

Genesis 24: A Quest to find and bring back a suitable wife for Isaac!

This is the climatic story¹ of a series of stories that have been focused primarily upon the life and events associated with Abraham and Sarah. For at least 12 chapters, Moses the writer of Genesis has narrated stories that demonstrate how God had blessed Abraham and Sarah- faithfully fulfilling his promises to take care of them! In this climatic story involving Abraham- the longest chapter in the book of Genesis, Moses tells us still one more story for us regarding Abraham that he wants us to see, understand, and to reflect upon.

In this last full story concerning Abraham, Abraham himself calls upon his most trusted and dependable servant to fulfill one more difficult and crucial mission for him. He calls his servant **to find and bring back a suitable and willing woman to be the wife for Isaac!** This is the focus and the one dominant concern that begins and ends this extremely long chapter. This is still the one blessing that Abraham strongly desires to happen to him before he dies!

Let us take a closer and critical look at this chapter in order appreciate still another well told story involving a challenging quest for Abraham's servant. Let us discover what is deemed so important to Abraham that he insists that his most trusted servant take a solemn oath to find the right young woman for Isaac. Through the two main actors in this story- Rebekah and Abraham's most trusted servant, let us witness how God is involved in the events that makes the quest so successful to all the parties involved.

I. Introduction and Background to the Quest! (vs. 1-9) A quest first of all is a search or an act of seeking something (or Someone). The first nine verses provide an introduction and **background for appreciating the quest** that Abraham entrusted to his most reliable servant to undertake on his behalf. Key facts to consider! The first thing to consider is Abraham's age. Sarah has recently died. Abraham had her buried in Hebron.² While this story begins by saying "*Now, Abraham was old and well advanced in years*", Abraham may have had up to 38 years after this event before he died at age 175.³ The second main thing that Moses wants us to see right from the beginning is the reminder to us that God had blessed Abraham. "*the LORD had blessed him in every way.*" Ok, this is a theme that we have seen before. But, does this idea coming at the very beginning of a new story, have a special function? Yes, I think it does! I think that the reminder sets up the story for us by introducing still one more way that God will bless Abraham. The narration of Isaac finding and marrying someone provides both a fitting final major story involving Abraham and the narration of still one more "blessing given to him by God." For the story of Isaac finding a suitable wife is both an important concern for

¹ The first of many stories regarding this couple began at the end of chapter 11.27.

² According to Gen. 23: 1 Sarah was 127 years old when she died. This means that Abraham was 137 years old.

³ Gen. 25:7.

an aging parent, but this event ensures that God's promises to Abraham and his offspring will continue after Abraham dies. Keeping this last issue in mind helps us appreciate both the urgency and seriousness of the mission that Abraham entrusts to only his most trusted and responsible servant!

Let us take a closer look at a few other important concerns mentioned in these first nine verses. 1) the challenging nature of the mission. 2) Abraham's strong hesitation & resistance to accepting his mission 3) Abraham overcomes and reassures his servant concerning the success of his mission.

A. The challenging nature of the mission. This final main story regarding Abraham involves the weighty assignment proposed by Abraham to his highest ranking and most trusted servant- *the one who was in charge of all that Abraham had*. What is so important to Abraham that necessitated him seeking his highest ranking servant and to make him pledge by word and deed a most solemn oath to carry out this assignment. The author makes it clear. Finding a wife from my own blood relatives (kindred). This requirement is none negotiable! Someone from Hebron or anywhere in Canaan will not do. An Egyptian or Philistine woman will not do. Only finding someone from Abraham's home country and family would be acceptable to Abraham!

B. Abraham's servant balks and has serious reservations. What specifically is his main reservation? Verse five tells in the servant's own words. "***What if the woman is unwilling to come back with me to this land?***" Finding a suitable woman who meets all the criteria that Abraham set for Isaac's wife does not seem to be the main problem for Abraham's servant! The woman's willingness to travel back 500 miles with a complete bunch of strangers to marry someone who seems to be a total stranger, now that is a problem for the servant.

C. Abraham overcomes the reservations of the servant. Abraham overcomes the hesitation of the servant to accepting this assignment by clarifying the mission of finding a wife once again for his servant by mentioning three important factors. 1) First, if Abe's servant finds the perfect wife for Isaac, the servant must promise Abraham that Isaac must never ever go back to Mesopotamia to marry her! Why must this be so? 2) Secondly, if the servant finds the perfect wife and yet he is unable to persuade her to go back and marry Isaac, the servant will not be guilty of breaking his promise to Abraham- "*the servant will be released from his oath*". 3) Finally, Abe reassures his most trusted servant that God will go before him in this most weighty mission giving him success. What is Abraham's basis of confidence? Abraham points to Yahweh- the God of heaven and earth who guided and brought him safely from his father's household and promised by oath to give me this land- my God will guide and make you successful in "finding a wife for Isaac". (vs. 8). On the basis of all three factors **the servant says yes** to Abraham's assignment and takes a solemn oath. (vs.9).

II. Success in the first part of his mission-the servant successfully finds the right woman. (v.10-28) This second scene of this story is centered upon the servant quickly

arriving at his intended destination-Abraham's country and to the town where his kindred dwell in Mesopotamia.(Aram Naharaim). The narrator tells us nothing concerning this 500 mile- month long journey except that the servant loaded up 10 of Abraham's camels with all sort of supplies and gifts for this journey. The narrator tells us at the very beginning of this section that one day the servant with at least ten of his men with him arrived at evening just outside the gates of Nahor. Nahor was the town where Abraham's relatives resided. Furthermore the writer tells us the key fact that they stopped close to the well just outside the city. They were presumably not only tired, but hungry and thirsty as well. (v.10-11). So the first thing the servant does is have the camels kneel down and rest and thus preparing the camels to have someone get them something to drink.

This brief background then sets the scene for all that happens next. Please note the following points from this second story. 1) The prayer of the servant. 2) The servant then **establishes his own test or conditions** for discerning God's hand in helping him "find the wife that God had chosen for Isaac. 3 The servant waits to see how God answers his prayer. 4) A critical question is raised to confirm whether or not this girl who met the initial tests is indeed the one chosen by God for Isaac. 5) In the mind of Abe's servant- Rebekah is the one that God had chosen for Isaac and the specific answer to his prayer for guidance. Let us take a closer look at each of these important points.

A. The prayer of Abraham's servant. (vs.12) The servant prays for God's mercy and for God to grant him success in his mission, before doing anything else even before satisfying his own thirst! "*Make me successful today, and show kindness to my master Abraham.*"

B. The tests established by the servant in order to discern God's guiding hand.

(vs.12-14) The servant formulates a two- fold test or set of conditions that he desired to see happen in order to determine God's leading. What I find absolutely fascinating is the nature of the test so constructed by the servant. The servant does not ask for an obvious physical sign such as may the girl that you have picked be wearing a red scarf or be riding on a donkey, or even the first girl or even 5th girl coming out of the town. The condition or test constructed by the servant is **a test that reveals something of the nature of the young woman that he is hoping to find for Isaac**. Do not miss this! What he asks for in terms of a "confirmatory sign or test" significantly reveals something of the heart and mind of what Abraham's faithful servant desires of the future wife for Isaac!

For note the conditions. First the servant asks one of any number of possible girls and young ladies that he envisions encountering that evening: "Can I have a sip to drink?" Most of the young women that would come to the well that evening would say yes to this basic request! It is the second condition that must be satisfied that I maintain few of the young women would offer! What is that? Giving water to ten thirsty camels! This would be doing this servant a huge favor. For this was no easy task! This would be a

tiring long task requiring at least a dozen trips to the well to refill her jug. Finding someone **who volunteered to do this** not for money or even being asked to do so, but who volunteered to do this would surely be finding someone who was worthy of being Isaac's wife.

C. The servant waits for an answer from God. (vs.15-21) The servant does not have to wait long for someone to come out to the well and to offer him a drink in response to his request. Not surprising! Immediately the author of our story tells us that "Rebekah daughter of Bethuel" who was the son of Milcah and daughter of Nahor- whom all readers should identify as Abraham's brother comes out of the town with a jug on her shoulder. The writer wants the *reader to see in advance* the identity of the young woman even before the servant in the story recognizes who she is! So the key part in this section is that –Rebekah fulfills the two-fold set of conditions set by Abraham's servant. All the while Rebekah is working very hard and fast to bring water to the ten camels, ***the servant is all the time wondering silently to "learn whether or not the LORD made his journey successful."*** (vs.21)

D. Abraham's servant now raises two questions to determine whether or not his journey/mission has been successful or not. (vs.22-23). The first question is designed to see if this young woman who has met his criteria for a suitable wife for Isaac meets the main condition set by Abraham. What is that condition? The wife for Isaac must be from his blood relatives or his own kindred. So after Rebekah finishes her work, the servant gives her generous gifts of two gold bracelets and a gold nose ring, the servant asks her: 1) whose family do you belong to? 2) Can we stay at your place tonight? What is the point of the second question?

E. Rebekah's own response to Abraham's servant's questions. (vs.24-25) Without hesitation Rebekah, declares two short answers to both of the servant questions. **"I am the daughter** of Bethuel- the son of Milcah that she bore to **Nahor!** Interesting that she does not say I am Rebekah! The servant immediately had a heart attack! Why? Two things the servant would be informed of by Abraham prior to making his quest of finding a woman to be Isaac's wife. First, Look for her in Haran or the city of Nahor. Second, The servant would know the names of some of these relatives. At the very least he certainly knew **that Nahor was Abraham's brother**. So what is the servant's response?

F. The servant believes that God has made his journey successful and that he has found a suitable young woman to be Isaac's wife. (vs. 26-28) After hearing Rebekah's response the servant breaks out in worship and thanksgiving to God saying: "*Praise be to the LORD the God of my master Abraham who not abandoned (or shown kindness & faithfulness) to my master. (v.27) And God has granted my prayers! The LORD "has led me on the journey to the house of "brothers, not merely relatives"*"⁴ For according to Wenham,

⁴ Both Wenham and Hamilton prefer the translation brothers rather than relatives.

Milcah remember was the daughter of Abraham's oldest brother Haran who married Abraham's other brother Nahor! So Bethuel's parents have a very strong Abrahamic connection. Rebekah can be surely identified as being taken from Abraham's father's household, for she easily fulfills Abraham's sole condition or suitability necessary for the wife of his son Isaac.

III. Success in the second part of his mission- getting Rebekah to be willing to be Isaac's wife. (vs. 29-54a) In the previous section, we saw how Abraham's servant was fully convinced that Rebekah, not only had the right stuff; but according to the servant was the woman whom God had chosen to be the wife of Isaac. Now, in still another lengthy section of the entire story, we will discover how the servant persuades Rebekah's family that Isaac would make a good husband for Rebekah. The servant needs to persuade them that the LORD whom they recognize, has bought the two families of Terah together and has appointed this marriage to Isaac and Rebekah. **How does the servant do this?** He recounts the three main themes previously mentioned so far in this story. They are 1) the mission that Abraham assigned to him. 2) His prayer to the LORD to help him find the woman meant to be Isaac's wife. 3) How Rebekah perfectly **met the two main tests** that the servant himself set in order for him to be able to recognize how the LORD was guiding him to the right woman that the LORD himself had chosen for Isaac. With these three points in mind let us quickly look at the response from Rebekah's family to his presentation.

"Now if you will show kindness and faithfulness to my master (Abraham-your own blood relative), tell me, if not tell me..." Tell him what? The servant is asking Rebekah's mother and father, brother Laban, and even Rebekah who is also present to assent to the truth of his story. Particularly the servant wants them to agree with him that Rebekah is not only related to the servant's master –that she is a grandniece of Abraham, but God –the LORD –their God too has **chosen Isaac and Rebekah to marry each other**. This is supported by Rebekah's father and brother two fold response to the servant. **"This is from the LORD, we can say nothing to you one way or the other"** (vs. 50) and **"Here is Rebekah: take her and go, and let her become the wife of your master's son, as the LORD has directed."** (vs.51) These last two verses strongly convey a strong unanimous agreement that the LORD is responsible for making the servant's quest successful, and the LORD is ultimately the one guiding and controlling events bringing these two individuals together to marry each other. Finally, Rebekah and her family along with the entire crew that came with the servant enjoy a grand feast that evening celebrating the betrothal of Rebekah to Isaac!

IV. Rebekah agrees to make the long journey back to Canaan and become Isaac's wife! (vs. 54b-66) The final twelve verses wrap up and conclude the story of this intriguing quest instigated by Abraham to find a suitable wife for Isaac. The story has a happy ending! The camels do not die on the long road trip home. Nor does Rebekah have second thoughts when she finally sees her future husband. Nothing like this happens! Instead, Abraham's faithful

servant without incident returns home and reports to Isaac-not Abraham- the details of his journey and his quest. Most importantly we are told the main thing about the story! “Issac *“married Rebekah”!* But not before the journey home and perhaps even the marriage itself experienced a momentary snag –or unexpected obstacle! What was that? Let us take a quick look at these final verses to see what this last minute snag was to the event of the final consummating of the marriage between Rebekah and Isaac!

1)The Instigating Event raising the possibility of delay. “*when they got up the next morning, the servant said, Send me on my way to my master.*” (vs.54b) The previous several verses had strongly conveyed a total commitment by Rebekah’s family to the marriage and the consequent long return journey away from them to Isaac home town of Hebron. Now, the morning after, the story continues not with the report of hugs and kisses and the family saying goodbye to her; Instead of that story, the story is focused upon her mother and brother hesitating to send her on her way. What happened? Cold feet? Perhaps! Or simply just not expecting Rebekah to leave them so soon! The mother and brother suggest a few more days delay. Ten more days. Surely a reasonable request?

2) The servant ruthlessly says no! No time to delay! Is the servant being heartless? What is the servant’s justification for getting on the road without delay? The servant says “*Do not detain me, now that the LORD has granted success to my journey. Send me on my way so that I may go to my master.*” Rather than being heartless, there may be two better reasons for not wanting to delay his return journey home with Rebekah. The first reason that both Wenham and Hamilton both mention is that the amount of time being asked for was not 10 days but a year. Perhaps! But, I see something different. Let’s assume that they are asking him to delay his journey “**by ten days or so!**” The servant might rightly imagine that at the end of 10 days the family would still be not ready to release and let Rebekah go with him! This is so normal!

The servant on the other hand, is laser focused on his quest! The servant cannot rest until his mission is fulfilled. He must not just find; but, he must finish his mission and bring Rebekah back to Isaac to marry,⁵ and thus fulfill his solemn oath to his master Abraham. This is exactly what happens. But, who breaks this impasse between the wishes of Rebekah’s family and the servant? **Rebekah does!** What an incredible way to end the story? So why does she agree to go back with the servant right away without delay? What is it about Rebekah that **makes her so willing** to go on this 500 mile journey with a stranger and his men to marry someone she only has discovered less than 24 hours earlier is distantly related to her? The writer does not tell us explicitly, but has left us a few clues embedded in the story for us to discover for ourselves. (vs. 50-51) Can you identify them and discover still one more **admirable trait** that the writer wants us to see concerning **Rebekah?**

⁵ Note the incidental evidence of this character trait of being intently focused being possessed by the servant. The servant is reluctant from the beginning to make his oath to Abraham. The servant will not eat until he reports his mission to Rebekah’s family.