

## **SELECTING A WIFE: GENESIS 24**

**by R H Johnston**

The selection of Rebekah as a wife for Isaac can be interpreted allegorically as a picture of the selection of a bride for God's Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, with Abraham typical of God the Father, Isaac of the Son, the servant of the Holy Spirit and Rebekah of the church. This interpretation illustrates the proper balance of Divine sovereignty and man's responsibility in the salvation of God's people. But the story also provides wise counsel on selecting a wife: this simpler understanding of the passage is considered in what follows.

It must of course be recognised that there are a great many cultural differences between the time of Genesis 24 and today. In Bible times women usually married shortly after puberty, and it was consequently relatively easy for them to adjust to married life and the children that followed, as they knew no other life. God's command to "go forth and multiply" was followed without difficulty.

Today the extended childhood and lengthy singleness caused by over-extended education followed by paid work makes marriage and childbearing something hard for many women to adjust to because their lives have been moulded in a radically different direction. This has created serious social problems concerning sexual relationships, marriage and family in Western societies leading to fertility rates well below replacement rates, and widespread self-centredness (compare Ezekiel 16:49-50).

So Rebekah's story is one that our generation should consider carefully and prayerfully, as it challenges current mores, which we have all absorbed to a greater or lesser extent.

### **Do not seek a wife**

Isaac himself was unaware of his need: he never asks for a wife. His father perceived the need, which became apparent when Isaac missed his mother when she died (Genesis 24:67). Similarly Adam was blind to his need: it was God who saw that it was not good for Adam to be alone (Genesis 2:18). When the woman was brought to Adam he recognised that she was just what he wanted (Genesis 2:23), and the same was true for Isaac (Genesis 24:66-67).

A man should not seek a wife for himself (1 Corinthians 7:27). A prudent wife is from the Lord (Proverbs 19:14): to find such a wife is to find a good thing and receive the Lord's favour (Proverbs 18:22). Since God withholds nothing good from those who walk uprightly (Psalm 84:11), it follows that the best thing

a man can do is to live in such a way that the LORD will delight to favour him. There is another kind of woman whose "*heart is snares and nets and whose hands are fetters*" whom God appoints to snare the sinner (Ecclesiastes 7:26; compare Proverbs 22:14). She is more bitter than death, but he who pleases God escapes her (Ecclesiastes 7:6).

### **Priorities in a man's life**

Psalm 45:2-9 sets the priorities for a man's life. Priority is given first to grace, then girding on the sword for warfare, conquering and subduing the enemy, and the establishment of the rule of righteousness. In consequence, God is pleased and bestows His anointing, and brings to him the woman who shall be his wife, leading finally to the fruitfulness of sons. Psalm 45 speaks of Christ and the church, but as Ephesians 5 shows, the relationship of Christ to His church is parallel to marriage in every respect. So the important thing for a man to do is to get on with the work which God has given him. If God sees that the man needs a wife to help him to fulfil his tasks, He will bring the wife He has selected to the man, who will recognise that she is just what he wanted.

### **A wife should share her husband's background**

The choice of a wife requires the maximum benefit of wisdom and experience. Abraham therefore selects the oldest and most trustworthy of his servants to find her (Genesis 24:2). She must not be a Canaanite (Genesis 24:3): these tribes were already under judgement and would ultimately be displaced (Genesis 17:8). Inter-marriage with them is forbidden (2 Corinthians 6:14), even though they live close at hand. The wife must be from Abraham's own country and kindred (Genesis 24:4).

In a Christian context, a prospective wife must not only be a Christian but should share with the man a common background and vision, both culturally and spiritually. Marriage is hard enough without adding the problems which arise from widely differing ethnicity, nationality, social class and spiritual outlook and vision. All Christians are spiritually one, but there are differences in function of the different members of the body (1 Corinthians 12:14-30). It is inappropriate to link together permanently in marriage people who do not have functions which complement each other.

### **The purpose of marriage**

The primary purpose of marriage is work, not pleasure (compare 1 Thessalonians 4:4-5). The command of Genesis 1:28, given to man and woman jointly, is to be fruitful and multiply, to fill the earth and subdue it. This emphasis on work is illustrated by the agricultural picture of marriage in

Mark 10:9, which may be translated "*What God has yoked together, let not man separate*". Any pair of oxen can be yoked together to plough a field, but the wise farmer chooses to yoke oxen which are matched for strength, speed, endurance and direction (compare Amos 3:3).

### **Modern methods of choosing a wife can be destructive**

Isaac played no part in choosing his wife: he was not even consulted. The choice was to be carefully considered, not the result of infatuation or the type of relationship which develops more or less by accident into marriage.

The modern "boyfriend-girlfriend" or "partner" relationship does not appear in a commended form in scripture. No relationship is described between "*treating the younger women as sisters in all purity*" (1 Timothy 5:2) and "betrothal", when the marriage covenant had been made, a more formal and committing step than modern engagement.

Many problems, both before and within marriage, owe their origins to the experimental nature of modern courtship. These practices lead to much heart-break and regret (Proverbs 5:1-14) and also make it difficult to be sure that the finally chosen marriage partner is the right one. They should be avoided.

### **A wife must be willing to leave her old life behind**

The servant asks what he should do if he finds a suitable wife, but she is not willing to leave home. Should Isaac go to her? (Genesis 24:5-8) Abraham's answer shows that a woman who will not leave her family and follow her husband is not suitable as a wife – she will continue to assert the same sort of control thereafter. The wife is commanded to forget her own people in Psalm 45:10-11: this is because Genesis 2:18 makes her a helper for the man and not conversely. This does not make a wife a slave – far from it: man and wife are ontologically equal - but they have different roles, just as the Jesus the Son of God is subordinate to the Father. She must be where her husband is in order to help him to fulfil their joint task.

Many marriages fail to fulfil their purpose because the woman insists on her own way, saying in effect to her husband, "If you want to be with me, you will have to come my way". In Psalm 45:10-11, it is when she forgets her own old ways that her beauty becomes desirable. A wife's true beauty is internal, a matter of the heart (1 Peter 3:1-5).

If the woman would not follow, the servant was released from the oath (Genesis 24:8), and was not required to seek another. It is better for a man to remain single, in the place of God's command, promise and blessing, than with

the right wife but away from the place God wants him to be. To follow her is to submit to the will of a woman with an unsubmitive and unwilling heart (Proverbs 21:9). It is all too easy to be side-tracked from God's plan through marriage (1 Corinthians 7:32-35).

### **God's provision of a wife (if required) will not fail**

A **good** wife, of course, does not cause such a conflict of interest. Her desire is to assist her husband to fulfil the will of God, and carry out the good works prepared for both of them to do (Ephesians 2:10). Esther is an excellent example of such a wife, using all her feminine powers to seek her husband's highest good, and so fulfils Proverbs 31:12. Ruth demonstrates the kind of commitment to follow which is required (Ruth 1:16-17). Unlike the servant, Abraham is so confident that the right wife **will** follow that he suggests no alternative strategy.

If a man is to have a wife, God will make the divinely appointed woman willing and she will be brought to him at the right time. A man should never think that God failed to provide him a wife because the one chosen was unwilling. Still less should he choose his wife himself, like Esau (Genesis 26:34-25; 28:8-9).

### **How to select a good wife**

Genesis 24:11-14 shows wisdom in action. The servant knew what he wanted, a wife with the twin qualities of willingness and a lack of fear of hard work, a functional wife rather than an ornament. He called on God to give his selection test a successful outcome. He went to the place where such a woman ought to be. He was looking for a young woman who was doing the job she should be doing, which was drawing water (Genesis 24:11). He sought one who would show mercy to a stranger by giving him the water when he asked (Genesis 24:14), **and** who was willing to do far more than she is asked (Genesis 24:14, Matthew 5:41). A man drinks a few pints of water at most, but an offer to water his fleet of ten camels (Genesis 24:10) is something else: for all the girl knows, they have not drunk anything for weeks. Doubtless some young women avoided the water-carrying chore altogether. Others did the bare minimum, studiously avoiding the eyes of the stranger with his retinue so that they could return quickly to their own interests and concerns (compare Esther 1:9,12).

His prayer was soon answered (Genesis 24:15-21). This maiden had all the characteristics men seek: she was beautiful and a virgin (Genesis 24:16). The servant would probably have been able to discern this from the way she acted: the virgin is very different in her demeanour from the woman who has known man. In a businesslike way she fills her jar from the spring and comes up. The

servant approaches her and makes his request. She quickly gives him a drink without question or argument - what a contrast with John 4:7 where it appears that Jesus never got his drink - and then she offers to draw for the camels until they have done drinking. This even seems to surpass the servant's prayer in Genesis 24:14. The speed of her work and diligent energy come through strongly in Genesis 24:20, right through to the end of the job. She was not a girl to leave a job half done. Thus she demonstrates Proverbs 31:20.

Rebekah was drawing water from the spring. So was the woman in John 4, but that woman was deeply unsatisfied and found drawing water a laborious effort she would have preferred to avoid (John 4:15). Not so Rebekah. She was satisfied herself and enjoyed drawing water, not only for herself but also for others (Isaiah 12:3).

A prospective wife should be actively working in the place of God's will, drawing on the wells of God's salvation and giving freely to those in need, a source of Life (Proverbs 5:15), not death (Proverbs 12:4; Proverbs 21:9). By contrast, a lazy or self-indulgent woman is as good as dead (1 Timothy 5:6).

### **Real beauty is internal**

Although the servant approached a beautiful woman (Genesis 24:16), he knew that it was hopeless to select a woman on the basis of appearance (Proverbs 31:30). He knew that an immoral lazy life ruins the character, so that an outwardly beautiful woman may have an evil heart. Such a woman may be spoilt and conceited, or lack discretion (Proverbs 11:22). This is why the servant used a test to reveal her heart (compare 1 Samuel 16:7) and prove that she was functional. But selecting on the basis of the character of her heart selected a beautiful virgin too! These things are associated, but the testing can only be done this way round. A willing, hard working woman will possess purity and an inner beauty that stems from her contentment with her lot, sense of purpose and pure heart (1 Peter 3:4-5).

### **Her family had to agree**

The servant's success also depended on the attitude of her relatives. They were equally generous (Genesis 24:28-33), and her brother and father both recognised that the selection of Rebekah had been a work of God, and that consequently it was not their place to interfere (Genesis 24:50-51). So they commanded the servant to take Rebekah to be his master's son's wife.

It is important that the woman's family should be willing for the marriage to occur. When a marriage is\* the Lord's will, even a family who might be expected to be unwilling will not stand in the way. As in this case, they will

recognise that the decision has been taken at a higher level. This remains true even if the woman's family are not Christians. In addition close Christian friends should agree that the marriage is right. The need to obtain the approval of both heavenly and earthly fathers and families provides the main protection against an ill-advised marriage.

### **The danger of delay**

However it seems that her mother and (another?) brother were less than keen on letting Rebekah go. In Genesis 24:55 they are starting to go back on the declaration of Genesis 24:51, already forgetting that the matter had not been decided by them but by God. With any further delay, attitudes would probably have hardened until the whole family would have insisted on Isaac coming to live with them (compare Genesis 30:25-31:55).

A woman's family can ruin a marriage by holding onto her. She must be allowed to leave them and forget her father's house (Psalm 45:10. See also Judges 19:1-9). Unless the servant dealt with this problem immediately it might lead to the woman's failure to follow.

### **Finally, the woman must also agree to follow**

The servant was wise not to trust Laban to keep promises (Genesis 31:41), but the good result of the family's indecision is that Rebekah is asked her will (Genesis 24:57). The woman's consent was the final hurdle. The limited nature of her choice is interesting. She knew nothing about Isaac. She could only decide, as in Genesis 24:50-51, on the basis that God had picked her out as a wife for someone she did not know.

This is the only way to decide. It is vital to be sure that it is God's choice, since only He knows the heart. What someone will be like as a wife or husband is always unknown before they are married.

Rebekah recognises God's will in what had occurred and she displays a total and immediate willingness (Genesis 24:58). She does want a delay so that she can complete any unfinished business of her own.

Once it is decided whom a woman should marry there is no need for delay. If a woman wants to delay the marriage, she is unwilling, and such unwillingness will carry over into marriage. Delay reveals that she is unsure that God is leading her to this man, since she finds her own business more desirable. In such a case the issue of her marriage partner has not been resolved.

Rebekah is then sent off by the family with their full blessing (Genesis 24:60). The woman, having been prepared, tested, and having laid aside her private ambitions and be married to the man God has chosen, is brought to the man (Genesis 24:61, compare Genesis 2:22).

### **The man and woman meet: disclosure**

Like Rebekah in Genesis 24:15-16, Isaac was doing what he ought to be doing, meditating in the field in the evening, (Genesis 24:63) when Rebekah arrived. He was not anxiously seeking out a likely wife in the town, seeing who was available. The good wife is found in the midst of doing the Lord's work. When they "lifted up their eyes" (Genesis 24:63,64), they saw each other for the first time. They became aware of each other. They had not known each other previously.

This sense of becoming mutually aware of each other can occur even where a man and a woman have worked together for some time. Suddenly God causes them to see each other in a different way. At this point the woman must cover herself, modestly hiding, so that she does not disclose prematurely things which should be kept until the right time.

### **The man must be sure she is right**

Although they have seen each other, the man still needs to discover the will of God. The servant reveals the full story to Isaac (Genesis 24:66), so that he may be certain that she is the right one. Once sure, Isaac took Rebekah as wife (Genesis 24:67). It was after they were married that he loved her: real love follows marriage. Emotions which may precede marriage are not the real love.

### **The right marriage does not ensure marital bliss**

Although the marriage of Isaac and Rebekah was divinely appointed it was not an altogether happy relationship. The differences in attitude between Isaac and Rebekah, and the consequent family difficulties (Genesis 27) have a number of causes, some of which are recorded (e.g. Genesis 25:21-23; Genesis 27:4), but a contributory factor may have been their large difference in age.

Isaac was forty when he married (Genesis 25:20). It seems likely that Rebekah was much younger than Isaac, probably not much past puberty: the way Rebekah acts in Genesis 24 seems youthful; Isaac was sixty before their sons were born (Genesis 25:26); and Rebekah seems younger in Genesis 27:5 compared with Isaac (Genesis 27:1), who appears to be in physical decline. A large age difference between a man and his wife may cause marital problems

later in life, because of growing differences in physical capacity and attitudes, with the risk that the wife may come to despise her husband.

On the other hand, if a man and his wife are too close in age there can be other difficulties. The direction of a man's life, his life-purpose and calling, takes time to develop. A wife can only help her husband to fulfil his calling once it is clearly established.

If a man marries young, before his life purpose is clear, his wife will find more satisfaction in developing her own business. This will tend to pull them apart. Once a pattern of separate activity is established it will be hard for her to change when the man's lifework does become known.

A man should marry after his lifework is established, as in Psalm 45. If he marries a wife of similar age, she will have developed a definite direction in her life and the habit of working independently (as is often the case today). Unless she sets this aside completely, which she may find difficult, it could prove hard for them to develop their joint work. A younger wife, who has not developed these self-sufficient habits, would probably find it easier to become a Genesis 2:18 co-worker in the business and calling of her husband.

Apart from the exceptional case of Adam and Eve, the only age difference between a man and his wife recorded in scripture is the ten year gap between Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 17:17). The above considerations suggest that this could perhaps be regarded as the normally desirable age difference between a man and his wife.

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These notes are not comprehensive but should stimulate personal bible study. Every effort has been made to be accurate, but the reader should test everything in accord with the example of Acts 17:11 and the command of 1 Thessalonians 5:21. Errors, or queries which are unresolved after consulting the LORD, should be referred to the author (email: rhjbibpap@rhj.org.uk) (First Edition Sept 1982, revised 8 March 1994, further revision in the light of current social changes 8.9.2018)

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