

One Biblical Marriage
Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67
July 6, 2008

In our culture, love and romance tend to be the factors drawing people together in marriage, but even romance can smell wrong sometimes.

A young couple got married and left on their honeymoon. When they got back, the bride immediately called her mother.

"Well, how was the honeymoon?" asked the mother.

"Oh, mama," she replied, "the honeymoon was wonderful! So romantic" Suddenly she burst out crying. "But, mama, as soon as we returned, Sam started using the most horrible language. He's been saying things I've never heard before! All these awful four-letter words! You've got to come get me and take me home ... please, mama!"

"Sarah, Sarah," her mother said, "calm down! Tell me, what could be so awful? What four-letter words has he been using?"

"Please don't make me tell you, mama," wept the daughter, "I'm so embarrassed! They're just too awful! You've got to come get me and take me home ... please, mama!"

"Darling, baby, you must tell me what has you so upset Tell your mother these horrible four-letter words!"

Still sobbing, the bride replied, "Oh, mama ... words like dust, wash, iron and cook"

It was not romance that brought Isaac and Rebekah together, for in their culture marriages were arranged. Typically the man's family took the initiative in arranging a marriage, as it was their legal responsibility. Abraham insists that his son not marry a local inhabitant of the land of Canaan in which they lived. This instruction is indicative of some of the restrictions placed on chosen mates. Hebrews were supposed to marry only within their own kinship groups. This was not necessarily a racial bias, but rather a way to avoid the negative influence of other cultures and religions prominent in the day. The Hebrews were the minority in the land at the time; they took care that their monotheistic religion not be shaken by more popular pagan religions around them. A foreign marriage partner might teach the children to worship the gods of the homeland and not the one God of the Israelites.

In the patriarchal period of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Isaac's son, the ideal mate was one's paternal parallel cousin, or the father's brother's daughter. In Rebekah's case, she is Abraham's great-niece, the granddaughter of his brother Nahor.

Abraham's servant, unnamed throughout this entire chapter, meets Rebekah at the city well. In traditional societies drawing water is women's work. Such an encounter at a well leading to marriage is a traditional narrative form in the scriptures. In later chapters Jacob will meet his future wife Rachel at a well (Gen. 29:1-3). In Exodus Moses meets the daughter of the priest of Midian at a well and she becomes his wife (Exodus 2:11-22).

The servant seeks God's guidance in the selection of the bride for Isaac. He sets up a sign so that he will know which woman is the chosen one. He will ask for a drink and the woman who also offers a drink for his ten camels will be the wife decreed for Isaac. Rebekah is the first maiden to arrive. Unbeknownst to the servant, she is indeed a relative of Abraham. She is also very beautiful and a virgin. She goes down to the spring, fills her jar, and comes up the hill. The

servant asks for a drink, and she obliges. Rebekah then offers, “I will also draw for your camels, until they finish drinking.” She empties her jar into the trough, runs back to the well to draw water, and provides for all the camels.

Author Karen Armstrong shares that camels have a huge capacity for water. Rebekah didn’t just give the camels a taste of water, but she went back and forth to the well until they were finished drinking. Remember, the servant brought 10 camels. The scripture notes that she had to carry the water uphill from the spring. Rebekah proves herself to be not only industrious, but also a woman of hospitality. Not only does she provide for the servant, but she also provides for the animals.ⁱⁱ It reminds us of Abraham’s hospitality to the three servants who came to his tent to share the good news that a son would be born to Abraham and Sarah. As a gesture of hospitality, Abraham had Sarah fix an elaborate meal for these strangers, even before they shared their message. Rebekah shares the energetic generosity of her future father-in-law.

Before he knows the identity of the woman at the well, the servant offers her gifts. Then he inquires of her family and the possibility of lodging. Her response is confirmation that the servant has found the family of Abraham, as requested. Rebekah runs home to her mother’s household. Her brother Laban comes to meet the guest and invite him to their home. Before he will eat with them, the servant tells his story and the reason for his visit.

His story is a means of negotiating the marriage contract with Rebekah’s family, specifically her mother Milcah, her father Bethuel, and her brother Laban. As in many other societies, the Hebrews felt that a man owed his prospective father-in-law compensation for the loss of his daughter, and especially of her offspring, which would strengthen the family. In addition to this bride or progeny price, additional gifts were made to the bride and to members of her family at the time of betrothal. Such gifts were signs of a valid marriage and the legitimacy and lineage affiliation of children born in the marriage. When a young man was deserving but poor, he could work for his father-in-law instead of paying bride wealth. This is what Isaac and Rebekah’s son, Jacob, will do in order to earn his two wives, Leah and Rachel, from their father, Laban.

Once the matter of bride wealth was settled, the father of the bride made a solemn commitment to the groom, initiating the engagement, called a betrothal. In the current story, Rebekah’s brother and father agree to the arrangement. Abraham’s servant is eager to return home with Isaac’s wife. The tradition was that the new couple lived with the groom’s family. Although her family desires that Rebekah remain at home for ten days, they ask if she is willing to go immediately. She offers her consent and leaves with her family’s blessing. “O sister! May you grow into thousands of myriads; may your offspring seize the gates of their foes.” This is reminiscent of the blessing given to Abraham when he was asked to leave his homeland to the land God would show him. God blessed him saying, “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing” (Gen. 12:2). Rebekah is indeed the person through whom the blessing given to Abraham will be continued. She will bear two sons, Esau and Jacob. Jacob will be the father of twelve sons, the leaders of the twelve tribes of Israel, who will solidify the Hebrew presence in the land of Canaan.

When they approach Abraham’s home, Rebekah sees Isaac in the distance. She veils herself, perhaps a part of the wedding ceremony. Upon hearing the servant’s story of his journey to find Rebekah, Isaac receives her into the tent of his mother Sarah, who has recently

died. Rebekah is the new matriarch of the family. Although this is an arranged marriage, a “blind date” if you will, Isaac loves Rebekah.

As the scriptures continue, their marriage is not without its challenges, even though it begins as a “match made in heaven.” Although I have not read the book, I appreciate the title, *Flawed Families of the Bible: How God’s Grace Works through Imperfect Relationships*. Biblical families are marred by confusion, betrayal, and pain. In spite of the pious platitudes about biblical family values, the Bible tells of a messy assortment of marriages and families. That’s why it’s important to look at the overarching messages of scripture and not to become so focused on adhering to the details. How many of us today would agree to an arranged marriage to a spouse whom we had never met? It is not the custom of our culture. Not every specific pattern translates into contemporary life. Customs change and evolve over time.

Remember Tevye, the Jewish father of four daughters in the musical, *Fiddler on the Roof*. The Russian village had a matchmaker who was to arrange marriage for the young people in the village. Tevye’s daughters had other ideas. The breaking of tradition caused him great distress, and yet, in most cases, he allowed love to prevail.

In the story of Isaac and Rebekah’s arranged marriage, we find a few hints of qualities of committed relationships. Rebekah was responsive to the needs of others, both of the servant’s need for water and Abraham’s desire for a wife for his son. Likewise, upon seeing Rebekah, Isaac responded with love. Although not explicit in the story, there is a hint of mutuality and reciprocity in the relationships. The needs of the other are given thoughtful consideration and action is taken to meet those needs.

Fidelity seems to be characteristic of this marriage. This is one of the few instances in which a man does not have an additional wife or wives or a concubine. In the seminomadic and agricultural period of Israel’s history, the possession of several wives made a large working force available to tend the flocks and the fields. The desire for sons was so strong that if a wife failed to produce a son, husbands often took another wife or a concubine, usually the maid of his wife, in order to produce a son to carry on the family name. As time went on the importance of faithfulness to one spouse became understood and accepted.

Related to fidelity is a sense of commitment, a willingness to work through the hard times without taking the easy way out of the relationship. Commitment entails developing communication skills, working through conflict, even making accommodations in order for the relationship to be fulfilling to both parties. It was probably not easy for Rebekah to leave her own family and homeland; she had likely envisioned her future there amongst her own family. Instead, she moved to a far land with the possibility of never seeing them again. She made a commitment, in spite of the hardship and loss.

Covenant relationships are marked by the qualities of mutuality and reciprocity, fidelity and commitment. May we be bold to make these the hallmarks of our most deep and abiding relationships.

ⁱ Homiletics Online, attributed to www.dramaministry.com.

ⁱⁱ Karen Armstrong, *In the Beginning: A New Interpretation of Genesis* (New York: Knopf, 1996), p. 74. “Marriage,” *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 2 (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 19), pp. 279-287.