

BaptistWay: Rebekah, finding love

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- *The BaptistWay lesson for June 23 focuses on Genesis 24:34-67.*
- [Download a powerpoint resource for this lesson here.](#)

Love stories are rare in the Old Testament. In fact, only on a few occasions does the narrator state that a man loves a woman—Isaac (Genesis 24:67), Jacob (Genesis 29:20) and Samson (Judges 16:4). And I know of only one story that states a woman loved a man—Michal in 1 Samuel 18:20. Of course, Song of Songs is the exception to the rule. There the man and woman express their love and desire for one another in luscious metaphors.

Arranged marriages were the norm in biblical times, so perhaps that's why love rarely is mentioned. In Genesis 24, Abraham sends a trusted servant to Haran to find a wife for Isaac. Why Isaac himself did not make the trip is not explained. Abraham made clear to the servant the woman must be a relative (v. 40).

Marriage within the clan

One of the things modern readers find surprising—and uncomfortable—is the Old Testament practice of endogamy—marriage within the clan. All the patriarchs except Joseph married close relatives. Abraham married his half-sister, Sarah (Genesis 21:12). Isaac married his first cousin once removed (Genesis 24). Jacob married his first cousins, Leah and Rachel (Genesis 29:15-30).

In ancient times, people believed to keep a bloodline pure, you had to marry close relatives. Today, we call this incest. Regardless, in Genesis,

great importance was placed on marrying a woman who was a descendant of Terah, the father of Abraham, Nahor and Haran. And that is why the servant was sent to the city of Haran where Abraham's relatives lived.

The servant prayed a prayer along the way, asking God to show him the right woman for Isaac using the following test: the woman would offer to give the servant a drink and also offer to water his camels (vv. 42-44). Sure enough, when the servant arrived at the well in Haran, Rebekah offered him water and then watered his camels as well (vv. 45-46).

When modern readers envision this scene, we usually think of a well like the ones you see in Disney movies—above ground with a pitched roof and a pulley to lower and raise the bucket. But wells in Israel were dug deep into the ground, and one had to climb down a long series of narrow steps to get water. In order to water the servant's camels, Rebekah would have had to make numerous trips up and down the steps. Hers was a herculean effort, and it foreshadows the kind of strength her son Jacob later would display at a well (Gen. 29:10).

Negotiations

The servant asked the girl's identity, and when she said she was the daughter of Bethuel, he knew his prayer had been answered (v. 47). He put a ring in her nose and gave her gifts of jewelry, and she brought him back to her house where he negotiated the bride price with Bethuel and Rebekah's brother, Laban (vv. 49-53).

A bride price, mohar, was required of a groom in ancient Israel. It consisted of gifts to the family in exchange for the bride. Although some consider this to indicate a woman merely was property—and that view is plausible—the bride price may have been more than a simple exchange of goods for goods. The family was losing not just a daughter but also a worker. A woman performed many important tasks in an agrarian society,

so the bride price may have been compensation for the loss of the work and contributions of the woman who left the family.

Laban and Rebekah's mother pressed the servant to stay on for a few more days, perhaps hoping they could negotiate an even higher bride price, but the man insisted on leaving immediately (vv. 54-55). So, Rebekah was asked if she wanted to go immediately or wait, but she was not, in fact, given a choice about whether or not she would marry Isaac (vv. 57-58). She decided to go immediately. Rebekah, who probably was a teenager, chose to leave her family and her land to go to a foreign country to marry a man she'd never seen. That took some guts.

The blessing

The blessing the family gives her is striking because it is similar to the blessings given to Abraham (Genesis 17:4; 22:17): "Our sister, may you increase to thousands upon thousands; may your offspring possess the cities of their enemies" (v. 60).

When Rebekah arrived in Canaan, she and Isaac were married. The text says Isaac loved Rebekah, and he was comforted after his mother's death (v. 67). But the narrator never says Rebekah loved Isaac in return.

Can you imagine the singles ad Isaac would have placed if Haran had newspapers or if there was a Hebrewsingles.com in those days? "Forty-year-old man who still lives in his mother's tent seeks a young virgin who is a close relative. The girl must be beautiful, willing to move to Canaan, and marry this man, sight unseen. Gold, silver and camels will be offered. Nose piercing required."

What girl in her right mind would marry a man like that? Well, Rebekah did. And, as it turns out, she becomes a formidable matriarch in the stories that follow, securing her favored son, Jacob, the blessing and the status as next patriarch (Genesis 27).

This “love” story is not without its problems. It raises questions about arranged marriages, endogamy and the status of women as property. We wonder if Isaac’s love for Rebekah was unrequited. Later stories about Isaac and Rebekah suggest rifts in their relationship (Genesis 27), and, unlike Sarah, Rebekah’s death goes unmentioned. So “happily ever after” is not something implied in this story, even if it begins with Isaac’s love.

And what does this story say to us today? Arranged marriages are not the norm. Most people don’t marry their cousins. Women are no longer considered property (at least in North America). So what does it mean?

Questions raised

Perhaps this story’s value is in the questions it raises more than in any answers it offers. As we think about the people we teach in church, some of the following questions might be good for discussion.

For example, in a class of unmarried adults we could ask, “Is there just one person you are meant for?” Or “How does one find love today?” “Where do you meet people?” “Are dating websites OK?” “Is marriage for everyone?”

In a class of married adults, perhaps the discussion could revolve around the following questions: “How did you meet and fall in love?” “How do we protect love in our marriages?” “How do we go about healing our relationships if we are struggling?”

In a class of divorced people: “How do love stories make you feel?” “What causes relationships to fail?” “How can we find healing after divorce?”

In a class of widowed people: “Tell us your love story.” “What things do you most cherish about your marriage?” “How do you keep the memory of your lost spouse alive?”