

The Church Fathers and Genesis: St. Ephrem the Syrian

Then they called the young woman to learn from her [whether she would return with him or not.] Because she heard about the oath that Abraham had made him swear, and about the prayer that the servant had prayed at the well and about the sign for which she had asked and which had been granted to him, she feared to say "I will not go," because she knew that it was the will of the Lord that she go. So she went and became Isaac's wife. Commentary on Genesis, 21. 4

Marriage of Isaac to Rebekah

The story of the promise continues in the next chapter when we see the arrangements made to secure a bride for Isaac, the son of Abraham and Sarah. When the time comes for Isaac to take a wife, his father, in keeping with the Near Eastern social norms of the time, must secure a suitable partner for his son. This is indeed a tall order as Abraham cannot choose Isaac's wife from among the Canaanites that surround him. He must find one from among his own people who, unfortunately, are back in Mesopotamia, the land of his birth. This creates a bit of a dilemma. If he journeys back to Mesopotamia with his son to find a wife, it would be an act of direct disobedience to the mandate of the Lord that he stay in the land that has been promised to him, i.e., Canaan.

However, this will offer Abraham no prospects of finding a wife for Isaac. Thus, Abraham must send someone (in this case his eldest servant) into the land of his birth to find the bride for Isaac.

If the prose seems somewhat repetitive in this story and you feel that you are hearing the same verses again and again, fear not. You are developing an ear for Hebrew storytelling in which events and speeches are recounted numerous times to ensure that the details are etched in the mind of the hearer. The repetition of instructions given Abraham about finding Isaac a wife, ("...you will go to my own land and to my kindred...") are meant to instill in the mind of the listener that all the events are part of the Divine plan and each detail is significant. Let's take a look at the requirements given to Abraham:

- The young woman could not be of Canaanite stock
- She must be taken from amongst Abraham's kindred
- Isaac must remain in Canaan while the servant searches for his bride
- She must come of her own free will; if she refuses, the servant is to return home

As with most biblical stories, when specific instructions are given and repeated several times, you may be able to get an indication of how the story will play out. And as it turns out, we are not surprised at the outcome of this story. The will of the Lord - that Isaac get a bride from among his father's people who returns and dwells in the land of the promise - is fulfilled. Yet, when we look at the requirements above, there is clearly an escape clause built into the list. Everything hinges upon the young woman. She is given a say in the matter. Rebekah, like many famous women in the bible, must say "yes" for the story to reach its desired ending. Saying "yes" to the Lord is pivotal in every case we will encounter in the Bible. Surprisingly enough for a patriarchal society some four thousand years distant from the present, the result often depends on the faith of a young woman.

Also, we should be aware that Rebekah is a fairly well drawn personage in this story. She is not simply a name but a person whose character is shown through her actions. It is important to pay attention to her activities near the well. Seeing a stranger at the local oasis would normally cause a young maiden alone to stay clear. However, Rebekah shows Abraham's servant hospitality and kindness - characteristics you would expect to find in Isaac's future wife. She not only offers him the water she has drawn from the well (and anyone who has ever drawn water from a deep well will attest to how arduous a process that can be) but she also offers to water the man's camels. Clearly, the Lord has directed the servant of Abraham to the right woman. She shows by both her words and her deeds that she serves the LORD.