
his errand successful or not. When the
camels had finished drinking, the man took a
gold nose-ring weighing a half-shekel, and
two gold bands for her arms, ten shekels in
weight. [23]"Pray tell me," he said, "whose
daughter are you? Is there room in your
father's house for us to spend th night?"
[24]She replied, "I am the daughter of Bethuel
the son of Milcah, whom she bore to Nahor."
[25]And she went on, "There is plenty of straw
and feed at home, and also room to spend the
night." [26]The man bowed low in homage to the
LORD [27]and said, "Blessed be the LORD, the
God of my master Abraham, who has not
withheld His steadfast faithfulness from my
master. For I have been guided on my errand
by the LORD, to the house of my master's
kinsmen."
[28]The maiden ran and told all this to her
mother's household. [29]Now Rebekah had a
brother whose name was Laban. Laban ran out
to the man at the spring -- [30]when he saw the
nose-ring and the bands on his sister's arms,
and when he heard his sister Rebekah say,
"Thus the man spoke to me." He went up to
the man, who was still standing beside the
camels at the spring. [31]"Come in, O blessed
of the LORD," he said, "why do you remain
outisde, when I have made ready the house and
a place for the camels?" [32]So the man
entered the house, and the camels were
unloaded. The camels were given straw and
feed, and water was brought to bathe his feet
and the feet of the men with him. [33]But when
food was set before him, he said, "I will not
eat until I have told my tale." He said,
"Speak, then."
[34]"I am Abraham's servant," he began.
[35]"The LORD has greatly blessed my master,
and he has become rich: He has given him
sheep and cattle, silver and gold, male an

female slaves, camels and asses. [36]And
Sarah, my master's wife, bore my master a son
in her old age, and he has assigned to him
everything he owns. [37]Now my master made me
swear, saying, 'You shall not get a wife for
my son from the daughters of the Canaanites
in whose land I dwell; [38]but you shall go to
my father's house, to my kindred, and get a
wife for my son.' [39]And I said to my master,
'What if the woman does not follow me?' [40]He
replied to me, 'The LORD, whose ways I have
followed, will send His angel with you and
make your errand successful; and you will get
a wife for my son from my kindred, from my
father's house. [41]Thus only shall you be
freed from my adjuration: if when you come
to my kindred, they refuse you -- only then
shall you be freed from my adjuration.'
[42]"I came today to the spring, and I said:
O LORD, God of my master Abraham, if You
would indeed grant success to the errand on
which I am engaged! [43]As I stand by the
spring of water, let the young woman who
comes out to draw and to whom I say, 'Please,
let me drink a little water from your jar,'
[44]and who answers, 'You may drink, and I will
also draw for your camels' -- let her be the
wife whom the LORD has decreed for my
master's son.' [45]I had scarcely finished
praying in my heart, when Rebekah came out
with her jar on her shoulder, and went down
to the spring and drew. And I said to her,
'Please give me a drink.' [46]She quickly
lowered her jar and said, 'Drink, and I will
also water your camels.' So I drank, and she
also watered the camels. [47]I inquired of
her, 'Whose daughter are you?' And she said,
'The daughter of Bethuel, son of Nahor, whom
Milcah bore to him,' And I put the ring on
her nose and the bands on her arms. [48]Then I
bowed low in homage to the LORD and blessed
the LORD, the God of my master Abraham, who
led me on the right way to get the daughter
of my master's brother for his son. [49]And
now, if you mean to treat my master with true
kindness, tell me; and if not, tell me also,
that I may turn right or left."
[50]Then Laban and Bethuel answered, "The
matter was decreed by the LORD; we cannot
speak to you bad or good. [51]Here is Rebekah
before you; take her and go, and let her be a
wife to your master's son, as the LORD has

spoken." [52]When Abraham's servant heard
their words, he bowed low to the ground
before the LORD. [53]The servant brought out
objects of silver and gold, and garments, and
gave them to Rebekah; and he gave presents to
her brother and her mother. [54]Then he and
the men with him ate and drank, and they
spent the night. When they arose next
morning, he said, "Give me leave to go to my
master." [55]But her brother and her mother
said, "Let the maiden remain with us some ten
days; then you may go." [56]He said to them,
"Do not delay me, now that the LORD has made
my errand successful. Give me leave that I
may go to my master." [57]And they said, "Let
us call the girl and ask for her reply."
[58]They called Rebekah and said to her, "Will
you go with this man?" And she said, "I
will." [59]So they sent off their sister
Rebekah and her nurse along with Abraham's
servant and his men. [60]And they blessed
Rebekah and said to her,

"O sister!
May you grow
Into thousands of myriads;
May your offspring seize
The gates of their foes."

[61]Then Rebekah and her maids arose, mounted
the camels, and followed the man. So the
servant took Rebekah and went his way.

[62]Isaac had just come back from the
vicinity of Beer-lahai-roi, for he was
settled in the region of the Negeb. [63]And
Isaac went out walking in the field toward
evening and, looking up, he saw camels
approaching. [64]Raising her eyes, Rebekah saw
Isaac. She alighted from the camel [65]and
said to the servant, "Who is that man walking
in the field toward us?" And the servant
said, "That is my master." So she took her
veil and covered herself. [66]The servant told
Isaac all the things that he had done.
[67]Isaac then brought her into the tent of his
mother Sarah, and he took Rebekah as his
wife. Isaac loved her, and thus found
comfort after his mother's death.

A. The Biblical Narrative

"The present narrative," writes Ephraim Speiser of Genesis 24, "provides a restful interlude between the story of Abraham's life, which is just coming to a close, and the history of Jacob that will soon unfold."[16] Indeed, the Bible offers almost no "story of Isaac," per se. The second patriarch is discussed almost exclusively in the context of being Abraham's son or Jacob's (and Esau's) father. One might have expected the story of Isaac's marriage to be an exception. However, the events of this passage, in which Isaac's consort is secured, take place almost entirely without Isaac's involvement. The second patriarch, frequently impotent, is nearly invisible.[17] Speiser is correct: we cannot rightly call this the "Story of Isaac," but merely an interlude between the epics of Abraham and Jacob.

The interlude does, however, serve an important function. "Continuity," Speiser writes, "is essential."[18] Abraham must assure the proper perpetuation of his covenant with God. The key elements in that continuity are elucidated in the two conditions that Abraham places on his

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[16]Speiser, Anchor Bible, p. 182.

[17]Genesis 26 is perhaps an exception. One may argue, however, that the narrative there is little more than a retelling of the Abraham-Sarah wife-sister stories with the names changed.

[18]Speiser, Anchor Bible, p. 182.

servant in verses 3 and 6:

> (1) Isaac must not take a wife from among the Canaanites, for that would affect the purity of the line through which God's covenant is to be implemented; and (2) he is not to be repatriated to Mesopotamia, for the covenant is bound up with the Promised Land.[19]

Rebekah is chosen, therefore, primarily because she is a member of the Nahor clan; and she can be accepted because she is willing to return to the Land with Abraham's servant.

The scene which seems to drive the narrative, on the other hand, is not so much the one that takes place between Abraham and his servant in verses 1-9, but rather the one that transpires between the servant and Rebekah at the well in verses 15-27. There, Robert Alter tells us, we see the enactment of an archetypal betrothal scene, complete with two symbols common to a number of biblical betrothal scenes: the journey and the well. It is not, however, the similarity of this biblical bride-finding to others that is telling, but rather it is the extent to which the narrative of Genesis 24 differs from those other tales that signals the key elements of the story. We cannot help but notice that the journey here is made, not by Isaac, but by his father's servant. Moreover, here and only here, the girl herself, Rebekah, draws the water at the well.[20]

Indeed, Rebekah is totally dominant in this scene,

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[19]Ibid., p. 183.

[20]Alter, Biblical Narrative, pp. 52-3.

which the narrator makes evident by presenting her in "a continuous whirl of purposeful activity" at the well. If we had any doubt about who the key player is, we need only consider Alter's accounting: "In four short verses (Gen 24:16, 18-20) she is the subject of eleven verbs of action and one of speech."[21] Isaac's impotence and Rebekah's power, which will mark their life together, stand in bold contrast to one another at this moment of their betrothal.

We have already noted that Rebekah's fitness for her position as Isaac's wife, and therefore as a matriarch of Israel, is established by her lineage and by her willingness to return to the Land. Her appropriateness for her position is confirmed at the well. As Alter writes,

> She is immediately identified ([in] verse 16) with unconventional explicitness as the suitable bride for both her beauty and her unimpeachable virginity. Then in her actions and speech we see her energy, her considerable courtesy, her sense of quiet self-possession.[22]

As we shall see, Rebekah's fitness to be a matriarch of Israel is the principal interest of the rabbis' approach to Genesis 24. Here we see that her appropriateness to her position is also a concern of the biblical narrative itself.

What the rabbis will not address, but rather take for granted, is the overall style of Genesis 24. We would be remiss, however, if we did not pause to consider, with

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[21] Ibid., pp. 53-4.

[22] Ibid., p. 54.

Alter, the unique literary style of this narrative:

> The most striking feature of this version of the [betrothal] type-scene is its slow, stately progress, an effect achieved by the extensive use of dialogue, by a specification of detail beyond the norm of biblical narrative, and, above all, by a very elaborate use of the device of verbatim repitition, which is a standard resource of the biblical writers. These strategies of retardation are important because in this particular instance the betrothal is conceived ceremoniously as a formal treaty between two branches of the Nahor clan, . .[23]

Perhaps, for an audience of the biblical period, the chief function of Genesis 24 is an act of treaty-making. Even for the reader who is chiefly interested in the selection of a matriarch, however, the slow, detailed pace of the narrative is instructive. The continuation of the Abraham family and its covenant with God is essential. No detail is spared in the explanation of how the appropriate match is secured. Yes, Genesis 24 is an interlude between the larger narratives of Abraham and Jacob; but without Genesis 24, the two could not be linked. The reader of bible, the authors of midrash among them, must be assured that the proper connection has been made.

B. Midrashic Responses to Genesis 24

The central concern of the Midrash to Genesis 24 is Rebekah's fitness for her position as a matriarch of Israel. Perhaps, though, the case is overdrawn when we call this a

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[23] Ibid., p. 53. The emphasis appears in the original.

"concern" of midrash, since the possibility that Rebekah is not fit is nowhere considered. What we do find, on the other hand, is that different strains of midrash emphasize different justifications for Rebekah's appropriateness to her position.

Often, the midrash demonstrates the extent to which Rebekah is God's choice, the object of divine selection. Other texts emphasize the importance of Rebekah's lineage as the determining factor. Still others focus on the matriarch's own virtues: her actions at the well, her virginity, her virtue in the face of idolatrous surroundings, her wisdom, and her worthiness to serve as the successor to her mother-in-law Sarah.

In every case, the midrash argues that Rebekah's worthiness is crystal clear from the biblical text itself. Often, as we shall see, the authors of midrash explicate or extend biblical verses in order to make their points. Nevertheless, in the minds of the midrashic authors, the varied answers to the question, "What makes Rebekah appropriate to her position as mother of Israel," are to be found in Genesis 24 itself.

1. Divine Selection of Rebekah

We ought not be surprised to find that the rabbis, eager to demonstrate God's omnipotence, would argue that God ultimately selected Rebekah as Isaac's wife and, therefore,

as a matriarch in Israel. Indeed, the rabbis argue for Divine selection of Rebekah, both generally -- insisting that Rebekah was pre-selected by God -- and specifically -- demonstrating that God intervened in the drama of Genesis 24 to facilitate the match.

Interestingly, it is a statement by two biblical pagans, Laban and Bethuel, that occasions a rabbinic declaration that God is the ultimate matchmaker of Rebekah and Isaac. Indeed, Laban's and Bethuel's proclamation in verse 50, meYHVH yasa) haddavar, "'The matter was decreed by the LORD,'" is taken by Rav to be the chief pentateuchal evidence for the veracity of a rabbinic dictum that God selects wives for all men, meYHVH)ishah le)ish.[24] This notion extends beyond the amoraic period, as essentially the same text is repeated centuries later in Midrash Aggadah.[25]

Moreover, a similar point is made by the medieval commentator Sforno, though he bases his argument on verses 44-45, rather than verse 50. Here, Abraham's servant,[26] speaking to Rebekah's family, tells of the plan he implemented to identify the woman "'whom the LORD has

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[24]B.T., Moed Katan 18b.

[25]Midrash Aggadah to Genesis 24:50.

[26]Throughout rabbinic literature, the servant who is a key player in Genesis 24, is called "Eliezer." While the servant is not named in Genesis 24, Genesis 15:2 puts these words in Abraham's mouth: "'[T]he one in charge of my houehold is Dammesek Eliezer.'" The rabbis apparently assume that "the senior servant of his household" (Gen. 24:2) is this same Eliezer.

decreed for my master's son.'" Rebekah appeared and fulfilled his prophecy, the servant declares, when "'I had scarcely finished praying in my heart.'" This demonstrates, says Sforno, the work of a bat qol, a heavenly voice, that declares, bat ploniy lefloniy, "the daughter of this one is for that one."[27]

As we begin to examine midrashic texts which define specific action in which Rebekah was pre-selected by God, we find that Pirqei deRabbi Eliezer argues that she was identified as Isaac's wife from the womb. Here, the rabbis ask, "[How can it be] that a daughter of kings,[28] who never went out to draw water her whole life, went out to draw water at that very hour, and a young woman who did not know the man agreed to be coupled with Isaac?" This impossible scenario came to pass, we are told, because "she was intended for him from her mother's womb."[29] This notion, that Rebekah was selected in utero, is carried through from the eighth century Pirqei deRabbi Eliezer into later writings, for it appears again in the medieval Genesis Rabbati.[30]

Most of the rabbinic writings that emphasize God's

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[27]Sforno to Genesis 24:44-5.

[28]The identification of Bethuel and Laban as part of a royal dynasty is common in the rabbinic literature.

[29]Pirqei deRabbi Eliezer, Chapter 16.

[30]Genesis Rabbati, Chapter 59.

intervention in the selection of Rebekah focus on specific aspects of the Genesis 24 narrative. God is said to send specific angels with Abraham's servant to expedite the match-making, to quicken the servant's journey by shortening the road, to facilitate the encounter between Rebekah and the servant at the well, to assist Rebekah's own actions at the well, and to associate Rebekah with Isaac by causing the event at the well to coincide with minḥah, the prayer associated with Isaac.

God's presence in the events of Genesis 24 is, in fact, emphasized in the biblical narrative itself, beginning with Abraham's declaration to the servant in verse 7: "'[God] will send His angel before you.'" The effect of Abraham's statement is extended by the rabbis, beginning early with Genesis Rabbah, and extended later in Yalqut Shimoni, Leqaḥ Tov, and Midrash Haggadol. All of these texts argue that God sent not one, but two, angels, "one to bring out Rebekah and one to escort Eliezer."[31] God's hand, then, is clearly said to be at work in Genesis 24, since angels sent by God are the agents causing Rebekah and the servant to come together at the well.

The nature of the servant's journey from the Promised Land to the place of Abraham's birth, a trip from Canaan to Mesopotamia which might have been a very long and arduous

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[31]Genesis Rabbah 59.14; Yalqut Shimoni I, 107; Leqaḥ Tov to Genesis 24:7 and Midrash Haggadol to Genesis 24:7.

one, is the subject of a good deal of midrashic comment. One pre-rabbinic text, Josephus' Antiquities, insists that the expedition was indeed difficult:

> The servant's journey was prolonged, because travel is rendered difficult in Mesopotamia, in winter by the depth of mud, and in summer through the drought; moreover, the country is infested by bands of brigands whom travellers could not escape without taking necessary precautions. But at length he reached the city of Harran . . .[32]

The rabbis, however, are unanimous in positing a description of the servant's journey that diverges significantly from that of Josephus, despite the fact that they were drawing on the same information: without divine assistance, the journey from Canaan to Mesopotamia would have been a long one. Therefore, from amoraic times through the medieval period, a number of texts can be found to assert that the earth (sometimes, the road) jumped to facilitate the servant's trip. All of these texts are based on Genesis 24:42, in which the servant declares, "'I came today to the spring . . .'" Feeling the need to provide a reason for what they perceived to be the seemingly superfluous word hayyom, "today," the rabbis insist that the biblical text is meant to imply that Eliezer both set out and arrived on the same day.[33] Thus, the rabbinic texts imply, did God

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[32]Josephus, Antiquities I:XVI,1.

[33]B.T. Sanhedrin 95a; Tanhuma Buber I, 150; Pirqei deRabbi Eliezer, Chapter 16; Yalqut Shimoni I, 107,109; Midrash Haggadol to Genesis 24:42.

facilitate the servant's meeting Rebekah at the well by quickening the servant's trip there.

One medieval text takes this same point further. Genesis Rabbati asks how Eliezer knew that Abraham's great neice had been designated to be Isaac's wife. The answer, the text tells us, is implied in the servant's words in verse 27, "'For I have been guided on my errand (badderekh) by the LORD, to the house of my master's kinsmen.'" Drawing on the earlier midrash about the road (derekh) that jumped, Genesis Rabbati argues that verse 27 means to inform the reader that the road jumped specifically in such a way as to lead Eliezer directly to Abraham's family, to Rebekah.[34]

The central event that brings Rebekah and the servant together, and the most dramatic moment of the Genesis 24 narrative, is the servant's request in verses 12-14 and its fulfillment in verses 15-20. Although the servant addresses his request to God, the biblical text does not indicate any specific divine action in bringing the prayer to fruition. Josephus, writing before the rabbis, seems to have no problem with God's limited role, even asserting that the prayer itself had a narrow intent. For Josephus, the servant had been specifically sent to find Rebekah, and the events at the well serve only to identify the woman who had already been selected.[35]

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[34]Genesis Rabbati, Chapter 59.

[35]Josephus, Antiquities I:XVI,1

The rabbis, on the other hand, find God's hand at every turn. Striving to bolster their views of divine omnipotence, they find evidence of God's power in the events at the well. It is God, in the rabbinic writings, who gets the primary credit for bringing Abraham's servant and his son's intended together.

In order to make their point, the rabbis at time seem to need to de-emphasize the role of the human beings involved. The most striking exmaple of this need is one point on which the rabbis are nearly unanimous: their contention that the servant's request was an inappropriate one. Perhaps the rabbis feared that their contemporaries would attempt such a plan and meet with disaster as a result. Indeed, in a passage in the Babylonian Talmud, the rabbis worry that a woman who was "lame, or even blind" might have come out and given water to the servant and his camels. Genesis Rabbah and subsequent texts wonder what might have prevented a "maid-servant" from meeting the conditions laid out in verses 12-14. These terrible [sic] fates did not befall Eliezer, we are told, because God answered him favorably despite his having asked inappropriately. God, not the servant, is to receive credit for the success of the plan at the well.[36]

I called the rabbis "nearly" and not entirely unanimous

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[36]B.T. Ta'anit 4a; Genesis Rabbah 60.3; Yalqut Shimoni I, 107; Leqah Tov to Genesis 24:13; Midrash Aggadah to Genesis 24:14; Rashi to Genesis 24:14.

on this point, because Ibn Ezra finds this particular rabbinic line of reasoning to be ridiculous:

> Many are surprised, saying that [the servant] did not ask appropriately. I do not know why, for if it had been another woman who had given him and his camels to drink and he had found that she was from a different family, he would have abandoned her and not lost anything, for he said, "'Whose daughter are you?'" [verse 23] Its meaning is that he already said [this] to her before he gave her anything. He said: "I will ask her and I will put on the ring." And the general meaning of the [request] is that he prayed to God that He would distinguish her [for him] from his master's family, and the proof [would be] that she would behave in a moral fashion like a noble daughter. And God heard his prayer.[37]

Ibn Ezra assumes that the servant already knows that Isaac's wife is to come from Abraham's family. In any case, Ibn Ezra has a higher regard for the servant than do the other midrashic authors and commentators. Nevertheless, even for Ibn Ezra, God does have a significant role in fulfilling the servant's request. For Ibn Ezra, the servant must still find out which member of Abraham's family is designated for Isaac, and he asks God to show him. God obliges and brings Rebekah to the well.

One particular aspect of the answer to the servant's plea that interests some medieval rabbis is the dispatch with which it comes. The Bible tells us that Rebekah appears at the well when "[h]e had scarcely finished speaking." The sense of the immediacy with which Rebekah

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[37]Ibn Ezra to Genesis 24:14.

arrived is even clearer in the Hebrew text, *vayehiy-hu' terem killah ledabber*, literally, "And it was when he was yet in the process of finishing to speak . . ." Several medieval midrashic texts emphasize that God's hand is particularly evident from the fact that the servant's prayer was answered even before he finished speaking it.[38]

One detail of the events at the well that receives little notice in the rabbinic literature is its timing. Indeed, the text itself gives us little reason to question or assign special significance to the note in verse 11 that the servant arrives at the well and makes his request of God "at evening time." The Zohar, on the other hand, does see meaning in this timing. We are reminded that rabbinic tradition views Isaac as the founder of the late afternoon prayer, *minhah*, and are told that the meeting at the well took place at the exact time that Isaac went out to pray. This coincidence in time is, for the Zohar, evidence of "the work of Divine Wisdom" in bringing Rebekah together with the servant.[39]

The timing of the events at the well is not the only evidence offered by the Zohar for God's hand in making the match. This time, the authors of the Zohar focus on a single word in verse 15, *yose't*, "she came out." The

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[38]Midrash Haggadol to Genesis 24:15; Yalqut Shimoni I, 108; Leqah Tov to Genesis 24:15.

[39]Zohar I,132a.

authors of the Zohar wonder why the Bible says that Rebekah "came out" to the well, rather than simply saying that she ba'ah, "came" there. The aggadah that this text builds on the word yose't comes to tell us that the people of that place were not worthy.[40] God, we are told, specifically brought Rebekah out, causing her to stand out "as an exception to them."[41]

Rebekah's arrival at the well, then, is viewed by the rabbis as a divine act. On the other hand, as we shall see below,[42] the credit for what she does there is generally reserved for Rebekah herself. Nevertheless, one midrashic explanation, introduced early in Genesis Rabbah but cited by Rashi much later, sees the divine hand at work in Rebekah's first act of water-drawing. God, we are told, caused the water in the well to come up to Rebekah on its own. The authors of Genesis Rabbah, it seems, were troubled by the fact that, in verse 16, the text says merely that she "filled her jar," not that she lowered it or drew the water. This absence of lowering or filling action stands in juxtaposition to verses 18, 19, and 20, in which Rebekah's actions with her jar are specified. Rashi, however, asks a different question. He wonders why "[t]he servant ran

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[40]Rabbinic tradition throughout considers the people of the place which Abraham had left, especially including Bethuel and Laban, to be idolators.

[41]Zohar I,132a.

[42]See pp. 39-42.

toward her" in verse 17, since he did not yet know that she was his master's son's intended. Drawing on the text from Genesis Rabbah, Rashi tells us that the servant was so anxious to confront Rebekah because "he saw that the water came up to meet her," since he had received a divine sign that this was the woman for whom he was searching.[43]

The rabbis, then, set forth a clear view, in opposition to that of Josephus, that God played a significant role in selecting Rebekah as Isaac's wife and in bringing her together with the servant at the well. From this view, we may infer a strong rabbinic suggestion that Rebekah is appropriate to her role as a matriarch of Israel, for God is the primary agent securing her position. As we shall see, the notion that God secures Rebekah's selection does not necessarily exclude other justifications for her selection or evidence of her fitness to become a matriarch. Certainly, though, the rabbis would not accept any argument that other influences take precedence or had operated absent the hand of God. God, in the mind of the rabbis, selected Rebekah for her role and assured her ascendancy to it.

2. The Role of Rebekah's familial relationship to Abraham

While God is not entirely absent from the text of Genesis 24 itself, divine intervention can certainly not be said to be the Bible's own primary explanation for the

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[43]Genesis Rabbah 60.6; Rashi to Genesis 24:17.

selection of Rebekah. Rather, from the beginning of the chapter, the key is that Isaac's wife must come from Abraham's birthplace. Moreover, although Abraham does not specify in his initial instructions that the servant must select a bride for Isaac from among his own family members, that is how the servant interprets his master's instructions. In verse 40, for example, telling Rebekah's family about his instructions from Abraham, Eliezer quotes his master as saying, "'"You will get a wife for my son from my kindred, from my father's house."'" Further evidence for the primacy of Rebekah's family link to Abraham as a key factor to her selection, and for the argument that family connection and Divine intervention are not mutually exclusive considerations, is found in the verse 48, where the servant says, "'Then I bowed low in homage to the LORD and blessed the LORD, the God of my master Abraham, who led me on the right way to get the daughter of my master's brother for his son.'" Clearly, in the biblical text itself, Rebekah's family connection to Abraham is an important reason -- and perhaps the key basis -- for her selection.

Josephus never wonders who is primarily responsible for Rebekah's selection, or why. He wrote,

> Abraham, having decided to give [Isaac] to wife Rebekah, the granddaughter of his brother Nahor, sent the eldest of his servants to ask for her hand in marriage. . . . Aye, though he might have taken for him from the wealthiest of the women yonder, he

> scorned such a match, and in honor of his own kin now plans this marriage.[44]

It is clear to Josephus that Abraham has chosen this woman, and he has done so because she is a member of his own family.

For the most part, we find the early rabbis silent on the matter of Rebekah's lineage, and reluctant to grant Abraham credit for her selection. We do find a text in Genesis Rabbah which suggests that Eliezer wished to marry his own daughter to Isaac, and portrays Abraham as rejecting such a union, saying, "'you are cursed and my son is blessed, and a cursed one may not cleave to a blessed one.'" This statement, however, is primarily concerned with the inappropriateness of marrying Isaac to a Canaanite, and makes no positive remark about the importance of Isaac's marrying a member of his own family.[45] Apparently, the early rabbis were concerned about presenting a clear position that God, not Abraham or any human being, is responsible for Rebekah's selection.

Rebekah's lineage is of greater interest to the rabbis of the medieval period. Ramban, commenting on verse 7, finds special meaning in Abraham's apparent redundancy when the patriarch speaks of God's having taken him out mibbeyt)aviy ume)res moladtiy, "from my father's house and from my

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[44]Josephus, Antiquitites I:XVI,1 and 3.

[45]Genesis Rabbah 59.12; also Yalqut Shimoni I, 107.

native land." Abraham is purposefully redundant, Ramban tells us, in order to emphasize that he would not be pleased with just any woman from his birthplace, but only with a member of his own family. Ramban then turns to verses 40-41, described above,[46] for further evidence that one of Abraham's kin was intended.[47]

As clear as Ramban is that Abraham directed that a member of his own family be selected, the commentator is less certain that Rebekah was the only woman who could have been chosen. Indeed, both Ramban and Sforno, addressing themselves to Genesis 22:24, tell us that the reason that we are told about Nahor's concubine's children there is because a daughter from that line would have been equally acceptable for a union with Abraham's son.[48]

Perhaps, though, the Genesis 24 text itself militates against Ramban's and Sforno's theory that a daughter or granddaughter of Nahor and his concubine would have been as acceptable as Milcah's granddaughter. After all, verse 15, in which Rebekah herself makes her first appearance, she is described as "Rebekah, who was born to Bethuel, <u>the son of Milcah</u> the wife of Abraham's brother Nahor." Even Ramban must admit the significance of this remark, when he asks why the Bible calls Bethuel Milcah's son, eschewing the normal

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[46]See p. 33.

[47]Ramban to Genesis 24:7.

[48]Ramban to Genesis 22:24; Sforno to Genesis 22:24.

formula of identifying a person as the child of his or her father. Ramban himself answers that the Bible describes him this way in order to point out that Rebekah's father was the son of the wife, not the concubine, of Nahor.[49] Even for Ramban, then, the fact that Rebekah is a legitimate granddaughter of Abraham's brother has some significance.

The whole discussion of Rebekah's selection because of her family connection to Abraham begs the question of why Abraham particularly wanted his son to be married to one of his kin. We ought not be surprised, however, that the Bible itself does not confront this concern; there is a good deal of endogamy among the members of the patriarchal families, and the biblical authors do not seem to find this unusual. Indeed, the matter is scarcely addressed by the rabbis themselves, who seem to have accepted the near-incestuous marriages of Genesis characters unquestioningly.

Midrash Haggadol is an exception, though even there the principal question is not, "Why did Abraham wish to marry Isaac to a member of his family," but rather, "How could Abraham have wished to find a wife for Isaac from idolatrous stock?" We are reminded that Joshua 24:3, mentioning Abraham's Mesopotamian kin, identifies them by saying that they "lived beyond the Euphrates and worhiped other gods." Midrash Haggadol resolves this problem, providing this fascinating aggadic material:

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[49]Ramban to Genesis 24:15.

> Abraham said, "Since I am seeking proselytes, I will seek proselytes from among my family and from my father's house, since they precede all." And for no other reason save that they are relatives? A response to this: It is taught, let it ever be that the thoughts of a man are close to his relatives; and, if he has them, to act for their benefit. And thus it says, "[Do] not . . . ignore your own kin." (Isaiah 58:7)[50]

We ought not be surprised to find that the resolution provided by Midrash Haggadol is not echoed in other rabbinic texts. Throughout most of Jewish history since the destruction of the Second Temple, Jews were prevented from seeking converts; and, as a result, Jewish leaders generally took the defensive posture that Judaism is a non-proselytizing religion. Perhaps 14th and 15th century Yemen, from which Midrash Haggadol emanates, was an exception. In any case, we are her provided with an interesting theory on why Abraham selected a wife for Isaac from among his kin.

The early rabbis largely ignored the question of Rebekah's lineage, perhaps in order to emphasize God's role in selecting Rebekah, or maybe simply because they believed the Bible to have sufficiently stressed her relationship to Abraham. If their reason was the latter, they were correct: the Bible does highlight the familial relationships involved. The medieval rabbis, in particular, pick up on this emphasis, and find it to be a central reason for

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[50]Midrash Haggadol to Genesis 24:4.

Rebekah's selection. From them, one gets the sense that endogamy is key to the perpetuation of the patriarchal line. The covenant has been made with this family, and it will continue in this family. For the medieval rabbis, at least, the fact that Rebekah is a member of Abraham's family makes her particularly fit for her position as a matriarch in Israel.

3. Rebekah's Own Virtues

For the rabbis, Rebekah's fitness to be Isaac's wife and an Israelite matriarch is not exclusively based on her having been selected by God and/or Abraham. Rather, she is viewed as possessing virtues of her own which make her uniquely appropriate to her position.

Even if they had wanted to give all of the credit for Rebekah's selection to God and Abraham, the rabbis could scarcely have ignored the weight of the biblical text, which gives a great deal of attention to Rebekah's own actions. As discussed above,[51] Rebekah is the chief actor of Genesis 24. She takes a great deal of initiative both at the well and when the servant comes back to her family's home. And she is described as a beautiful virgin in verse 16. The midrash focuses on her actions, her beauty, and her virginity, but also turns to the extent to which she is an exception to her family of origin and to her ability to

[51]See pp. 19-20.

serve as a successor to her mother-in-law Sarah as evidence of her fitness for the matriarchal role.

The focus on Rebekah's actions in Genesis 24 is the episode at the well. Interestingly, though, we find that the early rabbis ignore Rebekah's role there. Again, they seem to need to emphasize God's intervention to the exclusion of all other influences on the events at the well, or to believe that Rebekah's role, like the importance of her familial relationship with Abraham, is sufficiently emphasized in the biblical account itself.

We do, however, find comments on Rebecca's role at the well both in the writings of the early Jewish philosopher from the intertestamental period, Philo, and from the medieval rabbis. Interestingly, Philo and the medieval rabbis even stress the same theme, though there is no textual similarity to suggest that the later rabbis were echoing Philo's writings. From Philo to the midrashic anthologies to the medieval commentators, we find emphasis on the extent to which Rebekah's actions at the well exemplify characteristics that are known to mark Abraham's family.

For example, Philo writes, "Excellent and good people perform their good works without delay. Such, too, was the whole household together of the all-wise Abraham."[52] Leqah

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[52]Philo, Questions and Answers on Genesis 124, p. 408.

Tov, demonstrating the rabbinic maxim that "people are not paired with each other except by their deeds," argues that the servant's test is designed to find a woman who is "generous" like Abraham's clan, and therefore worthy of being attached to it.[53] Similarly, Midrash Aggadah, wondering why Eliezer establishes the specific task of offering water as the condition for identifying the woman who is to be Isaac's wife, answers: "[I]f she says this she will be righteous, and she will like to serve guests like Abraham and Sarah had done."[54] Lest any reader be unclear as to the specific reference to the hospitality of Abraham and Sarah, Genesis Rabbati directs the reader's attention to Genesis 18, where they provide hospitality to the three men who ultimately announce that Sarah will bear a child. In an unexpected twist, Genesis Rabbati here goes so far as to utilize the comparison to demonstrate that Rebecca demonstrated strength greater than Abraham's in accomplishing her own acts of hospitality.[55]

One particularly charming aggadic passage, found both in Leqah Tov and Midrash Aggadah, suggests that Rebekah is to be praised for her particular generosity, demonstrated by her having gone even beyond the servant's requests:

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[53]Leqah Tov to Genesis 24:44. A similar point is made by Rashi in his commentary to Genesis 24:14.

[54]Midrash Aggadah to Genesis 24:14.

[55]Genesis Rabbati, Chapter 62.

> He asked for one draw [from the well], but Rebekah gave him all that he needed to drink. . . . He requested lodging for one (laliyn), and she offered lodging for several (lalun).[56]

While the aggadah here might be based on what we know to be a poor understanding of grammar, the point being made in this selection from these two midrashic anthologies is that the Bible itself suggests that Rebekah demonstrated great munificence at the well.

The medieval commentator Sforno finds a silence on the events at the well to be particularly instructive. He points out that neither the servant nor the reader ever finds Rebekah requesting or expecting any recompense for her actions at the well. Thus, Sforno concludes, the servant sees that Rebekah acts out of "complete lovingkindness," and moves to solidify her selection as Isaac's wife.[57]

Rebekah's actions at the well, we see, were of interest to the rabbis of the medieval period, even as they had been ignored by earlier rabbis. Perhaps the notion that individuals could look to biblical characters as models was more important to -- or better understood by -- the later rabbis. Also, it is apparent that, unlike their predecessors, the medieval rabbis had no trouble understanding that God, Abraham and Rebekah could all be

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[56]Leqah Tov to Genesis 24:17-19,23; Midrash Aggadah to Genesis 24:17, 23, 25.

[57]Sforno to Genesis 24:22.

credited with significant responsibility for making the match without contradiction. Indeed, we have seen that many of the same texts that emphasize Rebekah's role also stress God's intervention at the well and Abraham's participation in the selection of this matriarch.

However, despite the early rabbis' failure to acknowledge Rebekah's actions at the well, they did not ignore her virtues entirely. As we shall see, they do admit that Rebekah's attributes play a part in determining her fitness for her position.

Aside from her actions throughout Genesis 24, Rebekah's virtues are primarily spelled out in the first half of verse 16: "The maiden was very beautiful, a virgin whom no man had known." Philo, as we might expect, interprets both of these attributes, beauty and virginity, philosophically. Of her beauty, Philo writes:

> Do not, however, think that it now presents to us fairness of body in respect to that which is called beauty of form, which consists of the symmetry of parts and beauty of form such as even harlots have. These I would never call fair, but on the contrary, foul, for this is their proper name. . . . But he [sic] in whom the divine words of wisdom and virtue dwell, even though he may be more deformed of body than Silenus, is necessarily fair.[58]

Turning to virginity, the philosopher asks an exegetical question common to the rabbinic texts as well. He wonders,

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[58]Philo, Questions and Answers on Genesis 99, pp. 382-3.

"Why does [Scripture] use a double expression in calling her a virgin," indicating that she is a "virgin" and adding that "no man had known" her? Philo's answer, appending the philosophical to the more apparent corporeal interpretation, is: "[S]he had two virginities, one in respect of the body, the other in respect of the incorruptible soul."[59] These statements, as well as the one described above, come in the context of a rather extensive section of Philo's Questions and Answers on Genesis in which the philosopher deals with Genesis 24. Apparently, for Philo, Rebekah was the metaphorical embodiment of the kind of perfect philosopher that he and the philosophers of his day aspired to be.

The rabbis, of course, demonstrate no such philosophical notions. They do not comment on Rebekah's beauty, for they see no reason to do so, taking its meaning to be well-known and not seeking an interpretation beyond the corporeal. They are, however, presented with the same textual question about the biblical description of Rebekah's virginity that Philo addresses, namely the seemingly redundant phrase, "a virgin whom no man had known." The authors of Genesis Rabbah, whose explanations are echoed in the later midrashic anthologies and by the medieval commentators, were apparently so taken by this problem that they offered three possible solutions to it: 1) she had neither lost her virginity through intercourse, nor lost her

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[59] Ibid., p. 382.

tokens of virginity through other means;[60] 2)she was a virgin, not only with respect to her hymen, but with respect to her entire body; 3)not only was she a virgin, but no man had made a claim to her.[61] While none of these three explanations has any particular significance for us, taken together they tell us something important. The rabbis were concerned with the sexual purity of the woman, wanting to assure that no man married a woman who might be "damaged goods." Here they make clear that Rebekah is a virgin in every imaginable way, and therefore fit to become Isaac's wife.

Genesis 24:16, however, is not the only text that gives rise to rabbinic discussion of Rebekah's virginity. In a text from Pirqei deRabbi Eliezer that is echoed much later in Yalqut Shimoni, we find concern that Rebekah might have been violated by the servant on the way back to the Land. Abraham, we are told, instructs Isaac to examine her for the signs of virginity upon her arrival at Hebron, and Isaac complies, "[taking] out her signs of virginity by hand and show[ing] them to Abraham his father" before taking her as his wife. Moreover, we are told, that this act of Isaac's set a precedent for "all Israel [to] bring out the signs of

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[60]The phrase, "lost her virginity through other means" is expressed in the rabbinic literature by the phrase, "deflowered by a tree."

[61]Genesis Rabbah 60.5. See also Midrash Haggadol to Genesis 24:16 and Rashi to Genesis 24:16 in this regard. Leqah Tov to Genesis 24:16 offers only the second explanation.

virginity by hand, so that they would not come into doubt."[62] This text, perhaps, indicates more about the rabbis' obsession with a woman's virginity than it does about their attitude toward Rebekah. Nevertheless, we are assured that she is a virgin and therefore fit to become Isaac's wife.

Other aspects of the Genesis 24 narrative occasion rabbinic responses that indicate several different divine interventions to protect and/or demonstrate Rebekah's virginity. One example is verses 53 and 55, in which Rebekah's mother and brother, but not her father, appear. Indeed, Bethuel does not appear again at all. The standard rabbinic interpretation is that Bethuel has died since his last appearance in verse 50, for which two midrashic anthologies, Yalqut Shimoni and Midrash Aggadah, give reasons related to the present discussion:

> Why did Bethuel die? Because he was a King in Aram-Naharaim and he had sexual intercourse with every young woman on the first night after her marriage, and afterwards she returned to her husband. All the princes got together and said: "If he does to his daughters as he did to ours, fine; and if not, we will kill him and his daughter." Therefore, he died in order to rescue Eliezer and Rebekah.[63]

In addition to killing Bethuel, we are told that God made a miracle to keep Eliezer from having intercourse with Rebekah

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[62]Pirqei deRabbi Eliezer, Chapter 16; Yalqut Shimoni I, 109.

[63]Yalqut Shimoni I, 109; Midrash Aggadah to Genesis 24:53.

on the way back to Hebron. Midrash Aggadah indicates that, just as God had made the road jump to facilitate the servant's journey to the well, it jumped in order to allow him to convey Rebekah back to Abraham and Isaac "in six hours, so that he would not be alone with her at night on the road."[64]

Finally, the same midrashic anthologies that told us that Bethuel was killed in order to protect Rebekah's virginity, Yalqut Shimoni and Midrash Aggadah, provide a tale that describes a divine action to demonstrate Rebekah's purity to Isaac. The story is based on a phrase from verse 64, where we are told that, upon first laying eyes upon Isaac, "She alighted from the camel." The verb, translated "alighted" in the New Jewish Version, is tippol, literally, "she fell." Asking why she had fallen, the rabbis answer:

> Because she saw from the holy spirit that, in the future, Esau the evil one would [be sired by] him. She was shaken and was deflowered by a tree, and the blood of her virginity came out from her. Immediately, the Holy One of Blessing said to Gabriel: "Go down and guard the blood so that it will not evaporate and there will be no blemish in it. Isaac came upon her and did not find her to possess the signs of virginity. He suspected Eliezer. He said, "Where are your signs of virginity?" She said to him, "When I fell from the camel, I was deflowered by a tree." He said to her, "You are lieing! Rather, Eliezer violated you." But she swore that he had not violated her. They went and found the tree, colored with blood. Immediately,

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[64]Midrash Haggadol to Genesis 24:61.

Isaac knew that she was pure.[65]

Two aspects of this text are significant. We will address the first, Rebekah's prophecy about Esau, in the next chapter. As for our present concern, we see again that the rabbis posit God in the role of ensuring the proper demonstration of Rebekah's virginity to Isaac. We are assured not only that she is pure, but that Isaac knows that she is a virgin when he marries her. The rabbis have indeed gone to great lenghts to reassure us that, in the particular matter of her virginity, Rebekah is fit to be Isaac's wife.

Earlier, we saw that the Zohar emphasizes that God made Rebekah an exception to the people among whom she dwelt. There, God receives all the credit making Rebekah different from the idolators around her. On the other hand, other rabbinic texts, even including one from the Zohar itself,[66] praise Rebekah herself for being different from those who surrounded her. The standard text about Rebekah's being an exception to her surroundings is one that first appears in Genesis Rabbah and is repeated in essentially the same form in a number of texts spanning several centuries. The comment is not based on Genesis 24, but is considered here because it speaks to the matter of Rebekah's appropriateness to her position. The rabbis are responding to a seeming

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[65]Yalqut Shimoni I, 109. There is a similar text in Midrash Aggadah to Genesis 24:67.

[66]Zohar I, 136b-137a.

redundancy in Genesis 25:20, which calls Rebekah the "daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean." The rabbis wonder why the text says both "Aramean" and "Paddan-aram," since the fact that he was from Paddan-aram would already imply that he was an Aramean. They also wonder why it is necessary to repeat the modifier "Aramean" with reference to Bethuel. The rabbis use a word-play to explain. They rearrange the letters of the word for "Aramean,") - r - m - y, and spell a new word, r - m -) - y, meaning "rogues," "liers," or "swindlers." Thus, we are told that the text means to emphasize that Rebekah's family was a collection of rogues, to whom Rebekah is an exception. She, on the other hand, is to be compared "to a rose among the thorns."[67] Lest we be concerned that Rebekah is unfit for her position because she comes from a terrible family, we are assured that she is untainted by their trechery. Rebekah, "a rose among the thorns," is fit to become, as it were, a rose among roses, a member of Abraham's family.

The final event of Genesis 24 finds Isaac bringing Rebekah into his mother's tent, taking her as his wife, and thus being comforted after his mother's death. This episode, described in the 67th and final verse of the chapter, occasions significant midrashic comment emphasizing Rebekah's appropriateness to her new position.

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[67]Genesis Rabbah 63.4; Leviticus Rabbah 23.1; Yalqut Shimoni I, 110; Leqah Tov to Genesis 25:20; Midrash Aggadah to Genesis 25:20; Midrash Haggadol to Genesis 25:20.

The standard midrash on this verse, found first in Genesis Rabbah and echoed in several midrashic anthologies, tells us that Rebekah's presence brought life and a divine presence back to the tent, primarily because she was scrupulous in observing particular commandments that had been particularly associated with Sarah. Perhaps the clearest statement of this tradition is found in Midrash Aggadah:

> "He brought her into his mother's tent," because he found her to be like Sarah, like his mother. And the Sages of blessed memory said, for upon Sarah a cloud hovered over the tent, and when she would kindle the lights on Sabbath eve, they would remain lit until the end of the Sabbath, and it was similar with Rebekah. The cloud covered Sarah's tent; when Sarah died, the cloud went away, and when Rebekah came, the cloud returned. Just as Sarah shined in three commandments to which the woman is obligated -- family purity, the separation of dough, and the kindling of lights -- Rebekah similarly shone.[68]

Rashi and the Zohar take the same point even further. Rashi, who also speaks of the Sabbath lights and the cloud returning to the tent, goes so far as to assert, "[S]he became a model of Sarah his mother, which is as if to say: 'behold, she was Sarah his mother.'"[69] The Zohar bases its comments on a textual problem in verse 67. The phrase that

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[68]Midrash Aggadah to Genesis 24:67, based on Genesis Rabbah 60.16; see also Yalqut Shimoni I, 109 and Leqah Tov to Genesis 24:66; aspects echoed in Midrash Haggadol to Genesis 24:67; Rashi to Genesis 24:67; and Zohar I,133a.

[69]Rashi to Genesis 24:67.

is translated, "into the tent of his mother Sarah," is probematic in Hebrew: ha'ohelah sarah 'immo, "to the tent -- Sarah his mother." One might have expected la'ohel shel sarah 'immo, which would more literally express, "to the tent of his mother Sarah." In any case, the Zohar is not incorrect that the first part of the verse might be translated, "He brought her into the tent, Sarah his mother." From this, the Zohar interprets the verse as telling us that Rebekah was the very image of Sarah, so much so that when Isaac brought Rebekah into the tent, it was as though he was actually bringing Sarah back.[70] There could certainly be no better statement of Rebekah's appropriateness to assume her new position than the assertion that she is the very reflection of Sarah, the woman who is both the paradigmatic matriarch and, for Isaac, the perfect woman.

C. Summary

Exploring the midrashic responses to Genesis 24, we have seen that different strains of interpretation emphasize different justifications for viewing Rebekah as fit for her new role as Isaac's wife and matriarch in Israel. The early rabbis, echoed by their medieval successors, stress God's role in selecting Rebekah and assuring that the match is made. On the other hand, pre-rabbinic commentators -- again

[70]Zohar I,133a.

echoed by later rabbis -- stress Abraham's actions and Rebekah's own participation in making the match.

The distinction between the different strains, however, is subtle, and we are struck much more by their convergence. All of the portraits before us emphasize that Rebekah is the appropriate woman to become Isaac's wife and Israel's matriarch. God has chosen her and facilitated her meeting with Abraham's messenger. Her own lineage is suited to Abraham's needs and to those of the covenant. Rebekah's actions have contributed to the success of the match-making, and her own virtues indicate that she is the woman desired.

In the end, we see that the midrashic authors' purpose meets that of the biblical text itself. We began this chapter by noting that the function of Genesis 24 is to ensure the proper continuation of the covenant. We conclude by remarking that the rabbinic material, taken together with the biblical narrative, assures us that the task has been completed successfully. A proper match has been made for Isaac. Through the combined actions of God, the patriarch Abraham, and the young woman herself, an exemplary woman has been found to join with Isaac in providing Abraham with grandchildren. The covenant will be transmitted to the next generation; the epic can continue.

CHAPTER III

GENESIS 25:19-24: PROGENY

[19]This is the story of Isaac, son of Abraham. Abraham begot Isaac. [20]Isaac was forty years old when he took to wife Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean. [21]Isaac pleaded with the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD responded to his plea, and his wife Rebekah conceived. [22]But the children struggled in her womb, and she said, "If so, why do I exist?" She went to inquire of the LORD, [23]and the LORD answered her,

"Two nations are in your womb,
Two separate peoples shall issue from your body;
One people shall be mightier than the other,
And the older shall serve the younger."

[24]When the time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb.

A. The Biblical Narrative

At the beginning of the previous chapter, we saw that the central purpose of Genesis 24 is to provide a link between the Abraham narrative that precedes it and the Jacob epic that follows. In the same light, Genesis 25:19-24 might be viewed, not primarily as a story about Isaac's and Rebekah's endeavors to conceive and Rebekah's resulting pregnancy, but rather as an introduction to the story of Jacob.

We first become aware that we are not dealing with a story about Isaac and Rebekah when we notice that genealogical information about them is offered in two short verses, just enough to tell us with whom we are dealing, and ultimately to remind us of who are the grandparents of the

children about to be born. The fact that the story does not focus on Isaac and Rebekah becomes even clearer when we consider that Abraham's and Sarah's inability to conceive is the subject of several chapters of biblical narrative, whereas, as J.P. Fokkelman aptly notes, "the story (not of Isaac but) of Jacob spends as little narrative time as it can on Isaac and his grievous waiting, which, nonetheless, lasted 20 years (verses 20,26)."[71]

The difference in length notwithstanding, we can not help but be struck by the parallel created in the biblical narrative between Abraham and Sarah on the one hand, and Isaac and Rebekah on the other. In both cases, the legitimate heir -- first Isaac, then Jacob -- is conceived and born only after tortured years of barrenness.

Another striking feature of this brief passage, also laid out by Fokkelman, is the powerful demonstration of the efficacy of prayer. Most notable in this regard is verse 21. Illustrating his point, Fokkelman breaks the verse down into four parts: "(a) Isaac pleaded with the LORD on behalf of his wife, (b) because she was barren; (c) and the LORD responded to his plea, (d) and his wife Rebekah conceived." This one verse describes and resolves the entire problem of Rebekah's barrenness, which is not mentioned anywhere else. Moreover, its parts respond to each other in such a way as to emphasize God's power. We can not help noticing the

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[71]Fokkelman, Narrative Art, p. 87.

completeness with which part (a) is answered by part (c), and part (b) by part (d). This parallelism and resolution is strengthened when we consider the Hebrew texts of parts (a) and (c). The verbs translated as "pleaded" in part (a) and "responded to his plea" in part (d) are the pi'el and nif'al forms, respectively, of the same verb, ' - t - r.[72]

Isaac's entreating of God in verse 21, however, is not the only encounter between God and the human being in this passage. We are told that Rebekah herself "went to inquire of the LORD" in verse 22. Again, we see the power of prayer: God's response follows immediately at the beginning of the next verse. There is, however, a difference between the descriptions of Isaac's and Rebekah's approaches to God. Instead of ' - t - r, we are told that Rebekah went lidrosh (inquire of) God. Perhaps the two words are not interchangeable. Fokkelman, offering evidence from several other biblical usages of the word, contends that the verb d - r - sh is the "technical term to indicate the consulting God by means of an oracle."[73] Whether or not Rebekah consulted God directly will be, as we shall see, a central concern of the midrash.

Perhaps most interesting to our purposes, however, is the fact that virtually all of the action of the passage

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[72]Ibid., p. 88.

[73]Ibid. II Kings 3:11 and 8:8 are particularly persuasive examples offered by Fokkelman.

primarily involves God and Rebekah, not Isaac. To be sure, verse 21 (a/c) is an exception. That brief section, however, is massively overshadowed by verse 21 (b/d), and verses 22-24, which entirely concern God, Rebekah, and her pregnancy, and do not mention Isaac. This phenomenon is not unlike what we saw in Genesis 24 and that which will be most striking in Genesis 27:1 - 28:5: Rebekah is clearly the principal actor of this second patriarchal/matriarchal pair. When Isaac and Rebekah appear, her actions tend to determine the direction of the narrative. We shall not be surprised, then, to find Rebekah at the center of the midrashic concerns about this passage.

B. Midrashic Concerns

Four principal problems present themselves to the authors of midrash as they confront Genesis 25:19-24. Unlike Genesis 24, these concerns do not converge to build a single central point, but address instead four different difficulties that faced the midrashic authors as they read the biblical text.

First, reading verse 20, which provides Isaac's age but not Rebekah's, they wonder how old Rebekah is. Next, the midrashists ask who really prayed for progeny, and whose prayer was answered. They ponder the meaning of the phrase lenokhah 'ishto. The New Jewish Version translates, "on behalf of his wife," but the midrashists ask if the words do

not imply an even greater role for Rebekah. On a related matter, they ask themselves about the barrenness, clearly attributed to Rebekah in verse 21, but not explained. The rabbis speculate about whether Isaac might not (also) have been infertile, and ponder reasons for the couple's inability to conceive. Finally, and most contentiously, the midrash confronts Rebekah's inquiry of God and the response she receives, wondering whether God would in fact communicate so much information directly to a woman.

1. Rebekah's Age

Verse 20, which together with the preceding verse seems to provide basic information about both Isaac and Rebekah, tells us that "Isaac was forty when he took to wife Rebekah . . .," but fails to reveal Rebekah's age. This particular silence seems to have been troubling to rabbis only in the medieval period; we see the issue addressed in Rashi's commentary and in three midrashic anthologies, Yalqut Shimoni, Midrash Aggadah, and Leqah Tov.[74]

All three texts agree on the basic points, which are based on the purported convergence of three events: the binding of Isaac, Rebekah's birth,[75] and Sarah's death.

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[74]Rashi to Genesis 25:20; Yalqut Shimoni I, 110; Midrash Aggadah to Genesis 25:20; Leqah Tov to Genesis 24:44.

[75]See pp. 6-8.

Since the Bible tells us that Sarah was 90 years old when Isaac was born and 127 years old when she died, then Isaac must have been 37 when she died. If, then, Sarah's death and Rebekah's birth were coincident -- the occasion being the ʿageidah -- and Isaac was 37 when Sarah died and 40 when he married Rebekah, then Rebekah must have been three years old when she married Isaac.

There are two striking consequences to Rebekah's being three years old when she and Isaac were married. First, we might wonder whether in fact Rebekah can be said to have been barren for twenty years if she was only three years old at the beginning! Although we shall see some concern with that matter below, the present texts do not ask that question, though Rashi and Midrash Aggadah -- consistent with other rabbinic texts concerning females of idolatrous stock -- do assert that the age of three implies fitness for sexual relations. Second, we might wonder how Rebekah could possibly have carried out all the actions with which she is credited in Genesis 24. Indeed, the Leqah Tov passage acknowledges that one might ask, "'How could a child three years old go out to draw water?'" No sooner does the text ask the question, though, than it provides an answer: "A three year old girl in the earlier generations was bigger than a three year old girl in these generations."

No sweeping point seems to be made in these comments to Genesis 25:20. Nevertheless, we ought not be surprised that

the medieval rabbis find a need to fill the void. The presence of a statement about Isaac's age highlights the biblical silence on the matter of Rebekah's age. The medieval rabbis close the gap in typical fashion, drawing on whatever other biblical evidence is available to construct a theory, and reconciling that theory in the face of apparent contradictions.

2. Who Prays for Progeny? And Who is Answered?

Reading the standard translations of verse 21, one gets the impression that Isaac's one definite action in this passage is that he prays for progeny. The rabbis, however, are not so sure that Isaac is the only one who pleads with God in that verse. The problem is with the words lenokhaḥ ʾishto, which the New Jewish Version translates as "on behalf of his wife." Apparently, that meaning is not so clear to the rabbis, and other theories about what happens in verse 21 are based on alternative translations of that phrase.

Genesis Rabbah, characteristically echoed by several medieval texts, argues that the wording lenokhaḥ ʾishto "teaches that Isaac was prostrated [in prayer] here and she was prostrated [in prayer] there. The phrase lenokhaḥ ʾishto seems to be understood here to mean, "facing his wife," rendering a meaning very different from "on behalf of his wife." Nevertheless, Genesis Rabbah also uses the

concept that the one who prays does so "on behalf of" the other. After insisting that both prayed, the text offers the content of those prayers:

> He said, "Master of the Universe, may all the children that You give me be from this righteous woman." She also said: "May all the children that You ever give me be from this righeous man."[76]

Perhaps we should be surprised that such an early rabbinic text as Genesis Rabbah reads a greater role for Rebekah into the text. Indeed, as noted above,[77] her actions in this passage are already dominant. Moreover, we saw in the last chapter that the early rabbis were not inclined to impart a greater position to Rebekah in Genesis 24.[78] Nevertheless, we do see Rebekah here as an equal partner at least in asking God for progeny.

A different interpretation of the opening phrase of verse 21, but one that leads to the same conclusion, is found in Midrash Haggadol. There we are told that, no matter which parent's barrenness is responsible for the failure to conceive, "the birth does not happen until the two of them are equal in crying out and in prayer and in supplication, as it is said: 'And Isaac pleaded with God

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[76]Genesis Rabbah 63.5. See also Yalqut Shimoni I, 110; Leqah Tov to Genesis 25:21; Midrash Aggadah to Genesis 25:21; Rashi's commentary to Genesis 25:21; and Rashi's commentary to B.T. Yevamot 64a.

[77]See pp. 55-56.

[78]See Chapter II.

lenokhaḥ ʾishto'"[79] Here, the last two words seem to be understood to mean "with his wife," or even, "equal to his wife." In any case, the concept is the same as that proferred by Genesis Rabbah and its medieval followers: Rebekah prayed for progeny alongside Isaac.

Midrash Haggadol makes its case for Rebekah's role even stronger by offering the text of her prayer. The eloquence of the prayer indicates the authors' respect for Rebekah, and seems to indicate a view that she was a rather intelligent woman:

> R. Eliezer said in the name of R. Yosi b. Zimrah: "Considering the matters of her heart, she said before him: 'Master of the world, You created many parts in flesh and blood, and you did not create among them any thing for no reason: eyes to see, ears to hear, a nose to smell, a mouth to speak, hands to do work, legs to walk and breasts to nurse. To what purpose are these breasts of mine? Give me a child to nurse from them!'"[80]

The eloquence attributed to Rebekah by Midrash Haggadol notwithstanding, other texts do not agree that she joined Isaac in praying for children. This should not be a suprise; after all, Rebekah does not have to be present if Isaac is merely praying on her behalf. Nevertheless, even in texts that do not indicate her joining in prayer, Rebekah is not entirely absent.

Pirqei deRabbi Eliezer, which is not concerned with the

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[79]Midrash Haggadol to Genesis 25:21.

[80]Ibid.

meaning of lenokhaḥ ʾishto, attempts to connect both Isaac's prayer in verse 21 and Rebekah's in verse 22 with the ʿaqedah. The text indicates that Isaac took Rebekah to Mt. Moriah to pray for progeny and that she went back there herself during the pain of pregnancy.[81] For our present purposes, the point is this: in a place where the Bible does not require Rebekah's presence at all, the rabbis continually placed her at the scene of the action.

Sefer Hayyashar similarly locates the events of verse 21 at Mt. Moriah, and also indicates Rebekah's presence. This text, however, goes even further:

> And it came to pass that, in Isaac's 59th year, Rebekah his wife was yet barren.
> And Rebekah said to Isaac: "Did I not hear, master, that Sarah your mother was also barren, until my master your father Abraham prayed on her behalf, and then she became pregnant by him? Now, stand up and pray to God, you also, and He will hear your prayer and remember us on account of His lovingkindness."
> But Isaac responded to Rebekah his wife, saying: "Abraham my father already prayed to our God on my behalf, to increase my seed, and now if we have no seed, the barrenness is from you."
> Then Rebekah said to him: "Nevertheless, stand up and pray, you also, and God will hear your prayer and will give me children."
> And Isaac heard the words of his wife, and they got up and went, Isaac and Rebekah, to the Land of Moriah, to pray there and to beseech the LORD. . . .[82]

This particular piece of aggadah, though it is clearly an

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[81]Pirqei deRabbi Eliezer, Chapter 32; echoed in Yalqut Shimoni I, 110.

[82]Sefer Hayyashar to Genesis 25:21.

expansion on the present biblical text, most accurately captures the relationship between Isaac and Rebekah. She, as usual, is the instigator of action. He, as usual, is reluctant to act, but finally does so in response to her demands. The prayer for progeny, the rabbis seem to be telling us, can not be accounted to Isaac alone.

When we turn to ask whose prayer was answered, however, we find a different attitude. Virtually every text, including those that emphasize a role for Rebekah in praying for progeny, insist that Isaac's was the prayer that was answered. Perhaps, though, we should not be surprised: the third phrase of verse 21 does clearly say, "and the LORD responded to **his** plea."

The same Genesis Rabbah text that establishes Rebekah's part in praying for children, offers a clever analogy indicating the way in which Isaac is answered, not even considering that Rebekah's prayer might be the one to which God responds. Drawing on the two forms, active and passive, of the verb ʿ - t - r in the verse, the text compares Isaac's pleading and God's response to two people digging a tunnel toward each other and meeting in the middle.[83]

The Babylonian Talmud, followed by several medieval texts, agreeing with Genesis Rabbah that Rebekah joined Isaac in prayer, can not simply say that Isaac is the one who is answered without giving an explanation involving

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[83]Genesis Rabbah 63.5.

Rebekah. The standard response is that Isaac's prayer is answered because he is a "righteous one [and] the son of a righteous one," whereas Rebekah is "a righteous one, [but] the son [sic] of an evil one." The prayers of two such people, we are told, are not equal. Therefore, the text says that "the LORD responded to his plea," not hers.[84]

Only Midrash Haggadol carries its understanding of equality in verse 21 through the full verse, arguing both that Rebekah joined Isaac in asking for children and that their prayers were answered equally. Interestingly, Midrash Haggadol finds evidence for its point within the text itself. The phrase "the LORD responded to his plea," we are told, indicates that Isaac's prayer for progeny was answered, whereas the phrase, "and his wife Rebekah conceived" is meant to tell us that Rebekah's prayer was answered.[85]

Midrash Haggadol notwithstanding, the preponderance of rabbinic material insists that God answered Isaac only, or at least primarily. This may be the result of a rabbinic desire to downplay women's contact with God, a tendancy we shall see yet more clearly later in this chapter, or it may simply be viewed as the most direct response to the text here. Indeed, the most striking characteristic of the

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[84]B.T. Yevamot 64a; Rashi to Genesis 25:21; Rashi to B.T. Yevamot 64a; Midrash Aggadah to Genesis 25:21.

[85]Midrash Haggadol to Genesis 25:21.

rabbinic reaction to verse 21's prayer for progeny and the response to it is the rabbis' unanimity in highlighting Rebekah's role beyond that which is necessitated by the biblical text itself. Perhaps Rebekah is so active in every other scene in which she appears that the rabbis can not imagine that she is silent at this critical moment. Looking at the action of verse 21, the rabbis have created a role for Rebekah that is consistent with the matriarch's behavior elsewhere, even if they can not agree about the precise nature of that role.

3. Barrenness

In addition to the prayer for progeny and its response, verse 21 includes the announcement that Rebekah is barren. The text on this matter does not appear to ambiguous; as we are told that Isaac prays "because she was barren." Nevertheless, the midrashists are not content simply to accept Rebekah's barrenness as a matter of fact. Rather, there is a wide range of material on the question of barrenness, ranging from avoidance of barrenness altogether to theories of why she was barren, to the proposition that Isaac was also barren.

Interestingly, the earliest texts relating to Rebekah's birth, both in the Book of Jubilees and in Josephus' Antiquities, do not mention barrenness at all. To be sure, neither text directly refutes the Bible's statement that she

was barren; indeed, neither seems aware that there is any question of barrenness. Rather, Jubilees simply states: "And in the sixth week, in the second year thereof, Rebekah bare [sic] to Isaac two sons, Jacob and Esau."[86] Josephus is equally brief and matter-of-fact: "Now after Abraham's death, Isaac's young wife conceived . . ."[87]

Turning to the rabbinic material, we find a very different story. The rabbis could clearly not avoid the biblical text; barrenness could not be denied. There is, however, a spectrum of opinion on the matter, from speculation as to why Rebekah was barren to charges that Isaac was himself unable to sire children. Interestingly, the different arguments do not seem to be born of different time periods. Statements of the widely diverging theories can be found in both early and late texts.

Genesis Rabbah, echoed by the medieval anthology Leqah Tov, is convinced that Rebekah was barren. These texts find evidence in the Hebrew word for "barren" in Genesis 25:21, ʿaqarah, from which they infer that Rebekah was missing ʿiqar mitriyn, the essential part of the womb, or ovaries.[88]

Elsewhere, Genesis Rabbah, this time echoed by several midrashic anthologies, provides an explanation for Rebekah's barrenness. We are reminded of Genesis 24:60, where

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[86]Book of Jubilees 19:12.

[87]Josephus, Antiquities I:XVIII,1.

[88]Genesis Rabbah 63.5; see also Leqah Tov to Genesis 25:21.

Rebekah's kin bless her, saying, "'O sister! / May you grow / Into thousands of myriads . . .'" The rabbis argue that Rebekah is barren until the prayer for progeny in Genesis 25:21, "so that the heathens would not be able to say, 'Our prayer made these fruits.'"[89] We should not be surprised that the rabbis argue that Rebekah and Isaac endured two decades of barrenness in order to prove that only the God of Israel has power; they are the same ones whom we saw in the last chapter emphasizing the nearly exclusive power of God in bringing Isaac and Rebekah together in Genesis 24.[90]

Song of Songs Rabbah begins its explanation of Rebekah's barrenness by offering the same theory found in Genesis Rabbah. But Song of Songs Rabbah does not stop there. Reminding us that other matriarchs were barren as well, the text offers several rather startling theories when it asks why:

> R. Azariah said in the name of R. Hanina b. Papa: "Why were the matriarchs barren? In order that they might endear themselves to their husbands by their beauty." R. Huna and R. Yeremiah in the name of R. Hiyya b. Abba said: "Why were the matriarchs barren? So that their husbands would enjoy their beauty,

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[89]Genesis Rabbah 60.13; see also Yalqut Shimoni 109; Leqah Tov to Genesis 24:60; and Midrash Haggadol to Genesis 24:60. A related, but slightly different, argument is made in Midrash Haggadol to Genesis 25:21, which tells us that the matriarchs themselves were idolatrous priestesses in their youth. As a result, we are told, God withheld children from them until they had time to demonstrate complete devotion to God, and would know that they had been granted children by God and not because of their previous idolatrous worship.

[90]See Chapter II.

> since when a woman gets pregnant, she swells and becomes abominable. Know that this is so, since all the years that the matriarch Sarah was barren she would sit in her house like a bride in her huppah. When she became pregnant, her good looks changed. As it says: 'In sadness shall you bear children' (Gen. 3:16)." R. Levi in the name of R. Shila from Kfar Temarta and R. Helbo in the name of R. Yohanan said: "Why were the matriarchs barren? So that the Holy One of Blessing could be seized with desire to hear their voices. . . .[91]

This text is the only clear example of misogyny in the rabbinic literature I encountered in studying Rebekah. Indeed, one might argue that some elements of this text, especially the last, are to the matriarchs' credit. To be sure, the notion that God wants to hear their voices is meant as a compliment to them. Moreover, one could claim that the text is being kind to the matriarchs when it says that their natural beauty was so great that God did not want to spoil it through pregnancy. Nevertheless, one can not help being left with a strong sense that the authors find pregnancy to be repulsive. One can only imagine the pain involved in being the pregnant wife of one of these rabbis.

Another less than flattering theory on the reason for the matriarchs' barrenness occasioned by Genesis 25:21 is a comment in Midrash Haggadol which claims to be ancient, but which I did not find in earlier texts:

> Our rabbis taught in a barayta: "The elders asked, 'Why were the matriarchs barren?' They said to them, 'because they were

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[91]Song of Songs Rabbah 2.14,8.

> righteous and fitting such that the LORD did not want them to be sure of themselves and say, "We are so worthy that we have been given children." The Holy One of Blessing said, "Behold, I am diminishing their strength so that they will not be so sure of themselves."'"[92]

While this text does praise the virtues of the matriarchs, it also insists that they would have been haughty if they had not experienced the pain of barrenness. Clearly, this comment can not be said to be to their credit.

An entirely different understanding of barrenness in Genesis 25:21 is presented by the Babylonian Talmud, and repeated in several medieval texts, claiming that Isaac, not Rebekah, was the one who was barren. In the Talmud, the explanation is given in the midst of a discussion about how long a man should remain married to a barren wife before taking another wife. The answer of the majority is ten years. Isaac, of course, would be in violation of this law if Rebekah were barren, since the text says that he was 40 years old when they were married and 60 when the boys were born. Therefore, the Talmud concludes, Isaac must have been the barren one. Inexplicably, the rabbis also argue there that the other patriarchs were also barren. Interestingly, the reason given for the patriarch's barrenness is the same as the only favorable explanation offered by Song of Songs Rabbah for the matriarchs' barrenness: that God "desires

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[92]Midrash Haggadol to Genesis 25:21.

the prayers of the righteous."[93]

Finally, we find an explanation in Midrash Haggadol that both Rebekah and Isaac were barren. This theory is based on a perceived textual problem in verse 21. In the phrase, "because she was barren," the word for "she" is written hv), the spelling of "he," but vocalized hi), "she." While this spelling is not unusual where the biblical text means to say "she," Midrash Haggadol insists that it is intentional here, intending to inform us that both Isaac and Rebekah were unable to conceive.[94]

The midrash, then, provides a wide variety of material to explain the barrenness indicated in Genesis 25:21. Several of the pieces here contradict each other, diverging on a question as basic as the identification of who exactly was barren. Interestingly, though, one can not make any statements about change in the tradition over time, since the most basic difference is between two early traditions, found in Genesis Rabbah and the Bablyonian Talmud, and the theories of both texts are carried into medieval works. Of course, as we could see from the last theory presented from

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[93]B.T. Yevamot 64a; Yalqut Shimoni I, 110; and Midrash Haggadol to Genesis 25:21. Zohar 137a/b seems to make the same argument, applying it to both the patriarchs and the matriarchs. Later, though, Zohar 137b insists that Isaac was not barren, and knew it -- having received a prophecy that he would bear Jacob and, through him, the twelve tribes. Isaac did not know, however, that Rebekah would be the mother, thus he prayed "on behalf of" his wife.

[94]Midrash Haggadol to Genesis 25:21.

Midrash Haggadol, the rabbis may not have considered the idea that Rebekah was barren to be necessarily in conflict with the argument that Isaac was (also) unable to sire children.

4. Rebekah's Contact with God in Genesis 25:22-23

In the verse immediately following the announcement of barrenness and the prayer for progeny, Rebekah begins to have a difficult pregnancy. Right away, we are told in verses 22-23, "She went to inquire of the LORD, and the LORD answered her," telling her about the nature of the two sons in her womb. The nature of this apparent dialogue between Rebekah and God is the subject of a great deal of midrashic material.

The primary thrust of the rabbinic material about Rebekah's encounter with God in these verses is the rabbis' uncomfortableness with the notion of a woman's conversing with God directly. This problem is evident even in two pre-rabbinic interpretations, namely those of Jubilees and Josephus' Antiquities. Jubliees actually leaves God out of the entire matter, portraying Abraham as the one who favored Jacob and told Rebekah that the younger twin was to be the legitimate heir.[95] Josephus, on the other hand, tells the story almost as the Bible does, with one detail changed:

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[95]The Book of Jubilees 19:15-16.

Isaac, not Rebekah, receives the prophecy from God.[96]

This avoidance of portraying Rebekah in direct contact with God is not, however, a unanimous tendency of pre-rabbinic commentators. Philo assumes, in fact, that Rebekah did seek God directly, and he praises her for doing so. The philosopher sees Rebekah's action in seeking answers during a difficult time as an "argument against arrogant and conceited persons who, though they know nothing, admit that they know everything."[97]

After Philo, though, we must wait for the medieval period before we find any other text suggesting direct contact between Rebekah and God. Indeed, three major texts -- the Palestinian Talmud, Genesis Rabbah, and Midrash Tehillim -- insist that Sarah was the only woman with whom God ever spoke directly.[98] None of the three offers a justification for the notion that God did not speak directly with any other woman; indeed, the repetition in all three texts suggests that the statement that Sarah was the only woman with whom God ever spoke directly is an ancient formula.

The three early texts do, however, offer explanations as to how Rebekah received the prophecy. The theory of the

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[96]Josephus, Antiquities I:XVIII,1.

[97]Philo, Questions and Answers on Genesis 156, p. 440.

[98]P.T. Sotah 29a; Genesis Rabbah 63.8; Midrash Tehillim 42a/b.

Palestinian Talmud, that "the words fell on her" is unique to that text.[99] Both Genesis Rabbah and Midrash Tehillim suggest that she received the word of God through her ancestor, Noah's son Shem. That particular explanation is popular in the medieval texts.[100] Genesis Rabbah offers the alternative explanation that she received the prophecy through an angel, a theory which is also echoed in the medieval period.[101]

Despite the unanimous agreement of the early rabbis that Rebekah did not speak with God directly, and the tendency of medieval rabbis to echo those texts, two medieval works -- Yalqut Shimoni and Ramban's commentary -- do view Rebekah as receiving the prophecy herself. Perhaps it is in the nature of a midrashic anthology to contain a variety of material, some of it even self-contradictory, for we see in Yalqut Shimoni both material supporting the notion that Rebekah received the word from Shem and aggadic material insisting that she heard it herself. First, and perhaps not in conflict with the notion that she received the Genesis 25:23 prophecy from Shem, we are told that

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[99]P.T. Sotah 29a.

[100]Genesis Rabbah 63.8 and Midrash Tehillim 42a/b; also Yalqut Shimoni I, 110; Midrash Aggadah to Genesis 25:23; Genesis Rabbati 63c. Zohar 137b says she went to the Academy of Shem and Ever. Sefer Hayyashar to Genesis 25:23 says she went to the Academy of Shem and Ever and to Abraham, and heard God's word from all three.

[101]Genesis Rabbah 63.8; also Leqah Tov to Genesis 25:23.

Rebekah's fall from the camel when she first sees Isaac in Genesis 24:64 is a result of her being told "by the Holy Spirit that, in the future, Esau the evil one would come out from [Isaac]."[102] Later, we are offered a variant text of God's speech to Rebekah in Genesis 25:23. Beginning with the words, "He (God) told her . . .," the text portrays God as telling Rebekah that she is like a vineyard "who is destined to fill the Garden of Eden with righteous ones [the Garden of Eden being, of course, the ultimate distination of Jacob and his descendants] and Gehinom with evil ones [the descendants of Esau]."[103]

Ramban does not even wonder whether or not God spoke directly to Rebekah. Rather, as he approaches Genesis 27, he asks a different, but related, question. How, Ramban asks, could Isaac call Esau for the blessing of the firstborn, when God had declared that Jacob is to be dominant in Genesis 25:23? The answer, implying that Rebekah had received the prophecy from God, is that she never told Isaac. Moreover, Ramban sees this secretiveness as being to her credit. Rebekah theorized, Ramban argues, that Isaac, loving Esau, would not want to bless Jacob. Her act of trickery in Genesis 27, on the other hand, allows Isaac to bless Jacob "with a full heart and a happy soul,"

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[102]Yalqut Shimoni I, 109.

[103]Yalqut Shimoni I, 110.

believing in naive bliss that he is blessing Esau.[104] Ramban's theory, of course, is consistent with Rebekah's general character: she takes matters into her own hands and is the primary actor in every scene involving her.

Rambam's argument notwithstanding, the primary rabbinic portrait of Rebekah's contact with God in Genesis 25:23 contrasts with Rebekah's generally dominant character. The rabbis, unable to reconcile themselves with the notion of a woman in direct contact with God, remove Rebekah one degree from the center of action by placing an intermediary between her and God.

C. Summary

We began this chapter by noting the extent to which Rebekah stands at the center of the action in the passage at hand. While the midrashic commentary to this section seems to center disparately on four different topics without a common thread, Rebekah's centrality might be one issue that is significantly touched at least by the last three topics discussed.

Where Rebekah does not seem to be present, in the prayer for progeny, the rabbis draw her into the action. She is said by many to have joined in Isaac's prayer, or to have prayed her own, or at least to have instigated his praying, even if her prayer is not the one answered. On the

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[104]Ramban's commentary to Genesis 27:4.

matters of barrenness and Rebekah's dialogue with God, however, the matriarch appears to be the only person involved. Here the rabbis push her away just a little, bringing in Isaac in the former case and an intermediary in the latter. Rebekah's character, it would seem, militates against her absence in a matter that involves her. On the other hand, the rabbis do not seem comfortable with her being the only person at the center of a given scene.

Another issue that unites at least two of the four concerns addressed in this chapter is contact with God. Again, some ambivalence is evident in the minds of the rabbis. They can not allow her to be totally absent in praying for progeny, and yet she can not be fully present in verses 22-23. The main problem, though, is not Rebekah's approach to God, but God's response to Rebekah. Here, the early rabbis, at least, are resolute. Even if she prayed for progeny, hers is not the prayer answered. Even if she sought God during a difficult pregnancy, God did not respond to her directly.

We should not be surprised. The rabbis clearly did not view the women in their midst as having access to God equal to their own; they could not have viewed Isaac and Rebekah, a couple of prototypical Jews, as having equivalent experiences with the Divine.

CHAPTER IV

GENESIS 27:1-17,41-46; 28:1-3:

REBEKAH'S INVERVENTIONS ON JACOB'S BEHALF

27 [1]When Isaac was old and his eyes were too
dim to see, he called his older son Esau and
said to him, "My son." He answered, "Here I
am." [2]And he said, "I am old now, and I do
not know how soon I may die. [3]Take your
gear, your quiver and bow, and go out into
the open and hunt me some game. [4]Then
prepare a dish for me such as I like, and
bring it to me to eat, so that I may give you
my innermost blessing before I die."
[5]Rebekah had been listening as Isaac spoke
to his son Esau. When Esau had gone out into
the open to hunt game to bring home, [6]Rebekah
said to her son Jacob, "I overheard your
father speaking to your brother Esau, saying,
[7]'Bring me some game and prepare a dish for
me to eat, that I may bless you, with the
LORD's approval, before I die.' [8]Now, my
son, listen carefully as I instruct you. [9]Go
to the flock and fetch me two choice kids,
and I will make of them a dish for your
father, such as he likes. [10]Then take it to
your father to eat, in order that he may
bless you before he dies." [11]Jacob answered
his mother Rebekah, "But my brother Esau is a
hairy man and I am smooth-skinned. [12]If my
father touches me, I shall appear to him as a
trickster and bring upon myself a curse, not
a blessing." [13]But his mother said to him,
"Your curse, my son, be upon me! Just do as
I say and go fetch them for me."
[14]He got them and brought them to his
mother, and his mother prepared a dish such
as his father liked. [15]Rebekah then took the
best clothes of her older son Esau, which
were there in the house, and had her younger
son Jacob put them on; [16]and she covered his
hands and the hairless part of his neck with
the skins of the kids. [17]Then she put in the
hands of her son Jacob the dish and the bread
that she had prepared.

[41]Now Esau harbored a grudge against Jacob
because of the blessing which his father had
given him, and Esau said to himself, "Let but
the mourning period of my father come, and I
will kill my brother Jacob." [42]When the
words of her older son Esau were reported to
Rebekah, she sent for her younger son Jacob
and said to him, "Your brother Esau is
consoling himself by planning to kill you.
[43]Now, my son, listen to me. flee at once to

Haran, to my brother Laban. 44Stay with him
a while, until your brother's fury subsides -
- 45until your brother's anger against you
subsides -- and he forgets what you have done
to him. Then I will fetch you from there.
Let me not lose you both in one day!"
46Rebekah said to Isaac, "I am disgusted
with my life because of the Hittite women.
If Jacob marries a Hittite woman like these,
from among the native women, what good will
life be to me?" 28 1So Isaac sent for Jacob
and blessed him. He instructed him, saying,
"You shall not take a wife from among the
Canaanite women. 2Up, go to Paddan-aram, to
the house of Bethuel, your mother's father,
and take a wife there from among the
daughters of Laban, your mother's brother.

A. The Biblical Narrative

Rebekah's extensive involvement in the action of Genesis 24 and Genesis 25:19-24 is merely a prelude to the narrative of Genesis 27:1-28:2, in which the matriarch is in nearly total control. If the story of Isaac and Rebekah serves in the biblical narrative primarily as a link between the more significant Abraham and Jacob narratives,[105] the present passage is the climactic moment at which the connection is made, for it is here that Jacob's sole ascendancy to the position of patriarch is assured. Not surprisingly, from what we now know of Rebekah's character, it is she who engineers both Isaac's blessing of Jacob, the event tantamount to his coronation as the next patriarch, and Jacob's departure to Paddan-aram, where his own story

[105]See p. 18.

begins in earnest. J.P. Fokkelman, perhaps, characterizes the entire passage and Rebekah's role in it best, when he writes:

> [Rebekah] may claim to be the auctor intellectualis of the whole event! She eavesdrops in verse 5; she sets about doing things at once, does not shun responsibility in the least (verse 13: ʿalay qillatekha beniy ["'Your curse, my son, be upon me'"]), and influences Jacob, who at first mutters objections (verse 11f). She also ensures a "good result" and saves Jacob's life (verse 42f), to that purpose cleverly calling in the help of the father. In short, she manipulates to perfection. Genesis 27 -- cherchez la femme.[106]

Fokkelman is, of course, correct. Rebekah is the manipulative primary actor in the two critical scenes of the chapter. First, in verses 5-17, on learning that the aging Isaac plans to confer his blessing upon his eldest son, she devises and causes Jacob to implement a plan to trick Isaac into blessing Jacob instead. Later, in verses 42-46, finding out that Esau plans to bring physical harm to the brother who has just stolen his birthright, Rebekah convinces Isaac to send her favorite son to Haran. She does this, however, without revealing her fear for Jacob's safety, stressing endogamy instead.

Although this action takes place in Genesis 27, it is foreshadowed by a biblical statement which immediately follows Jacob's and Esau's birth. Genesis 25:28 tells us, "Isaac favored Esau because he had a taste for game; but

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[106]Fokkelman, Narrative Art, p. 100.

Rebekah favored Esau." Notably, this text, which does tell us why Isaac prefered Esau, does not offer a specific reason for Rebekah's favoritism toward Jacob. Perhaps we are expected to remember God's words to the matriarch in verse 23, which announce the younger twin's eventual domination, but verse 28 does not confirm that the word of God is the motivation behind Rebekah's preference.

Robert Alter argues that the biblical text is purposeful in not providing a specific justificaiton for Rebekah's greater love of Isaac. By stating a trivial reason for Isaac's favoritism and not giving any for hers, Alter argues, the text implies that Rebekah's preference is morally superior to Isaac's:

> Genesis 25:28 provides an almost diagrammatic illustration of the Bible's artful procedure of variously stipulating or suppressing motive in order to elicit moral inferences and suggest certain ambiguities. Isaac's preference for Esau is given a causal explanation so specific that it verges on satire: he loves the elder twin because of his own fondness for game. Rebekah's love for Jacob is contrastively stated without explanation. Presumably, this would suggest that her affection is not dependent on a merely maternal convenience that the son might provide her, that it is a more justly grounded preference.[107]

Fokkelman, on the other hand, reads Genesis 25:28 very differently. We have moved, he suggests, to a new phase in the relationship between Isaac and Rebekah. To this point, the couple has been harmonious, particularly in the pursuit

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[107]Alter, Biblical Narrative, p. 44.

of progeny. From this point forward, they move apart, seeking different ends, particularly in Genesis 27. The distance between Isaac and Rebekah, Fokkelman argues, is evident from the moment that their different preferences among the twins is announced:

> Rebekah's special liking for Jacob and Isaac's preference for Esau (which runs via the stomach and is definitely pre-reflexively rooted . . .) reveal something of a gulf between the two married people. Could they grow apart, perhaps, by the coming of these two very different children?[108]

The deepening chasm within the family is, indeed, the theme of Fokkelman's commentary on Genesis 27. In both episodes of the chapter in which Rebekah appears -- verses 5-17 and 42-46 -- Fokkelman correctly sees Rebekah as manipulating her husband and favorite son into complying with her action against Esau. Jacob is an almost unwitting accomplice; Isaac is completely snowed, especially in the chapter's closing verses; and Esau is the loser at every turn.[109] Yes, Fokkelman argues, Rebekah is the primary actor of Genesis 27, but her actions have utterly torn the family apart:

> Finally we see scheming behind the scenes the originator of all the misery and the one who is responsible in the first place, Rebekah. She denies her husband and her marriage, she contrives to deprive Esau of his being for her darling's benefit, she urges Jacob to vile deceit. Now she is the only one guilty

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[108]Fokkelman, Narrative Art, p. 94.

[109]Ibid., pp. 101-105.

with respect to all the others.[110]

Fokkelman nevertheless wonders whether Rebekah is to be credited with bringing about the will of God. He answers this question in the negative, however, noting that neither Rebekah nor Jacob ever receives divine instruction to actualize the prophecy of Genesis 25:23 that Jacob is to be dominant. Rebekah's actions in this passage can not be viewed as simply carrying out the word of God; she acts out of her own needs and preferences, or at least out of her own strong sense of what God desires.[111]

Fokkelman's assessment of Rebekah's action in Genesis 27 is particularly harsh. One could, of course, argue the other side, claiming that Rebekah, knowing God's preference, acts out of unswerving allegiance to the Divine. Moreover, from the perspective of the Bible itself, Rebekah's actions do seem to achieve the desired result: Jacob's ascendancy to the status of patriarch is assured, and the stage is set for his eventual endogamous marriage.

After Genesis 27, Rebekah does not appear in the biblical narrative, except for a few mentions of her name for the purpose of identifying other characters. There is no need for her to do so. The story of Jacob has begun in earnest; the link from the previous generation to the next has been made. Rebekah has been the primary actor in making

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[110] Ibid., pp. 119-120.

[111] Ibid., p. 120.

this connection. She has served her purpose.

B. Midrashic Responses

In contrast to the other biblical narratives in which Rebekah is a prominent actor, the midrash on the matriarch's actions in Genesis 27 is sparse. There is almost no discussion of Rebekah's motivations, and relatively little comment on her actions. Perhaps, by this point, the rabbis are used to Rebekah's significant role, and see no reason for further comment. On the other hand, we saw that, in commenting on Genesis 24, the early rabbis tended to deemphasize Rebekah's actions in favor of God's.[112] Moreover, in examining the midrash to Genesis 25:19-24, we observed that, when Rebekah is particularly dominant in the biblical narrative itself, the rabbis tend to downplay her role.[113] Maybe, then, the lack of commentary on Genesis 27 results from the rabbis' uncomfortableness with Rebekah's commanding position in the narrative.

Those passages which can be found in the midrash to respond to Rebekah's role in Genesis 27 can be organized around three central themes. First, there are a very few comments on the question of the motivations behind her actions. Second, and most significantly, there is discussion of what some of the rabbis view as demonstrations

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[112]See Chapter II.

[113]See Chapter III.

of Rebekah's prophetic powers in the chapter. In particular, the rabbis ask how Rebekah knew what she knew at two significant points in the narrative: verse 5, where we are told that she is aware of Isaac's plan to bless Esau, and verse 42, where we learn that Rebekah is cognizant of Esau's plan to harm Jacob. Finally, there are several pieces of midrash which discuss -- and occasionally expand upon -- Rebekah's specific actions on Jacob's behalf.

1. Rebekah's Motivations

Genesis 27 does not itself inform the reader of Rebekah's reasons for devising and implementing a plan for Jacob to secure Isaac's blessing. We do, of course, already know that Jacob is her favorite son, and that well might be reason enough. We also know that God has told Rebekah that Jacob is to be the dominant twin. Again, we might simply assume that she is implementing God's plan, although she receives no specific instruction to do so. Therefore, although the text does not reveal Rebekah's motivation to us, we might make our own eduacated guesses.

The midrashic comments about Rebekah's motivations total three pieces, all found in medieval midrashic anthologies. The early rabbis do not question her motivation at all. Perhaps they simply assume that she acts on Jacob's behalf because he is her favorite and/or because of her having been told by God that Jacob would be dominant.

Even the three pieces of midrash we do have on the subject do not specifically say that they are giving us Rebekah's motivation. They do, however, provide us with two possible explanations for the matriarch's actions, neither of them being exactly what we might have guessed.

A tradition in Midrash Aggadah and its parallel in Leqah Tov suggest that Jacob's responsiveness to his mother is the motivating factor behind her action. In a comment to Genesis 27:6, the point at which Rebekah begins to reveal her plan to Jacob, we are told:

> "Rebekah said to her son Jacob . . ." Was Esau not also her son? But Jacob listened to his father and his mother, as it is said, "Jacob heard [his father and his mother] . . . (Genesis 28:7), whereas Esau heard only his father. Therefore, the text calls him "her son."[114]

Perhaps this explanation for Rebekah's motivation is similar to the notion that she acted because Jacob was her favorite. This time, though, we are given a specific reason for her favoritism that is rooted in Jacob's behavior: his responsiveness to her.

In contrast, Yalqut Shimoni offers an explanation that is similar to the notion that Rebekah acted in order to implement God's intention -- revealed to her in Genesis 25:23 -- that Jacob be dominant. Although that specific

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[114]Midrash Aggadah to Genesis 27:6. Leqah Tov to Genesis 27:6 is parallel.

passage is not mentioned, the text in Yalqut Shimoni does indicate that Rebekah was motivated by desire to fulfill the will of God, and specifically rejects the notion that she acted because Jacob was her favorite:

> "One who declares a wicked one righteous and one who delares a righteous one wicked -- both are an abomination to the LORD." It was not because Rebekah loved Jacob more than Esau that she did this thing, rather she said, "He must not come and err on behalf of the elder." As it is written, ". . . both are an abomination to the LORD."[115]

Rebekah's motivation, then, is not a serious issue for the rabbis, despite the fact that it presents itself rather boldly to the modern reader of the biblical text. The little comment we do have seems to divide more or less along the lines of what we might have guessed: Rebekah acted on Jacob's behalf because she favored him -- perhaps because of his own behavior -- and/or because she believed that, by ensuring that Jacob would receive Isaac's blessing, she was doing God's work.

2. Rebekah as Prophet

In the previous chapter, we saw that the rabbis approach Rebekah's contacts with God with a marked degree of ambivalence, neither wishing to see her as totally absent from the prayer for progeny in Genesis 25:21, nor in direct contact with the divine two verses later. Genesis 27 does

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[115]Yalqut Shimoni I, 113. The verse from Proverbs is translated according to the midrash's usage of the verse.

not mention any conversation between Rebekah and God. Nevertheless, several rabbinic texts suggest that the matriarch did receive some kind of heavenly communication at two different points in the chapter. Again, the contact with God is not presumed to be direct. However, the rabbis do create a prophetic role for Rebekah where the text does not necessarily demand it.

The first incident that occasions rabbinic speculation that Rebekah received a communication from the Divine in Genesis 27 occurs in verse 5. The New Jewish Version tell us that Rebekah knew about Isaac's plan to bless Esau because "Rebekah had been listening as Isaac spoke to Esau." That translation, though, is, like all translations, an interpretation, for the Hebrew text uses the verb shoma'at, "she heard," not higshivah, "she listened."

A text in the medieval anthology Leqah Tov agrees with the translation of the New Jewish Version, charging that Rebekah listened in on Isaac's conversation with Esau: "'Rebekah heard . . .' From this [we learn] that women are eavesdroppers."[116] An earlier text, however, found in Tanhuma Hannidpas, demonstrates a very different understanding, saying, "[I]t was told to Rebekah through a holy spirit."[117] We have, here, two very different interpretations, reflecting widely diverging views of the

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[116]Leqah Tov to Genesis 27:5.

[117]Tanhuma Hannidpas, Toledot 10.

matriarch. Leqah Tov portrays Rebekah as a nosey woman, whereas Tanhuma Hannidpas depicts her as a woman in contact with the Divine. Unfortunately, other midrashim do not seem concerned with the question of how Rebekah heard Isaac's plan to bless Esau, so we will have to turn to rabbinic interpretations of another incident for broader comment.

How Rebekah learns of Esau's plan to kill Jacob is at least as mysterious as how she finds out about Isaac's plan to bless the elder twin. The text says simply, in verse 42, that "the words of her older son Esau were reported to Rebekah." Again, though, the translation of the New Jewish Version uses a stronger verb than that which is found in the original text. Instead of "reported," the Hebrew word is vayyuggad, "told." We do not know who told her, or how.

The Book of Jubilees theorizes that Rebekah learned of Esau's plan "in a dream."[118] Going even further, Genesis Rabbah, in a text echoed much later in Yalqut Shimoni, says simply:

> "The words of her older son Esau were told to Rebekah . . ." Who told her? R. Haggai said in the name of R. Yishaq: "The matriarchs were prophets, and Rebekah was among the matriarchs."[119]

Both the explanation of Jubilees, and that of Genesis Rabbah and Yalqut Shimoni are in line with the view of Rebekah demonstrated by Tanhuma Hanndipas. By and large, the rabbis

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[118]The Book of Jubilees 27:1.

[119]Genesis Rabbah 67.9; Yalqut Shimoni I, 116.

see Rebekah as connected to God, at least in some way.

Two other incidents in Genesis 27 contribute to this view of Rebekah as prophet. The first seems to be a simple detail among her instructions to Jacob as she schemes to secure Isaac's blessing for him. "Fetch me two choice kids," she tells him in verse 9. The authors of two Palestinian gaonic works, Pesiqta Rabbati and Tanhuma Hannidpas, knowing that two goats are sacrificed on Yom Kippur, call Rebekah's request for two goats here prophetic. The text, as it appears in Pesiqta Rabbati, is:

> "Go to the flock and fetch me two good kids . . ." What is [the meaning of] "good"? R. Berakhah said R. Helbo said: "She meant, '[The kids are] good for you and good for your children. They are good for you, since you will go in and feed your father and take the blessing from him. They are good for your children, who will defile themselves with sins all the days of the year, and then bring two kids on Yom Kippur to sacrifice to atone for them.'"[120]

Again, God is not mentioned. However, the texts must clearly assume that Rebekah has prophetic power if they assert that she is aware of the religious practice of Jacob's descendants.

The other incident in Genesis 27 that occasions a rabbinic statement that Rebekah was a prophet is the matriarch's desperate plea to Jacob in verse 45, where she says, referring to her two sons, "Let me not lose you both

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[120]Pesiqta Rabbati, Pisqa 47, Subsection 4; Tanhuma Hannipas Toledot 10 and 'Emor 12.

in one day!" An aggadah in the Babylonian Talmud, which depicts a scene in which Esau attempts to prevent Jacob from being buried in the last remaining spot at the Cave of the Makhpelah, describes Rebekah's plea as a prophecy fulfilled:

> Dan's son Hushim was there, and he was hard of hearing. He asked them, "What is going on?" They said to him, "[Esau] is preventing [Jacob's burial] until Naftali comes from the Land of Egypt." [Hushim] replied, "Until Naftali comes from the Land of Egypt, my father's father hangs in contempt." Thereupon, he took a pole and struck [Esau] on the head. [Esau's] eyes fell out and fell down to Jacob's feet. Jacob opened his eyes and smiled. And that is why it is written, "The righteous person shall be glad when he sees vengeance. He shall wash his feet in the blood of the wicked" (Psalms 58:11). At that moment, Rebekah's prophecy was fulfilled, as it is written, "Why must I lose you both in one day?" (Genesis 27:45). Even though they did not die on the same day, they were buried on the same day.[121]

The text of Genesis 27 itself does not necessarily indicate any prophetic action on Rebekah's part. God is not even mentioned in the context of her actions. Nevertheless, several different rabbinic traditions see a number of occasions in the narrative as depicting Rebekah's prophetic powers. When we consider this phenomenon together with that which we observed about the rabbinic reactions to Genesis 25:21,23, we have a heightened sense of the rabbis' ambivalence with regard to Rebekah's contact with the Divine. Where the text depicts the matriarch in

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[121]B.T. Sotah 13a. The biblical verses are translated according to their usage in this midrashic passage.

conversation with God, the rabbis find the need to place some distance between the conversants. Where God is not obviously present in Rebekah's actions, however, the rabbis posit some contact, though they still do not suggest direct dialogue. The modern reader, then, is left with an ambiguous model. Rebekah is a woman who has some relationship with God and certain powers that derive from the Divine, but she is also a woman to whom direct conversation with God is denied.

3. Specific Actions on Jacob's Behalf

Given the number of verses in which Rebekah is involved in significant action in Genesis 27, one might well expect extensive rabbinic comment. The midrashists, however, have very little to say about what Rebekah does in the chapter. Where they do comment, it is to explain or expand upon her actions here and there in ways that are not inconsistent with the biblical narrative.

One midrash, actually a comment on Genesis 25:22 but recounted here as it fits the theme of Rebekah's interventions on Jacob's behalf, is Midrash Haggadol's explanation of the pregnant matriarch's plea, "If so, why do I exist?" The author of this piece views the plea as a prayer on Jacob's behalf, which is particularly interesting because it comes before the revelation in verse 23 that Jacob is to be dominant:

> Another explanation of _'im ken lammah zeh 'anokhiy_ ("If it is thus, why do I exist?") _dorshey hareshumot_ (those who expound (hidden) signs) said: "Rebekah said before the Holy One of Blessing: 'Master of the world, _'im ken_ (if it is thus), that in the future Esau will kill and put an end to the wise, distinguished people who will descend from the children of Jacob, who will say before You at the Sea: "This is God and I exult Him?" And to whom will You say at Mt. Sinai, "The LORD is Your God?"' Immediately, she girded her loins and stood in prayer."[122]

Although this midrash reads Rebekah's actions on Jacob's behalf back into her pregnancy, earlier than any intervention suggested by the biblical text or any other midrashic text, it is not out of line with her character. One would expect the matriarch to act to achieve her goals as soon as possible; her pregnancy is certainly the first possible moment at which she could intervene on her favorite son's behalf.

Moving into Genesis 27 itself, we find in verse 13 a statement by Rebekah, the meaning of which is not entirely clear. Attempting to coax the reluctant Jacob into acting on her plan to secure Isaac's blessing for himself, she says, "'Your curse, my son, be upon me!'" Although various midrashists read the verse differently, all agree that her saying this is, to varying degrees, to Rebekah's credit.

Philo understands Rebekah's statement in verse 13 as a literal willingness to be the recipient of any curse that might fall upon Jacob as a result of his participation in

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[122]Midrash Haggadol to Genesis 25:22.

tricking his father. The philosopher is particularly moved by Rebekah's words, seeing maternal love and selflessness as the keys to understanding her meaning:

> It is fitting, indeed, to admire the mother for the thoughtfulness of her goodwill, for she agrees to take upon herself the curse upon him.[123]

Genesis Rabbah offers two possible explanations for her statement. The first, stated in the name of R. Abba b. Kahana, is similar to Philo's understanding that any curse would actually fall to Rebekah. Here, though, Rebekah's statement is not viewed as charitable, but merely as a description of the natural order of things. The second explanation, cited in the name of R. Yishaq, is that Rebekah will take upon herself the responsibility of explaining to Isaac the reason for blessing Jacob instead of Esau. The text reads:

> "But his mother said to him: 'Your curse, my son, be upon me!'" (Genesis 27:13) R. Abba b. Kahana said: "When a man sins, is not his mother cursed, as it is written: 'Cursed be the ground because of you [Adam]' (Genesis 3:17); similarly, "'Your curse, my son, be upon me!'" R. Yishaq said: "[Rebekah meant,] 'It is my responsibility to go in and say to your father: "Jacob is righteous and Esau is evil."'"[124]

The two explanations of Genesis Rabbah form the basis for most of the later rabbinic literature on the subject. Both explanations are picked up in midrashic anthologies, though

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[123]Philo, Questions and Answers on Genesis, 202.

[124]Genesis Rabbah 65.11.

by different texts, Midrash Haggadol repeating R. Abba b. Kahana's opinion and Yalqut Shimoni echoing that of R. Yiṣḥaq.[125]

R. Yiṣḥaq's explanation, though, is not the only one offered by Midrash Haggadol. Elsewhere, the midrash insists that Rebekah stated her willingness to receive any curse that might befall Jacob because she knew that none would be forthcoming. Having received the word of God in Genesis 25:23, "the older shall serve the younger," we are told, Rebekah was confident that her plan would work.[126]

Moving on, we find that two midrashim address themselves to the final words about Rebekah's actions prior to Jacob's going in to receive Isaac's blessing. The words of verse 17 do not seem to require comment: "Then she put in the hands of her son Jacob the dish and the bread that she had prepared." Nevertheless, Philo seizes on these words as an opportunity to praise the matriarch, writing, "For a perfect life, it is fitting not only to wish for things worthy of pursuit and virtue, but also to do them."[127] The philosopher has indeed captured Rebekah's character: she is a doer.

Leqaḥ Tov finds in the same verse an opportunity to take Rebekah one small step further in the action. The

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[125]Midrash Haggadol to Genesis 27:13; Yalqut Shimoni I, 114.

[126]Midrash Haggadol to Genesis 27:13.

[127]Philo, Questions and Answers on Genesis, 205.

midrash suggests that verse 17 is, at first glance, superfluous. Of course Rebekah gave Jacob the food: she made it, and he presented it to Isaac. The verse must, therefore, be meant to convey some other information, namely, that "Rebekah came to accompany Jacob to [Isaac's] doorway."[128] Such an action would be consistent with Rebekah's character: she goes as far as she can to participate in the action of the narrative.

As little midrashic comment as there is on Rebekah's actions in verses 5-17, there is less still on Genesis 27:42 - 28:3. There is, however, a passage in Genesis Rabbah that tells us that, when Isaac blessed Jacob (28:1), Rebekah blessed him as well:

> Rebekah, his mother, also blessed him similarly, as it is written: "O you who dwell in the shelter of the Most High" (Psalms 91:1). And similarly, she said to him, "For He will order His angels to guard you wherever you go" (Psalms 91:11). When she had spoken to him in these words, blessing him, a Holy Spirit [responded]: "When he calls on Me, I will answer him" (Psalms 91:15).[129]

Perhaps because of the unclear connection of the verses from Psalm 91 to the present narrative, this midrash is not echoed in later texts. Nevertheless, the Genesis Rabbah passage is consistent with the rabbinic tendency to place Rebekah in the action when she is absent from the biblical

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[128]Leqah Tov to Genesis 27:17.

[129]Genesis Rabbah 75.8.

narrative. Rebekah is not present when Isaac blesses Jacob in Genesis 28:1-3. Given her generally pervasive presence, her absence here does not make sense to the authors of Genesis Rabbah, so she is placed at the scene.

Various midrashists also indicate that Rebekah was involved in two later episodes in which the biblical narrative itself does not place her. The first, a text from Sefer Hayyashar, describes Rebekah's intervention in the incident in Genesis 32-33, in which Jacob encounters Esau at the Jabbok River:

> Laban's messengers, when they left Esau, went to the Land of Canaan and came to the house of Rebekah, the mother of Jacob and Esau. They told her that her son Esau had gathered 400 men to meet his brother Jacob, for Esau had heard that Jacob was coming from Haran. Esau therefore was going to make war with him, smiting him and taking all that he had.
>
> Rebekah hastened, sending 72 men from among Isaac's servants to meet Jacob. The messengers went on the way and met Jacob at the crossing of the Jabbok River. And Jacob said when he saw them, "This camp is set up for me; it comes from God." And Jacob called the place Mahanayim."
>
> And Jacob recognized all his father's men, and he kissed and hugged them, and he asked about his parents. And they said, "<u>shalom</u>." And the servants said to Jacob: "Your mother sent us to say to you: 'I heard, my son, that your brother Esau has gone out to meet you with men from the children of Se'ir. And you, son, listen to my words and see by your counsel what you shall do. When Esau comes upon you, bend down before him and do not speak to him harshly, but give him gifts from that which you find in your hand and from that which God has bestowed upon you. And when he asks you something, do not keep anything from him. Perhaps he will turn away from his anger, for it is your responsibility

> to realize that he is your older brother.'"
> And it came to pass that, when Jacob had heard his mother's words which the messengers brought to him, Jacob lifted his voice and cried. And Jacob did as his mother had commanded him.[130]

The Bible does not mention Rebekah's name in the story of Jacob's encounter with Esau at the Jabbok. Nevertheless, to some extent, her involvement as described in Sefer Hayyashar fits her character: she controls the scene, just as she did Genesis 27:5-17, by instructing an obedient Jacob. On the other hand, Rebekah's instructions here differ significantly from her previous actions, in that here she is much more charitable in her attitude toward her older son. According to Sefer Hayyashar, unlike the Bible itself, Rebekah is responsible for healing the rift between the brothers that she has caused by her actions in Genesis 27.

Finally, we turn to Genesis 35:8, "Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, died, and was buried under the oak below Bethel; . . ." This verse will be discussed at length in the next chapter, as it is the occasion for much rabbinic discussion of Rebekah's death. The verse is introduced here, however, because it is seen by two medieval texts as indicating further involvement by Rebekah in Jacob's life.

The verse is curious, for Deborah's presence with Jacob has not previously been noted. Two medieval texts, Midrash Aggadah and Rashi's commentary, ask what Deborah is doing

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[130]Sefer Hayyashar, Vayyese).

here. Our attention, now, is called back to Genesis 27 where, in verses 44-45, Rebekah has instructed Jacob to go to Laban's house for safety until Esau's anger subsides; then, the matriarch promises, "I will fetch you from there." In the bibilical text, however, Rebekah's promise is not explicitly fulfilled. Rashi and Midrash Aggadah resolve two problems, the reason for Deborah's presence and the lack of follow-up to Rebekah's promise to retrieve Jacob from Paddan-aram, by combining them. Rebekah, we are told, had sent Deborah to "fetch" Jacob back to Canaan.[131] Again, the midrash fits Rebekah's character. She is not one to forget what she has said, or to totally disengage herself from her son's life. Once again, the rabbis indicate their uncomfortableness with allowing Rebekah to be absent. Once again, she is placed at the scene of the action.

C. Summary

Essentially, in examining Genesis 27 and the midrashic responses to it, we have reconfirmed that which we learned most profoundly in our study of Genesis 25:19-24. The rabbis are ambivalent about Rebekah in two important ways.

First, they have mixed feelings about Rebekah's encounters with the Divine. Where she is totally involved with God in the biblical text, the rabbis seek to distance her from God. Where no contact with God is mentioned, on

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[131]Midrash Aggadah to Genesis 35:8; Rashi to Genesis 35:8.

the other hand, they are often quick to posit some kind of contact with the Divine.

Second, they are ambivalent about Rebekah's dominant role in the narrative. Where her preeminence is inescapable, as it is in Genesis 27, the rabbis are reluctant to comment at all. Where she is not present, the midrash has a tendency to place her at the scene.

Unfortunately, the midrashic material before us does give us a clear picture of the rabbis' attitude toward Rebekah's manipulation of events. In the few passages in which the rabbis discuss the matriarch's actions, they do so descriptively, without evaluative comment. Perhaps, however, we can assume a positive attitude in the rabbis' silent evaluation. The midrash does not, in any way, describe Rebekah as a divisive force in her family, or indicate any negative repercussions to her actions. Rather, the rabbis seem to view the matriarch as carrying out the word of God that she has received in Genesis 25:23.

Ultimately, the rabbis can not avoid reinforcing the overarching biblical portrait of Rebekah. She is the principal actor in the scenes in which she appears. She controls events even when she is not present. Certainly in Genesis 27 and the passages related to it, she is -- to use Fokkelman's terms -- the auctor intellectualis, both in the biblical text itself and in the mind of the rabbis.

CHAPTER V

GENESIS 35:8-9: REBEKAH'S DEATH

35[8]Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, died, and was buried under the oak below Bethel; so it was named Allon-bacuth.[132] [9]God appeared again to Jacob on his arrival from Paddan-aram, and He blessed him.

Perhaps it is strange to begin a chapter which purports to discuss Rebekah's death by presenting a biblical passage which does not seem in any way to mention it. Indeed, like her birth, Rebekah's death is not recounted in the Bible at all. Biblical silence on a matter on which the Bible ought not have been silent is, however, frequently a cause for significant rabbinic comment. Thus, while the Bible is silent on the matter of Rebekah's death, the rabbis are not.

This does, not, however, answer the question of why this chapter begins with a quotation from Genesis 35:8-9, a passage which does recount the death of someone close to Rebekah, namely her nurse Deborah, but which does not mention Rebekah's own death. We focus, nevertheless, on these two verses, because all rabbinic discussion of Rebekah's death has centered around midrashic readings of them.

Before examining the rabbinic presentations of Rebekah's death, we turn to two non-rabbinic texts from the intertestamental period which provide interesting explanations of Rebekah's death without reference to Genesis 35:8-9.

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[132]Translators' note: "Understood as 'the oak of the weeping.'"

A. Josephus and Jubilees

Josephus seems undaunted by the Bible's failure to explain Rebekah's death. He simply assumes it had happened before Jacob's return to Canaan, writing:

> From there [Bethlehem and Rachel's death] [Jacob] came to Hebron, a city in Canaanite territory, where Isaac had his abode. They lived but a short while together, for Jacob did not find Rebecca alive and Isaac also died not long after the coming of his son. He was buried by his children beside his wife at Hebron in their ancestral tomb.[133]

Claiming to provide a history of the patriarchal/matriarchal period without specific reference to or claimed dependance on the Bible, Josephus has the luxury of tieing the matter up neatly. Therefore, while he does not provide any details of Rebekah's death, he does provide a proper place for her. Closure is put on Rebekah's life in Josephus' history: she has indeed died. Moreover, Josephus informs us of her burial place, the one which we would expect: the patriarchal/matriarchal burial place (presumably the Cave of the Machpelah) in Hebron.

The Book of Jubilees takes a rather different and fascinating approach. In a full chapter devoted to describing events surrounding Rebekah's death, a fascinating narrative unfolds. First, Rebekah forces Jacob to swear to honor Isaac and, surprisingly, Esau. Only after he agrees

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[133]Josephus, Antiquities I:XXII.

do we come to know why she is addressing such a topic: she has prophesied her own imminent demise. Next, Rebekah turns her attentions to Isaac. She effectively forces him to swear to force Esau to swear not to harm Jacob. Then, she proceeds to convince Isaac that her favorite son, Jacob, should now, finally, be Isaac's favorite too. We are not surprised when she is successful, and Isaac declares that Jacob is his favorite son. Next, she turns her attention to Esau, imploring him to bury her near Sarah and to love Jacob. Even Esau accedes to her requests. Penultimately, in two brief verses that seem to be afterthoughts if not indeed accretions, she instructs Jacob about her burial and implores him to love Esau. Finally, she dies as she has prophesied and is buried according to her instructions.[134]

By providing a rather detailed narrative to explain Rebekah's death, Jubilees -- like Antiquities, a prototypic narrative midrash -- clearly attempts to fill a biblical gap by providing such a complete account for this recapitulation of the Genesis narrative. At first glance, the author(s) succeeds. We see Rebekah as both prophet and manipulator, roles in which we have seen her before. Here, though, the event that she prophesies is her own death, and -- in contrast to certain actions which are described in Chapter IV as perhaps home-wrecking[135] -- her manipulation here is

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[134]The Book of Jubilees, Chapter 35 (all).

[135]See pages 82-83.

aimed at family reconciliation. Perhaps, indeed, the Rebekah character in this Jubilees account of her death is a charicature of the biblical Rebekah. Here her manipulation is almost too immediately successful, her vision almost too clear. Nevertheless, she is still recognizably Rebekah, in charge of her life and the lives of the members of her family to her end.

Neither Josephus nor the author(s) of Jubilees base their theories on Genesis 35:8-9 or any other biblical passage. Indeed, neither even acknowledges that the Bible is silent on the matter of Rebekah's death. Both create their own scenarios to fill in the gap that neither admits. The rabbis, who, except when composing narrative midrashim, are bound by their exegetical methodology, generally do not grant themselves the luxury of creating explanations of Rebekah's death without both confronting the biblical silence and finding a biblical excuse for filling the gap. Therefore, we should not be surprised to find that neither Josephus' nor Jubilees' explanation of Rebekah's is widely echoed in the portraits of the rabbis.

B. Evolution of the Midrash on Genesis 35:8-9

Any examination of the development of rabbinic attempts to base an explanation of Rebekah's death on Genesis 35:8-9 must begin with at least a quick examination of those verses themselves. We shall see that the rabbis based their

theories on these verses not only because there is no actual biblical mention of Rebekah's death, but also because Genesis 35:8-9, and especially verse 8, are themselves problematic, raising the possibility of broad interpretation.

The events of Genesis 35 take place at Bethel, where Jacob had spent the night and dreamed of angels on a ladder in Genesis 28, after leaving his mother and father to flee from Esau and journey toward Paddan-aram. Jacob's return to Bethel on his way back to Hebron is a fitting parallel to the events of Genesis 28. Just as Jacob had "set up a pillar" before leaving Bethel in Genesis 28, he "built an altar" upon his return in Genesis 35. Just as he has an encounter with God in his dramatic dream at Bethel in Genesis 28, he again meets God in Genesis 35, and his name is changed to Israel.

Verse 8 intrudes between the two central events of Genesis 35, the building of the altar and the encounter with God. Moreover, the verse appears to have no connection to either of these two dramatic events, and no link is made anywhere else in the chapter. Further still, no connection is made to link Jacob to Deborah's death. We are told merely that she has died and been buried, not that Jacob buries her or mourns for her. To use rabbinic terminology, this verse is crying out, <u>darsheini</u>, "expound upon me," for its function in its biblical context is entirely unclear.

Verse 9 begins the events of the encounter of God, and is not difficult to understand in that context. One aspect of verse 9, however, is not entirely clear. We are told, vayyera' 'elohim 'el-ya'aqov 'od . . ., "God appeared again to Jacob . . ." The meaning of the word 'od, "again," is clouded, for there is no apparent antecedent. The best theory might be that this is a reference back to chapter 28, but that is not made explicit. More troubling to the rabbis are the words, "He blessed him." As we shall see below, the rabbis ask, "With what blessing did God bless him?" To the biblical reader, God's address to Jacob in verses 10-12, the speech in which God changes Jacob's name to Israel,[136] is undoubtedly the blessing that God bestows on Jacob here. It would seem, however, that the pronouncement of verses 10-12 does not meet the rabbis' definition of a "blessing."

The earliest rabbinic text to explain Genesis 35:8-9 as based on Rebekah's death is Genesis Rabbah. All the rabbinic material on the matter which follows may be viewed as building upon or adapting this Genesis Rabbah account:

> R. Shmuel b. Nachman said: ['elon bakhut, "the oak of weeping] is Greek for 'elon aher ("the oak of another"). When he was observing the mourning period for Deborah, [he received] the news that his mother had died. Thus does it say: "God appeared again to Jacob on his arrival from Paddan-aram, and He blessed him." What blessing did he bless

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[136]To be sure, the changing of Jacob's name to Israel has already taken place in Genesis 32:28-29. However, in that case, the "man" who has just wrestled with Jacob confers the new name. Here, the renaming is repeated in the name of God.

him? R. Aha b. Yonatan said: He blessed him with the mourner's blessing.[137]

The aggada of Genesis Rabbah has two central elements. First, it suggests that the biblical name of Deborah's burial place, "the oak of weeping," is a direct suggestion that Jacob received word of his mother's death. This theory is based on the apparent association of the Hebrew word for "weeping," bakhut, with the Greek word for "another." While a modern scholar would certainly dismiss the notion that the author(s) of Genesis 35 knew Greek, we should not be surprised to find the early rabbis responsible for Genesis Rabbah basing an interpretation on what seemed to them to be a close association of a Hebrew word with a Greek one. Second, the rabbis solve two problems with one solution. Both troubled by a lack of accounting for Rebekah's death and the aforementioned missing explanation of God's blessing in verse 9, they put the two together and argue that God here bestowed the "mourner's blessing" upon Jacob. Interestingly, and perhaps because it so neatly solves two difficulties at once, this interpretation of verse 9 became standard rabbinic fare. Practically every later account of Rebekah's death includes this explanation of verse 9 and the "mourner's blessing."[138]

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[137]Genesis Rabbah 81.5.

[138]Tanhuma Hannidpas Ki Teṣei 4; Tanhuma Buber Ki Teṣei 4; Pesiqta deRav Kahana 3.1; Pesiqta Rabbati, Pisqa 12, Subsection 4; Yalqut Shimoni I, 135; Midrash Aggadah to Genesis 35:9; Rashi to Genesis 35:8; Ramban to Genesis 35:8.

One interesting element of the Genesis Rabbah account is an omission: the text does not ask why Rebekah's death is not mentioned in the Bible, and does not seek to answer this question. Just as Genesis Rabbah seeks to fill a void in the Bible, later midrash will attempt to close this gap in the earlier midrashic tradition.

Just as we might not have been surprised to find an explanation based on an association with Greek in a fifth century text, we are not startled when we find that the "oak of weeping - oak of another" part of the Genesis Rabbah account does not appear in later texts from times and places where Greek may not have been well-known in the Jewish community. Even in texts as early as Tanhuma Hannidpas, Tanhuma Buber, and Pesiqta deRav Kahana, the explanation does not appear. In these three texts, however, the "oak of another" interpretation is directly replaced by a reading of ʾelon bakhut as ʾelon bakhot, which is interpreted by these texts to mean "two tears."[139]

These slightly later texts also add another element which is carried through most of the remaining development of the rabbinic material on Rebekah's death by seeking to fill the aforementioned gap left by Genesis Rabbah, namely the failure to ask why the Bible does not recount Rebekah's demise. The answer, we are told, is clear when we consider

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[139]Tanhuma Ki Teṣei 4; Tanhuma Buber Ki Teṣei 4; Pesiqta deRav Kahana 3.1; also found later in Yalqut Shimoni I, 135.

who was able to bury her. We are reminded that "Abraham was dead; Isaac's eyes were dim and he stayed at home; and Jacob had gone to Paddan-Aram." That, of course, leaves Esau. Various texts tell us that the Bible does not recount the scene because Rebekah was cursed by those who saw her body being brought out by Esau, or because Esau brought her body out at night in order to avoid such a curse. In either case, the midrashim tell us that the Bible uses the devices of "the oak of weeping" of verse 8 and the "blessing" of verse 9 to hint at Rebekah's death in order to inform us that Rebekah has died without revealing the ignominious circumstances in which her body was taken out to burial.[140]

One succinct example of the midrashim which explain the Bible's quiescence as resulting from Esau's wickedness is found in Midrash Aggadah:

> Why does [the text] not recount Rebekah's death? Because her son was Esau, and she was buried at night because of Esau, so that nobody would say, "May such and such befall the womb in which such a man was formed."[141]

Pesiqta Rabbati puts an interesting twist on this same explanation. Rebekah herself, we are told, commanded that her body be brought out to be buried at night, in order to save herself from being cursed by those who would see her

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[140]Midrash Tanhuma Ki Tesei 4; Tanhuma Buber Ki Tesei 4; Pesiqta deRav Kahana 3.1; Pesiqta Rabbati, Pisqa 12, Subsection 4; Yalqut Shimoni I, 135; Midrash Aggadah to Genesis 35:9; Rashi to Genesis 35:8.

[141]Midrash Aggadah to Genesis 35:8.

body borne by the wicked Esau.[142] This particular innovation in the development of the midrash is reminiscent of the narrative in the Book of Jubilees, in that both make use of Rebekah's tendency to control situations. Here, however, Rebekah's level of control is not taken to the sort of extremes evidenced in Jubilees, and is in fact quite in line with her character.

One final explanation of Rebekah's death that we will examine is that found in Sefer Hayyashar:

> At that time, Deborah the daughter of Utz, Rebekah's nurse, who was with Jacob, died. And Jacob buried her under Bethel, under the oak that was there. And Rebekah the duaghter of Bethuel, Jacob's mother, also died. She died at that time in Hebron, which is Kiryat-Arba, and she was buried in the Cave of the Machpelah, which Abraham had bought from the sons of Heth. And the life of Rebekah was 133 years; and she died. And Jacob heard that Rebekah his mother had died, and he cried a great deal over his mother. And he made a great lamentation for her and for Deborah, the nurse, under the oak. And he called that place <u>'elon bakhut</u>, the crying-oak.[143]

Like the earlier rabbinic interpretations, Sefer Hayyashar bases its story about Rebekah's death on Genesis 35:8. In a sense, however, this medieval text recalls the pre-rabbinic works of Josephus and Jubilees: all three tell their stories matter of factly, not acknowledging the Bible's silence on the matter. Moreover, all three tie things

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[142]Pesiqta Rabbati, Pisqa 12, Subsection 4.

[143]Sefer Hayyashar to Genesis 35:8.

together neatly with everything in its place: Rebekah has indeed died and has been buried in the appropriate location, and her beloved son Jacob has mourned her loss.

c. Summary

Biblical silence seems to have been a significant impetus for midrashic interest in the matter of Rebekah's death. Practically every work that I examined, from what we might call pre-rabbinic narrative midrashim to medieval commentaries, finds the need to provide an explanation for Rebekah's death, and often for her burial. The rabbis, in particular, found the need to explain the Bible's quiescence, and they did so by emphasizing that the text itself hints at Rebekah's death in Genesis 35:8-9.

Here, in particular, we have been able to view development in the material over time, beginning with pre-rabbinic works which could ignore the biblical gap to a series of rabbinic works which were forced to confront it. Next, we could see the development in the central rabbinic midrash, from its core in Genesis Rabbah to its adaptation by later rabbis.

All of the texts share in common the need to provide closure to Rebekah's life that the Bible does not yield. Common to them is the certainty that Rebekah has indeed

died.[144] Many of the midrashim emphasize that she has been buried in the proper place and that Jacob has mourned her loss. Several provide theories to explain the Bible's silence on the matter. Each one, in its own way, allows the reader to continue the study of biblical narrative with the feeling that Rebekah's story has been told. She was born, she fulfilled her function, and she has died. One is left with the feeling that her life has ended as it should have.

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[144]That Rebekah has actually died is not, perhaps, to be taken for granted. In the case of some others whose deaths are not recounted -- most notably Elijah -- an end other than death is theorized by the rabbis.

CONCLUSION

Despite the variety that exists among the depictions of Rebekah offered by different midrashists, there is a sense in which the material converges to paint one composite portrait of the matriarch. The Rebekah who emerges from the midrashic texts about her is absolutely fit for her role as a matriarch and as Isaac's wife, for she is viewed very positively as a charcter uniquely responsible for ensuring the continuation of Abraham's covenant with God. Furthermore, like the biblical Rebekah, she in control of the episodes in which she appears and in contact with God, if perhaps a little less dominant and less directly in communication with the Divine than we might have believed had we read the Bible alone. Finally, unlike the biblical matriarch, the rabbis' Rebekah is a character, the basic facts of whose life are in order, the moments of her birth and death being clearly identified.

Indeed, the variety among the rabbinic portrayals results primarily from different routes to the same conclusions. The rabbis agree that Rebekah is appropriate for the life for which she is chosen in Genesis 24, even if they disagree as to who primarily designated her for it or what particular aspects of her character were most decisive. No midrashist is comfortable with the idea that Rebekah might not be present when Isaac prays for progeny in Genesis 25:21, though the nature of her involvement is the subject of a number of very different theories. The midrashic texts

agree almost unanimously that God does not speak directly to the matriarch in Genesis 25:23, but they provide several different explanations of how she did receive the word of the Divine.

To be sure, there are some disagreements between rabbinic texts which can not be so easily viewed as different evidence for the same conclusion. The midrashic views on the barrenness mentioned in Genesis 25:21 range from suggestions that Isaac and Rebekah had no trouble conceiving to contentions that both the patriarch and the matriarch were infertile, with explanations of the inability to conceive ranging from the misogynist to the complimentary. Rabbinic explanations for how Rebekah knew of Isaac's plan to bless Esau (Genesis 27:5) range from the claim that she was eavesdropping to the notion that she was told by a Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, even these disagreements do not take us far afield from the composite portrait we have been able to construct.

This thesis suggests three areas for further work, all of which would contribute to the overall goal of this project, to provide modern Jews with stories of biblical women whom we might view as models for our own Jewish lives. A study of the rabbinic material on the other three matriarchs would make the lives of all four of the mothers of Israel accessible to today's Jews. An extension of this examination to include existing modern midrash on Rebekah

would extend and likely alter the findings of this thesis. Finally, writing modern midrash on Rebekah would provide the opportunity to create a portrait of the matriarch which might be free of the patriarchal influences betrayed by the rabbinic texts.

More specifically, a study of the rabbinic material on Sarah, Leah, and Rachel would allow us to make comparisons between the midrashic portrayal of Rebekah and those of the other three matriarchs. The questions I would ask include: 1) Does the midrash go to great lengths to establish the fitness of the other matriarchs to their positions, as it does with Rebekah? 2) Do the rabbis ever accept the notion that one of the matriarchs of Israel, like their husbands, might have had a direct conversation with God? 3) Are the midrashists ambivalent about other matriarchs' domination of particular biblical narratives, distancing them from the center of action when they seem to control it and placing them at the scene when they appear to be absent? 4) How do the rabbis view the infertility problems of Sarah and Rachel? 5) Do the midrashists have a need to define Leah's death which, like Rebekah's, is not clearly elucidated in the biblical text? To be sure, the situations of the other matriarchs are not entirely parallel to that of Rebekah. For example, none of the others has an entire chapter devoted to the story of her betrothal. Moreover, the problem of barrenness is different in Sarah's and Rachel's

cases; their husbands have children with other women. Perhaps most significantly, none of the other matriarchs quite dominates biblical narratives in the way that Rebekah does. Nevertheless, the comparisons would be instructive, and Jewish people of today ought to have access to all four matriarchs as potential models.

Studying existing modern midrash on Rebekah would allow us to explore new ways that contemporary, and perhaps feminist, thinkers have employed the biblical text and traditional midrashic material to construct non-patriarchal portraits of the matriarch. Writing our own midrash would allow us to participate in the act of liberating the character of Rebekah from the views of the patriarchy ourselves, and would afford us the opportunity to create a biblical model for Jews of today and tomorrow that would be in response to our own experience. As I consider either making a study of existing modern midrash or creating my own, my ponderings include: 1)Are there different views of Rebekah's own role in marrying Isaac? Along these lines, how might her act of consent be highlighted or reinterpreted? 2)How did Rebekah feel about leaving her own home and family to marry Isaac? 3)How might Rebekah's virtues, outlined in Genesis 24, be understood today? 4)What was Rebekah's role in praying for progeny in Genesis 25:21? 5)What was the nature of Rebekah's conversation with God in Genesis 25:23? 6)Did she ever hope or pray for a

daughter? 7)Did Rebekah feel any ambivalence about betraying Isaac and Esau when she intervenes on Jacob's behalf in Genesis 27? 8)Did the matriarch experience the pain of loneliness in her old age, with her husband nearly blind, her elder son estranged from her, and her beloved younger son gone to Paddan-aram?

Through this study, I have learned, though I suspected as much, that there are portraits of Rebekah in the Bible and in the rabbinic literature which can be studied and which can serve as models for modern Jewish men and women. As a rabbi, I need not claim ignorance of the mothers of Israel or an inability to articulate the ways in which they, like the patriarchs, can inspire Jewish lives.

I have also learned, still not to my surprise, that the models offered by the classical texts are fraught with ambivalence toward a dominant woman and reluctance to see even a matriarch of Israel as being able to communicate directly with God. The midrashic portraits of Rebekah do not converge to create a beautiful masterpiece. Rather, together they create an unfinished picture, albeit one with rather clear outlines. But even those lines are replete with rough edges, and the work lacks the full range of color.

Women and men who are aware of the injustices of patriarchy and misogyny, and who are committed to a Jewish future free of their influences, must pick up the paintbrush

that is the midrashist's pen. Together we must listen to the tradition, but also hear the voices of our own consciences, our personal experiences with God, and our lives as they are lived with other human beings. Then we will come to know a fully human Rebekah who might have been. Then we will be able to find the matriarch to be one model among many after which we might pattern meaningful Jewish lives for ourselves. Then we will be ready to complete the masterpiece that a midrashic portrait of Rebekah might be.

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