

Women in Scripture



A Dictionary of
Named and Unnamed Women in the
Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books,
and the New Testament



Carol Meyers,
General Editor

Toni Craven and Ross S. Kraemer,
Associate Editors

WILLIAM B. EERDMANS PUBLISHING COMPANY
GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN / CAMBRIDGE, U.K.

heaven — the deity does not appear to Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, or Bathsheba, and according to Matthew, the heavenly messages come not to Mary but to Joseph — to view them as sinners associates women with sin in a way that is absent from the Gospel.

The women's various unexpected sexual activities — Rahab is a prostitute (although she is never depicted engaging in any sort of sexual act); Tamar poses as a prostitute and seduces her father-in-law; Ruth, of Moabite origins and therefore associated with incest (see Gen 19:30–38), has a possibly incest meeting with Boaz on the threshing floor; and Bathsheba, while married to Uriah, conceives a child with David — may be seen to anticipate Joseph's concern with Mary's pregnancy and, perhaps, to serve as responses to claims of Jesus' illegitimacy.

Although their inclusion in the conventional pattern of the genealogy implies that they lived in traditional domestic arrangements, not one of the women is identified as married at the time of her child's conception; thus a trace of independence, if not subversive status, remains. In this perspective, the women can represent members of the community associated with the author of the Gospel of Matthew: independent of biological families and seen as potentially disruptive by those on the outside. Moreover, they are also to some extent independent of their natal communities: Tamar is inappropriately housed in her father's house, since she is legally a member of Judah's family; Rahab survives the destruction of Jericho; Ruth leaves Moab; and Bathsheba is identified as the wife of Uriah, the Hittite who fights for the Israelite king. So too will Mary be forced to leave her home in Bethlehem and relocate first to Egypt and then to Nazareth in Galilee.

In their willingness to act and to move, the women may also indicate the higher righteousness that Matthew frequently endorses. Rahab acts righteously in order to save the spies sent by Joshua, just as Tamar forces Judah to act; Ruth motivates Boaz, and Bathsheba, here identified as "she of Uriah," recalls the Hittite's fidelity while David

stayed home at the time when kings go off to war. Joseph, the major actor in the infancy account, also subverts expectation: "being a righteous man" (Matt 1:19), he had resolved to divorce Mary quietly. Yet he is convinced by an angelic dream to marry.

Rahab is, finally, the first Gentile clearly mentioned in the genealogy. Ruth, too, is a Gentile, and the ethnic origins of Tamar and Bathsheba were debated by Jews and Christians in the early centuries. Rahab thus may foreshadow the entry of Gentiles into the Matthean church. However, in Jewish literature of the period, Rahab, along with Ruth, was regarded as a righteous proselyte to Judaism.

SEE ALSO Part I: Bathsheba; Ruth; Tamar.

AMY-JILL LEVINE

RAHAB IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

(Heb 11:31; Jas 2:25)

Rahab, the prostitute who hid Joshua's spies from the authorities in Jericho, became an example of conversion in early Christianity and Judaism because she and her family escaped the ban on Jericho and continued to live in Israel "to this day" (Joshua 2:6–17, 23–25). She appears in the historical example lists of Hebrews, James, and the late-first-century letter called *1 Clement*, to the Corinthians. In Heb 11:31, Rahab is presented as an example of faith, having "received the spies in peace," she escapes the fate of the unbelievers. The Epistle of James, which emphasizes the relationship between faith and works, offers her deed as an example of the works that show faith. In *1 Clement*, she exemplifies faith and hospitality. This common emphasis on faith probably derives from the deduction that she became a proselyte, a view that also appears in a number of early Jewish commentaries.

MARY ROSE D'ANGELO

Rebecca

Greek transliteration of the Hebrew name *Rebekah*; the different spelling reflects the use of the double kappa for the Hebrew *koph* (q) as well as the English letter *c* for the Greek *kappa*.

See also Part I: Rebekah: Rebecca in the New Testament.

Rebekah

perhaps "cow" Hebrew *bagār*, a metathesis of *ribgā*, or "knof," from the unattested Hebrew root *rbg*, "to tie fast"

REBEKAH IN THE HEBREW BIBLE
(Gen 24–27, 28:5, 29:12, 35:8, 49:31)

The second (after Sarah) of the matriarchal figures in the ancestral stories of Genesis, Rebekah is one of the most prominent women — in terms of her active role and her control of events — in the Hebrew Bible. The beautifully constructed narratives in Genesis 24–27 describe how she becomes Isaac's wife, gives birth to twin sons after initial barrenness, and finally obtains the primary place in the lineage for her younger son, Jacob, who is destined to become ancestor of all Israel.

The story of the wooing of Rebekah unfolds in Genesis 24, the longest chapter in the Book of Genesis. A spouse for Isaac is to be obtained from his uncle Nahor's family; the ensuing cousin marriage, with Rebekah and Isaac both members of the same kinship group, serves to emphasize the importance of their lineage. Abraham dispatches a trusted but unnamed servant to Mesopotamia, the land of his birth and where some of his family still resides, to find a wife for his son. Rebekah secures her role as wife-elect for Isaac by befriending the servant and his ten camels in the famous well scene, which has been called a type-scene — a narrative episode with certain expected motifs that appears at the critical juncture in the life of a hero. Indeed, the account of Rebekah at the well is the premier biblical example of such a scene. It ostensibly draws attention to Isaac, but, in his absence, reveals the beauty and especially the virtues of his wife-to-be.

After the well incident, Rebekah brings the servant home, enters into the marriage arrangement, and sets off to meet her future husband. She seems to have some input into the marriage negotiations, or at least into the decision about her departure from her homeland and birth family. Once she arrives in the promised land, she enters Isaac's home (called "his mother Sarah's tent," 24:67). There she is "loved" (24:67) by her husband, the first woman in the Hebrew Bible for whom marital love is proclaimed.

After twenty years of marriage, when Rebekah fails to become pregnant, Isaac prays to God, who grants the prayer that she may conceive. Another type-scene, that of the barren wife, thus enters the Rebekah story, calling attention to the special role of the children ultimately born to her. A divine oracle is addressed to her when she is pregnant, making her the only matriarch to receive a direct message from God (although Abraham's slave wife Hagar also receives an oracle). *yhwh* proclaims that "two nations" are in her womb and will contend with each other (25:23). This oracle foreshadows the tensions that will characterize the relationship between her sons, Jacob and Esau, as figures in the Genesis narrative and as eponymous ancestors of Israel and Edom.

In the next episode in the Rebekah story, Isaac passes her off as his sister. This narrative, similar in many ways to two such accounts about Sarah, at first seems to contribute little to the role or character of Rebekah. However, it does differentiate her in a significant way from Sarah; in one of the two wife-sister episodes in which she figures, Sarah seems to have had sexual relations with Pharaoh (Gen 12:13–14, 19) to ensure the safety of her husband and their household. Rebekah's marital fidelity, in contrast, is never compromised (Gen 26:7–11). Her relationship with her husband is consistently monogamous, unlike that of Sarah, who not only has extramarital sex, but also provides her husband with the slave wife Hagar, and of Rachel and Leah, who are co-wives and also provide slave wives to Jacob.

The final scene in which Rebekah appears is another well-known biblical episode: Isaac blesses Jacob rather than Esau, the first to emerge from the womb and thus the expected recipient of the paternal blessing. This designation of Jacob as heir to the ancestral lineage, which will mean his becoming

progenitor of all Israel, is orchestrated by Rebekah. Through clever manipulation, whereby Isaac is deceived, she achieves her purpose and controls the family destiny.

Evaluating Rebekah's role in the biblical story of pre-Israelite ancestral beginnings has evoked varying perspectives. Two millennia of Jewish and Christian biblical interpretation have focused largely on the male ancestors—the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Furthermore, virtually all scholarly studies and Bible textbooks, until very recently, designated the pre-Mosaic era as the patriarchal period, thereby providing an inherent male bias to any consideration of the family stories of Genesis. That bias rightly reflects the biblical concern with patrilineage—tracing families through the male line. Yet it obscures the fact that those family stories include strong female characters.

This is especially true in the case of Rebekah, whose position in the second generation of ancestors is actually more prominent than that of her spouse. For one thing, Rebekah is far more dynamic and proactive than Isaac, for whom no independent episode is reported. The very fact that the verb *to go* is used of Rebekah seven times (a number used in the Bible for emphasis) in the courtship narrative of chap. 24 highlights her active character. In addition, Rebekah's behavior in Genesis 24 is depicted by a series of action verbs—she runs, draws water, fills jars, and rides a camel—that contribute to a sense of her individuality and vitality, in contrast to Isaac's passivity. Also noteworthy is the way the language used in reference to Rebekah's journey from Mesopotamia to Canaan, and in anticipation of her role as progenitor of countless offspring, echoes that found in the Abraham narratives (compare Gen 24:4, 38, 60 with Gen 12:1 and 22:17). Furthermore, Rebekah is said to have had a nurse (Gen 35:8), a highly unusual circumstance in the Hebrew Bible and one that thus signifies her unusual stature.

Finally, the long courtship account of Genesis 24, which is considered by many to be a self-contained novella, can perhaps be called a woman's story. Rebekah's dynamic presence in that episode may indi-

cate its origin in women's storytelling, as do certain other features. The term "mother's household," for example, appears in 24:28. That phrase is found only four times in the Hebrew Bible, all in texts that reveal women's lives and agency. It signifies the important role of the senior woman in a family household, at least when considered from a female perspective, as does the use of the phrase "his mother Sarah's tent" for Isaac's home.

Because of the centrality of Rebekah, in contrast to Isaac, the ancestral sequence might more accurately be called Abraham, Rebekah, and Jacob. Indeed, when Rebekah's favored son, Jacob, is sent to Mesopotamia to secure a spouse, he identifies himself to his future bride (and cousin) Rachel not as the son of Isaac, but rather as "Rebekah's son" (Gen 29:12); his paternal ancestry is eclipsed by Rebekah's lineage. This incident may signify a reality of maternal dominance, at least in the case of Rebekah, that is too powerful for the androcentric interests of biblical narrative to obscure.

CAROL MEYERS

SEE ALSO Part I: Deborah 1; Sarah 1/Sarah; Part II: Mothers of Ruth and Orpah (Ruth 1:8, etc.).

FOR FURTHER READING: Allen, Christine Ganide. "Who Was Rebekah? On Me Be the Curse, My Son."

Alter, Robert. *The Art of Biblical Narrative*.

Meyers, Carol. "Parashat Hayyei Sarah (Genesis 23:1-35:18)."

Stansell, Gary. "Mothers and Sons in Ancient Israel."

Steinberg, Naomi. *Kinship and Marriage in Genesis: A Household Economics Perspective*.

Tengels, Lieve. "A Strong Woman Who Can Find? A Study of the Characterization in Genesis 24 with Some Perspectives on the General Presentation of Isaac and Rebekah in the Genesis Narrative."

REBEKAH (REBECCA) IN THE NEW TESTAMENT (Rom 9:10-12)

Paul argues here that Abraham's only true descendants are those born to him by virtue of a promise (Gen 18:10) and that therefore, from the moment of the births of his offspring, distinctions were drawn between his descendants. He exemplifies this principle further by arguing that it is not only valid in

the case of two different mothers (Sarah and Hagar), but also in the case of *one*, referring to the fact that "something similar happened to Rebecca when she had conceived children by one husband, our ancestor Isaac," for even before the twins Esau and Jacob were born, she was told by God: "the elder shall serve the younger" (Gen 25:23). So only Jacob is heir to the promise.

PETER W. VAN DER HORST

Reumah

meaning uncertain, perhaps "daring," related to Akkadian *rdmu*, "to love"

(Gen 22:24)

The secondary wife (concubine) of Nahor (brother of Abraham, the first major male figure in the ancestral narratives of Genesis), Reumah bears Nahor four children, in addition to the children borne to him by his primary wife, Milcah. The names of these children are the names of Aramean tribes, which are indirectly related to the Israelites through this genealogy and whose history intersects with that of Israel in the period of the monarchy.

NAOMI STEINBERG

SEE ALSO Part I: Maarah †; Milcah †; Part II: Aramean Concubine of Manasseh († Chr 7:14).

Rhoda

"rose," from Greek *rhodon*, "rose"

(Acts 12:13–15)

A slave (Greek *paidiskē*, diminutive of *pais*, "girl") in the household of Mary, the mother of John Mark, Rhoda is not presented as a believer but as one free to watch the door while others pray. In this capacity she responds to the knock of the recently rescued Peter, but does not open the gate immediately; instead she runs to announce his arrival.

As a social figure Rhoda embodies the anonymous slaves of Christian owners addressed or discussed in several later New Testament texts. As a literary figure she evokes two important cross-

references. Like the women of Luke 24:10–11, her report is disbelieved. She turns the tables on Peter — now he must pay a penalty for denying Jesus to another (anonymous) slave girl (NRSV, "servant-girl"; Luke 22:56–57). This lowly slave is a perfect, if imaginary, flower of poetic justice.

RICHARD I. PEARO

SEE ALSO Part II: Two Servant-Girls Who Accuse Peter (Matt 26:69–72); Servant-Girl, of the High Priest, Who Accuses Peter (Mark 14:66–69); Servant-Girl Who Accuses Peter (Luke 22:56–57); Slave Girl Healed of a Spirit (Acts 16:16–18).

Rizpah

"baking stone" or "hot coal," from Hebrew *rispā*, "coal"

(2 Sam 3:7; 21:8, 10, 11)

The daughter of Aiah, Rizpah is the concubine of Saul, the first king of Israel (reigned c. 1025–1005 B.C.E.). Since Saul's wife Ahinoam has borne him four sons and two daughters, the reason for his taking of a concubine is not to produce an heir. Rizpah bears Saul two sons, Armoni and Mephibosheth. They become potential claimants to the Saulide throne after Saul because Saul's three eldest sons die in battle at Mount Gilboa (1 Sam 14:49; 31:2), and the youngest son, Eshbaal, who had not been old enough to fight, is crowned Saul's successor (1 Sam 14:49; 2 Sam 2:8; 1 Chr 8:33; 9:39) and then is assassinated (2 Samuel 4). In order to usurp the throne, David uses a three-year famine as a pretext to turn over the remaining seven eligible Saulide male heirs to the Gibeonites for ritual execution to atone for the bloodguilt Saul was supposed to have incurred against this group. Rizpah's two sons and the five sons of Saul's fertile daughter are killed. Rizpah prevents the executed bodies from being defiled by animals until David agrees to give them proper burial.

At some point after Eshbaal's installation as king, his great-uncle Abner, the seasoned commander of the Israelite army, makes a bid to wrest the throne from the inexperienced youth by sleeping with