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Rebekah in Biblical Text and Historical Reception

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Introduction

This project aims to trace the reception of the character Rebekah from the biblical text through select modern interpretations up to the 21st century. Rebekah is the second of the four matriarchs; her name appears in the daily (egalitarian) Amidah, the traditional blessing of daughters on Shabbat evening, and several other times in our liturgy where we invoke the matriarchs. Beyond the liturgy, Rebekah is a crucial link in the biblical genealogy and the lineage of the people Israel. It is through Rebekah that God's promise to Abraham and the continuation of his family line might be fulfilled, and she plays a decisive role in determining how the covenant will continue through the next generation.

Powerful women always generate divided reactions in their reception. Rebekah is no exception: opinions about this biblical figure range from appreciation to sharp criticism. All of the women in Torah are important, but Rebekah is also influential in a specific way. Guided by God, she makes decisions that decisively direct the course of what will become the Israelite people in the earliest moments of the people's formation. Rebekah remains a divisive biblical figure today because scholars, clergy, and lay people alike debate where she falls on a spectrum between the honorable matriarch fulfilling God's will and a deceitful woman who selfishly plays favorites with her children and lies to her husband.

As a fellow Rebekah namesake, this project has personal meaning for me as I step into my new title as Rabbi Rebecca Kaufman. I look forward to being able to teach about her character with new depth each year as we cycle through her story and the stories of the Abrahamic family.

After a critical translation of relevant sections about Rebekah in Genesis, I offer a close reading of the biblical text in Chapter One, and examine what we learn about Rebekah's

character through the text itself and how the biblical authors tell Rebekah's story. I focus on several key moments in Rebekah's story: how the text introduces her, her agency in choosing to go with Abraham's servant, her independence in calling out to God, and her role in shaping Jacob's (and thereby Israel's) destiny. Before immersing in the millennia of interpretations that follow, I focus on the meaning of the words and structure of the text.

In Chapter Two, I examine depictions of Rebekah in the Targum, Talmud, and Midrash. These sources are vast and this chapter does not exhaust an analysis of Rebekah within this material, but rather seeks to understand how these sources deal with Rebekah's character at pivotal moments in her story. The Targum does not write about Rebekah in particular, but through its translation choices, modern readers have a window into how early first century interpreters understood her in the text. Similarly, the Talmud usually does not offer explicit positions on particular figures in Tanakh. Nonetheless, we glean some understanding of how the rabbis of the Talmud thought of Rebekah based on the ways in which she is brought in as a textual example and proof text in their arguments. Midrash, specifically *Genesis Rabbah*, differs from these earlier two sources and addresses the Rebekah stories directly. Because this paper surveys millennia of material, I explore a selection of key moments where the midrashim deal with Rebekah.

Chapter Three jumps forward in time and looks at Jewish medieval commentators on the Rebekah stories. This analysis does not exhaust the commentators' explication of the Rebekah stories but focuses on key moments that drew the commentators' attention and key moments in Rebekah's story. In many cases, medieval commentators rely on earlier talmudic and midrashic material.

Chapter Four looks at a selection of modern commentaries dealing with Rebekah. There are too many commentaries to choose from in this category. I focus on several scholars who raise questions that the earlier commentators deal with, as well as on several brand new frameworks that modern scholarship affords us. Feminist perspectives on Rebekah ask an entirely new set of questions which help us evaluate her character. Modern scholarship also helps take into account and make sense of the biases that the early rabbinic commentators held. Modern scholarship looks for patterns throughout other women's stories in Genesis to shed light on Rebekah's character.

After exploring Jewish textual sources that analyze Rebekah, Chapter Five will explore Rebekah's portrayal in a selection of European art. One rationale for focusing on textual sources for Judaism and art for non-Jewish sources relates to the fact that textual interpretation has played a central role in expressing—and shaping—public Jewish perspectives, whereas art has been influential in public expression within Christian circles. More to the point, however, is that art presents an important didactic tool for opening the conversation about biblical figures, and European art has been more widely developed for two millennia than other depictions of scenes from the Torah. Finally, I chose to include art in this capstone because just as Rebekah is an influential figure in the Torah, my grandmother z"l, who was an artist, has been an influential woman in my life. She taught me to understand how the composition of a painting directs the viewer's eye to the subject matter, how light and shadow change a viewer's perception of the action or mood of the material. My grandmother taught me to appreciate the colors in every sunset and I think of her each day and any time I look at a painting. I dedicate this portion of my work to her.

The following is a close translation of the most critical verses of Rebekah's story. I opted for clunkier English translations in favor of remaining more loyal to the Hebrew text and grammar.

Gen 22:20	And it happened that after these things, Abraham was told, “here Milcah, she also bore children to your brother Nahor. ¹	וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וַיִּגַּד לְאַבְרָהָם לֵאמֹר הִנֵּה יָלְדָה מִלְכָּה גַם־הִוא בָּנִים לְנָחוֹר אָחִידָהּ:
Gen 22:21	Utz, the first born, and Buz his brother, and K'muel the father of Aram.	אֶת־עֻזַּן בְּכֹרֹו וְאֶת־בּוּז אָחִיו וְאֶת־קִמּוֹאֵל אָבִי אָרָם:
Gen 22:22	And Kesed and Chazo and Pildash and Yildaf and Betuel.	וְאֶת־כְּשֵׁד וְאֶת־חָזוֹ וְאֶת־פִּלְדָּשׁ וְאֶת־יִלְדָּף וְאֶת־בְּתוּאֵל:
Gen 22:23	And Betuel begot Rebekah. These eight Milcah bore to Nahor, brother of Abraham.	וּבְתוּאֵל יָלַד אֶת־רִבְקָה שְׁמֹנֶה אֵלֶּה יָלְדָה מִלְכָּה לְנָחוֹר אָחִי אַבְרָהָם:

Gen 24:15	And it happened that before he finished speaking, and behold! Rebekah, who was born to Betuel son of Milcah the wife of Nahor, brother of Abraham, was coming out with a jar on her shoulder.	וַיְהִי־הוּא טֹרֵם כֶּלֶה לְדַבֵּר וְהִנֵּה רִבְקָה יֹצֵאת אֲשֶׁר יָלְדָה לְבְתוּאֵל בִּן־מִלְכָּה אִשְׁת נָחוֹר אָחִי אַבְרָהָם וְכֶדָה עַל־שִׁכְמָהּ:
Gen 24:16	And the young maiden, a virgin, appeared very pleasing, ² and no man knew her. And she went down to the spring and filled her jar and came up.	וְהַנַּעֲרָ טַבַּת מְרֹאֶה מְאֹד בְּתוּלָה וְאִישׁ לֹא יָדָעָה וַתֵּרֶד הָעֵינָה וַתִּמְלֵא כֶדָה וַתַּעַל:
Gen 24:17	And the servant ran toward her, and said, “Please, may I drink a little water from your jar?”	וַיָּרֵץ הַעֶבֶד לִקְרֹאתָהּ וַיֹּאמֶר הֲגִמִּיאִנִּי נָא מֵעֵט־מַיִם מִכֶּדָּהּ:
Gen 24:18	And she said, “drink my master,” and she hurried and she lowered her jar on her hand	וַתֹּאמֶר שְׁתֵּה אֲדֹנָי וַתְּמַהֵר וַתִּרְדּוּ כֶדָה עַל־יָדָהּ וַתִּשְׁקֶהוּ:

¹ The context of these verses where we first encounter Rebekah are extremely important. This scene takes place immediately after the Akedah and God rewards Abraham, bestowing blessing upon him (22:17-18). In this verse (22:20), Abraham is told via the passive verb ויגד about progeny Milcah births to his brother Nahor. Since there is no other speaker mentioned and God spoke to Abraham a few verses prior, we understand that God delivers the information about Milcah and Nahor's children to Abraham.

² Perhaps, “of a good appearance,” but the language suggests more than “good.” Someone good to the eyes suggests beauty or lovely. The phrase טַבַּת מְרֹאֶה appears only once in Tanakh, though the adjective טב/טבה appears a number of times sometimes translated as pleasing or beautiful.

	and let him drink. ³	
Gen 24:19	When he had finished his drink she said, “also for your camels, I will draw water until they finish drinking.”	ותכל להשקותו ותאמר גם לגמליה אשאב עד אם-כלו לשבת:
Gen 24:20	And she quickly lowered her jar into the trough, and she ran again to the well and watered each of his camels.	ותמהר ותער כדה אל-השקת ותריץ עוד אל-הבאר לשאב ותשאב לכל-גמליה:
Gen 24:21	The man gazed at her in silence wondering whether Adonai ⁴ had made his mission successful or not.	והאיש משתאה לה מחריש לועת והצלח יתנה דרכו אם-לא:
Gen 24:22	And so when the camels finished drinking the man took a gold ring ⁵ , its weight half a shekel and two gold bracelets on her arm, weighing ten gold pieces.	ויהי כאשר פלו הגמלים לשותות ויקח האיש גזם זהב בקע משקלו ושני צמידים על-ידיה עשרה זהב משקלם
Gen 24:23	He said, “daughter, who are you? Please, tell me; is there a place in your father’s house for us ⁶ to spend the night?”	ויאמר בת-מי את הגדי נא לי הוש בית-אביה מקום לנו ללון:
Gen 24:24	She responded to him, “I’m the daughter of Betuel, son of Milcah whom she birthed to Nahor.”	ותאמר אליו בת-בתואל אגכי בן-מלקה אשר ילדה לנחור:
Gen 24:25	And she responded to him, there is also much straw and feed with us; also a place to spend the night.”	ותאמר אליו גם-תבן גם-מספוא רב עמנו גם-מקום ללון:
Gen 24:26	And the man bowed low and prostrated ⁷ before Adonai.	ויקד האיש וישתחו ליהוה:

³ The verb שקה is a *hiphil* form meaning to cause to drink water or to give a drink. (BDB 8248). It can also refer to irrigating though here would refer to offering water to animals or people. The term suggests an intimacy and a hands-on approach to offering the servant water.

⁴ I have chosen not to translate God’s name in the form yud-heh-vav-heh, instead transliterating as Adonai to indicate where God’s name is used.

⁵ In Tanakh, גזם usually refers to a gold ring or nose ring.

⁶ Notable that the first person plural is used here, referring to the man and his camels.

⁷ Two different verbs are used for the servant’s bowing קדד and Hitpael שחה. The verb קדד appears alongside שחה in several moments in Torah including in discussing the Israelites bowing before God in the telling of the Passover story when the Israelite homes were spared.

Gen 24:27	And he said, “blessed be Adonai, God of my master Abraham who did not abandon his kindness and his faithfulness ⁸ from my master. I have been led on my path by Adonai to the house of my master’s family.” ⁹	וַיֹּאמֶר בְּרוּךְ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי אֲדֹנָי אֲבִרְהָם אֲשֶׁר לֹא-עָזַב חֶסְדּוֹ וְאֱמֻתּוֹ מֵעַם אֲדֹנָי אֲנִי בְּדֶרֶךְ נְתַנִּי יְהוָה בֵּית אֲתֵי אֲדֹנָי:
Gen 24:28	And the maiden ran and told these things to her mother’s household. ¹⁰	וּתְרִיז הַנַּעֲרָה וַתַּגֵּד לְבֵית אִמָּהּ בְּדִבְרֵיהֶם הָאֵלֶּה:
Gen 24:29	And Rebekah had a brother whose name was Laban. And Laban ran out to the man at the spring.	וּלְרִבְקָה אָח וּשְׁמוֹ לָבָן וַיֵּרֶץ לָבָן אֶל-הָאִישׁ הַחוֹצֵה אֶל-הָעֵיץ:
Gen 24:30	And when he saw the nose ring and the bracelets on his sister’s arms, and when he heard the words of his sister Rebekah saying, “Thus the man spoke to me,” and he came to the man, behold, he was standing there by his camels by the spring.	וַיְהִי כִּכְרָאת אֶת-הַנָּזָם וְאֶת-הַצְּמִידִים עַל-יָדֶי אָחִיתָּ וּכְשָׁמְעוּ אֶת-דִּבְרֵי רִבְקָה אָחִיתָּ לֵאמֹר כֹּה-דִבֶּר אֵלַי הָאִישׁ וַיָּבֹא אֶל-הָאִישׁ וַהֲנֶה עֹמֵד עַל-הַגְּמִלִים עַל-הָעֵץ:
Gen 24:45	I had not yet ceased speaking in my heart and then Rebekah came out with a jar on her shoulder and went down to the spring and drew. I said to her, “please let me drink.”	אֲנִי טֹרֵם אֲכַלֶּה לְדַבֵּר אֶל-לִבִּי וַהֲנֶה רִבְקָה יֹצֵאת וּכְדָה עַל-שִׁכְמָהּ וַתֵּרֶד הָעֵינָה וַתִּשָּׂאב וַאֲמַר אֵלֶיהָ הִשְׁקִינִי גֹא:
Gen 24:46	And she hurried and lowered from her body the jar and said, “drink and I will also water your camels.” I drank and she also watered the camels.	וַתַּמְהֵר וַתִּזְרַד כְּדֵה מֵעֶלְיָהּ וַתֹּאמֶר שָׁתֵּה וְגַם-גְּמֻלֶיךָ אֲשָׁקֶה וְאֲשָׁת וְגַם הַגְּמִלִים הִשְׁקֵתָה:
Gen 24:47	And I asked her, saying, “whose daughter are you?” And she said, “the daughter of Betuel, son of Nahor that Milcah birthed to him. And I put the ring on her nose and the bracelets on her hands.	וְאֲשָׁאֵל אֹתָהּ וַאֲמַר בֶּת-מִי אַתְּ וַתֹּאמֶר בֶּת-בְּתוּאֵל בֶּן-נָחוֹר אֲשֶׁר יָלְדָה-לּוֹ מִלְכָּה וְאֲשֶׁם הַנָּזָם עַל-אַפָּהּ וְהַצְּמִידִים עַל-יָדֶיהָ:
Gen 24:48	And I bowed down and prostrated before Adonai and I blessed Adonai, God of my master Abraham who led me on the path of truth to get the daughter of my master’s brother for his son.	וַאֲקֻד וְאֲשַׁתְתָּנָה לַיהוָה וְאֲבִרְךָ אֶת-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי אֲדֹנָי אֲבִרְהָם אֲשֶׁר הִנְחֵנִי בְּדֶרֶךְ אֱמֶת לְקַחַת אֶת-בֶּת-אֲתֵי אֲדֹנָי לְבָנוֹ:

⁸ Sometimes אמת means truth, here it evokes something more like faithfulness or stability.

⁹ Literally, the house of my master’s brother or kin.

¹⁰ This could also be translated as “her mother’s house.”

Gen 24:49	And now if you are offering kindness and truth to my master, tell me if not, tell me if I turn to the right or to the left. ¹¹	וְעַתָּה אִם־יִשְׁכַּם עֲשִׂים חֶסֶד וְאֱמֶת אֶת־אֲדֹנָי הַגִּידוּ לִי וְאִם־לֹא הַגִּידוּ לִי וְאֶפְנֶה עַל־יְמִין אוֹ עַל־שְׂמָאל:
Gen 24:50	And Laban and Bethuel answered, ¹² saying, “From Adonai this thing went forth, we cannot speak bad or good.	וַיַּעַן לָבָן וּבְתוּאֵל וַיֹּאמְרוּ מִיְהוָה יֵצֵא הַדְּבָר לֹא נוֹכַל דִּבֵּר אֵלָיוּ רַע אוֹ־טוֹב:
Gen 24:51	Behold, here is Rebekah before you; take her and go, and may she ¹³ be a wife for your master’s son, as Adonai has spoken.”	הִנֵּה־רֵבֶקָה לְפָנֶיךָ קַח וְלֵךְ וְתָהִי אִשָּׁה לְכוֹנ־אֲדֹנֶיךָ כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר יְהוָה:
Gen 24:52	And when Abraham’s servant heard their words he bowed to the ground before Adonai.	וַיְהִי כַּאֲשֶׁר שָׁמַע עֶבֶד אַבְרָהָם אֶת־דְּבָרֵיהֶם וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ אֶרְצָה לַיהוָה:
Gen 24:53	And the servant brought out objects of silver and objects of gold and clothes and he gave them to Rebekah; and he gave choice items ¹⁴ to her brother and her mother.	וַיּוֹצֵא הָעֶבֶד כְּלֵי־כֶסֶף וְכֵלֵי זָהָב וּבְגָדִים וַיִּתֵּן לְרֵבֶקָה וּמַגְדָּנָתָה נָתַן לְאֲחִיהָ וּלְאִמָּהּ:
Gen 24:54	And they ate and drank, he and the people with him and they stayed the night and, they rose in the morning and he said, “release me ¹⁵ to my master.” ¹⁶	וַיֹּאכְלוּ וַיִּשְׁתּוּ הוּא וְהָאֲנָשִׁים אֲשֶׁר־עִמּוֹ וַיִּלְגְּיוּ וַיִּקּוּמוּ בַּבֹּקֶר וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁלַחְנִי לְאֲדֹנָי:
Gen 24:55	And her brother and her mother said, ¹⁷ “Let the maiden remain with us some days or ten, after that you will go.”	וַיֹּאמֶר אָחִיהָ וְאִמָּהּ תֵּשֵׁב הַנַּעַר אִתָּנוּ יָמִים אוֹ עֶשְׂוֶר אַחֵר אַחֲרֵי תֵלֵךְ:
Gen 24:56	And he said to them, “Do not delay me and Adonai has made my path successful. Release me, and I will go to my master.”	וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם אַל־תְּאַחֲרוּ אֹתִי יְהוָה הַצְלִיחַ דְּרָכִי שְׁלַחוּנִי וְאַלֶּכֶה לְאֲדֹנָי:

¹¹ Though this verse is cryptic, through these words we see the earnest nature of the servant’s request.

¹² In this verse we see the verb יַעַן in the singular but there are seemingly two subjects, Laban and Bethuel. We might understand this in several ways; they were answering as one party and one voice as Rebekah’s guardian. Or perhaps one of the men was a later addition to the passage. In a study of other cases of singular verbs with multiple subjects, the author offers that “a singular verb draws attention to the first member of the compound subject as the principal actor.” (Michael Shepherd, “The compound subject in biblical Hebrew”).

¹³ Or This could also read as “let her be a wife...” or “may it come to be that she is a wife for...”

¹⁴ This term only appears four times in Tanakh, twice in Chronicles and once in Ezra. In all cases it seems to refer to offerings or gifts.

¹⁵ The verb שְׁלַחְנִי is the *piel* form of שָׁלַח meaning to release.

¹⁶ Though there is reference to the people with the servant, it is made clear by the text that only the servant is speaking with Laban and Bethuel.

¹⁷ Here again we have a verb יֹאמֶר in the singular with two subjects.

Gen 24:57	And they said, “We will call the maiden ¹⁸ and we’ll ask for her response.” ¹⁹	וַיֹּאמְרוּ נִקְרָא לַנַּעַר וְנִשְׁאַלָהּ אֶת־פִּיהָ:
Gen 24:58	And they called to Rebekah and said to her: “Would you go with this man?” And she answered. “I will go.”	וַיִּקְרְאוּ לְרִבְקָה וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלֶיהָ הֲתֵלְכִי עִם־הָאִישׁ הַזֶּה וְתֹאמַר אֵלָיו:
Gen 24:59	And they sent Rebekah, their sister, and her nurse with Abraham’s servant and his people.	וַיִּשְׁלְחוּ אֶת־רִבְקָה אֶחָתָם וְאֶת־מִנְקֻתָּהּ וְאֶת־עֶבֶד אֲבִרָהֶם וְאֶת־אֲנָשָׁיו:
Gen 24:60	And they blessed Rebekah, and said to her, “Our sister, may you grow to thousands of abundance and may your seed dispossess the gate of its enemies.”	וַיְבָרְכוּ אֶת־רִבְקָה וַיֹּאמְרוּ לָהּ אַחֲתֵנוּ אֵת הַיָּד לְאַלְפֵי רִבְבָּה וַיִּנָּשׁ זְרַעוֹ אֶת־שַׁעַר שׂנְאָיו:
Gen 24:61	And Rebekah and her maidens arose, ²⁰ and mounted the camels and followed after the man. The servant took Rebekah and went.	וְהָיָה רִבְקָה וְנַעֲרֹתֶיהָ וַתִּרְכַּבְנָה עַל־הַגְּמָלִים וַתִּתְלַכְנָה אַחֲרֵי הָאִישׁ וַיִּקַּח הָעֶבֶד אֶת־רִבְקָה וַיֵּלֶךְ:
Gen 24:62	And Isaac came back from near the well of Lahai-Ro’i ²¹ and he was dwelling in the land of the Negev.	וַיָּצֵק בְּאֵר מְבוֹא בְּאֵר לַחֵי רְאִי וְהָיָה יוֹשֵׁב בְּאֶרֶץ הַנֶּגֶב:
Gen 24:63	And Isaac went out walking, ²² in the field before the dusk and he lifted his eyes and saw and behold, camels were coming.	וַיֵּצֵא יִצְחָק לִשְׂוֹחַ בַּשָּׂדֶה לִפְנֵי עֶרֶב וַיִּשָּׂא עֵינָיו וַיֵּרָא וְהִנֵּה גְמָלִים בָּאִים:

¹⁸ The term נער in masculine and feminine appears throughout these passages. It is difficult to translate precisely because it seems to connote a youthful age and at times a social class status.

¹⁹ Literally, we’ll ask of “her mouth.” This language is important because it suggests that the response Laban and Betuel are seeking must truly come from Rebekah, from her mouth, not the suggestion of her relatives. This verse is a pivotal moment in Rebekah’s story because Rebekah’s guardians present one opinion, that Rebekah should remain at home for some time longer, but the servant pushes back on that request. Instead of arguing, Rebekah’s brother and mother turn the matter over to Rebekah. We wonder whether we are to understand that Rebekah was aware of the different preferences or if she is just answering for herself.

²⁰ Again we see תקם as a singular verb to refer to a plural subject, here Rebekah and her maidens. The third person feminine plural is less common in Tanakh though we see it here to refer to the women mounting the camels (תרכבנה).

²¹ This place, באר לחי ראי, is mentioned three times in Genesis, named after Hagar receives a message from God in Genesis 16:13-14.

²² The word לשווח appears only here in Tanakh. It typically means to stroll/wander or to be bent or hunched. In most translations, it is translated as, “Isaac went out walking.” I’m interested in translating it as he went out in the field bent down, because it is paired with later in the verse noting that he lifts his eyes; he had been looking down as he was in the field, and then when he lifted his eyes, he sees Rebekah’s entourage. Rashi and Ibn Ezra translate it as meditating or praying, or walking among the trees.

Gen 24:64	And Rebekah lifted her eyes and saw Isaac and she alighted ²³ from the camel.	וַתִּשָּׂא רִבְקָה אֶת-עֵינֶיהָ וַתֵּרָא אֶת-יִצְחָק וַתִּפֹּל מֵעַל הַגָּמֶל:
Gen 24:65	And she said to the servant, “Who is this man there walking in the field toward us?” And the servant said, “He is my master,” And she took her veil and covered herself. ²⁴	וַתֹּאמֶר אֶל-הַעֲבָד מִי-הָאִישׁ הַלֹּכֶה הַהֵלֶךְ בַּשָּׂדֶה לִקְרָאתָנוּ וַיֹּאמֶר הַעֲבָד הוּא אֲדֹנָי וַתִּקַּח הַצִּיצִיף וַתְּתַכֶּס:
Gen 24:66	And the servant told ²⁵ Isaac all of the things that he did.	וַיְסַפֵּר הַעֲבָד לִיִּצְחָק אֶת כָּל-הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה:
Gen 24:67	And Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah’s tent and took Rebekah and she became his wife. He loved her and Isaac was comforted after his mother. ²⁶	וַיְבִאֶהָ יִצְחָק הָאֵלֶּלֶה שָׂרָה אִמּוֹ וַיִּקַּח אֶת-רִבְקָה וַתְּהִי-לּוֹ לְאִשָּׁה וַיֵּאָהֲבָהּ וַיִּנָּחֶם יִצְחָק אַחֲרֵי אִמּוֹ:
Gen 25:20	Thus Isaac was forty years old when he took Rebekah, daughter of Betuel the Aramean of Padan Aram, sister of Laban the Aramean, as his wife.	וַיְהִי יִצְחָק בֶּן-אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה בָּקָחְתָּ אֶת-רִבְקָה בַּת-בְּתוּאֵל הָאֲרָמִי מִפְּדַן אַרָם אֵתוֹת לָבָן הָאֲרָמִי לֹא לְאִשָּׁה:
Gen 25:21	And Isaac prayed ²⁷ to Adonai in front ²⁸ of his wife because she was barren. And Adonai answered his prayer ²⁹ and Rebekah, his wife, became pregnant.	וַיַּעֲתֵר יִצְחָק לַיהוָה לְנִכְחֹף אִשְׁתּוֹ כִּי עֲקָרָה הָיָה וַיַּעֲתֵר לֹא יְהוָה וַתֵּהָרַם רִבְקָה אִשְׁתּוֹ:

²³ This word, ותפל, is a crucial word in the verse. Did Rebekah fall off of the camel or lower herself in a hurry, or simply come down from its height. In Ruth 2:10, ותפל על פניה, Ruth falls and prostrates her face to the ground. She does not trip and fall, she chooses to lower herself in gratitude. Similarly, in Esther 8:3, Esther falls before the King’s feet, another intentional act.

²⁴ This usage of ותכס is the only usage of this verb in its third person feminine in the Tanakh, though it otherwise appears many times.

²⁵ The verb here, ויספר, instead of לאמר or להגיד evokes a sense of storytelling. The servant did not merely recount that his mission was made successful, but retold the story of his previous days. ויספר appears far fewer times in Tanakh than the other two verbs.

²⁶ This verse is almost always translated as after his mother’s death, however the word death does not appear in the verse.

²⁷ The verb ויעתר appears less than thirty times in Tanakh, and only here in Genesis. It is used primarily when figures are pleading with God. We might translate it as pleading or suplicating instead of praying. I chose to translate it here as “prayed” though it should be understood as a pleading from the heart, not a modern prayer formula.

²⁸ We could translate לנכח as “on behalf of,” however that language removes some of Rebekah’s agency; she too could have, and perhaps did plead with God, but here we learn about Isaac’s prayer. Isaac, too, wanted to be a parent, his prayer may have been partially on Rebekah’s behalf, but the text tells us that he prayed in Rebekah’s presence.

²⁹ The Qal and Nifal of the verb לעתר are used here to describe Isaac’s request and God’s response.

Gen 25:22	And the children crushed each other ³⁰ within her and she said, “If so, why am I?” ³¹ And she went to inquire ³² of Adonai.	וַיִּתְרָצְצוּ הַבָּנִים בְּקִרְבָּהּ וַתֹּאמֶר אִם־כֵּן לָמָּה זֶה אֵלַי וַתֵּלֶךְ לִדְרֹשׁ אֶת־יְהוָה:
Gen 25:23	And Adonai said to her, “two nations are within your womb, two peoples will separate from each other. ³³ One people will be stronger than the other; the greater ³⁴ will serve the younger. ³⁵	וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה לָהּ שְׁנֵי (גִּיּוֹם) [גוֹיִם] בְּבֶטְנְךָ וְשְׁנֵי לְאֻמִּים מִמֶּעַיֶךְ יִפְרְדּוּ וְלֵאמֹר מְלָאִם יֵאָמְרוּ וְרַב יַעֲבֹד צָעִיר:
Gen 25:24	And when her days filled ³⁶ to give birth, there were twins in her womb.	וַיִּמְלְאוּ יָמֶיהָ לֵלְדֹת וְהִנֵּה תוֹמָם בְּבֶטְנָהּ:

³⁰ This verb רָצַץ in the Hitpael form here is reflexive. The fetuses are crushing one another, mutually acting upon the other. The root also appears in Deuteronomy 28:33 in describing curses for the Israelites; they will be “crushed continuously.” The meaning here is very intense. It appears also in Amos 4:1 referring to those who oppress the poor.

³¹ The phrase אִם כֵּן לָמָּה זֶה אֵלַי is a critical exclamation in this chapter. JPS 2006 translates it as “If so, why do I exist?” Alter chooses, “Then why me?” and offers a second suggestion “Then why am I...?” leaving Rebekah’s question translated more literally and open-ended. She seeks God to even clarify her question, not only to find an answer.

³² Here the infinitive לִדְרֹשׁ likely means “inquire” per BDB. Another translation might be “seek.” She not only inquires the way one curiously wonders what is going on, but she is yearning and seeking for God’s explanation in this moment.

³³ The term לָאֵם is not the typical word for nation / people, as compared to the more common term גִּיּוֹם, which also appears in the verse. The term לָאֵם appears 27 times in Tanakh, including four in Genesis, 11 Isaiah, and 10 in Psalms. There are two ways we might understand the separation described in this verse. One can interpret יִפְרְדּוּ as separating from Rebekah’s body or separating from one another. The second part of the verse seems to emphasize the importance of the former, that they separate from one another.

³⁴ Many translations use “older” however רַב connotes the greater or larger including in this word the idea that the older child has some additional value in being older (that the older would have received extra blessing).

³⁵ In verses 25:22-23 there are three different terms used as prepositions to describe what is happening inside/within Rebekah: בְּקִרְבָּהּ בְּבֶטְנָהּ מִמֶּעַיֶךְ. Each have slightly different valences, but are all rare terms in Tanakh as they appear here. בְּקִרְבָּהּ appears only three times in the first five books: once when Sarah laughs within herself, once during Abraham’s conversation with God about Sodom and Gomorrah and here. These are each moments of acute tension and are part of conversations with God. בְּבֶטְנָהּ appears only here and in Proverbs and refers more explicitly to within a womb. מִמֶּעַיֶךְ, though a more common preposition in other forms, is also used very few times usually with the verb יָצָא and refers to progeny issuing forth from a woman. Rachel Adelman (“Reading Rebekah Unveiled”) points out that Rebekah’s name can be רִבְקָה an anagram for בְּקִרְבָּהּ.

³⁶ Many translations use the syntax, “when her time was come to give birth” or “When her time to give birth was at hand;” I like holding onto the definition of the word מָלָא in the translation because it evokes the kind of physical fullness that a pregnant woman has, emotionally filled to the top, physically full of life. The phrase מָלָא יָמִים appears at least 13 times throughout Tanakh to indicate a period of days being completed.

Gen 25:25	And the first one came out red all over, like a charity mantle and they called him Esau.	וַיֵּצֵא הָרִאשׁוֹן אֶדְמוֹנִי כָּלֹךְ כְּאַדְמַת שָׁעָר וַיִּקְרְאוּ שְׁמוֹ עֵשָׂו:
Gen 25:26	And after this, his brother came out his hand grasping the heel of Esau, and they called his name Jacob. Isaac was 60 years old when they were born.	וְאַחֲרֵי־כֵן יָצָא אָחִיו וְיָדוֹ אֲחֻזָּה בְּעֵקֶב עֵשָׂו וַיִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ יַעֲקֹב וַיִּצְחָק בְּוִשְׁשִׁים שָׁנָה בְּלֵדָתוֹ אֹתָם:
Gen 25:27	And when the boys grew up, Esau was a man skilled in hunting, a man of the fields, and Jacob was a wholesome man who dwelled in the camp.	וַיִּגְדְּלוּ הַנְּעָרִים וַיְהִי עֵשָׂו אִישׁ יָדָע צֹיד אִישׁ שָׂדֶה וַיַּעֲקֹב אִישׁ תָּם יֹשֵׁב אֹהֲלִים:
Gen 25:28	And Isaac loved Esau for his taste for game and Rebekah loved Jacob. ³⁷	וַיֵּאָהֵב יִצְחָק אֶת־עֵשָׂו כִּי־צֹיד בָּפִיו וְרֵבֶקָה אֲהָבָת אֶת־יַעֲקֹב:

Gen 26:6	And Isaac dwelled in Gerar.	וַיָּשָׁב יִצְחָק בְּגֵרָר:
Gen 26:7	And the people of that place asked of his wife and he said, “she is my sister” because he feared saying “my wife” lest the people of that place kill me on account of Rebekah for she is beautiful in appearance.	וַיִּשְׁאַלּוּ אַנְשֵׁי הַמָּקוֹם לְאִשְׁתּוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר אֶחָתִי הִוא כִּי יִרָא לֵאמֹר אִשְׁתִּי פֶן־יַהַרְגֵנִי אַנְשֵׁי הַמָּקוֹם עַל־רֵבֶקָה כִּי־טוֹבַת מְרָאָה הִוא:
Gen 26:8	And it happened that some time passed there and Abimelech, King of the Philistines, looked out through a window and saw there Isaac playing ³⁸ with his wife Rebekah.	וַיְהִי כִּי אָרְכוּ־לוֹ שָׁם הַיָּמִים וַיִּשְׁקֹף אַבְיִמֶלֶךְ מִלְּדָה פִּלְשֹׁתִים בְּעֵד הַחֲלוֹן וַיִּרָא וַהֲגֵה יִצְחָק מִצְחָק אֶת רֵבֶקָה אִשְׁתּוֹ:
Gen 26:9	And Abimelech called for Isaac and said, “So she is your wife. How did you say she is your sister?” Isaac said to him, “Because I thought lest I be killed on her account.”	וַיִּקְרָא אַבְיִמֶלֶךְ לְיִצְחָק וַיֹּאמֶר אֵךְ הִנֵּה אִשְׁתְּךָ הִוא וְאֵךְ אָמַרְתָּ אֶחָתִי הִוא וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו יִצְחָק כִּי אָמַרְתִּי פֶן־אָמוּת עָלַיָּה:
Gen 26:34	When Esau was forty years old, he took as his wife Judith daughter of Beeri the Hittite and Basemat daughter of Elon the Hittite.	וַיְהִי עֵשָׂו בֶּן־אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה וַיִּקַּח אִשָּׁה אֶת־יְהוּדִית בַּת־בְּעָרִי הַחִתִּי וְאֶת־בָּשֶׁמַת בַּת־אֵילָן הַחִתִּי:

³⁷ Translations often use “favor” instead of love, perhaps to not rule out that Isaac loved Jacob, too, but in a lesser manner. However, the text reads יָאָהֵב and אָהָבָת meaning loved.

³⁸ Some translations use other choices for מִצְחָק such as fondling (JPS). Alter also uses playing which I believe is more faithful to the text. The romantic or personal act Isaac and Rebekah engage in is not the

Gen 26:35	And it happened that they were bitter in spirit to Isaac and to Rebekah.	ותהגנין מרת רויח ליצחק ולרבקה:
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Gen 27:5	And Rebekah heard Isaac speaking to his son Esau. Esau went to the field to hunt game to bring back.	ורבקה שמעת בדבר יצחק אל-עשו בנו וילך עשו השדה לצוד ציד להביא:
Gen 27:6	And Rebekah said to Jacob her son, saying, “Here I heard ³⁹ your father speaking to Esau your brother, saying,	ורבקה אמרה אל-יעקב בנה לאמר הנה שמעתי את-אביך מדבר אל-עשו אחיך לאמר:
Gen 27:7	“Bring me game and make me a tasty dish that I can eat and I will bless you before Adonai before I die.”	הביאה לי ציד ועשה-לי מטעמים ואכלה ואברככה לפני יהוה לפני מותי:
Gen 27:8	And now, my son, listen to my voice as I command you.	ועתה בני שמע בקולי לאשר אני מצוה אתך:
Gen 27:9	Please go to the flock and bring to me from them two good kid goats and I will prepare them as a tasty dish for your father just as he loves. ⁴⁰	לך-נא אל-הצאן וקח-לי משם שני גדיי עזים טובים ואעשה אתם מטעמים לאביך כאשר אהב:
Gen 27:10	And then bring it to your father to eat in order that he blesses you before he dies.”	והבאת לאביך ואכל בעבר אשר יברכה לפני מותו:
Gen 27:11	And Jacob said to Rebekah his mother, “though my brother Esau is a hairy man and I am a smooth man.	ויאמר יעקב אל-רבקה אמו הן עשו אחי איש שעיר ואנכי איש חלק:
Gen 27:12	Perhaps if my father feels me, I will appear before his eyes as a deceiver and I will bring upon myself a curse and not a blessing.”	אולי ימשני אבי והייתי בעיניו כמתעתע והבאתי עלי קללה ולא ברכה:
Gen 27:13	And his mother said to him, “Your curse, my son, is upon me, but listen to my voice and go bring them to me.”	ותאמר לו אמו עלי קללתך בני אך שמע בקלי ולך קח-לי:
Gen 27:14	And he went and he got them and brought them to his mother and his mother prepared a tasty dish just as his father loved.	וילך וילקח ויבא לאמו ותעש אמו מטעמים כאשר אהב אביו:

³⁹ Some translations including JPS write that Rebekah tells Jacob she "overheard" Isaac speaking to Esau. The text itself does not suggest subversiveness here; the verb used is שמע, “Rebekah heard.”

⁴⁰ In 27:9 we see the repetition of verbiage from 27:7 where Rebekah recounts what she heard and also in 27:4 where Isaac uses the same words עשה לי מטעמים כאשר אהבתי.

Gen 27:15	And Rebekah took Esau, her oldest son's most desirable clothes, that were in the house and she dressed Jacob, her younger son.	וּתְקַח רִבְקָה אֶת־בְּגְדֵי עֶשָׂו בְּנֶהּ הַגָּדֹל הַחֲמֻדִּים אֲשֶׁר אִתָּהּ בְּבֵית וּתְלַבֵּשׁ אֶת־יַעֲקֹב בְּנֶהּ הַקָּטָן:
Gen 27:16	She dressed his hands and part of his neck, with the skin of kid goats.	וְאֵת עֶרְתָּ גִדְּיָי הָעֵזִים הִלְבִּישָׁה עַל־יָדָיו וְעַל חֻלְקֵת צוּאָרָיו:
Gen 27:17	And she gave the tasty dish and the bread that she had made in her son Jacob's hand.	וּתְתֶנּוּ אֶת־הַמִּטְעָמִים וְאֶת־הַלֶּחֶם אֲשֶׁר עָשְׂתָה בְּיַד יַעֲקֹב בְּנֶהּ:
Gen 27:18	Then he came to his father and said, "my father," and he said, "Here I am, who are you my son?" ⁴¹	וַיָּבֹא אֶל־אָבִיו וַיֹּאמֶר אָבִי וַיֹּאמֶר הֲנִנִי מִי אַתָּה בְּנִי:
Gen 27:19	And Jacob said to his father, "I am Esau, your first born. I did as you told me. Please rise, sit up and eat of my game, after which you can bless me with your soul."	וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב אֶל־אָבִיו אֲנִכִּי עֶשָׂו בְּכֹרִי עָשִׂיתִי כְּאֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְתָּ אֵלַי קוּם־גַּא שִׁבָּה וְאֲכַלָּה מִצִּידִי בַעֲבוּר תִּבְרַכְנִי נַפְשָׁךְ:
Gen 27:20	And Isaac said to his son, "how is it that you found it so quickly my son?" He said, "Because Adonai your God caused it to be before me."	וַיֹּאמֶר יִצְחָק אֶל־בְּנוֹ מַה־זֶּה מִהֵרָתָ לָמָצָא בְּנִי וַיֹּאמֶר כִּי הִקְרִיהָ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לִפְנֵי:

Gen 27:41	And Esau bore a grudge against Jacob for the blessing that his father blessed him with and Esau said to himself, "as the days of mourning for my father approach, then I will kill my brother Jacob."	וַיִּשְׁטֹם עֶשָׂו אֶת־יַעֲקֹב עַל־הַבְּרָכָה אֲשֶׁר בָּרַךְ אָבִיו וַיֹּאמֶר עֶשָׂו בְּלִבּוֹ יִקְרַב יְמֵי אָבִי וְאֶהְרֹגָה אֶת־יַעֲקֹב אָחִי:
Gen 27:42	And the words of her elder son Esau were made known to Rebekah, she sent and called for her younger son Jacob and said to him, "Now Esau your brother is consoling himself by planning ⁴² to kill you."	וַיִּגַּד לְרִבְקָה אֶת־דִּבְרֵי עֶשָׂו בְּנֶהּ הַגָּדֹל וּתְשַׁלַּח וּתְקַרָא לְיַעֲקֹב בְּנֶהּ הַקָּטָן וּתֹאמֶר אֵלָיו הִנֵּה עֹשֶׂה אָחִיךָ מִתְנַתֵּם לְךָ לְהָרְגֶךָ:
Gen 27:43	And now my son, listen to my voice and rise, flee to Laban, my brother, in Haran.	וְעַתָּה בְּנִי שְׁמַע בְּקוֹלִי וְקוּם בְּרַח־לָךְ אֶל־לָבָן אָחִי תִרְנָה:
Gen 27:44	And dwell with him a some time, until your	וַיִּשְׁבֶּתָּ עִמּוֹ יָמִים אֲחֻדִּים עַד אֲשֶׁר־תָּשׁוּב

⁴¹ Some translations use "which of my sons are you?" (JPS) however I prefer, "who are you?" It more closely reflects the text and the open ended nature of the question.

⁴² The text seems to literally say that "Esau is consoling himself by killing you." From this we might understand that Esau does not get to fully console himself since the action is never completed; nonetheless the translation makes more sense with the context to say, "planning to kill you."

	brother's rage turns back	חַמַּת אָחִיךָ:
Gen 27:45	Until your brother's anger toward you turns around and he forgets what you have done to him. And then I will send for you and take you from there. How that I might lose ⁴³ both of you in one day!"	עַד-שׁוּב אֶף-אָחִיךָ מִמָּךְ וְשָׁכַח אֶת אֲשֶׁר-עָשִׂיתָ לוֹ וְשָׁלַחְתִּי וּלְקַחְתִּיךָ מִשָּׁם לָמָּה אֲשַׁכֵּל גַּם-שְׁנֵיכֶם יוֹם אֶחָד:
Gen 27:46	And Rebekah said to Isaac, "I feel loathing at my life because of these Hittite women. If Jacob marries a woman from among the Hittites like these, from among the women of the land, what will be my life?"	וּתְאֹמַר רִבְקָה אֶל-יִצְחָק קִצְתִּי בְּחַיִּי מִפְּנֵי בָּנוֹת חֵת אִם-לִקְחָם יַעֲקֹב אִשָּׁה מִבְּנוֹת-חֵת כִּאֲלֵלָה מִבְּנוֹת הָאָרֶץ לָמָּה לִּי חַיִּים:

Gen 28:5	And Isaac sent Jacob and he went to Padan-Aram, to Laban son of Betuel the Aramean, brother of Rebekah, mother of Jacob and Esau.	וַיִּשְׁלַח יִצְחָק אֶת-יַעֲקֹב וַיֵּלֶךְ פָּדָן אַרָם אֶל-לָבָן בֶּן-בְּתוּאֵל הָאֲרָמִי אָחִי רִבְקָה אִם יַעֲקֹב וְעֵשָׂו:
Gen 35:8	And Devorah, Rebekah's nurse, died and she was buried beneath Bet-El under the oak tree and its name was called Allon-Bacut. ⁴⁴	וַתָּמָת דְּבוֹרָה מִיְּנֻקַּת רִבְקָה וַתִּקָּבֵר מִתַּחַת לְבֵית-אֵל תַּחַת הָאֵלֹן וַיִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ אֵלֹן בָּכוֹת:
Gen 49:31	There Abraham and his wife Sarah were buried, there Isaac and his wife Rebekah were buried, and there I buried Leah.	שָׁמָּה קָבְרוּ אֶת-אַבְרָהָם וְאֶת שָׂרָה אִשְׁתּוֹ שָׁמָּה קָבְרוּ אֶת-יִצְחָק וְאֶת רִבְקָה אִשְׁתּוֹ וְשָׁמָּה קָבַרְתִּי אֶת-לֵאָה:

⁴³ The verb used here, שָׁכַח evokes barrenness and childlessness. The language here calls back to the time when Rebekah was barren; the dialogue suggests that losing her sons at this stage would be as tragic as though she never had them.

⁴⁴ Allon-Bacut might be translated to mean, the crying oak, however the name as a phrase appears only here in the Tanakh.

Chapter 1: Rebekah in the Biblical Text

The matriarch Rebekah's name appears 29 times in the Torah all in the book of Genesis.⁴⁵ Her story has four phases: her encounter with Abraham's servant who brings her to be Isaac's wife (Genesis 24); her infertility and the birth of Esau and Jacob (Gen 25:20-28); the sister-wife episode with Isaac (Genesis 26:6-9); and, Rebekah's intervention to have Jacob receive Isaac's blessing for the first born (Genesis 27). In these episodes, the biblical authors develop Rebekah as a bride, woman, wife, and mother with remarkable autonomy and agency. Rebekah continues the Abrahamic line, marrying Isaac and giving birth to the next biblical patriarch, Jacob. Not only does Rebekah birth Jacob, but she intervenes to ensure he receives Isaac's blessing; she also pushes Isaac to ensure that Jacob marries appropriately when the time comes and saves him from the wrath of his twin brother. Rebekah's story spans multiple chapters and takes place over 200 verses.⁴⁶ Liturgically, we read the majority of her story in *parashat Toledot*.

The content of Rebekah's story teaches us the most about how we are meant to understand her character; but it is worthwhile to examine the architecture of her story and the verses it occupies in the Genesis as another way to highlight her prominence as a biblical figure.

- I. Abraham's servant seeks a wife for Isaac (24:1-67)⁴⁷
 - a. Abraham's servant begins his journey, asking God for a sign (vv. 1-14)
 - b. Rebekah and the servant meet; Rebekah waters the servant's camels (vv. 15-27)
 - c. Rebekah and the servant return to her home (vv. 28-61)
 - i. The servant recounts his story to Rebekah's father and brother (vv. 28-56)

⁴⁵ Rebekah's name appears in the following verses: 22:23, 24:15, 24:29, 24:30, 24:45, 24:51, 24:53, 24:58, 24:59, 24:60, 24:61a, 24:61b, 24:64, 24:67, 25:20, 25:21, 25:28, 26:7, 26:8, 26:35, 27:5, 27:6, 27:11, 27:15, 27:42, 27:46, 28:5, 35:8 49:31. In addition, there are plenty of times she is referred to in the third person or by titles such as maiden, nonetheless it is notable where her name is used.

⁴⁶ The matriarchs Sarah and Rachel's names appear more times in Torah than Rebekah's, but Rebekah has more dialogue. Sarah (including Sarai)'s name appears 49 times between Genesis 11-25. Rachel's name appears 38 times from 28:6-48.

⁴⁷ This section is notably long! It includes a lot of dialogue and repeated conversation. The biblical authors care about the details of Rebekah's story here.

- ii. Rebekah's father and brother ask Rebekah if she wants to go with the servant and they bless her (vv. 57-61)
 - d. Rebekah and the servant return to Isaac; Isaac and Rebekah marry (vv. 62-67)
- II. End of Abraham's life (25:1-18)
 - a. Abraham's lineage through Keturah (vv. 1-4)
 - b. Abraham passes his inheritance to Isaac (vv. 5-6)
 - c. Abraham's death and burial (vv. 7-11)
 - d. Abraham's lineage through Ishmael (vv. 12-18)
- III. Rebekah births Esau and Jacob (vv. 19-34)
 - a. Rebekah struggles to conceive; Isaac addresses God; Rebekah inquires of God (vv. 19-26)
 - b. The text expresses Isaac and Rebekah's preferences for Esau and Jacob respectively (vv. 27-28)
 - c. Esau sells his birthright to Jacob (vv. 29-34)
- IV. Sister-wife episode (26:1-35)
 - a. Isaac tells Abimelech Rebekah is his sister (vv. 1-17)
 - b. Isaac wanders and builds altars to God (vv. 18-35)
- V. Rebekah positions Jacob to receive Isaac's blessings (27:1-28:7)
 - a. Isaac instructs Esau to prepare to receive his blessing (vv. 1-4)
 - b. Rebekah intervenes and instructs Jacob to disguise himself as Esau (vv. 5-17)
 - c. Jacob receives Isaac's blessing (vv. 18-29)
 - d. Esau returns from his hunt expecting Isaac's blessing (vv. 30-40)
 - e. Rebekah warns Jacob of Esau's threat (vv. 41-46)
 - f. Jacob receives a final blessing from Isaac and flees to Paddan-aram (28:1-7)

As we shall see, the biblical authors introduce Rebekah with fanfare, cueing readers that Rebekah is destined for importance. Her birth is first announced at the end of Genesis 22, a significant moment. The servant whom Abraham later sends to find a wife for Isaac has instructions to return to Abraham's kinsmen. Before we learn anything further about Rebekah, we know that she is a promising candidate for Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac's family. The

subsequent verses waste no time in positioning Rebekah as having precisely the qualities in a woman that Abraham's servant seeks. The biblical authors cast no doubt that Rebekah is intended for Isaac and that she will perfectly fulfill the familial needs, also given the lineage linking her to Abraham's family.

The first mention of Rebekah in the Torah (Gen 22:23) takes place after the Akedah, the binding a near sacrifice of Isaac, one of the most dramatic stories in Jewish tradition. God praises Abraham for his actions and blesses him and his descendants (Gen 22:17-18). In the context of the blessing of Abraham's descendants, an anonymous voice tells Abraham a message about his brother Nahor and Milcah's progeny. Two verses prior, God was speaking to Abraham and it stands to reason that God's voice speaks the message to Abraham about the subsequent generations. Rebekah is Nahor's granddaughter. Nahor's grandsons are never mentioned. Given how rare birth announcements of named daughters are in the Bible (except for the genealogies in Genesis 5 and Chronicles 1-9), Rebekah's birth announcement is striking. Only the births of Naamah (Gen 4:22), Dinah (Gen 30:21), and Oholibamah (Gen 36:25) are recorded elsewhere in the Torah. Of these women, Rebekah's story is most prominent. Although Rebekah has brothers (Gen 24:60), especially Laban (Gen 24:29), their births are not recorded at this point. The unique treatment of Rebekah's birth signals how important she is; no other matriarch is so honored.

Upon introducing Rebekah herself for the first time (Gen 24:16), the biblical narrators use three descriptions of Rebekah, along with a social title. These three descriptions are important because they are the first qualities we learn about Rebekah after learning her lineage. They would not all be readily apparent to Abraham's servant, who also appears in this scene. The first description is via the word נַעֲרָה, a noun that is used for characters of both sexes, sometimes

connoting youth or a social status.⁴⁸ The biblical authors also use *na'ar* to refer to Abraham's servant. It is interesting to see that both Abraham's servant and Rebekah are at times referred to by נער. In the first depiction of Rebekah, the biblical authors describe her as טבת מראה מאד, three words to evoke her great beauty or very pleasing appearance. Next follow two descriptions emphasizing Rebekah's sexual purity, בתולה (virgin) and added emphasis that no man had known her. Her appearance combined with her purity and youth are the perfect signals in antiquity that she is fit to be a wife. As if to emphasize the appropriateness of the match for Isaac, וירץ העבד, Abraham's servant immediately runs toward Rebekah upon seeing her.

The words מהר “quickly” and תרץ “she ran” are repeated through these verses (24:18, 24:20, 24:28); it seems the narrators wanted to emphasize Rebekah's eagerness to fulfill the requests speedily. This shows a decisiveness in her action and her hardworking nature.

Rebekah, herself a powerful female figure, gives her lineage including her paternal grandmother (24:24). This identification is unique. Milcah, Rebekah's grandmother, appears seven times in Genesis.⁴⁹ It is interesting that Rebekah includes Milcah's name because the biblical authors could have easily omitted it and still placed Rebekah in the appropriate genealogy as part of Abraham's clan and thus an appropriate fit for Isaac. In Genesis 22:20-23, Abraham is told about his brother Nahor's (and his wife Milcah) descendants. Importantly, Milcah is also mentioned here, but if she were omitted, the connection between Abraham and Rebekah would still remain clear. Rebekah makes sure her grandmother is acknowledged. The text lists Nahor's eight sons including Bethuel and in Genesis 22:23, the text highlights and repeats Rebekah's lineage, “Bethuel being the father of Rebekah. These eight Milcah bore to Nahor, Abraham's brother.” The biblical authors appear to want to leave no doubt of Rebekah's

⁴⁸ The Hebrew uses the masculine consonantal form of the noun (*na'ar*) but pointed to be read as feminine, (*na'ara*).

⁴⁹ See Genesis 11:29a, 11:29b, 22:20, 22:23, 24:15, 24:24, 24:47.

familial connection to Abraham. These verses immediately follow the Akedah scene. This timing is important and points toward the future of Abraham and Isaac's lineage following the most dramatic moment where the family's survival appears at stake.

The biblical authors pay double attention to Rebekah's female lineage. Not only does Rebekah include her paternal grandmother Milcah in identifying herself, but the text says that she returns to her mother's household after the encounter with Abraham's servant (Gen 24:28).

One of the defining moments of Rebekah's story takes place in verses 24:57-8. Rebekah's father and brother, Betuel and Laban, consult Rebekah about whether she will leave immediately with Abraham's servant, or remain at home longer as her family preferred. Two parts of these verses are notable: the first, that Rebekah's male relatives clearly indicate that they will follow Rebekah's own decision, and the second, that Rebekah answers the inquiry so definitively with one word, אֵלֵךְ, I will go. There are a multitude of responses that the biblical authors might have formulated for Rebekah's response. The text could have read, "I will do as you please," or "she remained silent." Her family members make a decision to consult her, implying that they expect a response. This suggests trust in and respect for Rebekah's wishes and judgment, even though we know Rebekah is young. She responds without hesitation; she will go with Abraham's servant to a foreign land a thousand miles away. The audacity, courage, and readiness for a challenge are remarkable. Here, the biblical authors paint a confident and unwavering Rebekah.

Another key moment in Rebekah's story takes place when she first encounters Isaac in the field (24:63-65). The word of interest, also discussed in the footnotes, is וַתִּפֹּל, which I understand as "she alighted" in this context, but others translate as "she fell." Isaac is the first to see the entourage of camels, but Rebekah identifies Isaac before he knows her identity. She again

acts independently, choosing to veil herself before he approaches. This scene is the subject of several of the paintings I examine in Chapter Five.

In 24:67, we learn that Isaac loves Rebekah, וַיֵּאָהֲבָה “he loved her and was comforted after his mother[’s death].” The medieval commentators focus on the first half of verse 24:67 “And Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah’s tent and took Rebekah and she became his wife;” but, Isaac loving Rebekah is extremely important because of how few times love between spouses appears in the Torah. Jacob also loves Rachel (29:18) and there are a handful of examples of parental love or preferences for children.⁵⁰ Love does not always pair with marriage in the Torah and thus this verse calls our attention. Jacob was willing to sacrifice many years of labor for his love of Rachel; we wonder in reading this line what role the biblical authors imagined Isaac’s love playing in their family story. Familial love interweaves throughout the Abrahamic generations, sometimes expressed as a parental preference for one child over the others.⁵¹ Isaac’s love might explain his willingness to honor Rebekah’s concerns about Jacob’s future wife in Gen 27:46.

Birth of Esau and Jacob

Genesis 25:21 introduces and resolves Isaac and Rebekah’s struggles with conception: “And Isaac prayed to Adonai in front of his wife because she was barren. And Adonai answered his prayer and Rebekah, his wife, became pregnant.” As I discussed in the translation, the word לִנְכָּה suggests that Isaac prays while physically alongside Rebekah, leaving open the possibility that Rebekah joins Isaac in his prayer. I disagree with the translations that read לִנְכָּה as Isaac

⁵⁰ These examples from Genesis show parental love/preferences for children: Abraham’s son that he loves (Isaac) Gen 22:2; Isaac loves Esau and Rebekah loves Jacob Gen 25:28; Jacob loves Joseph Gen 37:3.

⁵¹ Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks writes about some of the instances of familial love and tension “Time for Love, Time for Justice,” arguing that mentions of love lead to tension in Genesis. <https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/vayetse/time-for-love-time-for-justice/>

praying “on behalf of” Rebekah.⁵² The verse begs the question as to why Rebekah was comfortable to speak to God a few verses later, but we are not privy to the information about whether she also addresses God to pray to conceive a child in 25:21.

The text also raises the question as to why Isaac did not seek another wife or why Rebekah did not offer one of her handmaids to Isaac for the purposes of bearing children. Sarai gave Hagar to Abram when they had not succeeded at having children. Jacob also had many children with Rachel and Leah’s handmaids, Bilhah and Zilpah. One explanation is that Isaac loved Rebekah (24:67) and the two prioritized their relationship. Isaac also presumably knew something of God’s promise to Abraham and perhaps prayed to God because of his own desire to continue his family line.

Rebekah is an independent self-advocate; she initiates conversation with God. Even when Abraham argues with God about Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18, God initiates the conversation with Abraham. Each time God interacts with Abraham, God approaches and departs Abraham’s presence. In 25:22 we see Rebekah responding to her own circumstances and approaching God. Although Isaac was the one who prayed in 25:21, Rebekah initiates her own conversation unmediated (it is noteworthy that later rabbinic traditions make her approach less direct. See Targum Yonaton 25:22 and Genesis Rabbah 63:7).

In 25:22, Rebekah calls out an enigmatic question, “And the children crushed each other within her and she said, “If so, why am I?” And she went to inquire of Adonai.” The text leaves open multiple questions. The experience of the children struggling or crushing one another within her seems to prompt her response. The verb ויתרצצו initiates Rebekah’s concern and inquiry. Midrash and medieval commentators write extensively about this term and her

⁵² There are only two other instances of לנכה in the Bible: Genesis 30:38 and Proverbs 4:25, both of which refer to a nearby physical position.

subsequent question and what they imply for her pregnancy experience. Interpretations range from significant pain that causes Rebekah to consult other women, to an unusual physical experience so dire that Rebekah wonders if she or the children will survive. From the text, readers know that Rebekah experiences the children physically struggling in her womb. This causes her to exclaim, **אם כן למה זה אנכי**. Many translations write, “If so, why do I exist?” As I explained in the earlier section, I chose to leave the question more ambiguous in the English to remain closer to the Hebrew words. The question does not include the word “exist;” readers are left to fill in the blank in what reads as only a partially formed thought, “why am I...” I understand Rebekah’s partially formed question to be deeply holy. She feels compelled, by a physical feeling she cannot fully explain, to call out to God, even when she does not have the words to precisely form her question. Readers get a sense for her confidence and independence; she puts her voice into the world and expects a response from God. The Bible makes clear that she gets one.

Many commentators focus on the pain Rebekah must be experiencing. However, the text suggests that Rebekah seeks to understand her role and function in light of the struggle; this explanation makes better sense given God’s response. God’s answer, in the form of an oracle, addresses Rebekah’s **למה**, “why” by sharing unique information about her children’s destinies.

The text also does not make clear who hears Rebekah’s question. She might be exclaiming it aloud to herself, Isaac could be present as she was for Isaac’s prayer in the previous verse, or this could be the question directed to God. After she asks it, the verse states, **והלך** “And (then) she went [to inquire of Adonai].” This suggests a physical separation between her initial question and her inquiry of God. Verse 25:23 follows immediately with, “And Adonai answered her,” which points to Rebekah’s question itself being the inquiry she poses to God.

Shortly following the twins' birth, comes a critical verse which frames some of the familial tension. In 25:28, the text states, "And Isaac loved Esau for his taste for game and Rebekah loved Jacob." Various translations use "favor" instead of love, however the biblical authors chose the verb אהב in both cases. It is notable both that the reason for Rebekah's love of Jacob is not mentioned and that the text *does not* say Rebekah and Isaac do not love their other children. Thus readers might understand the love described here as a preference or favoring of one child, but it is important to maintain the integrity of the text emphasizing parental love.

The text gives us a window into Rebekah's dedication and passion for her cause, though readers are left with questions surrounding Rebekah's motivations. The biblical authors do not explain why it is so important to Rebekah that Jacob receive the blessing from Isaac. However, we have two hints in the text. We know that Rebekah favors Jacob (25:28), who, in contrast to Esau, dwells in tents (25:27). Rebekah also received a message from God when she was pregnant with her sons that very likely informs her later actions. In 25:22, Rebekah "went to inquire of Adonai" regarding the feelings in her womb. God's answer includes the words, ורב יעבוד צעיר "the greater will serve the younger." Rebekah knows things that Isaac does not.

When Rebekah instructs Jacob to prepare to receive Isaac's blessing, she may be responding to developments in which God's words to her were not manifesting in the way God described. She may have realized that it was upon her to act to bring God's words into being that the greater or elder of her sons would serve the younger.

Sister-wife episode

Genesis contains three episodes known as "sister-wife" stories where Abraham tries to pass off Sarah as his sister instead of his wife twice (Genesis 12 and 20), and Isaac does the same with Rebekah once (Genesis 26). Abraham and Isaac claim to use the sister-wife messaging out

of fear that the Egyptians, Gerarites, or, in Isaac's case, the Philistines, might kill the husbands on account of their wives' beauty. The episode does not tell us much about Rebekah as a character, though we learn that Isaac thought her beauty is sufficiently striking that she would likely attract the attention of those nearby. As it turns out, none of the Philistines pursued Rebekah in the way that Sarah was pursued. Sarah's beauty is confirmed by others, whereas only Isaac identifies Rebekah as beautiful at this point.

Abimelech, the Philistine king, spots Isaac and Rebekah playing or being intimate with one another. It is difficult to draw significant meaning about the nature of Isaac and Rebekah's relationship from this one word *מצחק*, however there are other ways the authors might have led Abimelech to discover that Rebekah and Isaac were married. It is possible to draw from this that Isaac and Rebekah shared a kind of playful closeness at moments in their relationship, though extrapolating much further would stretch our read of the text. The affection that is part of their relationship is already mentioned in Gen 24:67 when we learn that Isaac loved Rebekah. In the two Abraham-Sarah sister-wife episodes, God is the one who reveals to the foreign leaders that Sarah is Abram's or Abraham's wife. The biblical authors do not highlight the intimate moments between Abraham and Sarah in the way Isaac and Rebekah are described as *מצחק*.

The sister-wife episode in Genesis 26 interrupts the story about Jacob and Esau's relationship and their struggles with their birthright and Isaac's blessing. The story's placement gives some context to Isaac and Rebekah's relationship prior to Rebekah going behind Isaac's back to direct his blessing to Jacob. Rebekah and Isaac spent sufficient time together, were close enough as a couple to be seen by Abimelech when he happened to look out of his window. The writer presents Rebekah and Isaac as a couple that knows each other intimately; they were not the kind of couple who inhabited totally different spheres. Additionally, Isaac only had one wife,

whereas other patriarchs and men around him often had multiple wives. Isaac seems to think that Rebekah is very beautiful, although others do not react as if she is.

This story also shows that Isaac, for his part, is not a stranger to deception or misleading. He lies to Abimelech in an attempt to protect himself. The biblical authors might use this kind of deception to link thematically to Rebekah's deception of Isaac in the following chapter. In both cases, God appears to reward deceptive behavior. In chapter four, I discuss Susan Niditch's work on the biblical valorizing of the underdog.

Rebekah intervenes in Isaac's blessing

In Genesis 27, we learn about Rebekah's character through her actions. Our lens to view Rebekah's actions and speech are no longer limited by the questions that her father or brother addresses to her. In this chapter, once again (as in 25:22-23), she takes initiative. Action begins with her, her dialogue progresses the scenes.

Genesis 27 opens with Isaac summoning Esau to his side and instructing Esau to prepare a specific meal in advance of receiving Isaac's blessing. There is no indication from the first four verses where Rebekah or Jacob might be during Isaac's instruction to Esau, and if anyone else would be present for the conversation. Knowing that Isaac is old and believes himself to be dying, it stands to reason that Rebekah could have been close at hand, perhaps attending to or caring for Isaac, perhaps present for her husband's meaningful instruction to their son.

Commentators have a tendency to portray Rebekah as a trickster and 27:5 is one of the earliest moments where some readers accuse Rebekah of nefarious behavior. However, the text does not suggest anything out of the ordinary or behavior that crosses any ethical lines. The verse states that רבקה שמעה, "Rebekah heard" Isaac speaking. The verb שמע does not imply eavesdropping; it does not explain whether Rebekah heard Isaac's words from beside where Isaac

sat or rested, or whether she happened by the conversation. One word in the verse might point to the conversation taking place solely between Isaac and Esau without Rebekah present in the room. Isaac spoke to his son Esau; the verse uses the word בְּנוֹ as opposed to something like בְּנֵהּ, their son. Yet, even the word בְּנוֹ does not preclude Rebekah's presence; the male dominance of the text might lead the biblical authors to refer to Esau as Isaac's son. Additionally, readers know from 25:28 that each parent had a preferential relationship with one of the sons.

In verse 27:5, readers witness Rebekah's deliberate nature and awareness of her surroundings. Whereas Isaac's eyes have dimmed, and the biblical authors portray him as not fully aware of his context, Rebekah does not begin speaking to Jacob until after Esau leaves for his hunt. Through contrast, the biblical authors show us more about Rebekah's persona; Isaac does not know who can hear his conversation with Esau. Rebekah knows Esau is out of earshot when she recounts her instructions to Jacob.

One way that the biblical authors elevate Rebekah's story in Genesis 27 as well as in Genesis 24 is through repeated dialogue and narration. The text includes several moments where the biblical authors might have written that a character recounted a conversation, but instead the authors spell out the repetition for emphasis. There are times in the text when we do not have a full repetition of dialogue: in 24:28, the text records that Rebekah told her mother's household what transpired at the spring. However, in 24:42-48, Abraham's servant retells in a lengthy speech to Rebekah's family his account of meeting Rebekah. The repetition adds nuance and highlights through emphasis the importance of what is recounted; it suggests that the servant is trying to persuade Rebekah's family of the authenticity of his journey and the divinely ordained quality of their encounter. Nonetheless, there are ways that the biblical authors might have spilled less ink in telling this story and the choice to repeat so much of the dialogue through the

servant's words. In 27:7, a similar, though shorter type of repetition appears when Rebekah's dialogue with Jacob recounts almost verbatim Isaac's words from a few verses prior. I believe that the choice to lengthen Rebekah's story in the text through repeated dialogue and narration elevates the importance of Rebekah's character and shows the biblical authors placing value in her role and her story. It also confirms that Rebekah accurately represents Isaac's position.

In 27:6 we see Rebekah take the action into her own hands. She recounts what she heard to her son, בְּנֵה, Jacob, which is a notable contrast to Isaac's son בְּנוֹ. The biblical authors place emphasis on the words Rebekah heard as Rebekah repeats Isaac's instruction almost verbatim. Perhaps the biblical authors want to suggest that part of Rebekah's wisdom is in using this exact language that Isaac used to describe what he wants. They show that Rebekah listens carefully and attentively to the important details.

Rebekah's agency begins to appear most clearly in 27:8 when she directs Jacob to follow her instruction, irrespective of Jacob's own interpretation of Isaac's words. What Rebekah wants Jacob to do is indisputable; her motivations at this moment, on the other hand, are not recorded in the text. Readers have clues to her motivation from the earlier in the text: knowing that Rebekah loves Jacob and God foretold to Rebekah about her younger son overcoming the older. Rebekah also knows that Isaac has a preference for Esau and thus might be blinded by this preference to other signs from God pointing toward Jacob. Rebekah seems to understand what Isaac needs in this scene. Whereas Isaac tried but failed to deceive Abimelech in 26:7-9, Rebekah succeeded in deceiving Isaac. Readers might also understand Rebekah's motivations as a desire to protect her and Isaac's family and to prevent Isaac from mistakenly blessing Esau, given the information God shared with her in 25:23.

Rebekah's actions are thorough and attentive to detail; to convince Isaac that Jacob is their older son Esau and the one to be blessed, she prepares the meal, she disguises Jacob's hands in animal skins, she takes Esau's clothes, she dresses Jacob in Esau's clothes, and she manages each detail of the preparation down to placing the prepared dish in Jacob's hand. Rebekah takes orderly steps to achieve her goal of preparing Jacob for greeting Isaac. She is firm, direct, and precise. The biblical authors make clear that Rebekah, not Jacob, directs the action in the scene.

Readers hear very little from Jacob in the course of receiving Rebekah's instructions to prepare to receive Isaac's blessing. Jacob expresses one reservation in the text (27:11-12) which is that Isaac might notice from the feel of his hands or arms that his smooth skin feels different than Esau's hairiness. Jacob's larger fear is that he will be discovered as a deceiver, as though he is making a mockery of his father, and will be cursed instead of blessed. This is the first moment in the text where we have explicit acknowledgement of mockery, or the idea that Rebekah is risking something in going against Isaac's wishes. The next verse 27:13 is even more powerful. "And his mother said to him, 'Your curse, my son, is upon me, but listen to my voice and go bring them to me.'" Rebekah demonstrates that Jacob receiving the blessing from Isaac is so important to her that she is willing to take significant personal risk to move the course of her family's trajectory in the direction she determines is necessary. When Rebekah says to Jacob, "Your curse, my son, is upon me," (Gen 27:13a) she assumes responsibility for any divine or human curse, yet the benefit, the blessing, goes to Jacob, not to her. Rebekah remains focused on her mission; in the same sentence as she assuages Jacob's concern, she returns to the task at hand, "but listen to my voice and go bring them [the kids] to me" (Gen 27:13b). From this verse we learn how important it is to Rebekah that Jacob receives Isaac's blessing. She wastes no time

in returning to the completion of the necessary tasks: cooking and preparing the meal to fulfill Isaac's request.

Rebekah uses the phrase שמע בקולי three times to Jacob in chapter 27, a statement that expects obedience and reflects authority. A similar form of this phrase appears three other times in Genesis and fifteen other times throughout Tanakh. God ends his blessing to Abraham with these words at the end of the Akedah (22:18). Abraham will receive God's blessing because he listened [and acted according to] God's voice. The verse 22:18 also includes the word עקב which some have connected as forecasting to Jacob as one of Abraham's descendants. In 26:5, as God instructs Isaac to remain in the land, the text reiterates the blessing God offered Abraham and again we see the phrase that Abraham listened to God's voice. The word עקב also appears in this verse. The final time this phrase appears in Genesis, Rachel speaks the words, noting that God has listened to her voice and granted her a son.

Another moment in the text that echoes the idea that God plays a role in Rebekah's actions to position Jacob to receive the blessing appears in verse 27:20. Isaac wonders how Jacob found the game so quickly to prepare the meal, and Jacob answers that God caused it to appear before him. Rebekah presented Jacob with where to retrieve the kid for the meal; however, Jacob claims that God is the true source of the plan (one may hear echoes of Abraham's answer to Isaac in the story of the Akedah in Gen 22:8). Jacob's words direct us to consider that God shapes Rebekah's decisions in preparing Jacob to receive the blessing and Jacob seems aware of God's role.

Rebekah succeeded in physically disguising Jacob as well as motivating him to persist through Isaac's doubts, and Isaac blesses Jacob (27:28-29). Many of the artistic depictions in Chapter 5 show Rebekah present for Jacob's blessing, but 27:17-18 suggests a separation

between Rebekah handing Jacob the meal and Jacob appearing before Isaac. “And she gave the tasty dish and the bread...Then he came to his father...” The text does not indicate that Rebekah witnessed the blessing, but the later context suggests that she knew it took place.

After Esau and Isaac discover the blessing swap and Isaac offers alternative words to Esau, Esau’s anger builds and he threatens to kill Jacob after Isaac dies. Verse 27:41 reads, וַיֹּאמֶר, עָשׂוּ בְלִבּוֹ “and Esau said to himself [within his heart].” The text makes fairly clear that Esau speaks these words in private, perhaps not even aloud to anyone, but in the following verse readers learn that despite Esau’s privacy, the words have been transmitted to Rebekah, “The words of her elder son Esau were made known to Rebekah.” The text uses the passive verb וַיִּגַּד; Rebekah is the object of the telling, but the text leaves the ‘teller’ ambiguous. Rebekah received earlier information pertaining to Jacob’s future via an oracle from God. Thus one might understand that God also transmits to Rebekah this new information about Esau’s threat. However Rebekah receives it, this is another example of Rebekah receiving privileged background information that informs her actions to protect her beloved son Jacob.

Rebekah’s parting words to Jacob

Immediately upon being informed of Esau’s threat to Jacob, Rebekah summons Jacob and passes along the information (27:42-43). She invokes her signature phrase to instruct Jacob, שמע בקולי “listen to my voice,” and tells him to flee to Haran. Rebekah adds that she will send for Jacob to return at a later point. Then, in 27:45 Rebekah makes an ambiguous exclamation using her signature interrogative, למה: “How (למה) that I might lose both of you in one day!”

There is some ambiguity in Rebekah's speech when she expresses concern about losing both of her sons in one day. The text suggests that Esau might kill Jacob, but it is not immediately obvious how Rebekah would then lose Esau. Perhaps Rebekah would lose Esau by

virtue of his being a murderer, or perhaps she envisions some kind of conflict which results in both of their deaths, should Esau initiate an attack. Verse 27:46 hints at another possible explanation for what Rebekah might mean in terms of losing her sons.

In 27:45-46 the biblical authors also show some of Rebekah's passion through the repetition of the word למה, which appears in both verses. Exasperated or emphatic, Rebekah exclaims to Isaac expressing her thoughts and concerns. Rebekah also uses למה in her speech when she cries out to God in 25:22. The biblical authors present Rebekah not only as deliberate and mission-focused, but also as emotionally expressive. The transition between verse 27:45 and 27:46 gives readers insight to an important issue of Rebekah's concern. Rebekah tells Isaac, "I feel loathing at my life because of these Hittite women. If Jacob marries a woman from among the Hittites like these, from among the women of the land, what will be my life?" Rebekah appears concerned that she will lose Jacob if he marries outside of the appropriate clan.⁵³ This time, Isaac hears and understands Rebekah's worries as they pertain to the continuation of their family line.

Jacob does not leave immediately after Rebekah's instruction in 27:43; rather, in 28:1, Isaac summons Jacob to give him an additional blessing and instructions about where he should find an appropriate wife. With Isaac's final instructions to Jacob, he fulfills Rebekah's wishes and manipulations of her family's future.

Chapter 27 brings Rebekah's story to a close; she does not speak again with Isaac or Jacob. Her final dialogue expresses dissatisfaction and concern for her children's future, but ultimately Isaac honors and manifests her wishes. While the text announces Rebekah's birth, we

⁵³ Tamara Eskenazi also raises the consideration that Rebekah's instruction regarding Jacob's marriage prospects could be a subterfuge that she uses to justify sending Jacob away.

do not learn the specific moment of her death. In Gen 49:31 when Jacob blesses his sons toward the end of his life, he mentions that Isaac and Rebekah are buried together in Machpelah.

In 28:5, Rebekah's name appears again, explaining her familial relations to figures we have already encountered. It is notable that Rebekah is introduced as mother of Jacob and Esau, with Jacob listed first. Typically children are listed with the eldest first, but the biblical authors prioritize the more important bond and relationship between Rebekah and Jacob. There are several ways that Rebekah could have been described in relation to those present (as Isaac's wife or Betuel's daughter) but instead the text describes her as mother and sister, as opposed to daughter or wife. These are subtle choices, but emphasize Rebekah as an independent figure, not a subservient partner.

On many occasions, the biblical text portrays Rebekah as independent, self-directed, privy to behind-the-scenes information, and closely connected with God. She asks questions, initiates dialogue and action to move forward the story of the Abrahamic family. Though Isaac has the patriarchal authority to bestow blessing upon his children, Rebekah has the personal, intellectual, and spiritual power to direct the outcome of Isaac's blessings. With this power, she shapes the future of the entire story of the people Israel.

Chapter 2 Rabbinic Sources on Rebekah

Rebekah in Targum Onkelos and Targum Yonaton

Moving forward in time from the written Biblical text, we encounter a subsequent layer of interpretation: the Targum. Today we have two primary Targum editions: the Targum Onkelos and Targum Yonaton. Both are Aramaic translations of the biblical text that infuse their own interpretations into the translation. During the first century BCE and early centuries CE, Jews in the Middle East spoke Aramaic and most did not understand the biblical Hebrew of the Tanakh. Translators or a *metarguman* would translate the recitation of the Torah verse by verse into Aramaic for the populous to understand. Versions of these Aramaic translations became the Targum editions that we have today. The translations were designed both to translate and also to explain the text. Thus there are times when a verse in the Targum will directly mimic the Hebrew using the same words and roots in the Aramaic and other times when the Targum extrapolates on ideas in the biblical text giving modern readers insight into a first century understanding of our biblical sources. The Targum Onkelos is the older of the two and was developed in Babylonia. The Targum Yonaton developed in the Land of Israel and also references later material including from Midrash and Talmud.

Large swaths of the Targum for the verses examined in this paper remain loyal to the Hebrew text. Many areas of the narrative arc and dialogue between the characters are nearly identical in biblical text and Targum. It is difficult to draw too many conclusions from the sections where the Targum mimics the text. We might understand that the authors of the Targum found the story to be sufficiently conceptually clear and non-problematic, that it did not require additions or changes for their audience to understand.

In Gen 24:64 both Targum translations place autonomy with Rebekah, using the *hitpa'el* וְאֵתְרַכְּנָהּ which means “to let oneself down” according to Jastrow. Jastrow also offers “to fall” as a definition, but the *hitpa'el* suggests directed action by Rebekah. In Gen 24:67 the Targum is more explicit than the biblical verse; the biblical verse says that Isaac was comforted after his mother and leaves out his mother’s ‘death’ though her loss is implied. The Targum says that Isaac was comforted after her death.

Targum Yonatan 25:21–22 sets in motion important textual changes that the later Midrash explores in depth. The biblical text in Gen 25:21 explains that Isaac prays and Gen 25:22 reads, “and she went to inquire of God.” The Targum intentionally shifts the focus away from Rebekah by situating both Isaac’s prayer and Rebekah’s request in male dominated spaces. The Targum adds that Isaac went up to the mountain of prayer, the mountain where Abraham planned to sacrifice him, to pray to God. The Targum thus situates Isaac’s prayer between Isaac and God, removing the possibility that Rebekah was present for the prayer and that she would have been praying alongside Isaac. I believe this translation also shows Targum Yonatan’s discomfort with the Akedah scene and this prayer on the site of the near sacrifice, is an attempt to redeem the Akedah moment by linking it to Rebekah’s pregnancy. In the following verse, Targum Yonatan adds to the text that Rebekah “went to the school of Shem Rabbah to pray/inquire with compassion before God.” While the biblical text depicts Rebekah addressing God directly, Targum Yonatan adds an intermediary, the sages at the house of study who would transmit the prayer on Rebekah’s behalf. The biblical text illustrates clear communication between Rebekah and God. However, the Targum restricts the honor of communicating with God to the male sages. Rachel Adelman, professor of Hebrew Bible, suggests that the Targum authors and later rabbis “are uncomfortable with her direct appeal because of the consequences—she comes to know

more than her husband about the divine plan.”⁵⁴ The Targum emphasizes the appropriateness of Rebekah’s fit in the Abrahamic family, but seeks to limit the role of women in their direct relationship with God.

In Genesis 27:5 the Targum Yonaton makes an interesting addition to the verse to explain a question that many raise in the text. The verse says, “Rebekah heard Isaac speaking to his son Esau,” רבקה שמעת. Targum Yonaton adds the following: כד מליל יצחק עם ברוח קודשא. “Rebekah heard by the holy spirit each word Isaac spoke to Esau.” The biblical text leaves ambiguous how Rebekah heard Isaac’s instruction; was she eavesdropping, or would she have been standing beside Isaac and been directly privy to the conversation? Targum Yonaton suggests that Rebekah was not in the immediate vicinity when the conversation took place, but that God wanted Rebekah to hear this message so that she could act accordingly. The spirit of God placed the words in her mind. Contrary to being a sneaky eavesdropper, it was divinely ordained that Rebekah hear what Isaac told their son—and presumably, act on them.

A few verses later, Targum Yonaton continues to embellish the biblical text. When Jacob tells Rebekah that Esau is hairy and he is smooth-skinned, Targum Yonaton adds to Jacob’s dialogue explaining that he would be sinning if he steps in Esau’s place. The biblical text itself presents Jacob’s statement as an observation and subsequent concern that Jacob’s actions might lead to a curse. Targum Yonaton spells this out further, making sure that the listeners to the Targum know that Rebekah understands the risks she imposes on Jacob when he goes before Isaac in disguise and that Jacob is concerned with being a sinner—a theological not simply self-serving concern.. Targum Yonaton draws out the tension between Rebekah’s divine guidance to send Jacob to receive Isaac’s blessing and her and Jacob’s knowledge of the risk that deceiving

⁵⁴ Adelman, “Reading Rebekah Unveiled,” 18.

Isaac entails. On the one hand, then, Tagum Yonaton accentuates the risk Rebekah is undertaking and also somewhat diminishes her agency (as also in 25:22), on the other, it makes her actions more directly connected to God's agenda.

Rebekah in the Talmud

Rebekah is mentioned by name in the Talmud only a handful of times. She is brought up as an example to resolve issues of gender and blessing. Many of these passages teach us about concerns of the rabbis but nothing about what they think about Rebekah. This type of representation of biblical women in the Talmud is common in regard to other biblical women. Women whose stories tend to be represented with more depth tend to be wives of rabbis or other post-biblical figures that the rabbis invent or describe. Nonetheless, it is valuable to look at places where Rebekah appears in the Talmud to understand how the rabbis related to her character.

In Yevamot 64a, Rebekah appears in a discussion about the length of time a man should or must wait before taking another wife if the couple remains barren. Isaac and Rebekah's marriage is used as a counterexample to the *stam*.⁵⁵ Isaac and Rebekah were married for twenty years before bearing children, whereas the *stam* suggests that a couple should wait ten years and divorce if they have not borne children in that time. The rabbis of the Talmud argue about the rationale for Isaac not divorcing Rebekah or finding another wife. One argument they make for Isaac's decision to stay with Rebekah was that Isaac knew he was the infertile partner so, finding a new wife would not have addressed the problem. The rabbis also theorize that infertility was a

⁵⁵ The *stam* is the anonymous editorial voice in the Talmud to which other rabbis and voices respond.

condition all of the patriarchs engaged with to some extent to instruct the patriarchs to pray to God and reveal God's mercy.

In Taanit 4a, the rabbis explain that Abraham's servant is an example of improper prayer in Tanakh because he prayed that the woman he encounters at the spring be a suitable wife for Isaac. Despite the servant's improper prayer, the rabbis acknowledge that God saw to it that the woman who the servant encountered was Rebekah, a very fitting wife. From this passage the rabbis do not give us an explicit window into their understanding of Rebekah. In this passage the rabbis emphasize that God sent Rebekah to Abraham's servant. The rabbis see Abraham's servant and God as the primary actors in this scene. The rabbis are less concerned with Rebekah's agency or the decisions her character makes in this scene.

In Berakhot 61a, within a passage about whether it is acceptable or dangerous for a man to walk behind a woman, Rebekah appears once again as an example in the rabbis' arguments. When Rebekah and her entourage go with Abraham's servant back to meet Isaac, Rebekah follows the servant, affirming the rabbis' perspective that it is dangerous for a man to walk behind a woman. Again in this example, we see the rabbis using Rebekah only as a side prop to a larger point about male female relations. This suggests to us that the rabbis were far less concerned with Rebekah's attributes and tend to see her as yet another woman in Tanakh whose example can serve to bolster arguments related to male-female relations or other topics of import.

In Sotah 13a, there is a passage about the fulfillment of Rebekah's prophecy about losing both of her sons. The rabbis of the Talmud acknowledge the power of Rebekah's words, that her words indicated not only a parental fear, but that her words had power beyond herself. This passage is one of the few moments where the rabbis attribute power to Rebekah's character. The

rabbis acknowledge that the prophecy did not come true; Jacob and Esau did not kill one another. However, the Talmud still seeks to find validity in what they regard as Rebekah's prophecy and explains that later, Jacob and Esau were buried on the same day although they did not die on the same day. The other piece of this passage which is notable is the choice the rabbis made in calling Rebekah's words a prophecy נְבוֹאָה. They could have characterized her words as a plea, a hope, a prayer, an expression of exasperation, but instead chose to elevate her words to be prophecy. This passage in Sotah 13a illustrates that Rebekah was not only a supporting figure for questions of gender and marital issues for the rabbis, but that they found her words to have prophetic weight.

Rebekah in Midrash

Midrashic literature treats Rebekah's character very differently than the Talmud does. The rabbis use her story to both explore male-female relationships, and also to understand and reveal different aspects of her character. As with all midrashic commentary, the midrash often extrapolates from the biblical text and takes a story in a direction not implied by the biblical text. Most of this analysis will focus on Genesis Rabbah, the midrashic commentary on the book of Genesis. We date this text from the years 300-500 CE; the precise author is unknown.⁵⁶ This midrashic compilation offers the richest material on the Rebekah stories because it traces Genesis verse by verse with homiletical, aggadic interpretations. Genesis Rabbah has far more material than this paper will analyze in depth. Below I will explore a selection of midrashim that speak to key moments in Rebekah's story.

⁵⁶ Some ascribe authorship to the *amora* Hoshiaiah from the third century in Palestine <https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/3056-bereshit-rabbah>

Genesis 24:16 discusses Rebekah's virginity and then states that she filled her jar at the well. Genesis Rabbah 60:5 on this verse goes into vast detail about the state of Rebekah's virginity and implications for other marriageable women. The element of this midrash about the latter part of the verse gives us some insight into the rabbis' depictions of Rebekah. Genesis Rabbah 60:5 says, "all of the women went down to fill [their jars] from the spring, but for this one [Rebekah] when it saw her, the water rose up immediately. God said to her, this is a [positive] omen for your children..."⁵⁷ This passage is one of many places in Genesis Rabbah where the rabbis illustrate God ordaining that Rebekah is the fitting person for her role as progenitor of the future generations. Later, the midrash will spend many lines explaining that the biblical text (Gen 25:22-23) does not indicate that God and Rebekah had direct communication, but rather that Rebekah communicates with God via rabbinic sages. It is therefore surprising that Genesis Rabbah adds dialogue between God and Rebekah that does not appear in the biblical text. One difference between God's message to Rebekah in Genesis Rabbah 60:5 and God's oracle to Rebekah in Gen 25:23 is that in the midrash, Rebekah does not initiate the conversation with a question, rather God explains to Rebekah why God helps her fetch the water for the camels and in doing so offers a positive omen for Rebekah's future.

In Genesis Rabbah 60:16, the rabbis compare Rebekah and Sarah, positioning Rebekah as filling the spiritual gaps in the biblical family left by Sarah's death (this notion is only implied in Gen 24:67). This portrayal of Rebekah is powerful because the rabbis want to position Rebekah as equally meritorious as Sarah. Though Rebekah is a newcomer to the family, she fulfills the duties equally, in the same role. The rabbis imagine that the same blessings God bestowed on Sarah hold true for Rebekah. For example, the rabbis share a story that while Sarah lived, her

⁵⁷ This translation is my own. I have also consulted the Soncino translation.

Shabbat candles would stay kindled from one Shabbat through the following Shabbat; when Sarah died this ceased. However, when Rebekah entered the tent as Isaac's wife, this blessing resumed and the candles remained kindled from Shabbat through Shabbat as they had with Sarah. Though the biblical text does not speak about the patriarchs and matriarchs observing practices such as Shabbat candle lighting and baking challah, we also see the ways in which the rabbis blend their rabbinic world with the ancient stories. The rabbis elevate the importance of their rabbinic practices and the mitzvot by tying them to the matriarchs. The fact that the rabbis seek to validate their Shabbat observance by rooting them in the matriarchs' practices shows us the high esteem in which they held Rebekah and the other matriarchs.

Genesis 25:21 tells us that Isaac prayed before Adonai, in the presence of Rebekah. Bereishit Rabbah 63:5 elaborates on Isaac's prayer, explaining that he offered prayers בעשר, or plentifully and in so doing, Isaac changed the course of their family's path causing Rebekah to be able to carry their children. From the biblical text, we understand that Rebekah was present, but the midrash goes on to explicate the term לנכה, which the rabbis translate as across from, in that both Isaac and Rebekah were across from one another praying for the same thing.

Bereishit Rabbah 63:6 includes several explanations of the term ויתרוצצו, "[the children] struggled or crushed each other." The rabbis seem interested in portraying Esau as evil from the start; Esau was antagonistic to Jacob even before they were born and Esau was drawn toward idolatry, while Jacob was drawn toward houses of prayer. One interpretation that I find particularly interesting is that the rabbis also map the tension between Jacob and Esau onto their own rabbinic framework: they explain that within Rebekah's womb, Jacob and Esau disagree about the permissibility of the other's legal rulings. This passage reflects how seriously the rabbis took their disagreements with one another: in the biblical text, Jacob and Esau's tensions

do not involve scholarly disagreement given that Jacob fears for his life and Esau threatens to kill Jacob. We can either understand this midrash to raise the stakes of the disagreements the rabbis have with one another, or perhaps to lower the stakes between Jacob and Esau. One could understand this midrash to say that Jacob and Esau's disagreements are akin to a legal argument that could be resolved in the *beit midrash*. My sense is that the rabbis are most interested in positioning Esau as the source of evil, and while they acknowledge the mutual tension between the brothers, they place primary blame with Esau.

The midrash continues to address the second part of the verse where Rebekah goes to inquire of God: **אם כן למה זה אנוכי**. Here the midrash tries to make sense of Rebekah's question which is somewhat ambiguous in the biblical text. The midrash considers that Rebekah might be crying out in physical pain and then goes to consult other women to find out if indeed child bearing is always this painful. In one midrash, she laments ever becoming pregnant. The midrash seeks to elevate Rebekah by connecting this verse to Rebekah's destiny as the (grand)mother of the twelve tribes born to Jacob. The rabbis dabble in numerology here by pointing out that the final word of Rebekah's question **זה** corresponds to the number twelve (*zayin* = 7 and *heh* = 5) forecasting that Rebekah is concerned about the future of these tribes. Via this passage and an earlier passage connecting Rebekah to Sarah, we see the ways that the rabbis solidify Rebekah's significance because of her connection to the generations that precede and follow her.

In general, Genesis Rabbah elevates Rebekah and highlights her independence, however, there is a line they are not yet ready to cross: they are not comfortable imagining that God directly answers a woman's prayer. They explain that Rebekah received her answer to her prayer to God in Genesis 25:22-23 via an angel instead of directly from God (Genesis Rabbah 63:7). The midrash acknowledges the obvious tension: the text says clearly, **ויאמר יהוה** the same

language used throughout the entire Tanakh when God addresses Moses, Abraham, or any of the male figures. The rabbis' interpretation does not offer a further explanation, only that it must be implicit that only in the very rarest of cases does God address a woman directly, so the biblical text must assume we know it was through an angel. That the midrash has to detail all of the ways that God is *not* speaking directly to Rebekah only serves to highlight that the biblical text does not have a problem with God directly addressing women.

In this section of Genesis Rabbah, we see two concerns of the rabbis at play. The first is that at every turn, the rabbis seek to emphasize the importance of their rabbinic world and read (anachronistically or otherwise) their legal rabbinic frameworks back into the biblical text. We see another example of this when they debate where Rebekah would have gone to לדרוש את יהוה. The biblical text does not definitively suggest that Rebekah traveled anywhere, but the rabbis imagine that she would have gone to the oldest known house of study, the house of Shem and Eber. The second area the rabbis seem to emphasize is the importance of Rebekah's destiny and role in the Abrahamic family. They solidify Rebekah's connection as the righteous matriarch destined to be forbearer of the people Israel.

Even though the rabbis of Genesis Rabbah cannot permit the idea of God speaking directly to a woman, they are comfortable with a certain relationship that Rebekah has with God. Later, as Rebekah prepares Jacob to receive Isaac's blessing, Genesis Rabbah 65:17 explains that she hands Jacob the prepared meal and says: מִכָּאן וְאֵילָּךְ בְּרִיךְ יְיָ וְקוּם לָךְ “until this point I will be for you, from here you will go and your God will go before you.” The biblical verse says only that Rebekah hands Jacob the meal and the bread; the midrash imagines comforting words that Rebekah might have said to Jacob as he enters Isaac's presence, afraid of transgressing his father's wishes. The most interesting part of Rebekah's dialogue in the midrash

is that the rabbis emphasize her connection to God and God's blessing of Rebekah's decision to send Jacob in Esau's place to receive the blessing. In this manner they seem to relieve her from the guilt of deception. The midrash acknowledges that Jacob must complete the action of receiving the blessing without Rebekah's support; up to this point she handled Jacob's attire and all of the food preparation. Genesis Rabbah makes it clear that Rebekah's, and by extension Jacob's, actions are blessed by God. This gives us insight into how the rabbis see Rebekah. In their eyes, like Abraham who came before her, she takes on risks to fulfill God's instructions.

Rebekah's name appears in a few other places throughout the midrashic material including the commentary on Song of Songs. In Shir HaShirim Rabbah 2:2 In this passage the midrash compares Rebekah to a verse from Shir HaShirim about a lily among the thorns. The thorns in the midrash are Rebekah's brother Laban and her father Bethuel, each known as trickster (רמאי). In the midrash, Rebekah represents the lily, the gem hidden among these tricksters. What interests me the most about this midrash is that Rebekah is sometimes portrayed as the very type of deceiver that this midrash distinguishes her from. The midrash seems to understand רמאי as a category of a person who will perpetually deceive and for their own selfish goals. Perhaps the midrash understands Rebekah as someone who deceives for a purpose beyond her self-gain.

The talmudic and midrashic literature take a multifaceted approach to Rebekah's character. These texts repeatedly emphasize the importance of God's role in directing Rebekah's life and the future of the Abrahamic family. They celebrate her role as the appropriate match for Isaac while minimizing her autonomy and independence.

Chapter 3 Rebekah in Medieval Commentaries

Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Ramban and Or HaChaim on Rebekah

Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac, born in France in 1040 and known as Rashi, remains one of the most influential commentators on the Jewish canon from the Tanakh through Talmud. Rashi's commentary sought to elucidate the plain meaning of the text. But his commentary also went on to shape centuries of other commentators' perspectives, as later scholars both agreed with and responded to Rashi's analysis. Understanding Rashi's commentary on the Rebekah stories gives us a window into the medieval perspectives on these stories and on Rebekah's character. Rashi often incorporates midrash from Genesis Rabbah in his commentary. It is not always evident whether Rashi fully agrees with the midrash, or just seeks to bring it into dialogue with the verse.

For many of the verses I examine in this chapter, I also consult Abraham Ibn Ezra's commentary. Ibn Ezra was born in Spain around 1092 and is believed to have written his commentaries on Tanakh in the 1140s.⁵⁸ He focused his commentaries on biblical grammar and, unlike Rashi, avoided midrashic interpretations. Ibn Ezra's commentary focuses so closely on the grammar and the conjugation of certain verbs that it can be difficult to draw out what he might argue about Rebekah's character as a whole. In a few places I bring in commentary by Nachmanides also known as Ramban (1194-1270). He lived in present-day Spain and is most known for his commentary on the Torah. He is known for a deep sense of piety and adherence to Talmud. I will also examine some commentary from Or HaChaim, an early 18th century work, written by Rabbi Chaim ben Moshe ibn Attar, a Moroccan scholar and Kabbalist.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ <https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/7985-ibn-ezra-abraham-ben-meir-aben-ezra>

⁵⁹ <https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/2096-attar-ibn#anchor6>

In the first verse where Tanakh mentions Rebekah's name (22:23), Rashi emphasizes the importance of Rebekah's role. Her name is preceded by genealogy that illustrates the connection between her to Abraham's family. Regarding the three verses of genealogy that list male descendants of Abraham's brother, Rashi writes that the entire purpose of listing the genealogy is to arrive at Rebekah's birth. Rashi sees Rebekah not as another of the progeny, but the entire purpose of listing progeny in the first place. Ibn Ezra agrees with this assessment; he believes that the purpose of these verses is to demonstrate Rebekah's pedigree, so that when she appears by the spring later in the text it becomes immediately clear to all that she is destined to join the Abrahamic family.

Rashi cites Genesis Rabbah in 24:17 when Abraham's servant runs toward Rebekah. The midrash states that the waters rose in the well when Rebekah approached, a mystical interpretation that suggests divine signs pointed toward Rebekah being exceptional. Rashi's reliance on Genesis Rabbah suggests he was comfortable with Rebekah's exceptionalism.

Rashi on 24:23 and 24:47 notes that the servant switches the order when he recounts his meeting with Rebekah to Laban and Rebekah's family. Rashi wonders why the text states that the servant gave Rebekah gifts before asking who she was in 24:22-23. Rashi answers this question by explaining that the servant knew God had made his mission successful “בזכותו של אברהם” on account of Abraham's merit.” Therefore the servant could offer Rebekah the gifts in 24:23 before asking about Rebekah's family. When the servant recounts his day to Laban and others, he says that he asks Rebekah's name before handing her the gifts. Rashi understands that this switch is so Rebekah's family does not think he is recklessly handing over gifts when he does not know before whom he stands.

Rashi cites Genesis Rabbah in Genesis 24:57 when Laban and Betuel consult Rebekah about leaving her home with Abraham's servant. Rashi explains that it is from this verse that women must consent to their marriage. Rashi understands Rebekah's response as a marker of her independence: אֵלַי suggests to Rashi that Rebekah agrees to go with Abraham's servant even if her choice is against the wishes of her family members. Rashi continues to highlight Rebekah's importance in 24:60 when he links the blessing Laban and Rebekah's mother give her with the promise that God makes to Abraham. Rashi understands the text as elevating Rebekah's importance in this moment; the blessing cements that Rebekah will be the one in line to carry out God's promise to Abraham.

Rashi and Ibn Ezra both discuss in detail Rebekah's actions when she first sees Isaac in the field (24:64). The biblical verse states, "Rebekah lifted her eyes and saw Isaac and she alighted from the camel." The crucial word for commentators is ותפול. Rashi understands this as השמיטה or lowering herself to the ground, but not fully reaching the ground. Rashi also cites the Targum's translation which I discussed in Chapter Two. Ibn Ezra agrees that the verb points to Rebekah being in control of her action; he cites a verse from Numbers 16:4 when Moses ויפל על פניו, "falls on his face." In the case of this other usage, we understand that Moses chose to lower himself before God. The Ramban weaves Rashi and the Targum into his interpretation, citing numerous other biblical verses to affirm that Rebekah lowered herself or inclined from the camel but did not unceremoniously fall to the ground. These interpretations seem clear: the medieval commentators are committed to the idea that the biblical text illustrates that Rebekah was in full control of her actions. Though I agree with the interpretations, I wonder why it was so crucial for the commentators to make this point. Perhaps their concern had to do with maintaining

Rebekah's dignity and falling off of a camel would be more fitting for a Shakespearean comedy than a biblical matriarch.

The commentators engage in a lengthy discussion of Isaac's prayer on behalf of Rebekah in 25:21. Throughout the Rebekah stories, Rashi relies on Genesis Rabbah to portray an active Rebekah. When Isaac pleads (ויעתר) with God on behalf of Rebekah, Rashi cites Genesis Rabbah which imagines Isaac praying in one corner of the room and Rebekah doing the same in another. Rashi offers multiple viewpoints on this verse. Rashi adds that Isaac was praying profusely and persistently. Though Rashi can envision Rebekah praying alongside Isaac, he also cites Yevamot 64a to note that Isaac's prayer would have been more worthy in God's eyes because of the righteousness of Isaac's lineage as compared to Rebekah's. Ibn Ezra focuses on the grammar of the verb ויעתר which appears twice in this verse, noting that first Isaac pleads to God, and then the *nifal* of the verb tells us that God permitted Godself to be pleaded with.

Rashi emphasizes the complexity of Rebekah's dialogue and address to God in 25:22. Rashi writes that verse calls out to readers demanding a midrashic explanation of Rebekah's words. Rashi relies on Genesis Rabbah for most of his explication of this verse. Here Genesis Rabbah uses an anachronistic explanation to explore what it means that Jacob and Esau struggle inside Rebekah's womb: when Rebekah passes by a house of study, Jacob flails, making himself known, and when she passes by a pagan site, Esau does the same, each son expressing affinity for the place to which he would be drawn in life. Rashi also suggests, citing Genesis Rabbah, that Rebekah's question derives from a place of experiencing physical pain and wanting to know if her pregnancy is worthwhile. Rashi posits that Rebekah goes to inquire of God because she wants to know what will happen to her in the end. I do not agree with Rashi's explanation here because the question למה זה אנכי does not point to Rebekah inquiring only about her wellbeing.

The question can just as easily be directed toward what might happen to the two children inside of her. Rebekah may be inquiring about her purpose, but Rashi's interpretation seems to limit the focus of her question to her own wellbeing and how she will fare in the end. Avivah Zornberg, in a survey of the use of למה, posits that למה often opens rhetorical questions in the Bible and as such, it is possible to read Rebekah's question as doubting the purpose of her own existence.⁶⁰

Ibn Ezra takes a different approach than Rashi in 25:22, suggesting that Rebekah would have consulted other women to find out if her challenging experience was normal. The grammar in the verse does not point to Rebekah addressing other women about their pregnancies. Additionally, though it is clear that the children in the womb struggled or crushed each other, the verse does not specifically say that Rebekah also suffered from their struggles. Ibn Ezra and most of the early commentators make this leap that the struggles within Rebekah also led to her suffering. It's not an outlandish leap from the text; I write this while carrying one child and sometimes a small somersault is enough to cause true discomfort, however the biblical text does not say that Rebekah suffered, only that the children inside struggled.

Moshe ibn Attar speaks to some of this discrepancy in perspectives and addresses this verse in great detail by responding to some of Rashi and others' commentaries. Moshe ibn Attar cannot reconcile the pious Rebekah with one who would complain to God about having to bear children, and even more so as someone who would wish she'd never become pregnant. Given the term ויתרוצצו, which he understands as "crushing one another" he suggests that Rebekah is concerned about the outcome of her pregnancy and worried for the wellbeing of the children she carries. He understands Rebekah's inquiry of God to be an extension of her prayer that she could

⁶⁰ Zornberg, *Murmuring Deep*, 215.

carry the pregnancy to term. I found this a useful counterpoint to some earlier interpretations of this verse.

When God answers Rebekah in the following verse (25:23) Rashi and Ibn Ezra both clarify that God's message was transmitted indirectly via a prophet to Rebekah. Ibn Ezra often stays very close to the literal meaning of the text, so it is notable where he adds or changes meaning that cannot be derived from the words in the verse. We see that it is important to Rashi and Ibn Ezra, like it was for the rabbis of *Genesis Rabbah*, that God not have a direct dialogue with Rebekah at this moment. Both Ramban and Moshe Ibn Attar do not share this concern in this verse and instead focus their commentary on the nature of God's response and its meaning. Ramban explains that God's words are intended to comfort Rebekah and assuage any fear she has that her pregnancy is abnormal. Moshe Ibn Attar builds on the idea of God addressing Rebekah's fear. He imagines that God's response addresses Rebekah's concern that her pregnancy will go smoothly, while acknowledging that not all women carrying twins experience the internal struggle she has experienced. It is interesting to note the discrepancy between the commentators who choose to focus their explanations on pulling away from the biblical text to explain why God could not have spoken to Rebekah with those who take the biblical text at face value. In this case, I do not believe that it sheds much light on the commentators' perspectives on Rebekah in particular, rather it reflects their concern about women's role in religion more broadly.

Genesis 27:5-6 and their interpretations are critical to how we understand Rebekah's character and her role in guiding Jacob to receive Isaac's blessing. Rashi offers no discussion of Rebekah's actions here. Ibn Ezra clarifies the fitting translation of the verb conjugation of שמעת, which he explains should be "was listening." This does not directly address the question of

whether he believed that Rebekah was meant or known by Isaac to be listening, or whether he believed that she was eavesdropping. My understanding of Ibn Ezra's translation of שמעת suggests that he thought Rebekah was already in earshot when Isaac began addressing Esau. The Ramban offered no comments on these verses. Moshe Ibn Attar, on the other hand, wrote several comments about these two verses to explain the nature of how Rebekah came to hear the information from Isaac. He explains that we know from scripture that Rebekah was a prophetess and thus always listened to Isaac's words. He derives this interpretation from the unusual verb conjugation. He goes on to explain that 27:6 begins with the *vav* to indicate that Rebekah agreed with God's spirit who brought her wind of the conversation between Isaac and Esau. Moshe Ibn Attar believes Rebekah chose her speech very carefully, so that Jacob knew that he had sufficient time to complete his task and that Rebekah had not delayed in sharing critical information with him. Moshe Ibn Attar's commentary on these verses when Rebekah hears Isaac's conversation and relays it to Jacob suggests to me that he had no doubt that Rebekah was divinely ordained to hear the conversation. He leaves little room in his commentary for anyone to suggest that Rebekah acted deceptively.

Ramban raises an argument a few verses prior in 27:4 that also informs this discussion. When Isaac instructs Esau to prepare the meal, Ramban explains that this must have meant that Rebekah did not divulge to Isaac the prophecy she received from God while pregnant. If she had, Isaac would not be continuing with his plan to bless the first born twin, since God's words to Rebekah suggest that Jacob is the son bound for blessing and continuing the family line. Ramban offers a few hypotheses as to why Rebekah did not share the prophecy with Isaac earlier, including that the situation is in divine hands and she does not need to disturb Isaac overtly. He

also suggests that since she went behind Isaac's back to address God earlier, that her not telling Isaac the prophecy was a form of modesty.

Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Ramban also wrote little on 27:13 when Rebekah tells Jacob that any curse he receives will be upon her. Ibn Ezra diminishes the bravery and conviction of Rebekah's statement by commenting that וְזֶה מִשְׁפַּט דְּבַרֵּי הַנָּשִׁים, "this is the custom of the words of women [to accept blame for their children's wrongs]." Moshe Ibn Attar again takes the verse in a different direction understanding Rebekah's dialogue to demonstrate her righteousness. He explains that Rebekah's actions which favored Jacob illustrate that Rebekah cleaved to good, as opposed to Esau's wickedness. He writes that the continuous emphasis of Jacob as Rebekah's son shows that Jacob's righteousness stems from Rebekah.

Chapter 4: Selected Modern Scholarship on Rebekah

David Zucker and Moshe Reiss' volume *The Matriarchs of Genesis: Seven Women, Five Views* engages in a similar type of project as this thesis, exploring the four matriarchs as well as Hagar, Bilhah, and Zilpah from the biblical text through today. Though I conducted my analysis prior to reading Zucker and Reiss, we unsurprisingly identified many similar perspectives especially from the early rabbis' views on Rebekah. Zucker and Reiss included a larger variety of early sources such as pseudepigrapha, and my work spends more time on the detail of certain commentaries. Their text served as an extremely valuable source in pointing to other contemporary scholarship on Rebekah, however I found it more difficult to parse whether and where they offered their own arguments about Rebekah as a biblical figure. Zucker shares an interesting perspective that perhaps instead of Rebekah deceiving Isaac, they work in concert and Isaac also wishes to bless Jacob but needs Rebekah to intervene for that to happen.

In an article, "Rebecca's Character," Malka Simkovich frames some of the commonly understood tensions about Rebekah's reception. She describes one view of Rebekah as "manipulative and controlling," in contrast with "traditional virtues associated with femininity."⁶¹ Modern scholarship deals in part with this question, reconciling Rebekah's behavior, which in general is honored in the Torah, with the morality of deceiving those close to us. Modern scholarship helps pull apart the ways that earlier rabbis might have diminished Rebekah's role because of their fear of assigning too much power to female figures in the text.

Alice Ogden Bellis' scholarship on women in the bible introduces a selection of feminist approaches to studying the biblical women, from the major figures to those who only appear in passing. Bellis sums up perspectives from several authors about Rebekah in a short section within her book *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes*. Bellis brings in Christine Allen who argues

⁶¹ Simkovich, "Rebecca's Character," TheTorah.com

that Rebekah is the spiritual link between Abraham and Jacob, a role she earns by acting on the information that God reveals to her during her pregnancy. Allen asks if it could be possible that Rebekah is called to sacrifice some of the integrity of her marriage in exchange for fulfilling God's plan for her family.⁶² In this way, one can still view Rebekah's trickery with disdain, but as an unfortunate byproduct for an important outcome.

All of these debates about whether Rebekah fully deceives Isaac suggest that Isaac had no knowledge of Rebekah's plan and that he was fooled by Jacob's disguise. The biblical text could be read in multiple ways. When Jacob appears before Isaac with the meal, Isaac seems to doubt Jacob because he repeatedly asks his identity. Perhaps the narrators try to show via Isaac's line of questioning that Isaac knows the truth. On the other hand, Isaac has a visceral response with extreme trembling when Esau arrives for the blessing (27:33), which can be understood as Isaac's surprise at discovering what transpired. How we understand Isaac's knowledge of the scene affects how we see Rebekah's role and the morality of her behavior.

Tikva Frymer-Kensky, prominent biblical scholar, wrote critical feminist biblical scholarship which advanced the field of how we can come to understand women in the Bible. She gives important background about the nature of a feminist understanding of an ancient text. We must be under no pretense that the Tanakh is a feminist work; it was a product of its time in a patriarchal society that valued men over women.⁶³ This background makes the stories of women in Tanakh all the more fascinating. The Torah does not describe women, including Rebekah, as lesser than men, and in many places celebrates their roles and familial importance. We find that only the later commentaries add lenses that denigrate women and describe them as less deserving

⁶² Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes*, 82.

⁶³ Frymer-Kensky, *Women of the Bible*, xv.

than men (for instance the commentaries mentioned earlier that cannot imagine that God would speak directly to a woman).

In the first chapter of her book, Frymer-Kensky walks through Rebekha's story, first highlighting the significance of Rebekah's birth announcement. She notes that of all of the biblical women, the Torah only announces Rebekah's birth.⁶⁴ While there are other women whose birth we learn about, they are far less notable than Rebekah's. When we meet Rebekah (24:16), we learn she is beautiful, a virgin, and no man had known her. To contemporary ears, these qualities sound oversexualized or misogynist, but Frymer-Kensky explains the value of these qualities in their biblical context. Beauty is a mark of divine favor. Frymer-Kensky translates בתולה as "of marriageable age," a more neutral understanding. Finally, she clarifies that virginity was a value held in high esteem in biblical times that represented purity and goodness, and reflected well on a girl's family of origin. We learn this context about Rebekah from the narration that describes her. Additionally, from Rebekah's actions when she fully waters the camels, we learn of her generosity, sheer strength, and stamina.⁶⁵

Frymer-Kensky argues that Rebekah agreeing to go with Abraham's servant demonstrates another link between Rebekah and Abraham and Sarah. Like them, she has to leave her home because of a divine promise and venture to the unknown.⁶⁶ Frymer-Kensky also highlights that Rebekah, like Abraham, rushes to do hospitality. In my analysis in chapter 1, I noted the frequency of words like מָהָר and רָץ; Frymer-Kensky draws a useful connection to Abraham's behavior.

Frymer-Kensky usefully explores the nuance that Rebekah's character must balance when she sends Jacob in Esau's place to receive Isaac's blessing. She acknowledges that motives are

⁶⁴ Frymer-Kensky, *Women of the Bible*, 5.

⁶⁵ Frymer-Kensky, *Women of the Bible*, 9.

⁶⁶ Frymer-Kensky, *Women of the Bible*, 13.

rarely singular and thus Rebekah may have had multiple reasons for sending Jacob to receive the blessing including: she favored Jacob, she believed Jacob needed the blessing to fulfill the omen from God, or she felt she would not have been able to convince Isaac to change his plan, so she needed to act behind his back. Frymer-Kensky notes that Rebekah employs a persuasive argument: by accepting any negative ramifications from a possible curse, Rebekah relieves Jacob of the risk of his actions. A critical piece of Frymer-Kensky's arguments about Rebekah relates to her understanding of what it means to be a trickster in biblical times. She explains that trickery itself was not considered immoral through the lens of the Bible and in fact was a tool those without power would have used to achieve their goals. Generations of the Abrahamic family engage in trickery and are not castigated for it. The negative view of Rebekah as a deceiver is a later interpretation.⁶⁷

Susan Niditch deepens the literature about tricksters in the Bible in her work, *A Prelude to Biblical Folklore: Underdogs and Tricksters*. Niditch uses a type of literary and comparative analysis to explain that the underdog and trickster are literary archetypes which appear in mythology all over the world. She argues that these roles had special appeal for Israelite biblical authors. She studies biblical stories through the field of folklore studies, bringing a different methodology to bear on these familiar scenes. Her analysis touches two parts of Rebekah's story: the sister-wife episode and the narrative pattern of Jacob's life, including when he takes the blessing in place of Esau. "Underdogs who are also tricksters have a certain bravado. They survive because they have the nerve to use their wits. They appeal also because they are so human in their sneakiness, their trickiness."⁶⁸ She suggests that these stories have appeal for any person or group that does not see itself as part of the establishment. She also details the ways in

⁶⁷ Frymer-Kensky, *Women of the Bible*, 18-19.

⁶⁸ Niditch, *Underdogs and Tricksters*, 48.

which a deity in general, and the God of Israel in particular in these stories, serves as an ally or accomplice in the deception. This association or even partnership with God, illustrates that the identity of the trickster is not a negative one.

Niditch highlights Jacob as the primary trickster in stealing Esau's blessing, but places Rebekah as a co-trickster. I see Rebekah as the primary driver of the trickery and Jacob as the actor who implements what needs to happen. She highlights all of the other moments in Jacob's life where he engages with and alongside trickery, thus stealing the blessing is just one of many tricky behaviors.⁶⁹ She explains that "successful trickery is a form of wisdom,"⁷⁰ especially when the trickster lacks power.

Niditch's thorough work on the role of trickster and the identification of the trickster motif gives us, as contemporary readers, another way to understand Rebekah in her context. Rebekah's actions and behaviors can be seen as part of a much-enjoyed literary pattern of an underdog, or person with less access to power, exercising control in a situation. These frameworks that suggest the trickster role as a popular element of folklore, point to the biblical authors using the trickster motif much like they would use other literary frameworks, like the beloved hero. These frameworks are in contrast to the idea that Rebekah's trickery is immoral. I see Niditch's research moving the question about Rebekah's role to one of its literary or cultural function, rather than where Rebekah's behavior falls on a moral spectrum. Niditch's explanations of the trickster also suggest that the trickster does not have to be a negative label, but in fact might be celebrated. Typically when debating whether Rebekah acted as a trickster, the debate sits between her tricky, deceitful behavior on one side and her fulfilling God's plan on the other. Niditch explains how these do not need to sit on opposite spectrums.

⁶⁹ Niditch, *Underdogs and Tricksters*, 100.

⁷⁰ Niditch, *Underdogs and Tricksters*, 105.

Rachel Adelman writes about Rebekah's deception as a kind of concealment that begins with Rebekah veiling herself upon seeing Isaac.⁷¹ Adelman argues that like other moments of concealment, Rebekah has more information than Isaac; she sees him and asks his identity, and she acts on this privileged information by veiling herself before he could similarly identify her. Rebekah will receive additional privileged information when she is told (27:41) about Esau threatening Jacob's life. Adelman frames Rebekah's question to God in 25:22 as a continuation of Rebekah's lack of communication with Isaac. Isaac, on the one hand, prays in front of Rebekah to God on behalf of their family, whereas Rebekah seeks information independent of Isaac.⁷² With this privileged information via God's oracle, Adelman describes Rebekah as one who understands the discrepancy between "outer norms (the election of the firstborn) and the inner truth of the divine plan. She also exemplifies the difficulty in externalizing that inner divine truth..."⁷³ Adelman seems to speak to a sense of Rebekah's spirituality, a figure connected to divine messages and manifestations and how God relates to the world she inhabits. Rebekah's actions seek to bridge the earthly world with the divine. Adelman explains that veiling a bride was an act typically performed by the husband-to-be and argues that Rebekah choosing to veil herself exemplifies another moment of Rebekah's independence at the start of her relationship with Isaac. Whether Rebekah's veiling initiates her pattern of misdirection or deception, or was an act of ancient near eastern modesty, Adelman highlights several important moments where Rebekah is comfortable with incomplete communication between parties.

Tammi Schneider writes about women in Genesis blending an archeological lens with close reading of the text. Like many of the modern scholars, Schneider is interested in the repetition of Rebekah's lineage. She draws a connection between the emphasis on Rebekah's

⁷¹ Adelman, "Reading Rebekah Unveiled," 12.

⁷² Adelman, "Reading Rebekah Unveiled," 17.

⁷³ Adelman, "Reading Rebekah Unveiled," 21.

ancestry to Rebekah's role in carrying forward the Abrahamic generation and ensuring the formation of the people Israel.⁷⁴ Schneider compares the descriptions of Rebekah in the biblical text with Rebekah's actions. She highlights Rebekah's speed and willingness to act quickly in a variety of settings: at the well, rushing to her family home, assenting to leave home with Abraham's servant. Similarly, Schneider compares instances where Rebekah is the subject of the action and where she is acted upon, highlighting Rebekah as a dominant figure who appears active in the text.⁷⁵ As I noted earlier, Rebekah drives much of the action in her own story, advancing her story and her family's legacy.

Avivah Zornberg's scholarship adds several dimensions to our understanding of Rebekah not yet addressed. She analyzes the text and writes about the ways that Rebekah embodies *hesed*. Zornberg explains that Rebekah's acts toward Abraham's servant constitute her *hesed*, as do the ways that she fulfills her role in Isaac's life.⁷⁶ For all of the discussion of Rebekah as trickster, Zornberg also notes that Rebekah never acknowledges or describes her instructions to Jacob as deception; she merely tells him what steps to take. Jacob's dialogue with Rebekah only expresses concern that he will appear as a trickster, not that his actions are truly deceptive.

⁷⁴ Scheider, *Mothers of Promise*, 43.

⁷⁵ Scheider, *Mothers of Promise*, 58.

⁷⁶ Zornberg, *The Beginning of Desire*, 141.

Chapter 5: Portrayals of Rebekah in European Art

As humans, visual images inform how we understand the world. When we hear a word or a name, a corresponding visual representation appears in our mind that consciously or subconsciously informs how we relate to the concept. Some of these representations may derive from our lived experiences such as the image conjured in your mind when you read the word, “home.” Other images may be known to you via photographs or popular representations such as the images that come to mind when you read, “Queen Elizabeth.” It is almost impossible to engage in conversation about these topics without an accompanying visual representation in our mind. Yet, each person’s representation may differ dramatically. “Home” might conjure images of a cozy bustling kitchen, or a room of siblings screaming at one another.

When we read stories in Torah, we are faced with a different set of challenges. There are no photographs from biblical times, no surviving artistic representations and many of the stories may have had multiple originating tales; no one depiction would capture a biblical story. Yet, when one hears for the first time or the twentieth, the story of Abraham’s servant meeting Rebekah at the spring with camels in tow, or Isaac blessing Jacob, one conjures the scene in one’s mind.

The Bible, both the New Testament and the Hebrew Bible, including stories from the Torah have had unparalleled influence on European art from the Byzantine period forward. Since Jews do not typically include depictions of human forms in synagogues,⁷⁷ the most known representations of scenes from Torah come from European Christian art. These paintings and other media are important for several reasons. They continue to influence people’s assessments

⁷⁷ A notable exception to human depictions in synagogues are the ancient frescoes and mosaics that archaeologists have uncovered at sites such as Duro Europas. The synagogue at Duro Europas, in modern-day Syria, is one of the oldest known synagogues in the world, dating from 244 CE. Over fifty biblical scenes, including the Genesis stories, were depicted on the walls of the synagogue in full iconography. Synagogues in Roman Palestine also have been uncovered with mosaic iconography; yet by and large, these examples are the exception, not the rule. <https://www.thetorah.com/article/retelling-the-story-of-moses-at-dura-europos-synagogue>

of biblical figures today. Many people may not have a medieval portrait of Rebekah in mind. However, when thinking about Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, many more people might conjure an image of a pale, naked Eve, guarded by leaves in lush green surroundings (see for instance the painting below by Johann Wenzel Peter from the early 19th century, which can be found today in the Vatican). This type of image may look familiar to us not because this is indeed what the biblical authors intended for us to imagine as the Garden of Eden, but because these types of artistic representations from European art have shaped our collective imaginations. Whatever we learn or study about Adam and Eve becomes overlaid with these images as we try to reconcile these depictions with our reading of the text.



Johann Wenzel Peter, *Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden*⁷⁸

⁷⁸<https://www.museivaticani.va/content/museivaticani/en/collezioni/musei/la-pinacoteca/sala-xvi---secolo-xix/wenzel-peter--adamo-ed-eva-nel-paradiso-terrestre.html>

When studying biblical figures, we must raise the question: What external sources beyond the text itself may bias our understanding of this biblical figure? In this chapter we will examine a few paintings of scenes that include Rebekah to see what messages this art displays about her character. Artistic representations of biblical scenes also help us ask different questions of the biblical text. A painting might catch us by surprise by posing questions we had not thought to ask of the text: how old was each figure during a particular scene; how close were they standing; who else might have been nearby whether or not they appear in the text.



Rebecca at the Well, c. 1582/1588 Venetian⁷⁹

The Venetian painting above, from the late 1500s, shows Rebekah at the well when she encounters Abraham's servant. The scene is crowded. Large camels, whose proportions are slightly off, which reflects animal depictions of the time period, blend into the sky. Sixteenth century architectural structures appear in the background, reminding a modern viewer that the artist may not have had a full archeological grasp of the biblical period. Light directs the focus of

⁷⁹ <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.41697.html>

this painting. The viewer's eye is immediately pulled to Rebekah's bright skin and the light reflecting off of her dress. Next the viewer's eyes are drawn to her gaze pointing toward Abraham's servant and the interaction between them. One notices here that Rebekah looks youthful, but strong. She appears capable of the task of watering the camels, which the biblical text describes.

The scene also includes two other unnamed figures who seem to be servants. One servant behind Rebekah tends to the camels; viewers might wonder whether this suggests that Rebekah did not tend to the animals but rather her entourage assisted, or these may represent people who were imagined to accompany Abraham's servant on his journey.

The painting brings age into the conversation; the artist depicts Abraham's servant as an older man, perhaps having served Abraham for many years. This journey to secure a wife for Isaac may be one of his last duties to Abraham. Viewers of this painting would imagine age playing a role in the exchange between Abraham's servant and Rebekah; the two are not peers in conversation with one another.

Rebekah also appears to be doing something with her hands. Perhaps is wiping them, having completed the task of tending to the camels. She may also be fastening jewelry to her wrist. Abraham's servant looks questioningly at her face and he and the other man kneeling on the ground seem to be offering Rebekah gifts or jewelry, also as described in the biblical text. Rebekah's expression appears skeptical, a fitting expression for someone whose life is about to change forever as a result of this encounter.

Viewers of this painting cannot know what the buildings in the background are supposed to represent, however one might imagine that the artist envisions Rebekah's family residing there. This painting helps bring into question some of the geography of the scene: how far did

Rebekah have to run home, what did the daily work of fetching water entail, what kind of home would Rebekah leave behind when she chose to leave with Abraham's servant and entourage.

This painting also raises the question: who else appears in this scene? Most biblical scenes do not open by giving a full context about who was present or who else might have engaged in dialogue with the primary characters. The artist suggests by including multiple male figures that Rebekah would have spoken with multiple members of the servant's entourage.

Finally, my sense from this painting is that the older man in orange represents Abraham's servant, but upon further study, it also seems plausible that the servant is the man on the ground handing Rebekah the jewelry.



Rebecca at the Well, c. 1745 Joseph Wagner (publisher) after Jacopo Amigoni⁸⁰

In the etching above, from the mid-1700s, viewers see Rebekah near the well receiving gifts of jewelry from Abraham's servant. This image serves to position Rebekah as an elegant medieval woman, modestly averting her eyes as she receives these gifts. The depiction does not feel particularly close to the biblical text; Rebekah looks more like a woman of leisure than someone who would have drawn water for all of Abraham's servant's animals. Viewers also can note the comparable size of the figures. Rebekah is as large as the servant and stands above him, pointing to her status and relative importance. A viewer looking at this painting walks away with

⁸⁰ <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.65596.html>

no doubt that Rebekah is the main character in this story. The servant also appears in more stereotypical middle-eastern clothing, with cloth wrapped around his head, whereas Rebekah wears a European-style dress. To the audience viewing this painting in its time, this emphasizes Rebekah's significance and primacy in the story. The painting focuses less on the servant completing a mission from Abraham and God, but rather on winning over an important woman.



James Jacques Joseph Tissot, French, 1836-1902 *Isaac Sends Esau to Hunt* c. 1896-1902 / Gouache on board

In the painting above, Tissot depicts the conversation between Isaac and Esau when Isaac sends Esau on a mission to bring him game before receiving his blessing. The white material of Isaac's robes draw the viewer's eyes to the center of the painting and Isaac's hands and gaze point viewers to the exchange taking place between him and Esau. Finally, viewers see the third figure, Rebekah, who appears to be standing or hiding behind Isaac's bed's drapery. Rebekah's expression is difficult to make out in this painting, with her face partially covered by her hair and scarf, but she appears to listen to the scene with a sadness or wistfulness. In portrayals of these scenes, I am always interested as to whether Rebekah is portrayed as being part of the

conversation--did she hear Isaac's instruction to Esau because she was beside him while he gave it, or do the artists imagine her as an eavesdropper? This painting also shows a difference in Rebekah and Isaac's ages. While Isaac is older and bed-ridden, Rebekah appears more youthful and active. While the earlier Venetian painting shows the figures wearing European style clothing, probably contemporary styles to that which the artist experienced, this later painting shows the figures wearing dresses that might be more appropriate to the context of the scene.

Esau's figure in this painting seems exaggerated; his clothing appears almost bawdy and hair billows over his face, making him look animalistic. The portrayal of Esau seems to position him as an outlier from the family; he appears different from his parents, as though he does not belong. Most importantly for this project, we see that Rebekah appears to listen to Isaac with care, as though she is often by his bedside attending to his needs. Compared to the men, she is smaller.



Isaac Blessing Jacob 1642 Gerbrand van den Eeckhout / Dutch⁸¹

⁸¹ Description from Metropolitan Museum of Art: *Jacob impersonates his elder brother Esau in order to receive the blessing of their father Isaac, a scheme conceived by Rebecca, the blind man's wife.*

This work from 1642 depicts Isaac blessing Jacob at the end of Isaac's life. The Metropolitan Museum of Art's description of the painting highlights that the artist followed in his teacher Rembrandt's style including the choice of depicting biblical scenes. The painting is dramatic in its use of light and dark. Immediately the eye is drawn to the center where Isaac's bright robe pops out from his pile of pillows and he extends his hand blessing Jacob. Jacob appears small and youthful in comparison to Isaac's presence and the large European-style furniture. Silver hammered serving platters adorn the table, another anachronistic component of the painting. In this painting, Isaac appears old and resting in his bed, but not obviously blind and bedridden. Rebekah appears older, too; she hunches over a cane and the skin on her face has signs of aging.

This painting shows Rebekah by Isaac's bedside as Isaac blesses Jacob. Rebekah is presented as large and on par with Isaac. She seems to be instructing Jacob to stay the course, different from the midrash where Rebekah leaves Jacob at the threshold of the doorway to speak with his father privately. The artist chooses a notable detail in Rebekah's figure: she raises a finger appearing to be either speaking or giving nonverbal instruction to Jacob. The artist seems to portray her as inserting herself into a conversation where she does not belong, or nagging her son to behave as she instructs. I would argue this painting shows Rebekah in a less positive light, as a woman interfering in men's affairs. At the same time, the painting features Rebekah's importance and centrality in the biblical story. Her figure appears at the same height, or just higher than Isaac, perhaps reflecting her powerful role.

The painting uses so many dark shades that a viewer could easily walk away before seeing a figure in the back left corner: Esau, returning from his hunt. The biblical text (27:30)

Rembrandt made several drawings of the Old Testament subject in the 1640s, and a few of his pupils followed suit. In this case Van den Eeckhout emulates the master's style more successfully than his gift for effective staging. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/436266>

gives us a sense of the timing for Isaac's blessing, but this painting brings the scene to life. As soon as Jacob leaves Isaac's presence, Esau returns. This painting increases the drama of the moment, positing that Rebekah and Jacob had only minutes or hours to enact their scheme before Esau would have received Isaac's blessing as Isaac planned. It is useful to engage with visual representations such as this one to help us address questions about Rebekah's proximity, Isaac's relative wellbeing in this moment and the timing of the scene.



The Genesis by Étienne Delaune⁸²

The two prints (*The Genesis* above and *Issac und Rebecca* below) feature the scene when Rebekah sees Isaac for the first time. They offer interesting points of comparison in their portrayal of Rebekah and Isaac as well as the general atmosphere of this initial meeting. In the

⁸² Engraving from the years 1550-1572 https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_Gg-4D-111

earlier engraving, which is part of a series of many scenes from Genesis, the artist shows Rebekah stumbling off of her camel into Isaac's arms. This portrayal strays from the text; when Rebekah alights or falls (Gen 24:64), Isaac remains farther away and Rebekah has the chance to compose and veil herself before he approaches. This engraving takes on an almost fairy-tale Prince Charming motif with anachronistic European cottages in the background and Isaac coming to Rebekah's rescue. The foreground is crowded with Rebekah and Abraham's servant's entourage, all of whom study Isaac and Rebekah's encounter with interest and concern. Even the camels watch their meeting expectantly. The artist uses the focus of all of the figures in the image to draw attention to the consequential meeting of the next generation of the Abrahamic family. This image might not tell viewers anything new about Rebekah's figure, but it gives the modern observer a lens through which to consider how Rebekah has been viewed over time. While modern scholarship almost unanimously sees Rebekah as the dominant figure in her and Isaac's relationship, this portrayal shows Isaac as her savior.



Isaac und Rebecca, W. Otto circa 1845⁸³

In the second print, produced roughly 300 years later, the artist, W. Otto, creates an entirely different feeling and characterization of Rebekah and Isaac's relationship. In comparing the images, one notices the artistic developments over time in the portrayal of animals; the camels appear more realistic in the later image. Similarly, some of the anachronistic elements in the background have been eliminated; the desert scene in the second image seems more appropriate for the biblical geographic and temporal setting. In the former, action is the subject of the print: viewers' eyes are drawn to the motion of Rebekah falling into Isaac's arms.

Rebekah's face is the focus of the second. One can see a triangle between Isaac, the man gazing at Rebekah on the left of the page, and the person riding the camel behind Rebekah. This triangle draws the viewer's eye toward Rebekah's face.

⁸³ Rebekah seated on a camel being admired by a man in oriental costume; Isaac standing to right; women seated on camels in the background; after a painting by Bouterwek. C.1845”
https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1979-U-744

W. Otto portrays Rebekah as physically stable with an air of confidence (not tumbling off of her camel), beautiful, perhaps a slightly coy expression, as she reaches to pull her veil over face. Isaac on the other hand seems taken aback, presumably by Rebekah's beauty. Though the text depicts Rebekah as the physically unstable one, Isaac here seems to be the figure trying to catch his balance.

These two images, similar in content, paint different perspectives on how a viewer might perceive the biblical figures. Like the vast range of rabbinic and modern interpretations, these artistic depictions guide the viewer to different understandings of the relationship between Isaac and Rebekah. Someone reading the biblical text alongside the second image might be more likely to imagine Rebekah as independent, arriving to Isaac on her own terms as opposed to falling into the arms of her husband.

Conclusions

Through a close analysis of the biblical text and tracing the reception of Rebekah's stories across millennia of interpretation, several themes rise to the surface. The first is that even among the perspective of a single commentator, and all the more so among a body of literature with multiple authors like the Talmud, there is no singular view of Rebekah's character. This is not surprising! Commentators and the authors of Genesis Rabbah did not approach their commentary as character reports. They studied the text as a whole and gravitated to areas where the biblical text surprised them, created ambiguities, or contradicted bits of their world view. Parsing what Rashi thought about Rebekah is a project akin to literary archeology. Thus it is challenging to draw certain overarching conclusions because commentators' views of Rebekah may shift throughout parts of her story as the commentators refocus on the issues of importance to them, be they gender roles, family relations, or the patriarchs. It is only when we reach modern scholarship that scholars address Rebekah in full. Modern biblical scholarship, and particularly as feminist biblical studies have blossomed, takes an interest in understanding the way our texts speak about the matriarchs as full characters.

When it comes to Rebekah's reception, commentators prioritize the issues of primary concern to them over a neutral interpretation of the biblical text. Despite these interpreters' biases, they have significant value for us today. It is telling to identify what questions the commentators tried to answer through their interpretation. For instance, in Genesis 25:22, generations of rabbis asked a version of, "how is it possible that Rebekah, a woman, could have a direct dialogue with God?" Through their own commentaries, they answer the question by inserting intermediaries between Rebekah and God. This speaks to larger concerns these rabbis might have held, such as preserving their unique roles as interpreters and transmitters of the text,

and in this way, their own special relationship with God. When Genesis Rabbah needs to solidify the role of men as the only interlopers between God and humankind, no amount of direct speech from God to Rebekah will alter how they view the dialogue.

One of the most critical themes in understanding Rebekah's character is the debate between Rebekah being moral and divinely directed in her behavior vs Rebekah as a trickster who deceives her dying husband. Modern scholarship, particularly Susan Niditch's writing, has been very useful in this debate by erasing the distance between these poles and suggesting that Rebekah can be a trickster, but that title need not give a negative valence to her character in terms of the biblical view of tricksters. Earlier commentaries see a tension: they simultaneously elevate Rebekah's importance as part of the Abrahamic lineage and a mother of the Israelite people while diminishing Rebekah's autonomy in the biblical text.

Bringing art into the conversation about Rebekah's character offers us an entirely new way to look at her figure. The images featured in this paper are not bound by Jewish obligations to maintain a certain type of loyalty to the text. They are surely strongly influenced by Christian interpretations of their time, artistic styles of their day, and Christian portrayals of biblical figures. These depictions raise new questions about Rebekah and her relationships to those around her. The paintings invite and also challenge us to envision these biblical scenes with the archeological, anthropological and comparative historical knowledge we have today. By visualizing biblical scenes, these paintings also prompt us to consider emotional and interpersonal issues at play between the biblical figures in key scenes.

After delving into the text and commentaries, I see Rebekah as a powerful, linchpin figure standing between autonomy and destiny. From the earliest moments before Rebekah's

character appears, the biblical authors flag her importance by highlighting her lineage (Gen 22:23). The biblical authors position this announcement on the tail of one of the most dramatic scenes: the Akedah. Rebekah signifies an opportunity for redemption of the Abrahamic family and a way to move the family forward and fulfill God's promise, after the near destruction of the Abrahamic lineage. We have a sense that Rebekah is destined for importance. Given Rebekah's importance and the powerful role she occupies, the biblical authors might have later inserted references to her lineage to solidify her credibility.

When we meet Rebekah, she appears independent, decisive, and willing to take her future into her own hands. She demonstrates her compassion and thorough work ethic when watering Abraham's servants' camels (Gen 24:19). We see her decisiveness and willingness to determine her own destiny when she confidently asserts that she will leave her home to marry Isaac (Gen 24:58). Throughout Genesis 24, the biblical authors affirm that Rebekah's destiny aligns with her character traits. Abraham's servant repeatedly finds signs that she is the woman intended by God for Isaac.

Rebekah stands out among biblical women, and even among biblical men, as a figure who advances the storyline and shapes critical decisions in her life. Sarah directs banishing Hagar, but the most defining event in Sarah's life, arguably the Akedah, happens to her without her involvement. Rebekah's own actions qualify her to marry Isaac; Rebekah chooses to leave her home to marry; Rebekah initiates conversation with God when she needs clarity about her pregnancy and role; Rebekah directs the future of her family in positioning Jacob to receive Isaac's blessing. Other biblical figures receive direct instructions from God; Rebekah must interpret God's oracle and carve her own path based on her intuition and understanding of God's will. This independence and inner strength defines Rebekah's character.

Rebekah's significance transcends her role as an independent figure who advances the storyline of her family. The biblical authors draw out several examples of Rebekah using her intuition, spirituality, or connection with God to inform her actions. Rebekah can seemingly read through the lines of God's oracle to shape the destiny of her family (Gen 25:23). She knew when to call to God to receive the information she would need to support herself through the pregnancy and then later in her sons' lives. The authors of the Targum and Genesis Rabbah push back against Rebekah's direct connection with God by inserting intermediaries. Their pushback suggests that they, too, saw Rebekah's connection with God and needed to work creatively to explain it away. If her connection with God was not so forthright in the biblical text, they would not have needed to respond to it in the way these sources do over the centuries. Rebekah has other moments of hearing the unspoken. In Genesis 27:42, Esau's words, uttered only in his heart, make their way to Rebekah. The text does not indicate how Rebekah became aware of this information, but I understand this as another example of Rebekah being in tune to God's voice. She often repeats to Jacob the phrase שמע בקולי "listen to my voice" (Gen 27:8, 27:13, 27:43) echoing the theme that she understands the power of messages transmitted by people and by God. Rebekah, ever in tune to what can transpire inside her own womb, also models a listening ear to the divine.

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