

Rebekah and The Promise

Rebekah was beautiful (Gen 24 v 16), generous, kindly, courageous. Above all, Rebekah trusted in God.

But Rebekah is the woman who, in a moment of deceit, deliberately manipulated her dying man. So, how did our heroine get to that moment?

It is a story, that starts with her great uncle, Abraham.

Abraham is the key figure at the moment in the story that our salvation history kicks off. He stands at the point when God decrees that the world is going to be redeemed, restored. How does God signal this?

Abraham is given *The Promise*.

At that stage, *The Promise* was that Abraham was to be the father of a countless number of descendants. In Genesis 15 Abraham is sorrowfully thinking that he has no child, and to him God then says “*Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them. So shall your descendants be.*”

And that is grace. God moves towards Abraham; God gives him *The Promise*.

And Abraham has a son, Isaac.

The story of Rebekah is all about how *The Promise* moves forward in human time. And it is Rebekah that kicks it along. More than any of the blokes involved, I think.

And the point of Rebecca is that she believes, she trusts in this Promise, in God who gives The Promise. And she bases her life upon it.

You can read for yourselves all we know about Rebekah. It is there within the saga of Genesis. She pops up too in The Epistle to the Romans (Rom 9 v10), but the legend on which Paul bases that reference is within the Book of Genesis, from **chapter 22 to chapter 27**.

Rebekah arrives at the end of Genesis chapter 22. And Genesis chapter 22 tells us that Abraham *did not* sacrifice his only son, an act of *human* sacrifice which God prevents him from carrying through. The very fact that the sacrifice of a human being was seriously proposed by Abraham is evidence that such things did go on, long ago, amongst those Semitic people. Indeed, there is the suggestion in the Old Testament that, in a primitive time, the first-born-child of a marriage went this way. But Abraham thought otherwise, and then the custom grew to offer a substitute for the sacrifice, an animal. (cf Luke 2 vv 23-24)

So, Rebekah steps up for her introduction to us just at the moment that our faith story steps away from a barbarous, primitive ritual. The moment is ‘no-

more-human-sacrifice / enter-Rebekah'. Indeed, a Jewish legend is that she was born at the moment of Isaac's deliverance. The two events are linked : Isaac stays in the world, and Rebekah comes into the world. They are joined in time. Rebecca and Isaac signal that redemption is on its way.

Rebekah lived in Nahor, in the land of the two rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates. In what a later age called Mesopotamia, or even Iraq. And that is the place Abraham has moved away from. And he is not going back. God has told him not to. Isaac is not going there for the same reason. But Rebekah is there. So, she has to be fetched.

(22 v20) We learn that Abraham is Rebekah's grandfather's brother. So there was a wider family connection, which recommends her as a potential bride. The attraction of a bride from the wider family must have included that she had similar religious ideas. So, Rebekah had something in her culture, perhaps her beliefs, that ran parallel to Abraham's thinking.

When Abraham thinks that it is time his son found a wife, he concludes that the most suitable lady will be amongst his own kin. And the story of how Rebekah is chosen as the lady is quite magical. Of course. Because in that choice, the writer of the story wants you to see the mysterious, powerful, irresistible work of God. Abraham sends a retainer, Eliezer, to find the wife and it is Eliezer who says *'let the right girl come out to me as I arrive and help me'*.

The women of Nahor fill their water pots at a spring, and here comes Rebekah with her pot. She is nothing special, then, she works like every other woman there. Well, perhaps. At one point we see her working alongside the other women and then later we learn she is travelling with a servant. We are left wondering whether she is just ordinary, or something of a Princess.

Rebekah comes to Eliezer, *'Here is water'*, she says, *'drink'*. And then she deals with the thirst of ten camels. How much does a camel drink? After a journey in dry country? Whatever, she does the job. That's the first thing Rebekah gives - her time and energy. She acts generously. We don't know precisely why - Genesis does not tell us - except that by acting in this way, she falls in with the will of God. She meets the criteria Abraham's man has laid down. She's singled out. Now Rebekah MAY have been acting as she always did, maybe this is how she always behaves, and that might be interesting because she is bringing to the party a certain genetic make-up, certain traits. The story suggests her actions are noteworthy at least, perhaps very unusual amongst those people generally. They were dwelling in a dry land and access to water may not have always been straightforward. Whatever, it is clear that a generous, kindly young woman steps up to the role of wife to Isaac. So, generous, kindly Rebekah becomes the wife of Isaac-the-son-of-Abraham.

Note that there was a crunch moment. It was when the unmarried young girl Rebekah was asked whether she would leave her own home to go away from

her friends and family to marry a man she had not seen, Isaac. She was asked, “*Will you go?*”. And Rebekah said “yes”. That’s the fulcrum on which the story turns. It is obedience to a call.

Rebekah says “yes” and off she goes to a new life. Rebekah always has a choice, she is a creature like us given a life with choices. But she says yes. (24 v 58) That took some courage.

And in saying “yes”, Rebekah steps up to be the person, the mechanism, through which God’s Promise to Abraham moves on towards fulfilment. She embraces, picks up that challenge, that role.

So, how does Rebekah serve God? Well, first Rebekah becomes a wife. Her husband falls in love with her. (Gen 24 v 67) Then she becomes a mother. She and Isaac don’t seem to have easily had children. Rebekah waited a long time for her pregnancy. The same is said of Sara, her mother-in-law. And of Rachel, her daughter-in-law. Why is this? I think because the writer of Genesis wants you to see the work of God in busting the log jam, producing the pregnancy, owning the child. Anyway, we read that Isaac really loves Rebekah. So they tried. And then she has twins. Rebekah’s delivery is not easy. (25 v22) There is a bit there about the pain involved in childbirth. Anyway, all ends well. Esau (first) then Jacob. And Rebekah lives.

So, Rebekah becomes the mother of Jacob. And – because Jacob fathers them all - she is the grandmother of the twelve tribes – of Joseph the dreamer, with his coat and his eleven jealous brothers. So, there is the process whereby *God’s Salvation* comes together through Rebekah. She does what women – some women – do: have babies. And (glory be!) God uses that gift. And *The Promise*, which comes with her husband, can then go on to their children.

That decision which she had made, *yes I will go and marry this Isaac*, is absolutely essential to God’s purpose. *The Promise* leaps forward two generations. How many people did it take to begin a nation? I don’t know. But at the start of the story, Rebekah sees *The Promise* in her husband’s father, and, before she dies, she must see it in twelve grandsons. So, she sees it go from one person – Abraham - to the twelve grandsons - Joseph and his brothers. And we are on our way towards a lot more people.

And then in Genesis Chapter 25 we see Rebekah’s real moment. We read of how she loved the younger of her two sons, Jacob, rather more than his marginally older brother. (Gen 25 v 28) She is seeing in Jacob attractive characteristics, or perhaps she is seeing in the older twin unattractive characteristics. Her husband was older than she was, you will remember that she was born when he was a youth. So she is still hearty when he is getting doddery. And we read how she tricked poor feeble old Isaac in his blindness, by passing off her favourite as the elder son when the time came to collect the sacred gift of leadership from her dying husband. (Gen 27) This was a move of duplicity, and shrewd. It cannot have been morally right. It is not the only occasion in our Old Testament where one of the people chosen by God acts

wrongly. In this case, the progress of the salvation history is promoted by her act. But it is a puzzle. Because God is shown to be working through Rebekah's action. It is Jacob – Rebekah's favourite – who takes forward the salvation history.

We need to note that this story originates from long before the Prophetic voices were heard, the voices of Amos and Hosea, Isaiah, demanding righteousness. There is in this story no connection between faith and morality. In Genesis 25, for the Genesis writer, trust in God does not require Rebecca to behave well. Can you see how Amos, and his concept of the righteousness of God, coming later, changes that? Amos would see Rebekah's action as we do. But before Amos there is no condemnation in behaving as Rebekah does.

And then too, we may struggle to understand what exactly passed to Jacob in that final blessing? Why was that so important? It is a good question. It is not a thing of our culture. But Jacob becomes, because he gets it, the heir, the top man. What was it, this inheritance? Well, it was *The Promise*. And God had decided that Jacob was the better man. And so it happened - the passing of *The Promise*. To Jacob. And Rebekah knew all of that. She knew the importance of the moment, and she knew Jacob, not Esau was the right man. She makes it happen in the way it did.

There is an old Jewish tradition that Rebekah, as an older lady lived on, a widow, for many years and that in her later solo life she was a person who, to her contemporaries, was of great sacerdotal and religious significance. There's nothing about all that later life in Genesis. The last we hear of her is Genesis 49 v 31 and she is in the family grave.

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The Genesis sagas were originally what scholars call *oral tradition*, and the stories are from long, long ago, from the folklore of a Semitic people in the near East. The stories may date from between 2,000 and fifteen hundred years before Christ. These were written up later into the form we have them now, we don't know when – between the 10th and the 5th Centuries BC.

So, these are old, old stories, and what is here for us twenty-first century Christians?

1. The Church is Abraham's child

Well, first, look at what S.Paul does with *The Promise*, in the Epistle to the Romans as he mentions Rebekah. Romans 9 verse 10. What Paul is saying is that God's Promise – *The Promise* - is fulfilled in the Christian church. Paul says that the inheritors of the legacy intended for Abraham's children is not confined to those whose blood line of descent goes back to Abraham, the Jews. And he should know; he says of himself that he is a Jew of Jews. (2Corinthians 11 vv22-23) No, Paul is saying that the inheritors of Abraham's legacy are the Christians. The Christian church. And he should know that

too. He is busy creating it. God's promise has busted out of the strait-jacket that confined it, for we are all the inheritance of Abraham. That means you and I, us.

So, The Promise has developed. Changed. For, of course, we should ask ourselves, why did God want Abraham to have children? Well, of course, so that He could send Jesus amongst them. So He could redeem the world. Alleluia!

2. God favours fallible Rebekah

Then, note that the passing of *The Promise* is not to or through a person whose behaviour is perfect. God uses Rebekah and Jacob. Rebekah tricks her husband and betrays her elder son. She is a sinner. Just like you and I. And yet, God is favouring Rebekah. God's love does not depend upon her behaving well. God shows his love and protection of Jacob. Within a short time, Jacob is at the holy place that becomes Bethel, seeing his ladder to heaven. And then, later we are all on our way up it. God favours fallible, sinning Rebekah. For God, she does not have to be perfect. That is comforting; for which of us is perfect? The grace of God is His Great Love that "*while we were yet sinners,*" Jesus came for us. And paid the price for all our misbehaviour. Alleluia!

3. Rebecca's response to the call

Third, when Rebecca said that word, "yes", she is like another young woman, Mary the mother of Jesus. In a not dissimilar matter, Mary's choice was to accept and go with the life choice presented to her. When Mary said "yes" her child redeemed the world. Did she have Rebekah's example in her mind? Mary's faith makes God's entry into history possible. Mary's faith helps deliver *The Promise*. As she said "yes", did Mary think on Rebekah?

And we too have said, have we not, a positive "yes"? Our own response to God's call is what makes us Christians, what makes us a church. We share in saying that "yes", individually and collectively. We say "yes" when God asks, do you trust Me, and we say *we trust, we believe*. His loving purpose for us is to fill us – fill all those who can say "yes" - with those fruits of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. (Galatians 5 vv22-23) Alleluia!

4. God delivers on his Promises

We only have to say "Yes, I believe" to join the stars. So, fourthly, think about delivery of *The Promise*. I once looked up at the night sky from the Canadian forest. There was no, what we now call *light pollution*. The stars spread themselves from horizon to horizon, twinkling stars, bright stars, shooting stars, stars which seemed tiny. A countless number. How great is our God, whose creative power and majesty took the stars into his thoughts and they became. And Abraham saw that, and God used that image to throw in front of him a vision of vast numbers of people, saved, secured for God. Because they had faith, and they kept the faith. Each one of them has said "yes." Like Rebekah. Like Mary. Like us when we say, "I believe, I trust." In the

Communion of Saints we have so many brothers and sisters. A countless multitude. So, a Promise delivered. Alleluia again!

5. Know and understand the certainties God is giving us.

Let us get to know and understand the certainties God is giving us. The promises of God seem to me to fall into two kinds: first, there are those that come to us individually, the product of close conversations with our Father God, in prayer. Sometimes they are so sweet, you keep them to yourself. But, surely, when one of those promises is delivered we should give thanks appropriately. It is news worth sharing with fellow believers! Worth shouting about! When Ian invites us, as he sometimes does on a Sunday morning to say whether anything special has occurred, that's when we might say out loud that a promise has been delivered. That ought to occur frequently here as we more and more make ourselves a church of prayer. Yes and Alleluia!

But the second sort of *Promises of God are those from our Bibles*, where we read of promises made to His people, that is, us – collectively, to the Church, to the children of Abraham.

And in the Bible, when we search for God's promises, we should give complete confidence particularly to those Jesus Himself makes. That God loves. That Sin and Death are vanquished. That He is coming.

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So there she is. Rebekah. Generous, kindly, courageous Rebekah. Above all Rebekah who trusted God. Her trust in God's Promise became the dominating factor in her life. And she knew that God will always deliver on his Promises. I have directed your own thoughts to the stars, and I have reminded you of the countless generations of people across the world, in every age, who have trusted in Abraham's God. We see (don't we?) that The Promise has been delivered. And that is true of every one of God's Promises, of judgement for sin, of deliverance from evil, of the Spirit of God being amongst us.

So, give your trust, and give it generously, even as our Lord Jesus gives to us. Trust in God like Rebekah. Like her, let that trust in God direct your life too.

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