

Looking past female stereotypes

A case study on Rebekah

Tamara Knudson offers a reflection on the character of Rebekah

Biblical characters are easy to oversimplify. Even famous figures in the Bible are often flattened and reduced to the most memorable moments of their stories. This results in less-than-relatable caricatures, like the wafer-thin figures that my Sunday school teacher pressed against a flannelgraph board: Eve the apple-eater, David the giant-slayer, John the hairy baptizer.

Women in the Bible are particularly prone to this kind of one-dimensional interpretation. Depending on the traditions we come from, we might not expect female characters to play powerful, story-shaping roles. As a result, Biblical women often disappear into the background of the story like faded wallpaper behind a muscled portrait of Abraham, Moses, or another male counterpart. And when they do make an appearance, women tend to be categorised too quickly as one extreme or the other: virtuous and beautiful, or wayward and immoral.

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Rebekah is a good example. She is perhaps best known for the elaborate scheme that she devises to trick her husband Isaac blessing their younger son, Jacob (Genesis 27). Although Isaac plans to bless their firstborn Esau, Rebekah takes advantage of her husband's blindness and helps Jacob to impersonate his older sibling. The whole ruse is Rebekah's idea – from the goatskin that disguises Jacob's smooth skin, to the tasty stew she cooks on his behalf, to the outfit she selects from Esau's wardrobe and instructs Jacob to wear.

It's easy, based on this uncomfortable episode, to dismiss Rebekah as a meddlesome matriarch. But a closer look at the entirety of her story adds depth and complexity to her character and suggests that she plays a powerful and important role at the beginning of the Biblical narrative.

Rebekah's story begins when Abraham sends his servant in search of a wife for Isaac (Genesis 24:1-4). The servant calls on God to help him find a suitable partner for his master's son and comes up with a litmus test to identify the woman (vv.12-14). Whoever gives the servant a drink and offers to draw water for his 10 camels (an act of extravagant generosity and stamina) will reveal herself as Isaac's future wife.

Before the servant has finished praying, Rebekah appears on the scene. And when Abraham's servant asks her for a drink, Rebekah doesn't miss a beat but quickly offers to draw the camels their fill too. As the servant looks on, Rebekah runs back and forth from the well to the camels' trough until they are satisfied (vv.20-21). Both her offer and the determination with which she fulfils it reveal her wholehearted generosity.



Rebekah's hospitality doesn't stop there. She eagerly invites the servant home, where there is 'plenty of straw and fodder and a place to spend the night' (v.25). When she hears the servant's prayer of thanksgiving to Abraham's God, Rebekah sets off running again, this time in the direction of home, where she relates the evening's events to her mother's household.

These are only the introductory scenes to Rebekah's story, but she has already emerged as a powerful character in her own right. She's confident, generous, strong, and willing to serve a stranger in extravagant ways. She runs to water the camels and runs home afterwards, suggesting her strength and youthful vitality (vv.20,28).

Rebekah's family appears to be aware of her depth of character. When Abraham's servant asks permission to leave with Rebekah the next day, her mother and brother try to delay him but eventually call on Rebekah and ask her, 'Will you go with this man?' (v.58). Rebekah's agency in this moment is unusual for betrothal stories in the Bible, in which the wife-to-be tends to have little say in the matter (see, for example, Genesis 28:8-9; 29:23). Rebekah makes the final choice for herself and says, 'I will' (Genesis 24:58).

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Before she leaves, Rebekah's family blesses her. The words of their blessing echo the promises that God gave to Abraham in Genesis 22:17:

**May you, our sister, become
thousands of myriads;
may your offspring gain possession
of the gates of their foes.**

(Genesis 24:60)

This blessing foreshadows the important role that Rebekah will play in the story to come. Like Abraham and Sarah before her, Rebekah becomes an important character at the beginning of the Biblical narrative – a matriarch in the long line that leads to Jesus.

Although Rebekah is initially barren, Isaac prays for her and God allows her to conceive. Her experience of pregnancy is alarming, however, when two babies push and shove inside her womb. But Rebekah's response is telling: in her confusion and discomfort, she looks to the Lord for help (Genesis 25:22). In fact, Rebekah is the first character in the Bible to 'inquire' or 'seek' (Hebrew, *darash*) the Lord.

In response to her enquiry, God gives Rebekah prophetic insight into the future of her two sons (v.23). She is carrying twins, each of whom will become the father of a nation. These two nations will be divided – one will serve the other. The final line of God's revelation to Rebekah overturns the status quo: *the elder shall serve the younger*.

The text doesn't pause to reflect on Rebekah's feelings about this surprising and significant revelation. Instead, the narrative jumps forward to the birth of her sons, and we are left to wonder over the gaps in this story. Did Rebekah ponder God's words for the remainder of her pregnancy, as her sons jostled inside her growing belly? Did she share God's words with Isaac, or anyone else?

Although these questions are left unanswered, they are situated within the broader context of what we already know about Rebekah's character: she is strong, proactive, and unselfish. When their sons grow up, Isaac – who enjoys the taste of wild game – favours Esau the hunter. But Rebekah loves their younger son, Jacob (v.28). The text doesn't reveal the reason for Rebekah's fondness for Jacob, but the absence of this detail suggests that she has not forgotten God's words concerning the two boys who wrestled in her womb.

With the details of Rebekah's characterisation so far in mind, we are likely to discover a more well-rounded reading of her actions in Genesis 27. To begin with, the catalyst for Rebekah's scheme is a conversation she overhears between Isaac and Esau, in which Isaac prepares his older son to receive the firstborn blessing. This blessing will secure wealth, security, and firstborn privilege for Esau. Either Isaac is unaware of God's prediction about the upside-down relationship between his sons, or he is willing to override it based on his own preference for Esau. Either way, what is Rebekah to do?

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The obvious answer is for Rebekah to interrupt Isaac's plans and blurt out God's revelation, if she hasn't already. But the complicated (and dangerous) scheme she embarks on next suggests that perhaps this option is not available to her, either because she has already communicated God's words to Isaac – or perhaps because Isaac has the final say as the boys' father. Whatever the reason for Rebekah's next move, it stands in stark contrast to her previous generosity and kindness. Rebekah's deception appears to come from a moment of weakness or desperation – the exception in her characterisation rather than the norm.

Whatever the reason for her actions, the text doesn't shy away from their painful repercussions. Rebekah helps Jacob to deceive his own father, and Isaac's vulnerability is highlighted by the repeated reminders of his blindness throughout the narrative. At the end of the story, Isaac and Esau's grief over their betrayal is palpable and the family is in disarray. Clearly, this is a complicated story and all its characters are implicated in one way or another.

The Bible doesn't avoid messy scenarios like this one. Many of its characters are complex and – in their complexity – relatable. As readers, we are drawn in by Rebekah's courage, eager generosity, and youthful verve, just as we are invited to see ourselves in her attempts to secure God's promises by her own means. Along with Noah, Moses, David, Rahab, Esther, and many other heroes of the faith, Rebekah's character is both inspiring and multifaceted – round rather than flat. In the depth of her character, we encounter both our own strength and our own need for a saviour.

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Suggested questions for reflection:

1. What aspects of Rebekah's character stood out to you in Genesis 24-27?
2. What options were available to Rebekah in Genesis 27?
3. What other Biblical women come to mind who are prone to one dimensional or oversimplified reading?



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